

## Synopsis:

It all started about a decade ago, when the Portal suddenly opened up over the stadium right in the middle of a game. Cleveland just hadn't been the same since, what with electronic devices pretty much useless — unless you were willing to spend a fortune in digital protection and redundancy equipment — and all the dragons, elves, gnomes, dwarves, gargoyles, etc., who'd come through the Portal to take up residence with the areas covered by the Portal's magical field. For Kline Maxwell, City Hall reporter for the Cleveland Press, magic-based Cleveland had long since become the status quo. At least until a fellow reporter named Morgan came down with a case of eyeballs growing all over his body. The diagnosis: stay out of Portal territory and he'd be just fine. But that meant Maxwell and all the other reporters were going to have to take up the slack. And Maxwell hated the thought of doing “fuzzy gnome” stories. Still, he took his job seriously, and when he was assigned to cover a dragon's death by crash-landing into the Cuyahoga, he headed over to the accident site with only a modest number of curses. But what should have been a simple accident report soon led Maxwell in search of a much bigger story — one that would see him kidnapped by elves, framed for murder, holding secret meetings with dragons, and fleeing not only from the cops but from pretty much everyone...

# **The Dragons of the Cuyahoga**

**By**

**S. Andrew Swann**

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This is dedicated to a poor little guy named Henry.

I want to thank all the hamsters  
in Cleveland who saw this MS  
and tried to improve it.

# Prologue

I DIDN'T witness it, but I imagine it happening like this. . . .

The name he is given in English is Aloeus. He weighs over fifteen tons. A hundred feet from nose to tail and a wingspan half again that long. Muscles ripple under leathery black skin with every wing beat, as each sweep hauls his serpentine bulk into the sky.

Aloeus is unconcerned about the fact that his soaring is impossible by the rules of Earthly physics. His flight is as much through the forces that pour through the Portal as it is through the mundane air. More than any other creature, Aloeus is a creature of those forces. His mind is knit by strands of magic, and magic— as much as muscles and sinew— holds his wings against the biting wind tearing across the sky three thousand feet above the city of Cleveland.

He sees those forces as he soars above the city. Where a human being would only see sky and clouds, a brilliantly lit skyline, and the roiling clouds by the lakeshore— the constant vortex marking the Portal itself— Aloeus saw in a spectrum that humans could barely imagine, much less perceive. The Portal is a font of mystical power, visible to Aloeus' eye, and to the mind behind that eye. Glowing, pulsing tendrils of power twist and whip out from the Portal, pouring through the streets like rivers of mana, flowing into the sky like an inverted waterfall.

Aloeus breathes the power like air, feels wisps of it glide through his mind, tugs against it with his wings.

The power has its limits, but Aloeus cannot see them this close to the heart of it all, the Portal. The irregular edges of the magical flood are far from here, just short of Canada to the north, just short of Pennsylvania to the east, halfway to Columbus to the south, Sandusky to the west, and perhaps about three miles up. If Aloeus could see the edges of the mana enveloping northeast Ohio, he would not be flying this fast. Here, though, practically on top of the Portal, Aloeus is immersed in the forces that keep him alive.

The forces that keep him practically immortal.

While it would be disastrous for him to leave the sea of magic that pools around the Portal, there's no danger of that *here*. While the turbulent flood of magic ebbs and flows around him, like the air, or water beneath the surface of the ocean, it is always *there*. It may be more or less dense and spots might temporarily deaden, but unlike the fickle edges far from the Portal, the magic never fades this close to the source. He would have to fly three miles straight up for that to become a danger.

These facts are fundamental in Aloeus' world. Very basic assumptions that he takes so much for granted that he isn't aware— or, perhaps, does not want to be aware—

that they *are* assumptions.

Of all the creatures in the world, magical or not, Aloeus should know better.

Unconcerned, Aloeus tears through the night sky, black as a thunderhead, and as powerful as a tsunami. The citizens who care to look up at the cloudless sky see him only as a tiny eclipse of a star or two. A few people, working very late nights or very early mornings in some of the skyscrapers around Public Square, look west in time to see Aloeus' demonic silhouette against a swollen setting moon.

As to what his last thoughts are, no one can know and I don't care to guess. He doesn't see it coming; if he did, he might be able to do something, maneuver, avoid it. . . .

Around him, the impossible happens. A dead spot in the mana sea. Aloeus doesn't even have time to understand the enormity of what is happening. As the magic disappears, his mind dies. Aloeus' brain, the meat circuitry that regulates his physical body, is not complex enough to house his mind. The thinking part of Aloeus, his identity, lived in the mana that, until moments ago, had lived in every cell of his body.

His conscious mind is dead.

However, he is not unconscious. The higher functions are gone, the eyes that saw as much by magic as by light are now half blind, but, like any brute animal, Aloeus can feel pain.

He wears a body impossible by what human beings would consider the normal rules of biology and physics. Now, suddenly, he exists in a world where aerodynamics, the square-cube law, and the tensile strength of muscle and sinew all mean something.

The wind becomes a wall, tearing wings back, ripping joints out of their sockets, splintering delicate bone, shredding skin. The long serpentine neck snaps back, vertebrae separate and fracture, as a head the size of a human body slams into his back above the base of his tail.

His body tumbles in a spinning downward dive as overtaxed lungs separate from the chest wall and his heart busts open with the pressure of his blood.

No longer a shadow gliding across the sky, he is a plummeting missile. More people see him now, they can hear the whistle of air sliding by his body. There is the slight, horrible, chance that— as his body falls out of the dead spot and back into the mana sea— the thinking part of his brain might awaken enough to *understand*.

Then he hits.

Aloeus, one of the most private of creatures, suffers the most public of deaths. Fifteen tons of dragon slam into a gravel mine on the western shore of the Cuyahoga River within sight of downtown Cleveland.

The body hits at such a velocity and such an angle that it keeps moving. Bones turn

to jelly and flesh tears away as it skids across the ground. Gore marks gantries two hundred feet up and fifty yards away. The body tears into a docked cargo ship, twisting bulkheads and steel as it tumbles off the far side and plunges into the river, finally, to rest.

And, before the last postmortem tremors leaves Aloeus' epic corpse, the dominoes have started to fall.

## Chapter One

THE domino with my name on it happened to be Columbia Jennings, a whip-thin, middle-aged Hispanic woman who was the Metro editor of the *Cleveland Press*. Third in the chain of command and my immediate boss.

Don't get me wrong about this, I like my job. Cleveland, for various reasons, is one of very few places where serious print journalism is still kicking. Seniority gave me the ability to concentrate on investigative reporting and op-ed pieces. There are few times I dislike coming into the office.

All those times have Columbia's name written on them.

When I came in that morning, and sat down at my workstation, and saw a little messaging icon with her name on it hovering in the middle of the LCD flatscreen display, my first response was to look around the office to see if anyone had witnessed my arrival and could testify if I bolted for the fire exit.

When an unseen escape proved not to be an option, I gritted my teeth and clicked on the message. Meeting, her office, three minutes ago. I think my wince was barely visible.

The words, "You're late," greeted me as I opened her office door. I looked around the office. Just me and her. Bad sign. She waved at me to close the door, which was worse— if only because it confined the stale smell of cigarette smoke in the room. Columbia reeked of it, and the air around her made my eyes water.

I took a seat across from her and said, "I just got your message."

I don't know exactly how she did it, but she could radiate disapproval without changing her expression. "Have you heard any news broadcasts this morning?"

I shook my head. One of my few personal rules was not to take work home. When I was off duty, I was off duty. Between whatever point I got home to my condo, and coming into work the next morning, I avoided news broadcasts, newspapers, even C-SPAN. It only took my wife and daughter moving to California to learn me that lesson, though I doubt my ex gives me any credit for it.

The disapproval wave hit me again.

"They found a dragon floating in the Cuyahoga River this morning."

"I didn't know they could swim."

"Dead." She snapped the word.

I was taken aback. It must have shown, because she let a shadow of a smile leak from the corner of her mouth. Common knowledge was that dragons were supposedly immortal. The things were supposed to be able to take a bullet directly into the brain or heart and still keep flying— though I don't know anyone personally who'd had the balls to put that theory to the test.

Christ, there were only a handful of dragons on this side of the Portal. This wasn't just news, this was *major* news.

Which made things pretty damn obvious to your truly.

"You *know* I don't do fuzzy gnome stories."

"This isn't a fuzzy gnome story," she said, "and you know it." She was giving me a very cold look. I had the impression of an Old Testament pagan idol, the kind they fed babies to.

"This isn't my kind of—"

"Bullshit, Maxwell." She stood up. "You may have a privileged position here because you've been covering City Hall since they played football in Browns Stadium, but you can only take that so far. You still work for this paper."

I shook my head.

"You think you're too good to cover Morgan's beat?"

Morgan would have been the man to cover this story. If he'd still been at the paper, this probably would have been his crowning achievement, actual feature material.

I shook my head no.

"Good, because you are the only person on the staff who hasn't had to cover for him."

I gave a resigned nod. I know very few reporters at the *Press* who envied Morgan's beat. All the paranormal crap was, supposedly, what made Cleveland interesting. Makes sense, right? The fact was, the guy on the magic beat, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, is working the ubiquitous "fuzzy gnome" stories. All the stupid (in)human interest stuff that's filler in the paper and gives the morning dee-jays something stupid to talk about. Unicorn sightings, gremlins in the sewer line, the occasional talking frog— which never has anything interesting to say. All the kind of stuff you would have found in a supermarket tabloid before the Portal opened and the crap started actually happening.

The difference is, of course, when the hacks in the tabloids were making the shit up, they made sure it was interesting.

Morgan was a transplanted Kentuckian who was one of the few people who actually enjoyed hearing mages pontificate on the different varieties of graveyard soil.

Unfortunately for everyone, Morgan's interest in his subject had overcome a prudent professional detachment, and it wasn't just his objectivity that suffered. The stories on how it happened varied; the cleaner versions had him ingesting some elixir he shouldn't have, the more ribald versions had him intimate with something not quite human. Either way, everyone agreed that four weeks ago, Morgan broke out in a carpet of tumors all over his skin. That would be bad enough, but apparently all these warts grew tiny little eyes that started staring at him. They did an MRI scan and discovered the little buggers scattered everywhere in his body.

Even so, his prognosis was pretty good. They just had to life-flight him down to Columbus, away from the influence of the Portal.

Bad news, returning anywhere within a hundred miles of this town would probably wake up all the little bright-eyed tumors, with fatal results.

"Do we know who it is?"

"They haven't released any information yet."

I stood up. "Okay, Bea, where am I going?"

She scrawled directions on a Post-It note and handed it to me. And for a brief moment I saw something that I've rarely ever seen in Columbia's eyes.

Relief.

I did spend some nominal time on the way there wondering how it was, when a hundred-foot-long, fifteen-ton corpse with a 150-foot wingspan clogged the Cuyahoga River in the shadow of the Hope Memorial Bridge, that the *Cleveland Press'* senior City Hall reporter got the plum assignment.

Unfortunately, while I am pretty good at spotting real or imagined conspiracies in city government, I wasn't that good at seeing them at my own newspaper. In retrospect it was probably the willful blindness of a middle-aged man comfortable in his job that made me avoid asking a few key questions until much later.

I got to the scene a little after nine a.m. About five blocks from the river I was solidly wedged in traffic backed up from the bridge. I could just catch sight of police and EMS flashers at the base of the northern-most art-deco tower.

I looked up and saw a few traffic 'copters hovering above the river. Above them, reptilian shadows circled in the blue August sky. Other dragons paying their respects.

I turned on the radio and scanned through the stations. Each one announced itself with a few brief seconds of Portal-generated babble before the digital circuitry managed to decipher the real broadcast from the extraneous magical signals that ate

up fifty or sixty percent of the bandwidth. The interference resolved into the tail end of a traffic report. "—nasty tie-up on Carnegie near the river. Police have closed the Hope Memorial Bridge, but that hasn't seemed to stem the tide of curiosity seekers, who've tied up traffic all the way back to the Convocation Center—"

I grunted in frustration. It had already taken me fifteen minutes to move half a block, so I decided to change modes of transportation. I cut off a rust-bucket Hyundai and pulled my Volkswagen up on the sidewalk.

It was already headed toward the nineties, so I had been driving with the AC full blast. So I wasn't quite prepared for it when I opened the door.

The smell of the decedent hit me like damp towel soaked in rancid bacon fat. The kind of smell that sort of slithers in when you inhale it. My lungs stopped in a sort of appalled shock, and I had to force myself to keep breathing.

*Jesus, it's coming from the river*

During my twenty-some years as a reporter I had been close to some ripe bodies. That did not make me relish dealing with them. During my career I had done my damndest, in fact, to get away from situations where I had to deal with them. I hadn't planned on getting close enough to the dragon to smell it.

Apparently, there was a flaw in that plan.

I could picture Columbia laughing at me. *So Maxwell's uncomfortable with magic? Let's not just hand him one of Morgan's stories, let's give him the one with the highest gag factor.*

I decided that she was pissed at me, and this was her way of showing it.

It only got worse as I walked toward the bridge. I wasn't getting anywhere near the source of that smell without a little preparation.

*It landed last night! These things must rot real quick.*

I stopped in a drugstore two blocks away. The place was empty except for a scrawny little Indian guy who was busy lighting the fifteenth lucky-number votive candle on the counter in front of the cash register. It wasn't doing any good. The guy's eyes were watering. I grabbed what I needed and placed it on the counter next to a Madonna backlit in red wax. "Hey, if you're staying here, you need some of this."

The guy blinked at the small blue-green package. I shelled out five bucks, tore open the box and un-screwed the lid of the small canister of Vicks VapoRub. I got two fingerfuls of the gel and smeared it above my upper lip, under my nose. "Menthol," I explained.

I held my hand out to the guy.

"Many thanks," he said as he repeated my gesture. He took a few deep breaths. I could almost see his sinuses clear as he smiled. "Oh, God, thank you." He pushed my five back at me. "No charge."

My good deed for the day.

I walked out, taking my own deep breaths. I still sucked air through my mouth, the gel couldn't kill the evil slithery smell, but it prevented the smell from triggering a gag reflex or shutting my lungs down in horror.

The closer I got to the bridge, the more I had to watch my step. The sidewalk was splattered with the stomach contents of people less prepared than I.

In theory I was supposed to meet the *Press* photographer out here. Looking at the traffic, I decided that waiting for the guy was an exercise in masochism. I doubted that he would have any trouble finding carnage to digitize without my help.

So I walked up to where the cops had set up a perimeter, a few hundred feet from the bridge itself. A pair of black-and-whites lorded it over a forest of red cones that blocked all four lanes of Carnegie, diverting everyone onto Ontario or I-90. No cops immediately in evidence, so I just walked past the roadblock.

Once I passed the perimeter, I heard a car door slam, and a slightly strangled voice say, "Hey . . ."

I turned around and saw a uniformed cop coming out of one of the black-and-whites. The cop was a kid, less than half my age. It was probably some detective's idea of a joke setting the guy up here.

"You," he coughed, "can't go up t-there."

I was impressed that the guy wasn't falling to his knees from the smell. He was sweating. The druggist's eyes had been watering, but this guy's eyes were leaking down the sides of his face.

"Kline Maxwell, *Cleveland Press*." Instead of reaching for ID, I reached for the Vicks. I did it slowly, because one should never make sudden moves in front of cops in obvious physical and emotional distress. "You need some of this."

He made eyes at me as if I'd just turned into a two-headed dwarf. I could tell he was a rookie who'd never had my dubious pleasure of being too close to an over-ripe corpse. I gestured with my other hand, over my upper lip. It took a moment before the light dawned and he followed my lead. The few ragged breaths he took made me feel like the Good Samaritan.

"Oh, God, that's better."

I pocketed the Vicks. "New on the force?"

He nodded. "Two days."

"Tell whoever set you on that duty that they're an asshole." I said as I turned around.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Maxwell, I still need to see an ID."

I fished out my wallet and hand him a press card and my driver's license. Once we were both satisfied about who I was, he said, "I'm not supposed to let anyone up on the bridge."



"We all got our jobs to do."

"It's a crime scene, sir." The kid took my arm and steered me back toward Carnegie. I was about to make the obligatory noises about hassling the press and the public's right to know, when he said, "You know it's just luck I noticed you." He coughed. "I have to hide in the car from this damn smell. If you'd just walked around the other side . . . The other car's empty." He coughed again and shook his head. "Just lucky I caught you, right?"

He gave me a pat on the shoulder as he escorted me past the nose of his car. After which he opened the door and slid back into the driver's seat.

The kid would have had to taken an ad out in the *Press* for his hint to be any broader. I walked around the back. True to his word, the rookie cop didn't notice me.

I walked down the center line, toward the knot of cop cars blocking the westbound lanes of the bridge. The sound of the traffic jam was distant, overwhelmed by the sense of stillness. First impression: the only movement was from the flashers on the cop cars, and a circling mass of black birds that were doing lazy circles over the Cuyahoga River in imitation of the dragons much farther up in the sky.

Two massive stone pylons flanked the entrance to the main span of the bridge. Built in 1932 in a style that might be called art-deco-classical-Babylonian, the godlike humanoid statues loomed impassively over the tiny human inhabitants of the bridge. Their gaze fixed on the distant eastern horizon, as if everything here was beneath their notice.

Glancing up at the northeast pylon, towering over the cops, I saw something man-sized, leathery and reptilian perched on the statue's left shoulder. I might have caught sight of a gargoylike wing and a skull-like face, but then it skittered around the pylon, out of sight.

Whatever it was, I didn't like it.

Par for the course.

One cop broke from the herd and headed in my direction. I started angling toward the guardrail so I could get a good look at what had brought me here.

"Kline Maxwell," the cop called out to me. I wasn't that surprised that he recognized me. *I* recognized *him*.

Thomas O'Malley, SPU police commander. He was thin and dark, with a sharp face that led like the bow of a ship. He looked less like a cop and more like a Mafia stool pigeon, to the point where his voice seemed to carry a hint of New York in it. Despite his name, the only thing Irish about him was the fact that the Democratic political machine—in the guise of Adrian Phillips back when he was Mayor Rayburn's campaign manager—had got him his job.

"O'Malley," I acknowledged him as I reached the guardrail. I tried to lean nonchalantly on the rail, which was hard with the wind blowing the smell of rotting

mentholated fish in my face. "Any comments about the floater?"

I noticed that O'Malley had a greasy trace of white under his nose. I wondered if it was better than Vicks. "What're you doing here?" he asked.

"Freedom of the press, hear of it?"

O'Malley shook his head. The gesture reminded me of a bird of prey tearing a goblet of flesh from a corpse. "This is a little far from Lakeside, Maxwell— or are you doing an exposé on the city contracts to move the corpse?"

"So is the Special Paranormal Unit in charge of the investigation?"

"Did someone say there was an investigation?"

"Fifteen tons of dragon falls out of the sky. I may be slow, but that is out of the ordinary, isn't it?"

"Icky-eff, it happens all the time."

"Yeah, right." I turned to look down at what brought me here.

*God, what a mess.*

"I can't see you walking the pavement unless some politician's getting his ox gored." His voice sounded distant, far away from the enormity below me.

"Morgan?" he asked.

I nodded, mute, staring.

"How is he? I heard they had to keep an eye on him."

I tried to swallow, but my throat was tight and dry. I whispered, "*Droll, O'Malley, very droll.*" I don't even know if he heard me.

The dragon did not go neatly. I had expected the body to be floating, more or less peacefully, spread-eagled in the river. That was a way too optimistic scenario. Crooked as the Cuyahoga was, it was, in retrospect, pretty damn lucky it hit the river at all.

Here, under the bridge, the river went mostly northwest for about a mile before it took a hairpin turn due west. The dragon, from the look of the wreckage, had been heading due east, and met the ground about seventy-five feet shy of the river, at the edge of a gravel-mining operation. The impact zone had just missed the loading gantries.

It was going at a shallow angle, because the body didn't go splat there and then, though there was gore on the gantries about a couple hundred feet up.

The body bounced or slid, off of the land, and tore across the cargo ship that had been anchored by the gantries. The deck buckled, machinery twisted and caved in, the great doors to the holds bent inward, everything splattered with black-red gore.

The dragon had made it almost all the way into the river. Its tail was the only thing

left on the cargo ship. Muscular and black, it was caught up and twisted in a pile of wreckage on the starboard side. It looked as if some gigantic monster had taken a bite about midway down the ship, a semicircular area where the deck didn't exist anymore. It had become a satanic jungle gym of twisted girders, chain, and steel cable.

About a dozen firefighters and emergency workers were scrambling around the wreckage, and I could see four blue white sparking flares where they were cutting the tail free. Looking at the firemen, the dragon's tail was put into perspective. It was thicker than a human torso, and the part where it lay flat on the remains of the deck came up to mid-thigh on the tallest of the emergency crew.

In the river floated the rest of the body. The current was dragging the corpse north, but the tail anchored it firmly so that it pointed at an angle toward the center of the river. The wings had been shredded by impact, and were splayed out over the water like a tattered oil slick. The body seemed little more than a ragged leather sack, black mostly, but in several places there were brief glistening flashes of white where fractured bone had torn free of muscle and skin.

The neck, near a third of its length, had been twisted so far as to nearly decapitate the body. In places it was held on by strips of muscle and sinew thinner than a human arm. The head floated on its side, and it was hard to believe that the open golden eye was not looking right at me.

"The worst icky-eff since that griffin in Hunting Valley," O'Malley told me. I wondered how long it took to cultivate that blasé attitude. I couldn't manage it. I looked at O'Malley and decided that all it took was not giving a crap. "At least this time," he continued, "no one was hurt."

"Except the dragon."

O'Malley shrugged, and pulled at my shoulder. "Okay, long enough."

I resisted the pull, more out of orneriness than an actual desire to remain there to watch the carnage. "Any witnesses?"

"Witnesses?" He snorted. "Every West-Sider who was awake and outside at three-thirty in the morning. This isn't something you miss, Maxwell."

"Did anyone see what happened?"

"What happened?" O'Malley pulled me away from the guardrail and shook his head. "A dragon took a nosedive into the Flats, Sherlock. I know you aren't up on your forensic pathology from working City Hall so long, but maybe I can explain multiple blunt trauma to you as I walk you off the bridge."

I shrugged out of his grasp and kept looking over the water. There was a Coast Guard ship down there, holding position downstream from the head. Around the base of the ship the normally mud-brown waters of the river had turned a sickly rainbow-shimmered shade of black— a slick of the dragon's blood.

As I watched, a figure broke the surface near the base of the cutter. His wet suit was

almost as black as the water he swam in.

*Whatever they pay that guy, it isn't enough.*

He gave a thumbs up to the people on the ship and a pair of winches in the back began reeling up cable. The cables slid out of the water behind the ship, gradually growing taut between the rear of the ship and the shoulder blades of the dragon.

"What're they doing?"

"Come on." He was more insistent, grabbing me this time. "Nesmith is going to give a briefing. You can ask her all the questions you want."

I kept thinking of the frogmen who had to anchor those cables.

"You've seen enough."

I pretty much had, but O'Malley was a little more agitated than he should have been. I wondered why.

"Look, they're going to tow it to Lake Erie and sink it. The carcass is a public health hazard. Now let's move it, Maxwell, before I cite you for interfering with police business."

I risked a glance back at the Coast Guard ship as O'Malley led me away. A glance whose significance flew right by me at the time.

The irony was, if I wasn't so used to the taxonomy of public officials in Cuyahoga County, if I was anyone else— say Morgan, who *should* have been reporting this mess— it would have hit me immediately that Adrian Phillips was out of place on the deck of a Coast Guard cutter dragging a corpse out of the river. Forget who, or what, the corpse was. But whereas O'Malley had managed to cultivate a blasé attitude about blood and carnage, the sight of major public officials had ceased to make much impression on me unless I was expecting some sort of wrongdoing.

To extend the irony, I was probably the only person on the staff of the *Press* who could have identified Phillips at that distance while he was hiding behind an elaborate gas mask.

So I glanced, noted the rotund figure of Adrian Phillips, chairman of the Port Authority, and didn't think anything about it until much later.

## Chapter Two

*ONE of the thirty-two dragons known to be resident in northeast Ohio died sometime between three and four in the morning today, police said. The dragon had been in flight, eastbound over downtown Cleveland, when it struck the ground on the west bank of the Flats about a quarter mile north of the Hope Memorial Bridge.*

*"According to police sources, the suspected cause of death was the so-called 'Icarus Effect,' the name coined by Dr. Newman Shafran of Case Western Reserve University to describe the often fatal side effects when a magical entity strays too far from the Portal . . ."*

The words glowed up from my laptop, fairly stunning in their banality.

"Icky-eff," O'Malley had said. A much more evocative term than "Icarus Effect." The latter sounded like a cheap thriller novel, the former was something you scraped off the sidewalk.

Five times I was tempted to use the cop slang, but I didn't because it seemed disrespectful—which was a damned odd reaction from someone who'd covered Cleveland City Council for nearly a decade.

Whatever name you used for it, the event described by Dr. Newman Shafran would have been catastrophic for a dragon.

I was one of about a half-dozen reporters in a small meeting room in the Justice Center, waiting for the press conference to begin. No one was making statements on-site, for the obvious reasons.

I had started my wait by trying to run off a draft of the piece on my notebook computer. When that effort stalled, I followed an impulse to start getting some background on what it was that killed the dragon. My third call directed me to Dr. Shafran, the professor who'd written the first academic paper that described what our dragon had gone through.

Shafran had been in and, to my surprise, was a source obscure enough to not yet be inundated by calls from other news agencies.

"Icarus Effect," he had repeated my words in a thick Eastern European accent. I couldn't help picturing Bela Lugosi as he talked.

"Yes, the police believe that's the cause of death."

"Interesting. So close to the source, in fact. Odd."

"Is it possible?"

The doctor chuckled and said, "Why, yes, anything is . . . *possible*."

"Can you describe how it could happen? I thought the Portal's influence extended halfway to Canada."

"Oh, indeed, even farther. But mana, magical power you understand, it is energy—but not like light, or gravity, or any so-called force. It is a fluid. Like the air, or the sea, it seeks its own level, subject to eddies and currents."

"So how high up does it go?"

"It completely dissipates at about three miles up over the Portal itself."

"So this dragon had to be flying up pretty high, right?"

He paused. "Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?"

"As I said, the power ebbs and flows. The victim of the effect might be safely within the boundary— they *can* sense where they are, where the power is— but the power might suddenly shift, quicker than the victim can react. A point in space that was saturated with mana can abruptly become dead. Like an air bubble in the sea. Such volatility is much more likely at the edges of the Portals' influence, but is theoretically possible anywhere."

"How long would it take . . . ?"

"Before death?"

"Yes."

The picture that the doctor painted for me, in his bad Transylvanian accent, was less pretty than the scene at the river, if that was possible. Without the magical infrastructure to hold its body together, the sheer mass of the beast would tear it apart. The loss of magic would be as severe for it as the sudden loss of a skeletal system would be for a human being. Combine that with the probable speed the dragon was going when this happened— dragons have been known to break the sound barrier— and the result is akin to shooting a frozen turkey out of a cannon and into a brick wall.

"Couldn't a dragon survive that?" I had asked. "If the impact wasn't fatal?" Dragons were supposed to be able to survive lethal wounds to the brain, the heart, just about anything that didn't cause outright dismemberment.

"No," he said gravely. "The damage descends to the cellular level."

The awful smell of the corpse was because it *did* rot quickly. Unlike a normal corpse, large segments of its flesh were dead before it was. The growth of bacteria in the body was three or four times as fast as in a normal body. Instant gangrene.

Only a fraction of the corpse had rotted by the time I had arrived, but even that amounted to a half a ton of distilled putrescence to poison the air for a quarter mile in every direction.

Probably, if I was a crime reporter, covering people's dead kids for a living, I would have found the last few minutes of this dragon's life a little less affecting. But the deaths I'd covered in the last ten years were those of people's political careers, the blood largely metaphorical.

I stared at the screen on my laptop, convinced I was writing crap.

I kept thinking of the damn dragon, my hands hovering over the keyboard, unmoving. What had it been thinking? Where had it been going? Could it sense the end coming, like feeling the tidal bore before the wave crushes your body— or was it caught completely unaware? What would it be like to be stripped of your reason as the laws of nature decided to tear your body apart?

There was a chorus of chairs scraping around me. I glanced up and saw Public Safety Director Julian Nesmith walk into the room, toward the podium. Everyone was standing, and I pulled out my nondigital notebook. Most everyone here pulled out a similar pad of paper, or a palm-top organizer and a stylus. A few people pulled out digital recorders, but the printed word held the upper hand.

That was something that always struck the new people, especially in my profession. The lack of video. Even after the techies figured out how to get good quality digital imagery near the Portal, the photographic image had taken a cultural back seat in my hometown. There were only two digital cameras in evidence, in the back.

The Portal had struck a deathblow to television in northeast Ohio, which— in the chaos right after the Portal opened— was barely noticed at the time.

What the Portal does— in addition to opening the gates to another reality and giving us sprites and elves, mages and dragons— is play havoc with any recording medium. Take a pre-Portal tape recorder and try to dictate something, what will play back will sound like the taped inner monologue of a paranoid schizophrenic Tibetan monk, backward. Video, you'd get a fun-house mirror vision of hell seen by a color-blind housefly.

Luckily, digital communications had proved a little less susceptible to the interference. Even when the phone lines seemed to only produce garbled static, anyone with an ISDN line had been able to— at least half the time— get on the Internet. This apparently had to do with redundancy and error-checking. What it meant in practical terms was that now every electronic communication device anywhere near the Portal had to carry at least three computer processors to transmit multiple signals that could be combined at the other end to filter out the garbage. It also meant that video monitors had to be high definition flatscreen LCDs, audio recordings had to be on CD or silicon, the hard drive on my laptop had to have five times the space to store enough copies of my data so I could be certain to get it back along with a custom operating system with three-way redundant check sums that could weed out ghost data on the fly.

Bottom line, consumer electronics in this town were specialized and *very* expensive.

But Cleveland now has more local dailies than New York City, so I guess it's a blessing.

Because of that, Julian Nesmith was one of a select few American public officials who didn't have to stare into klieg lights and flashbulbs when she gave a press conference. She was also one of the few American public officials who would never need a microphone. An even five feet of pure adrenaline, she had one of those personalities that tore into a room like a rototiller into a vat of Jell-O.

"I have a short statement, after which I'll take a few questions." She looked at the clock on the wall, hands gripping the sides of the podium. She was perched on a step stool that was invisible behind the podium, and the posture that resulted reminded me of an old revival preacher haranguing us sinners. "We'll try to get this

wrapped up by twelve." I had no doubt, with Nesmith leading the proceedings, that by twelve-oh-one this room would be empty.

"Between three-twenty and three-twenty-five this morning, several people in the Flats and surrounding areas reported seeing a dragon in an uncontrolled dive, heading for the Cuyahoga River. It struck a cargo ship, the *Huron Star*, that was anchored for loading at a facility on the west bank of the Cuyahoga River.

"A forensic examination of the body began at five this morning, concluding fifteen minutes ago. The examination was supervised by Cuyahoga County Coroner Egil Nixon. Copies of the findings will be passed out at the conclusion of this press conference. To summarize the findings; the dragon has been identified as Aloeus, resident of 1000 Euclid Avenue."

There was an uncharacteristic wave of muttering, interrupting Director Nesmith. There were a few shouts, premature questions that were ignored. She waited patiently for the room to calm down.

Aloeus was the first dragon— one of the first *anything* to come through to our side of the Portal.

When the room calmed down, she continued. "Death came prior to impact due to multiple trauma caused by leaving the immediate influence of the Portal. In the opinion of Coroner Nixon, it is death by misadventure."

There was more commotion this time, but the director talked through it. "Because the body represents a present threat to public health and safety, I have authorized its disposal. The Coast Guard is currently towing the body a safe distance out into Lake Erie where it will be chemically treated and burned. I have five minutes to take questions."

A sandy-haired kid, half my age, from the *Plain Dealer* asked, "Have there been any estimates of the amount of damage?"

*Cut right to the chase, kid.*

"Approximately two hundred thousand—"

My cell phone started vibrating at me. I had forgotten to turn it off. It was absolutely the wrong time, but I'm one of those guys who can't stand to let a phone keep ringing. I flipped it open one-handed and whispered harshly, "This better be good."

There was a whistle of static on the line. Piercing, like trying to talk to a fax machine. There was a chorus of voices beneath it, mumbling, whispering. It was the common static from the Portal, but it felt sinister, and it didn't go away the way it usually does when the phone finally deciphers the real signal.

When sense wasn't immediately forthcoming, I closed it.

". . . don't know as of yet. I'll direct you to the SPU liaison for that question." O'Malley's Special Paranormal Unit again. It was virtually an autonomous district within the Police Department, one of several outstanding gripes the Police



Department had with City Hall. Hearing the initials made me severely pissed off that I'd missed the question.

"Madam Director," an older guy, from the *Leader*, was asking this one. "Don't you have any reservations about the method used to dispose of—"

My phone buzzed again.

I pulled it out. "Goddamn it." I kept my voice to a whisper, but some of my fellow pillars of the fourth estate turned to look in my direction.

It didn't surprise me this time when my ear was met with a piercing whine and the subliminal muttering. This time, a voice made itself heard over the babble.

"*Is this a dagger I see before me?*" The voice's tone and pitch warbled like an old cassette tape that kept sticking.

"What?" I whispered at it.

"*The handle toward my hand?*" The keening background noise increased, and the voice itself stretched toward breaking. "*Come, let me clutch thee—*"

The voice, and the other noises abruptly cut off. A few seconds of clicking, then a dial tone. The caller ID on my phone was no help, the anonymous thespian had his number blocked.

*Great, someone with an unlisted number is phoning in Shakespearean quotes to me.*

This time I turned the phone off.

## Chapter Three

*THE dragon Aloeus, first of his kind to reside here, has also been the first of his kind to die here. Shortly before four this morning, Aloeus plunged to his death on the shore of the Cuyahoga River. This afternoon his body was towed out to the open water and burned."*

*"The Cuyahoga County coroner issued a statement ruling Aloeus' death accidental, 'death by misadventure.' A victim of the 'Icarus Effect.' Dr. Newman Shafran of Case Western Reserve University, the person who first described it, explains the effect as follows . . ."*

I liked this better.

With a first draft safely wired to the *Press* server, I was the last to leave the Justice Center. Most of my colleagues were off, some on what would be fruitless attempts to get comments from other dragons, others to comb the West Side of Cleveland in search of a witness or a dozen, others to pull the chains of whatever personal contacts they had in the city government.

I didn't mind being the last out. I had been doing this for way too long to engage in a panicked rush to be the "first" to get something. Instead, I had written out a first draft of the feature once I'd gotten enough material to write one. Without the deadline pressure looming as large, I was free to ponder how I was going to attack this story.

I left the Justice Center by the Lakeside exit. Across the street, beyond the park flanking City Hall and past the twenty-foot wall surrounding the old Browns Stadium, I could see the lake. In the distance, I could make out a pillar of oily black smoke on the horizon.

*We sent a dragon to Valhalla today . . .*

I watched the smoke for a moment. I knew I wanted to write about Aloeus. Not just the carnage in the Flats. Everyone would rehash that. I wanted to get a sense of who it was that died this morning.

I caught a whiff of ozone and heard thunder rumbling from the permanent cloud formations above the stadium. I looked up at the swirling vortex, and saw a pillar of black clouds stacked above the site of the Portal. I could see lightning flashes break across the slowly rotating mass. Except for the smoke on the horizon, the sky was otherwise a cloudless blue.

The strange weather here was not actually due to some magical aura cast by the Portal. It was plain old meteorology. The Portal didn't just let in dragons and elves and magic and such, it also let in— and out— very large volumes of air. The difference in air pressure, temperature, and humidity between the two sides of the Portal had created a standing weather front on both sides. There was always some sort of atmospheric effect marking the site of the Portal.

A few drops of moisture hit my face as the clouds above the stadium began a downpour. I was far enough away to avoid getting drenched, but it was disconcerting to watch the gray sheet of rain sluice off the stadium not half a mile from me.

Rainbows unfolded over the lake as the sun shone through the localized storm.

I looked at the stadium, really *looked* at it for the first time in a while. Where Aloeus had come from, the Portal, and the world beyond it.

I had been one of a select group who were able to see the Portal without either paying to reach it or being paid to guard it. A friend at WKYC— yes, I was a local TV news whore at one time— had to attend a funeral and had given me his season tickets for the game. I had gone to see a division championship battle. Instead, I had gotten the show of the millennium.

It had been a few months shy of ten years ago, when I had seen it open— twenty feet above the Pittsburgh thirty-five yard line. Halftime, tied game, and I don't think anyone really remembers that the Steelers went on to win the division when they played the second half at Three Rivers.

It sort of grew out of a point in the air, swelling until it sliced into the turf. It still gives me chills the way the silence in the stands grew with the sphere. It can be really scary when thousands of people are being really quiet.

The Portal was a mirrored sphere about fifty feet in diameter, rippling with rainbow shimmers of color. Mirror, but not quite a mirror, since the reflection on the sphere wasn't of the surrounding stadium, but a coliseum of a much more ancient vintage. Within moments we could all feel a breeze from it carrying the smell of damp mulch and swamp gas. Probably from the reflected coliseum which seemed to have been overtaken by wetlands and reeds.

The PA system whined, broadcasting whispered muttering. TV monitors across the stadium, and beyond, began showing strange ghost images, as if Salvador Dalí and Hieronymus Bosch had collaborated to make a Philip Glass music video.

The cameramen were the first to approach it, hopelessly trying to get the image on tape.

Then they came.

A small band of folks in ragged garb first appeared in distorted reflection on one side of the mirror, growing closer until they slipped through the surface. If you tried, you could pretend this quartet of guys were funky-looking humans. But, I think to the last of us, we knew. These folks weren't from around here.

They were all tall, six feet to a man, and had hair that didn't look quite right. The shade was off, and the way it grew around the skull followed subtle curves that didn't belong to a human face. Their ears were long and pointed, eyes narrow, chin long. Three of them had a bluish cast to their skin, one was a fire-engine red that would put Chief Wahoo to shame, and the last one was black— and not the black we mean when talking about human skin color, but black, like a shadow on the brightest day.

Elves. Fugitives from a kingdom on the other side of the Portal. A regime that must have been a true horror when you consider five guys from a feudal agrarian society— magic or not— walking into a Browns game . . .

Let's just say that they must have burned all their bridges before being prodded by microphone-wielding sportscasters and being surrounded by three-hundred-pound guys in dog masks started looking attractive.

It took about ten hours to clear the stadium. The police were the first to set up a perimeter around the field. Then around the stadium. In forty-eight hours, when some of the nasty things— and Aloeus would have been classed in that group at the time— started coming through, the perimeter became the province of the National Guard.

The next twelve months were pretty rough. No TV at all, Radio intermittent enough to be almost useless. Only completely digital communications worked, and those became less than reliable. Computers would work for a time, but were subject to massive random failures. Everything was pretty damn chaotic.

The Feds tried to step in, and that gave Mayor Rayburn his moment of glory. The common legend is that Cleveland's mayor saw what the Portal meant, not just in relation to the short-term chaos it was causing, but in what it could mean for the area, long-term. Not that many appreciated it at the time.

When FEMA was all set to come in, declaring northeast Ohio a disaster area, Mayor Rayburn drew a line in the sand, saying, "This far, no farther." The nation was appalled that the city would stop federal aid at the city limits, but his explanation was terse, "I will not have this natural resource nationalized through the back door."

The President scoffed at the accusation, but subsequent efforts to claim the Portal through everything from the Defense Department to the National Parks Service showed that Rayburn was prescient. While the legal battles between city and federal government rolled up toward the Supreme Court, Congress made the point moot. The federal legislators— a majority of whom belonged to a party that wasn't the President's, and made much political hay over limiting the interference of the federal government in people's lives— saw a grand opportunity to thumb their nose at their least favorite executive without damaging their own power base. They sent up a veto-proof bill that granted the Portal exclusively to Cuyahoga County.

It was later uncovered that, during this whole time, Mayor Rayburn had established several unilateral trade agreements across the Portal that rendered FEMA assistance unnecessary.

Once Cleveland got out of that first year, Rayburn's decision began paying off. Once city and social functions resumed some sort of normalcy, the Portal began to grow us its first cash crop. Tourism. Nearly two million people the first year. All to see a place where things now existed that were never seen outside a Tolkien novel or a Grimm fairy tale. The money that came in the second year undid the damage of the first. The year after *that* helped undo the last quarter century of urban neglect. The year after that, and the census found that for the first time since the seventies, the city's population was growing. There were people who moved here simply because a herd of unicorns had taken up residence in Hunting Valley.

Magery itself became a major industry. The powers wrapping northeast Ohio could be used to do many things that couldn't be done elsewhere, everything from removing an inoperable brain tumor to giving you a whole-body makeover that could go as far as gender and species.

Last, but not least, the Portal itself was the ultimate moneymaker. How much would you pay for a chance to start over on another world, one with completely different rules? A lot of people would pay considerably, and the city charged what the market would bear— slightly less than a passenger ticket on the space shuttle.

Over the course of a decade, the home of the Portal had grown more and more secure. Where the stadium was once surrounded by barbed wire and AA batteries, it was now contained within a forty-foot-tall brick wall that tried to look vaguely like a castle. The anti-aircraft batteries now stood in handsome cylindrical towers where people could ignore them if they wanted to. Not a hint of razor wire.

And every week a bus would pull into the stadium, drop off our émigrés and pick up the Portal's latest refugees.

Above, the sky was always swirling and black. Marking the place where our world ends, and another one begins. A connection between here and there. An unexplained freak of (super)nature that had become the backbone of this city's economy. And the fact that no one really could explain it, mages and scientists alike, meant that everyone here was living on borrowed time.

The door opening was chaotic enough. Something about Aloeus' death made me wonder what would happen if the door ever shut?

## Chapter Four

I DECIDED that, if I was going to focus on the dragon himself, I needed to start with the dragon. I headed my Volkswagen up Euclid to see the legal residence of the late dragon Aloeus.

1000 Euclid. The address had sounded familiar, but it wasn't until I reached the light at East Ninth that I realized why.

The intersection of Euclid and East Ninth has been a financial nexus since the 1900s. The Huntington Bank Building lorded over the northeast corner, a massive gray stone pile over a century old. Across from it on Ninth was the characterless white facade of National City Bank, an architectural cipher perpetrated in the nineteen-sixties. Across Euclid from the blank whiteness of National City Bank was the brand new corporate headquarters of First Cleveland Savings and Loan.

1000 Euclid was on the southeast corner, the old Cleveland Trust Building. *Aloeus lived here?* I thought as I pulled up half a block to a parking lot.

The Cleveland Trust Building had been empty for a few decades before the Portal opened, ever since Cleveland Trust and its conglomerate successors merged into nothingness. Apparently, sometime in the last ten years, it had found a new occupant.

I felt a little chill. For many people, this kind of revelation would just wash over them. Not knowing that the Cleveland Trust Building was occupied? Why should they know?

*I should know.* That was my job. This building wasn't just some random empty real estate. Cleveland Trust was an inexorable part of the city's history. It was thanks to that particular bank that the city went into default in the nineteen-seventies, and since the building had been vacated, it had been owned by a succession of movers and shakers. Racking my brain, I think the last time I heard about who owned the building it had been bought by Forest Hills Enterprises, Leo Baldassare's development company, maybe a year or two before the Portal opened.

In retrospect, it was interesting how the building never appeared to have been taken up in the economic boom that had gripped the rest of downtown. I wondered if Baldassare still owned the building.

Unlike its neighbors, the Cleveland Trust Building wasn't a high-rise, though it dominated the intersection. It was four stories of domed neoclassicism, someone's platonic ideal of a bank.

Looking at it, it still seemed empty to me. But examining it made me realize that the windows were tinted black, so there was no real way to tell if anyone was home. I wondered if a dragon ever resided there, or if the address was just a front. It was common enough for people involved in the higher levels of this city to rent properties just to have a legal address. I still remember the bad old days when Council members would have one address in their ward, and another one as far as their school district was concerned.

While I watched from the parking lot, I saw two or three people walk up and try the doors. Fellow members of the journalistic community. I saw about a dozen guys hovering about the building. No luck, apparently.

I stepped out of the Volkswagen and into the humid August air. I'd decided to give my obligatory fifteen minutes to this angle before I went somewhere else to ferret out Aloeus' history.

I crossed Ninth and headed toward the steps in front of the central set of massive entry doors. One of the people milling around called out to me, "Ain't no use, no one's answering."

I turned around and saw the sandy-haired kid from the *Plain Dealer*, the one who'd asked about property damage. He was shaking his head. "Typical. They only speak through their lawyers, and the lawyers don't speak."

I nodded and continued up to the doors. They were solid metal, decorated with embossed scrollwork, but no windows. I stood there a few moments wondering exactly what it was I was going to do. Knock? While I stood there, pondering the lack of a doorbell, intercom, or even a knocker, I heard a skittering noise above me.

I looked up and saw a leathery gargoyle wing flash from up on the roof. I was at the wrong angle to see what it was, so I backed up a few steps to get a better look at it. Before I could tell what it was, a voice called my attention back to street level.

"You're Kline Maxwell, aren't you?"

I turned around to face the kid again. "Yeah."

"You used to be big, didn't you?"

*To hell with you, too, kid.* "I suppose you could say that."

He held out his hand, "I admired your work all through college."

I pondered snubbing the brat, but I was slightly more professional than that. I took his hand and shook it quickly, once. "And you are?"

"Sam Barlogh. So is there some sort of political angle to the dragon's swan dive?"

I looked over my shoulder, up at the roof of the building. Whatever had been there was gone now. "There's a political angle to everything."

"What're you looking at?"

I turned back to face him. "Nothing."

"But—" I was saved from further conversation by a black Caddy limo pulling up to the curb. My comrades, Sam Barlogh included, converged on the vehicle as the rear passenger door opened.

The nexus of the attention was an older gentleman— white hair, clean-shaven, narrow glasses with gold rims, charcoal-gray suit with black armband. He had one of those expressions that made you think the owner went through life smelling something unpleasant. He pushed his way through the reporters without looking at them or speaking. He headed directly toward the Cleveland Trust Building, and the doors opened for him before he reached them.

I didn't bother trying to crack that particular nut. Instead, I looked at the limo, which everyone was ignoring. It pulled away, and I caught sight of its license plates.

"FOREST 1"

The windows were tinted, but I wanted very much to see if there had been another passenger.

After striking out at Aloeus' home base, I had done the rounds of the obvious interviews. Eyewitnesses, public servants, including an eerie conversation with one of the divers who'd chained the body to the Coast Guard cutter. The only obvious person I couldn't get hold of was Egil Nixon, the County Coroner, just voice mail saying he was out of the office. Didn't matter all that much, I had his write-up on the dragon.

At this point, late in the afternoon, my story had gone through another three drafts, and I was sequestered in the periodical department at the Main Cleveland Public Library. It was a quiet place where the computers outnumbered people. There were still microfilm stacks, which held everything up until the turn of the century, but everything recent was in a computerized database. Local conditions made digital archiving a necessity. It also made a researcher's job easier. With the combination of OCR software that could "read" just about any type of printed text, and search algorithms pioneered for the Internet, the user could parse millions of scanned pages with any keyword— not just a list of subjects that some database programmer thought was important.

Which worked well for me.

Aloeus, like the rest of his kin, avoided the press. There wasn't much about *him* in the archives. I did find one article, however, that had him involved in a strange

"welcoming" ceremony with Mayor Rayburn in the first few months after the Portal's opening. This dragon was the first paranormal critter to meet with anyone in an official capacity. It was also shortly after this meeting that the city set in motion the legal mechanisms to recognize the nonhuman creatures coming through the Portal as beings with rights. That movement reached up as far as the state level so, currently, the United States—for the first time since the Civil War—had states that disagreed on the legal definition of a human being.

Aloeus met with people on several levels: city, county, state; judicial and legislature; public sector and private. Rarely did his name dominate the stories. It was always this particular official enacting some initiative, and the dragon's name would be mentioned in passing. Discussions were talked about, but rarely the contents of those discussions.

I had *written* some of these stories.

Very, very good at keeping a low profile. The perception from the articles was that his involvement was slight, almost beneath mention. The volume of text belied that. I tried to remember some of my own thoughts about some of these stories. To my embarrassment, I couldn't focus on any thoughts about Aloeus' involvement. The emphasis was always on what the *humans* were doing, what the government and the people in it were doing. Which Councilmen were winning, which were losing, what city departments were going to get money, which will lose funds. . . .

Did I ever once wonder about what these "paranormal citizens" did, or thought?

*Only insofar as it became grist for the political mill on Lakeside.*

I didn't like where the self-examination was going, so I buckled down and tried to find a connection between Aloeus and Forest Hills Enterprises.

Jackpot.

The thing about the legal status of dragons is that they only had rights as individuals within the state of Ohio. While other states had to recognize some aspects of that legal truth—contracts binding in Ohio were binding in California and so on—that didn't mean, for instance, that Aloeus had property rights in Nevada. Aloeus couldn't sign a contract drafted under the rules of any other state. He couldn't have personal assets in an out-of-state bank.

Since dragons liked to accumulate wealth, that was a bit of a handicap, even if they couldn't physically visit the places whose laws didn't recognize them.

The solution was to incorporate. A dragon, or any creature recognized as having legal rights under Ohio law, could form a corporation under Ohio state law and that corporation would exist under the laws of every state as well as those of the federal government. The corporation would have more rights than the person who owned it.

Dragons pioneered this technique to sidestep the nation's refusal to deal with them as people. Aloeus, Inc., was formed twenty-four hours after the governor signed the law granting Aloeus the right to own property.



And Aloeus, Inc., had a lot of real estate.

All of it seemed to have been bought through, or from, Forest Hills Enterprises. Besides the Cleveland Trust Building, there were properties dotting the city, and several thousand undeveloped acres in— of all places— Mexico. Leo Baldassare was making a lot of money off of Aloeus Inc.

I decided that I was going to have a talk with Baldassare about a dragon.

## Chapter Five

LEONARDO Baldassare and I knew each other. He had been a high-level unnamed source for a number of my stories in the past. I was one of a select few who had his personal cell phone number, a privilege I never abused. Baldassare was much too valuable a resource for me, and he was very much aware of it.

In general, he was willing to talk to me for the usual reason: to stir the pot of his political enemies, and sometimes his allies. In return for allowing myself to be fed those stories, he would occasionally allow me to probe issues that were on my own agenda.

He once told me, "I talk to you for two reasons. One: I never saw you print anything that wasn't true. Two: You've never used my own words against me." The former was good journalistic practice. Always confirm your facts. The latter was due to the fact that Baldassare was too smart to hand over ammunition to a reporter. A fact that made him twice as smart as any politician that has served in this town in the last twenty years— except his political ally, Mayor Rayburn.

I think the real reason he was willing to talk to me was because I never quoted him, even as an unnamed source. Any information I got from him I confirmed from a couple of other sources before it went into print. Kept us both honest.

So I wasn't completely surprised when I called him for a comment and he invited me to his estate for a private chat. I made it down to Hunting Valley at a little after six in the afternoon.

Hunting Valley is an enclave of the landed rich. Unlike the golf-course developments that have multimillion dollar homes ready-furnished for the latest executive VP import, there's a sense of permanence to the estates here. The residents have an unbeatable combination of wealth and a desire to keep things as they are. We're talking a suburb so rich that it doesn't need to collect property taxes. A suburb where the city itself buys up property to keep it from the developers— though anyone coming to the city asking for commercial development, or even a multifamily zoning variance, would be laughed out of City Hall.

There are roads in Hunting Valley where you can drive for a few miles without seeing a single house.

The Baldassare estate was true to that model. It lived out of sight behind a split-rail fence, a row of pine trees, and about two dozen acres of horse pasture. The only indication of who lived here was a small wooden sign that said Long-Run Farms. Below that, it bore the ubiquitous Hunting Valley icon of the fox-hunter in mid jump.

There wasn't a gate, or even a sign warning off trespassers. The only sign of how high class this place was, was the fact that the road wasn't gravel or asphalt, but cobblestone.

I turned down the driveway and followed it past the stand of pines. The split-rail fence paced me on both sides. A pair of horses stood off in the distance, watching me with bored curiosity from the center of the pasture. I lost sight of them when I rounded the trees.

The impact of the estate sort of sneaks up on you. When you reach the trees, you have a disarmingly bucolic setting. Then you enter the woods and drive about fifteen seconds, and suddenly the realization strikes you. This is *all* one estate. A single man owns *all* this. Then you reach the second gate.

This is the point where you realize that this guy is a billionaire.

The wall was about eight feet high, built out of stone carved and beveled like a jigsaw puzzle. The gate was wrought iron with twisted gargoyle shapes. Imbedded in the lattice of the gate itself were about a dozen semiprecious stones the size of my fist. The stones glowed faintly red in the evening light. The wards didn't need such a visual display; the glow was there to let you know that the wards existed.

As my Volkswagen approached, the gates opened inward. The benefit of being expected.

I followed the road. I emerged from the woods and followed the driveway down one side of a reflecting pool larger than my condo. I pulled to a stop outside Baldassare's house.

I was looking at concentrated personal wealth, distilled and molded into a Tudor mansion that covered more square footage than the field in Baldassare's stadium.

Somewhat incongruously, I saw Baldassare on his flagstone patio, waving from over a barbecue grill. I waved back to acknowledge him and stepped out of the car. The evening air was pleasantly cool, and the wind was blowing the odor of mesquite toward me.

Baldassare wasn't as big as his name. He was a head shorter than I was, and about fifty pounds lighter. At first glance he looked like one of those background guys that disappear through life. Then you made eye contact with him, and something about that impression changed. You had just started sizing him up when you realized he had already sized you up, decided what you wanted, what he was going to give you, and what you were going to pay for it.

"How are you doing, Kline?" he said, smiling at me. He presented the kind of aura of easy camaraderie that was unsuccessfully aped by most politicians and used car

salesman.

I shrugged. "Same old, same old."

"That isn't quite true." He flipped a steak on the grill. The steak was an inch-thick porterhouse, and the grill was a cavernous stainless-steel barbecue that probably cost more than my Volkswagen. "It seems you're taking a step or two off the political beat."

"Yes and no."

He turned and pointed a two-foot-long barbecue fork toward a bar on the far side of the patio. "Feel free to grab a drink."

"Thanks." I walked over to the bar and poured myself a seltzer water. "I appreciate you seeing me."

"I was interested in where your questions were going." He tonged a steak out of the grill. "You want one? I got four going."

I shook my head and didn't ask why he was cooking four porterhouse steaks at one time. From what I could tell, we were the only ones here. He must have seen the question in my eyes, because he said, "Clara's off doing some charity thing in California, and I only get one night off a week to cook." He looked at the meat and said, "I know it's a sin to microwave steaks, but if I vacuum-pack these babies right after I grill them— and don't freeze them, God forbid anyone freezes them— got dinner for the rest of the week."

I nodded and sipped my soda water. I felt a little nervous. Baldassare was not just any source. I'd been cultivating him since Rayburn's first mayoral campaign. He was invaluable as long as I didn't alienate him.

"So, to what do we owe your change in the subject matter?"

"Maybe you heard about what happened to Morgan?"

A small grin crossed his face. "I hear he was a sight— so *you* got his beat?"

I shook my head. "No, just the dragon. Which isn't far outside my bailiwick, after all."

He raised his tongs. "Hold that thought." He proceeded to pile four medium rare steaks on a platter. "I'll just be a moment."

Baldassare walked toward the French doors that opened onto the patio with his pile of steaks. He bore a brief resemblance to a server in one of those old-world Little Italy restaurants. He left me outside to sip my drink.

He came back without any steaks. When he saw me looking at him, he wiped his hands on his apron and said, "Oh, I'd already eaten." He shut down the grill and shed the apron on the back of a wrought iron chair. He walked over and fixed himself a drink. "So, Kline, since when did dead dragons become political?"

"Since the dragon was political."

"A little outside the City Hall beat, isn't it?"

"A little," I agreed. "You knew him."

"The dragon?" For a few long moments he looked introspective as he sipped an unstirred vodka martini. "No, I didn't know Aloeus."

I arched my eyebrow enough so he'd know that I knew of his business relationship with Aloeus.

He acknowledged me with a shake of the head.

"I'm not saying I didn't meet him, negotiate with him, do business with him, even. But I never *knew* him." He gave me a half smile, and I knew that he was having a chuckle at my expense. At how transparent I was and how easily he faked me out.

He gestured toward a pair of wrought iron chairs that flanked a mosaic table. The motif on the table was a reproduction of some ancient Greek artwork, a serpentine monster that undulated endless coils around a naked human figure armed only with a sword. "Have a seat."

I took the chair, and he settled in next to me. Seated, we both looked out from the patio toward a rolling hillside that ended in the Chagrin River.

"Kline, take out your notebook. For once, what I'm telling you is on the record."

"You see that hill over there? That's where we met the first time. I still don't know exactly how he found me, or how he knew who I was.

"I was coming out to the barbecue, just like you saw me. I dropped fifteen pounds of baby back ribs into the dirt when I saw him. It was just the start of an early spring, about two months after the thing opened. You know what it was like then? Yeah. It wasn't much better for me. I mean, of all the ways to lose the season. The National Guard was parked on my stadium, and it looked like the Feds were about to steamroller through everything.

"And I walked outside and there's this lizard as big as my house sitting on the lawn and looking at me— he looked at me like my wife's cat looks at me. Head cocked to one side. And that neck— he was looking *down* on the roof. How he managed not to be seen for two months, I don't know. I suppose there was some sort of magic involved.

"What he looked like? I keep thinking of my wife's cat, this arrogant Siamese with a shitty attitude. Not that he looked anything like a cat; he didn't, but it was the body language, the way he sat and looked at you.

"Black skin, muscles rippling like a thoroughbred, head almost birdlike. He blinked slowly, like he had all the time in the world.

"His tail dragged in the water, and when he lowered his head toward me, I could feel his breath on my face. Smelled like flowers and brimstone, sort of a perfumed sulfur.

"I won't lie. I nearly crapped my pants. I thought I was going to die there and then.

"Then it opened its mouth.

**" 'Mr. Baldassare, we have to talk.'**

"Now the last thing I expected from this thing was for it to talk to me. This was something out of a monster movie— supposed to eat people, not talk to them. And the voice. If James Earl Jones was a nine-hundred-foot-tall pope, he could sound like that if he was really pissed.

"Despite that, I managed to ask it how it knew me.

**" 'I know many things.'**

"This was one of those moments where everything just sort of clicks. For me, this was the point when I personally realized that everything had changed forever. I backed up and sat down in the chair you're sitting in now.

" 'You know me,' I told it. 'I don't know you.' That's one of the first rules of negotiation, never let the other side realize you're scared and intimidated. Especially if you *are* scared and intimidated.

**" 'Call me Aloeus. I am the first of my kind to transit this realm.'**

" 'What do you want?' I was doing my damndest to stay calm with this thing's breath smelling of wet sulfur and wearing a lizard grin that had incisors the size of Mike Tyson's biceps. It wasn't easy. But I kept thinking, I've talked turkey with folks in Youngstown who'd kill me as easy as this thing, and probably in more creative ways.

**" 'You know the ruler here, the local baron?'**

"It took me a moment to get it. 'Dave Rayburn?'

**" 'Dave Rayburn.'**

" 'Yes, I know him. I helped get him elected. He's the *mayor*, though, not a baron—he doesn't even have any jurisdiction here—' I waved at the hills and the Chagrin River over there. 'His authority stops at Cleveland's border.'

**" 'I have known mayors. His rule extends beyond that title.'**

"I didn't correct him. States of emergency do tend to amplify executive power. But, Dave had only been in office half a term, and while the Portal business solidified his support in the city initially, that was a short honeymoon. Right at that moment, Dave was probably at his lowest ebb, fighting the Feds, the state, the Council. He wanted to hold the Portal, but he was only inches from caving. I was *not* telling the dragon that. I was hoping he knew something I didn't.

"In retrospect, he did.

"I asked, 'What do you want with the mayor?'

*" 'We need to discuss his future, and ours.' "*

"I won't bore you with the details, but we talked through the night. He told me what the Portal could mean to both our peoples.

"What did it mean? Well, to Aloeus and his kind— and I mean kind to include the elves, griffins, unicorns— it was an escape from the tyranny of Ragnan, the realm on the other side of the Portal. To us, it was a window to possibilities that we couldn't have dreamed of before. At that point we were still dealing with the negative side effects of the Portal— Aloeus wanted to be sure we saw the positive ones.

"Yes, and he wanted the Portal to remain under local control.

"When dawn broke he said, *'Go now, bring him here.'*

"I tried to tell him that there was an emergency going on here, and pulling the city's mayor out to the suburbs might not be that easy.

"Aloeus held out a clawed fist in front of me. His hands seemed tiny in proportion to his body, but that fist was still the size of my head. He opened it, and laying in his hand was a loop of solid gold chain. *'Take this to him. He will come.'*

"I picked it up, and it was warm to the touch. At the time I thought it was from being held, but now I'm pretty sure it was the heat of some sort of enchantment. I took it as a good faith offering.

"Of course, when I managed to corner Dave in the HQ they'd set up at the Justice Center, he looked at me as if I were nuts. There were a few moments that morning when I was convinced that we'd finally parted company.

"Then I gave him the chain, which was still warm.

"I told you about the moment when everything clicks? I think that was the point where Dave had his click. He handled that chain for a few moments, and he must have felt something I couldn't, because right then was when he told the U.S. Army to go to hell.

"That had been the decision he'd been struggling with the past week or so. The federal government was moving into position to cap this Portal thing; they were just waiting for the mayor. He handled the chain, looked out the window at the stadium, and called in his aides.

"He gave them the first notice that David Rayburn wasn't going to play ball. Instead, he told them to request the governor to send in every available National Guard unit to, in his words, 'help hold the city.' It was as much to hold it against the Army, as the Portal.

"That evening, a motorcade came down here. We had Dave, about six police cars, and two Hummers carrying National Guardsmen. Dave didn't talk on the way out here, he just kept staring out the window and fondling that chain. He was looking out at what had happened to the city already. Even on the outbound Shoreway, you could see the damage. Boarded-up storefronts, boarded-up *banks*. National Guard

on patrol through the streets of Cleveland— and once we crossed the border we saw some of the Army units, tanks and all.

"When we left 271, we passed through three blackout zones.

"I know he was thinking about the city. At that point I don't think he was sure that keeping the Feds out was the right thing. You must remember what it was like the first two months. Everyone— I mean *everyone*— was calling for Dave's head. The President was calling him an insane autocrat for trying to retain control of the Portal. I mean, in the third week of the crisis, Dave had to go as far as to get a federal judge to issue a restraining order to keep the Army from taking over.

"For two months he had been resisting. And it looked, then, like he had committed political suicide. I was close to the only ally he had left— and frankly that was because I had some vested interest in keeping the Feds from taking over the stadium. It was getting to the point where I felt that we were going to need to let the Feds in just to get the city under control. I mean, it wasn't money anymore, it was getting to be things like food—

"Yeah? I know about those rumors. I'm not going to venture an opinion. I have no direct knowledge that the Army was blocking aid into the city to put pressure on Dave. I know that shipments were making it into the suburbs, but not over the border. That could just as well have been the jurisdictional chaos the Army blamed it on. The Senate hearings found no wrongdoing, so I'm not going out on a limb to say there was any.

"Anyway, what I was saying was that Dave was taking a hell of an unpopular position at that point. People were starting to go hungry, and it was *his* fault. No one saw the Portal as anything other than a bizarre natural disaster. The federal government wanted to take it over, and he was the only one who saw any reason not to let them.

"Aloeus had stayed, as promised, and when the motorcade rounded the driveway, I was worried that the Guard, or the police escort, would start shooting. This huge lizard hadn't become any less intimidating while I'd been gone. Fortunately, Aloeus didn't make any sudden moves, and I doubt he considered the threat from the Guardsmen or the police as significant. Or, more likely, considering where he came from, he considered it only appropriate that the local baron have an honor guard.

"The security people didn't want Dave to leave the car, but Dave shook them off. I moved to accompany him, and he just shook his head. 'No, Leo. Just me.' The first words he'd spoken to me since we started down here.

"I didn't hear what they talked about. But it took longer than my talk with the dragon. Dave, to his credit, didn't appear intimidated by the fact that he was talking to a hundred-foot lizard with a set of jaws that could bite him in half at the waist. He paced. He waved his arms. He shouted. Just like he talks to the Council.

"No, I never got to know exactly what they talked about. But I do know he asked what the chain meant. I saw him hold it up, and I could read the question on his lips.

I only heard a fragment of an answer, " ' . . . *a sign of what is at stake* . . . '

"After that, Dave ordered the escort back, and after about a fifteen-minute argument with the ranking cop and the ranking Guardsman, we all pulled back out of earshot.

"It was hard to believe that Aloeus could whisper.

"Yes, it did influence Dave's stand against the Feds. It seemed to solidify his initial instincts. Of course, it didn't help his standing with anyone when the rumors started that he was talking to something that'd come out of the Portal. I mean the *elves* were still sitting in a tent city, behind a razor wire wall at Burke Lakefront.

"If Valdis, Ragnan's reigning god-king hadn't fallen about four months into it, Dave wouldn't have survived. Council was already getting together the legal machinery to remove him, and the courts looked like they were beginning to lean against him. The deal he struck with Zygmund, the rebel overlord who'd defeated Valdis, was nothing less than a political miracle.

"When food started coming out of the Portal, all of Dave's enemies were struck dumb for about a month. You know that Dave made damn sure that everyone knew that it was him, his administration, that was bringing the food in. That was when the tide turned. Especially when, after it was obvious that no *aid* was necessary, the federal government started its other moves to take over the Portal.

"It was almost two years through the appeals, and the court orders. It was scheduled before the Supreme Court before the Congress decided to decide the issue for everyone. By Dave's reelection campaign, he was a hero. The man who stood up to the Feds.

"I know, we're talking about Aloeus. I didn't have much personal contact with him after those initial meetings. I was just a middleman. I know that he was active in helping the administration draft legislation to deal with our new paranormal citizenry. The kind of thing that allowed some rights to these critters, at least on the local level.

"The deal with the stadium? That was just an arrangement to compensate me for the rights I— and the Browns franchise— had to give up so that the city could administer the Portal. I know, the city does *own* the property, but there was a twenty-five-year lease that both I and the city were obligated to. The fees I get from the stadium are simply compensation for the city breaking the lease.

"No, I don't think Aloeus had anything to do with that deal."

## Chapter Six

AFTER Baldassare finished his story, we both sat for a few long moments of silence. While the story itself was good background, it omitted more recent history, specifically Forest Hills and property deals. I knew the omission was intentional, Baldassare was more than adept enough to know why I was here. Either he didn't



want to talk about it, or he wanted me to ask.

"I have a few other questions," I said quietly.

"I was sure you would," he said, smiling.

It was a chess game now. Baldassare had stopped volunteering information. He wanted me to probe. That way, he would get a measure of exactly what I did and didn't know. Which meant that, if I asked the wrong questions, in the wrong order, he would blithely allow me to stumble down the wrong path.

I bore him no malice for that; it was part of the game, after all. He treated prosecuting attorneys and Council committees no differently.

"You said you did business with him?" I opened.

"To be precise," he said with a bit of a grin, "I said I didn't *deny* doing business with him."

"But you did."

"His company, yes. I presume you knew that."

"What kind of business did you engage in with him?"

Baldassare steepled his fingers, "You should understand that I'm under contractual obligations. I can't just itemize business dealings ad hoc. I can refer you to the quarterly shareholder's report—"

I shook my head. "Just, in general, what did Forest Hills Enterprises provide Aloeus?"

"Aloeus, Incorporated, Kline. He may have died, but the legal construction carries on without him."

*Interesting point.* "So Forest Hills provided what?"

"It is a real estate development company. Forest Hills does with Aloeus, Inc., what it does with everyone else. It buys and sells commercial development properties."

"In Mexico?"

"Forest Hills Enterprises holds properties all across North America."

"And why would Aloeus, *Inc.*, want to buy acres of undeveloped property in Mexico?"

Baldassare looked at me, "I suspect you would have to ask Aloeus that question." He sipped his drink, and I had the eerie feeling that in our little game of conversational chess I had suffered a fool's mate.

I didn't let him go at that. "Why would you think he bought property in a place he would never be able to go?"

"If I were to theorize, which I do not, I would say that the property was purchased for the same reason it was sold. To make a profit."

"You're saying that Aloeus was speculating in real estate."

"That seems to be the obvious conclusion." He set the empty glass on the mosaic table. "Do you have any other questions?"

"Do you associate with any other dragons?"

"Some business contacts. They tend to be private creatures."

*And wealthy*, I thought. The community of money could inspire more solidarity than nationality or— I suspected in this case— species. "Do you know any who might talk to me?" I asked him.

"Interesting question," Baldassare shook his head. "They don't line up for interviews."

"Could you set up a meeting?" I asked.

"You don't ask small favors." Baldassare said.

"I rarely ask any," I replied. In his case, it was true. In my years of our relationship, I'd never asked him to perform any actions on my behalf. Not so much as an introduction. I had always felt the dynamic between us was too fragile and too one-sided for me to push things with him.

I don't know why I asked him to introduce me to a dragon. I suspect that Baldassare was as surprised that I'd asked as I was. I suspect that what prompted it was a gut-deep instinct that he would. I don't know why I felt that way, unless it was an overall impression from Baldassare's monologue, but it proved correct.

"I *can* set up an appointment for you," he said after a long, thoughtful pause. "An associate who might be willing. Her name is Theophane. She resides in the BP Building."

"Thank you."

"Kline, goodwill is a fragile thing with these creatures. Don't make me sorry I did you this favor."

"You won't be," I assured him.

I drove away from Baldassare's estate with two conflicting emotions fighting for airtime in my head. First off, I was really pleased with myself for landing an interview with a dragon. That would be a real coup if I could pull it off. I certainly wouldn't find a better source for background on Aloeus.

But, on the other hand, I kept feeling that I'd slipped up somewhere with Baldassare. That thought kept nagging at me as I drove up the curvy, wooded road paralleling the Chagrin River. It kept nagging at me until my cell phone rang.

I flipped it open to familiar static and incomprehensible whispering voices fading in and out.

"I am determined to prove a villain—"

"Hello, who is this?"

"Plots I have laid—" Then a sudden series of clicks and a dial tone.

*Christ, what the hell is this?* I knew that it had to be the same person who'd called me with the *Macbeth* quote. This new one sounded vaguely Shakespearean as well. It made me wish I'd paid a little more attention in my English Lit classes in college.

Normally I hate people who chatter on cell phones in the car, but the heat of curiosity was on me. So, after I had again determined that the last caller was from an unknown number, and made sure that it was still before eight, I called up one of my research sources.

"Cleveland Public Library, archives. How can I help you?"

"Eric, it's Kline."

"Kline? I can barely hear you. Where are you?"

"On my cell phone, quick question— how's your Shakespeare?"

"My Shakespeare? What you working on?"

"Can you ID a quote for me?"

"Speak up, what?"

" 'I am determined to become a villain. Plots I have laid' What's that from?"

"Can you repeat that?"

" *'I am determined to become a villain!'* " I yelled into the phone. " *'Plots I have—'* " I was just making a blind turn on a road following the edge of the Chagrin River, I looked up and suddenly there was a rider in front of me. I dropped the phone and slammed on the brakes, pulling the Volkswagen into the wrong lane and off the road.

In front of me the blinding-white animal turned and reared. I don't know how I missed it, a cloven hoof seemed to come close enough to touch the windshield.

The car came to a stop with one front tire tilted into a ditch. My neck felt as if the shoulder belt had abraded it raw. I popped the door and released the seat belt. I stepped out and almost tumbled downslope into the river.

"Are you all right?"

I turned, looking back toward the road. The rider was a young woman wearing a sea-green hunt coat and a matte-black helmet. Her steed was smaller than your average horse, cloven hoofed, golden maned, with a goatlike beard and a long spiraled horn emerging from its forehead about a handspan above its eyes.

They were both backing to a path that paralleled the road.

"I almost hit you," I said. I walked around the edge of the car, keeping my hand on the roof for balance. "Are *you* all right?"

The unicorn kept backing away. I suspect he didn't like me. She leaned forward and patted the creature's neck and whispered something. I heard enough to realize that it was the elves' language. She looked up, and I could see that it wasn't a coincidence. Her face carried the alien lines and metallic eyes of an elf.

That explained why she wasn't cursing me out right now. Elves had more reserve than any creature had a right to have. From a human viewpoint they had less passion than a lobotomized Englishman on thorazine.

"We are all right." She looked down on me from her mount. "You should watch for riders in these woods, sir."

I nodded. "Stupid mistake," I agreed. "I'm sorry."

"Your apologies are unnecessary, and it was not as stupid as it could have been." Something passed across her face too quickly for me to tell if it was a frown or a smile. "What is your business here?"

I was tempted to say, *none of yours*. But Hunting Valley residents were kind of touchy about outsiders, and I did just come close to running her over.

"I had a meeting with Mr. Baldassare. Down the street."

She stared at me with alien, pupiless eyes. Trying, I supposed, to determine if I was lying. Finally she said, "I am Ysbail, sir."

She paused long enough for me to realize that I was supposed to reciprocate. "Kline Maxwell." I almost offered my hand, but when hers didn't reach to meet it, I changed the gesture to rub my abraded neck.

She nodded. "You are."

I didn't know if I liked the way she said that. I heard a small faraway sound, and remembered my cell phone. I held up my hand, "Wait a moment, would you?"

I was already thinking that an elvish perspective on the whole thing would be a neat detail I could slip in. Keeping an eye on Ysbail, I scrambled around the front of the Volkswagen and found the phone, still open, under the driver's seat.

She, apparently, didn't share my plans. Her mount turned without any visible signal from her.

"Hey. *Wait!*" I called after them as they disappeared down a path that led away from the road.

"Hello? Kline?"

I sighed, shook my head, and said a curt "Yeah." into the phone.

"What happened? I thought you were cut off—"

"Never mind that." I kept staring into the woods. "Do you know the quote?"

"Uh-huh. I found it for you. The full thing's, 'I am determined to prove a villain/ And hate the idle pleasures of these days. Plots I have laid, inductions dangerous/ By

drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams/ To set my brother Clarence and the King/ In deadly hate against one another—' "

"You don't have to read the whole thing. Just tell me what it's from."

"It's from the opening soliloquy of *Richard III*."

I pondered a moment. "That's the humpbacked king who kills his nephews in the Tower of London, right?"

"You got it."

*Macbeth*, then *Richard III*? There was obviously something my anonymous caller was trying to tell me. Something about powerful men, and betrayal. But who, and what . . . ?

*Mind games*.

Some joker who believed that this was some form of subtlety. I shouldn't be wasting my time on it. What I *needed* to do was get tomorrow's dragon story into the paper. And, tomorrow, I was probably going to get to talk to a dragon in the flesh.

After putting the story to bed, I got Chinese takeout. I pulled up to my complex after dark. My condo sat just on the Shaker Heights side of Shaker Square, part of a line of Tudor-Gothic apartment buildings built in the nineteen-thirties. The doorman— a grizzled old guy named Willie Czestzyk— let me in.

"Long day, Mr. Maxwell?"

"As long as they get," I said, holding my bag of Kung-Pao chicken close to my chest.

"What's the news?" He always asked me that question.

"The FAA is going to form a commission to investigate dragon safety."

Willie chuckled, like he always did, though I was unsure if I was being ironic or not. I mean, upon reflection, I would not be surprised.

Once up in my apartment I collapsed in front of the TV, promising myself that I wasn't going to think of anything work-related until I made it to the office tomorrow.

I had an investment in that promise. The television was easily the most expensive piece of equipment in my condo. It wasn't as hard to get video out of a piece of equipment around the Portal as it was to get video *into* it, but it was still a technological hurdle. Not only did my TV have to operate on redundant bandwidths like my cell phone to eliminate the spurious mana-related data in the signal, but the display had to be a hundred percent digital. That meant no picture tube at all. It had to be a flat screen crystal display, like my laptop.

Combine that kind of technology with the relatively low demand— after all, there were *no* local broadcast stations anymore, and the cable companies around here fell

into high-speed Internet delivery out of sheer necessity— you have a boob tube that runs two and a half grand for a twenty-inch model. And, of course, after spending about a grand for a special receiver hooked up to a dish that'd give me something to watch, I had to pull the stops and get the five-grand thirty-five-inch screen model.

Being a couch potato in this city cost money. And after that kind of investment, I almost felt guilty *not* watching pro wrestling.

Anyway, that was what greeted me when I turned the set on, and I didn't switch channels since this was the kind of mind-numbing stuff I was looking for.

I was just settling into it when the phone rang. Not my cell phone, which I switched off the moment I walked into the building, but my private line. I put down the takeout and hefted the receiver with a sigh.

"Hello," I said while muting the Masked Avenger's face's introduction to Mr. Turnbuckle.

"Daddy?" said a quiet teenage girl's voice.

## Chapter Seven

"I'VE been trying to call you all day," she said.

"I was working." I eased back up on the couch and stared at the ceiling. The TV carved out blue abstract patterns in the ceiling. Sarah's voice was too damn close on the phone. I should be able to hear the distance from Cleveland to San Francisco. Her voice should have been echoey and small, not like she was down the street.

"How're you doing, kid?"

"Awful. Perfectly rotten."

I'm a soft touch, and I have a pretty vivid imagination. For a few moments I was picturing everything from my ex's townhouse burning down to the city of San Francisco sliding into the ocean. I sat up, muscles tightening in the small of my back. "What's the matter, honey?"

"She's ruining my life," she said in a harsh whisper. "*The bitch!*"

To avoid hurting my daughter's feelings, I made every effort to keep my sigh of relief from being audible. I sank onto the couch as the possible crises reduced to those of a more manageable variety. "Don't talk that way about your mother."

"You don't know what she's doing." It was strange to hear the California in her voice. Just enough to be disconcerting.

"No, honey, I don't." I rubbed my forehead. "How, exactly, is she ruining your life?"

"I've been planning to go to this concert *all* summer, Dad."

"Uh-huh." A picture was beginning to form in my head.

"You've got to talk to her."

"*You* need to talk to your mother if you want to go out."

Silence.

I waited a beat before I asked, "Why did she ground you, Sarah?"

"*Dad.*"

"Why, honey?"

"I was fifteen minutes late. Fifteen minutes, Dad, and she's acting like I *killed* somebody."

"And this was the first time?"

Silence again. Despite the distance between us, I knew my daughter, and I knew my ex-wife. Margaret, my ex, wasn't one to lay down the law unless someone repeatedly ignored her warnings. I should know. "How many times did you violate curfew before she grounded you?"

"Dad, you don't understand, it wasn't my fault. Chris got lost on the way back home—"

I smiled and shook my head. "Sarah, it might not be your fault, but it *is* your responsibility."

"*But—*"

"But nothing. You tested your mother enough times to use up all the slack you had coming. Now you're calling me hoping that, since I haven't been present for all the sordid details, I might be oblivious enough to argue with Margaret about how unjustified her punishment is."

"*Please, Dad,*" She segued into the sobby little girl voice to tug at the old man's heartstrings. "Chris spent seventy-five bucks *each* for these tickets. We waited in line for *hours*. He'll never forgive me—"

"No. I'm not going to second-guess your mother. Besides, if you ask my opinion, if this Chris guy has the gall to be angry at you for a situation *he* created—"

"He didn't—"

"You just got through telling me that *he* got lost and caused you to miss curfew. So it's *his* fault."

"But—"

"He does know to get you home by ten, right?"

There was a long pause before Sarah said, meekly, "*Eleven.*"

"Young lady, I just lost any sympathy I had for you. And you better let Chris know that if he so much as gives you a harsh look over this, I am personally going to come down there and force-feed him the entire one-hundred-fifty dollars in pennies."

Long silence.

"Are you still there, Sarah?"

"Yes." There wasn't any affected sobbing now. Just a sigh of resignation.

"I'm sorry you can't go that concert. But it's not my place to get involved in this. You know that."

"I know." Another sigh. "It just meant a lot to me."

"Is this Chris a good guy?"

"Yes," she sounded surprised at the question. "Of course he is."

"Is he a smart guy."

"Yeah."

"Does he like you?"

"What are you getting at?"

"I'm just saying that a good, smart guy who really likes you would, I think, scalp the tickets that you can't use and save the money for another concert— or at those prices, ten or fifteen movies."

I heard her try to hide a chuckle. "I'll tell him that."

"Good."

"If you don't mind, I won't tell him about the pennies."

At that point the conversation drifted to less critical matters. I got to tell my daughter about all the weird things I was writing about in Cleveland, and I got to hear more about this Chris guy than I wanted to know. At least, more than I wanted to know when I was thousands of miles away from doing spot checks on the guy.

All in all, though, small price to pay.

After an hour-long talk with my daughter, I fell asleep dreaming about pro wrestlers named Chris.

Now, the guys who woke me up would not have made the WWF All Stars. Much too scrawny. However, the nine-millimeter Glock in the short one's hand made up for anything they lacked in the physical intimidation category.

"Mr. Maxwell," said the tall one. "I think the time for sleep is over." The tall one was *tall*, NBA territory— if the NBA could be conned into holding all their games at the Gund Arena. The guy, all eight and a half feet of him, was an elf.

I was still waking up, and trying to get the scene to gel into some sort of sense.

The TV was droning on in the background showing some sort of hyper-testosterone



extreme-sports broadcast involving snowboards, dog teams, and a gasoline fire. Elf One, the eight-footer, sat on the edge of my couch, just within arm's reach— his, not mine. Elf Two, the middle one, stood off to the side where— due to the shotgun design of my condo— he could watch both entrances at the same time. Elf Three, the shortest at about six-five, stood between me and the burning snow-boarders, holding the Glock pointed roughly at the half-eaten container of Kung Pao chicken between my legs.

"Mr. Maxwell?" spoke Elf One. The accent is somewhat hard to describe if you've never heard it. Very cultured, soft and breathy, and higher in timbre than it should be coming from someone that tall. An Oxford-educated Jamaican recovering from a blow to the groin. "Are you awake now?"

I doubted feigning sleep would serve any purpose. I nodded and slowly sat up.

The trio were dressed in cheap suits that hung wrong on their nonhuman frames. That and the Glock made me think "cop." Any other elves that would do armed home invasions would have the resources to get their suits tailored, and since the gun probably cost more than the clothes, it almost had to be department issue.

Elvish cops carried nine-millimeter Glocks because of their biological problem with iron. The mostly ceramic weapon not only didn't set off metal detectors, but the steel content was small enough to suffer repeated handling by elvish hands.

Though everyone here, including the guy with the Glock, was wearing gloves.

"Not that I mean any offense," I said. "But you mind telling me what the fuck you're doing barging in here . . ." I almost said, "*without a warrant*," the cop smell was so strong. But these guys weren't flashing badges, and disclosing my suspicions might not be the best thing to do right now.

"No offense taken, Mr. Maxwell." Elf One's face was gray in the light from the TV. Its true color could be anything from powder blue to pastel rose. His eyes were metallic, with no discernable iris or pupil, nothing in them but a slightly gold-tinted reflection of myself. The face was ovoid, too angular and narrow, and surrounded by a mane of hair that— even cut short— was almost a ruff. The ears were impossibly contorted and twisting to a slightly forward curving point on their tips. While I watched, I could almost see them move in response to the noises in the room. "However, we are not here to answer your questions. I have to ask you to accompany us for a short while."

Very calm, very polite. I doubt that more than three humans alive had ever seen an elf nervous, or angry. They all talked with the detachment of a bored psychoanalyst.

"It's two in the morning. Don't you think it reasonable that I might not want to go anywhere right now? Why don't you come back at a more human hour?"

He gave me a sterile smile that showed a flash of very narrow, very even, very white teeth. "Since we do not suffer the human addiction to periodic unconsciousness, following a 'human' schedule would be an exercise in inefficiency. I think that, upon a moment of reflection, you will see the wisdom in following our schedule." He gave

a slight nod to the elf with the Glock. "The wrong decision would be inconvenient for everyone concerned."

"Yeah, yeah." I stood up, gingerly placing the takeout container on the coffee table between me and the elf with the gun. The tacky sides of the container made me overly aware of the sticky feeling of my sweat-stained shirt sticking to the small of my back.

I gave the elf with the Glock an ironic smile. He didn't smile back. The bastards didn't even appreciate the effort I was making not to freak out.

I turned back to Elf One. Even with me standing, I still had to look *up* at him sitting on the arm of my couch. "You mind telling me what this is all about?"

"As I have told you," he stood up, towering over me and stooping slightly to avoid the track lighting, "we are not here to answer your questions."

We walked down the stairs, I think because the elves didn't like the elevator. Being enclosed in a solid steel box must be somewhat unnerving to them.

This time of night, Willie was long gone. There were supposed to be a half-dozen wards blocking unauthorized access to the building, but my escort walked through each magical barrier as if it wasn't there. The fact that they didn't trip a single alarm reinforced the idea that these were cops who had access to the talismans that allowed them free passage. My own talisman for the building was on my key chain, currently sitting on the kitchen table.

Elf Four was idling in a minivan out in front of my building. Probably not enough steel in it to bother these guys, mostly aluminum, plastic, fiberglass, and an acre of tinted windows.

I was hustled into the back, flanked by two elves, while Elf One took shotgun. I saw his head brush the roof. These guys needed the headroom of a van. In a normal car, Elf One would be looking out the windshield from between his knees.

As promised, none of my questions were answered, which didn't stop me from asking—occupational hazard. They didn't show any irritation, even though I was expecting a prod from the Glock at any moment to remind me who was in charge. Apparently, the elves didn't think like that.

We drove through the processed quaintness of Shaker Square, a yuppie haven of upscale restaurants, chain stores, and the occasional art gallery. Like my condo, it was built in the nineteen-thirties, and had about seventy years as a nice piece of local color before the developers got hold of it. I'm waiting for them to put in the Disney Store.

We drove through the square and took a turn north up MLK. We stuck with Martin Luther King Boulevard to where it hit Case Western Reserve University, and University Circle. Up until this point I was pretty sure that we were going to be

heading deeper into Cleveland proper. I had just about assured myself that these were detectives from the SPU who were going to take me downtown for some clandestine questions.

I was physically prepared for some inconvenience, but I wasn't particularly scared . . .

Not until we made a wrong turn.

We hit the messy intersection where MLK feeds into Chester— one of the main East Side arteries downtown. We were caught at the light, and the area had a surreal feeling at this time of the morning. There were no cars anywhere, no people on the street, and the streetlights gave the whole place the feeling of a recently abandoned stage set.

The campus of Case Western loomed off to our right, the sprawling campus an aesthetic jumble of architectural styles, ranging from the Gothic church closest to us, to nineteen-sixties institutional. Floodlights illuminated the fluted stone sides of the church, and as I looked up at it, one of the gargoyles yawned.

The light changed, and instead of heading west down Chester, toward downtown, the van turned east, down Euclid. This wasn't a good sign.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

Silence.

We rolled down Euclid, the only vehicle on the street. We drove under the Conrail tracks and passed the downhill side of Lakeview Cemetery, then we came to a rather inauspicious signpost.

It said, "Welcome to East Cleveland."

## Chapter Eight

EAST Cleveland is an object lesson of what *not* to do in the face of demographic change.

Around the 1900s, East Cleveland was a high-rent bedroom community for the Cleveland elite that couldn't quite make it to Millionaire's Row. There are *still* quarter-million dollar homes in some East Cleveland neighborhoods— the catch being that they'd be five to ten million anywhere else.

The 1960s changed that. During the end of that decade, middle-class blacks started buying a lot of homes in the inner ring eastern suburbs. In Cleveland Heights and Shaker Heights— neighboring communities to East Cleveland— there wasn't a panic among white homeowners, despite the attempt by real estate speculators to inflame passions.

Due to that one outbreak of sanity, both Shaker and Cleveland Heights have some of

the most desirable— and expensive— real estate of any inner ring suburbs. Which sinks that oft-used chestnut linking "changing neighborhoods" and falling property values.

East Cleveland suffered no such restraint. White flight broke the sound barrier. In the space of two years, most of the existing residents sold at a loss rather than face a black face across the driveway.

The crash in property values and the exodus of population nearly bankrupted the city government, and the plummet in city services continued the collapse in property values. Abandoned properties proliferated, the crime rate rose, businesses moved out. . . .

By the time the Portal opened, East Cleveland was fighting a standstill battle against urban rot.

The Portal nailed the coffin shut and put a shotgun to the corpse. All the absentee landlords— who, even if they did nothing to keep up with the property, gave tenants and the city someone to sue— disappeared. The twelve months of chaos after the Portal opened gave everyone with a stake in East Cleveland legal ground to claim it as a loss, dumping the property on the city. The government suddenly found itself in possession of over half the property in East Cleveland, much of it uninhabitable. Everything collapsed.

In the decade since, everyone— at least everyone human— with any sense had left the floundering suburb. Some to Euclid, some to Cleveland Heights, but most back into Cleveland, where the Portal was becoming an investment magnet, and money was going to actually rebuild many of the city's neighborhoods.

Not so for the urban purgatory that was East Cleveland. The vacuum created by the city's depopulation was filled with *other* things. There's no accurate census. But any brave soul who'd stop to do a random head count would find that three out of five of those heads weren't human— or even humanoid.

Most of the streetlights were out, so as we drove down Euclid the buildings on either side were little more than looming shadows. Occasionally a storefront would be illuminated by torches or glowing braziers, and the boards over the shop windows would be scribed with arcane symbols written in paint, or blood, or branded into the surface of the wood.

Here were the mages who couldn't operate in the face of public scrutiny. Necromancers, assassins, wizards who worked with blood and bone and did not inquire about the source of their raw material. Here were also the night creatures who supplied the mages. . . .

From what I'd heard, the street value for a healthy undamaged human cadaver around here was five to ten grand.

If the elves noticed me tensing up, they didn't show it.

Two excruciatingly long minutes into East Cleveland, the elves turned the minivan off

Euclid Avenue. They drove a short distance down a street that was more pothole than asphalt, and pulled to a stop outside a Victorian frame house that huddled under the shadow of the railroad tracks. When the van's headlights brushed by it, I saw clapboards whose paint had long weathered away to leave dead gray wood.

I thought I saw movement behind one of the blind, glassless windows.

Elf One got out and slid the side door open. I didn't leap at the chance to get out, and for the first time the elf next to me prodded me with the Glock. I scrambled out into the street.

The air here felt several degrees cooler than it should have. A suffocating morguelike silence muffled everything. The only sounds to break the night were twittering creatures— I forced myself to think of them as birds— whose distant calls were like insane giggles. If I concentrated, I could just make out an irregular liquid sound, almost a slurping . . .

I stopped concentrating.

*If they wanted to kill you, they could have put a bullet in you before you woke up.* The thought wasn't that comforting. I really couldn't read their intentions. With regular strong-arm types you could get a sense if the guys wanted to rough you up, talk to you, or finish you off. These guys could be going to a wedding, or casting a snuff film.

The three who escorted me from my condo escorted me up to the house. The driver stayed with the van. As we ascended the steps, the large oak door that led into the house swung inward releasing the moist odor of mildew and rotting wood. It made me sneeze.

I could still see the nail holes in the door where it had once been boarded over.

"You're late," came a voice from within the darkness.

I caught what might have been the flash of an ironic smile on the face of Elf One. "Our apologies. You were paid enough to wait."

"Why do you think I waited for you Keebler bastards?"

If the racial slur bothered my companions, they didn't show it. I think, though, that the human concept of a word being derogatory didn't register with them.

I still couldn't see the speaker. My escort led me into a hallway that was in almost complete darkness. All I could see was a dim sense of movement on all sides of me. The air was thick and musty, and I felt sweat rolling down between my shoulder blades. Under the mildew and rot, I could catch a hint of smoke, as if this place had burned a long time ago.

Ahead of us, a heavy curtain drew aside, revealing a bare room illuminated only by candlelight. Heavy black drapes marked the walls, and facing us was a massive granite fireplace, its mantle supported by a pair of griffins, the firebox blackened, cold, and dead.

The candles formed a circle on the hardwood floor, and complex symbols surrounded the circle. The writing was drawn in either ash or salt, it was too dim for me to tell.

I was really scared now. I did *not* want to be the centerpiece in some necromantic ritual. I turned, my fear now having fully counterbalanced my conscious knowledge of being outnumbered, outgunned, and being in the middle of East Cleveland. It speaks to either my dexterity, or the elves' confidence, that I got four steps toward the hallway before a thin, long-fingered hand put a very firm grip on my upper arm.

"Being uncooperative is not an option, Mr. Maxwell." I felt the Glock at the back of my neck. "We can get the information just as readily from your corpse—"

"Hey, hey, *hey!*" I finally saw the other speaker. He didn't fit my profile of a freelance necromancer. He was shaved bald, and wore a black leather jacket and blacker denim pants. His hands shone with rings, and gold chains hung from his neck. "You smoke that guy here, you blow the vibe in this room—"

"I am sure you can accommodate us if that is necessary—"

"Three grand more," the bald mage said. "Above and beyond. Ain't what you paid me for."

"—but it will not be necessary," Elf One concluded. "Will it?" he asked me.

At this point I wasn't one to argue. The elf with the Glock led me to the center of the circle, walking a careful path that was left through the symbols on the floor. The bald mage berated him twice for straying off the center of the path. I was left standing in the center of the circle of candles.

The elves stepped back to a shadowy corner of the room, so I could barely see them. The mage stepped forward, took a small pouch, and completed the break in the circle I had walked through.

Doing that, he looked up at me. "The mojo's been building here a couple hours. You break the pattern, boy, and it'll be like someone shoved a stick of dynamite up your ass."

He grinned as if daring me to make the attempt.

The air was heavy with the smell of melted wax and incense as he gradually filled in the pattern, walking away from me. Most of the pattern seemed to consist of Greek and Hebrew letters, and as he backed away, he was chanting softly in Latin.

I had some time to reflect on the opportunistic nature of the powers the Portal released. Magical energy was drawn to patterns and complexity— from physical form, to the abstractions of human ritual. That meant that it wasn't just rituals imported across the Portal that worked. The Portal had affected everyone from neo-Pagans to the Catholic Church.

I had no idea what this guy was doing, but even I could tell he was home-grown. I wondered why these elves had hired a local to do their dirty work. I would think that

they'd be more comfortable with a mage from their own stomping grounds. Might cost more, but Elf One didn't seem overly concerned with the price of service.

The mage stood up in his own circle, drawn at the periphery of the symbols that surrounded me. He began chanting.

Despite living here, I'd never seen a magical ritual up close. I was expecting something dramatic; candles flaring, the symbols glowing, the floor cracking open over a fiery pit. Conditioning from movies and TV, I suppose.

What happened was a lot of incomprehensible vocalization in the mage's somewhat sardonic voice. I couldn't tell that anything was happening at all, at least not initially.

As the chanting progressed, I became more and more uncomfortable. At first the nervousness and the nausea seemed to be only reasonable physical reactions to the situation I found myself in. It wasn't until I felt my legs giving way under me that I realized that what I was feeling was abnormal.

Then he shouted something and clapped his hands three times.

My body jerked as if someone had just strapped me into Old Sparky and pulled the switch. I lost all motor control. My body froze, leaving me resting on my knees and the tips of my toes, my back arched, arms splayed backward. My neck craned back so far that my field of vision was limited to the ceiling of naked lath dotted with fragments of an elaborately molded plaster ceiling.

I should have been in awful pain, but my whole body had gone numb, the only sensation flickering ripples of pins and needles. My mind seemed severed from my body, watching from inside. In a panic, I tried to move my body, escape, breaking the pattern be damned. I couldn't even speak.

Voices seemed very far away.

"Who are you?" Elf One asked, or maybe it was the mage.

"Kline Maxwell." My voice sounded so eerily similar to the elf's that I had trouble realizing that I'd spoken.

"Who do you work for?"

"The *Cleveland Press*. My editor is Columbia Jennings." My voice was distant, almost into nonexistence. My thoughts had retreated to the calm irrationality that one usually only finds in dreams. I was wondering if I was having a near death experience— and if those carried any more weight this close to the Portal.

"No one else pays you?"

"No one else pays me." I was too disoriented to find the questions as interesting as I should have.

"You were at the Hope Memorial Bridge early yesterday. What were you doing there?"

"A dragon fell into the river. I'm doing the story."

"You are a political reporter, correct?"

"Yes."

"I am told that you have a talent for unearthing scandals."

There was a prolonged silence, during which I could gather some semblance of thought. I didn't know what the mage was doing, but it was damned scary. I couldn't even move my eyeballs, and all I could feel was that rippling numbness. I had a panicked thought that what they'd done might be permanent— a bullet in the head would be preferable.

"Why is he silent?"

The mage's voice responded, the tone of exasperation cutting through the distant fog I was listening through. "It wasn't a question, was it? You're not having a fucking conversation here. You ask, he'll answer— and we got about ten minutes before we drain him dry."

"Time enough," Elf One's voice. "Now listen, Mr. Maxwell. You do have a talent for scandalmongering, do you not?"

"It's called investigative journalism." I was left wondering if my words were tinged with irony or sarcasm.

"Indeed. So what is your interest in the dragon, Aloeus?"

"It's news."

"Is that all?"

"It's a major story."

"But not political?"

"Of course it's political."

"How?"

"Aloeus was a major behind-the-scenes figure in all the legal and political ramifications of the Portal. He acted as an advocate for the nonhumans that came out of the Portal. He's tied into the Rayburn administration. He's had business dealings with Leo Baldassare. Nesmith oversaw the cleanup, and Adrian Phillips was on the boat towing the corpse out to sea." I spoke in a dull monotone, each syllable as dead as the last. My distant brain registered surprise at mentioning Phillips. At the time it seemed just a footnote establishing how deeply Aloeus seemed tied to the Rayburn administration.

For the first time I heard the other elves speak. There was a whispered conversation in a language that didn't belong on this planet. It lasted a few seconds before Elf One said something harsh. The closest thing to an emotion I had heard in his voice.

"You believe that there is more than the story of the dragon's death."

"Yes."



"What do you believe?"

"There are major winners and losers. Who gains from the dragon's death? Who's losing something? If there's a power vacuum in the paranormal community, who's going to fill it?" Something in my gut turned sour hearing myself voice things so starkly. I had told myself that I was interested in Aloeus for his own sake. I didn't like the fact that, when it came down to it, I wouldn't have been so interested in him if he hadn't cut so wide a swath both literally and figuratively.

"Do you believe Aloeus' death was an accident?"

"No." My answer was flat, final, and a complete surprise to me. Whatever spell bound me was digging deep into unexamined areas of my own mind. The elf had plucked a suspicion out of my head that I wasn't even aware I'd been harboring.

"Why?"

"Aloeus should have been able to avoid it, whatever *it* was. I have a natural suspicion whenever any public figure dies in a freak accident."

More elvish talking then, "Does the name Faust mean anything to you?"

"He made a deal with the Devil. Old book."

"You know no one by that name?"

"No, I don't."

My vision was dimming, and I had lost even the numbness that connected me to my body. I kept thinking back to the mage's comment about draining me dry.

"These answers have been truthful?"

I was surprised that I didn't answer. Apparently the question wasn't addressed toward me. The mage said, in a voice now very far off and wee, "What you think you paid me for?"

"Then we are done."

Silence.

Darkness.

## Chapter Nine

I WOKE up the next morning with enough memory of the prior night to realize that it was far from the nightmare I wanted it to be.

This was uncharted territory for me. The greatest physical threat I'd ever suffered before this was when an elderly George Forbes threw a chair at me during a press conference when I asked a question that— apparently— questioned his judgment in reentering city politics after umpteen years of retirement.

There is a considerable difference in tone between a chair wielded by a washed-up politician, and a Glock wielded by an emotionless elf cop. My pulse raced in my neck, and my mouth tasted of copper just thinking about it.

But, on reflection, the motive behind both was the same. Intimidation.

That pissed me off.

One major self-destructive part of my personality was that whenever someone threatened me to get me to abandon a course of action, I became more committed to whatever I was doing. Even if I *want* to cave, I can't.

That was pretty much what happened to my marriage. When Margaret started telling me I had to spend less time at the job or our marriage was in serious trouble, I couldn't bring myself to change. I knew better, but some adamant kernel of ego kept me from responding. The Portal opening was the biggest story of the millennium, and, by God, I was going to cover it.

I can't say I was surprised when I came home to an empty house.

All in all, the divorce was amicable. Because, once I'd done the stupid macho shit and refused to bend, I was so pathetically guilty that I caved on every other point. As if responding to my wife's needs now was somehow going to fix it. Fortunately for me, Margaret didn't have her lawyer feed too much on my bloated corpse.

And, if I wasn't going to let the loss of my marriage intimidate me, a cabal of armed elves didn't have much chance.

That was what was running through my head as I pushed open the door to Columbia Jennings' office the morning after. The smoke smell was as thick as ever, and she was half turned away from me, facing the screen on her desktop. I could see an image of this morning's *Press* on the flat screen before she looked up at me.

"Maxwell?"

"Morning, Bea," I said as I pushed the door shut behind me.

"I was going to congratulate you. Good story. Above the fold."

I nodded. She was being way more gregarious than usual. She almost smiled. The subliminal nervousness that I'd sensed yesterday was there full force now that I knew what to look for. "Yes. It turns out to be more my line than I'd thought at first." I didn't sit. "Perceptive of you to give me the lead on this, wasn't it?"

"Thank you." She said it in a way that made it clear she wasn't sure it was a compliment.

"Why?"

"Pardon?"

"Why did you give the story to me?"

"It's your line. Like you said—"

*"Bullshit!"*

She stared at me, stunned at my outburst. I was a little surprised myself. I was running on instinct here, but that little reporter barometer in my gut was saying *warmer* . . .

"Bea, you *needed* to get me on that story. When I agreed without a fight, the relief in this room was as thick as the smoke. If you, for one moment, thought of this as a political story, you would have used that to sell me on it. One mention of Phillips, Nesmith, Rayburn, Baldassare, and you would have *had* me on this thing before you finished the sentence." I leaned across the desk. "*You* didn't know who the dragon was when you pawned this off on me, did you?"

She didn't answer.

"If you remember, I *asked* you who it was."

She nodded slowly.

"You had no idea of the political ties to this story when you assigned it to me."

"No."

"Why, then?"

"I have bosses, too. You think I decide everything here by personal fiat?"

*Yes*. However, this wasn't the place to say that. "Hackett?" I asked, naming the editor-in-chief of the *Press*.

"He's the one who gave me the news that you should cover the dragon. He has a boss, too."

Nyle Montgomery, owner of the *Cleveland Press*, a man who was probably richer than Leo Bladassare. Bea was telling me that my assignment to the dragon story had come from the top, before the victim had even been identified.

*Officially identified*, I corrected myself.

"Do you know anyone named Faust?"

"What?"

"Never mind." I turned and walked to the office door.

"Where are you going?"

"I've got a dragon story to cover, remember?"

I had several directions I needed to go in now. I had a dead dragon who had his talons in a lot of local pies. I had the suspicion that his death was more than an accident, the unvoiced hunch gaining a lot more credibility based on my nocturnal questioning. I had at least four elf cops with an interest in this; all probably members

of O'Malley's Special Paranormal Unit since only two or three elves were cops outside the SPU. I had a human mage that I wouldn't have any problem picking out of a lineup. I had a name, Faust.

And I had Adrian Phillips on a Coast Guard cutter.

*Why?*

There was a tenuous connection. For a variety of historical reasons, the Port Authority had direct executive control over the Portal. It was the Port Authority that maintained the stadium, ran the buses in and out. Because of that, they also had regulatory control over the magic in this town, such as it was. Several times the Council had tried to spin off the magic stuff into its own agency, but Phillips and his Port Authority fought that turf battle tooth and nail. They were the agency in direct contact with the world beyond the Portal, so they should keep control of what came out of it.

Because of Phillips' tight rein on his own agency and what it controlled, he was probably the third most powerful person in the city government. Under his control was every mage who worked for the city, with the sole exception of the forensic mages who worked in the SPU. Even those had to work under guidelines drafted by Phillips and his agency.

Aloeus' nosedive had drawn some high-powered attention. The more I thought of it, the more Phillips' presence seemed to confirm the thought that there was more going on here than a simple accident. I began wondering if the report Nesmith passed out gave the whole story.

While I was at my desk, I tried to give the coroner, Egil Nixon, a call. Again, I got voice mail. This time the message said that he was going to be out of the office the remainder of the week. I left a message, feeling a little uneasy. I made a few more calls, found out his home number was unlisted, and used a source in the sheriff's office to get it and his address.

No answer at home.

*That goes on the things to do list.*

I wrote myself a note, then I called Baldassare.

"The dragon will be expecting you," he told me. "Like I said, don't do anything that makes me regret setting this up."

"Thank you," I said, writing down the meeting time under my note to check up on Coroner Nixon. Before he hung up, I added, "I wanted to ask you something."

There was a pause. "Okay, Kline. What is it?"

"Has it ever crossed your mind that Aloeus' death might have been less than an accident?"

"I don't put any credence in rumors, Kline. Whenever a public figure dies, especially a political one, there'll be conspiracies around every corner. I won't contribute to that."

"You've heard rumors?"

"What did I just say?"

"You know I had to ask."

"That's the difference between me and you. There are some questions I wouldn't ask." A beat. "Anything else?"

"Two things," Both were long shots. "I ran into someone on the way back from your place," Almost ran into, anyway. "Her name's Ysbail. I wondered if you knew her."

"You did?" Hard to read his voice, hard to tell if the surprise was real or feigned. "How in the world did you two meet?"

"By accident. Friend of yours?"

"Acquaintance." He seemed to consider carefully before he said, "Is she the source of your rumors?"

*Interesting.* "You know a reporter doesn't reveal sources— where would you be if I did that?"

"What was the other thing?"

"Do you know anyone named Faust?"

A very cold, "No."

I waited a moment, which told me all I needed. Just the denial, no question about why I was asking or who Faust was supposed to be. Either Baldassare wanted me to know Faust meant something, or I had— for the first time— really surprised him with something. My bet would be the former.

"Thanks again for the help."

"You're welcome," he said. "Just remember all this when *I* ask *you* for something."

I walked into the glassy atrium of the BP Building trying to fit several disjointed pieces together. My discussion with Baldassare gave me some impressions of what was happening. From the sound of things, my escorts last night weren't the only elves out there who thought Aloeus had suffered something other than an accident. From Baldassare's point of view, this Ysbail elf was of a similar mind.

It would make sense. If Aloeus was a political advocate for the paranormal underclass, it made some sense that the people he supported would view his death with suspicion. However, since some of them seemed to be cops, I suspected it was

more than a knee-jerk reaction.

I wondered if Theophane had heard any rumors.

I walked back to where the elevators were kept. There was one elevator, separate from the others, that went to Theophane's floor. I had expected an intercom, a phone line, something— but all there was was the single call button mounted in its brass plaque in the marble wall.

I pressed it, looking around for visible wards or security cameras. I saw one recessed area near the elevator that could have been either, but I didn't have the time to examine it closely because the mirrored brass doors slid open immediately.

I stepped inside the wood-paneled elevator and turned around to see the doors close in front of me. I reached for the button for the thirty-ninth floor, and didn't find one. Where the control panel normally sat was a blank brass plate. The only controls were the key-operated fire department override, and the stop/alarm button. I suddenly had the feeling that those were there only because the fire code required it.

The elevator didn't move.

After a few moments I heard a voice. "*Who is asking for admittance?*" The voice had the directionless character that told me that it wasn't being reproduced electronically.

"Kline Maxwell, *Cleveland Press*. Leonardo Baldassare sent me."

It was a long sixty seconds before the elevator began moving. The upward acceleration was sudden, unexpected, and unpleasant. The little LED display ran floor numbers by too fast to read, until it hit thirty and began slowing down.

I rubbed my chin and looked into my reflection in the polished brass doors.

Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine . . .

The doors slid open.

Baldassare had said there was a moment where everything clicked, a point where it sank in how much the world had changed. I thought that I had passed that point long ago. I knew what the world had become.

But when I walked out onto the top floors of the BP building, it clicked. I realized that I knew jack shit.

The BP Building was late seventies, early eighties. The first major skyscraper built here after the city came out of default. First it was the Sohio corporate headquarters, then BP Oil bought them out and stayed long enough to rename the building. It was a high-profile address, right on Public Square, and the top floors were about as exclusive as you got as far as downtown office space went.

I had never been here before, but I could tell that the current tenant had ordered extensive remodeling.

The fortieth floor no longer existed except as empty space three stories above me. In

front of me was an atrium that enclosed almost as much space as the grand lobby downstairs. To my left and right were three stories of windows that looked down on the city from a dizzying height. Except for the heavy stillness in the air, the feeling was as if I stood on an urban mountain peak. The air smelled of roses and sulfur.

What affected me most wasn't the grand space, but the single occupant of that space.

She— I wouldn't have known gender if Baldassare hadn't told me— was easily half again the size of Aloeus, though I was probably too close to her for an accurate measure of size. All I saw was a wall of muscular blue-black flesh that rose above my head and slid, slowly, from left to right. In the direction of motion, the wall narrowed to a serpentine neck that arched above her, ending in a head longer than I was tall. She lowered her head, pulling her body in an undulating motion behind it, so I glimpsed an arm stretching lazily toward the ceiling. Baldassare was right about feline body language, though the clawed hand I saw could easily break an eight-hundred pound Siberian tiger in half.

I realized the wall of flesh in front of me was her back when she completed the feline stretch by rolling over— in my direction. If the intention was to impress me, Theophane succeeded. I flattened myself against the elevator doors, as her enormous form rolled to face me. She came to rest about ten feet from the column that held the elevator shaft, but my hypothalamus was screaming to the rest of my body that I was about to be crushed.

Her head came down between me and the rest of her body. She looked at me with a heavy golden eye the size of my skull. She opened her mouth, and her voice filled the humid air around me.

*"Fuzzy gnome stories?"*

## Chapter Ten

"THEOPHANE?" I asked unnecessarily.

She blinked at me slowly.

I realized she had asked a question, and was waiting for an answer. "It's slang," I told her, hoping to God I wasn't being insulting. "News stories that are predominantly about the paranormal."

*" 'So I am a 'fuzzy gnome?' "*

I closed my eyes because I didn't want to see her reaction. "Strictly speaking, yes."

I felt wet sulfur breath on my face and heard an ominous rumble. It shook the floor and I tensed, expecting to feel the dragon's wrath at any moment. The rumble became louder, and when I wasn't immediately torn limb from limb, I risked a peek.

Theophane was laughing.

She shook her head as she finished rolling to her feet. It took her body even closer, but she had enough control to avoid squashing me. She took a few steps away from me. With her stride that meant that there was suddenly about forty feet between us. I could now see most of her— a whiplike saurian body that seemed to cross a python with a T-rex. Her body shaded from black-blue on top, to a blue-white underneath. Her wings folded against her back like a cape, and her tail slid back past me and the pillar that held the elevator shaft. Her head sat on a serpentine neck that turned it to keep her gaze on me as she moved. Brimstone-scented steam rose from her nostrils as she laughed.

After a moment, she regarded me with her head cocked inquisitively, "***You do not find that amusing?***"

"I see the incongruity of the statement." *Sorry, but I'm a little too shit-scared to laugh right now.* "Where did you hear that phrase? I thought it was just some provincial jargon from the local press." I was having difficulty keeping my voice on an even keel. Somehow it'd never occurred to me that seeing a dragon up close would have this kind of effect on me. Blame that on the little knot of ego that got me into situations like this in the first place.

***"I have heard that you're a journalist who does not do 'fuzzy gnome' stories."***

"The death of Aloeus is more than that."

***"We are all more than that."*** The great deep voice carried something akin to Columbia's disapproval. Just like a flamethrower carries something akin to a Zippo.

"I didn't mean offense."

The dragon laughed again in a way that made my fillings ache. "***You are only human, Mr. Maxwell. Can I fault you for that?***" I got the feeling that I wasn't completely off the hook.

I wondered again where she had heard the phrase.

***"Mr. Baldassare called on your behalf last night. I agreed to meet you, knowing your aversion to 'fuzzy gnomes.'*** "

"What do you know about that?" I asked her.

***"I make knowing things my business."*** She lowered her head to be at a level with me. That was disconcerting, facing her beaklike toothy mouth. "***Mr. Baldassare said you want to know about dragons.***"

"I want to know about Aloeus."

***"Are they not the same thing?"***

There was silence for a moment before I heard a small alarm from behind her. She cocked her head. "***Pardon me a moment.***"



She turned from me, the motion of her body vibrating the floor. Her tail slid by me with a soft hiss across the blood-red carpet. ***"I must buy some more Microsoft shares before the NASDAQ starts upward again."***

I stood there and watched for a while, letting the past thirty seconds sink into my world view. Call me a racist, but I didn't expect a dragon with a sense of humor. Theophane seemed to be getting a lot of enjoyment out of playing all my expectations false. Which was no difficult task, since she knew a lot more about me, and humanity in general, than the sorry bits I knew about her kind—and about her specifically, I knew nothing beyond name and address.

And she wasn't lying about the NASDAQ.

When she moved aside, I could see another pillar in the vast chamber, twin to the one holding the elevator. This sole architectural feature seemed to serve as a combination office and entertainment center for Theophane. Flat screen displays covered most of the available space. Some showed CNN, C-SPAN, and other news and public affairs channels. The screens were all muted, dialogue transcriptions running across the bottom of their screens. Central to all of them was an inset display positioned at what must have been a comfortable level for her, about four feet above my head. I could catch a few glimpses of a computer display showing windowed bar graphs and columns of figures. Across the top I could clearly see a stock ticker running.

Theophane maneuvered an oversized mouse with a few well-placed claws. I don't know why I found it incongruous.

"So can you answer some of my questions?"

She shook her head as she stared at the screen. The display was twice the size of my TV, but it seemed too small for her. ***"Your distraction cost me fifty thousand dollars."***

She must have sensed me backing up, because her head turned my way just as I felt the warm muscular wall of her tail along the small of my back.

***"No matter, the entertainment value should be worth as much."*** Her head lowered to be just slightly above my level, and I had the uneasy sensation of being surrounded. ***"What is it you want to know, Mr. Maxwell?"***

"I want to understand dragons."

Theophane's head drew back and tilted slightly in my direction. There was a distinctly saurian cast to her face, especially with the heart-shaped bony ridge of her forehead facing me. The nose and mouth were very like a skin-covered beak with teeth. Her voice was eerie, coming from deep inside her throat, with little help from tongue and near-nonexistent lips. I might have suspected that the sounds weren't even coming from her if not for the feel of moist breath on my forehead as she spoke.

She raised one hand and drew her clawed fingers together at its point, the gesture disturbingly human. ***"An interesting synchronicity. I wish to understand humans. I feel we both may have embarked on an endless task."***

Conversing with her was helping me recover from the initial impact. With that came the feeling that she was playing with me. I didn't feel that levity— even the levity of a two-hundred-foot lizard— was appropriate. I took my notebook out of my pocket.

"Theophane, I am investigating the death of one of your fellow dragons. I need to know why he died."

***"Perhaps you do, Mr. Maxwell. Do I?"***

"Do you what?"

***"Need to know why?"***

"Aren't you concerned at all about Aloeus' death? He was one of your own."

***"You are right to believe you do not understand dragons."*** Theophane shook her head and withdrew it. When she moved, I was no longer surrounded, and I breathed a little easier. She moved away from the video pillar, toward a vast wall of windows that overlooked the eastern city.

I walked up next to her, the view an antidote to the claustrophobia I'd been feeling. Below us, the arched glass roof of the Old Arcade flashed sunlight back up at us.

***"There is no reason the death of Aloeus should concern me more than the death of anyone else."*** She shook her head. ***"We are not social animals. We do not form tribes, cities, or religions— any trappings of such things we undertake for the sake of others."***

"I find that hard to believe."

***"Of course you do. You have been trained from birth that another man must have authority over you, that other men define the codes you shall adhere to. You exist in a prison made of other human beings."***

There was something very cold in the way she said that. My hand shook a little as I took notes. "You mean that dragons don't?"

There was another of her snorts that I took to be laughter. This one held less humor than her prior ones. ***"Consider me, Mr. Maxwell. You look at a creature supreme in physical prowess, in intellect, in mystical ability. Perhaps that sounds immodest, but modesty is a human virtue. To have a tribe, one must lead, and others must be willingly subjugate themselves."*** She drew herself up and spread wings that reached from one end of the cavernous space to the other. ***"No dragon is a slave."***

This was not what I was expecting, and it didn't feel quite right to me. "You mean to say that there's no social connection between dragons at all?"

***"We are not human beings."***

A statement that any good newsman would recognize as a non-answer answer. She had sidestepped the question as adroitly as any politician. It prompted me to push slightly. "Aloeus' death means nothing to you?"

***"We are sovereign creatures, each one's fate is his own."***

"Even if it wasn't an accident?"

She looked down at me, then turned her serpentine neck to look out at the eastern horizon. ***"There are no accidents,"*** she said. A clawed finger touched the ground near my feet. It was disconcerting, the black talon was almost the length of my forearm. ***"Ask me about dragons, Mr. Maxwell."***

There was something in her voice, a burning emotion that I could feel in her words, but couldn't identify. Rage or grief? I didn't know, and its intensity frightened me. "Tell me why you came here, through the Portal."

***"This is the background you need?"***

"You are a dragon. Everything I've heard says Aloeus was leading the way out, that nonhumans were being persecuted—"

***"A refugee?"*** Her neck twisted and brought her face withing a foot of my own. Apparently, while modesty might be a human virtue, pride was universal. ***"Is that what you believe?"*** Her voice lowered in pitch until her consonants caused my ribs to ache.

"Why, then?"

She swung an arm back toward her cavernous rooms. ***"This, little man. This."***

"I'm not sure I understand."

***"You require an explanation?"*** She drew back and shook her head at my ignorance. ***"Do you know why dragons love gold?"***

I was tempted to say, "greed." But I decided that insults weren't the best policy right now. "I know the popular image of dragons is that they hoard wealth."

***"It is fact."*** She turned from the wall of windows and moved toward the northern edge of the building, where more windows looked over the lake, and Browns Stadium. From here the constant atmospheric disturbance was even more impressive. A twisting pillar of dark clouds towering thousands of feet into an otherwise clear blue stratosphere. From this high up, I could see the motion, like a massive slow-motion tornado set slightly off center above the roofed-over stadium.

***"Many aspects of this world's myth and legend bear enough truth to lead one to suspect that the Portal is not a unique phenomenon."***

"I've heard that before," I admitted. "No one can prove it. If a portal existed in the past, it was far enough back that no one can find any archaeological evidence for it."

***"Perhaps not. But it gives my kind an explanation for why humankind suddenly appeared and ran rampant these past millennia."***

"So why do dragons love gold?"

***"Power,"*** she told me. ***"As I said, we are supreme physically, mentally, in the realm your bizarre language refers to as the supernatural. So what is our weakness?"***

I thought for a minute, and came up with something that jibed with the stories I'd heard so far about the place they had left. "You're loners. You aren't organized. In a conflict you'll best any one human, but humans band together— facing you with a city, and army, a nation."

***"That is, exactly, our sole weakness."*** She looked out over the water. I wondered if she had watched Aloeus' body as it was towed out to sea. ***"Such a grave one that it may now overshadow our strengths. For millennia before our contact with elvish, and then human, 'civilization' it mattered not to us. The idea of 'political' power, 'economic' power— manipulating events through proxies, and symbols— were concepts long and hard in coming to us."*** Theophane waved back to the pillar, where her computer was showing a stock ticker. ***"Wealth is the easiest— and the most easily understandable— way to acquire that kind of power."***

I scribbled a few notes as I asked her, "You're saying that you only hoard wealth to be able to influence humans?"

***"Human society,"*** she corrected me. ***"An individual human being means little to us. But the possession of wealth allows us to influence a city, a government, a church."*** She gave me a long, cryptic look. ***"A newspaper."***

That took me back a beat. "Are you saying that you influenced—"

***"Don't ask me things you can readily discover elsewhere. Do not waste my time."***

I sucked in a breath. I did not want to push this interview. I definitely wanted to leave things at a point where I could come back if I needed to. I made an effort to return to the conversation's previous tack. "Is that all you care for money, then? What about comforts—" I waved an arm to take in the retrofitted top floors of the BP Building. "This wasn't cheap."

***"I left a more spectacular aerie to come to this world. What is a diamond, Mr. Maxwell, except a pretty rock? What is money here, in this world, but paper and ink— or ephemeral records in someone's computer?"***

I looked back at the stock ticker. "Is it difficult?"

***"What, exactly?"***

"It's different here, isn't it? Back on the other side of the Portal, from what I

understand, was a medieval economy. Wealth was a 'real' physical thing. A pile of gold, gems—"

Her head bobbed, a serpentine nod. ***"I understand what you mean. Though I don't think you understand what I was saying. To us, a golden stone is just as symbolic as a piece of paper, or some accountant's record. None has inherent value, just as words on a page do not have any inherent meaning. Values and meaning are assigned to them arbitrarily, and the association is only as strong as the number of people who agree on the assignment."***

"So it wasn't a difficult transition."

***"Not conceptually."***

"There were other difficulties?"

***"The matter of agreement applies to your bureaucracy as well as your economy. Fortunately, your bizarre layers of rule here have allowed the city of Cleveland, the county of Cuyahoga, and the state of Ohio to allow me that right. And with it the right to equal protection, the right to own property, and most importantly, the right to incorporate. The right to hold assets anywhere in the world. The right to litigate."***

"Aloeus, Inc.," I said. "I take it there is a Theophane, Inc.?"

***"Much more than that, Mr. Maxwell."*** She looked over her shoulder, back at the pillar. ***"At that workstation, I have won more battles against your kind than had ever been fought on the other side of the Portal. With a single e-mail, I can send armies from a dozen corporations into motion in any country on this planet. That is power, Mr. Maxwell. That is why I came here."***

## Chapter Eleven

I LEFT the BP Building feeling as if I had just walked through a combat zone. The adrenaline was slowly leaking out of my system, and I was filled with an appreciation of the fact that I was still alive. Intellectually, I knew that I hadn't been in any physical danger. Theophane had as little need to show displeasure in a physical way as Baldassare did.

My body was convinced otherwise.

Egil Nixon was next on my list today. I was hoping that he was hiding out at home, since that was where I was headed. I really wanted to talk to him about what he had seen, and why Adrian Phillips was on that boat. I also wanted to see his eyes when he answered. Whatever he did say, my experience is that most people— outside the professions that require it— make rotten liars.

*Faust.*

The name rang in my head as I drove the Volkswagen through the working-class Slavic Village neighborhood that Egil Nixon called home. The place was in the midst of gentrification, and the houses were split evenly between places that had served as family homes for twenty years, and brand-new spit-shined renovations that went for twice the money to young couples or singles who had no family. No kids anyway.

Nixon lived in one of the latter.

Theophane's response when I asked her if she knew anyone named "Faust," her response was "*Faust is no dragon.*" That struck me as a nondenial, but I hadn't been able to get her to elaborate. For all the stonewalling I was getting on the name, I was getting the sense that it was important, and related to Aloeus' death.

Nixon's car was in the driveway. I was in luck.

I pulled up in front of the building and walked up to the chain-link fence surrounding the front yard. The gate was hanging open. I pushed it open the rest of the way and walked up the path to the front door. I glanced at the car in the driveway, a late model BMW, black.

The lawn was mowed with surgical precision, the path perfectly edged, the grass stopping in a perfect circle around the base of the tree that dominated the small front yard.

The house itself was brick, the trim painted in a Victorian tricolor scheme of rose, gray, and hunter green. I mounted the steps to a brand-new front door that was mostly a beveled-glass oval. The porch was small, but neatly kept, the patio furniture arranged just so, as if awaiting a photo shoot.

I pressed the doorbell and heard it chime inside the house.

I couldn't see anything through the window. A gauze curtain was drawn across it, and the house looked darkened beyond it.

I pressed the button again, thinking I had struck out. Hell, if the city was hiding something, they could have easily bought the guy a ticket to Hawaii.

I was just about to ring the chime again, when I heard a window shatter upstairs.

"*What the . . . ?*" I backed from the doorway and looked up in time to see a figure leaping from the second floor, above the driveway. The black-clad figure moved as if in slow motion, tumbling through the air, to land in a crouch in front of the nose of the BMW.

It was not Egil Nixon.

He wore black leather, and his shaved head shone in the sunlight. I could see a flash of gold from several fingers. He wore a face that I wasn't going to forget.

The mage from last night.

He looked almost as surprised to see me as I was him.

"Hey—"

He was a man in a hurry. The lights bipped on the BMW and the door opened for him as he dove toward the driver's side. I ran for my Volkswagen as the black car was pulling out of the driveway. He turned left, which made me realize I'd never get my car around in time to follow him. So, instead of diving into my Volkswagen, I ran into the street to get a good view of the license plate.

It wasn't breaking and entering, because the front door was open. It also wasn't obstructing justice, because I was calling 911 as I entered the house looking for Egil Nixon. The only thing I left out of my call was the fact that I'd met the intruder before.

The house itself was pathologically neat. The sparse, modern furniture looked as if it had been laid out with a T-square and a level. That made the smell that much more ominous. A sour, ferric smell coming from upstairs.

I tread lightly on the white Berber carpeting as I climbed the steps. The smell intensified as I went.

I wasn't completely surprised at what I found, but that didn't make the sight any easier to take. Egil Nixon had suffered at the hands of the mage. Arcane inhuman writing scrawled the walls of his bedroom, spiraling up to where his body hung, suspended by spikes driven into the ceiling. His naked body had been slit from Adam's apple to groin, and the flesh had been pulled back to allow various parts to dangle. The carpet was soaked with Nixon's blood.

I turned away, walking carefully not to disturb anything, and went outside to wait for the police to show up.

Not a long wait. The first three cop cars were turning down the street as I came out. They pulled up, surrounding my Volkswagen, and when they turned off their sirens, I could hear more coming in the distance. One cop came up to the house and hustled me off the porch as another one started stringing up yellow police tape across the gate and the driveway.

As the cop questioned me about what happened, half a dozen more police cars showed up as well as a forensic van with SPU markings. My cop got the details from me and stationed me by his police car as he went to give the details to a supervisor. Once he left, I had the chance to make a call to the office.

"*Cleveland Press*. Columbia Jennings—"

"It's Maxwell. The shit's hitting the fan here."

"Maxwell? What's happening?"

"I don't know if the police are going to let me go in time to turn something in on time for tomorrow's edition. Egil Nixon's very dead."

"Wait," I heard the rustle of papers on the desk, a mumbled obscenity, then the sound of fingers hitting the keyboard. "Okay, details."

"He was staked out on the ceiling, eviscerated, apparently in some sort of ritual. A man was seen leaving the scene—" I gave the mage's description. "He's driving a black BMW." I gave the plate number. "There are cops all over the place here, I count at least ten squad cars. An SPU forensics team is going into the house right now. I haven't gotten a comment from police yet— but I might because Thomas O'Malley is walking right toward—"

O'Malley reached over and took my phone.

"Hey, O'Malley, that's private property!"

He put the phone up to his ear and said, "He'll call you back." He flipped the thing shut and pointed the antenna toward me. "Do the words thin ice mean anything to you?"

"Don't give me that."

"You just *stumbled* on a corpse, Maxwell? Egil Nixon's corpse?"

"I wanted to talk about a dragon, O'Malley."

"If you've been withholding evidence—"

"I called once I saw a B&E."

"If I find out different, you're in serious trouble." He tossed me the phone. "You saw a suspect leave?"

"Yes," I repeated the description for the third time.

"Ever see this man before?"

"I don't know him," I evaded.

"Uh-huh. You'd recognize him if you saw him again?"

"Yes."

O'Malley nodded and looked back up at the house. The upper windows were glowing blue with whatever the forensic mages were doing. I caught a whiff of ozone on the air.

"Okay, Maxwell, get the hell out of here."

"What?" I had already figured on at least a couple hours questioning downtown.

"Leave," he said. "If we need you, we'll be in touch."

I was actually speechless for a moment as he turned around. I did manage to shout out a question as he walked away. "Do you think this is connected to the murder investigation?"

O'Malley stopped. He turned around with a face so stony that he looked more like a Mafioso than ever. "What murder investigation?"

"Aloeus."



"The dragon was the victim of a tragic accident."

"Was Mr. Nixon an accident victim, then?"

"These are two unrelated incidents. Now, if you would step behind the police line and let us do our job."

"What about Faust?" I asked.

"Officers," O'Malley called to the two nearest uniformed cops. "Please escort this man away from the crime scene."

"Is Faust a suspect?" I called as I was hauled past the outer line of parked patrol cars. No response. I was unceremoniously deposited on one end of the blocked off street, effectively stranded since my Volkswagen was in the center of all that police activity.

"Maxwell, when you step in it, you really step in it."

I turned around to see a familiar face. "Cutler?"

Kirk Cutler was a fellow reporter. He looked like his name— beefy, crewcut, smoking like a chimney. He would never had made it as a TV journalist. He was a twelve-year veteran of print crime reporting, and he'd worked at a half dozen papers going back to when Cleveland was a one-paper town. He had come to resemble his subject matter.

Currently I think he worked for the *Leader*.

He leaned on a beat-up Oldsmobile that looked like a scarred veteran of a 1970s cop show. "You remembered," he said from behind a cigarette, "how touching." He smiled.

"Nixon?"

"Police scanner is a wonderful thing. Though Nixon is only part of the reason I'm here. That's why I'm waiting for you, rather than wading into that mess." He cocked his head back toward the house crawling with cops. "I got everything the police were willing to give me anyway."

"You were waiting for me?"

"Uh-huh," Cutler flung the cigarette at the asphalt by his feet and ground it out with a steel-toed work boot. "You found the body, after all."

I nodded, a little uncomfortable being on the other side of the journalistic fence.

"Also, we got a mutual acquaintance to discuss." He opened the door of the Olds and said. "So, need a lift?"

I cast a glance at my Volkswagen and nodded.

True to his reputation, he drove us both to the Crazy Horse Saloon. As topless

dance clubs go, the Crazy Horse was fairly classy. It was downtown, and a good part of their clientele was the lunchtime old-boy network. Executives, veeps, lawyers from the Justice Center—the kind of folks that want their smut scrubbed clean. The dancers looked as airbrushed as a *Playboy* centerfold.

We didn't look like we fit in, but the extra bill I saw Cutler slip into the cover charge got us a choice table, in a private corner, with an unobstructed view of the stage.

I ordered a Diet Coke, while he chose a "Grog," one of the less subtle local microbrew beers. He seemed very much at home, lounging back and watching the stage. Thankfully he had the good taste not to order a lap dance.

He yawned as the latest athlete lowered herself from the chromed pole on stage left and cleared the way for the next performer.

Up to this point, I had done most of the talking. I'd told him about the scene at Nixon's house, including the mage's escape and O'Malley's appearance. I figured that it was his turn to reciprocate.

"You wanted to talk about a mutual acquaintance?" I prodded him.

"Yeah," he said, taking another swig of his Grog. The beer had an eerie phosphorescence in the black light. It swirled and made complex patterns in the bottle independent of the motion of the liquid. Cutler elbowed me as the next dancer came up on the stage.

"Look at the set on her."

I cast the obligatory admiring glance at the stage. "So, Cutler—"

"His street name is Bone Daddy."

I looked back at him, he hadn't taken his eyes off the stage. I suspected that, if he was here alone, he'd be shoving fives and tens in the dancer's garter. When you hit a certain age, have a decent job, and find yourself single, you tend to get weird with money. With me it was an entertainment system, with Cutler I think it was tittie bars.

Cutler kept talking. "Given name is Caleb Mosha Washington. Rap sheet longer than Euclid Avenue. Priors— defiling a corpse, body snatching, possession of criminal tools, a few things that haven't been crimes since the Salem Witch Trials."

"This is the guy who jumped out of the window?"

"*And* the guy who engaged in a little clandestine chat with you in East Cleveland."

I choked on my Diet Coke. Coughing, I put it on the table and grabbed a napkin to cover my mouth.

Cutler laughed. "Didn't think I knew that, did you?"

"How?"

"I've been following something big. As big as your chicken little, maybe bigger."

"What?"

"Rogue cops in the SPU."

"There've been rumors of that since they formed the unit."

"I got more than rumors. I got elves dealing with Bone Daddy. I got cash changing hands. I got Bone Daddy walking away from several airtight busts. They're in each other's pockets." He turned to face me.

"You, my friend, are gold. I trailed Bone to that little rendezvous of yours, but you were in there *with* them."

"Ahh."

"You see my interest."

"And I get?"

Cutler laughed. "The appreciation of a colleague," he reached into his jacket and pulled out a CD. "You also get all the background I've already dug up on the dirty elves and Mr. Bone."

I reached for the CD, and he put it back inside his jacket. "Why don't you go first?"

## Chapter Twelve

IT was late afternoon before I recovered my Volkswagen and had it parked across from the old Cleveland Trust Building. I was biding my time, rummaging through the contents of Cutler's CD while I waited for the late dragon's lawyer to show.

Cutler had not been parsimonious with his bequest of data. I had in hand the results of what had to be several month's worth of investigation. The linchpin of which was Bone Daddy, aka Caleb Mosha Washington, a mage of no fixed address. The history Cutler had built for the guy went back as far as the guy's birth certificate. The notes were a combination of interview transcripts, old news articles, and public records from various sources.

Skimming the high points, I gleaned the following;

Bone Daddy was born to an upper-middle-class family in Shaker Heights. Father was a doctor, mother a lawyer. Their only son had been problematic early on. When he was six, he destroyed about eight grand worth of electronic equipment, including a laptop computer and three cell phones by throwing them into the pool. When he was eight, he responded to one of his mother's business trips by slashing the tires on her BMW, *and* his dad's Jaguar. When he was twelve, he managed to call a travel agent on his dad's behalf and successfully cancel hotel reservations, car rentals, and a return ticket from a Las Vegas convention while his dad was still on the outbound flight. At fourteen, he was stealing his parents' cars. At sixteen, he was stealing their credit card numbers.

Whatever point he was trying to get across was never made. At eighteen he left.

Once he left home, his rebellion seemed to take a different tack. From the point he left home, until about a year after the Portal opened, Bone Daddy didn't have any trouble with the law. I was surprised, and I made the initial assumption that he just wasn't getting caught.

But Cutler's bio wasn't relying on police records. He had tracked down and talked to dozens of Bone's associates. The fact was, during the time in question, Bone Daddy's recreational activities weren't illegal. Mr. Bone was a mystic before mysticism worked. He was a practicing neo-Pagan, devotee of Alister Crowley, the Golden Dawn, and a shitload of other crap that I don't know jack about.

Now, when the Portal opens, the power that flows out of it doesn't care where the rituals come from. All that power is looking for is focus. Pattern. Bone Daddy had that in spades. From all accounts, the people on that particular fringe regarded him as an expert in the magical arts for two or three years before the Portal opened.

Bone Daddy was a black-market mage before anyone realized such a thing existed. Apparently, with the newfound power came a renewed antiauthoritarian streak. While most of the mages in town, especially those at Bone's level, were playing nice and working within the envelope provided by the Port Authority in an attempt to control what could be a very dangerous commodity, Bone would have nothing of oversight, regulation, or any legal limits on his power.

A spell called for a human corpse? Who was he to argue? Potentially lethal alchemical components? What his clients didn't know wouldn't hurt them. Violations of privacy, curses, sales of deadly potions? It was a new world, and people who weren't prepared to defend themselves from it had to be prepared to pay the price.

I couldn't help but think of Morgan and his eyeball tumors.

What made Bone Daddy all the more interesting was, despite all his arrests— as Cutler said, a rap sheet as long as Euclid Avenue— he'd never been convicted. He'd never even had to stay overnight at the Justice Center. That spoke of one of two things. Either he was an informant, or cops were being paid off.

Perhaps, as Cutler speculated in his notes, both.

Cutler had compiled an exhaustive itinerary of meetings going back as far as the formation of the SPU. Even at that point, Bone Daddy was a major figure. He was in the top five underground mages. He was not the type of candidate that cops select as an informant. You were supposed to use little fish to catch big fish.

Apparently what was happening here was the reverse.

A small cabal of SPU officers, all elves, had been meeting repeatedly with Bone Daddy since the formation of the unit. According to Cutler's notes and a few digital pictures, cash went both ways. From the looks of things, Bone handed rivals and minor annoyances to the SPU elves, and in return he was pretty much immune from the cops.

It seemed off-key to me; elves have always seemed to put a lot of stock in personal

honor. Like their reserve, it seemed a racial characteristic. Enough so that I found it hard to believe that a quartet of them were dirty. But Cutler's evidence was pretty damning, even if I didn't take my own experiences into account.

The crowning bit, of course, was the fact that they were the *same* elves that'd kidnapped me.

The most chilling part was a story Cutler included about the SPU's founding, seven years ago. The article was content-free, avoiding the nasty feelings in the police rank and file about the creation of this departmental entity that, while supervised by a police commander, was essentially only answerable to the Public Safety Director. What got me was the picture that accompanied the article.

It was an artist's rendering, probably based on a couple of digital snapshots too low-res to print. It showed the ranks of the twenty-five officers that formed the initial core of the SPU. The elf-to-human ratio was nineteen to six in favor of the elves. I knew that over the next seven years the ratio would drop to nearly nil on the human end. The human cops were just too subject to the ostracism of their fellow officers while the elves could care less.

Sitting in the back were four familiar-looking, overly tall kinsmen. These were the bastards who'd kidnapped me and fed me to Bone Daddy. They had been in the unit from the start, which meant they all probably had command positions now.

I stared into Elf Number One's expressionless eyes. Looking down at the caption, I finally had a name to go with the face— Maelgwyn Caledvwlch.

I preferred "Elf Number One."

There was a tapping on the driver's side window, and I closed my notebook.

Looking at me through the glass was the man I was waiting for. I lowered the window.

"Are you Kline Maxwell," he asked me.

"That's me," I said with a smile.

The man gave me a sour expression. His hair was white, his face clean-shaven. Narrow glasses with gold rims perched on a beak of a nose. He wore a charcoal-gray suit that could have been a twin to the one he'd worn yesterday. He still wore a black armband. "I do not appreciate blackmail," said the late dragon Aloeus' personal lawyer.

I couldn't help smiling, because what kept going through my mind was that kid Sam Barlogh saying, "*You used to be big, didn't you?*"

I let myself out of the car and looked at my quarry. His name was Jefferson Friday, and he had been a partner in one of the largest law firms in the city— one that, coincidentally, had Forest Hills Enterprises as a major client. Shortly after the Portal opened, he went into private practice which, some tentative research showed, had not hurt his standard of living despite his only having the single client. Apparently,

Aloeus, Inc., paid well.

"Mr. Friday, this is not blackmail. Blackmail involves a *quid pro quo*. I was just letting you know information that I've gathered, and I'm providing you the opportunity to comment."

"You can't print things like . . ."

"Like what?" I prompted.

He shook his head. "Come on," he waved me forward, "You'll have your comment."

Having Friday lead me into Aloeus' lair within the Cleveland Trust Building was no small achievement. While dragons were notoriously insular, their lawyers brought client confidentiality to a whole new level of pathology. It had taken me a few hours on the phone, sifting through what I could find of Aloeus' employees, before I even found out who Friday *was*. There had been a dozen lawyers on Aloeus, Inc.'s payroll— but there was only one personal counsel to the dragon-in-chief.

And, while Friday could quite readily stonewall the likes of Sam Barlogh and his fellows, Sam Barlogh and his fellows weren't following quite the same paths I was. A catalog of property damage might make a splashy feature, and details of the corpse's explosive demise might make titillating copy, but those angles weren't going to raise Friday's eyebrows a millimeter or encourage him to give anything but a boilerplate comment on the death of a client. However, a tastefully composed e-mail hinting at Aloeus' powerful connections to the current administration and massive land deals with Forest Hills Enterprises, and suddenly Jefferson Friday, Esq., was a lot more interested in talking.

We stood on one of the massive stone steps of the Cleveland Trust Building, and Friday faced the elaborate scrollwork on the heavy metal door. He made a few passes with his hand and muttered something under his breath. The metal doors silently opened, revealing a marble stairway into the soft-lit inner sanctum.

He led me through a room that was all pillars, wood, and marble. The only furniture was that of a permanent nature, like the long marble partition that housed the darkened tellers' windows.

The spaces were still and silent, tomblike. The tinted windows allowed little daylight to break the gloom, and only one out of three light fixtures were in use.

Scattered over the marble floor, leading back into the darkened areas, were Persian rugs and embroidered cushions the size of my couch. There was room down here for a dragon, but I didn't see how it could enter or leave.

"Did Aloeus live here?" I asked.

"This was his home."

"How did he get into the building?"

He looked over his shoulder as he took me back to a curving staircase. "We removed a wall opposite East Ninth and Euclid." He looked back up the staircase.

I looked around and tried to see the exit as we ascended. I couldn't find it. Warded and camouflaged, most probably. Wouldn't want just any riffraff walking into your lair.

On the second floor, we passed through a massive mahogany door into an office that overlooked the intersection of Euclid and East Ninth. He seated himself behind an acre of desk that reflected the white monolith of National City back at me in shades of rose.

There wasn't a chair for visitors, and I doubted he was the type to open up to someone casually sitting on his desk, so I leaned against the doorframe.

"So," I asked as I took out my notebook, "for the record?"

He shook his head. "You have excessive temerity, Mr. Maxwell."

"I'm a journalist, Mr. Friday. My job is to report the facts."

"However distorted those facts are?"

"Mr. Friday, a distorted fact is an oxymoron."

"And what you e-mailed me were *facts*?"

"You say they aren't?" I smiled. "Can you elaborate on where, exactly, I am mistaken?"

"You are ready to print all about his involvement in mundane affairs. Human affairs. Nothing could be further from what he stood for."

"From my point of view, Aloeus was a major player in city politics. There's legislation that wouldn't have existed if not for him."

"That is my point. You do not understand. No one would."

I nodded. "That's why we're here, for you to explain it all."

Friday explained it for me, in depth, as if arguing his point to a judge. He began with the standard, though detailed, explanation of what was on the other side of the Portal.

On the other side was an empire whose name roughly transliterated as Ragnan. Ragnan was a massive state that enveloped that world's main continent the way the Roman Empire had once enveloped Europe. Ragnan was a human state, upstart by immortal standards. But upstart or not, it had about five thousand years to establish itself as the ultimate temporal power in that world.

Ultimate control of the empire rested in the The sarch, a human emperor who not only held ultimate political and spiritual authority, but— due to the nature of magic's

attraction to ritual and meaning— held massive power inherent in the office.

I knew the story. The mention of divine kings made most people think of medieval Europe. Close enough for people whose only dealings with the place was three steps removed via the side effects of the Portal. However, the reality wasn't something out of the knights of the round table. The The sarch was a true god-king, a cross between a pharaoh and the pope.

Of course, the The sarch wasn't universally loved. Ragnan's history was drenched with the blood of countless wars, most against nonhumans. At the time the Portal opened, Ragnan was ruled by a The sarch more despotic than most— the The sarch Valdis.

Valdis had reigned for a century before the Portal opened. He exhibited all the characteristics of a good despot: a conviction in his own infallibility; an unquenchable thirst for control; and a ruthless paranoia. Friday related a story that was worthy of an Old Testament rewritten by Josef Stalin:

In the third decade of Valdis' reign, he issued an order for the Lords in each district to monitor the population for criticism of the The sarch. The speakers of such disloyal thoughts were to have their property seized and ceded to the empire. One Lord Mayor refused to obey the order as being too much of a burden on the population. When Valdis learned of this, he called down a rain of fire that reduced the city and everyone in it to ashes— except for the Lord Mayor, whom Valdis left as a crippled beggar just so he'd know what had happened.

During Valdis' reign, the population of dragons in the world had been halved, a nation of elves had ceased to exist, and five of Ragnan's own cities were reduced to ash.

I nodded a lot, and took a few notes, but so far a lot of this I could have been obtained from the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Then Friday mentioned Aloeus, and my attention sharpened.

The Portal formed in a place fortunately remote from the forces of Ragnan and Valdis. And while the great despot knew of the disturbance, he did not initially know its nature. Elvish fugitives were the first to scramble through it, a few days ahead of Valdis' mages, and few weeks ahead of his ground forces.

Aloeus saw the Portal as more than escape for a few. He saw it as the prospect of a different world, without Valdis' totalitarianism. In the middle of the night, the day after I had seen the Portal open, Aloeus flew through into our world.

At this point, the Portal was still guarded by a half dozen cops in an empty floodlit stadium. The only things to have come through had, so far, been alien-looking humanoids who spoke no English. Everyone was preoccupied with the electronic chaos the Portal's opening had caused. The Portal itself wasn't seen as a direct threat.

The sight of Aloeus unfolding his wings and rising from the top of the Portal changed that. Fifteen cops saw him unfold out of the top of the spherical Portal, a



hundred feet from skull to tail, the shadow of his wings blacking out half the field.

The cops, being cops, started shooting, which did very little. Killing a dragon with a handgun is kind of like trying to kill a bull elephant with a drinking straw—it might be theoretically possible, but would require twenty years of anatomy study and complete surprise on the part of the victim.

Aloeus let out a belch of fire that outshone the floodlights just to get the point across, before he flew off into the night.

His point being that the Portal was dangerous. His goal was to throw a scare into the folks on this side of the Portal, so they wouldn't be caught completely off guard if Valdis tried to invade. It achieved the desired effect. Within twenty hours, the National Guard was ringing the stadium.

Aloeus lived here, concealed by his own magical abilities, for nearly two months before he absorbed enough of the language to communicate with the men here. He picked his first contacts very carefully, not people in the city administration, but powerful men who supported the administration. Friday didn't name Baldassare, but we both knew who he was referring to.

Friday talked about Aloeus' career as one of a diplomat, not a politician. He was very clear on that point. Aloeus had always kept a distance from human politics.

"His interest was always Ragnan, and the citizens from there." His eyes were very bright and distant behind his glasses, through his expression never changed. "Do you understand? His goal was to lead his people to a new homeland, free from oppression."

*Uh-huh, Dragon as Moses.* "From what I know about local history, Valdis stopped being a problem over there about four months after the portal opened."

The bright light in his eyes didn't dim. I was almost ready for him to start chanting or speaking in tongues. "A changing of the guard, no more."

I nodded. "More than that, I think. Where Valdis was blockading the Portal on his end, his successor has been much more willing to deal with us."

"With Rayburn, you mean. With the human government. Do you think the purges have stopped there, or that the expansion of the empire has ceased? No. These people need an advocate, every nonhuman citizen of that world and this. *That* was Aloeus' mission. That was why he was so . . . *political*." In Friday's mouth the word was a curse.

*Now he's Martin Luther King.*

"Still, with Valdis deposed, there's free traffic across the Portal. That is an improvement."

Friday looked at me, and I had a gut feeling that there was something he was holding back.

"Did Aloeus have anything to do with the coup in Ragnan?"

"He never involved himself directly in any of Ragnan's affairs after he left the Portal." That was a nondenial. "What about indirectly?"

"Indirectly?" Friday folded his hands in front of him and frowned. "Valdis' power was largely based on the perception of his omnipotence. When the Portal opened, he was fatally weakened."

"So, according to you, Aloeus' public life was an exercise in altruism?"

Friday nodded.

"What about the purchase of land in Mexico? What motivated Aloeus to do that?"

He leaned back in his chair and turned around to face the window. "He did not do that. Aloeus, Inc., did that."

"That's sidestepping. Outside the state of Ohio they're effectively the same thing."

"No, sir," Friday said. "One is dead."

"I apologize."

He shook his head. "The corporation is large, and Aloeus did not oversee everything personally. It was an investment opportunity one of our people took advantage of, that's all." He rubbed the bridge of his nose and said, "Please go now. If you need more questions answered, e-mail my office."

"I'll do that," I smiled and flipped the notebook shut. "I can let myself out."

Friday nodded, still facing away from me.

I started to leave, but the pressure of too many "Colombo" reruns got to me.

"Pardon me, just one more thing—"

Friday turned toward me. "What?"

"You know a person by the name of Faust?"

His face went stony. "No, I do not."

"Thanks," I turned and left him there.

He was probably lying about Faust, but I *knew* he was lying about the land. I don't know why. Whatever was going on about that, it wasn't an investment. I had researched the site. The land was miles from anywhere and had no road or water access. It was the size of three or four counties, and from all accounts it was mountainous and uninhabitable. Short of some miraculous mineral deposits—large enough to justify mining there—Aloeus, Inc., would be lucky to unload it for half of what they paid. I suspected that there was more to Aloeus' connection to the end of Valdis' reign. It just smelled too convenient in retrospect.

I also had trouble buying the dragon as a selfless messianic figure. That went counter to everything Theophane told me about dragon kind. Dragons were supposed to be motivated by power. That was right in line with all the political maneuvering that

Aloeus did, while Friday's angle was almost completely opposed.

Then, again, I wondered.

## Chapter Thirteen

I DON'T know if Mr. Friday would approve of my story, but I did give a fair bit of ink to his point of view. It certainly gave a different perspective on the decedent. I left out, for the time being, any speculation over the cause of death, even though the murder of the County Coroner at the hands of Bone Daddy gave me ample grounds to speculate.

That speculation took me down to University Circle, to the brand new wing of the Natural History Museum. More than a wing, it was an entirely new building somewhat removed from the old center of science and paleontology, as if the trustees wanted to make a point of separating the two. In front of the old building was a life-size fiberglass statue of a stegosaurus, in front of the new building was a life-size statue of a dragon in flight.

The old building couldn't help but be upstaged.

I walked up the crushed gravel walkway and looked at the statue. From recent experience, I could tell that the rendering was accurate. I could also tell the subject wasn't either Aloeus or Theophane. A small plaque named the dragon Phlegethon.

You walked under Phlegethon to get into the new wing, and the sensation was somewhat disconcerting. The dragon was suspended with no obvious support, hovering, its wings outstretched from one side of the facade to the other. The only sign of what kept it up there was a series of white stones carved with elaborate runes hidden in the landscaping.

I entered the building and paused a moment in the lobby to get my bearings. A small ticket window stood off the cavernous lobby to the right, flanked by a rearing griffin and a rearing unicorn. The display was designed to be reminiscent of some sort of heraldic device.

I walked over to the window.

It was fifteen bucks to get into the place, including the lecture by Dr. Shafran. I used my *Press* American Express Card. The guy behind the counter swiped my card and gave me a ticket. I felt like I was walking into a theme park.

In a way I was.

Cleveland has always had a fair number of museums. However, even before the Portal a noticeable fission had begun. For three quarters of the twentieth century, we had places of genuine scientific, historical, and artistic value. The old Natural History Museum had genuine paleontologists doing original work in the field. The Cleveland Museum of Art had a nationally recognized collection and the best collection of

Medieval and Renaissance armor and weaponry on the continent. The Western Reserve historical society was a place of genuine scholarship.

Then we went and built the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Now don't get me wrong, I'm as interested in Janis Joplin's psychedelic Porsche as anyone else. But there's a reason they built it on the lakefront and not in University Circle. It has about as much to do with scholarship and education as P.T. Barnum's original American Museum. Then there was the Great Lakes Science Museum, which I don't think has ever employed a genuine scientist.

By the time the Portal opened, we already had two sets of museums in this town. The old style places run by stuffy PhDs and paid for by grants and donations, and the new style run by marketing MBAs and paid for by tourism.

The old Natural History Museum was the former. The new Natural History Museum was most aggressively the latter. It had been a shrewd decision on the part of the board, since the whole complex, old and new, was now self-sufficient based on the income the new wing generated.

Dr. Shafran was lecturing in one of the auditoriums to the rear of the main building. To get there, I walked past displays illustrating the flora and fauna unique to our Portal-influenced environment. I also passed a large swirling display describing the atmospheric effects caused by the Portal itself. The three-dimensional animation filled half of the room before the auditoriums. Central to it was a tiny model of the Portal. Even though it wasn't the real thing, the sight of an alien world reflected in a thing the size of a small Christmas ornament made me stop for a moment. They even had a breeze coming from the faux Portal's direction, a breeze that reversed as they illustrated temperature and pressure changes.

I slipped past the display and into the auditorium. The lecture was just about half over, and Dr. Shafran was speaking to room about half full. I took a seat in the back. The heavily accented voice was familiar, but he didn't resemble Bela Lugosi. He had, in fact, a very innocuous appearance. Something like a German watchmaker, or Gepetto. He was a small man with a fringe of white hair surrounding a balding crown. He had a mustache a half-shade darker than his hair, and he wore thick, round bifocals that he had a habit of taking off his nose and gesturing with.

". . . is a failure of reason," he was saying. "Even those in the scientific community can be guilty of such a failure. I believe that the fault lies in our semantics. We called this thing 'magic,' so therefore no rules apply. Wrong, very wrong . . ." He walked back and forth behind the podium. "The application of scientific principles, the scientific method, is as valid here as anywhere else."

He looked up into the audience. "I see incredulous stares. You do not believe this? Shall I make an analogy for you. Cooking? You understand that an egg that will boil in sixty seconds here will need to boil longer in Denver, Colorado. Do we say that the laws of the kitchen are in anarchy? Do we expect our soufflé recipe to behave the same at whatever altitude we cook. Of course not." He looked around, and I could see a few blank stares myself.

"A starker example. You light a match. Do you expect that match to light just as well underwater? On the moon. In an atmosphere of pure carbon dioxide? Of course not. But the same laws of physics apply to each match." He made a grand gesture with his glasses and then replaced them. "Just because a chant, a ritual, a *spell* works here and does not work elsewhere, that does not mean the suspension of the laws of nature here. The local conditions are *different*. Energies flow here that flow nowhere else on the planet. Just as a match will not light in the absence of oxygen, a *spell* will not work in the absence of these energies."

Dr. Shafran had me thinking, again, why Aloeus, Inc., would be interested in a huge plot of mountainous Mexican land. I couldn't see why anyone, much less someone who was limited to a geographic area about a hundred and fifty miles around Cleveland, would be interested in that land. It seemed to me that this had to be an obvious counterexample to Friday's protests that Aloeus wasn't interested in human politics. That land could only be of interest to people in the mundane world, people who could use it.

Power by proxy Theophane called it. To Aloeus, the property wasn't a physical object. It was a symbol, only meaningful for the value that others placed in it. The dragon wanted the land, not for itself, but as a leverage with someone who *was* interested in it. Once I discovered who had interest in that land, I had a gut instinct that I'd be a lot closer to what Aloeus was trying to do. Perhaps a lot closer to why he had died.

The way things would turn would prove me half right, and half *very* wrong.

Dr. Shafran was wrapping up his lecture. "The scientific mind should not shrink before this time and place. Never has such a broad category of unquantified and unanalyzed phenomena been presented to a civilization with the tools to explain it. There are such . . . possibilities." The doctor looked down at his watch and said, "I'm afraid I've run over, but I will take a few questions. Yes?"

A woman stood up. She wore a necklace of chunky amber crystals and an orange sundress with a Navaho motif. "You've mentioned nothing about the spirit, Dr. Shafran."

"No, I have not."

"But isn't that what the point is, here. This place is where the spirit of man is closest to the spirit of nature—"

"I am not a theologian, madam. I am a scientist. I see no reason to introduce unmeasurable forces into an environment that does not require them."

"But you've said that the human mind controls these forces—"

"I have said that these forces can be influenced by human mental activity. Repeated and ritualized mental activity. You may call that spirit if you like, but in my opinion that is simply an old human prejudice. Our brain is no more the center of the universe than our planet is. There is no reason that a properly programmed computer, or even a well-trained monkey, could not perform the same 'spiritual' feats

as a human mage."

The woman sat down, looking unconvinced.

Another man stood up and asked a more interesting question. "Is it impossible then, for any magical effect to influence the world outside this Portal's influence?"

"That is a good question," Dr. Shafran took off his glasses and pointed at the questioner. "It depends on what you term a 'magical effect.' It should be obvious that any change in the physical world will persist outside the realm of the Portal. The world outside doesn't care if a rock was carved by magic or by a chisel. It becomes more complicated as the mage tries to influence the world outside directly. But the existence of the Portal itself shows that it *is* possible."

Dr. Shafran smiled, probably because he'd gotten a bit of a reaction from a relatively dead audience.

"This land was empty of any magical force, and yet, the Portal—the quintessential magical effect—opened here. Therefore it is possible. For that reason, if no other, we must study the Portal. Once that mechanism is understood, and we know what forces created it, we will be able to channel this power where we will. Perhaps even generate it.

"If there are no more questions, I should dismiss you. The museum closes in five minutes."

I walked up to the podium after most of the audience had filed out. Dr. Shafran was picking up papers and putting them in a briefcase. "Good lecture, Doctor."

"Thank you," he said without looking at me. Now that he wasn't speaking publicly, his accent had grown thicker. His brows furrowed a moment, and he turned to face me. "The voice is familiar. We have spoken?"

I nodded and held out my hand. "Kline Maxwell, *Cleveland Press*, we spoke yesterday."

Dr. Shafran smiled broadly, put down the case, and grabbed my arm with both of his. "Yes. The newspaperman. You do me a great service."

"You did me a service, Doctor."

"Nonsense," he gave my arm a vigorous shake and let it go. "It is you who helps my work." He waved at the auditorium. "Mine is not a popular study."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Believe me." He picked up his case. "No one wants to hear what I have to say. The scientific community," he shook his head sadly. "Too many people dismissed what was happening here as rampant fantasy before it was documented. I'm afraid that the whole generation will have to die off before one can get an impartial jury to judge a scientific paper on the subject. And the public . . ."

"I saw the woman."

"I am doing serious work here, and what kind of questions do I get? Spirits, angels, demons, God and the devil. Do they not hear what it is I am saying?" He patted me on the shoulder. "We must leave before they lock us in this place."

He led me out of the auditorium and back through the halls of exhibits. "You do me a great service by quoting me accurately. Perhaps I can use the attention in a grant request."

"Then you wouldn't mind answering a few more questions for me?"

"Certainly."

We took a seat outside the entrance, under the dragon's looming effigy.

"What concerns you tonight, Mr. Maxwell?"

I looked up at the abdomen of the dragon above us. We were lucky that Aloeus had hit in the Flats. The kind of damage that might have happened elsewhere was frightening.

"I wanted to know if it is possible that what happened to the dragon might not have been an accident."

"How exactly do you mean? Certainly the dragon could have ended his own life in such a way, intentionally aiming to an area of fatally low power."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"You are asking if someone else could have created the conditions that killed him."

"Yes."

"It is possible."

"How?"

Dr. Shafran took off his bifocals and waved them at the air around us. "The power is a fluid. When any magical effect occurs, that power is drained for a bit, somewhere. Like siphoning water from a river. If a spell was cast, involving a massive amount of energy, a momentary void could be created."

"How massive?"

The doctor shrugged. "I do not have enough information to quantify that. Enough to spread the burden, the energy flows through the mage, like an electric circuit. Too few and the synapses would fry."

"A guess?"

"Perhaps a dozen."

Christ, I didn't think there were that many competent black-market mages in the city.

"So, to engineer that, you need the collusion of at least twelve mages?"

Dr. Shafran shook his head. "No, you only need one specific mage."

"But you said—"

"The mechanics are like this, Mr. Maxwell. In a proper multiperson ritual, there is only one mage directing the spell. All the other participants are gathering and channeling the power to create the effect envisioned by the central figure. If more than one person is actively casting, they *must* be focusing on different elements. Each person's influence is different, and if you have more than one person concentrating on the same thing, the effect is to dilute the effectiveness of whatever you're trying to do, not multiply it."

"But if a dozen people cast something, aren't they all going to know what it is? At least after the fact? If you're expecting some massive effect and something *else* happens"—

"You do not understand me. The void, the power being sucked away from the river, that is a *side effect*. It is quite possible for a mage to cast some great effect and be completely ignorant of the specific geographic location the energy to cast the spell came from. For most rituals the source of the energy is local and arbitrary, but all that's required is one mage in the ritual to direct *where* the power is coming from. If a mage had wanted to kill a dragon in this fashion, he need only participate in a large enough ritual, and direct the channel from where the power came from. It would be possible to do so with none of the other participants being aware."

"So it *could* have been murder."

"Yes, it could have been. But it was not."

I had been staring at the dragon above us and thinking of Aloeus' last moments. Dr. Shafran's assertion brought me back to earth. I turned and looked at him. "Why do you say that?"

"A cursory examination of the body would have revealed it," he said. "Anyone remotely familiar with the process would have been able to tell the difference."

"What? It's the same thing, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "Only insofar that the cause of death is the same. But the differences would be as stark as the difference between death by asphyxiation and death by explosive decompression. The natural phenomenon is a gradient, the body would die at different rates in different areas, the process would be nonuniform. An artificial drain would cause a sudden, stark, absence of power. The parts of the body inside the effect would all be affected equally. Any part outside the effect would be completely unscathed." He looked at me. "Such a line of division, such a uniform degradation of the flesh, that would be as obvious as a bullet wound or a slash from a knife. The police would not dismiss such a thing as an accident."

*No, but perhaps Coroner Nixon had.*



If Dr. Nixon had falsified the manner of death, that gave someone an excellent motive to finish him off. Since Aloeus was now so much ash, there'd be no one left to contradict the "official" examination. I was more certain than ever that Aloeus' death was murder.

I decided to not bother Dr. Shafran with my conclusions. I thanked him for his time and stood up. "One last thing."

"Certainly."

"Have you ever heard of anyone named Faust?"

"No—"

"Thank you."

"Not recently."

I stopped in mid stride and turned back around. "What?"

"A long time ago, back in the months after the Portal opened." He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment.

"Yes?"

"Just a rumor I heard somewhere. When people were talking about elves and such taking over."

"What rumor, exactly?"

"Faust was the person who was going to lead the elvish takeover. A dozen different descriptions. All probably someone's paranoid fantasy. The elves have not taken over."

"Thank you."

One of many rumors to have spawned after the Portal opened. The doctor was right. It was probably someone's paranoid fantasy. Except for the fact that Bone Daddy and the SPU elves had been asking about him.

## Chapter Fourteen

I GOT home late, and the message light was blinking on my home phone. No Shakespeare this time, just the voice of my ex-wife saying, "Call *me*." I set a Styrofoam box of tandoori chicken on the coffee table and dialed her number, hoping that Sarah would answer the phone.

No such luck.

"Where have you been? It has to be nine-thirty out there."

"Ten-thirty," I corrected her, rolling my head to hear my neck pop.

"You talked to Sarah—"

"*She called me*," I said. Unlike the call from my daughter, the tone my ex-wife was using made me grateful for the distance between us.

"What did she tell you?"

I shook my head. "She told me you beat her with chains and fed her broken glass. What do you think she told me? *Sheesh*."

There was a long pause before she said, "Do you think I'm being unreasonable?"

I closed my eyes and put my head in my hand. "Margaret, I told her that I wasn't going to pressure you on her behalf. I'm going to tell you the same thing."

"Kline, please—"

"I'm not *there*. I won't second-guess your parenting skills. I don't doubt you're a good mother, or that our daughter gave you ample justification, but I'm not getting involved in a fight between you two. Period."

"You're her father—"

"Thank you for clearing that up."

"You're supposed to back me up on things like this."

"That wasn't on the divorce paper I signed." I was sorry the moment I said it. I felt the words leave my lips and realized that she had managed to snare me in the old trap of following her up the emotional escalator.

"*Goddamn it, Kline!* Since she called you, she won't talk to me."

I sighed and took a deep breath to center myself. "Margaret, she called me to bitch about being grounded. She's a very pissed young woman."

"You're taking her side?" Her voice was escalating. Any moment now, dogs all over San Francisco would start howling in response.

"You know better than that. And my opinion has no bearing on how angry she is. Whether or not you're justified, has no bearing on how angry she is. She probably deserves everything she's getting. Do you think for a moment that makes her feel *better*?"

"You don't understand. You don't have to deal with this."

"That's exactly why I should keep my substantial nose out of the whole mess. Just step back and think of how much well-meaning destruction I could wreak if I tried that kind of long-distance parenting. You really want to debate curfews with me over the phone every week?"

"She was really upset, wasn't she?" Her voice had calmed down.

"It didn't seem unwarranted."

There was a long sigh. "Sometimes I think it would be easier if you were closer."

"You're the one who moved."

"I couldn't have our child in that environment."

"It's a lot better now—"

"Kline—"

"Houses in the city are worth something now, the school system is finally—"

"Kline, *don't*."

I stopped.

"You know better than that," she said. "Sarah's lived here most of her life now. She has friends—"

"Uh-huh. Now why don't you tell me about this Chris guy . . ."

Despite the successful deescalation of things with Margaret, my subconscious was uneasy enough to prod me with nightmares.

I am confronted with a specter of Aloeus' corpse, torn and broken worse than I had seen on the river. The body is being consumed by the unnatural rot that afflicted the corpses of slain magical beasts. It stares at me with a blind milky eye the size of a hubcap and whispers in an uneven voice that sounds like a tape recorder going bad, "Murder most foul, as in the best it is. But this most foul, strange and unusual . . ."

The voice merged with the sound of my phone demanding attention. I rolled off my couch, pissed at the second rude awakening to happen to me in the past forty-eight hours.

I grabbed the handset and growled "What?"

Even though it had been a dream, I was still surprised to answer the phone and hear the voice of Kirk Cutler and not my harassing Shakespeare buff.

"Maxwell, what happened to you? Why aren't you answering your cell phone?"

"Jesus Christ, Cutler. It's three-thirty in the morning."

"I've been trying to reach you for two hours."

"Did you hear me? It's *three-thirty. A.M.!*"

"I've been leaving messages all over—"

"Cutler, I go off duty when I come home. I turn my cell phone *off*. That means that I'm not even going to ask you why you're worked up, because whatever it is can wait until eight."

"Don't you listen to the radio? The news tonight—"

"I'm hanging up, Cutler."

I was reaching to hang up the phone, and just as I was about to set it in the cradle, I heard, very distinctly, the word, "Dead."

A feeling of dread filled my stomach as I raised the handset back to my ear. I began to wonder what would get Cutler so worked up, and why he might call *me* of all people. We had consummated our *quid pro quo* and, if anything, I needed him for my story more than he needed me for his. "What was that?" I asked the receiver, something in me wishing the connection had already died.

"I said that Bone Daddy is dead. Deceased. It was all over the late newscasts."

My words felt dry, tasting of copper. "I don't turn on the news at home."

"You missed a shitload. That BMW you spotted turned up at an intersection in Hough. A squad of SPU elves called in the plates. Mix in a liberal dose of 'allegedly' and 'according to police,' and you have a fucking massacre that looks like the end of *Bonnie and Clyde*."

I was standing, completely awake now. "Back up a minute, Cutler. You're saying the cops shot him."

"No, Maxwell. I'm saying they *slaughtered* the guy. At least a hundred shots fired, none from Bone. Which is kind of funny if you ask me, since the homeboy was packing."

I was pacing now, looking for where I'd tossed my clothes when I went to bed.

"From the top, Cutler. What happened?"

"I don't know *what* happened. I know what the police *say* happened."

"Out with it."

"The story goes: Bone's sitting at a light. A squad of unidentified SPU elves—whose identity I think we both can guess—run his plate, then call in that they are making the stop. Bone does not do the sane thing and pull over. Instead, he pulls an Uzi out from under the driver's seat and draws down on the elf cops—cops, I might add, who've had no problem letting him walk from all manner of felonies before this."

"He shot at the police?"

"No, apparently he was a little too slow. Though he did have the foresight to load up the Uzi with 9mm elf-stopper rounds."

I shook my head. The thing about the SPU being mostly elves and such, is bullets don't do a hell of a lot. A lead slug will knock them down, but they're a hell of a lot more resilient than your average cop. A head shot with a normal bullet won't take them out of the picture. But then, there are so-called "elf-stopper" rounds, fully steel-jacketed hollow points that fragment enough iron content to drop your average elf.

Unfortunately for Bone Daddy, the human body was quite vulnerable to standard lead bullets.

"The Uzi was a plant," I said.

"A regular rhodo-fucking-dendron."

"Why would they kill him?"

"Why you think I'm calling all over the place for you, Einstein? The dragon shit blew this open, and the hell if I'm going to lose a story because of one of you op-ed prima donnas. You and I gotta talk."

"Yeah, we do."

"Bring your notebook, I got another CD to show you."

I met up with Cutler at an all-night diner in Cleveland Heights at about four-fifteen. Cutler was getting a refill on his coffee when I walked in. I was carrying my computer, like he'd asked me.

He waved me over to the booth and waved the waitress away— rather rudely, since I didn't get a chance to order anything myself. He ground a cigarette out in the ashtray next to him and said, "Come on, let's boot this thing up."

I put the notebook on the table between us. Before I opened it, I asked him. "What is it?"

He reached down and put a clear crystal case down in front of us. The platter inside had the blue tint of a recordable CD. "You ain't going to believe this one."

"Try me."

"I hear Bone Daddy bites it. You aren't the only one I'm trying to get hold of. I'm running down everyone I know who knew Bone and who might talk to me. *Everyone*. The fucking case of my fucking life is bleeding away, Maxwell. I gotta get *something*."

"And you got this?"

"An old girlfriend— not even his current, this is, like, three bitches ago, but I'm running out of people who'll talk, right?— I knock on her door. She doesn't know that the cops capped her ex's ass."

I can picture Cutler at this woman's door. He wasn't exactly the soul of subtlety or discretion. This must have been only hours after the shooting, Bone wasn't even cold yet.

"So she loses it when you tell her," I said.

"Hell, no." Cutler taps the CD case. "She gives me this. Says that our wizard gave it to her three years ago, saying to give it to the man who tells her he'd been killed."

"What is it? A will?"

"I don't know," Cutler said. "It's encrypted."

I picked up the case and looked at the CD inside. I shook my head. "I hope you didn't call me here for my prowess as a code breaker." When it came down to it, there was enough hard encryption on the Internet that chances were that the CD was essentially useless, unbreakable without a passphrase.

Cutler shook his head. "No, but let me tell you this. Bone Daddy said to this chick, 'Pass this on to the man who tells you I've been killed.' He didn't say, 'when I die.' he said 'killed.' "

I shrugged. "Not a tough call in his line of work."

"Kline, this guy was an eye, a fortune-teller. He *knew* he was going to end badly. And, three years ago, he knew that someone was going to bring the news to this babe he was shackled up with."

"Fat lot of good it does anyone if the CD's encrypted."

"She told me that he knew that the guy who was supposed to see this thing would know the password."

I shrugged. "So if this guy is— was— such a seer, why don't you know it?"

"I don't think it is meant for me."

"Pardon?"

"I've tried passwords six ways from Sunday. Like I said, he's *good*. He'd know what passphrase to use to let it fall into the right person's lap. Not me. *You*."

I looked at the CD. "*Me?*"

"The CD is tied up with Bone's death. Not coincidentally, we're talking magic here. The guy it's for, he's tied up with it, too."

"What've I got to do with his death, Cutler?"

"You're the last person to see him alive, outside his killers. You gave the cops the plate number of his BMW. You were in his presence and in the presence of the elves who would kill him—"

"We're *assuming* they're the cops who shot him."

"Do you think we're wrong?"

There was something about Cutler's manner that I was starting to find unnerving. "I think you're reaching about this CD. You were a lot more tied in with Bone Daddy than I was."

"A day after you become involved his pet elves turn on him? I think there's a connection." He slid the CD across the table. "Try it." There was an uncharacteristic note of desperation in his voice.

I opened the notebook and slipped the CD inside. "I don't know what this is worth even if we could read it. It's three years old." I typed on the keyboard, trying to access the CD. Predictably, the only result was a little gray box asking for a

passphrase. "How good a seer *was* this guy?"

"Damn good," Cutler said, lighting up another cigarette.

The password box stared at me. The guy who was supposed to see this thing would know what to type.

On impulse, I typed, "*Murder most foul, as in the best it is. But this most foul, strange and unusual.*" The little text box filled with asterisks. My finger hovered over the return key.

"Cutler, I've got a question for you."

Cutler looked at my hands, still hovering over the keyboard. "What're you waiting for? Afraid it won't work?"

*More likely, afraid that it will . . .*

"How did you know I was the one who gave the plate number of his BMW to the cops?"

"Damn it, Maxwell—" he reached over and actually pressed the return key for me.

I grabbed his wrist. "What the fuck do you think you're—" I was interrupted by a beep from my notebook as a small gray window notified me, "Loading . . ." with an ominously slow-moving progress bar.

"Cutler, if this is a virus—"

"Christ. You got the passphrase in one shot? I spent hours with that mother before I called you."

I felt the sweat on my back freeze into solid little balls of ice on my spine. If this wasn't a practical joke on Cutler's part, I just guessed a sixteen-word passphrase, punctuation and all. That was better than a billion-to-one shot. The only explanation was that Bone Daddy had left this CD for *me*, and had divined my guess at a passphrase over three years ago.

The way that bar was moving, and the CD was rattling, I hoped the guy divined my processor speed and the space on my hard drive as well. I looked up at Cutler, "What did you give me?"

"I told you, I don't know." He looked up from the screen of my computer. "The CD *was* meant for you. Why the hell would he be giving *you* messages? After all the crap I went through—"

The questions weren't right, and his expression was all wrong. Tense, strained, muscles taut, eyes darting, a few beads of sweat by the hairline and the upper lip. His wrist, which I still held, was shaking very slightly.

"How," I repeated, "did you know I gave the cops Bone Daddy's license plate number?"

"You told me you did." The voice had lost a lot of confidence, and a note of

pleading had entered it.

I shook my head. "We talked about dragons, about kidnappings, about questionings. Never once did I mention what I talked to the cops about."

"Lucky guess, then." I saw Cutler's hand drift toward his chest, and stop. I saw fear in his eyes.

"What's going on here?" I stared at the spot on his chest where his hand was moving. There was a slight bump visible beneath the thin cotton shirt. "Christ, man? Are you wearing a wire?"

I stood up, pissed and confused. I smelled a setup. Cutler raised his hands, and I saw panic in his eyes. "Kline," he whispered. "Don't, they're watching."

I don't know exactly what possessed me. I supposed, from Aloeus' death until this point, everything had been a step removed from me. Even my abduction had been dreamlike, not as threatening as it should have been. So, instead of sitting down and playing it out like I should have, I bent over the table and pulled Cutler's shirt open.

No wire.

Hanging on a chain around his neck was a small charm the size of the last joint of my index finger. In a half second my brain registered what it was—

"*You stupid bastard!*" Cutler was reaching for me, fury in his eyes. His hands were almost at my neck as I realized the charm was a forty-five caliber bullet covered with intricate engravings that were just starting to glow.

I was deafened by the sound of a gunshot. Cutler spasmed away from me as flecks of gore erupted from the sudden crater in his chest. The odor of smoke was rank as I watched Cutler slump backward into the booth. The casing from the charmed bullet bounced off of the table and struck my right hand, burning it. My left hand still held part of Cutler's shirt. I let it go.

Someone screamed.

## Chapter Fifteen

*NO, no, no. This shit is not happening.*

I looked up, and everyone in the diner was backing away from me. I silently mouthed my innocence, knowing, already that it wouldn't do any good.

Worse, out the windows, I saw the blue of police flashers. Too soon. They'd been waiting. There wasn't any time. Normal course of events, I'd patiently wait for the cops. After all, I was obviously unarmed, and forensics was bound to get a lead on the magic bullet from the engraved casing.

This *wasn't* normal. Those blue flashers probably belonged to the folks that'd just



cashed in Cutler, and I saw a good likelihood that— like the late Bone Daddy— they'd shoot me and plant an appropriate weapon on my corpse after the fact. My gut told me to run, and I've always been good about following my gut.

I grabbed the notebook off the counter and ran for the back of the diner. I reached the emergency exit in the back before I had the thing closed. A siren started when I slammed through the door out into the parking lot in back of the diner.

There was no real cover. The cops were out front, and the diner was a single building surrounded by parking lot. Running right or left, I'd expose myself. The blue flashers were sweeping the cars in the lot to my left. If there were four of them, like last time, there would be two going into the diner, and a pair in the car to move around back. If they were smart, one got out of the car, and they were flanking me.

I ran straight back, toward a tall fence that separated the parking lot from the residences on the other half of the block. It was a twelve-foot wooden privacy fence, which I didn't have hope of climbing without help. Fortunately I had help in the form of a Buick Century parked next to a minivan that was backed in by the fence. The cars were almost straight back.

I'm no athlete, but adrenaline and fear can do some surprising things. I sprinted flat out for the Buick, and I reached it before I heard the warning whoop of the cop car's siren. I half jumped and half stumbled onto the hood and managed to keep moving.

Behind me I heard an elf-accented voice say, "Freeze."

Call me an idiot, I didn't freeze. Instead, when I scrambled on the roof of the Buick, I tossed the notebook up, over the fence. I didn't know what was on that CD, but I knew I didn't want my elvish adversaries to have it.

As I jumped for the roof of the minivan, I heard a gunshot. Something shattered underneath me. I cursed as I rolled on to the top of the van, the luggage rack gouging my shoulder. I didn't let myself stop. I got into a crouch like a sprinter, gasped as I felt the effort in my groin and my left knee, and sprang toward the fence.

The top was just in reach, which was good because the protests my lower body was giving me meant I wouldn't be able to make any substantial jump. I slammed into the flat face of the fence, slivers tearing into the meat of my hands as I grabbed its irregular top. I pulled up, trying to swing my right leg up as I kept a precarious foot on the roof of the van.

Another gunshot. It wasn't a warning shot. It barely missed, and I could feel the impact shake the fence. The shot of life-and-death fear that gave to me was enough to convince my forty-three-year-old body to pull itself over the top.

That almost finished the job for the elves. I flipped over the top, and couldn't hold on. I rolled off, and would have fallen the twelve feet straight down if a stand of pine trees weren't growing up right next to the fence. I rolled off into a tree, the trunk slamming into my lower back, sending a shock through my kidneys that made me forget the splinters in my hands and the burning muscles in my legs.

The branch beneath me snapped under my weight, spilling me down onto another branch, and another, thrashing me like whips for six feet or so, before I ended folded over a branch too thick for me to break.

At this point, just about every part of my body was screaming "bad idea" at me.

I heard the branch beneath me strain. I took it as my cue to finish my descent. I tried to lower myself by my hands and drop gracefully, but the bark tried to grind the splinters deeper into my hands and I couldn't hold myself up, even momentarily. As soon as my weight was supported by my arms, I fell.

It was a little less than six feet, and this time my fall was somewhat controlled. I hit with my legs, which buckled with the impact, not because that's the way to absorb the impact of a fall, but because my legs were having third thoughts about supporting my weight.

This wasn't part of my normal work experience. The most physical I ever got was about every other month when I got guilty about my lifestyle and used the gym at the *Press* building for about twenty minutes.

The ground here was lower than the parking lot, and graded away from the fence. I rolled through a bed of pine needles into the trunk of another tree. I finished facing upward, in time to see the blue lights of a cop car washing the tops of the trees.

"Fuck."

It had reached the point where I was pissed off that I hadn't broken any bones, which would give me a legitimate excuse just to wait here for the elves. Instead, I sucked in a breath and pulled myself up as quickly as I could manage. As I did, I whipped my head around looking for three things: pursuit, my notebook, and an escape route.

The first thing I saw was the notebook. It had hit the ground out of the shadow of the fence, where there was some light from the streetlights in the parking lot. The bad news was that the three-grand machine was now in about four separate pieces. Another thing I was going to have to justify; the machine belonged to the *Press*.

I half stumbled and half ran past the remains. I grabbed the lower half of the base unit, now just a plastic slab with a circuit board bolted to it. The keyboard was off elsewhere in two pieces, the screen even farther away. That didn't matter right now. This section of the remains had the two important bits, the CD unit, and the hard drive.

I heard some commotion behind me, and I burst into a limping run through the backyard of the house in front of me.

By all rights, the bastards should have caught me. I wasn't making good time on foot, and they had seen where I had jumped the fence. I'd almost considered ditching the remains of my notebook, because it seemed so inevitable.

But I eluded them. When I managed to slow down enough to think about what happened, I came up with the reason why.

These guys, while they might be cops, only had the one car. For a foot pursuit, you need backup. Cops don't outrun suspects, they flank them. The guy chasing you is radioing your position to a second car that's moving to cut you off. If these guys were who I thought they were—which was a guess, since I hadn't taken the time to look back at them—then they had to radio some Cleveland Heights cops for backup. Not only would the Heights cops not immediately be in position to cut me off, but the jurisdictional issues would probably add at least a minute or so to the response time.

My getaway vehicle was a blue-and-white Americab summoned via cell phone and met in a church parking lot. I gave the guy everything in my wallet to get me downtown, which amounted to a fifty to keep his mouth shut.

As I rode, I had time to attempt a coherent explanation for what happened.

Bone Daddy was a black market mage with a long criminal record and no small ability. Cutler was investigating his connection with a quartet of SPU elves. Bone Daddy and the bent elf cops had some interest in the demise of Aloeus, and my investigation of it.

They killed Egil Nixon, presumably to cover up the fact that Aloeus was murdered. Dr. Shafran had made it clear that a murder would be impossible to mistake for an accident.

Then Bone Daddy winds up dead, presumably killed by these same SPU elves. Cutler was right that a coincidental falling out was pushing the bounds of probability. He also seemed to have access to an inside source, since it seemed pretty certain that it was these bent cops that were holding his fatal leash.

I was also becoming certain that he wasn't telling the whole truth about the origins of the CD. I suspect that it was more than likely that the elves on the other end of that bullet handed the CD to Cutler, with marching orders to get it into my hands, preferably in a public place where they could see the keystrokes as I entered the passphrase.

Given the way he died, I doubt the elves were willing to have any unapproved data floating out there with Bone Daddy's name on it.

I had the cabbie let me out by a bank machine, where I got a large cash advance from my *Press Amex*. Then I proceeded to disappear for a few hours.

Bone Daddy sat on a leather couch pointing a remote at a digital video camera. He wore nothing but a pair of jeans that rode on his hips. He had a muscular torso and wiry arms, both of which were covered by black tatoos, dozens of circular charms made of Greek, Hebrew, and Latin text.

The hand with the remote was trembling slightly, and the other hand carefully set a bottle of amber liquid on the glass coffee table between him and the camera. He ran his hand over the skin of his scalp and shook his head.

"Man," he whispered. The remote clattered to the table.

Bone Daddy looked up into the camera and smiled— lips pulled tight and muscles locked. "Hello, Will," he said. "I'm going to call you that cause I don't know who the fuck you are. Chances are, you don't know who the fuck I am either." He grabbed the bottle and took a swig, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Ain't the Oracle a bitch?"

He stood up a little shakily and started pacing. "Word of advice, Will. Don't ask questions about your own future. Especially don't ask how you're going to die. The Oracle ain't going to lie to you, and the bitch ain't going to tell you anything you can change." He was quiet for a few moments, staring into the middle distance between him and the camera.

"You want to know what this is about, don't you? Well, I'm dead— smoked by some motherfucker I'm supposed to trust. And, no, I don't know who. If the bitch let me know *that*, I could do something about it, and she can't screw a perfect record, can she?" He grabbed the neck of the half empty bottle, lifted it up, and slammed it back down on the glass table. The table shattered, leaving him holding the bottle hovering over empty space.

He stood there a moment, staring at the remains of the table. Then he let the bottle drop.

"What you are, Will," he spoke into the camera, "is the guy most likely to fuck up the shits who killed me." He crouched, bare feet crunching the broken glass, and stared into the lens of the camera, leaning forward as if he could see the person he was talking to. "That's what you're going to do." He pointed a trembling finger up at the lens. "Fuck up these shits."

Every muscle in his body was tense. Sweat shone on the surface of his arcane tattoos. His eyes were wide and the pupils were points, nearly invisible in the iris. Reflected in the iris was a small image of the brick-sized digital camera pointing at him.

"I know you, Will. I spent three hours with that cold bitch, and she told me things. Not your name, but I know you're searching. Looking to find out something these shits don't want you to know. Don't know what, just that either you'll find it, or these shits will kill you, too."

He grinned. "Ain't life a bitch?" He shook his head. "Just in case you're thinking of dissing what I have to say— remember your quote, Mr. Shakespeare? Ironic one, too, ain't it?"

He shifted his weight to the sound of crunching glass. If he felt the glass under his feet, it didn't show in his face. "Anyway, I expect you understand, I know my shit. I think you also know you're in a world of trouble, too. You're at a nexus, Will. Right now, or very shortly, you're going to be in the sights of powers you only brushed against till now. You're not a powerful man and you threaten powers a lot greater than yourself." Closed his eyes and muttered to himself, "Fuck, as if I'm telling you

shit you don't already know."

He reached for the camera and looked down at it. His face held a haunted expression. "I'm a dead man, Will. I got wasted and wanted to know more than I should. This message might seem fucking weak, but damn it all, I tried not to seal your fate the way that I did mine. I didn't ask if you'd succeed or fail, if you'd live or die. You still got the freedom, Will, and fuck Fate—" He stood up and walked with the camera. "I got three things I busted my hump for. You *better* use them."

He was holding the camera right up to his face, staring into it, looking into the eyes of the person who would view this record. "You got three enemies, Will, all badasses. A villain of deeds, a villain of thoughts, and a villain of words. The first will kill you if given the chance, but he is the least of your opposition. The second is the mastermind, driving plots that others follow to your undoing. But the last is the greatest threat, for with only a well chosen word he will destroy one man, or empires unborn."

He held up a hand with two fingers extended up to the camera. "Your path has been chosen for you by forces you've known and have not seen, and they fear your allegiance because the masters you serve are not theirs. The alliance they offer will not be an easy one."

A third finger extended. "Finally, Will, there are many hands, but no head."

He blinked and lowered the camera. "That's all we got for you. Good luck, you poor bastard," Bone Daddy said as he switched off the camera.

I was watching Bone Daddy's auto-eulogy at one of the PCs in the Cleveland Public Library. You weren't supposed to load outside software on these things, but when no one was looking, I'd slipped Bone Daddy's CD into the base unit, and called it to life. It took me a few tries this time, I couldn't remember the exact punctuation and capitalization that I'd used the first time.

I watched the grainy digital movie three times trying to intuit why the elves would kill over this. The whole setup with Cutler had to be to get me to unlock this CD.

I had a room at the downtown Raddison, paying cash along with another generous bribe to buy silence. I had managed to clean myself up somewhat, and get most of the crap out of my clothes. I had slept until noon, which meant that the desk clerk hadn't phoned the cops on me.

When I had emerged, I didn't gather too many stares. My slacks were dark and didn't show the stains from sap, dirt, and blood. Most of the bruising was beneath my shirt which, while it had sustained a few tears and lost a button, was casual denim so it didn't show the damage so blatantly. The remains of my notebook had made it into a dumpster behind a restaurant I passed on the way to the library.

The only thing that made me look the fugitive were my hands. The effects of splinters and pine bark had made them a bloody mess. They were mostly scabbed

over now, but they had been bad enough that my bloodstained jacket had joined my notebook in the dumpster. They'd be all right if I didn't try to make a fist.

At one-forty-five I checked for people watching me and slipped the CD out of the PC.

I still couldn't quite get what was up with the SPU cops. If it wasn't a bunch of elves, their actions of the last thirty-six hours would've struck me as desperate, even panicked. But elves were too damn cold to be panicked. The interrogation struck me as an elf job, but not Bone Daddy's execution. That was sloppy. The little setup with me and Cutler was even worse, messy, witnesses, and not only did I make it out in one piece, but with the CD they seemed interested in.

I slipped the enigmatic disk into my pocket.

He had made it pretty clear that there was more than one power at work here. *There are many hands, but no head.*

"Well," I whispered to myself, "did we ever really believe that this thing was *just* the elves?"

I pushed away from the table and looked out the window.

The sane thing to do was to turn myself in to some clean cops. I actually knew a few. Staying on the lam like this was borrowing trouble. I knew that there'd be no way to make the charges stick, even if they'd tampered with the evidence any competent pathologist was going to be able to tell that Cutler hadn't died from a conventional gunshot wound.

*Yeah, then why don't I?*

I flipped open my cell phone—which had survived the night intact—and hit the third autodial button.

After a moment, a familiar, stressed voice said, "City desk."

"Miss me yet, Bea."

"Holy sh—" Her voice lowered. "What the hell are you doing? There're cops crawling all over here."

"I didn't do it, Bea."

"Christ, I know that. But we have policemen here, with *warrants*. They've already taken fifteen boxes of paper, your workstation—"

I knew how she felt. In spite of all the voyeurism inherent in the profession—or perhaps because of it—journalists are incredibly sensitive to invasions of privacy.

"Look, Bea, I am on to something. Big."

"Big enough to get Cutler killed?"

"And me, if I'm not careful."

"Where are you? I'll send a car."

"No, not a good idea. I just need to know, is the SPU there?"

"What are you into?"

"Are they?"

Whispered this time, "There's an SPU detective here, why are—"

"What's his name?"

"Caledvwlch."

"Thanks," I moved to turn off the phone.

"You better be on to something, or I'm personally going to—"

"Stand in line, Bea." I flipped the phone shut.

## Chapter Sixteen

I DIDN'T stay on the line with Columbia because, at this point, if they didn't have a trace on her phone, they probably had one on mine. Zeroing in on a wireless phone was difficult, but well within the SPU's capabilities in a normal police investigation.

I had called in some vain hope that the outlaw cops wouldn't allow there to be a normal police investigation. I was hoping that they'd want to keep it intimate. I was holding some pretty damaging info, they wouldn't want me hauled in by cops that weren't in on their particular scam.

I had either overestimated their caution, or things had gotten too big for them to bottle up. The Cleveland Police had a warrant out on me, and at this point I could either cut and run, or try to get myself into the custody of some non-SPU cops.

I came to a decision. The Justice Center was within spitting distance of where I was standing. I knew Caledvwlch and the rogue elves were crawling all over the *Press* building. All I had to do was slip into the DA's office, or maybe internal affairs. These bastards were deadly, but if I got firmly embedded in the system and, most importantly, got what I already knew into the record, it would be very difficult to get rid of me without implicating themselves.

When I left the library I took the rear entrance, to cut across the mall toward the city buildings clustered around Lakeside. I passed by a hot dog vendor, scattering the pixie things that hovered in the garlic-scented steam from the hot dog water. The little alien humanoids, all of an inch in height with a shimmering wingspan no bigger than my outstretched hand, gave me a wide berth. They probably saw it coming before I did.

I didn't know I was in trouble until I saw a van pull to a stop at the intersection ahead of me. I was a little too slow in reacting. I kept walking, turning to watch the van,

both the exactly wrong things to do. By the time my legs got the message and started turning, tensing to sprint, it was too late. The door was sliding open on the side of the van, and I was suddenly flanked from behind by two muscular gentlemen with navy suits and earth-tone ties.

"You have to come with us, Mr. Maxwell," said the suit with the brown tie, as the pair of them grabbed my arms and ushered me quickly to the idling van. I might have fought them, but I felt a hard pressure over my right kidney wielded by the suit with the mustard-yellow tie.

I knew right off they weren't local cops. They were too polite, too obviously concerned about making a scene. Local boys would have done one of two things; a cowboy would have tackled me, sworn a lot, and read me Miranda while he ground my face into the pavement, while a good ol' boy would call it in, and watch as five or six cars drove in to pick me up.

I was shoved inside the van, which was moving before the door had slid completely shut.

*And who the hell are you guys?*

"Where are you taking me?" I asked as we crossed the river on the Main Avenue Bridge, going west. I noticed a few of them, notably the guy with the mustard tie and the guy riding shotgun, watching to our right as we passed the stadium. It was the kind of look that let you separate the tourists from the natives— though the look Colonel Mustard was giving seemed more like a general sizing up an enemy army. The gun he still held on me must have contributed to the impression.

Mr. Brown watched out the opposite window. "We'll be there soon enough, Mr. Maxwell."

"What do you guys want?"

"We want you to be quiet until we get to the safe house," said the man I thought of as Professor Plum— glasses and gray hair made him look slightly bookish.

*Safe house?*

Over the river, the driver— whom I labeled Mr. White because he was a black guy who bore a passing resemblance to a former mayor of the same name— called back, "We got a critter on our six o'clock, pacing us."

"Fuck it," Colonel Mustard said as he squinted out the back windows of the van. "I don't see a tail."

"Up," said Mr. White.

I followed Colonel Mustard's gaze upward and saw what Mr. White had been talking about.

It was some sort of flying creature, about half man-sized, with leathery wings and a



skull-like face. A demonic gargoyle creature that, I now realized, had been following my movements since I'd arrived on the Hope Memorial Bridge. I'd seen it perched on a bridge, on a church while the elves kidnaped me, and I'd caught a glimpse of it on the Cleveland Trust Building. I wondered what my score on the oblivious meter was.

"Can we lose the familiar?" asked Professor Plum

"Sir," said Mr. White, "it flies. I can't lose it in traffic."

There was a pause, then Professor Plum flipped open a cell phone. "This is mobile one. I need a car at," he flipped open a notebook and, after a moment, said, "Rendezvous green-seven, third level. Ten minutes."

He flipped the phone shut without listening for any response. He looked over to Mr. Brown and Colonel Mustard. "I want to know what that thing's following." He looked at me and said, "Have you seen that creature before?"

This is where I get overcome with the self-destructive urge for resistance. "You bastards just kidnapped me off the street, why should I help you?"

Professor Plum smiled. "Mr. Maxwell, you're intelligent— but shall I spell it out for you? You're a fugitive, wanted by the police for questioning for a murder that was most likely committed by people who will have no hesitation in killing you as well. How many friends do you have? How sure are you that the thing following us is one of them?"

"Answer the man," Colonel Mustard said, pressing the gun into my side to make sure I got the point.

Bone Daddy's words echoed in my head, *many hands, but no head*.

"Yes," I said, finally. "I've seen it before."

"Christ, it's tracking him." Colonel Mustard didn't sound pleased.

"More than likely," agreed Professor Plum, "some charm planted on him." He pulled a small silver chain from his pocket. A stone dangled from it, rough and unfinished, resembling a piece of coal. He handed it to Brown. "Check him out."

Brown held the chain wrapped around his hand and mumbled a few words. Then he passed his hand over me. When his hand passed over my left jacket pocket, it glowed slightly— an evil greenish glow that made the eye hurt.

"Got one," he said and pulled my cell phone out of my pocket.

"Hey," I said.

Professor Plum took my phone from Brown. "Your phone has been subject to some sort of enchantment. I don't have the ability to determine what, right now. But it has probably been acting as a beacon for our hitchhiker."

I wanted to argue, but I couldn't. I had been receiving odd calls on my phone— could you phone in an enchantment?

Mr. Brown also liberated Bone Daddy's CD, and my house keys. Both apparently held magical signatures that our follower could track.

We were deep into Lakewood now, and Mr. White took us into a parking garage, drove up three levels and pulled in alongside a Lincoln Town Car that was idling and facing in the other direction. Doors opened before the van had stopped completely.

"Move," Plum said, "before that thing can see what's happening."

Mustard and Brown hustled me into the back of the Lincoln, Plum took shotgun again. White stayed with the van and started it again, driving up the ramp to the next level. The enchanted items Brown had identified were still sitting inside it.

The Lincoln started down, back out of the parking garage.

Mustard watched out the rear window for our follower. "Yes," he said. "It's with the van."

I could glimpse it, very high up, circling the parking garage as we pulled away.

Our destination wasn't in Lakewood, which made some sense. You wouldn't want to lose a tail very close to where you wanted to go. It was about twenty minutes before we pulled into the driveway of an anonymous white ranch deep in the wilds of Berea.

Brown opened the door just in time to let in the sound of a 747 on approach to Hopkins. I looked up to see the belly of the jumbo jet blacking out a quarter of the sky. It made me want to duck.

"*The house!*" Brown yelled at me over the sound of the engines.

I nodded, looking around at the place. The lawn was weed-shot and half-brown. The back of the property was marked by a twelve-foot tall chain-link fence topped with razor wire. There were trees behind the fence, attempting to screen the view of the airport and failing because they'd been cut uniformly down to twelve feet in height.

To the left, right, and across the street were vacant lots. I suspected that the only reason this building still stood was due to oversight, some accident of zoning. This place really shouldn't have survived the last airport expansion.

They escorted me up the concrete walkway, past empty flower beds where the mulch was in bloom. We reached the door in time for a departure to pass over our heads. A smaller three-engine jet this time, but close enough to rattle the aluminum storm door in its frame. I also noticed small metal amulets riveted to the inside of the door, where they wouldn't be visible from the outside.

One would be an adequate ward for most people. I knew my apartment had three. I didn't know much about magical security systems, but I did know there was a separate charm for each kind of protection— intrusion alarm, antiscrying, repelling certain types of creatures.

I counted seven amulets on the inside of the storm door before Colonel Mustard got

impatient and pushed me through with the point of the gun.

I stumbled through into a dingy living room, followed by all my escort except the driver. When the door shut, it was surprisingly quiet— enough that my ears popped with sudden relief from the aircraft's rumbling.

One wall, to our left, held a dead gas fireplace inset into a faux stone wall smeared with enough black soot that it seemed that someone had tried half-successfully to burn wood in the thing. The other walls were papered with mylar with a green velvet nap patterned on it. The mylar was gray-white with water stains and age, and the floral pattern had, between waist and shoulder level, had been worn away by three or four decades of human touch.

"Nice place," I commented. "I like the blue shag carpet, it adds just the right—"

"Shut up," said Colonel Mustard, "You're wanted in the rec room."

I shrugged and followed his lead. I expected to be taken to a wood-paneled room with a bar and a pool table, with an acoustic tile ceiling.

I was wrong about everything but the acoustic tile.

Brown and Mustard flanked me as I stepped into a room about ten feet square, off of the kitchen. The walls and ceiling were paneled with acoustical tile, except for a mirror about five feet long on the wall opposite the entrance. There was a single metal desk and three office chairs. On the side of the desk that abutted the wall sat a small bronze Buddha. A small curl of aromatic smoke rose from a cone of incense in its lap.

Sitting on one side of the desk was a middle-aged Asian gentleman. His hair and mustache were still jet black, but the skin on his face was deeply lined and the joints on his hands were swollen with the obvious signs of arthritis. He was rubbing his hands as we entered, and he gestured to one of the chairs. Brown and Mustard placed me into the seat, a little forcefully.

"Gentlemen, please. That isn't necessary."

Mustard snorted, "This guy's a Clevelander, sir."

"Which isn't a crime."

"Perhaps you two should wait outside," said Professor Plum as he walked in behind us. He took up the remaining seat.

Mustard grunted, but both he and Brown backed out of the room, closing the door behind them. This side of the door was covered with soundproofing tiles as well. I glanced at the walls and noticed talismans mounted near the ceiling at the four points of the compass.

I looked down at the new guy. "So what Agency are you with?"

The Asian smiled. Professor Plum looked slightly nonplussed, "What makes you—"

"Mr. Maxwell has simply taken note of the resources expended on his behalf, and

the nature of this safe house, and has come to certain conclusions."

"My only real question is what government you work for." I cast a glance at the Buddha.

"Simply a serene influence." He pulled out a bill-fold and opened it on the table in front of me. "Special Agent Ts'ao Kuo, Federal Bureau of Investigation."

I looked over at Professor Plum. He said, "I'm Doctor Roy Blackstone." He didn't provide an ID.

"Uh-huh?" I shook my head. "When does the FBI start kidnaping people off the street?"

"You're wanted for questioning," Agent Ts'ao said.

"By the Cleveland PD— and if you were going to charge me, why aren't we at the Federal Building?"

The doctor steepled his fingers and said, "There are matters of National Security involved here."

That was just what I needed. "And who do you work for?"

He glanced over at Agent Ts'ao and said, "I'm a special adviser on this case."

"And exactly what case is that?"

## Chapter Seventeen

IT didn't surprise me much when they weren't immediately forthcoming about their investigation. "What prompted you to start investigating the dragon Aloeus?" Dr. Blackstone asked me in answer to my question.

"Funny thing," I said. "Last I checked, my copy of the Bill of Rights said I don't have to talk to you."

"Son, you better—"

Agent Ts'ao raised his hand and said, "Mr. Maxwell is quite right. He doesn't have to say anything." He reached down, picked up a briefcase, and set it on the table between us. "We both respect the Constitution, don't we, Mr. Maxwell?"

I wasn't quite sure where he was going with this. "Goes along with my job."

Agent Ts'ao nodded. "And despite certain impediments to law enforcement, it goes along with ours." He opened the briefcase and started removing folders. "The doctor and I agree, our current job is the protection of that document. He was not engaging in hyper-bole when he mentioned a threat to national security."

I shook my head. "I've worked a political beat for a decade. I might not work in D.C., but I know that 'national security' is in the eye of the beholder."

Agent Ts'ao handed a stack of folders to the doctor and closed the briefcase. "It's fair to reserve judgment."

I watched Ts'ao's expression grow grave and the smell of incense in the air was heavy and stifling. "You weren't brought here to be hassled, Mr. Maxwell. You are here because I believe that we need each other."

"Interesting premise," I said. "Care to elaborate?"

"You've been close to the people we've been investigating," Blackstone told me. "You're going to help bring them down."

"I see," I said slowly. I looked from Ts'ao to Blackstone. "What exactly do I get for my civic mindedness?"

Blackstone gave Ts'ao a look that said, *I told you this was a bad idea.*

"You get two things, Maxwell," Ts'ao said. "The first is a federal shield against anything that comes out of your unfortunate meeting with Mr. Cutler." He leaned toward me. "You also get your heart's desire, Mr. Maxwell."

"Which is?"

He nodded slightly to the folders in Blackstone's hands. "Information."

The air in the meeting room was so still, it was almost stagnant. There was little or no air-conditioning, and if there was any ventilation, it was hidden so well I couldn't tell. I raised my hand to loosen the button on my collar, wincing as my injured hands fumbled with the button.

To be honest, I was stalling. The wheels in my brain had shifted gears so many times in the past seventy-two hours that I felt like my mental transmission had been stripped. Objectively, I shouldn't be hesitating; I *had* been on my way to the cops when they hauled me into the van. If anything, I should prefer the Feds, since no way in hell would they be tied up with a bunch of corrupt elven cops. All these guys had going against them were a traditional Clevelander's bias against Feds, and the strong-arm method they'd used to pick me up.

"What kind of information?"

"You asked about our investigation. You're interested in the death of a major public figure. Perhaps you're also interested in what the Port Authority and the Rayburn administration are really doing with the Portal." Ts'ao leaned back.

*Your path has been chosen for you by forces you've known and have not seen, and they fear your allegiance because the masters you serve are not theirs. The alliance they offer will not be an easy one.*

The Feds? Why not. I leaned back. "I'll tell you what I've found out. But I won't go into the identity of any sources."

Blackstone started to say something but Ts'ao cut him off. "That's no problem. We understand about sources and methods, don't we, Doctor?"

Doctor Blackstone nodded, but he didn't look happy about it.

I must have winced again, and Ts'ao leaned forward. "You're injured."

I pulled my hands down and said, "It's nothing."

Ts'ao leaned forward, over the table. His arms were long enough to reach for my hands. He turned them palm upward. "I think we need a first aid kit in here."

I don't think they were consciously doing good cop, bad cop. I don't think Blackstone counted as a cop anyway. I think that the doctor was just naturally an up-tight asshole, and Ts'ao was simply a little more subtle. Of the two, Ts'ao was the more dangerous. Like Baldassare, he had the glad hand down pat. He came across as genuinely sincere, and the fact is that he probably was. That did not, however, mean you could trust him. He'd be the first to tell you that the job came first. If he had to throw you to the wolves to do his job, he'd do it in a heartbeat. Though he'd probably apologize.

However, I played the cards as they were dealt to me. I gave them the story of my life the past three days as Colonel Mustard did a field dressing on my hands. I told them the truth, and didn't leave out anything except my interview with Baldassare and Theophane's name. I gave them everything I'd learned about Bone Daddy and the elves. In the end, everything I had was going to make it into print anyway.

After engaging in an hour-long monologue, I decided it was time for some *quid pro quo*.

"Your turn," I said.

"Now wait a minute," Blackstone said. "There are a few points I need to have clear here—"

"No," Ts'ao said. "Mr. Maxwell's right. He's been cooperating, and we should thank him for that."

Blackstone folded up his own notebook. "You've made it clear it's your show."

Ts'ao turned to me and said, "What do you know about the way the Portal is currently being used?"

"The city uses it as a source of income; there's a steady flow of immigration both ways. There's enough demand for tickets out of this universe to charge ten grand a pop. The Ragnan government has a similar setup sending people to this side. The city runs a quarantine camp at Burke Lakefront . . ."

"You know of the prisoner release program?" Agent Ts'ao asked.

"I've seen a few cases where they were given the option. It's voluntary, more power to them."

Ts'ao nodded slowly. "Council gave judges the power to give nonviolent offenders a

fresh start. A one-way ticket, though." He leaned forward and said, "Where have the homeless gone, Mr. Maxwell?"

"There's been a dramatic upturn in the economy—"

"You've never heard the rumors?"

Of course I had. "Do you have any evidence of people going through the Portal against their will?"

"As a reporter, I assume you realize that such a charge is difficult to substantiate." Ts'ao told me. "The alleged victims leave nothing behind. And the city officials doing this are those least likely to break their silence. The fact remains, Mr. Rayburn's administration has the power to disappear people, Mr. Maxwell. The right paper, signed by a local judge, can make someone cease to exist. No oversight, no appeal, no way to even determine if the choice isn't made under duress." Agent Ts'ao pulled a paper from one of the folders the doctor held. "We've made some studies— average time from sentence to Portal, three hours. Eighty percent plea the option without trial. Sixty without legal representation. More than half on misdemeanor charges that would mean probation in any other city." He slid the paper over. "Care to see? It would make any third world dictatorship proud."

I picked up the paper. Needless to say, I hadn't seen any statistical studies like this coming out of the local government. "This can be backed up?" I asked.

"All public records," Agent Ts'ao said. "Though as a reporter you might have a long wait before the city government responds to a FOIA request."

I shook my head. "No one has picked up on this story yet?"

"You know why," said the doctor, and he didn't sound pleasant. "The interests it serves have the power to suppress any story they want in this town."

I shook my head. "There are other news outlets—"

"Disney is negotiating with Cedar Point to put a theme park in Sandusky. They've got several billion poised to create a real 'Magic Kingdom' here. None of their news media outlets will ripple those waters. AOL Time Warner has too much invested in Disney's programming to start another feud that threatens their cable interests. Enough Microsoft stock is owned in this area—"

"I get the picture."

"Do you?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," I told him. "That's the same argument about corporate newsthink that I was hearing when I started in this business. It's bullshit."

"And you're part of—"

Agent Ts'ao raised his hand, cutting the doctor off. "Let's not go off on tangents here. The story is not necessarily being suppressed. Perhaps *overlooked* is a better word in this context."

It galled me being patronized like that, but I didn't say anything.

"There is more, Mr. Maxwell. Shall we hand you another journalistic coup? Doctor?"

Doctor Blackstone laid one of the folders on the table in front of me. "Are you old enough to remember the Cuban boat lift? Castro's last great, 'fuck you!' Rayburn and his equivalents across the Portal are doing a reprise."

The doctor opened the folder. I looked, half expecting what I saw: a full-color eight-by-ten glossy of a dead woman. Cops are nothing if not predictable, and typically throw horrible pictures in front of someone they're questioning in an attempt to shake something loose.

"Murder," the doctor said unnecessarily.

The woman had been violently abused and dumped in a woodland setting. The color of the clotting blood and the deep bruises showed too smooth a transition for a digitized image. The photograph had been taken outside the area of the Portal's influence.

The doctor followed it with others, "Rape. Assault. Assault with intent. Reckless endangerment. Kidnapping. Murder. Murder. Assault. Arson. Aggravated robbery. Rape." File upon file dropped in front of me, glimpses of criminal acts only subliminally registering. Finally, he looked up at me. "Shall I continue?"

I looked over at Agent Ts'ao and shook my head. "You're going to tell me that there is a point to this?"

Ts'ao nodded and drew the latest folder forward and held it up. "This one's Osric, being held in San Francisco for severely beating a prostitute when she demanded payment for her services." Another folder. "Maynard, hospitalized after attempting to fend off a NYC cop with a broadsword." Another. "Learoyd, attempting—I quote, 'to fulfill an oath of vengeance to erase a slur on his character.' He torched a club in Dallas after the bouncers ejected him." Ts'ao looked up. "These men are all immigrants from the Portal."

"Wait a minute," I said. "None of those incidents happened anywhere near here."

"Pointedly," Ts'ao replied. "For every criminal exile that Rayburn's administration sends across, another one comes back through. And unlike your elves and dragons and unicorns, a human being can leave the influence of the Portal."

The doctor slapped a hand on top of the stack of files. "These aren't just criminals. They are the dregs of a society that doesn't value human life, sees women as property, and sees violence as the first resort in a dispute. These men don't know the rule of law, and what does the Rayburn administration do with them? Put them in quarantine at Burke, where they have a show camp for all the exotic characters that can't leave the area anyway? No, because that would overflow the city's resources. You know what's done with them?"

I shook my head, though I did have some idea. It was common knowledge that the Port Authority helped relocate people who could live outside the influence of the



Portal. One of those little details that you never paid much attention to.

"They're given a change of clothes, fifty bucks, and a ticket on the next bus out of state. There isn't even a cursory attempt at orientation and assessment."

"So you have a problem," I looked at the two of them. "Shouldn't the INS be dealing with that?" I knew the answer, but I wanted to hear their take on it.

"Congress has," Ts'ao said, "in it's wisdom, passed a law that— currently worded— places the Portal and everything 'inside' it under the jurisdiction of Cleveland and Cuyahoga County."

"Annexing an entire universe and making it part of the United States," The doctor concluded.

I nodded. "So these immigrants aren't legally immigrants, are they? They're U.S. citizens."

The doctor frowned. "Because of a badly worded law, hastily passed."

What they were telling me wasn't really news to me. It was fairly well known that there were a few "problems" coming across the Portal. But a Ragnan native committing murder wasn't much more of a story now than anyone else doing the same thing.

Now if you start adding the courtroom statistics and the hint of a deal letting Ragnan send their criminals across, we started to get into interesting territory. "You said there was a deal?"

Ts'ao nodded. "Are you familiar with Article Two of the Constitution?"

"You're going to point out that only the President— with advice and consent of the Senate— can enter into treaties and conduct foreign policy."

"Two things that Rayburn and the administration have been doing with Ragnan since the beginning," Blackstone added.

I nodded. It was a well trod argument. The Supreme Court had already decided under current law, the Congress effectively annexed the Portal and made it part of the United States. And, as far as jurisdiction went, the Portal and its "contents" were inside the Cleveland metropolitan area. Until that changed, Rayburn has as much right to negotiate with Ragnan as he does with Lakewood. I told them as much.

Ts'ao raised his hands to his temples. I think I got him. "Do you understand the threat the Portal represents?" He pulled the Buddha toward him and frowned. "On the other side of the Portal is a foreign country of uncertain motives and alliance. The courts may not view it as a nation, but it still has the capacity to conduct covert activity that is against the interests of the United States."

"What are you getting at?" I asked.

"The worst threat to this nation since the fall of the Soviet Union," Dr. Blackstone said. He actually sounded serious.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "You mean China?"

Neither of them seemed to appreciate my humor. "It is a fact, Mr. Maxwell, which I don't think you'll deny, that the dragon Aloeus was fleeing an oppressive regime in his homeland," said Agent Ts'ao. "And he was a key figure in establishing Mayor Rayburn's policy toward the Portal."

I nodded.

"Followed, shortly afterward, by the fall of that regime," he continued.

"What are you getting at?"

"Aloeus was no refugee. He was the highest-ranking guerrilla in a civil war. He negotiated with Mayor Rayburn the delivery of arms and advisers from the Ohio National Guard, arms that were used to overthrow a foreign government."

I shook my head. "How the hell could that be kept a secret?"

"During the initial chaos after the Portal's opening, it was easy enough to keep things under wraps—including the disappearance of a whole unit of National Guard troops, three Apache gunships, and four Abrams tanks." Dr. Blackstone looked as if he was enjoying the look on my face. "You're wondering why none of the Guardsmen gave their story to CNN? They were debriefed by Army Intelligence when they came back, and the whole episode was classified. Those men represent one of the few intelligence assets that our government has on what's on the other side of the Portal."

Agent Ts'ao looked at me, sizing up my reaction. "The omnipotence of the The sarch was tied to a vulnerability—an inability to anticipate the speed at which the invaders could move, and the damage that could be inflicted by nonmagical means. The tanks, the guns, the helicopters weren't enchanted, so they weren't a threat. His command and control was vulnerable, overt, and easily targeted because they were immune to any magical threat. In two days the Guard traveled to Ragman's capital city. The battle lasted twenty minutes." Agent Ts'ao steepled his fingers. "The guerrilla organization that masterminded that coup didn't disband after that victory. They've remained in place, on this side of the Portal, engaging in espionage and political subversion."

"That's a lot to swallow," I said. "Why would the Guard invade a foreign territory like that?"

"Orders from the governor," agent Ts'ao said. "After a two-hour meeting with Mayor Rayburn."

"Okay," I said, "you still haven't—"

Agent Ts'ao raised a hand. "Shall I explain the threat to you? We have elements of a foreign regime in place here, a regime created by a violent overthrow aided by rogue elements of our own military. Despite the presence of magic, our own technological and military advances operate on the other side with a few exceptions— while the 'magical' advances of theirs fade in effect the farther one gets from the Portal."

Dr. Blackstone leaned forward. "We're a gold mine to them. It isn't a backward civilization we're dealing with. It is as sophisticated as our own. If you hand them an AK-47, they're capable of reverse engineering it and fabricating a copy. With magical aid they can sidestep the issues of machine tooling— in fact, with the right engineering knowledge, they can duplicate anything they want."

"Including weapons of mass destruction," Ts'ao said.

"Now you're reaching," I said.

"We're talking about an empire that has undergone unchecked expansion for millennia, and whose leader is traditionally just this short of an absolute god." Dr. Blackstone looked grave. "Combine technological espionage that can bear fruit in months and weeks rather than years, with a sophisticated grasp of magic. If they get a foothold here—"

There was a solid thump, and the Buddha rattled on the table.

"What was that?" Agent Ts'ao asked.

## Chapter Eighteen

**BROWN** burst into the interview room. "Sirs, we got a problem."

There was another thump, louder now that the door was open. It was an odd sound, heavy, but not like an impact— more like a rush of air.

Agent Ts'ao and Dr. Blackstone got up and went through the door, which Brown held open for them. I craned my neck to look beyond the three of them, but all I managed to see was an unnatural character to the light. A flickering quality that felt ominous.

Brown let go of the door as they went toward the front of the house. I saw no incentive to meekly wait for their return, so I stood up and grabbed the edge of the door before it had swung completely closed.

I heard Agent Ts'ao's voice, for the first time raised in anger. "Damn it, Blackstone! You said he was clean—"

"We checked—"

"Obviously not well enough."

I edged down the hallway between the "rec room" and the living room, to get a view of what was going on without interrupting the argument. I needn't have worried. The sight out the picture window was taking all of everyone's attention.

The thumps, which were more sustained and rhythmic now, *were* from a rush of air. A wall of it, rushing by the front of the house, glowing a peculiar orange in the sunlight.

"We weren't tailed here," Dr. Blackstone objected.

"Then that," Ts'ao waved toward the window, "is one hell of a coincidence, Doctor. You grandstanding Company spooks have done nothing but screw up since you got here. You probably got one of our assets killed—"

"Sir—" Brown's voice sounded strained.

Ts'ao shook his head. "Now you've blown the cover off of the *only* magically secure safe house we have."

"Sir—" Brown was pleading.

"Do you know how many man-hours it took to make Feng Shui look this crappy?"

"Sirs, *what do we do?*" Brown shouted at them.

Ts'ao looked out the window, gave a half smile, and shook his head. "About that? Nothing."

Dr. Blackstone looked appalled. "What do you mean, nothing? We're under attack."

"I've confidence in the building's security. If there was a breach, they would be exploiting it."

I looked out at the moving wall of force. I saw debris swept up in it, trash, paper, mulch— all darkening it like an approaching storm. Occasionally it would swell and seem to sweep toward the glass, but it would pull away before it touched.

"No," Ts'ao said. "The wind isn't the threat." He glanced at Brown and Mustard. "Break out the guns. And vests."

The way he said it let me know he wasn't talking about pistols.

Doctor Blackstone looked befuddled.

"Doctor, out there is a distraction. Very high profile covering fire meant to pin us down for the real attack." He looked out the window. "Which is going to be soon. No one can keep this up for long. You better keep an eye on our guest."

For some reason— probably complete obstinance— I backed away from the living room and slipped behind the first door that wasn't the interview room. Turned out to be a bedroom that, fortunately, was unoccupied.

Damned if I knew what I was doing, but I had a pretty good idea who the fireworks were for. Somewhere along the line I picked up information, or someone thought I had picked up information, that was worth pulling out all the stops to keep a secret. Elvish discretion or not, these guys were panicking. Whoever was in charge had completely lost any sense of proportion. I could not see anything I knew as being important enough to make a frontal assault on a bunch of Feds.

All I knew is that I'd seen Egil Nixon's corpse and I was not making plans for a similar end.

I ran over to the window. It was shaded by heavy drapes that I drew aside. I was

looking toward the back of the house, but I saw the same swirling wall of air. No escape that way. I stared into the maelstrom, watching the wind growing darker with accumulated dirt and debris. I knew enough not to open the window. The charms at every opening in this place gave this house an unbroken circle of protection. That was what kept the winds outside. Once that circle was broken—

"*Maxwell*—" came a voice from behind me.

I looked behind me and saw Dr. Blackstone standing in the bedroom doorway.

"What the hell are you doing?" he snapped at me.

"Figuring my odds on getting the hell out of here."

"You're not going anywhere, son," Dr. Blackstone said.

"I don't remember being charged or Mirandized." I stared out the window. If I agreed with Ts'ao's tactical assumptions— which I had no reason not to— when our opposition was ready to assault the house, the winds would drop to let the attackers in.

"It's not safe by the window," Blackstone said. "You need to come back to the interview room."

"So what do you do for the CIA?" I asked him, staying by the window.

Blackstone stayed silent.

"You don't strike me as a field agent. You're more an analyst type, right? Must be quite a legal Gordian knot to have you guys working on Ragnan when it's supposedly part of the U.S."

Blackstone grunted.

"That's why you're with the FBI, isn't it? Because you don't really have jurisdiction here— you need them to make it all neat and legal."

"What the hell are you doing?"

What I was doing was babbling at Blackstone while I tried to engineer my escape. The problem was how many people we'd have to deal with in the attack. Would they have enough to hit every opening? Would they have snipers?

I was betting that the attack would be limited. The bastards had a lot of magical resources at their disposal, but I doubted that they had a lot of spare warm bodies. They didn't have enough to flank me after the meeting with Cutler, they probably didn't now. I suspected that was the reason for the windstorm. They had to pin us all down, because they had limited numbers to devote to the attack itself.

That probably meant snipers.

I had studied the window and saw all the protective charms were attached to the storm window. That meant I could slide the inner window open without breaking the protection.

"Jesus, Maxwell—"

Blackstone wasn't doing anything. He was an academic type, and he suffered the flaw that, if no one automatically succumbed to his authority, he didn't quite know what to do.

I had a plan now. It wouldn't work until the winds dropped, but it gave me a chance.

Blackstone finally got over the fact that I wasn't listening to him. He grabbed my arm and said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Self-preservation," I said.

Blackstone backed up and pulled a gun on me.

"You really want to shoot me?"

"Don't force me to make that decision."

I looked him up and down. "You'd do better to train that gun on the window."

"You're coming back with—"

The wind stopped suddenly. The sound ceased as if someone pulled a switch. Almost at the same time there was the sound of gunfire. Blackstone ducked and suddenly didn't know where to point the gun. I ducked to one side of the window frame and looked outside. I didn't see anyone prepping to enter this way. Good and bad. Good, because they didn't have the manpower to cover every entrance. Bad, because that almost certainly meant that they had a sniper covering the area.

I threw open the inner window, and heard more gunshots.

"Christ," Blackstone said.

I looked back at him as the sounds of breaking glass and wood came from the front of the building. "We've got to get out of here," I told him as I tried to get the storm window off its track, while exposing myself as little as possible.

"What're you doing?"

The door into the bedroom was raked by a series of oblique bullet holes near the top. Splinters showered over Blackstone, and he dove over by me. He held his gun upright and divided his attention between the door and the window.

"The charms on the window," I said. "They'll probably protect us until we reach cover."

"You don't think—" Machine-gun fire interrupted him.

"I can't stop you from coming," I said as the aluminum storm window came free of its track. "You've got the gun."

My theory was partly confirmed as the inside window was suddenly peppered with gunfire. Again, it was oblique, the sniper shooting from off to the left somewhere. I stuck the storm sideways through the opening, and the shots stopped hitting the

window. I could still hear them, thudding into the wall above the window frame.

That was all the confirmation I needed.

"*Maxwell*—"

I dove through the open window trying to simultaneously keep the charmed storm window between me and the sniper, and to present as small a target as possible. I didn't land well. My left knee decided to remind me of what happened last night and buckled. I spilled to the ground, my bandaged hands losing their grip on the window as I plowed face first into the wound of raw earth left by the magical winds.

The storm window fell across my back. Lucky for me, the aura of protection provided by the charms worked for a diameter of about seven feet. Bullets that should have been kill shots were plowing divots in the ground about two feet in front of my face.

I heard Blackstone mutter an obscenity as I heard something hit the ground on the far side of me from the sniper. I felt the storm window lift up, and the sound of gunfire was much closer.

"Get up," Blackstone said between shots.

I did, and saw him standing next to me, holding the storm window with his left hand, as if it was a riot shield. His gun was pointed in the general direction of the unseen sniper. He fired another shot and yelled, "Get moving!"

Twenty-five feet to the airport fence, Blackstone moving slowly to keep from overtaking my limping lope. Every few steps, he would take a shot and mutter something like, "Fucking bullshit."

In front of the fence was an overgrown drainage ditch filled with a foot of black stagnant water. We took shelter in it, crouching behind our magic window.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Blackstone said. "Now what, genius?"

"Through the fence," I said.

Above us a jumbo jet took off, rattling fillings and drowning out the gunshots. I backed up, down the trench, away from the sniper. I risked a look back at the not-so-safe house, but I really couldn't see much of anything through the weeds. About ten yards down I found what I was looking for. A muddy stream fed runoff under the fence, into the ditch I was wading through. Despite the pain in my hands, I dug into the muck to clear a space under the chain-link.

"*Blackstone*," I yelled above the engines of the passing jet. I started under the fence without waiting for him. I crawled into the woods on the other side of the fence, and started running directly away from the house.

Blackstone was on the other side of the fence, with the window and its protection, but I was running on pure panic now. The fact was every instinct was screaming at me to put as much distance between me and the gun as possible.

The cover didn't last long. In a few seconds the sky opened above me and I was running through knee-high grass at the end of "White's Elephant," the ten thousand foot runway built as one of the last grand projects of the eponymous mayor before he left office. It was long enough to accommodate nonstop flights to the Pacific rim, at a time when there wasn't more than a single flight out of Hopkins that left the North American continent. The runway's extra length was unused and unnecessary until the Portal graduated from natural disaster to tourist attraction.

I ran toward the runway. The asphalt cut the air with heat ripples, and the sound of taxiing aircraft was a pressure trying to squeeze my head inside out. When I cleared the grass, my feet slid on gravel that flanked the edge of the asphalt. I fell down next to the concrete base of a runway light.

It felt like I'd slammed into a wall. I wasn't in great shape to begin with, and the past few days had taken their toll. When I got my breath knocked out of me, it was hard to get it back again. I rolled over, stunned, for a moment unable to do anything if the sniper decided to target me.

It seemed an hour where nothing moved. The thrum of jet engines so loud it wasn't really a sound any longer, just a throbbing pressure. Above me, the sky was cloudless and just starting to purple with evening.

Then, suddenly, Dr. Blackstone's face appeared over me as the silver belly of a 747 slid by above. He still had the gun. He pulled me up and started dragging me toward the terminal. The sniper didn't reappear.

## Chapter Nineteen

I DON'T know what Blackstone flashed at airport security, but it made them very deferential, right up to providing him with a private interview room and coveralls to replace the wreck our clothes had become.

"This is a fucking nightmare," he told me when we were alone. "What the hell happened back there?"

Every joint in my lower body ached, and I, for one, wasn't feeling very conciliatory. "Someone screwed up," I told him.

He nodded vigorously, though the skin on his face had turned a shade just this side of purple. "Yeah, you're a smart one, aren't you?"

"It doesn't take a genius to realize that your cover was blown back there."

Blackstone didn't look pleased at my assessment, but he didn't disagree. He looked at me and shook his head. "The whole situation here's blown. We need to get you out of the city."

"Hey," I said, "wait a minute. You don't have the authority to do that."



"You have no idea exactly what authority I have," Dr. Blackstone said. "I'm giving you a choice. Gracefully accompany me on a flight to Washington, or go there in handcuffs."

I got up. "You can't just kidnap American citizens."

"You'd be amazed at what one executive order can do."

Blackstone escorted me out into the terminal. I was good, and therefore didn't rate the handcuffs. However, the fact that I didn't try to ditch him and lose myself in the crowd had more to do with the idea that there were some very powerful people out there ready to do me physical harm than with any sense of cooperation.

While we walked down the terminal, Blackstone pulled out his cell phone, which had survived the mess. After a few moments of trying to get it to connect, he grimaced and closed it.

"Didn't get a Cleveland model?" I asked.

He muttered some obscenity and moved us toward a payphone. "You have no idea how sick I am of this town."

I looked at the phone, then at him, and said, "Do I rate a phone call?"

Blackstone sighed. "Calling your lawyer?"

"My daughter."

For once I saw the starch in his expression soften a little. I guess there was a human being in there after all. "Okay, I'll give you five minutes." He pulled out a credit card. "You're going to use a secure account. And I'm standing right next to you. You don't say where you are. You don't mention anyone's name. You don't say where we are going—"

I picked up the receiver and took the card. "And I don't mention the safe house, etc., etc." I used the card to dial California. It looked like a regular long-distance calling card, but there were a lot more clicks and whirs and electronic noise than seemed usual.

Hell, it was a government account, there was probably a recording being made in the NSA's basement for every call made with this account.

With Blackstone hanging over my shoulder I heard the phone on the other end pick up. "Hello?"

"Sarah?"

My daughter sounded surprised. "*Daddy?*"

"Yeah, honey."

"What's happening? You're all over the news. Are you hurt? What happened? Are you all right?"

*Oh, shit.* For some reason I was hoping the whole mess with Cutler was just going

to be a local story. Silly me.

"I'm all right—"

In the background I heard a very pissed voice say, "Is that your father?"

*Better and better.*

There was a muffled commotion and the phone rattled as it dropped on the floor. I was suffering a pang of severe guilt that this was the first moment after the mess started that I'd thought of calling my expatriate family.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, Kline?"

"Margaret, it's all right. There's just a little jurisdictional mix-up."

"Mix-up? The anchor on CNN said you're wanted in questioning for a murder."

"It's a misunderstanding. I didn't do it—"

"Christ, I *know* that. Why the hell are there cops looking for you, then?"

"It's jurisdiction. I'm cooperating with—" Blackstone placed his hands on the phone, ready to hang the thing up. "—the cops," I finished. Blackstone moved his hand away. "They're just not local. Cutler was dealing with dirty cops in the city here, and I didn't want those people involved."

"Why's CNN saying you're a fugitive?"

"The local cops don't know I'm working with another law enforcement agency." I looked at Blackstone, and when he didn't appear concerned, I went on. "They might not know until charges are filed."

I heard Margaret sigh. "Are you all right?"

I glanced at my hands but decided not to mention it. "I'm fine. I'm safe."

"You said it was getting better."

"This doesn't have anything to do with magic," I lied. "Dirty cops, this could've happened if I was working in San Francisco."

"Then why don't you?"

"Margaret—"

"If you can do the same work here, why don't you move closer to your daughter?"

"Can you put Sarah back on the line?"

There was a rustling, then a voice that said, "Dad?"

"Yeah, honey."

"You're not in bad trouble, are you?"

"Not really," I lied again. "Your mom will explain it to you. I'm fine. CNN just doesn't have the whole story yet."

Blackstone touched the watch on his wrist. Christ, I had not planned blowing my time arguing with my ex. "I'm sorry, honey, I've got to go."

"But, Dad—"

"I love you. I'll call back soon."

"I love you, too. But, Dad—"

Blackstone hung up for me. He looked at my expression and said. "I gave you more than I was obliged to. You can talk all you want after we've debriefed you."

I stepped back and handed him the receiver. He pulled out a different card, made a call— and with the power of a government expense account— we had a pair of business class seats on the next outbound Continental flight to Dulles Airport. The plane left in two hours. He made another call after he got his flight. "It's blown . . . Yes . . . three agents . . . I had local authorities informed about the mess . . . no, I have the subject here . . . I'm taking him in for debriefing . . . I've made arrangements, the flight leaves in two hours . . . Yes . . . Yes . . . I understand."

He hung up and started hustling us toward the gate.

"Hey," I said. "The rush is over, you got your flight, calm down." He looked at me as if I'd just suggested that he consummate an unspeakable act with his mother.

"We'll have about ninety minutes before they start boarding. I haven't eaten a thing all day, aren't *you* hungry?"

"*Christ.*" He looked at me as if my suggestion was singularly inappropriate, but he said, "Yes, we can get something to eat."

He pushed us into the first place that we passed, a McDonald's where some mental giant had contracted someone to construct full life-size simulacrum of some of the more creepy denizens of Ronald McDonald's world. A life-size blue-furred hump of a monster watched us with eyes that were too human.

He sat me down at a McTable and was interrupted by an electronic beeping. He pulled out his cell phone again, listened, shook his head and cursed it as he threw it down on the lemon-yellow table. "Useless . . . Hold up your hand, Maxwell."

I raised my right hand as if I was about to take an oath. He slapped one end of a pair of handcuffs on me, and before I could register an objection, he had the other end attached to the back of the chair next to me. "I thought we weren't going to resort to handcuffs."

"I don't trust you, Maxwell. And right now you're one of the few things I've got to salvage from this operation." He looked back at the counter and asked, "So what do you want?"

I ordered the generic burger-fries-and-soft-drink, just because what to eat wasn't high on my list of things I wanted to spend time thinking about. Dr. Blackstone went to stand in line, and I made a cursory examination of the McChair, which was fiberglass and bolted to the floor. It looked possible to break the cuffs free of the

chair, but not in any unobtrusive way.

While I was contemplating the chair, Blackstone's phone rang.

I looked at it. A small black rectangle, slightly rounded. The Motorola logo across the top without any of the trademarks for the kind of multichannel digital encryption that made phone traffic possible around the Portal. The only thing anyone would be able to get on that phone would be a cacophony of magical interference.

It rang again.

The thing shouldn't even be receiving enough of a comprehensible signal to know someone was calling it.

A third time it rang.

I reached out for it, a familiar feeling twisting in my gut. I raised it to my ear and activated it. I was greeted by the now familiar sound of whispering babble led by a voice that was like an old-fashioned tape player going bad.

"—I come not to praise Caesar—"

"*Who the hell are you?*" I whispered harshly into the phone. My anonymous Shakespearean *had* to be a magus of some sort. I couldn't figure anything else. How else could this guy know to call me on Blackstone's cell phone? Not to mention that his phone number was probably unlisted, and this phone didn't have the electronics for normal operation near the Portal anyway. Magic would be the only way my someone *could* make a call . . .

The voice continued with the quote.

"Damn it. Stop playing the enigmatic Oracle. I get your point—" This time the voice didn't cut off, it faded into the din and the babble took over. "Who are you? What do you want?" The transmission faded into nonsense. After a few more fruitless moments, I shut the thing off and tossed it back on the table.

Blackstone came back with our food and sat down. He still looked pissed, though now it was a pissed without a specific target. He kept looking toward the entrance and watching the crowds press by the terminal, as if he expected to be jumped.

I didn't blame him after the last hour or so.

"So what do you intend to do with me?" I asked him.

"You're going to be debriefed."

"CIA?" I asked again.

"Threat Assessment Office," Blackstone answered. "It's an interagency organization."

"What threats are you assessing?" I asked between bites of my hamburger.

"What do you think?" Blackstone asked, keeping an eye on the concourse outside.

"The Office was established in response to the Portal."

"So the federal plan to take over the Portal has spawned an entrenched bureaucracy."

Blackstone shook his head. "You can be glib if you want, but this is more important than a battle over local turf. Do you have any idea of the danger the Portal represents?"

"You've made that point—"

"One mage," Blackstone said, "one person with the arcane knowledge, and access to blueprints, can manufacture a nuclear device."

"Is that what you're worried about?"

"I've seen studies. I've *conducted* studies. It's possible for a mage— given enough effort— to create elemental matter. Nothing prevents their access to fissionable material." He turned to look at me. "No tooling necessary, no weapon plants, just one man with the will and the power. Same can go for chemical and biological weapons."

One thing I'll say for our government's intelligence agencies. They have no problem coming up with nightmare scenarios. I shook my head and ate a few fries.

Pointing one at Blackstone's nose I said, "There's something you're leaving out."

"Yes?"

"What exactly do I have to do with it?"

"You know something important," Blackstone said. "You have managed to stumble across something that this conspiracy— this magical fifth column— is willing to go to any length to prevent us from finding out."

"This is the conspiracy that Aloeus was part of?"

Blackstone nodded.

"Well, good luck, because I don't even know what that is."

"It can be anything, Maxwell," he said. "A name. Someone you've seen. Something that would allow us to uncover exactly what's happening, and who is involved."

I shook my head. "All I have is a dead dragon, a bunch of crooked cops, and a guy named Faust."

Blackstone leaned forward. "And exactly what do you know about Faust?"

*Ah.* This is what interested the doctor. I wouldn't lay odds against this being one of the things that Blackstone had wanted "clarified" after my first run through in the rec room.

"Nothing other than the elves were interested in him, and that he was a rumor that Dr. Shafran had heard about."

"More than a rumor."

"Why don't you tell me about him."

Blackstone shook his head. "No, that was why I was against Agent Ts'ao lending you information. There's no better way to contaminate the intelligence from a subject than to tell him what you already know." He looked at me. "Not that I disagree with him entirely. If you remain as cooperative as you have been, I don't see any reason not to answer your questions. *After* we debrief you."

I nodded. "You would like a story about all this crap, wouldn't you?"

"Let's just say that it would help us if public opinion started to move in our direction." He reached over and undid the handcuffs. "Come on, Mr. Maxwell, we have a plane to catch."

I hadn't finished my food, but I didn't see much point in arguing. So I grabbed the leftover burger to finish on the way to the gate. At this point I was kicking over story ideas in my head.

We were halfway to the gate when Blackstone stopped and said, "No, you've got to be kidding me."

That brought my attention back to the here and now in the concourse. I took a bite of my hamburger and looked around to see what Blackstone was complaining about.

It would have been hard to miss.

Coming down the central corridor of the concourse was a line of blue uniforms, their wearers watching us with grim attention. I looked behind us, and saw another five officers approaching from the rear.

At this point I was suffering from law enforcement overload and couldn't produce enough adrenaline to panic. Blackstone was looking back and forth with a dumbfounded expression that was almost amusing. "What?"

I finished my hamburger, dropped the wrapper on the floor, and slowly raised my hands and locked them behind my head. "There's a warrant out for me, remember?" I took a few sideways steps away from Blackstone. If he did something stupid, I didn't want to be caught in the aftermath.

The ranks of blue converged on us from both sides. I was somewhat relieved to see that they were all run-of-the-mill Cleveland cops supplemented by airport security. No SPU officers.

Blackstone recovered somewhat and addressed the lead cop, "What's the meaning of this?"

I was somewhat surprised, though only somewhat, to see that the head cop here was Commander Thomas O'Malley, looking more like the mafia hood than usual.

"Doctor Roy Blackstone?"

"Yes, I can show you my identification. I'm conducting a federal investigation here."

O'Malley nodded. "Uh-uh." He didn't look impressed.

Blackstone reached for his ID.

O'Malley raised his hand and shook his head. "I know, Doctor. One of Langley's little 'experts.' PhD dissertation on the geopolitical implications of the Portal, worked the Cleveland desk at the CIA— Christ, don't look so surprised. You thought the FBI was the only Agency that kept files on people?"

"This is a matter of national security, sir. I need to take this man back to Washington D.C."

"I'm sure that's the way you see it," O'Malley said. He waved a hand and three officers converged on a sputtering Blackstone, one on each arm and the third patting him down and taking his gun.

"You're making a big mistake," Blackstone shouted at O'Malley.

"No, Dr. Blackstone," he said. "It was a mistake when an academic CIA desk jockey decided he wanted to play James Bond in my city." He took Blackstone's gun from the officer who was patting him down.

"When word of this gets to Washington—"

"You'll probably be put on six months unpaid administrative leave," O'Malley finished. He looked at Blackstone and shook his head. "Shall I draw you a map? There's a burning ranch at the end of a runway. There're at least two bodies. A lot of gunfire. Then we have you, a federal employee with no police powers, aiding and abetting a suspect wanted for questioning in a felony investigation, taking him on a flight out of state."

"You can't—"

"Did I say that anything you say can be used against you?"

Blackstone shut up.

O'Malley turned to look at me. "Maxwell?"

"O'Malley," I replied.

"Not the smartest thing you've ever done."

"I didn't have much choice." I shrugged, my hands still locked behind my head.

"Besides, is there a law against poor judgment?"

O'Malley shook his head. "We don't have prisons that big. But obstruction of justice might do for a start. Leaving the scene. Failure to report."

"You're saying I should invest in a lawyer?"

"Maybe in some common sense."

The majority of the officers started leading Blackstone away, one of them finishing the litany of rights that O'Malley had started. I watched him go and looked at O'Malley. "So you knew about him?"

O'Malley looked back in Blackstone's direction.

"The Threat Assessment Office? Yes. As if we could keep the Feds from rooting around in our backyard." He turned back and looked at me. "And get your hands down, will you? We need to go downtown. Some people want to see you."

## Chapter Twenty

O'MALLEY rode in the back of an unmarked squad car with me as we took the freeway downtown. They didn't cuff me, and looking at O'Malley I had trouble reading if he was going to charge me or not.

He surprised me by saying, once we were underway, "Damn shame you got involved in this, Maxwell."

"My job, O'Malley."

"Is it?" he asked. He was gazing out the window at the sound barriers sliding by. "You stepped into a hornet's nest, my friend."

"Did I?" I decided to throw my cards on the table since I didn't seem to have anything to lose. "Was it investigating Aloeus' death, or was it when your SPU elves decided to do some extracurricular legwork? Or maybe it was set up with Bone Daddy? Since when do SPU units do traffic stops?"

O'Malley shook his head. "I suppose you have an answer already?"

"I know something corrupt is going on in the Special Paranormal Unit. I know that Aloeus was prominent in the decisions that Rayburn and company made about the Portal— with a *quid pro quo* that, in exchange for disaster assistance, some national Guard troops did some social engineering on the other side. I know the federal government is worried about influence across the Portal, stopping just short of accusing this city of harboring a fifth column bent on the overthrow of the U. S. government . . ."

O'Malley was shaking his head. "The Feds are a sideshow. Have been since the Portal opened." He looked across at me, and I noticed, for the first time, that he hadn't shaved and looked as if he hadn't slept in days. In short, he looked like I felt. "Maxwell, you're smart, and I think you realize this; you have no real idea what's going on here."

"Care to enlighten me?"

He shook his head. "That isn't my job."

We drove to Lakeside, but not toward the Justice Center as I expected. Instead, we went half a block farther, and pulled into the underground parking garage of City Hall



itself. I could almost sense the tension, as if some sort of static energy had rubbed off from the nearby Portal.

The car rolled down three levels underground, past ranks of city vehicles, then down a narrow one-way concrete ramp that read, "Authorized Vehicles Only." I saw expensive-looking digital cameras, as well as crystal wards set into the concrete walls.

The car drove another level down and into a nearly empty parking lot. The only light was a flickering fluorescent hanging roughly in the center of the space. Beneath the light, incongruously, sat a boardroom-sized table with about twelve executive leather chairs.

The driver shut off the engine, and the lock on my handleless door popped open. The driver got out and opened the door for O'Malley, who walked around and opened the door for me. I stepped out and shivered. This place was about ten degrees colder than the day outside. The only sound in the whole space was the sound of an electric motor lowering a rolling metal barrier across the ramp we'd just driven down. It finished with the echoing clatter of metal locking home.

"Welcome to the War Room, Maxwell," O'Malley said.

I had heard the rumors that Rayburn had established some ultrasecure meeting place in the early days of the Portal, back when the Feds were a military threat, not just a political one. I had taken the rumors, as had every one else I knew, as equal parts fact and exaggeration. Now I looked around at the space and decided that I, and the people I knew, probably lacked sufficient imagination.

I could barely see the near walls in the light, but what I saw was covered in small inscriptions. Mystic text no larger than the type on your average printed page. The floor, too, was covered with inscriptions. Concentric rings centered on the conference table. Unlike Bone Daddy's magic circles, these words were permanently inset in the concrete, each symbol cast in gold, silver, or some semiprecious stone. The feeling in this place was like standing next to the main transformer at a nuclear power plant. The hair on my arms wanted to stand on end.

O'Malley walked me toward the center of the room. I kept flashing back to a memory of Bone Daddy warning me, "*The mojo's been building here a couple hours. You break the pattern, boy, and it'll be like someone shoved a stick of dynamite up your ass.*"

I wondered how long the mojo had been building up in this room. Fortunately, someone would need a jackhammer to break the pattern.

O'Malley sat me down in one of the chairs at one end of the long table. He backed away, out of the light. My dark vision was shot now, and all I could really see was the conference table, the chairs, and the long fluorescent tubes above me. I heard a car door slam, and an engine start—

I turned and yelled, "*Hey!*" into the darkness.

I heard the car drive away, and the rattling metallic sound of another door closing.

For a few long moments I was left alone here, wondering exactly what the hell I was supposed to do. I squinted out at the darkness, trying to make out any sense of movement. The only sound now, the electric hum of the fluorescents. The air was heavy, cold, and carried the humid smell of mildew— perfect atmosphere for a dungeon.

Then there was the sound of a large electric motor, the sound so sudden in the enclosed space that I jumped. *Elevator*, I thought. I listened to its descent for what seemed an inordinately long time. Then the motor stopped and I heard the doors slide back. I also saw a narrow rectangle of light slowly open on the far wall across the conference table from me. The space revealed was huge, taller than the room I was in, and wide enough to take two cars abreast. All similarly embellished to the room I sat in.

Three human figures were dwarfed in the revealed space, and the capacity of the elevator made me wonder if they ever met dragons in this room.

The trio exited the elevator, and due to the ill lighting and misleading cues to scale, it wasn't until they entered the domain of the fluorescent light that I saw for sure who they were.

To the left was the five-foot blonde landmine that was Cleveland's Public Safety Director, Julian Nesmith. To the right was the pudgy and somewhat taller form of Adrian Phillips, the chairman of the Cleveland Port Authority. The man in the center overshadowed the other two, both in physical stature and in impact. Mayor David Rayburn stood six-six, and had shoulders that made it look as if he could break your average elf in half. He had huge peasant hands, blocky, the hands of a laborer—even if his dad put him through law school. He owned a legendary smile that he was choosing not to use at the moment. It might have been the light, but I think I saw a little more gray in his close-cropped black hair than I'd noticed the last time I'd seen him.

The trio sat without ceremony, Rayburn taking the seat opposite mine, the length of the table between us. "I think we can forgo the introductions, Mr. Maxwell." His expression was grim.

I nodded and folded my hands in front of me, on the table. "What can I do for you, Your Honor?" I managed, barely, to keep my voice in line with a fiction that I had come here voluntarily.

"I'm informed that you had a recent run-in with some local Federal Agents," the mayor said.

"I think that is, perhaps, an understatement."

Nesmith slid a small stack of eight by ten glossies toward me. "These the men who abducted you?"

I reached for the photographs. They were all slick black and whites, apparently

cribbed from whatever official IDs these men had owned. No names were attached, just file numbers. I rifled through them and tossed back Mr. Brown, Colonel Mustard, Agent Ts'ao, and the two drivers. There were a couple of other pictures in the stack of people I hadn't seen before. I studied them— just in case I ran into any more Feds.

"You're missing Doctor Blackstone," I said.

"We're aware of that," Nesmith snapped. Struck a nerve there. *They didn't know him until today, until that fiasco at the safe house.* Nesmith continued after pausing to look at the photos I had sent back. "These were the only agents you saw?"

I nodded.

"What did they question you about?"

I looked at the trio and got an uneasy vibe. Almost as if the Cleveland home team was on the same fishing expedition the Feds were. I answered the question, giving them a brief on the Feds' tune. It wasn't as if there were any privileged communications involved.

As I continued, the trio facing me grew graver.

When I finished, Mayor Rayburn folded his hands in front of him. Adrian Phillips leaned forward and said, in a squeaky voice, "Is that what you believe? After all this administration has done for—"

The mayor held up a hand, and Phillips fell silent. "Don't attack the messenger. Mr. Maxwell is simply relating a belief held by some in the executive branch of the federal government."

"Yes?" Phillips asked slowly. "But what's *his* view?"

I was about to answer, but the mayor spoke for me. "His views aren't the issue here. What side he takes in this turf war with the Feds is, at the moment, completely beside the point." Rayburn waved a hand at me. "You're not here because of your politics."

I couldn't decide if that was a good thing or a bad thing. "Why, exactly, *am* I here then?"

Rayburn leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. His collar shifted and I caught a gleam of gold around his neck. *The chain Aloeus gave him?* I wondered.

"The dragon." The mayor spoke softly, almost a whisper. "You know something about his death."

"Something. I wish I knew more."

Adrian slammed a palm on the table and looked at me with distaste. "Why are we bothering with him?"

"I know the pressures you're under, Adrian," Mayor Rayburn said. "But allow the man to speak. Tell us about what you do know."

Again, I gave them the story I gave the Feds. I studied them for reactions as I talked. To my surprise, none of them reacted when I talked about Cutler and crooked elf cops. Phillips himself was fuming.

When I'd gone through to my liberation from Dr. Blackstone, Phillips turned to face Nesmith and said, "Your people already established he wasn't on to anything. Why aren't your elves doing something productive, like finding Faust?"

The name "Faust" fired a switch in my brain, recasting everything that I'd been going through to date. No wonder O'Malley thought I didn't have a clue. "*Your elves?*" I leaned on the table and stood up. "Those were *your* elves?"

Nesmith looked at me with a slightly pained expression, the kind of face I'd expect to see on a mother when she learns that her six-year-old son has found out about sex. "Please sit down, Mr. Maxwell."

"These corrupt SPU elves that kidnaped me and fed me to the late Bone Daddy, they're yours?"

"Mine, actually," said Mayor Rayburn. "They're not corrupt, and they're very, very dedicated. Sit down please."

I shook my head and sat down.

Nesmith started, "That episode was outside normal channels—"

"No shit," I muttered.

"—because the people we're looking for have sources, perhaps even a mole, inside the administration. If we had brought you in for a formal questioning, your life might have been endangered. Even if you knew nothing, the appearance would have been that you did."

"Thank you so much, it worked so well. I'm sure Mr. Bone Daddy would agree—"

Rayburn leaned forward. "Let's dispense with the recriminations."

"Okay, let's." I said, glaring at Nesmith. "So what the hell was Cutler investigating? I have transactions between these guys and Bone Daddy since the start of the SPU."

Nesmith looked at Mayor Rayburn, who nodded at her.

"I will tell you this, Mr. Maxwell, only because Mr. Caleb Washington is dead. The gentleman you refer to as Bone Daddy was the best undercover cop this city ever had."

"*What?*"

"Caleb Washington was the first recruit the SPU ever had. We spent years building his persona, all the more genuine because he was one of the most talented native mages in the city. We knew about Cutler's investigation. He labored under a mistaken assumption. We used him to help maintain Washington's cover."

Suddenly, everything over the past three days took on a surreal cast. "No, wait a

minute, Egil Nixon—"

"Died less than three hours after he went home the day of the dragon's death." Nesmith shook her head. "Through his own means, Mr. Washington had followed a trail to Mr. Nixon's corpse."

"Why the shootout?"

Nesmith shook her head. "It was a decision O'Malley made. Washington was ambushed by someone, probably the people responsible for Nixon's death, before he could meet with O'Malley and pass on what he had discovered. O'Malley decided to preserve his cover by planting the weapon and manufacturing the story . . ."

"*Jesus.*" I whispered. The guy was a cop.

"The same people more than likely set up the episode with you and Cutler." She shook her head. "These same people may have set Cutler after Washington in the first place. Washington was getting very close to them."

"Faust?"

I was answered by a silent trio of nods.

## Chapter Twenty-One

"**PERHAPS** you begin to understand," Mayor Rayburn said quietly. "There have been threats that, up until now, it hasn't been in the city's interest to acknowledge publicly. To do so would have been to hand ammunition to the forces that want to remove local control of the Portal."

"What, exactly, do you mean?" I asked him.

"The Feds have been as reluctant to publicize their operations here as we've been to acknowledge the threat you named 'Faust,'" Nesmith explained. "Their contact with you has shown that their attitude has changed. That is why you're here, and not in the Justice Center."

"What are you saying?" I smiled and shook my head. "You offering an exclusive interview?"

"I am offering you a deal," Mayor Rayburn said.

"Over my objection," Phillips said, mostly to himself.

"What deal?"

"Help us get Faust," Nesmith said.

"Pardon?"

"Their activity has risen to an unprecedented level," she said, "centered on you."

"Now wait a minute—"

"They are giving us an opportunity to flush them out."

"Using me as bait?" I stood up. "Thank you, no."

"What did I tell you?" Phillips said. When he shook his head, his whole body moved. "This whole exercise is pointless."

"Please sit down, Mr. Maxwell," Rayburn said. It was the kind of voice I associated with Charlton Heston as Moses— after the bush incident. I stood my ground and looked Rayburn in the eyes.

"I think the discussion's over," I said.

"I don't think you want to leave just yet," Rayburn said.

"Is this where you start threatening me with criminal prosecution?" I snapped at Nesmith. I could feel the old self-destructive stubbornness strike. I did not like to be threatened.

Nesmith surprised me. "No. If you don't cooperate with us, you're free to go. No strings."

The silence filled the cavernous room. From somewhere water dripped. A vent kicked on and began to suck a mildewed wind across my face.

"What?" I said, slowly sliding back into my seat.

"We have no grounds to hold you," she said. "You witnessed a felony, that's all. You could walk out the door right now, if you wanted to."

"Then why don't I?" I asked Rayburn.

"Self-interest," Rayburn replied.

In the end they had me, and they *knew* they had me. Rayburn knew from the beginning. That was why he was the mayor, and I was the one doing features on him.

The deal, which wasn't really a deal, was simply this—

I cooperate, agree to be their stalking horse, I get a little limited Q&A with the Cleveland triumvirate. On the record.

I walk, and not only do I get to go without that particular interview, but I get to face an unknown quantity of killer mages without police protection— and with decent surveillance the cops still get to use me to flush the bad guys.

So, in the end, it was a no-brainer.

I pulled out my notebook and tried to get my money's worth.

Nesmith did answer most of my questions. I got some limited background on Faust. The name began as a legendary figure, a native human who sold his soul by working with the mage underground. The rumors were born in the first few months, when the primary reaction to the Portal— and the things coming out of it— was one of fear.

The name became associated with secret societies, and what Nesmith described as a government-inexile— almost as if Cleveland was a staging area for operations on the other side of the Portal. Faust and company could certainly communicate across the Portal, and the existing exchanges made it possible for agents to slip in and out.

I asked about the National Guard and forays into Ragnan, and got a predictable "no comment." When I asked why the Feds shouldn't be in charge of the Portal, with everything that was going on, I got a bombshell of an answer.

The Portal was not a natural phenomenon.

This thing that had been confounding scientists and mages for a decade had a very specific origin. The dragon Aloeus.

Not only was the dragon influential in shaping policy. Not only was he a primary source of intelligence about Ragnan. Not only was he a source of knowledge to work with mages and protect against them.

Aloeus was the last defense against the fifth column the Feds were worried about. He had created the Portal, and knew the mechanics of how to close it. As long as the dragon was friendly with the administration, the city didn't have anything to fear from an invasion. It was possible for Aloeus to shut the door.

The idea that Faust murdered Aloeus was enough to send waves of panic from Lakeside Avenue all the way to Pennsylvania Avenue. Such a blatant stroke made it almost certain that there was going to be some sort of push from the other side of the Portal.

Which made everyone all the more desperate to find these guys.

By the time I got to this point, I think I was using up the information faucet. I tried to get confirmations or denials on a lot of the Feds' accusations, but they weren't about to comment about National Guard involvement in a coup. Or disappearing homeless, for that matter.

One question I asked did get a rise from Phillips. Not that he said anything, he remained mute through the whole Q & A. But when I brought the questions around to Aloeus' business dealings. Rayburn, quite adroitly, pointed out that it was none of the city's business what Aloeus, Inc., did with its money. Phillips, however, looked uncomfortable.

I asked how they knew there was a mole in the administration. It boiled down to timing. Faust and company knew too many things. The fact that Nixon suppressed forensic data. The location of Bone Daddy's meet with O'Malley. The location of the

FBI's safe house. Cutler's investigation . . .

I looked across at Phillips. "You've been quiet."

"I do not agree with the decision to use you, or to talk to you."

"Why is that?"

"I've explained my reasoning to the mayor. I do not need to do so to you. Suffice it to say that I believe you're a risk the administration can ill afford at this time."

"Why were you on the Coast Guard cutter, Phillips?"

"My job required it," he snapped. "I think you've wasted enough of our time."

Rayburn glanced at Phillips, and his hand went to the chain at his neck. He turned back, as if reassured by the touch of the chain. "Mr. Phillips felt that his presence was needed on site. You don't need to question his loyalty to this city and this administration."

*Was that what I was questioning?*

I was about to say something more when the mayor went on, "I trust the people in this room, Mr. Maxwell. Strangely enough, that includes you. But the time for questions is over."

I left the bunker under City Hall in the back seat of a minivan escorted by my old friends, Elves One, Two, and Three.

Elf Three still held the Glock, and Elf One still did all the talking.

"Mr. Maxwell," he said by way of greeting.

"Maelgwyn Caledvwlch," I said, butchering the name.

If I'd hoped to rattle him by knowing his name, I was disappointed. He looked at me impassively, and said in his breathy near-Jamaican accent, "*Detective Sergeant Maelgwyn Caledvwlch, Mr. Maxwell.*"

I looked over to the elf with the Glock. At least he wasn't pointing it at me.

As we rolled out of that bunker I knew that Nesmith was drafting a press release to be faxed to all the papers in time for the a.m. editions. A press release calculated to make Faust and the Mage Mafia rabid to get me. I was pretty sure it went something like, "Kline Maxwell, recently wanted for questioning in the murder of Kirk Cutler, has turned himself over to the police. He has been cooperating with the murder investigation, as well as several other related ongoing investigations. At the moment he is not a suspect in any criminal wrongdoing, and is being held in police custody at an undisclosed location for his own protection." Something to rehabilitate me while simultaneously making me look threatening to Faust. That was how I'd write it.

"So where are you taking me, Detective Sergeant Caledvwlch?" I asked, expecting



pretty much as unresponsive a ride as I had gotten to Bone Daddy's ministrations.

"We're taking you home, Mr. Maxwell," he responded, confounding my expectations on several levels.

"Home," I repeated, for a time unsure if he was referring to my home or his.

"You are in protective custody," he told me. "We will remain with you until you are no longer in danger."

"Uh-huh," I said. "You're painting yourselves a mighty big target, aren't you?"

He didn't respond to that.

The minivan rolled out of downtown, east, through neighborhoods of new townhouses and small strip malls. It was hard to believe that, at one time, the area around us had been some of the most depressed real estate in the county.

I felt backed into a corner, and I didn't like it. For all their talk that I could just walk away, either choice I'd make essentially amounted to Rayburn and Nesmith throwing me out to draw the hunters. I didn't like the fact that their scenario about Faust didn't add up—a gut feeling, but a powerful one.

My doubts did have a foundation, albeit a shaky one. If Nesmith was correct in her theories, Aloeus was killed for something he *might* do, because he represented the administration's control of the Portal in a crisis situation. I'd always found it much more likely that people are killed for what they *have* done, or what they *will* do.

As the night slid by, I asked, "So were you the cops the late Bone Daddy supposedly drew down on?"

Caledvwlch, as usual, was the one who answered me. "It was unfortunate."

"More so for Bone, don't you think?"

"It is the nature of mortal beings to die." He paused a moment, as if in reflection. "The timing, in some cases, is inconvenient." It was hard to tell if he spoke with anger, regret or some other, less accessible emotion.

"You work with him a long time?"

"An instant," Caledvwlch said, making a gesture of dismissal. It rang false to me, even through the enigmatic elven reticence. I didn't get the feeling that there was affection there, but I sensed that there might have been some sort of camaraderie that Caledvwlch wouldn't want to admit. "He was useful for the work."

"The work?" I asked. "A rather pious way to put it. Or are you more than a city cop?"

"Our unit has a special role, Mr. Maxwell. Caleb Mosha Washington aided that role."

We hit University Circle. As we drove through, I looked up at the Gothic cathedral at the edge of the Case campus. Trying to see the gargyle that had yawned at me. I didn't see anything but inert stone.

"What is your 'role'? Do you guys have some sort of mission statement beyond 'serve and protect'?"

"You are looking for hidden agendas, Mr. Maxwell."

It wasn't a question, so I didn't answer it. "You—the SPU— were formed to be specialist cops, like Vice, or Homicide. Doesn't look as if that's the way things worked out."

"We are police officers."

"You're doing covert black bag jobs for the administration. That night with Bone Daddy wasn't your first midnight questioning of an unwilling subject."

"Perhaps." The minivan slowed to a stop outside my building.

They led me out of the van, and I hunched my shoulders, expecting an ambush out of the night. Three elves accompanied me inside, the driver staying with the car, as always.

Once we were in the stairwell and I felt a little safer, I asked, "How close was Cutler to what was really happening?"

Caledvwylch's voice echoed hollowly, and somewhat ominously, in the stairwell, "Mr. Cutler asked the wrong questions."

I had a real bad feeling. What were the *right* questions? Why did Cutler have to die? Why did they want me dead? Coroner Nixon? Bone Daddy? Several things that had been nagging at me began surfacing as the elf led me up to my condo. Nixon wasn't killed to hide the dragon's murder. Nesmith and company *already* knew, they had just invented an accident in an attempt to play things down. The city was doing Faust's job in that respect.

Nixon was killed for some *other* reason.

Faust had a mole in the administration. . . .

I looked at Caledvwylch and asked, "How did Caleb Washington die?"

He looked at me and said, "Mr. Maxwell, Caleb Washington held a fellow officer, a human officer, at gunpoint. We had no choice but to shoot him."

The air around me began to leach the heat off my skin. "Nesmith said—"

"Ms. Nesmith does not know."

When I stared at him for a few moments, he repeated, "We had no choice," as if I had missed the point.

Before I could ask him anything more, he had the door open and we were walking into my condo to face the hunched form of Thomas O'Malley. The elves flanked me and stood, almost at attention until O'Malley nodded and gestured them at ease. Caledvwylch was silent, and it started to strike me that, like Baldassare, this person I'd been pumping would never tell me a thing unless he had a concrete reason to do so.

As Commander O'Malley stood to greet us, I began to wonder exactly what that reason was.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

"WELL," I said, "make yourself at home." The bad feeling in my gut had just deepened several notches. What Caledvwlch had said in the stairwell didn't sync with what Nesmith had said about Bone Daddy, unless O'Malley here was part of it.

*How much of this did Cutler have right?*

O'Malley shook his head. "I would have thought you'd be flattered at the attention." He gave me a humorless grin. "You're under 'special police protection.' "

"The elf squad isn't special enough?"

"We all follow Ms. Nesmith's lead, don't we boys?"

"Sir," replied Caledvwlch. He was echoed by his two henchmen, the first time I had heard their voices. The feeling in the room was unnerving. I couldn't read the elves, beyond the fact that they had become even more reserved upon entering the room—as impossible as that seemed. O'Malley on the other hand, radiated unease like the heat from a compost heap. His posture was tense, and he eyed the elves more than he eyed me.

I looked at the tableau in my living room, all backlit by my wide-screen showing some nature documentary. The tension was taking its toll on me; I needed space to breathe, to think.

After a few long moments I said, "Okay, folks, if you all don't mind, I'm going to take a long overdue shower."

I had just got my airport coveralls unzipped, an effort the way my hands still pained me, when Detective Caledvwlch opened the door.

I stood there, the coveralls half dropped and hanging on my hips, staring at him in numb disbelief. "*Come on.*"

Caledvwlch responded by settling his ungainly form on the john. He reminded me of a spider, the way his overlong legs bent past his lap. Even so, he managed to look gracefully imperturbable.

"You are not seriously going to watch me take a shower?"

"Mr. Maxwell, our duty is to protect you and neutralize your attackers."

"Yeah, right." I waved an arm around the windowless bathroom. "You think someone will attack me in here? There's no way in. You can sit by the door."

"A magical attack can ignore physical barriers."

I sighed, stood there a little longer, and finally dropped the overalls. If privacy was a little much to ask for, I was going to have to settle for getting myself clean.

"Enjoy the show," I said, and continued with my mission to feel like a human being again. I considered making a joke about dropping the soap, but a joke is wasted on an elf— and it was the kind of reference that would probably mystify him.

While I cleaned myself, I asked through the shower curtain, "What's the deal between you and O'Malley?" With the door shut and the water going, my question wouldn't carry outside the bathroom.

For a time, I thought Detective Caledvwlc'h's comparative gregariousness earlier had been a fluke. I didn't hear anything for a minute or so, so I resumed scrubbing.

It took so long for a reply that when it came, I did end up dropping the soap.

"Mr. Maxwell, I fail to understand your question."

I snorted. It seemed an overly trite way of being coy, and I was about to say so, when it struck me that he might truly not understand. "There's no love lost between you, is there? You might be cool to me on general principles, but around him it's like you're all sucking on dry ice."

"We owe fealty to him," he said in a flat voice.

"Don't like your boss?"

"From him to Ms. Nesmith, from her to Mayor Rayburn." I actually had to turn down the shower, his voice had become so low. "But *first*, to him."

*Okay, he's got chain of command down pat.* But his words began to ring an uneasy chord in my mind. In the twenty-first century United States, archaic feudal codes of honor were way out of place. But Caledvwlc'h wasn't born, or in any real sense raised, in the twenty-first century United States. Would patterns of behavior, definitions of right and wrong, be so easily swayed by movement from an agrarian society of noble-born landowners and serfs to a post-industrial service economy?

*". . . a society that doesn't value human life, sees women as property, and sees violence as the first resort in a dispute. These men don't know the rule of law . . ."*

Blackstone was speaking of the dregs when he said that. How such a world created for us a new breed of criminals and rapists. However, I began to realize that the effects might be manifest in ways more subtle— and more corrupting to the principles the Feds were supposed to be fighting for.

I turned off the shower and pulled the curtain aside. Caledvwlc'h wasn't looking at me, but I was thinking of the way he had said— right before we entered the condo— that he "*had no choice*."

I was beginning to see more than one way to interpret that phrase.

"Who was Bone Daddy threatening?" I asked.

"I cannot say," Caledvwelch responded in the same flat voice, answering my question without answering it.

"O'Malley?" I asked.

"I cannot say." He didn't turn to look at me.

My elven escort followed me as I shaved, bandaged the cuts on my hands that'd reopened in the shower, and when I went to the bedroom to get dressed. While I pulled on some clean clothes, Caledvwelch kept up his silent presence, not looking at me.

He stood in the doorway, slightly bent because of his height. The silhouette of his head against the light of the hall was obviously nonhuman. His eyes had a slight glow to them that I hadn't noticed before, lifting them out of his shadowed face. His right hand touched his left shoulder, almost an expression of mourning.

It wasn't right. He seemed more out of place here now than he ever had. His cheap cop suit hung on him as oddly, and as disrespectfully, as a pair of dirty overalls hung on the statue of David. I've never used the word beautiful to describe another man, but in Caledvwelch's case, the word fit— a lot better than the suit.

"Why did you come here?" I asked him.

He answered in his breathless island-flavored accent, a few notches lower on its inhuman register. "I am supposed to protect—"

I shook my head and interrupted him. "Not here, my condo. Here, Cleveland. Why did you come through into this world? Why pass through the Portal?"

He turned to face me and looked as if no one had ever bothered asking the question. "What interest is it of yours?"

"You're out of place here."

"Everyone is out of place here." He turned away, looking down the hall, back toward O'Malley and the other elves.

"Why are you here?"

"Mortals have a great advantage," Caledvwelch said. "That's why Ragnan is the only empire of any consequence for the past thousand years. So fragile . . ."

He trailed off, and I didn't say anything. I didn't know where he was going with this.

"Mr. Maxwell," he turned to face me. "You might think that I might be more 'in place' were I to go home. You presume that a home still exists for me." Caledvwelch shook his head. "We are a dying race. We started dying when mortal man took the first step into our world. Valdis simply consummated the inevitable with the destruction of our noble houses."

The aspect of mourning became concrete, the gravity of his past drew on his

posture more than it did his words. "I and my fellows were raised for the honor of serving a noble lord. I have done so longer than any of the petty nations on your world have existed. Valdis took that last honor from us, with everything else." He looked upward and for the first time I saw a trace of emotion. His right hand clenched on his shoulder, bunching the material of the suit so tightly that I thought it might tear.

"They have the temerity to tell us that we're free now. *Free?*" The hand relaxed. "How can I be free, Mr. Maxwell? My native language doesn't even have a word for the concept."

His voice never wavered.

I stepped up, feeling the need to say something. It was a misplaced urge, and I realized it as the words came out of my mouth. "It must be a difficult adjustment."

He looked at me as if I was a disease-laden insect that had just landed on his shoe. "Adjustment? You are a fool if you believe it possible for us to be as inconstant as you. Honor and duty are not malleable virtues to be reshaped at a whim. If what is right is only right as long as it suits you, there *is* no right."

"I didn't mean that."

"What did you mean, Mr. Maxwell, other than that we adopt your 'freedom'? What purpose have I without honor? I have sworn myself, and that cannot be unsworn." He turned away from me, and his voice was very low now, almost as if he was talking to himself. "Even should I want to abandon myself, do you think I can be so easily changed? We do not change. We are not mortal. We are supposed to be incorruptible, eternal. What we are is permanence. To change is to die." Then, very quietly, "Not to change is to die."

Then he looked over his shoulder at me, as if he was waiting for me to follow him down the hallway. He said something that I found very disturbing.

"There is no word in my language for suicide either."

He walked me out to the living room where O'Malley was sitting watching my big-screen TV. On the high-definition flat screen, a lioness was chasing after a wounded gazelle. The other elves were gone.

"So where is everybody?" I asked him.

"Sent them to cover the rest of the building," O'Malley said. There was a tumbler of amber liquid in his hand. "You're important, Maxwell." He took a sip as the lioness ran the gazelle to ground and sank its teeth into the animal's neck.

"Uh-huh," I said.

I glanced over at Caledvwelch for a clue as to what was going on. The situation didn't feel right to me. Caledvwelch was no help, he had become solidly impassive again.

"You and the detective get to know each other?" O'Malley asked. "That's good," he added without pausing for an answer. "I know that Caledvwlch has a lot to get off his chest." He looked over at the elf and shook his head. "Take it from a good Catholic, confession is good for the soul."

"What's going on here, O'Malley?"

O'Malley chuckled and shook his head. "Sit down, Maxwell. Detective, stand by the door."

I didn't sit as Caledvwlch obediently stationed himself by the entrance to the condo. "This isn't right, O'Malley. What's going on here?"

"Oh, God, what isn't right about it?" He put the glass down roughly on my coffee table, and I was reminded of the image of Bone Daddy putting a bottle through the glass tabletop. "Sit yourself the fuck down, Maxwell."

I stepped in front of my lounge chair, but I didn't sit. I looked at O'Malley on the couch and, for the first time, I noticed that he had his gun out, resting on the arm of the couch opposite me. "What are you doing here?"

O'Malley stared at the screen where a trio of lionesses were tearing gobbets of flesh from the deceased gazelle. One white leg stuck straight upward, as if in some plea for mercy. "I wish I'd never heard of the damn Portal. I wish I'd stayed a damn beat cop. I wish I never had to deal with this crap."

"What are you talking about?"

"I didn't have to have this job, I volunteered. The Special Paranormal Unit. I thought it was so fucking interesting. Police work that no one else had ever done. Fucking idiot."

"O'Malley?"

"I did not start out to run a goddamn Gestapo. And now it's gone way past the point where I can go back." He reached for the gun.

I backed up. "O'Malley, this is not a good idea."

He moved slowly, picking up the remote and shutting off the television. "I didn't want this," he said as he stood up. He wasn't even looking at me.

"We can talk about this, O'Malley. Come to some sort of arrangement."

"Left hand doesn't know what the right is doing, Maxwell." *Many hands and no head.* "It's like trying to ride three horses, this job. Everyone's got a piece of me. All panicked over this Faust." He finally looked at me. His eyes were empty. "Some more panicked than others."

I raised my hands. "Let's not—"

"Do something rash? Irrevocable?" He shook his head and took out a silencer and began attaching it to the end of his gun. "Way too late for that Maxwell. It was too late when that goddamn dragon plowed into the Cuyahoga."

"Christ, O'Malley—" I looked back and saw Caledvwlch impassively guarding the door. Is that why he was so forthcoming? Because he knew I wasn't going to live through this? "At least tell me *why*?"

"*Why*? You know why. Didn't Nesmith explain it to you?" He shook his head. "If that bitch knew— so many fucking idiots. You know the chain the mayor wears? Tells him who lies to him, who's loyal to him— and the poor bastard thinks that means he knows what's happening."

I swallowed and thought about Bone Daddy's CD. "It wasn't Faust, was it?"

"Fuck, it was *always* Faust. Faust plans to destroy Rayburn and everything he's ever built. We can't let that happen, can we?" O'Malley shook his head. "We have to do anything to prevent that, don't we?"

"Aloeus . . ."

"Was working with Faust," O'Malley said. "Had to be stopped."

The whole sick situation was beginning to fall into place. The attack on Aloeus wasn't an attack *on* the city. The murder of the dragon required a *lot* of mages in a concerted effort. When it came down to resources, the city employed more mages than anyone else.

"Bone Daddy knew, didn't he?"

"Such a fiasco. Right hand, left hand again. Nesmith didn't know about the action to neutralize Aloeus. Didn't come off of her desk— but then, of the three, she's the least likely to do something that stupid. She also wasn't one to take things at face value. She knew it wasn't an accident despite what that poor little bastard Nixon was told to say."

I could smell his breath. There was enough scotch there to give someone a contact high. I looked down at the gun. "Why don't you set that down. We can figure out a way out of this together—"

I don't think he even heard me. "She sees it as a movement by Faust, all hell's going to break loose. Sends out Washington, our lone good cop. The one guy we actually got in close to Faust. Of course the shit starts flying—"

I stepped forward, "Why don't you give me the gun—"

"*Don't you fucking move!*" Scotch and spit flew from his lips as the shaking gun slammed barrel first into my chest. He shook his head and the eyes that looked down on me were those of a different person than the O'Malley I knew. "You think I *want* this? I'm a goddamn cop. You think for one moment, if Washington couldn't talk his way out of it—*Fuck!*" He slammed the pistol across my face and my vision blacked out as blood stung my eye.

"I recruited him. I handpicked him for this job. And he has to buy it because if it gets out how the dragon died it would be worse for Rayburn than if the beast had lived. Of course, since the stupid bastard sending the orders *loves* Rayburn . . ."



I rolled over and blinked up at him. A blurred form held a shaking gun at my head. "No contest, Maxwell. I don't even *like* you."

I braced for the shot.

The phone rang.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

IT rang again. O'Malley looked over at the phone *You want me to get that?* I thought, but I managed not to say it.

It kept ringing, the electronic beeping cutting through the silence like a knife. I could tell that O'Malley wanted the person just to hang up, but the caller wasn't cooperating. Five, six, ten rings.

I did say, "Might be Nesmith."

My vision had cleared enough to see O'Malley's mouth harden into a bloodless line. "Get that, Detective."

Caledwylch walked away from the door and picked up the phone. It was hard to read his expression. "Hello?" After another moment he repeated, "Hello?" After a half minute he hung up.

"Who was it?" O'Malley asked.

" 'The play's the thing, ' " Caledwylch quoted, " 'Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.' "

"What?" O'Malley wore a puzzled expression.

I was in a sprawl facing O'Malley, and the windows to the street. Streetlights shone against the curtains, and while I watched, a shadow passed between the window and the light. I took my Shakespearean caller as a cue to dive for cover.

I rolled behind the lounge chair as the window exploded inward. The hairs stood up on my arms as the wards on the condo let go, trying to stun the intruder.

Unfortunately for O'Malley, the wards only carried enough punch to KO something the size of a human being.

O'Malley turned around to face the window, bracing his arm. The gun fired, the silencer making the shots sound like a sledgehammer slamming into a bag of wet cement.

The intruder stood on the remains of my coffee table. The thing stood as tall as Caledwylch, even in its perpetual hunch. The black leathery batwings folded behind it added a foot to its height. Its arms were long enough for the knuckles to scrape the floor, its legs thick and half the length. The face was twisted and skull-like, all toothy jaws and deep black orbits for eyes.

My shadow.

O'Malley emptied his automatic. To his credit, even caught completely off guard, I saw about half the shots find a tight grouping on the gargoyle's chest. Fat lot of good it did O'Malley. The holes the bullets punched in the thing's flesh didn't even bleed, they only released a little steam.

The gargoyle's response was slightly more effective.

A long arm, ending with a hand full of foot-long talons, swatted O'Malley like a windshield wiper taking out a horsefly. Just as effective, and a lot more messy. O'Malley's body sailed into the entertainment center, shattering the wide screen and knocking it off the wall. His head didn't quite make it that far.

I did the sensible thing. I ran.

I had forgotten about Caledvwlc'h. I only made it halfway to the door when the elf clotheslined me. Flat on the ground, I coughed and opened my eyes to see Caledvwlc'h pointing a Glock down at me. "Are you nuts," I coughed. "That thing—"

Something was wrong here, because the gargoyle should have decapitated both of us by now. I looked back, and it hadn't moved from its station in the middle of my living room. It opened its mouth, and spoke "***Place the gun on the ground, brother.***" It was like the voice of the dragon, deep enough that I felt it vibrate behind my sternum.

"Do not approach, or your prize will die."

The creature spread its arms. "***You do not trust me?***"

"You killed my liege." Caledvwlc'h pulled back the slide on the Glock.

The creature laughed, and the sound made me sick to my stomach. It didn't help that Caledvwlc'h looked ready to shoot me to spite this thing. "***You would call a mortal liege?***"

"I have honor. I have duty."

***"You debase yourself. Do you imagine your 'liege' saw your noble fealty as more than a tool to control you?"***

Caledvwlc'h shook his head. "This is not what was agreed—"

***"Consider it a favor,"*** the thing said, gesturing toward the pile of meat that had been O'Malley.

"Go," Caledvwlc'h said, "the others will be here soon."

***"Not without him."***

Caledvwlc'h shook his head. "Not after what you've done. I cannot accept this."

***"Who are you serving now, brother? O'Malley's ghost? You know the evil***

*they've done."*

"I cannot trust you with him."

The Glock moved away, and I sat up a bit. "Don't I get a voice in this?"

*"You keep him in city custody, it is only a matter of time. You believe I would harm him after what we've gone through already?"*

Caledwylch wavered. For myself, neither option seemed all that appealing. The standoff seemed primed to endure indefinitely, then a pounding started at the front door. When no one answered immediately, the sound changed to someone slamming into the other side, trying to break the dead bolt.

Caledwylch looked at the door, then at the remains of O'Malley. He lowered his Glock and shook his head. "This cannot be allowed to continue." He stepped away from above me. "You wanted to *know*, Mr. Maxwell. So you shall. Go with the creature."

"Is this a good idea?" I asked as I got to my feet.

Caledwylch raised the Glock again. "Go," he said.

I heard the doorframe crack. So much for caution. I ran over to the gargoyle. It didn't give me much choice. Once I was within reach, those long arms took me into an ice-cold embrace, holding me to the un-yielding flesh of its chest.

The thing held me in an iron grip, and I had a few brief moments to contemplate the idiotic things people are capable of doing when a gun is put to their heads. I felt movement, but I couldn't see past the thing's shoulder. I managed to turn my head just as the whole world went topsy-turvy on me. I saw a brief flash of ceiling behind me as the gargoyle sprang backward. Then a starless expanse of sky twisted around us as my inner ear decided that it was time for me to throw up.

We fell like a stone; a dive that nothing should've been able to recover from.

Fortunately for both of us, the gargoyle was a magical entity and the laws of aerodynamics need not apply. It unfolded its wings beneath its plummeting body and managed to pull out of the dive a few feet above the sidewalk. We narrowly missed the power lines for the nearby rapid transit tracks as we shot upward.

By now the sense of vertigo from all the movement was making my head hurt. I managed one passing look at the floodlit quad of Shaker Square— from about three hundred feet up and at a sixty-degree angle— and screwed my eyes shut.

The thing moved so fast that it was hard for me to breathe. The wind whipping by us tried to snatch the breath from my mouth.

*Okay, someone remind me why this was preferable to being shot . . .*

I could feel the remains of this afternoon's McFood backing up on me. I think the only thing that kept me from actually throwing up was the thought that it might encourage this thing to drop me. I risked a few glances as we flew, looking

downward. We seemed to be heading northeast, though that was only a guess based on sighting the downtown skyline, and not from anything below or the sense of direction that I had abandoned during that dive out my condo window.

*Thank God no one is shooting at us.*

My one glad thought was quickly followed by the mental image of Aloeus. We were, apparently, escaping from the folks responsible for that. If they decided to reprise that with my gargoyle . . .

I spent the rest of the flight imagining myself plummeting to the ground embraced by three or four tons of inanimate stone— or whatever this thing was made of.

It felt as if we were airborne for an eternity, though it was actually only a few minutes before the gargoyle began its descent. I risked a look downward and, for a few moments, I thought we were falling, upside down, into the sky.

Below us was black, inky darkness. It was even darker than the sky, when I realized the sky was still above us. The blackness was bordered by broad avenues and streetlights, but the interior was a vast unlit space. We had already descended too far for me to see the extent of it.

The gargoyle set down on a dark lawn in the midst of the darkness. It let me go as soon as it landed. My legs weren't ready to support me, and my inner ear wasn't quite sure of the direction of up. I tumbled down at the gargoyle's feet. I had to sink my fingers into the grass to convince my body that I'd stopped moving.

I agreed with my body; down was good.

I lay there for a few long moments, waiting for the flight-induced vertigo to recede enough for me to open my eyes without setting my head spinning.

When I felt well enough, I pushed myself off of the ground. My legs were a little wobbly, but they supported me. I blinked a few times before I realized that I was face-to-face with an angel. A few more times before I was convinced that the angel in question was made of granite and perched atop a rectangular monument whose front read "Drummond" and whose side bore a carved shield with the text of the 23rd Psalm engraved in it.

It was dark, but I could see ranks of headstones surrounding me.

At least I knew where we were. Lakeview Cemetery was the only near east side necropolis that covered this much real estate. I turned around to face the gargoyle. It stood, impassive and unmoving.

"So?" I asked it. "We're here?"

No response.

"Now what?"

Nothing.

"Damn it, I know you can talk—" I shook my head. "Did you fly me all the way over

here to abandon me in a graveyard?"

"No," came a feminine voice from behind me. "And it cannot talk without someone to animate it."

I spun around again, staggering a bit because I did so too quickly. "Who?"

"We've met before, Mr. Maxwell," she said as she walked out of the shadowed woods beyond the graves. She wore a dark hood that made her form nearly invisible in the shadows. I only caught sight of her because of the sense of movement toward me. She lowered her hood as she approached me, and her pale face stood out against the darkness, her eyes glowing slightly as Caledvwelch's had.

"Ysbail," I said.

She gestured in a half bow, half curtsy.

I placed my hand on my head and closed my eyes. "This is a long way from Hunting Valley."

"One of many places of power."

"What the hell's going on here? Why did your pet— pet *thing* over there— grab me?"

"You would prefer being killed like their mage?" She walked up next to me and stared at the gargoyle. She spoke several lines quietly in her native tongue, and the misshapen thing jumped straight upward, unfolded its wings, and disappeared into the starless sky.

"You've had that thing following me since this started."

"Imperfectly," she said. "And initially it was watching Commander O'Malley."

"Why?"

"Accompany me, Mr. Maxwell, and I will explain." She started walking away, and the fear that she might leave me here was more than I needed to convince me to follow.

I walked after her, through sparse woodlands, toward a mausoleum set back into a hillside, facing partly away from us. "You were singled out the moment Aloeus fell from the sky. Set upon the twisted path that led you here." We walked around to the front of the mausoleum, where green bronze doors were held shut by a rusty chain. Ysbail made a hand gesture and the chains rattled to the ground.

"Uh-huh," I said as the doors to the tomb opened of their own accord. "Who did the singling out?"

The doors stood open before us and, inside the tomb I could see only an inky blackness. Ysbail walked up the steps and said, "Come with me."

She walked through without looking back. Her form disappeared into the darkness and I hesitated until the doors began closing again. I slipped through before they had

shut completely. I felt a sudden drop in temperature as a cool wind beat at my face. I felt for the walls, so I'd have some sense of direction, but my hands didn't find any.

I walked into light, as if a curtain was drawn aside.

For a few moments I was blinded. I blinked a few times, and the first thing I noticed was the unfinished stone floor.

I looked up to see Ysbail standing against a curving stone wall. The wall was unfinished stone, like the floor, and inscriptions in some alien language were carved into the rock. Light came from a Coleman lantern that hung incongruously from a bronze sconce set into the wall.

I looked around and saw no trace of the mausoleum we had entered.

However, hanging in the air behind us was a sphere of inky blackness that seemed to hold a reflection of some space that wasn't *here*. As I watched, the sphere shrank, as if it was deflating or fading into the distance. In a moment, it was gone.

I turned around to face Ysbail.

"Welcome to Ragnan," she said.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

I SHOOK my head. "No. Don't play games with me. Where are we?"

"The catacombs beneath the city of Galweir. I assure you that I am not playing any game."

I looked back to where the sphere had disappeared. "Was that what I think it was?"

"A Portal? Yes, though a short-lived one."

"That's not supposed to be possible."

"Many from your world wish that were so." She picked up the lantern, and the shadows shifted around us. "Come," she said, leaving me with little choice. She led me through twisting corridors of stone, all inscribed, most with niches in place to receive the dead. The air here was cool and dry, and— now that the mini-Portal was gone— still.

I looked at the skulls piled into some of the niches, and it didn't seem so far-fetched that we had left the shores of Lake Erie.

"Why are we here?"

"Because the people who threaten your life are not here." Ysbail said it as if she was explaining things to a child. She followed a narrow staircase upward.

"What's my life to you?"

"We used you. Invested what was left of our cause in you." Her voice changed tone slightly. I didn't know if it was the elvish equivalent of compassion, or irony, when she said, "We bear some responsibility for your safety."

"Used me?" I said. "Everyone and their brother have been using me."

"Yes," she agreed. I could swear she gave me the ghost of a smile. She pushed open a large oaken door and led me out into our partner universe. I don't know exactly what I was expecting.

What I saw was decidedly surreal.

The sky was just purple with dawn, which allowed me to see the mountain first. It towered over us, a rocky mound covered by trees until, about halfway up, someone had decided to turn the mountain into art. The bluff on which we stood, and looked upward from, turned into a muscular leg. The ridge where it led toward its sister mountains, became a tail leading into a serpentine torso. One wing still rose on the far side, but on our side, the stone dragon's remains were buried chest-high in rubble, on top of which lay a carved head the size of a five-story building.

I looked around and saw our surroundings were in similar disrepair. We stood on flagstones that could have once been inside. Stone walls on either side of us were draped in vines and moss and only seemed to go halfway up. Behind us I saw the shell of a ruined tower, collapsed so all that was left of the upper levels was a semicircular wall whose concave side faced us.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Our capital," Ysbail said. "The home of the elves."

I looked at her, and I could see the same aspect of mourning that I had seen in Caledwylch. I looked back toward the catacombs we had walked through. "You're supposed to be immortal."

For the first time in my life, I heard an elf laugh. It was a quiet sound, and somewhat sad. "Your word, Mr. Maxwell. Not ours. We do not age, but all but the most prideful of us know death is no stranger to us. To one as short-lived as you, we must seem forever unchanging, eternal. Our greatest sin was believing that was so." She cast an arm back toward the catacombs. "Our ancestors, and their ancestors. Generations before memory."

"What happened here?"

"You did."

"What?"

"Mankind. Mortals more familiar with death, and much more willing to face it. They could not abide us, so they destroyed us. Our people are so scattered now that in a few of our generations we will cease to exist." She reached out and took my arm. Her fingers were long, pale, and cold. "Come see."

She took me to the edge of the flagstone courtyard, which was once a great hall, and

stopped at the edge, where the floor fell away. We stood at the top of a hill that sloped downward about a mile. There was a road coming from what must have been the front of this place, snaking down the hillside to a city.

The road had once been lined with statues, but the sculpture lay in dismembered piles along the gutters. Large segments of the road had fallen away into gullies that now dug into the hillside. The buildings, whatever remained standing in the town, were roofless. Most had only two or three walls left. Plants covered the stone, giving everything a weathered, softened appearance.

I expected to smell death here. Perhaps my psyche needed that kind of tangible sensation to bring home the gravity of what I was looking upon. The world, of course, didn't cooperate. The smell here was the smell of a meadow at dawn, dewy grass and wildflowers. The mortal wound inflicted here happened too long ago to leave such a sign. The ruins here were centuries old.

Still, I asked, "Valdis?"

"No," Ysbail said. "He was only the most recent."

"How long has it been like this?"

"An instant—" she turned away from the dead village. "I remember when these halls smelled of incense and lavender and proud men argued about the most enduring values of aesthetics."

"Why haven't you rebuilt?"

"Here? No. The magic here is alive with the atrocities still. To remain here overlong would be death. To build here would be to desecrate a tomb." She shook her head. "Elsewhere? Until now, it has been all that we could do to survive in the face of the human realm here."

"Until now?"

She nodded. "To begin again— that has been what has made such bitter enemies, Mr. Maxwell. The great beast, Mankind, cannot forgive us for refusing to die, or be forgotten." She turned to face me, and I could almost see tears on her cheeks, though her voice didn't change timbre. "Your world as much as mine."

I was a journalist again, asking questions, taking notes. Ysbail, for her part, was like any partisan who'd suffered the loss of land, home, people. I don't know if she'd appreciate the comparison, but the voice that came from her belonged to every dispossessed person I'd ever heard. Croat, Irish, Palestinian, American Indian— it only really varied in intensity, which was a function of memory, the severity of persecution, and of the individual personality.

Ysbail's personality was cool, but more passionate than any elf I had ever met. If she'd been a human, I would have assumed that she was still in shock over the events she described, that any moment, when the reality sank in, she would break



down.

*Maybe that's it, the entire species is still in shock.*

Before Ragnan existed, when humans were still grubbing in the mud, killing their food with well placed stones, this— Galweir— was the soul of civilization of this world. It was a city of philosophers, scholars, mages, artists, and poets. It existed in peace for uncounted millennia, unchanged. Even the anarchic dragons paid tribute to study from the hoard of knowledge Galweir represented.

This place was so far removed from the lands of men that even the most learned among the elves thought that mankind would never become a threat.

According to Ysbail, it was the elves' inhuman pride that kept that belief alive long after it was apparent that mankind was growing too fast beyond anyone's ability to contain it.

The citizens of Galweir had been convinced of their own invulnerability even as their city was falling down around them. The men were ruthless in their slaughter. To the humans, death was an inevitability. To the elves, any death was a ghastly accident. Every elf who fell in battle was a festering wound cut into the body of their kind. Their choice became surrender or extinction.

Those whose choice was surrender were the only ones left. The damage, however, was already done. The scars ran deep into the elvish psyche. Their nobles were executed, individuals who had defined the elves' destiny for centuries. Their cities ruined, so soaked in the blood of their immortal dead that if any elf stayed there for any length of time the spirit of the place would drive them mad. Their people scattered so that the elvish community no longer existed, only singular individuals humbled by defeat and guilt-scarred by their own survival.

According to Ysbail, not one elvish child had been born since the fall of Galweir, while half of these supposedly immortal creatures had since died.

"There is no word in our language for 'suicide.' " Her voice was thin and hollow in the wind. Dawn was leaking over the ruined dragon, the light reflecting off of the skull, picking out what might have been gems encrusting the massive sculpture.

"Caledvwilch said that."

"A motto," said Ysbail, "for those of us who want to survive. Many of us saw this," she motioned to the ruins below, "as our end. To them, we are already dead and all that is left is the wait for the inevitable."

"You and Caledvwilch?" I asked.

Ysbail shook her head. "My brother is not me. He sees salvation in holding on to the old ways in the face of everything. He sees the survival of our culture as the survival of ourselves. Even if he has to call a human Lord."

"He is your brother?"

"In the ways that matter to my kind."

"You don't think he's right?"

"Pretending this did not happen does not undo it. He sees himself— all those who do as he does— as preserving us."

"And you?"

"I know better. Caledvwlch is simply looking for a way to die with some dignity." Ysbail turned to face me. "I do not accept our end. I rebel against it. I will fight it as a wounded she cat defending her young. I do not care about our dignity." She had grabbed my upper arm. The touch was light, but it shocked me, as did the sudden violence of her words. "I do not care to leave a dignified corpse."

She looked at me, and the expression on her face could have been that of a fanatic, or a visionary. The eyes, metallic and expressionless, could have hidden either.

"What does this have to do with Aloeus' death?"

The hand left my arm as she turned to look at the broken dragon. "The elves were first. But the dragons suffered as well. Even though each dragon was a nation unto himself, by then, mankind had great experience in subduing nations. Aloeus gave us an alliance, a chance to bridge the gap between worlds. To find a sanctuary."

I shook my head. "My apologies for the state of that sanctuary."

"You misunderstand. Cleveland was never the destination. The term in your language that best fits our purpose there would be 'reconnaissance.' "

"Recon . . ." My voice trailed off as switches began flipping in my brain.

Fact one, the Portal was not a natural phenomenon, as the general public seemed to believe.

Fact two, Aloeus created the Portal to give the elves a homeland. Cleveland, Ohio, while adequate, had the disadvantage of being populated by the mortal types who'd been giving these people the shaft.

Fact three, ten years to these creatures was a very insignificant span of time.

Fact four . . .

"Mexico," I whispered, looking at the mountains surrounding us. A plot of land the size of Cleveland with no commercial value, no easy access, little in the way of natural resources. A property completely worthless to Aloeus, Inc.

Until you opened a Portal to it.

"He was teaching us, Mr. Maxwell. Helping us. He had been since he opened the doorway into your world."

"Helping who?"

"The few remaining elves who want to survive." Ysbail looked away at the ruined dragon. Dawn was cutting the sky into ribbons of red and purple. "The land was ours. More than enough to rebuild our city. Enough to serve those who are left."

I suspected the answer, but I asked anyway. "You can move now, can't you?" I waved back to the catacombs. "You don't need the Portal."

Ysbail shook her head. "We learned enough from him to open a temporary doorway. It lasts hours at most . . . We cannot survive in a world devoid of magic, Mr. Maxwell. We need a permanent source."

Aloeus' death, his *murder*, made too much sense now. There were dozens of interests involved in having the Portal as a monopoly. *Everyone* in the city, from Rayburn on down, had a stake in our Portal being the only game in town. Christ, what would happen to the tourist money if an entire nation of elves decided to open up shop south of the border? What would be the draw if there was the same thing available in a better climate, and without the remnants of the twenty-first century hanging around obscuring the magic. Disney was ready to drop billions to build that kind of environment out by Sandusky.

To the person who, in O'Malley's words, panicked the most, the natural progression led to an even worse possibility: The second Portal wouldn't be the last.

"No one wants competition for the Portal," I said. One goose laying golden eggs is worth something, but more than that and the eggs start depressing the economy.

"Centuries of work were wiped out with Aloeus' death," Ysbail said. "It might mean the end of our species."

"*Centuries*," I whispered to myself. I thought of something Caledvwilch had said, "*You are a fool if you believe it possible for us to be as inconstant as you.*"

I thought about that for a moment. I was walking in a world where allegiances shifted slowly, if at all. That was important, maybe the key to what was happening here.

When Aloeus formed an alliance with Rayburn to keep control of the Portal local, helped engineer the attack that ended Valdis' reign, and continued his influence on the administration— during all that time, he had been working with the elves.

"You are 'Faust,' aren't you?"

"Your kind can be very loose with names. The same term can apply as much to many as to one." She looked at me. "I am of the many, but I am not the one."

I decided to count that as a confirmation. Nesmith was right. There was a mole in the administration, and someone had decided to do something violent about it. They were also correct, in a way, about "Faust" attacking the city and the administration. Their interests were certainly at odds with the long-term goals of most of the political and business community in Cleveland. From the look of things, though, the terrorism seemed pretty one-sided.

"Tell me about what Aloeus was doing with you."

She obliged.

The Portal was not intended solely as a doorway. It was to be an extension of their world into another, a foothold around which the elves could build their new capital.

It required years of effort to produce the permanence of the Portal. It took, had been taking, ten times as long to teach those skills. The temporary Portal that Ysbail had led me through was just a small manifestation, a temporary doorway whose creation was made easier by the proximity of the other Portal.

The difference between that, and creating a new, permanent Portal was the difference between driving down the interstate and *building* the interstate—and the car to drive on it. Ysbail's little portal was simply pulling the energies from the permanent Portal and opening another space to walk through. It wasn't even possible to do it outside the influence of the permanent Portal.

And, unlike the Portal that Aloeus opened, the little portals could only be opened into places the mages—and apparently there were several needed to do it—themselves had seen. At least one member of the ritual had a sole duty to visualize the destination.

The Portal that Aloeus created suffered no such restriction— of course it would have been useless if it had. Aloeus could cast a Portal to a world no one had ever seen. That gave them the ability to escape Ragnan, but made two Portals necessary for their mission. One for reconnaissance, the other once a suitable site had been found for permanent settlement.

The decision to solicit the National Guard's assistance was simply a tactical decision on Aloeus' part, to remove Valdis and buy time on the Ragnan side of the Portal.

Once the political situation on both planes had stabilized, they needed to find their final target on this world. A target they found with the help of Leo Baldassare.

I asked about him.

Ysbail told me, "He has been a friend to our cause since Aloeus arrived in this world."

"Hasn't helped with the administration?"

"We've both required privacy in our dealings."

"He knows about 'Faust'?"

"Yes."

I knew Baldassare kept things close to the vest, but this was surprising, even for him.

"Where do I come into this?"

Ysbail and her people *knew* that the Rayburn administration had Aloeus assassinated. There wasn't a question in their minds. With their plans wrecked with the dragon's death, their only real hope was to make the administration's actions public in such a way that it couldn't be covered up. Then, maybe, they could convince the government, the courts, the public— someone— to consider reparations.

That kind of proof was problematic. Especially as the administration and the SPU seemed to be moving to place the blame for the assassination on "Faust."

They needed someone credible, someone *human*, someone with no obvious connections to the paranormal citizens involved. They needed that person to voice the crimes of the Rayburn administration.

"You were chosen by the one 'Faust,' himself. He knows your works, and knows that if you call Mayor Rayburn a murderer, those who read your words will know it is truth."

"Baldassare," I said. "You had him pressure the *Press* to put me on this story."

"To the other journalists, it was not a political story."

I shook my head.

"We granted your guidance."

"What do you mean?"

"The term in your language is bibliomancy," she said.

It took a moment to realize what she was talking about. "You're the damn bard!"

"Not exactly," she said. "I could not establish any immediate link to you, magically or otherwise, because you were so well watched. I could, however, create an independent floating enchantment that could warn you, guide you, long after my connection with the spell had been broken and could not be traced."

"You're saying a *spell* called me?"

"I cast the spell on the web of electronics that makes up the phone system in Cleveland. The spell moved from point to point, confounding any attempt to trace it."

"What's with the quotes? Why not something useful, like 'your life's in danger.' "

"An oracle does not work like that. It needs a matrix, a form, to cast its information from. It can be runes, dice, cards, bones . . . I chose a form that would be easiest for you to interpret, and easiest for you to receive through the medium I selected."

"You expected me to go up against Rayburn for you."

"We believed that you would willingly publicize his crimes."

I nodded. "There's one problem with that plan, Ysbail."

"What?"

"Rayburn didn't have the dragon killed."

## Chapter Twenty-Five

YSBAIL turned to say something, perhaps an objection, but she was interrupted by a presence. There was a sudden feeling of imminence in the air, a sensation that set the hair on the back of my neck on end. I turned away from the ruined vistas of Galweir and back toward the flagstone courtyard we had emerged from.

The air rippled above the stone, and I could see a tiny speck floating there. As I watched it grew to a dot, then a ball, then a rapidly expanding sphere. This was the third Portal I had seen in my life, and the impact wasn't diminished by the fact that I was expecting it.

It certainly was a good way to cut any possible pursuit, just sidestep into the next dimension and wait for your comrades to rendezvous. I looked at Ysbail and asked, "How close are we to the original Portal, on this side?"

"Thousands of miles."

I looked at the slowly stabilizing sphere. "But someone can only *make* these temporary things near the permanent Portal, right?"

"The caster has to be within the permanent Portal's influence."

"So what were you planning on doing if the ride home didn't show up?"

"We would have had a long journey in store for us." She stepped forward. "Come, it only remains a few moments."

I took a step toward a curving image of a huge building in a wooded glen. With no sense of transition at all, I found myself stepping away from the shore of the Chagrin River. In front of us, rising out of the bluff overlooking the river was the massive Tudor pile of Leo Baldassare's mansion.

I got the weird feeling of coming full circle.

The air was thick with the smell of incense, and a quartet of exhausted looking people sat on the grass between us and the mansion. The two elves, I expected. The humans, I didn't. The man I hadn't seen before was long-haired with a beard and gut worthy of a Hell's Angel, with more cryptic tattoos.

The other one was Mr. Friday, the man whom I'd taken to simply be Aloeus' lawyer.

"You're a mage?" I asked.

He looked up at me as if I still carried an invisible, disgusting odor, "You are surprised?"

Ysbail walked up and looked over the quartet, examining each member as if checking for damage. Perhaps that's what she was doing. Friday seemed the least fatigued by whatever happened here. Perhaps he just showed it less.

The Hell's Angel type got unsteadily to his feet. "You," he said, pointing toward me. The look he gave me wasn't that friendly.

"Me?" I answered. So far, a stellar conversation.

"You're why they killed Bone." The finger collapsed into a fist about the size of my face.

I took a step back, and the guy stepped forward, about halving the distance between us.

"I think you're making a mistake," I said.

"You made the mistake. You tipped them off to Bone," he told me. "When this is over, I'll have your liver for lunch."

"Angor and Einion need to rest," Ysbail interrupted us. "We need to go inside." Ysbail helped the two elves up and started toward the mansion. Friday stood up and looked at me, then at the biker, and shook his head.

The biker was still standing in my way, staring me down.

I started, "I don't think you understand—"

"It's simple. Bone was fine with the cops till you showed up. Then something tipped them on to him." He slapped his open hand on top of his fist as if he was trying to drive a knife into someone's chest. "Your fault, ain't it?"

To the guy facing me, the question was rhetorical. For me it was less so. Yet another datum added to my evolving portrait of Caleb Washington. He had, as O'Malley said, gotten very close to this Faustian network. From the looks of things, all the way inside.

I suspected that this guy would not take well to the news that Mr. Bone Daddy was a cop, and had been one for years. The biker would probably be even less pleased with the info that Bone wasn't killed because the cops caught up with him. He was killed because he knew who was behind the demise of Aloeus, and made the mistake of taking the information to O'Malley, rather than to his little underground group.

The irony was, this guy might, in a sense, be right. Bone Daddy had been ventilated after interrogating me. I suspected that something he heard while questioning me set him on the path that got him killed.

I even had a good idea what that was.

When I didn't answer the biker immediately, he turned and followed Ysbail and the others up toward the house. I followed in time to see Leo Baldassare holding the door open.

He looked at me as we all walked into his wood-paneled sanctum, and his expression held no trace of irony. Not that I expected it. He'd always been one of those guys who knew exactly what he was doing, and left it to others to speculate about what that was.

"Kline," he said by way of greeting.

"Mr. Baldassare."

We had gathered in the massive library. There were more than enough overstuffed

chairs, and the two-story ceiling gave enough headroom even for the elves. The bookshelves covered three walls, ten feet up to a balcony that held more shelves all the way to the ceiling. A massive semicircular arc of windows faced the river and the clearing we had walked from.

Everyone sat, with the exception of Baldassare and myself. I stood next to a long, wide desk that seemed designed explicitly for holding large volumes flat. Quite a few were open on it. I saw a few non-English titles, a book with mostly Hebrew text amidst circles and linear diagrams, and something that was authored by Alister Crowley.

"I suppose you have some questions," Baldassare said as he closed the door.

"You know me," I said. "I always do."

"You know I support Rayburn, always have. But you probably know by now that the administration has some strange ideas about my friends here."

I nodded, walking down the long desk, flipping a few pages here and there at random. I stopped at one ancient-looking tome as thick as my arm and about three feet tall. The writing was hand-lettered in a text I couldn't recognize from any human alphabet.

"A fifth column," I said. "Elements of an invasion that may or may not come. A threat to the city government on several levels. At the least, a justification for deeper federal involvement. At worst, agents of unregulated and possibly competing access to Ragnan." I closed the book. The cover was black leather from some animal I didn't recognize. "I'm wondering what's your angle, involved in this."

Baldassare smiled. "It really isn't very arcane. I'm a businessman, not a politician. I provide them with logistical support, planning, staff," he glanced at Friday. "They find their homeland, and I receive sole rights to control human access to that homeland. Sole licensee to export goods from that homeland."

Right now Baldassare only received a royalty for each person passing through the Portal. He didn't have any control over it, didn't receive anything from tourism, or the goods and services that exist because of the Portal.

*Take what he has now, and add two or three zeros on to*

"That's an incentive," I said.

"He has been the one human of any temporal power who's been sympathetic to our purpose," Ysbail said.

Baldassare shrugged and was atypically self-effacing in the way he said, "For all the good it's done."

I looked at Mr. Hell's Angel, and thought about Bone Daddy, and asked, "How many are in this little underground of yours?" I directed the question at Ysbail.

She was comforting the two elves, who seemed to be suffering most of the aftereffects of our little rapid transit exercise. I saw one look at her and shake his



head. I preempted her response. "No, I know, let's keep numbers out of it. But a lot, isn't it?"

"Some might say so," Ysbail said.

I looked back at the biker and said, "We're not just talking an elvish homeland, are we?"

It was Friday who answered. "The Portal created a new underclass. Any mage has two choices here— accept dictation from the government, or suffer marginalization. The 'Faust' fantasy perpetrated by the administration is a threat because it— we— represent mages who aren't under their control. Therefore, we must be brought under submission."

*Voting with their feet.* There was a mage underground here that people on Lakeside dismissed as criminal, a ready source of people who would be candidates for relocation to a place free from the politics and bureaucracy of this city. For all the forces in place that brooked no changes to Cleveland's control of the Portal, I started to see that there might be as many— if not more— forces who would like to see northeast Ohio's monopoly on the paranormal come to an end. Which, of course, would contribute to making the former much more strident in their opposition.

"So, Mr. Baldassare, from what I know, no one here is doing anything illegal. You seem to agree that Mayor Rayburn and company have some wrong headed ideas about your project. You're on a first name basis with the mayor. Why haven't you just walked in his office and set him right?"

To his credit as a politician, he was expecting the question. "It's not that simple, Maxwell."

"Come on," I said. "That chain you gave him, from Aloeus, it's a lie detector. He'd *know* you were telling the truth."

Baldassare nodded. "The Dragon Stone."

"So why don't you?"

"You're assuming that politics fundamentally changes when you cannot lie," Baldassare said. "Truthfulness is different from honesty, and facts can always be dismissed, even if their accuracy is not in question. Shall I paint you a scenario? I confront my old friend, the mayor. I give him the unvarnished truth. He then asks me how I know Faust's motives. How I know I'm not being duped—"

"And, of course, you risk alienating one of your chief political patrons."

Baldassare didn't bat an eye. "I'm not just a sugar daddy for this project. Political connections are important. I lose David's ear, and the whole project loses."

"With what happened to Aloeus, it seems like you've already lost."

The biker muttered something like, "Fucking bastard." Ysbail was a study in mournful silence.

Baldassare frowned, "Don't think I haven't second-guessed myself since that happened. But when it comes down to it, if Dave was fanatic enough to have someone— to have a *dragon*— killed over this, then there was no way I was ever going to talk sense into him."

"Maxwell believes," Ysbail said, "that Rayburn didn't have Aloeus killed."

For once, Baldassare looked a little surprised. The expression didn't wear well on him. His persona was so consciously crafted that the contrast of seeing a truly uncontrolled emotion break the surface gave the feeling of seeing the first crack appear in the ice over a rushing river. He recovered from his lapse quickly enough to make me wonder if I had imagined it.

"I would like to believe that," Baldassare said. He walked over to the grand windows and looked out toward the dawn sky. "I'd always thought of him as a friend. It isn't pleasant thinking him capable of such an act."

"You believe it, though?" I asked.

"I *know* it," Baldassare said. "He began ruthless, and he's only become more so over time."

"He also inspires great loyalty, doesn't he?"

Baldassare chuckled and wrung his hands behind his back. "Inspires? Not quite."

"The chain," I said. "Aloeus' gift. It assures him loyalty . . ."

"It assures him that the people he employs are the sycophants he wants." There was a trace of bitterness in his voice, letting me see how he could end up supporting people that were so at odds with the administration. He turned around. "David has always wanted control. He never could tolerate dissent. Giving him that chain gave him the keys to Pandora's box. It allowed him to question everyone's loyalty, and anyone with imperfect belief in the Rayburn administration was shoved aside for someone with absolute loyalty."

"His appointees all support him, unquestioningly," I said.

"If he has his way," Baldassare said, "they worship him."

Baldassare was probably right. Rayburn was the wrong person to give that talisman to. It might have enticed him to negotiate with the dragon, and be un-surpassed as a gesture of faith, but it was a mistake to give such a tool to someone convinced of his own righteousness. Even before the Portal, there was Rayburn's way, and the wrong way. Leaders like that tend to need the balance of opposing views in the people around them. But with Aloeus' gift, Rayburn had the unprecedented ability, not just to employ people who said what he wanted to hear— but *believed* what they said.

"Then," I said, "it isn't unlikely that if someone in Rayburn's administration perceived a threat to Rayburn, he or she might go to extreme lengths to deal with it."

"Of all the fucking bullshit," the biker sneered at me. "That's what happened? Rayburn's goons killed Aloeus, killed Bone, killed that fucking jerk-off reporter of

yours?"

I nodded. "Not Rayburn."

"Not Rayburn," Baldassare repeated. He looked at me with an expression that seemed to acknowledge what I was about to say.

"Someone inside the administration has gone out of his way to protect Rayburn's interests. Gone so far that he's had to protect Rayburn from the knowledge of what was happening."

"That's bullshit," said the biker.

"It's called plausible deniability," Friday said.

"Yeah, it's still bullshit. You telling me that anything goes on without Rayburn knowing? He's got that damn chain."

"I suspect quite a lot happens without his knowledge," I replied. "Once you've surrounded yourself with people of unquestioned loyalty there's great temptation to trust their judgment. Rayburn is probably so convinced of his infallibility that it hasn't even occurred to him that his own people might be responsible. No one has to lie to him if the right questions are never asked."

Baldassare nodded. "It's possible, he's cocksure enough."

"How the hell you know this, is what I want to know." The Hell's Angel stood up and was glaring at me. "You working for him?"

"They were going to assassinate him," Ysbail said. "Mind yourself, now."

"Oh, the great one speaks for herself. You know, I've been minding myself for, what? Seven years?" He pulled his beard. "I was impressed with you poor fucks, I went along. You promised me a new city, a goddamn new world. What you been delivering is all been bullshit and fuckups—"

One of the other elves, still recuperating, pushed himself off of the couch. I didn't remember if he was Angor or Einion. "Do not talk to the Lady like that."

"I ain't one of you Keebler bastards, I'll talk to the bitch any way I want."

The elf got steadily to his feet and interposed himself between Ysbail and the biker. In his eyes I saw something like rage. It was the first genuinely violent emotion I had seen in an elf.

"Stop this," Ysbail said. There was a resignation in her tone that was fatal for any sort of leader. If it wasn't clear before, her voice, the plea for calm, confirmed the fact that this alliance was falling apart. It probably had been since Aloeus plunged into the river.

"Don't you get it?" the biker said. "It's *over*. The grand plan is shit and best we can do is cut and run." He looked over at me. "And off anyone who can rat us out."

"You will apologize," the elf informed him. The demand seemed rather ludicrous

coming from someone who was barely holding himself upright.

Ysbail tried again. "No, Einion, he will not."

The elf turned to face her and said, "My Lady—"

"His anger is his own. I will not have you make him deny it." She looked over at the biker. "You are free to leave us."

The biker looked somewhat surprised. "Yeah? And what about him?" He pointed toward me.

"He is not your concern," she said.

"Oh? I'm supposed to walk away so that he can tell Rayburn's goons to vent my ass? I don't think so." He sat himself down and folded his arms.

Einion shook his head and took a step toward the couch and half collapsed into it. Ysbail stood and helped place him back on the couch. "Too much effort," she whispered to him. "Rest." She brushed her hand against his cheek.

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"They bore the brunt of forming that portal you walked through," Baldassare said. "The energy had to be channeled through the people who had walked the ground they were connecting to. The others were basically life support."

"You better be worth it," the biker said.

Baldassare walked forward and looked at the two nearly comatose elves and said, "If he is correct, he might just be." He looked up from Ysbail and Einion and said, "It's a legitimate question, Kline. How do you know? You've provided a plausible theory. But it is just that, a theory. One that absolves the mayor of what happened. How do you *know* it was one of his subordinates?"

## Chapter Twenty-Six

IT took a while to tell them, going over my encounters with the upper echelons of this city's political machine, and going over O'Malley's last words. The way O'Malley had it, neither Nesmith nor Rayburn knew what had actually happened to the dragon. The attempt to frame Faust was for their benefit as much as the public's.

The person who ordered Aloeus neutralized had ties to O'Malley, and had control of enough mages to assassinate the dragon and set up attacks on the Feds' safe house. Mages that weren't— given the elvish markings on the bullet that killed Cutler— native to Cleveland. This person had to be loyal to Rayburn, close enough to be unquestioned, and fanatical enough to plan to "neutralize" Aloeus. It also would make sense that, by doing so, he was preventing a direct threat to his own power base.

"Who do you mean?" Baldassare asked me.

"Adrian Phillips."

The only one who did *not* give me a blank stare was Baldassare. The others, perhaps, could be forgiven for not knowing the chairman of the Port Authority—though they should've. Phillips was the executive in charge of "maintenance" of the Portal. His agency ran the quarantine facilities at Burke Lakefront that housed new arrivals. His agency employed the most mages of any city department. He was part of Rayburn's political machine, was his campaign manager in his first reelection bid after the Portal. He was adept at finding positions for political cronies; one such was the head of the SPU. He got O'Malley his job.

I had little doubt that O'Malley was loyal to the Rayburn administration, and to Phillips in particular. And because of the elves' fealty, the elves were loyal to O'Malley. So, even though the SPU was a police unit under the command of Nesmith, Phillips would be able to run it as a private fiefdom.

Phillips had spent a lot of time taking the "Faust" rumors and casting "Faust" as the devil. Ysbail and her followers were threats because they weren't under city control. When he discovered their plans, and the dragon's part in it, the dragon had to be removed. A new Portal not only threatened Cleveland's economy, but Phillips' own power base. He would no longer be able to control who came and left between the worlds.

He used the Port Authority mages to assassinate Aloeus. Then he used O'Malley and the SPU to attempt a sloppy cover-up.

Unfortunately for him, Rayburn and Nesmith had taken his beliefs about "Faust" to the obvious next step. They saw Aloeus' death as a first move in a coming attack from Ragnan. Combine that with the Feds pushing into the jurisdiction, and they needed to come up with "Faust's" head on a plate.

"Nesmith wants 'Faust,' " I said to Ysbail. "She's pegged you as the prime suspect. And that's why Caleb Washington was assassinated by the police."

My choice of words got the biker's attention.

Bone Daddy was a mole for the cops. He was looking for "Faust" and had been for along time. Everyone here probably had two things to thank for the fact that a squad of SPU elves weren't breaking down the door right now.

First was, I assumed— and Baldassare confirmed that I assumed correctly— that the network I was looking at was formed of independent cells like any sane guerrilla organization. Bone might have made it high in the echelons, but he hadn't got far enough to have real contact with the leadership. No Faust.

Second, and more important, Bone was a *real* cop. He wasn't into what O'Malley referred to as "Gestapo tactics." Caleb Washington wasn't going to go out of his way to report details on an organization that wasn't breaking any laws. Instead he spent his time giving the SPU any black market necromancer and two-bit mage who

was dealing with illegal shit.

The biker, as I had thought, didn't take well to this.

"You ain't telling me he's no fucking cop . . ."

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"I should fuck you up for saying that."

Ysbail held up her hand toward him. "Allow Mr. Maxwell his say."

"Of course, when Nesmith lets on to Bone that Aloeus' death is less than an accident, and that Faust is suspect number one, Bone Daddy is off on his own investigation. He has a major advantage over everyone. He's pretty damn sure, judging from the reactions he's seen within the Faustian community, that 'Faust' is the *least* likely suspect. Especially since— if he hadn't known beforehand, he would realize now— Aloeus was, in at least some important sense, 'Faust.'

"Going into his investigation, he questions yours truly and finds a fact that really doesn't sit well with him.

"Adrian Phillips was present while they dredged the dragon out of the water. Adrian Phillips was present during the medical examination by Egil Nixon. A medical examination that was falsified to show the death was an accident. Falsified by order of someone other than Nesmith, since her later comments showed she believed the report the honest opinion of the late Coroner Nixon.

"Unfortunately for Bone, Nesmith didn't believe Nixon.

"Unfortunately for Nixon, Phillips couldn't allow him to disclose exactly what went on aboard the Coast Guard cutter.

"I don't know what Bone discovered on his own, but I suspect it was whatever had killed Nixon. Phillips had already shown himself to be an imperfect tactician. Everything from the dragon's death onward showed no planning, just reaction. It seems quite likely that during the examination Phillips let slip something that identified him as the person behind the dragon's death. It could have been a mistake as simple as ordering the murder covered up before Nixon gave him his actual findings . . .

"Whatever Bone found, he didn't count on O'Malley being Phillips' creature.

"Unfortunately for O'Malley and Phillips, the snowball was already rolling downhill. Cutler was checking on Bone Daddy's movements before his death, and had got too close.

"I suspect that the real reason that Cutler got the CD was because the SPU handed it to him, right after putting that bullet around his neck. Something about that CD made the SPU think it was meant for me, and since it was from Bone, Phillips wanted it cracked. It could hold damaging information. After I opened the CD, they could finish me off in a righteous shooting once Cutler's chest blew open.

"I think it might have been less luck that saved me then, than the fact that Caledvwelch was already disillusioned with his liege at this point. The elf had worked with Bone for a long time; being ordered by O'Malley to kill him was enough to shake the foundations of his belief system. Not enough to ignore orders at that point, but enough, maybe, to miss.

"By this point Phillips was panicking about what Bone Daddy might have known and when. When the Feds nabbed me for questioning, it had to be the worst of all possible worlds. He had gone to the mat to 'protect' Rayburn. Letting the Feds pick my brain could be a disaster. He set up 'Faust's' attack on the safe house, and when that didn't finish things off for me, he had O'Malley pick me up when Blackstone tried to take me out of the city."

"Then why didn't the bastard take your sorry ass out right there?" quipped the biker.

"He seized me from a Federal Agent in a public place. They might have been becoming more reckless, but not *that* reckless." It must have been nerve-racking for Phillips during that triumvirate meeting. He probably had a near stroke when I asked about the Coast Guard cutter. Lucky for him that Rayburn was willfully blind.

"O'Malley was setting my death up as another one of 'Faust's' victims. He probably had his evidence all lined up." I shook my head and chuckled. "It's ironic really; you gave Phillips the best evidence he could want, with O'Malley's corpse."

"That was unavoidable," Ysbail said with the barest tinge of regret.

"I'm not complaining," I told her. "That gargoyle probably saved my life."

"Fat lot of good it's done us," said the biker. "They got O'Malley's death to dump at our feet, along with Aloeus and that reporter. And fuck if they ain't right this time. We *did* kill O'Malley. For what? So we can listen to exactly how we've been screwed?"

"He's gong to help us," Ysbail said flatly.

"Yeah, right. How?"

Baldassare looked uncustomarily grave. I suppose he had a lot invested in the success of this enterprise. "Lady Ysbail, I am afraid I do have to agree. While he has given a laudable analysis of the situation," he nodded in my direction, "I fail to see exactly how he is supposed to help."

"What you going to do? Write about it?" I got a sneer from the biker that was acid. It was an expression I knew. Two of the most lauded virtues in the old school of my profession were objectivity and detachment. We do not become part of the story. The point is not to right wrongs, but to illuminate them.

It wasn't Ysbail who spoke, it was Friday. "Caleb Mosha Washington was why we saved him."

"Bone didn't know this guy from Adam."

"His gift knew," Friday said. "It knew when he saw this man."

"There ain't no fucking savior. Not for the elves, not for us. He's a goddamn reporter, for Christ's sake."

"It is him," Ysbail said quietly.

Baldassare shook his head. "You're jumping to conclusions."

This had gotten cryptic enough for me. "What conclusions?"

"Don't worry, you ain't him."

"Show him the message," Friday said.

"While we're at it why don't we just tell him our life's story?" The biker looked back across at me. "That's what all this is to you, an effing story."

*Of course.*

I didn't say it, though.

Baldassare walked out of the library, leaving me alone with five rogue mages. I didn't realize until then how reassuring his presence was, the one player in this drama who I knew, who I thought I understood.

Ysbail sat, caressing the brow of one of the elves, the one who had defended her from the biker. The biker walked up to her and lowered his voice. His bearing suddenly had a trace of deference to it. "Lady, look I ain't subtle, and I ain't polite, and I sure as hell don't pretend to know all this shit. But, damn it, what the *hell* is the point of all of this? We've been keeping ourselves under wraps, and for damn good reason. We're just supposed to spill everything to this guy? What's he got at stake?"

"He is Caleb's man," Ysbail replied.

"Uh-huh? And what if he isn't? You're just going to let him splatter our secrets, our *names*, on the front page of his rag?"

"If he isn't, what reason have we left to hide?"

Baldassare returned with a notebook computer in tow. I had a strong feeling of déjà vu. He set it on top of the desk next to the large incomprehensible tome. He flipped it open, the blue LCD screen glowing ominously.

He struck a couple of keys and the CD player whirred.

"He left this with a lawyer," Baldassare said. "It was delivered the day after he was shot."

The blue background switched to black, which suddenly changed to an extreme close-up of a blinking eye. The eye backed away until we saw a shirtless Bone Daddy standing in a living room that was all too familiar to me. I noticed that the coffee table and all the broken glass was gone. He also looked a little less strung out. The arcane tattoos rippled across his back as he walked away from the camera and sat down on the couch.

"Greetings from the great beyond." He even smiled somewhat as he said it, but his



voice was flat and carried little in the way of emotion. He probably blew most of it on making the previous movie. At the very least, he had blown most of his inebriation. "I thought a lot about not making this tape. You should know that I *am* severely pissed off. That comes from divining that a good friend of mine is going to betray me. The fact that one of you all might be the one to off me sort of chilled my enthusiasm for trying to help you bastards out."

He leaned forward toward the camera. "Of course I kept trying to find out who the bad guy is, but you all know the Oracle. Can't let me know that, it might keep me from getting killed. So I did find out a few things you can't do anything about either." He held up his index finger. "Your great plans for a homeland are pretty much doomed. Sorry, I would have told you, if it could have done any good. Sometime in the week they bury me the whole thing is going to fall apart. Death, destruction, evil deeds, betrayal, the whole enchilada." Second finger. "A man of great temporal power holds your existence— I mean *all* of you— in his hands. He can destroy you or not, at his whim. This man is connected with the man who killed me, and may be responsible for my death. He is male, human, and is— big surprise here— involved in the political leadership of this city." Third finger. "There is another man, someone of great honesty who is threatened by the same forces. He is the one person I see who can get your butts out of the fire. Again, don't ask me who he is, I just know that he's got the best chance of sticking it to the shits who killed me off."

He lowered his hand and stared in the camera. I felt as if he was looking directly at me. "Call him Will."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

**MY** instincts wanted me to leave, told me I was too close to this little band of revolutionaries. Looking at the biker and Ysbail after Bone Daddy's last self eulogization, I knew that it wasn't altruism that prompted them to pull me out of a life threatening situation.

However, at this point, my options were limited. I faced the same Hobson's choice that I had been given in front of Rayburn's triumvirate, though no one here explicitly stated so. I could go along, or I could go out alone to face a threat that had shown no reluctance about violently dispatching people with too much information. Phillips could have every mage in the city's employ hunting me down. My only reprieve right now was the fact that Baldassarre's estate was very seriously warded against magical intrusions.

I needed Phillips stopped as badly as anyone did.

But as badly as anything, I needed to rest. I felt as if I hadn't slept in weeks.

Baldassarre led me to a bedroom bigger than the living room in my condo, and I collapsed on a mahogany four-poster king-size bed. My body screamed for sleep,

but my mind kept spinning along out of sheer momentum.

I lay on Baldassare's sheets and tried to think of how Bone Daddy's Oracle thought I was supposed to save the idea of an elvish homeland.

*Call him Will.*

"Bastard," I answered my mental image of Bone.

With that one phrase he tied me inextricably to his little prophecy. Even if I'd kept quiet about the CD that had been sent to me, word of it had made its way ahead of me. Apparently a familiar gargoyle had salvaged my hard drive from the dumpster I'd stashed it in. And there was enough decrypted data on it for Ysbail and company to scry the passphrase, and Bone's home movie.

The Oracle's second message to me: *Your path has been chosen for you by forces you've known and have not seen . . .*

That fit well. I had known a lot of players here— in Baldassare's case, years— without "seeing" the whole. And, according to Ysbail, it was Baldassare who pressured the *Press* to put me on the dragon story.

*. . . they fear your allegiance because the masters you serve are not theirs . . .*

Again that made sense. Probably more so than it did with the Feds. In the elves' case I had no doubt that they had a literal "master," possibly in Ysbail.

*. . . The alliance they offer will not be an easy one.*

I closed my eyes and whispered, "You pegged that one, brother."

It wasn't just that these people were unashamed partisans, and I was a supposedly objective journalist. I had done enough op-ed pieces to know that unbiased reporting was generally an oxymoron, and reporters have been getting involved in their own stories ever since Councilmen started throwing chairs at people.

No, what really worried me was the fact that I was standing with the losing side. Not just my opinion, mind you. These folks believed that they were on a death watch and it was only a matter of time before the darkness closed in on them. I had seen the fatalism in everyone's eyes— except, of course, within Baldassare's carefully crafted expression.

It was hard not to picture everyone here suffering the same fate as Aloeus. However careful they had been, it was only a matter of time. Despite Phillips' botched manipulation of the SPU, there were certainly more conventional investigations going on over Aloeus' death . . .

*. . . and Bone's.*

*. . . and Cutler's.*

*. . . and O'Malley's.*

All of it, given the nature of the quarry, would be tainted by SPU involvement. All of

it, with the SPU's help, subject to manipulation by Phillips.

If I had the luxury of time, an explosive exposé would be just what the doctor ordered. As nice as that thought was, there was no way this was something I could just phone in to Columbia. You can't go around accusing major public figures of murder in print without sources and documentation lined up from here to Lakeside Avenue. To get this into print without a criminal investigation would require more evidence than it would to convene a grand jury. I'm sure, as clumsy as Phillips had been, the evidence was out there. I just didn't have the weeks to collect and itemize it.

I kept coming at the problem from every angle, and kept getting the same simple, and the same ludicrous, answer:

Despite Baldassare's reservations, my— and by extension, the Faustians'— only hope lay in getting me a face-to-face with Mayor Rayburn.

The mayor might be adept at fooling himself, or cultivating blind spots where his cronies were concerned, but I doubted that he'd be as willfully blind when someone introduced the possibility that one of those cronies was going off half-cocked without his authorization. It was Rayburn's nature, there'd be no possible way he could tolerate that kind of challenge to his authority— no matter how loyal Phillips might be.

*Easy.*

I could picture the headlines the next day. "Newsman slain in foiled assassination attempt."

Rayburn never went anywhere unguarded. There were always cops, SPU officers, and mages shadowing the mayor to protect him. Any or all of them would be under Phillips' thumb. Worse, even to set up a meeting alone, assuming Rayburn would be willing, there was no way he'd be able to avoid telling his security team. That would, in turn, let Phillips in on the meeting. God only knows what he'd do then.

The only place that I'd ever seen Rayburn without an extended entourage was in the secret meeting room they had set up under Lakeside.

Eventually, I slept.

The sun had come and gone, its light fading from the windows when I opened my eyes. I sat up and looked across to see Ysbail standing in the corner next to the windows, watching me with her metallic eyes.

"How long have you been there?" I asked.

"Does it matter?"

"What do you want?"

"You know what I want."

"What if Bone Daddy is wrong?"

"Is he?"

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and swung my feet off the bed. I had not had a restful sleep. My racing thoughts and the heat of the day had kept me awake. But I did now have the embryonic glimmerings of a solution to our shared dilemma.

I told her about it.

"It has to be me," I said "Baldassare has the contacts, but he doesn't believe. Or, if he does, the best he could say to Rayburn was, 'This is what Maxwell said.' It would be easy to dismiss secondhand, especially after he admits his relationship to you."

Ysbail nodded.

"You all suffer that credibility problem. Even if Rayburn *knows* you're telling the literal truth. He can always tell himself that your beliefs are skewed. That's even if you could manage to meet with him, and I'm sure Phillips is watching that line of attack."

"Perhaps it is as you say. But what good is it for us for Rayburn to know that Phillips is corrupt? We have lost our Portal."

"You've lost *a* Portal," I corrected her. "Once Rayburn discovers what Phillips has done, is doing, he'll be driven to distance himself from the guy. He'll have to establish that the policies that Phillips was trying to advance are not the administration's." I looked up. "I think you'll be able to deal with him, if only to give him political cover from Phillips' covert activities."

"You sound very certain."

"I'm not certain of anything. This role was forced on me, I didn't volunteer."

"Perhaps," Ysbail said. "But we have learned to respect Caleb Washington's gift."

"Uh-huh." I shook my head, telling myself that— if I survived— there was going to be one hell of a story out of this. "As far as getting me and Rayburn in the same room before Phillips gets to do anything about it . . ."

"Yes?"

"You need to tell me, exactly, what is involved in casting that mini-portal of yours."

"You've got to be kidding, Maxwell," Baldassare told me after I'd explained to them all the details of my plan to, in Bone Daddy's words, pull our butts out of the fire.

"At least he's got some balls," said the biker, whose name I'd learned was Boltof. He was, unlike Bone and Friday, an immigrant from Ragnan.

Of course, Boltof couldn't let a compliment leave his mouth without hunting it down and killing it. He added, "Unless he's really a spy and this is all a setup."

"He is not a spy," Ysbail insisted.

"Besides," added Friday, "there would be easier ways to inform the administration who we are. The phone comes to mind."

"Yeah?" Bolt of shook his head. "He's smart enough to know that I'd slice him open if he pulled something like that."

"We all know," Baldassare said. "Can we all dispense with the posturing?" He turned to me. "Had Ysbail explained the implications of what you're suggesting?"

I nodded. "To open a temporary portal somewhere, you need someone who has been there—"

"Someone to visualize the destination," Ysbail corrected me.

"In this case it is the same thing. I'm the only person we have who's been there," I finished.

"You did see what it did to the elves?" Baldassare said.

I nodded. "Ysbail explained it. The spell needs someone to act as a lens, to focus the spell."

"*Someones*," Baldassare corrected. "This is no simple task. The energies involved are immense."

Friday rubbed his hands. "Mr. Baldassare does have a valid point." He said it as if he found it distasteful to allow the man that much. "The last Portal was the first we attempted with as few as two. Angor and Einion nearly collapsed focusing the energy."

"Exactly," Baldassare said. "And they were mages, and benefited from an inhumanly tough constitution. A human, especially an untrained one, would have died in their place."

Bolt of chuckled, "Hey, if he wants to—"

"I told you, I discussed this with Lady Ysbail," I said. "There's a risk, but it isn't a suicidal one."

"You think you'd be better at this than Angor or Einion?" Baldassare asked.

"No," Ysbail answered for me, and everyone turned to face her. "He realizes he is a novice. You all are forgetting the significant difference between creating a Portal to Galweir and what Mr. Maxwell proposes."

It only took a moment for Bolt of and Friday to get it. Friday nodded, as if it suddenly all made sense, and Bolt of just gave a caustic grin. Baldassare frowned and asked, "Will someone enlighten me?"

"In going from point A to point B, there are two things that stress the person guiding the destination," I told him. "The distance from the source, and that person's affinity for the target. While Angor and Einion might be adepts, and have an unmatched

affinity for Galweir, the distance from Galweir to the Portal on the Ragnan side was several thousand miles." I looked into Baldassare's eyes and tried to gauge his reaction. All I saw was a calculated concern. "My destination lies less than half a mile from the Portal, and lies in a place— at least beneath a place— that I have unquestionable affinity for. My inexperience might cost me, but the other elements we have going for us should make up for it."

Baldassare nodded. "You are talking about one of the most magically secure places on this side of the Portal."

"Designed by people who have no idea that Ysbail and her mages can do this. It is also one of the few places I know that Phillips won't be able to penetrate with his own mages. Once I'm in, the wards are going to protect me."

"You are *sure* that Nesmith will meet with you?" Friday asked me.

I nodded. "She's going to want to hear from me, especially after what happened with the gargoyle."

"Without Phillips?" Friday pressed.

"She has no reason to involve Phillips. This is a law enforcement matter, and she's the chief law enforcement officer in the city."

Baldassare nodded. "On this point, I agree with Maxwell. Phillips can't blatantly insert himself into Nesmith's turf without exposing himself, and Nesmith seems unlikely to invite a political rival into something that, from Maxwell's description, is her show." He smiled grimly. "I won't pretend to like this, and while I'm not a hundred percent convinced that you're right about Rayburn, things have descended to the point that some sort of negotiation is the only real option— whatever dangers it might open up."

"Then why the fuck don't we just set up the meet with Hizzoner himself?"

I shook my head. "Rayburn's security is an issue. If he goes anywhere alone, it might tip off Phillips. I'm betting the same attention doesn't apply to Nesmith. And if *she* sets up a private meeting with the mayor—"

"Lot of ifs," Bolt of said.

"But the reasoning makes sense," Baldassare asserted.

"Great, so you're behind this guy now?"

"I've yet to hear a more coherent suggestion." Baldassare walked up and took my arm. "You're taking a risk."

*More than you have. But then you know that, don't you?*

"How do you want to set up the meeting?" Baldassare asked.

"That's a sticking point." I said. "Contacting Nesmith directly has the same issues as contacting Rayburn directly. Any official channel is likely to alert Phillips."

"I have some 'unofficial' channels to contact people in Rayburn's administration," Baldassare said.

"I was hoping you would."

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"IF we're going to do this," Baldassare said, "we have to do it right."

I had no illusions that I was dealing with a democracy here. I had a fair certainty that whatever Lady Ysbail said was the rule, despite eruptions from Boltof. Even so, I could feel the political weight in the room shift with Baldassare's somewhat reluctant endorsement. It was interesting to see how Baldassare could move a room without so much as asking for anyone's support. The man had a gravity that drew even chaotic personalities like Boltof after him.

Even a genetic aristocrat like Ysbail could feel it.

I felt it, too, at first without realizing it. My initial reaction was simple gratitude at having his support. I had blown most of my intellectual capital in answering his arguments. Somehow, though, through some sort of rhetorical judo, Baldassare was suddenly center stage, laying out exactly how we were going to do this.

It wasn't until we were fifteen minutes into the details of the plan— a plan I had developed and introduced to these people— that I realized that I hadn't made a significant contribution since Baldassare had agreed to contact Nesmith to set up the meeting.

"Night would be the best time for this. Better chance that Nesmith will be unobserved during her off time. Lakeside will be pretty much empty except for a few cops, none of whom should be hanging around the meeting area." Baldassare kept going on, as if it had been his idea. At this point it seemed as if it was.

Watching him, I decided that it was the fact that he never seemed to stop thinking. He was always questioning, hypothesizing, figuring the angles. It was impressive, and scary.

"I'm going to have to set this up as close as possible to the meeting as we can get. The longer lead time we give Nesmith, the more chance that she might, voluntarily or involuntarily, let this slip to Phillips. Two, three hours, at most. And I shouldn't be anywhere near you people when you do your magic— and you shouldn't be anywhere near here."

Heads nodded, mine among them.

"When can your people do this?"

Ysbail looked at Boltof and Friday, "With the three of us—"

"You're going to have one novice more than you should doing this. How long before

Angor or Einion can back you up?"

Ysbail shook her head. "Days. Weeks."

Baldassare frowned. "You must have other mages who can do this. Back you up. You're going to need all the help you can get."

She looked across at Baldassare and seemed to be weighing something. I noted a look of concern cross Boltof's face. He shook his head and said, "We're exposed too much."

"There are others," Ysbail said quietly.

Boltof shook his head. "This is a mistake. They're underground for a reason."

"They have learned at our knee," Ysbail said. "To deliver us. This must work, or our purpose is lost. They will aid us."

"You made the right decision," Baldassare said. I wondered.

Twenty-four hours later, I got a slight amusement out of the fact that Boltof loaded us into a minivan that was the twin of the one used by the SPU elves. The van had spent those hours as a target for nonstop scrying wards. We might only be on the road for about fifteen or twenty minutes before we entered an area where the wards wouldn't be necessary, but each minute of that time was a risk. If Phillips' mages zeroed in on us—

That didn't bear thinking about.

Baldassare was in downtown Cleveland preparing to contact Nesmith, and it was about three hours short of my own personal zero hour.

Boltof drove the van off of Baldassare's estate, and that gave me the option of either worrying about leaving that permanently warded haven, or worrying about the fact that Boltof was native to a world without the concept of speed limits.

The van blew through the night, racing at seventy along dark, curving, rural roads, while Boltof stared forward with an expression of manic ecstasy.

I gripped the seat, telling myself that our destination was close.

We were headed due north of Hunting Valley, toward the Metroparks. Toward an area of wild enchantment that would make it very hard for anyone to follow us.

It was there that our quartet was to meet up with a trio of elven mages. It was an assemblage that would gather together almost all the people who had any knowledge how to open a Portal— all there to thrust me into a meeting with Nesmith.

The roads the minivan swerved through were pitch-black and hemmed in by the silhouettes of trees. No streetlights broke the darkness as we passed a large green sign saying, "Warning: You are entering the North Chagrin Reservation. Enter at your own risk."



Officially it was still part of the Metroparks system, but, since the Portal opened, it had become something unto itself. The woods here had changed. Neighboring developments in Willoughby Hills and Mayfield Heights had been overtaken by trees. Owners of half-million dollar vinyl monstrosities built on clear-cut lots would wake up to suddenly find their three-acre chemically treated front lawns home to a half dozen century-old maples and elms. New sewer lines would be clogged with roots, and wildlife from raccoons to skunks and deer would be making homes in garages, pools, and porches.

In a decade the enchanted wood had doubled in size, spreading northeast and southwest. The interior of the reservation— with the exception of a few human artifacts, like the road— had taken on a primeval character. Creatures were rumored to live here, sprites and dryads much more furtive than any elf.

Ysbail had picked this place for a reason.

Professor Shafran had explained to me— it felt as if it were a long time ago— that the magic flowing through the Portal was a fluid. It flowed and found itself concentrated in places, often at man's whim, sometimes at nature's. The North Chagrin Reservation represented such a concentration. For some reason, the geography here, the nature of the land, attracted the mana and kept it from flowing away, the woods becoming one of the densest concentrations of mana east of the Portal itself.

I could feel it hanging in the air. The sense of the sound just after, or just before, the portentous word is spoken. It ate into me with every breath I took, the weight behind the trees. It was almost as if we drove underwater instead of under a moonless sky.

Every so often we would pass an area where the trees were slightly thinner, and sometimes the headlights would catch the reflection of some pastel-tinted vinyl sagging off of the remains of a swaybacked house half eaten by vines and moss. Soon, even those traces were gone, and the van rocked on the broken asphalt as it edged into the heart of the wood.

There were no signs left. The wooden Metroparks signs had all rotted away, and the local park service hadn't replaced them. It had been a long time since anyone had jogged here, walked their dog, or had a picnic.

Apparently, one human structure remained, and— according to Ysbail— it was one of the half-dozen highest concentrations of mana within the Portal's influence. Anything cast there would have that much higher a chance of success. This one, in particular, was the choice for our ritual because it was the least accessible. The other places that offered as much of an advantage— Browns Stadium, Public Square, the reflecting pool in front of the Art Museum— all were much more public.

Squire's Castle, on the other hand, had done all it could to remove itself from human ken.

"They say it moves," Bolt of said, by way of conversation. "Won't let people it doesn't like near it." He looked at me and I wondered if he was trying to make me

nervous.

The castle had been built by Mr. Squire, vice president of Standard Oil, back in the 1890s. The stone structure was intended as a gatehouse and caretaker's quarters for an estate that was never built. By the time it passed into the hands of the Metroparks as a castellated turreted picnic shelter, it was little more than a shell. Proving that in the U. S. it only takes us half a century to reduce a castle to the state of ruin that Europe takes five or six hundred years to achieve.

I found it hard to believe it moved, magic or not. But I did know that it had, over the past decade, slipped rather quietly off the list of Cleveland landmarks anyone talked about.

Abruptly ahead of us, the headlights picked out a solid wall of trees blocking off the road. The van braked, coming to a graceless stop on the crumbling road.

"Here we are," Bolt of said, sliding aside the door on the minivan.

With the engine silent, it gave me a chance to hear how quiet the woods were. No insects, no bird calls, not even the leaves rustling in the still air. If it wasn't for the quiet ticking of the cooling engine, I would have thought I'd been struck deaf. The scent of mulch and rotting leaves hung in the air.

"Have you ever done any meditation," Friday asked me. "Any visualization exercises?"

I shook my head as I wiped my palms on my shirt. The air here was very still, as if the forest around us was locked in a single moment. If I didn't know better, I would have had the impression of a forest unchanged for a thousand years.

The headlights died, plunging us into darkness.

"You need to hold the image in your mind," Friday told me. "Concentrate on it. That's your part. We do the spell, you concentrate on where we're going."

I nodded.

"Don't let anything distract you," he said.

I heard Bolt of slam the door of the van, and one of the humanoid shadows around me spoke in Ysbail's voice, "This way."

I had no idea which way she meant, but someone grabbed my shoulder and led me. I think it was Friday.

We walked into the woods, and the way was clearer than I had expected. In the stark glare of the headlights, the way had looked impassable in every direction. The road appeared to be hemmed in by a wall of trees on every side. But, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, the wood was not as dense as it had looked from the van. The trees were old and tall, and they didn't crowd each other. At least not where we stood.

I thought, for a moment, I caught a whiff of woodsmoke and roses. Then I lost it under the damp smell of the leaves under my feet.

Once we had walked for about ten or fifteen minutes, and I could see enough not to walk into a tree, I got the eerie impression that, just beyond us, on every side, the woods crowded into impenetrability again. It was obviously an illusion, because we kept walking and the woods, if anything, thinned out around us as the trees got bigger.

Despite that, I knew that if I was separated from the others I would be hopelessly lost. I had heard the stories about these woods, and I could fathom how Boltof's legend of the moving castle might have grown.

These woods were enchanted, and I suspect that their enchantment warped the way the woods were perceived. The magic locked in these anachronistically ancient trees radiated an aura that made me see them as menacing and impenetrable, and once I was in the woods, they filled my senses with a forbidding dread. The trees said I didn't belong here. They said to stay here was to die.

It made panic seem like a viable option. Two things kept me from bolting and trying to make it back to the safety of the van. First was the fact that, if I bolted, I knew that my warped perception of the woods would have me lost within a few steps. The second reason was that I had the same sense I'd had during Bone Daddy's ritual, that the emotions I felt weren't my own. I knew that they came from the trees.

"This place," Ysbail spoke quietly, barely above a whisper. But I heard her clearly. "Across the Portal, little like it is left. Such concentrations of wild magic were challenges to the authority of the The sarch."

"What happened to them?" I asked.

"Valdis, and his predecessors, would burn the woods and salt the ashes," Ysbail told us. "Much of our world is desert."

Somehow, even given the menace of the woods here, I found the statement by Ysbail more chilling. I'd always thought that our world had held the monopoly on large-scale, man-made environmental disasters.

I noticed that Ysbail and Boltof seemed to be checking landmarks. The things they looked for were mostly invisible to me, though once or twice I could catch a glimpse of something— a pile of debris that could have been weathered asphalt, a dead piece of moss-covered wood that could have been an old Metroparks signpost, a mound of earth just rectangular enough to mark a man-made foundation.

Sometimes it was too easy to pretend that the Portal hadn't changed anything essential. I had spent most of the past decade avoiding the idea that the nature of my hometown had changed in a fundamental way. As we walked on, enveloped by the silent trees, I realized that the way I had been looking at things was wrong. The Portal, magic, the elves, the dragons, the mages— all of these things— I had seen them as simply additional layers on the city I had been covering all of my professional life. They were *additions*. As long as I saw them as separate from "my" city.

It wasn't until we broke into the clearing that it sank in exactly how far I'd had to

come. I stood in a woods that had, somehow, decided that mankind had not touched it for centuries, and had the power to rewrite its own history so that it was so. The land itself had changed, become something alien to me. The effect of the Portal wasn't just a modification, an adjustment to what was already there. It wasn't a demographic shift, like East Cleveland, or a flood of new investment, like Cleveland proper. It wasn't the introduction of a new species, or a new discipline, or a new kind of technology, or the effect of interference.

These woods had *changed*. The land I walked on wasn't the same as it had been a decade ago, the trees weren't the same, even the air I breathed wasn't the same.

And, when the scent of roses and woodsmoke returned, when we emerged into the clearing around Squire's Castle, I could see that the *castle* wasn't the same.

What I saw, lording it over the hillside, wasn't the gatehouse that Mr. Squire built in the nineteenth century. It wasn't the empty shell that had been used as a picnic shelter for the years before the Portal opened.

The castle had grown. The style had stayed the same, the stone walls still echoed an English baronial hall, but the walls had doubled in height, the turrets trebled and multiplied. The glow of firelight lit every window in a flickering orange, even in the upper stories where, in the original structure, there had been no floors. I saw shadows move and dance in the windows, as if the castle was occupied.

In the silence of the woods, I thought I could hear them. I heard songs in an unfamiliar tongue, heard the clatter of silverware. I could just barely perceive the perfume of an unearthly feast.

"What is this?" I whispered.

"The Folk," Friday responded. "The denizens of these woods. This is the home of their king. The center of their kingdom."

"How did they come through the Portal," I asked, "without us knowing?"

Ysbail shook her head. "They are closer to the magic," Ysbail explained. "Where it is, they are."

"But—" I started.

"Like the woods," Bolt of said. "The mana made the woods here, the woods made them, they made the castle."

Ysbail walked us up the hill, to the castle. She saw me hesitate and said, "We have permission."

She didn't say it in a reassuring manner.

We climbed the stone steps, the sounds of banqueting and revelry getting louder. As we mounted the steps I asked, "Are these our other mages?"

Bolt of chuckled.

Ysbail said, "The Folk *are* magic, they do not use spells as we do. They are

capricious."

We walked in through the open arched doorway, and I looked around to catch sight of the Folk themselves. It didn't happen. The moment we stepped through the arch, the sounds of revelry ceased; the odor of a banquet and of roses was gone on the wind. The silence of the woods descended again, and I looked through an entry hall that was empty of anyone.

"They're gone?"

"No," Ysbail said. "They remain, but they prefer to watch us rather than have us watch them." I could feel them watching us. I think I'd been feeling it since we'd entered the woods. "Okay, where are we going to do this?"

Ysbail looked up. "The turret."

I followed the others up a stone staircase that spiraled six stories up a tower that was three times as high as the original castle. The woodsmoke smell grew as we ascended. On the stone walls, ornate sconces held torches whose smoke curled straight up.

There was an odd feeling of anticipation in the air, as if the cold stone walls waited expectantly. We followed the stairs to a rough wood trapdoor in the ceiling that let us out on the roof of the turret. Outside, it was about thirty feet square, a wood floor hanging between waist-high castellations. About every five feet along the walls, a torch burned, casting a flickering orange light on the rough-hewn roof.

The wood had been covered with tracings in ash and salt, words in an alien language. The look was familiar to me from the glyphs on the casing of Cutler's bullet.

Three figures stood waiting for us. Two were elves whom I didn't know. The last was a human in a hooded robe. I could catch glimpses of the jaw of a disfigured face in the firelight, almost enough to recognize.

"No . . ." I whispered.

But the cloaked figure nodded in disagreement. "I'm afraid so." The man raised gloved, knobby hands and lowered the hood so I could see his face. He had once been handsome, and he still had a pair of innocent blue eyes that were as likely as not to send any girl this side of puberty into heat.

The problem was, now, that tiny twins of those blue eyes blinked at me from dozens of lumpy growths on his face.

"Morgan?"

"Maxwell," he said. "You're a sight for sore eyes."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

"YOU?" I said.

"Me," Morgan said. "You look surprised."

I shook my head. That was an understatement. "You're working with . . ." I waved at Ysbail, and at the elves.

Morgan smiled, and the way it twisted the tumors on his face made me turn away. "Is the distaste in your voice because you don't approve of the cause, or because you don't approve of a journalist being involved in this subject matter?"

"We do not have much time," Ysbail said. "Everyone get in place for the ritual."

Boltof led me to the center of the markings. I turned to Morgan, who had replaced his cowl. "You're a mage?"

"You know a better person to cover my beat?"

I kept shaking my head, trying to place this new bit of information in my world view. "You set me up," I said finally.

"I did toss your name in the ring. What? You thought you were Baldassare's first choice?"

No, maybe I wouldn't have been. We knew each other too well.

I looked around me, at the view past the torches. Beyond the immediate blackness of the trees, there was a glow from city streetlights. It was dim, though, as if I had stepped halfway out of the world.

"You're going to need to concentrate," Morgan said. "We've pulled out all the stops for the spell itself, but you have to tell it where to go."

"Why?" I asked him.

"Why am I part of this," Morgan said, "or why did I come back?"

"Take your pick."

"We really don't have the time. Let's just say the Morgan you knew was as much a fiction as Faust ever was, and if the possession infecting my body must progress to achieve our purpose, it's a price I'm willing to accept." His tone lowered. "Now, you need to imagine our destination. Make it clear in your mind."

I tried to do as he asked, closing my eyes and picturing the sanctum in the sublevels of City Hall's parking garage. I tried to mine all of my memory's resources for every small detail. The subliminal buzz of the single fluorescent fixture. The micron or so of concrete dust that marred the sheen of the table. The pebbled texture of the executive leather office chairs. The shape of the words carved into the concrete walls. The smell of confined air. The tang of exhaust fumes and oil. The feeling I felt through the soles of my feet when the access door slid shut.

Around me, the soft tones of a spoken ritual began. The language wasn't one designed for a human voice. The alien syllables wormed inside my ears as if they

were burrowing for a warm place to lay their eggs.

I was afraid of what was going to happen. For all my assurances to Baldassare, I didn't know a damn thing about what I was doing. All I understood about the spell that was about to be cast was that I was going to be in a position of channeling all the energy massed by the ritual.

And, in order to improve the success of the spell, there was going to be a lot of energy involved.

I pushed the fear away with images of arcane symbols etched in concrete.

The chanting continued, and it was a struggle to hang on to my memory of Rayburn's bunker. The words that filled the air around me threatened to fill every empty space in my brain. God only knew what the result would be if I allowed that to happen, and let my mind lock onto sounds without any concepts or connotations to them. Would a portal open? If so, to where? Could a portal be opened onto an abstraction?

I forced myself to think of the bunker. The feeling of the chair as I sat in it. The coolness of the still air. The smoothness of the table. The sound of dripping water.

An ache began behind my eyes, and spread through my sinuses into my jaw. I felt blood pulsing beneath my scalp, and the hair on my arms and legs bristled against my clothes. The air around me was no longer still. It carried the scent of electricity and ozone.

I screwed my eyes shut even tighter against the distractions. I didn't move, my muscles frozen in place for fear of disrupting the tenuous mental image. I imagined increasingly fine details of the room. The small cobweb I had seen at one end of the fluorescent light, the black husk of a dead insect suspended in it. The way the grain in the table's surface made a pattern somewhat like a human face near the end where Rayburn had taken his seat. The way the mechanism of the chair caught slightly when I had turned it to the right, and how the casters it rode on ground slightly with concrete dust caught in bearings designed for use on a quite different surface.

Something was rushing through me. I felt a vibration that seemed to originate in the core of my body, the marrow of my bones. It was as if my flesh now hung on a superstructure constructed out of an overloaded water main. My teeth hurt. Every muscle in my body began to contract against the force, tearing itself into a tiny ball. I felt the sensation of millions of tiny insects running across my skin. The sense unidirectional, originating in the soles of my feet, shooting upward. The insect feet became pins, then razors, then claws tearing my flesh upward, pulling it toward the sky, the same direction the vibrating pressure inside me was going.

There was a small crack in the veneer of the table, I remembered. Humidity, perhaps, had made the edge pull away from the rubber bumper that wrapped the edge of the tabletop. Above was the shine of mahogany grain under a light coating of dust, but for a small space, no wider than the base of my thumb, the veneer had separated allowing a view of the particle-board beneath. The top was dark, shiny, ordered—

but the true nature of the table, revealed by the flaw, was light, dull, and a chaos of wood splinters suspended in some sort of caked adhesive emulsion.

I collapsed, my legs giving way beneath me.

My hands had stuck to the arm of the chair, the skin peeling away from a surface that I realized was only vinyl that was textured to look like leather.

My breath came in gasps. My body shook, a seizure that slammed my legs, my arms, my head into the wooden floor. I couldn't feel the impact through everything else, but I heard the hollow thumps as my skull slammed into the wood.

Rust spots on the white reflective underside of the fluorescent—

Burning now, as if a torch had been taken to my trembling skin.

The glint off of the golden inscription beginning with the Hebrew character aleph—

The pulse of blood in my ears—

The chunk of the elevator's motor starting up—

Fingernails cutting into my palms—

The drip of water in the distance—

Blood—

Concrete—

Burning—

Flickering—

Choking—

Rayburn's face . . .

Suddenly, the pressure broke, so abruptly that I thought an artery had exploded, spilling all the pain and feeling, as well as what was left of my life, onto the ground. No more chanting, no more wind, no more hideous internal pressure. All that was left of my body was a burning ache and a terrible heavy fatigue.

The floor was cold and hard beneath me. I slowly unclenched my fists and took a few deep breaths.

The moment I tasted the cold, slightly stale air, I opened my eyes. Above me the world was twisted and distorted into a shrinking spherical reflection. I could look up into Ysbail's eyes and the sphere shrank, seeming to withdraw via a direction I couldn't perceive. Through the sphere came torchlight that illuminated the space where I found myself.

Concrete walls embossed with arcane inscriptions. A meeting table surrounded by executive office chairs. A single suspended fluorescent light fixture that was, at the moment, unlit.



Then the sphere was gone, and I lay on the concrete floor in total darkness.

I could have blacked out. The effort of what I had just done had sapped every ounce of my strength. It had tapped resources that I didn't know were there until I found them missing. The thought of not moving at all was tempting. I had done my bit, I only had to wait for Nesmith . . .

Of course, it probably wouldn't make much of an impression if she found me out cold on the floor, and it would probably blow my chance of talking to her without the possibility of Phillips overhearing or intervening. And that *was* why I was here.

I sat up slowly. My flesh felt so weak that it seemed the sheer weight of my skeleton would tear my bones free to clatter on the ground under me. My brain spun with a sick vertigo when I sat up, my mind tumbling in a viscous black liquid with no sense of up or down. My gut spasmed as I tried to heave up the contents of an empty stomach.

When the world stopped moving, somehow I was on my hands and knees. Spots darted in front of my eyes, as if I were squeezing them shut, but they were open—which I confirmed when I ran my hand over my face.

Pushing myself upright was like fighting hundred-pound weights draped across my shoulders. My knees threatened to buckle as I stumbled toward the table. My hand found it by slamming into the edge with a knife-sharp blow that felt as if it— in my weakened condition— could snap my bone.

Fortunately, my body's structural integrity hadn't been compromised by the spell, just my sense of it. I didn't suffer a compound fracture, just a numbed and bruised hand.

I leaned against the table and inched along until I bumped into one of the chairs.

I didn't want Nesmith to find me on the ground, but I lacked the strength to stand upright— even long enough to find the light switch. I slid into the chair feeling as if I only weighed fifty pounds, all held together with tissue paper.

I rubbed my hand; at some point during the ritual the dressings had come off the old wounds. My palms were moist, probably with my own blood.

I waited.

My one fear was that I was so close to collapse that I might lose consciousness before Nesmith met with me. Her reaction would probably be to hospitalize me under police guard, which would give Phillips an opportunity to finish the job that O'Malley started.

I couldn't leave this room until Nesmith had heard everything. Until I had got her to set up a meeting with Rayburn. If we could do it quickly enough, it wouldn't matter how secure it was, Phillips wouldn't have time to react.

Until then . . .

It felt as if I'd been sitting, waiting, for hours. The darkness made time expand, stretching out into an infinity of fatigue before and ahead of me. I might have blacked out again, but I had no way of telling in the unchanging environment.

Then an explosion of light washed the world with blinding whiteness. The light slammed into my eyes like a blow, grinding my retinas into the back of my skull. I blinked and turned away from the fluorescent that had come on.

I turned the chair toward the direction the elevator had been. I couldn't see the doors; my night vision had been assassinated by the light. But I could hear the whir of the elevator's motor starting up.

I could feel the pulse in my neck as I straightened in my seat. My fatigue was forgotten for the moment.

It seemed another hour after the motor started before the doors slid open, spilling light into the darkened corner of the chamber. The light backlit three silhouettes, just as before. With one exception: these silhouettes were different.

These silhouettes were also *wrong*.

None of them was short enough to be Nesmith's. Two were so tall and angular that they could only be elves.

The round one in the center was the most wrong of the bunch. The trio stepped forward and Adrian Phillips walked into the circle of light thrown by the fluorescent. Behind him, the elevator doors slid slowly shut.

"It's almost a shame to have to kill you," he said by way of greeting.

## Chapter Thirty

I WAS so drained that I couldn't even muster up a decent response. Somehow, Phillips had caught wind of the plan and had beat Nesmith here. I should have been shocked, afraid, at least a little pissed off. There was only an empty hollow inside me where my emotions should have been. I squinted at Phillips' sweaty, pudgy face, and all I could think of was at least it was over.

"No comment?" he inquired. "That's ironic, don't you think?"

"Nesmith?" I asked. I don't even know why I said it. Reflex, I think. I was in some sort of psychic free fall, and I wasn't really aware of the meaning of the word until after I spoke it.

"I regret she wasn't able to make it. Fortunately, I was able to intercept your contact with her."

*Obviously.*

I looked at his escort. The elves were familiar to me. Caledvwelch looked a little more gaunt, and the one I knew only as Elf Three had his Glock out. *What's going through your mind, Caledvwelch?*

"Where is she?" I asked, closing my eyes.

Phillips' words washed over me, leaving little of themselves behind. "Mr. Maxwell, since you've obviously become an agent of Faust's, or at least you're under his influence, it is only prudent that the Safety Director send trained officers of the SPU to bring you to her."

I shook my head, smiling. "At your suggestion?"

"You're a smart man, Maxwell." He shook his head and turned away.

His turning away pulled me out of my stupor, at least to the point where I could feel my own anger. "Why are you here?" I sputtered. My jaw ached and the muscles felt slack on my face, slurring my words. "Let your boys do the dirty work." I pushed myself upright, and the chair slid aside and upended.

Phillips turned around.

"You get off on it, don't you?"

"Maxwell—"

"The idea you can order someone killed gives you a raging hard-on, doesn't it?"

Phillips' hand was white and pudgy, and came at the end of a flabby swing that had more inertia than muscle behind it. It still managed to cave in my nose and make me topple backward. I sprawled at the foot of Phillips' bulk, his gray eyes glaring down on me.

If he expected the blow to shut me up, he was disappointed. Somehow the shock of the impact seemed to shake the remains of the stupor from my brain. "That's why you had to be on that boat. You had to see the dragon burn—"

Phillips shook his head. "*No.*"

"Bone Daddy— you look at the autopsy photos? You get a rush when you realize you did that?"

His foot connected with the most sensitive part of my lower anatomy, and that did shut me up. It wasn't pain so much as a burning numbness and a paralyzing clenching of the muscles that bent me double. I didn't have any idea what I was doing, or even if there was some kernel of strategy in it.

I think I might have just stopped giving a shit.

"You don't *know*." He leaned over and I could smell alcohol on his breath. "I was given the responsibility for this thing. A trust. To manage it, to support the mayor, to benefit the city. I could not let them do this thing. *Could not!*" I must have turned away, because a pudgy hand grabbed my jaw and forced my face toward his. My nose had swollen shut now, and I was forced to breathe through my mouth.

"God forbid we have any competition," I whispered between ragged breaths.

"You naïve bastard. You think that was it? No, Aloeus brought the Portal here for one reason. If he had achieved his goal, it wouldn't be competition, it would be the end. The end of economic recovery, the end of Mayor Rayburn's administration." His hand clamped on my jaw as he leaned forward. "It would be the end of the Portal. He had the power to shut it down, and once another existed, nothing would prevent him from doing so."

"You're trying to justify murder," I said.

"Aloeus was a traitor to the city, a realm that he helped create." Phillips shook his head and let my chin go. My head slammed back onto the concrete floor. "The mage was a traitor." He stood back up, wiping his hands on his suit. "So are you."

"So is anyone who threatens your private fiefdom—"

He shook his head. "This is Mayor Rayburn's city, not mine."

"He knows what you're doing?"

"The mayor's constrained by politics. It would prevent him from acting in his own, or the city's best interest." Phillips shook his head. "No, Maxwell, I do not like the necessities of the past few days. My responsibilities forced them on me and I would not be worthy of that trust if I did not act."

"A power trip, and you get to pretend to be noble at the same time," I spat. "You're living a fascist wet dream."

"Enough. Despite your accusations, I'm not here to relish the violence. I'm simply present to make certain that," he looked at the elves, "*this time*, the job isn't botched."

"Your whole world view is botched." I said, even though Phillips didn't seem to be listening anymore. "You think that killing me will accomplish anything? You've gone so far over the top that you'll never be able to keep it quiet."

"If you would finish the job here," Phillips turned to the elf with the Glock.

This was not how I'd planned things. For all my romantic notions about the press, I never saw dying for my profession as a particularly glamorous way to go. Several thoughts ran through my mind. First was a nice little daydream about me overpowering the elf with the gun, a slight possibility when I was in perfect shape. Then I thought about the consequences of killing someone in this inner sanctum. Bone Daddy had been concerned about it disrupting his magical environment. Would this place's more permanent nature make it more or less disruptive? I also idly wondered who Bea would get to replace me on my beat. It'd be ironic if Morgan could land the job.

My musings lasted long enough for me to realize that the fatal bullet wasn't immediately forthcoming.

Caledvwilch held his hand on top of the other elf's Glock. "I am afraid we cannot,

Mr. Phillips."

*Okay, what's happening here?*

"What do you mean? You took an oath to serve this city. That's supposed to mean something to you."

His posture and tone didn't change, but somehow I could tell that Caledvwelch didn't like the implication. "Do not fault our honor, sir. We serve the mayor and the city. We follow the commands of our liege."

Phillips waved toward me. "Your 'liege,' O'Malley, one of the most faithful cops in this city, is dead because of him—"

"There is no honor in killing an unarmed man."

I chuckled and Phillips whipped around to face me.

"I guess you get to do it yourself—"

Phillips grabbed the Glock from Elf Three, and aimed it toward me with a shaking hand. I tensed as he squeezed the trigger, even though nothing much happened. He didn't know enough to switch off the safety. He grimaced in frustration, and I was halfway between pissing my pants and busting up in laughter.

"Sir," Caledvwelch said quietly.

"Goddamn gun."

"Sir."

"How're you supposed to—"

"*Sir!*" The act of raising his voice erased every other sound from Caledvwelch's presence. It was a sound of such clear crystalline fury that it felt as if the concrete walls should crack just from hearing it. Caledvwelch held his own weapon on Phillips. His arm was arrow straight, and his hand was not shaking.

Phillips turned to face him, shock and anger rolling across his face like waves over a breakwater. "What is the meaning of this?"

*"Put the gun down."*

The sound of Caledvwelch's voice dried my mouth and made me push away from Phillips, the focus of it. Phillips sounded truly amazed. "He's the enemy. You know that. You serve—"

"We serve the Honorable Mayor David Theodore Rayburn. Our honor, our service, our duty became his when his servant, our liege, was taken from this life."

Phillips nodded.

I got it, what Caledvwelch was saying. Phillips didn't

"You see, then," Phillips said. "He's a threat to the mayor. To the city. He has to be stopped." He turned toward me and steadied his own gun.

"Put the gun down, Mr. Phillips."

Phillips shook his head. "We're serving the mayor here. You can't interfere." He found the safety at last, and cocked the weapon.

The gunshot was like a cannon going off in the enclosed space.

I could smell it, an acrid burning, as a hole erupted in Phillips' forehead. Phillips collapsed as if his body had turned into a sack of so much wet cement. He fell across my legs as blood sprayed from the hole in his skull.

"Shit," I pushed away from the corpse, pulling my legs back and trying to get clear of the spreading pool of blood. For a moment, everything was still except the blood. Even the gun smoke seemed to hang suspended in the air, frozen as if in anticipation.

The hair on my arms began standing on end.

Magic is a fluid thing, I've been told. It has eddies and currents. It follows the curve of reality, finding gravity in points of complexity, order, and ritual. It can concentrate in places, objects, even people. While we manufacture our own rituals to manipulate it, ultimately it is its own master.

I could feel the potential filling the air, like a static charge, like the hum of an overcharged transformer. There was even a smell to it, a slightly sour, tinny odor. The elves were stepping back from the body.

Phillips had fallen inside the central circle. The perimeter was etched in gold, embedded in the concrete. The blood spread across the concrete until it touched the circle.

The warning from Bone Daddy crossed my mind, "*The mojo's been building here a couple hours. You break the pattern, boy, and it'll be like someone shoved a stick of dynamite up your ass.*"

There was an arc when the blood touched the circle. The sound was somewhere between an electrical sizzle and a relay being thrown. A blue-green light began to radiate from the metal of the circle, sweeping around it in pulsing waves from where Phillips' blood touched it. The greenish light spread to the glyphs etched in the floor, in the wall, and from details I had never seen before in the ceiling.

The fluorescent light exploded in a cloud of sparks and dropped, sputtering, onto the meeting table. By that time there was enough of the glow to see.

I tried to push myself up, but Caledvwlch shook his head, "No." He may have said something, but the room was filled with the sound of electrical sizzling. Arcs leaped from the circle to the inscriptions, and back. Tendrils of blue-green energy erupted from the concrete walls, like lightning, but smooth, curved, and slow. The energy had a terrible feeling of potential. Just looking at the glowing snakes gave me an impression of energies an order of magnitude above what had passed through me when we cast the spell that had brought me here.

Caledvwlch was warning me to stay in the circle. Inside the glowing ring, free of the

display that tore the air apart outside. We seemed to be in a bubble that didn't quite reach the ceiling. Arcs and tendrils slid over an invisible dome around us, sometimes making slow-motion splashes against it.

Closer to me, Phillips' blood was sizzling. The pool of blood had turned black and was charring. Where the blood had touched the circle, the gold wasn't glowing. I could see green filaments of energy, slipping across that dead-black break, like probing roots.

The edges of the bloodstain started burning, jets of flame reached around from the edge of the circle and followed the now black stain. When the flames reached Phillips, they raced around the edges of the corpse like a chalk outline from hell.

The green energy was slower; it flowed out from the break in the circle, covering the black stain in a net of crackling light. It reached Phillips' head as the flames fully encircled him.

The green followed the blood; it crawled up the side of his head, the flesh charring and releasing smoldering jets of flame underneath its touch. It spilled into the head wound.

When it reached the interior of Phillips' skull, something fundamental changed in the room. The random electrical sounds were replaced by the sound of a great wind. The filaments that reached into Phillips grew, merged, became a thick, pulsing, green conduit. It began racing by, whipping up and down like a garden hose out of control— though the motion was reversed, the energy flowing *into* the stationary hole in Phillips' skull, the source whipping around the surface of the invisible dome around us, sucking power into itself.

The body jerked.

Caledwylch and the other elf had got on the ground themselves, staying out of the way of the whipping tendrils of energy that fed into Phillips. The circle seemed no protection now; power arced from outside, splitting into several sources, all feeding into Phillips' skull.

The body shook, the back arching and the limbs flailing in a seizure. The skin was turning black.

Phillips may have been dead, but he screamed. The sound of the prolonged cry drowned out everything. An agonized keening that went on long after living breath would have expired.

His back snapped back, and suddenly, impossibly, Phillips was on his knees. His arms flung forward and up, as if to embrace the energy spilling into his skull. His head bent and twisted side to side almost too fast to follow. Fire ate his clothes as smoke rose from the exposed parts of his carbonized skin.

Every scrap of the green energy fed itself into the corpse until all light in the room died. For a few moments the darkness was complete. The room was silent except for a quiet sighing. In a few moments, I could see a ruddy light, a crackling glow that

seemed to form an outline where Phillips' body knelt.

I distinctly heard the words, "*Oh, my God.*"

It was Phillips' voice.

Then came the explosion.

An eruption of red light, fire, and smoke tore from the remains of Phillips' body. The light shot upward, tearing a hole in the ceiling as a cloud of tar-black smoke unrolled in its wake. I was still on the ground, but the force of the blast pushed me back about four or five feet, spraying me with burning embers whose nature I really didn't want to think about.

I lay there, stunned and coughing, as sensations from the real, normal world began leaking in. Above me I could hear the sound of dozens of car alarms. I could also hear the spray of water from the sprinkler system. Somewhere a klaxon sounded a fire alarm, and as I looked up, through watering eyes, I could see the mercury-white glow of emergency lights shining from the ceiling— more exactly, from where the ceiling had been.

"Mr. Maxwell?"

I looked up and saw Caledvwlch standing there, looking unmoved despite the fact that his cheap cop suit was charred, stained, and spattered with blood.

"Yeah?"

"Perhaps we should talk."

It was like emerging from Dante's Inferno. The elves had to help me up out of the hole; the elevators were out of service. They escorted me through the levels of the parking garage, the lower two levels awash with water, courtesy of the sprinkler system. Another two floors up, and we passed fire crews going in the other direction. Another floor, and a trio of uniformed cops met us, but Caledvwlch flashed his badge and we continued on our way.

"Phillips was a traitor to his liege," Caledvwlch told me on the way up.

"No argument here," I said. My voice was hoarse and ragged, and all I wanted to do was to lie down. My eyes burned, and my body felt as if it had aged about thirty years. My clothes smelled of smoke and ozone, and my shoes were covered in blood, causing the soles to stick to the concrete as I walked.

"Our oath was to O'Malley," Caledvwlch continued. "Perhaps that was an error. But we served until he died."

I nodded. "So why—" I shook my head. "I have no objection about what you did. But why intervene for me, and not for Bone Daddy? I presume the situations were similar."



"No," Caledvwlch said. "O'Malley had our fealty. Our duty was to follow him. Anything he required, we had to give. That is the nature of the duty." He looked down on me and said flatly, "Were he alive, and ordered me, you would not still be living."

"Then I guess I'm glad he died."

"As am I," Caledvwlch said. "

"Hey? Isn't that a little traitorous on your part?"

"A traitor is defined by acts, not thoughts. My duty required me to obey O'Malley, not to love him." Caledvwlch looked across at Elf Three, who nodded solemnly.

"The killing of the mage was an evil, criminal act, that we were powerless to prevent. Our fealty takes precedence over any other oaths."

"Including an oath to uphold the law," I said. "You went through the standard cop initiation, didn't you?"

"Yes. But our honor places men before abstracts."

"Yeah," I said, "but, as they kept telling us in civics class, this is a nation of laws, not men."

"That may be so," Caledvwlch said. "But I have told you, we are not so easily changed."

"So what happened to you guys after O'Malley died?"

"Mr. Phillips did not understand—"

"Obviously."

"—he assumed that since we belonged to O'Malley, and O'Malley belonged to him, that we became his."

We walked up the ramp to the sounds of sirens and red-and-blue flashing lights. The sky was still black above us. I noticed that a few streetlights were out, and that a patch of lawn on the park to the north of Lakeside, next to City Hall, had turned black and ash-like. In the distance, the permanent clouds swirled over the Portal, and it might have been my imagination, but I thought the clouds had a greenish inner glow to them.

"You obviously didn't."

"Our fealty is an inviolate bond that cannot be severed, and certainly cannot be traded. We must give such loyalty, it cannot be taken. Mr. Phillips' attitude, that we were employees who owed him the same duty that we owed O'Malley, was an insult. The only man who holds such a claim to us now is the man who allowed us our pledge in the first place."

"Mayor Rayburn?"

"The ruler of our adopted land."

I shook my head and looked up at the sky. No stars, too many lights. "Why did you wait until Phillips had a gun on me?"

Caledvwelch was quiet, and I looked down and saw a contemplative look on his face. His pastel skin was alternately rose and aqua under the flashes from the emergency vehicles. "Dare I say that we have learned some things here of law and politics? Assassination is not a viable way to remove your liege's enemies. The act poses more threat than the individual could. But if such a man dies in the commission of a criminal act—deadly force is appropriate in a case where police or civilian life is in immediate danger. No matter who the man is." He looked over at me and might have smiled. "As you said, this is a land of laws, not of men."

A couple of paramedics came over. "Sir, I think we should look at you."

"No, I'm all right." I shook my head— a little too fast, it made me dizzy.

"No, you are not," said Elf Number Three. It wasn't until that point that I realized that he had been supporting me during the walk out of the parking garage. He made his point by ever so slightly lowering his arm from my shoulders. My knees felt my full weight and began to buckle.

The paramedics saw me start to collapse and got on either side of me. Caledvwelch and the nameless elf let them take me. By the time they got me to a gurney, my mind had already spun away, eager to be free of the effort of controlling my body and keeping myself awake.

My last thought was that Caledvwelch might not have the wrong idea about how to deal with this new world we shared.

## Epilogue

IT was five weeks after I got out of the hospital before I returned to Hunting Valley. It took me that long to get the various facets of my life back in some semblance of order. This not only meant giving depositions to the cops, to the Feds, and writing my own stories for the *Press*— suitably mauled by three layers of editorial oversight— it involved insurance claims on my condo, replacing my entertainment center, and dealing with building management to get a contractor to fix the damage. It also included a week of vacation and a long needed flight to San Francisco, where I got to take my daughter to a concert.

It was mid-September now, fall was starting to nip at the air, and the story of Phillips' little conspiracy had begun fading. The elves did Rayburn a favor in more ways than one by killing him. Not only was Phillips gone— a good thing in and of itself— but the lack of a warm body meant no trial, and less prolonged coverage. It also gave the administration a convenient scapegoat on whom to hang every query the Feds were on to. Phillips was in charge of the Portal, and any unpleasantness associated with the Portal, from prisoner dumping to disappearing homeless people

could be blamed on his criminal mismanagement of the department.

Hearings were being held, but with everyone's cards on the table, it was hard for the Council to stick anything on Rayburn. Everything had Phillips' prints on it, and it was evidence of Rayburn's political mastery that he had co-opted the elvish cause. Somehow he had got on the other side of the issue, and there were talks about constructing a reservation out in Lake Erie.

The Feds had lost the rhetorical war once Ysbail held a press conference at City Hall.

Of course, Phillips' position in the administration was still vacant. The Council had to go through all its hearings on the Port Authority before Rayburn could fill the job. The word was that there weren't a hell of a lot of people willing to step anywhere near Phillips' bloody shoes.

However, any good newsman has his sources, and one of my better placed sources gave me a short list of Phillips' possible replacements. At the top of the list of possible candidates was a familiar name.

One of many reasons I decided to pay my old acquaintance a visit once my own life was in order.

It was funny, how the approach to his estate seemed a little less intimidating than it had before. The mansion seemed a little smaller, the Tudor architecture less grand.

I suppose it was the memory of Galweir. Baldassare's realm suffered by comparison.

He was sitting on the patio again, the barbecue off. He stood up as I climbed out of my Volkswagen. His calculated smile and easy manner seemed more obviously artificial to me now. Looking at him, I knew he wasn't the one who had changed.

"Kline, good to see you."

I nodded, but I didn't take his hand. "I wanted to talk to you," I said. "I saw you were on the short list to replace Phillips."

"I shouldn't comment on that." His smile said that he thought otherwise. "I don't even know if I'll take the job."

"Oh, you'll take it."

The smile lost a little of itself. For all his political savvy, I don't think he understood, until that moment, why I had come here. The fact that the smile stayed at all meant he was still too cocksure to care. "Okay, shall we drop the pretense? Why are you here?"

I smiled myself, and shook my head. Baldassare was the only person here engaging in pretense. "I have a story and I wanted to give you a chance to comment."

He looked me up and down, measuring me again. Perhaps he was trying to figure out what it was I wanted.

"You've followed the stories about Aloeus?" I asked.

"Where are you going with this?"

"The public has just about sainted him. A martyr for nonhuman civil rights. With the elves stumping for Rayburn, the Feds are backpedaling so fast that you'd think *they* killed the dragon."

"Dave's always been adept at seizing political capital."

"All of which has made your own political capital rise."

Baldassare shrugged, "I didn't become involved with the elves for political gain—"

I shook my head. "No. That is *exactly* why you became involved."

"There's no call for—"

"Aloeus was no saint leading his people to the promised land, no matter how we'd like to read it that way, or how the pundits would like to spin it that way. Aloeus was a *dragon*. Altruism is a human virtue, a virtue of a society."

Baldassare shook his head. "His actions speak otherwise."

"To whom? My experience with Phillips has taught me that you cannot ascribe human motives and values to an alien creature. But I'm sure you understood Aloeus' motives perfectly."

"Did I?"

"Aloeus wasn't *escaping* Valdis. He wanted to *replace* him."

Baldassare nodded. "Interesting, but I've noticed you haven't printed that."

"Some editorial decisions are out of my hands."

"Come," he gestured toward the river. "Let's walk."

I followed him, waiting for some reaction.

When we had gone a way from the house, Baldassare asked, "Why does this disturb you, then? So Aloeus didn't have pure motives by human standards. He wasn't human. He made a cool decision that he could achieve some advantage, creating a Portal so that the elves could escape persecution. Would you condemn him because he saved the beings he sought to have serve him?"

"You've mistaken me."

"How so?"

"I don't condemn Aloeus," I told him. I turned around and faced him. "I condemn you."

To his credit he didn't seem surprised. "I suppose you have an explanation for this?"

"How did Phillips know?"

"Know what?"

"Know *anything*." I said. "The man was a fanatic. A loose cannon. He was inept and stupid. Seriously prone to overreaction. Aloeus hadn't changed allegiances since the Portal opened. Someone had to have tipped Phillips off that Aloeus was planning a new Portal somewhere." I looked over the river and wondered what it had looked like when Aloeus had flown over this river. I wondered if what had attracted him was the presence of a like-minded individual.

"Are you accusing me?"

"Bone Daddy gave me a message from his Oracle. 'A villain of deeds, a villain of thoughts, and a villain of words.' "

"You aren't expecting me to take this seriously?"

I didn't care if he did.

"Deeds was O'Malley, the one who'd kill me— but Bone called him the least of my opposition. Thoughts, twisted as they were, that was Phillips. The mastermind plotting my undoing."

"And I am words?"

"Fits you like a glove. You're a master of the glad hand, the spin, the rhetorical twist. You can talk someone into knots, and you could certainly give Phillips his share of encouragement. In the words of the Oracle, 'with only a well chosen word he will destroy one man, or empires unborn.' "

"You give me a lot of credit."

"How did Phillips know enough to ambush me?"

"He had mages—"

I shook my head. "No, he didn't use a mage to zero in on me. If he had, he would have been ambushing me at Squire's Castle, or trying to. He couldn't have found me in the 'war room.' The place was designed to be completely impenetrable to any *known* magical force. By definition, if Phillips or his mages had access to any arcane knowledge, they warded the place against it."

Baldassare had stopped smiling.

"He knew. He knew because you briefed him."

"I hope you don't intend to print this." For the first time in my life, I heard a hint of threat creep into Baldassare's voice. At one point that would have intimidated me. Not right now, though.

"It got to you, didn't it?" I asked. "Being so close to the administration, and losing control of the Portal to a dim bulb like Phillips."

"You think I had a dragon murdered over a civil service job?"

"Power." I said. "It is all about power. You joined in with Ysbail and the rest not out

of altruism but because Aloeus had become closer to the administration than you were. I suspect you relished the idea that Aloeus' goal would marginalize Phillips as he had marginalized you."

"Then why would I have the dragon killed?"

"Because Aloeus wasn't human," I said. "For all your Machiavellian political manipulations, the dragon was a colder, more manipulative motherfucker than you could ever hope to be. You never even realized that you were the one being used. I suspect that you believed you were to hold some powerful position when Aloeus opened his new Portal. Maybe the chief liaison between his new kingdom and the rest of the planet. Am I warm?"

Baldassare was silent.

"Was it when the land deal was finalized? Did it start sinking in then? You were dealing with a creature who only understood gratitude and loyalty as tools to influence people."

He shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Don't I? Aloeus had decided, like Rayburn, that he didn't need you anymore. You decided you didn't need him anymore."

"Did you come here expecting some sort of confession?"

"No."

"You're not going to get one."

"I didn't think I would."

"You don't believe you're going to get any of that garbage into print."

I laughed. "I can't substantiate any of this. And I know enough not to push a story that'll be pulled out from under me. I know if you could get my paper to assign me to a story, you can get them to pull one just as easily."

"Why are you here, then?"

"You ever imagine it?"

"What?"

"The last few moments. The plunge to the ground. Your body shredding to ribbons around you—"

Baldassare snorted, shook his head, and turned away, leaving me by the edge of the river. Very cool. I'll give him that.

"You know what the worst part would be?"

He kept walking. Apparently he was tired of our little game.

I yelled after him. "You know the worst part?"

He stopped.

"Seeing it coming," I told his back. "Seeing it coming and not being able to do a damn thing about it."

He turned around very slowly.

"You wanted to know why I'm here?" I said.

He stood there facing me. One of the most powerful men in the city. And I saw a twitch.

I smiled. "You betrayed a powerful group of *very* patient people."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just wanted to see your face when you realized that." I turned around and started walking to my car.

He was silent until I'd almost made it to my car.

"Powerful . . . patient . . ." Hearing Baldassare trip over a word was worth more than several thousand expressions. "What did you tell them. *What did you tell them?*"

I got into my Volkswagen and slammed the door. He still stood, halfway between his house and the river. He repeated, "*What did you tell them?*"

I lowered the window and called out to him, "Ask them when they catch up with you, in a year or so. Detective Sergeant Maelgwyn Caledvwlch can be quite the conversationalist."

As I drove away, I left the window open so that I could smell the hint of early fall in the wind.

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