

WHEN THE STUDENT IS READY

by Tanya Huff

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THE first time Isabel saw him, he was rummaging in the garbage can out in front of The Second Cup at Bloor and Brunswick. He was wearing a filthy "I love New York" T-shirt, a pair of truly disgusting khaki Dockers barely hanging from skinny hips, and what looked like brand-new, high-top black canvas sneakers of a kind that hadn't been made since the sixties—at least not according to her father who moaned about it every time he had to buy trainers. His dirty-blond hair and full beard were streaked with gray, as well as real dirt, and both skinny arms were elbow deep in cardboard coffee cups and half-eaten snack food.

She couldn't take her eyes off of him, which was just *too* weird. Having lived her entire life—almost seventeen years—in downtown Toronto, she'd seen street people before. Seen them, avoided them, given them her loose change if she was feeling flush and they weren't too smelly or too old. This guy was nothing special.

Thumbs hooked under her backpack straps, she took a step closer. Considering the heavy, after-school foot traffic, he had rather a large open area around him. Which wasn't at all surprising when the breeze shifted.

Did she know him? Was he like some old friend of her dad's who'd fallen on hard times? Breathing shallowly through her mouth, Isabel tried to recognize a familiar feature under all the dirt.

As if drawn by her regard, he rose up out of the garbage and turned, what she could see of his face wearing an expression of extreme puzzlement.

"Half a Starbuck's apricot square will last forty-six hours and seven minutes without going moldy," he said. "A muffin..." Glancing into the garbage, he shook his head. Then he looked up again, locking bloodshot gray eyes on hers. "There isn't much time."

Isabel could actually feel the hair rise on the back of her neck. It was a totally gross feeling. Pulling a handful of change out of her pocket, she thrust it toward him. "Here, buy a *fresh* muffin."

The two-dollar coin caught his attention. He plucked it off her palm, closed his right eye, and held it up to his left. "Two or not two. That is the question."

The coin disappeared.

She'd been watching the coin. Had almost seen it slide sideways into nothing. Had almost *recognized* the movement. She thought she heard something growl. A quick look around—no dogs. When she turned back to her street, he was in exactly the same position he'd been in when she'd turned away. "So, do

you want the rest of this money or not?"

He shrugged and held out his hand.

Isabel dropped the change in his palm, careful not to touch anything, and hurried away. *Maybe Dad's right. Maybe I should start taking taxis home from school.*

"Dad? You home?" She didn't expect him to be home, not at four thirty on a Tuesday, not on a day that Mrs. Gerfinleo was in, but it never hurt to ask.

Shrugging out of backpack and blazer, she dropped them on the floor, kicked off her sensible black school shoes, picked up her backpack, and headed for her bedroom. By the time she got out of the shower, her blazer was hanging brushed and pressed on the door to the walk-in closet and her newly shined shoes were aligned neatly in their cubby.

Grinning, she threw on jeans and a T-shirt and made her way to the kitchen for her biweekly lecture on how clothing didn't pick itself up.

The kitchen was as empty as the rest of the condo.

"Mrs. G.?"

A noise on the terrace, the sound of furniture being moved, caught her attention.

Well, duh. Mrs. G. was out watering the plants.

"Mrs..." Her greeting trailed off, leaving her standing silently in the open doorway staring at the biggest crow she'd ever seen. Perched on the back of a rattan chair, head cocked, it stared intently at her out of a brilliant yellow eye. And it was staring *at her*—not just in her general direction the way most birds did.

"What?"

In reply, it dropped the biggest streak of bird shit she'd ever seen down the back of the chair.

"Too gross! Go on, get out of here!" Flapping a hand at it, she added an emphatic, "Scram!"

Instead of flying away, it dropped down onto the terrace and hopped toward her.

"I don't think so, bird." Stepping back, she slammed the door in its face.

It stopped, glared up at her, ruffled its feathers into place, and said... well, it didn't say anything exactly. It cawed like crows did, but for a moment, Isabel was certain—almost certain—it had called her a stuck-up bitch.

"Okay. Low blood sugar. Definitely time for a snack."

Wherever she'd been, Mrs. G. had to be back in the kitchen by now.

She wasn't. But this time, Isabel saw the note.

Bella: Mr. Gerfinleo called from the emergency so I have to leave early. There was an accident with the

forklift. Don't worry, he's okay if you don't count the broken leg. Your supper is in the refrigerator in the stone casserole. Ninety minutes at 350 degrees, then grate some of the parmesan on top. Tell your father, I'll call him later when I know.

Well, that explained why the condo seemed so empty. It was.

About to peer into the casserole, Isabel paused. If Mrs. G. had left early, who'd picked up her clothes?

Clothing didn't pick itself up.

She saw him the second time on her way to Gregg's Ice Cream. Seven o'clock, her dad still wasn't home, and half a dozen questions kept chasing themselves around in her head. If anything could take the place of answers, it was sweet cream on a sugar cone with sprinkles.

Her streeter was standing outside the Royal Ontario Museum, inside the security fence, inside the garden for that matter, both hands pressed flat against a floor-to-ceiling window, staring in at the Asian temple. His wardrobe had grown by the addition of a mostly shiny black jacket with the logo for Andrew Lloyd Webber's CATS embroidered across the back. Nobody but her seemed to have noticed him, but he did have the whole poor-and-homeless cloak of invisibility thing going.

About to cross to the southwest side of Queen's Park—the museum's corner—Isabel stepped back up onto the curb and crossed to the north side of Bloor instead. When she then crossed west, four lanes of Bloor Street were between them.

It didn't matter.

As she drew level with him, her streeter turned and looked directly at her.

"Time is not an illusion, no matter what they say. Spare some change for a cup of coffee, miss. We need to start soon." He didn't shout, he didn't bellow, he just made his declaration in a quiet conversational voice.

She shouldn't have been able to hear him.

Then a transport drove between them. Caught by the red light, the trailer, decorated with a hundred paintings of closed eyes, completely blocked her view of the other side of the street. Isabel crouched down, but a pair of sedans in the next lane over blocked that view, too. When she stood, the painted eyes were open, the irises a deep, blood red. As the transport pulled away, she thought she saw them blink.

The lawn at the ROM was empty except for half a dozen pigeons milling about like they'd lost something.

"Extra sprinkles," she decided, picking up her pace.

The best ice cream in the city was of less comfort than usual. She still needed answers. The light was on in her father's den when she got home.

"Hey, Dad?"

He pushed his laptop away and turned to face her, waiting expectantly.

"Have you..."

He was a good dad, the best dad—even if he did have a tendency to date men who weren't ready for commitment— but Isabel knew with a cold hard certainty that he couldn't help her now.

"...heard from Mrs. G?"

If he realized that wasn't the question she'd begun, he didn't let on. "As a matter of fact, I have. She won't be in until Monday; Mr. Gerfinleo is going to need her at home. Will you be all right?"

"Me?" Did the weirdness show on her face? "Why?"

His brows dipped. "Because I've still got to leave for New York tomorrow morning, and I'll be gone until Friday afternoon."

Oh, yeah. New York. "Right. I forgot."

"You'll be on your own." He sounded less than convinced that it was a good idea.

"For less than three whole days." Isabel rolled her eyes. "I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't have a boyfriend to bring over, I'm almost seventeen—even if I eat nothing but crap—which I won't—I'll survive and, as long as I avoid Mrs. Harris, no one's going to call The Children's Aid Society on you."

"I don't know. Perhaps you should go stay with your Uncle Joe."

"Uncle Joe thinks I should be allowed to get my belly button pierced."

He winced. "On second thought, you'll be safer here."

Four long strides took her to where she could bend and kiss her father's cheek, patting him on the shoulder in what she hoped was a comforting manner. "Have a good trip. I'll be fine."

She had no close friends among the girls at school, no one she could call and say, "Do you feel like something weird's about to happen?"

That left only one person. Isabel reached out for the phone. It slapped into her palm, and she actually had her finger poised above the numbers before she managed to stop herself. No. Things would have to get a whole lot worse before she called her mother.

Which was when she realized that the phone had been across the room on the bed.

Her fingers tightened around the red plastic. That was not normal. Hearing crows talk was not normal. Normal people's clothes didn't hang themselves up. Normal people didn't have street people talk to them across four lanes of traffic.

"Normal people," she told her reflection, "would be way more freaked about this, but I'm not. Does that make me not normal people?"

Her reflection looked normal enough.

She saw him the third time through the window of Dr. Chow's chemistry class. He was shuffling up and down on the sidewalk in front of the school. She was supposed to be studying ionization constants.

"Ms. Peterson?"

Isabel jerked her attention in off the street to find Dr. Chou and most of the class staring at her expectantly.

"Le Chatelier's principle, Ms. Peterson."

The blackboard rippled and she was staring at the back of Mrs. Bowen teaching Classical Literature next door. And then it *wasn't* Mrs. Bowen. And then she realized it was about to turn around.

That would be bad.

Very bad. Its eyes would be a deep blood red.

I'm *s*going to die .

The blackboard reappeared so quickly, the front of the classroom picked up a faint fog of chalk dust.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe and then the moment passed and Dr. Chou was still waiting for an answer she didn't have. "Um, I'm guessing it's not the nice old man who was head of the school where Le Chatelier went as a boy?"

The class broke into appreciative giggles.

"Good guess. Loss of three points for being clever. Can anyone tell me the correct answer?"

Someone could. Isabel paid no attention to who . Her streeter was sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk, shoulders slumped in apparent exhaustion.

He was still there, fifty-five minutes later when the final bell rang. Pushing past a small clump of fellow seniors, she hurried toward him.

"Hey, Peterson."

It was an Ashley. Or maybe a Britney. One of the highlights and high hems crowd, anyway. Experience having taught her that ignoring them did no good, she turned.

"I'm so glad to see you finally got yourself a boyfriend." A toss of long, blonde hair behind one slender shoulder. "What *is* that aftershave he's wearing? Or is it Eau *detoilet* ?"

Isabel's lip curled. "Up yours."

Ashley—or maybe Britney—jerked, eyes wide. "You're such a total loser," she sneered, but the insult didn't have the usual vicious energy behind it. Tugging at her kilt, she turned her attention back to her friends.

Isabel had to stand directly in front of him before he noticed her. "You did that. Stopped that . . . thing."

He nodded.

"You were waiting for it. How did you know it was going to be there?"

"It was drawn to your power."

"My power?"

He smiled then, showing incongruously white teeth. "The youngest is always the most powerful."

"The youngest?"

"Youngest wizard."

She wasn't even surprised by how little surprise she felt. "You keep saying there isn't time. Time for what?"

"To teach you before the test."

Uh-huh. A test. "Is that what that... thing is? Was?"

"Spare some change?"

Isabel slapped her hands together an inch in front of his nose. "Hey! Let's maintain focus here!" He jerked back, his eyes clearing. "Is that... thing, the test?"

"No. It just wants your power."

"Great." A hundred new questions joined the earlier half dozen. She settled on the most mundane. "What's your name?"

His brow furrowed. "I have names."

"Good. Pick one."

"Leonardo."

"di Caprioor da Vinci?"

"What?"

"Pick another."

"Fred."

"There used to be one here, but now there isn't, and so I came. The others are all still arguing over which one of them it should be, but there isn't time." Fred tapped his chest lightly with a grimy fist. "I know."

Under normal circumstances, Isabel wouldn't have believed a word he'd said, but normal circumstances had been a little absent of late. The elevator chimed, and she held up a hand as the door began to open. "Wait here until I check the hall. I'mso not explaining you to anyone."

The coast was clear. She got him out and moving fast; hopefully fast enough that no one—specifically Mrs. Harris—could trace the nearly visible scent trail to the door. She didn't breathe until it closed behind them. Then she learned that breathing in an enclosed space with Fred was not a good idea.

By the time she stopped coughing, Fred had left the foyer and was standing in the middle of the living room.

Isabel hurried in beside him. "Look, my father is going to kill me if this place ends up smelling like the inside of a hot dumpster. You need a shower and some clean clothes."

"Clean." His tone suggested he was searching for a definition of the word. "Okay."

All at once, he *was* clean—hair, clothes, probably breath if she wanted to get that close, which she didn't.

"How did you do that?"

"Godfry!"

"What?"

Ignoring her, Fred headed for the terrace door and tried to push it open. On the other side, a big crow hopped from foot to foot and shouted, "Pull, you idiot." When he finally pulled the door open and went through, the crow fluttered up to the top of a rattan chair.

"Well?" it croaked. "Did you tell her?"

"He said he's here to teach me," Isabel answered before Fred had the chance. "That there'll be a test. He said I'm the youngest wizard and the nasty thing with red eyes is after my power—which rather redefined the rather shaky definition of normal I'd been working with. He didn't tell me what he is, it is, or *you* are."

"Him?" The crow turned to glare at her. "He's one of the nine—same as you."

"Nine?"

"Nine wizards. There's always nine. Don't ask why, I don't know. When one finally pops—and one popped early last year—the power finds a new conduit—that's you. It's been gathering in you since Beth Aswith died, which is why you're taking this so well in case you're thinking it has anything to do with you as a person."

Isabel curled her lip, but the bird ignored her, swiveling his head to face Fred.

"Him, he's an old conduit."

"I'm a piece of O-pipe."

"Sure you are." And back to Isabel. "My name's Godfry, I'm with him. The big thing with red eyes is a bad guy—sort of an and-wizard. You've got no control right now, so you're lit up like a Christmas tree. The bad guys want your power—well, they want everyone's power, but you're the only one they can find."

"Great." She picked savagely at a thread on her blazer for a moment. The crow's explanation, although it covered the main points, had been a little light on details. First things first. "So, if there's seven other wizards, how come I rate the dumpster diver?"

This time, Fred answered for himself. "No one else would come in time. A wizard with an apprentice gains power. They're arguing over who should get to teach you, and so they'll argue and stop each other from coming to you until it's too late." He peered nervously around the terrace, hands wrapped in the bottom of his T-shirt. "I've seen it before."

"Haven't they?"

"Yes. But it's their own places in the web of power they're concerned with, not yours."

"Wizards, as a rule, aren't very nice people," Godfry snorted. "You should fit right in."

"Yeah, you'd fit in a roasting pan, so if I were you, I'd be careful."

"Oh, I'm so scared." Wings flapping, he hopped along the back of the chair. "Help, help, cranky teenager!"

"Stop it!" Fred's voice rang out with surprising force. "We haven't time."

"Oh, like you care," Isabel snapped. "A wizard with an apprentice gains power,' remember? You're in it for yourself like everyone else."

He frowned, confused. "What would I do with more power?"

She opened her mouth and closed it again. Even clean, he still had the frayed-at-the-edges look of the street. "Okay. Good poi..." Her eyes widened involuntarily—another physical sensation she could have happily done without—and she jabbed a finger toward the sky. "Look!"

Fred and Godfry turned just as the clouds drifted into new formations.

"I see a horsy," the crow mocked.

"There were eyes," Isabel insisted. "Blood-red eyes in the clouds."

"It was the sunset through a couple of clear spots."

"It was not." Fred's hands were rolled so high in his T-shirt she could see the hollow curve under the edge of his ribs. "The first lesson is to trust what you actually see and not what you think you should see."

"Or what *I want* should be there," Godfry muttered. "If you two want to see blood-red eyes in the clouds, be my guest, I don't."

Unwinding a hand, Fred rested it lightly on the crow's back. "What you want doesn't change anything. But what *you* want..." He turned to Isabel. "...does. You have to agree to become my apprentice. Your choice."

"Yourwhat?"

"My student."

"I have to agree to learn to be a wizard from a skinny dumpster diver and a smart-ass bird, or I wait around for the teeth and claws to catch up with the eyes?"

"Yes."

"Great choice."

"Not really. But you might survive either way. Some people do."

Except for the nervous mannerisms, Fred looked and sounded like he knew what he was talking about. And she had to admit that given giant red eyes, nervous mannerisms weren't unreasonable. "Okay. Why don't you get something to eat while I get changed. On second thought..." She had a sudden vision of the two of them in the kitchen. "...wait here and I'll bring something out."

When Isabel returned to the terrace in street clothes, Fred had eaten a deli-pack of sliced roast beef, half a loaf of bread, and was just licking the last of the mustard off a tablespoon. "Don't put that back in the... Eww. Tell you what." She pushed the jar toward him. "Why don't you just *keep* the mustard."

Smiling, he shoved the spoon down until he could get the lid on, screwed it tight, and dropped the jar over his left shoulder. It never hit the terrace.

"What happened to...?"

"Pocket universe," Godfry told her, hopping down onto the table and poking around in the deli wrapping. "Very handy."

"I'm sure." It would certainly solve the forty-pound backpack problem. "So what's next?"

Fred stood and wiped his hands on his pants, leaving bright yellow smears against the green. "Next we go to my workshop and I teach you how to control your power."

"Okay, where's your workshop?"

"This is your workshop?"

A short walk from Isabel's building had brought them to the alley between the Sutton Place Hotel and the insurance headquarters next to it. Given the caliber of tenants in both buildings it was a pretty clean alley, but still...

"The world is my workshop."

"Cliche," Godfry put in from the top of a dumpster. "But true."

"Okay." She folded her arms. "So teach me."

Fred patted the air beside her shoulder. "Learn where your skin is."

"It's on my body."

"Can you feel it?" He headed for the dumpster.

Could she feel her skin? How stupid was that. Of course she could. She could feel her socks hug her ankles, the waistband of her jeans cutting in just a bit, how warm it was under her watch...

"From the inside." Fred's voice echoed about the dumpster and then floated up, eerily disconnected from his body. "Oh wow. It's a good thing I kept the mustard."

"You can't feel your skin from the inside," Isabel snorted at last. They were walking along College Street, heading toward Spadina.

"I can't?"

She glanced over at Fred, but he was watching where he was putting his feet with single-minded intensity. "Okay. / can't."

"When you try, what do you feel?"

"I don't know." A pause while he crouched and picked something off the sidewalk—she didn't want to know what. "A sort of a sizzle."

"Good. You found the power." He straightened, putting the something in his pocket. "That's what I wanted you to find."

"Yeah? Then why didn't you just tell me to look for the power?"

"Did you know what to look for?"

"No, but..."

"Now you do. Get to know it."

Isabel sighed. What a waste of time. "Is that lesson two?"

Fred started. "There was a lesson one?"

"Yeah: trust what you actually see, not what you think you should see." They'd reached the lights and, as they seemed to have been wandering without purpose, Isabel crossed north with the green.

"Good lesson." He stepped off the curb after her. "Wish I'd had a fish."

"Right." And as far as she was concerned, that was it for the night. Godfrey, by far the more consistently articulate of the two, had long since disappeared. "Look, I gave it a shot but it's getting late, and I promised my dad I'd be in bed by midnight."

"You agreed to be my apprentice."

"Fine." She rolled her eyes and picked up the pace back toward Bay Street. "I'll be your apprentice tomorrow..."

The shadows moved in the way shadows didn't, drawing closer, growling softly, tiny red lights flickering in pairs. They were all around her, cutting her off.

"Find the sizzle! Grasp it. Throw it at them!"

Fred sounded kilometers away although she knew he couldn't have been more than a meter behind her. Propelled by the pounding of her heart, the sizzle raced around just under her skin. No way she could catch it. And what the hell did *grasp* mean anyway?

A louder growl. Isabel spun around to face it. Her elbow brushed shadow. Sparks flew. She wanted to scream, but she couldn't find her voice. Wrapping her arms around her body, she tried to make herself as small as possible. Which seemed to contain the sizzle.

So she'd found it. Was grasping it. How did she throw it?

As a second shadow brushed icy terror against her.

The night exploded in light.

When she could see again, Isabel stared at the image of an elongated arm burned into the bricks of the building beside her, the talons nearly touching the shadow of her throat.

She peered through the white spots dancing through her vision. "Did I do that?"

"The youngest is the most powerful."

"So you said." There were other images burned beyond the closest one. "Cool. So, if I can do this, why do I need you?"

"Do you know how you did it?"

"Uh..." Icy terror. Light. "...no"

"Can you do it again?"

The sizzle had faded to a tingle—and in some places not even that. "Not right now."

"What if you had to? What if they attacked again?"

"More of them?" When he nodded, she moved a little closer to the streetlight. "Okay, okay, I need you. Still, can't I have a moment to enjoy my victory?"

"No." His voice dropped an octave and he held out his hand. "Teenager sets off explosion in street. Film at eleven."

"That's so retro, but I take your point." The wails of police sirens were growing closer. His hand was still basically clean. She reluctantly put hers in it.

And they were standing outside her building.

Fighting the urge to puke, Isabel staggered back until her shoulder blades were pressed against the

brick. Waiting for the world to stop rocking, she sucked in deep lungfuls of air.

"Downside to everything," Fred murmured philosophically. "Can you spare some change?"

Although Isabel offered him the use of the spare room, Fred spent the night on the terrace, wrapped in a disgusting sleeping bag he pulled from his pocket universe.

"I have to be where the sky people can contact me. And you have to sleep with your head at the foot of the bed."

"Why? Will it, like, scramble my power signature or something?"

"I have Liza Minnelli's signature on my arm."

Safe within her room, Isabel checked her messages and called her father back at his hotel. Conference was going great, blah, blah, blah. New York antique dealers had a few pieces he could use, yadda, yadda, yadda.

"Izzy, are listening to me?"

"Sure, Dad. I'm just tired. I'll see you Friday. Love you. Bye." She hung up before he could answer and glared at her bed. Wondering why she was listening to someone who ate pizza crusts covered in someone else's spit, she yanked up the sheets and moved the pillows down against the footboard.

The first time she woke, gasping for breath, she turned on every light in her bedroom before going back to sleep. The second time, she stuffed a pair of jeans along the crack under the door. The third time, she shoved her mattress off the boxspring and onto the floor so they couldn't come up at her from below.

At least I don't have to worry about Dad.

Hands rolled in the sheet, she stared at the ceiling and counted backward from a hundred in French.

"You look like crap."

"You look like you'd go with cranberry sauce." Stepping past the crowd, Isabel swept a searching glare around the terrace. "Where's Fred?"

"He left about sunrise."

"Contacted by the sky people?"

"Not likely," Godfrey snorted. "They're just a figment of old Fred's imagination—his reason for why he goes completely bugged if he sleeps inside."

"Great."

"Hey, be glad he's not wearing the tinfoil helmet any more."

"I'm just glad he's gone." Feeling nothing but relief—the thought of getting Fred out of the building unseen had tied her stomach in knots—she headed for the terrace door. "Tell him I'll see him after school."

"He's expecting you to join him."

That stopped her cold. Turning, she frowned down at Godfry. "What, now? Are you nuts. No way I'm cutting. My dad would kill me."

"And the shadows will what? Lecture you on responsibility?" He preened immaculate breast feathers. "Still, it's your choice. You can learn to be a wizard or you can put on that little fetish outfit and learn to be a productive member of society for as long as you manage to survive."

"Fine. I'll join Fred. But he'd better teach me the spell that makes lame excuses sound convincing."

It was too much to ask that the elevator be empty. "Mrs. Harris."

"You're not going to school today?" Isabel glanced down at her jeans. "Casual Friday."

"It's Thursday."

"Okay, casual Thursday, then."

"I heard men's voices on your terrace last night *and* this morning. I thought your father was in New York."

"He is. You probably heard one of my CDs."

"No." A thin lip curled. "I know what *they* sound like."

"Can't think what it might have been then."

"Can't you?"

The elevator door whispered open. "Have a nice day, Mrs. Harris." Isabel charged through and across the lobby.

Half a block away, Godfry dropped out of a tree and landed on her left shoulder. He weighed a ton and his claws hurt even through her jean jacket and he was still the most obnoxious creature she'd ever met, but it was so cool to be walking around with a crow on her shoulder that Isabel didn't care.

"Who's the old broad with the pickle up her butt watching us from the door?"

"Mrs. Harris. She's *always watching*. She's totally bent out of shape that my dad's gay."

"Yeah? I'm usually pretty cheerful myself."

They found Fred back at The Second Cup at Bloor and Bay. He rose up out of the garbage as they approached, holding two half-eaten blueberry muffins. "Good morning, apprentice. Breakfast?"

"No, thanks." She flexed her shoulder as Godfry dove for one of the muffins. "I'll get my own. Then can we go somewhere less noticeable? My school's just north of here."

They ended up sitting in the concrete doorway of the TransAc Club, half a block south on Brunswick, Fred assuring her that they'd be undisturbed for a while. A while lasted two and a half hours by Isabel's watch. Two and a half hours spent chasing the sizzle under her skin while Fred gave lectures to passing

ants.

They moved on just before the lunch shift showed up, heading south, then east along Dundas. Fred walked slowly, hitting up almost everyone they passed for change. When they got to Dundas and Yonge, he dropped what he'd collected in the battered old box sitting in front of an equally battered old man playing the harmonica.

"I don't need money," he explained. "And the world needs music."

"Even bad music," Isabel winced. Behind them, the harmonica wailed painfully.

"Yes."

"Is that the third lesson?"

"Sure. Why not."

"Do you have *any* idea of what you're doing?"

"Put your sizzle in your hands."

"Now?"

"The shadows don't ask so many questions."

It was hard to concentrate with the traffic and the people. "Okay."

"Put your palms together and pull them apart slowly."

Isabel rolled her eyes but did as she was told. For a heartbeat, three pale lines of light connected her palms, then they were gone.

Fred held up his hands. Even in sunlight, the multiple lines were a brilliant white. "This is control. This is what you need to be able to do before you can learn what to do *with* it. So, to answer your question..." The lines disappeared as he whirled to face a passing suit, grimy hand outstretched. "Spare some change, mister?"

Godfry caught up with them in the small park behind the Eaton's Center. Isabel vetoed a garbage can lunch and bought the three of them takeout. After they finished eating, she lounged back, the crow on the grass by her head, while Fred talked loudly to one of the spindly trees.

"He's got special sauce all over himself."

"Saving it for later."

"Gross."

"Hey, you're seeing him at very nearly his best. He's really into this whole master/apprentice thing."

"Master," she snorted. "As if. Godfry, how..."

"Did one of the nine end up a loony who sleeps on subway grates and talks to trees? Well, the other wizards think he couldn't cope with being so different, but me, I think he couldn't cope with not being able to change things."

"What do you mean?"

Godfrey studied her with his left eye then his right. "When you get control of your power, what are you going to do?"

"I don't know; I haven't really had time to think about it." Plucking a few pieces of grass, she dropped them onto the wind. "Travel, I guess. Find that matching Queen Anne vase my dad's been looking for his whole life."

"Fred wanted to make the world a better place, but you can't do that with power, you can only do it one person at a time. Even if you change the outside crap, easing droughts, ending wars, that sort of stuff, you can't change the way people behave and that's where the problems really come from. After a while, the frustration just got to him."

"So he's too good to be a wizard?"

"Essentially."

"And I'm not?"

"Apparently."

"I'd be more upset about that, but..." She waved a hand at the topic of the conversation who was methodically sliding lengths of folded newspaper down his pants.

They spent the afternoon down by Lake Ontario, freaking out a scattering of tourists and condo owners. Isabel kept expecting someone to call the cops, but apparently these buildings had no Mrs. Harris. Lucky them.

Toward sunset, one of the waves rose higher than the others and half turned toward them, a translucent but nearly human face momentarily under the crest.

"Water elemental," Fred told her when Isabel squeaked out an incoherent question. "Don't trust them—most of the time, they work with the under-toad. But good eyes on your part. You saw what was really there."

"Rule one."

He nodded. "If that's your toaster."

Another fast food meal and an evening wandering slowly through alleys and access roads back toward Bloor. By the time they reached her building, Isabel could hold a single string of light between her palms for almost fifteen seconds. It wasn't much, but for those fifteen seconds she knew what she was doing and she knew *that* was the feeling she had to capture and keep.

She'd have been happier about it had a previous attempt not arced up and plunged three city blocks into temporary darkness.

"No shadows tonight?" she asked as Fred dragged out his sleeping bag and unfolded it under the table.

"Now they know how much power they need to use to take yours, so they're building it. Tricky for them. If they wait too long, you'll know what you're doing. They'll be back sooner than later." Hanging his CATS jacket neatly over the back of a chair, Fred smiled up at her. "But that's why *I'm* here."

Isabel was surprised to find that comforting. It was the only thing that had surprised her in days.

"One of the reasons I'm here," Fred amended thoughtfully. "Because you're my apprentice. That's the other reason. Not that I wouldn't protect you if you were. Or weren't."

"Good night, Fred."

"Okay."

There was no way the clock in her bedroom was right. Except that it was the same time as her watch. And the microwave. And the VCR. And her computer. One oh five. A.M. An hour and five minutes too late to call her dad— who'd left three messages.

He didn't sound happy.

Until five in the afternoon, Friday was pretty much a carbon copy of Thursday. At five, Isabel managed two lines of light for twenty seconds and was so close to *knowing* what she was doing that not being able to do it was driving her crazy.

She wanted to yell and curse and throw things.

"Why are we hanging around here?" she demanded, leaping off the concrete retaining wall that separated the parking lot from the alley. "What is *hedoing*?"

"What's it looklike he's doing?"

"Sorting through a dumpster!"

Godfry spread his wings and methodically folded them again. "Good girl."

"He's not teaching me anything! I'm learning all by myself!"

"Hey, a few less exclamation marks and a little more remembering who taught you what you were supposed to learn in the first place."

"And has he taught me anything since? No." A snicker pulled her attention off the crow to two boys about her age crossing the parking lot. "What?"

"Weirdo," said one.

"Brain fried," snorted the other.

"Oh, yeah, like you two are going to rule the world some day. You know, I don't need him to teach me how to be unpopular," she pointed out when the boys were gone. "I can do that on my own. I'm done for

today. When he gets out of the dumpster..."

"It's time."

The crow and the wizard's apprentice turned to see Fred holding an empty laser printer drum and staring north.

"Time for what?" Isabel asked, searching the gathering shadows for flecks of red.

"Chinese food. There's great garbage behind the noodle shop."

"Forget it," she sighed. "I'll pay."

By the time they finished eating, it was dark. Godfry had devoured half a bowl of noodles and left while he could still see to fly. They were walking through the tiny park on Bellevue Avenue, arguing the merits of egg rolls over spring rolls when the shadows attacked.

"Fred!"

Darkness wrapped around him, reached for him. He screamed and Isabel echoed it although none of the shadows had gone for her.

"...they want everyone's power but you're the only one they can find."

And Fred was with her.

So they could find Fred.

She could barely see him inside the shifting darkness. A dozen or more glowing red eyes swirled around him. He was confused. He'd expected her to be attacked and Fred didn't change gears quickly. By the time he did, it would be too late.

She was his only chance.

And when they finished with him, they'd be after her.

Hands ten centimeters apart, Isabel fought to control her breathing.

Find the sizzle. Find the sweet spot. Find where it works.

Two strings of light stretched from palm to palm.

Oh, that's a lot of help.

How did Fred do it? He never concentrated on *anything* this hard.

Duh.

Power snapped into place with an almost audible click. Half the shadows turned as a hundred strands of light formed between her palms.

Too late.

She smacked her hands together.

It was still nothing more than a crude release of power, but this time she was doing it on purpose. With a purpose.

"Fred!" Blinking away afterimages, she dropped to her knees by his side. "Are you okay?"

After a short struggle, he focused on her face. "The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain."

Isabel grinned. Suddenly her dad's interest in musical theater was actually useful. "Could you possibly mean, 'By Jove, I think she's got it?'"

"Okay."

"We rule. We rock. At the risk of sounding like the end of every bad sports movie ever made, we are the champions and champions deserve ice cream. There's a pint of Cherry Garcia in the freezer." She flashed a smile at a still wobbly Fred and reached for the condo door. "Technically, it's Dad's, but he's not...Dad!"

"Isabel."

Hurrying into the foyer behind her father were Mrs. Harris, a police officer, and two large men dressed like ambulance attendants. Isabel was suddenly very aware that behind *her* stood a skinny, grimy man who looked like he'd just been bounced across a park and who still had folded newspaper down his pants.

Anger and worry showed about equally on her dad's face. No, wait, anger seemed to be winning.

"I didn't want to believe what Mrs. Harris was telling me, Isabel, but when you weren't home last night and then I got the message from the school about you not being in class, and then you wander in... Do you even know what time it is?"

"Uh, ten?"

"Three."

She checked her watch. Three A.M.

"Time flies when you're having shadows."

"Thanks, Fred. You might have told me that!"

Fred shrugged. "Iceberg."

Which was either an enigmatic Titanic reference or he was gone again.

"He's probably her dealer," Mrs. Harris snorted.

Isabel ignored her, stepping between Fred and her father. "Dad, I know this looks bad, but Fred's

my..." Quick, a word for what Fred was that her father would understand. "...friend. Okay, I cut school and I let him sleep on the terrace, but he needs me."

"Needs you?"

"Yes! And he's teaching me so much."

Mrs. Harris pursed her lips disdainfully. "I can't imagine what."

"Try compassion," Isabel snapped. "And I'm sure you can't imagine it!"

"Isabel..." Her dad sighed and began again. It looked as though worry had won the final round, "Izzy, your friend has run away from a facility in Scarborough. The police have been searching for him for weeks. They recognized him the moment Mrs. Harris gave them a description. These men are going to take him to the facility and see that he gets back on his medication."

"Dad, he's not crazy."

"All right, but look at him, he's skin and bones. If he stays on the street, he'll die. I don't know why you've suddenly decided to adopt him—and believe me, we're going to talk about this—but he's a person, not a puppy or a kitten, and you can't know what's best for him." Grabbing hold of Isabel's shoulder, he moved them both to one side. Pressed up against him, she could feel the fear rolling off him like smoke.

Afraid for her? Or of something?

The ambulance attendants advanced.

"Fred! Do something!"

He stared wide-eyed at the approaching attendants. "I can macrame a plant hanger."

"Not helpful!" She had to do something. But what? All she knew how to do was make a bright light which was great at chasing shadows away, but these were flesh-and-blood men. Big men. Big scary men. Even if she temporarily blinded them, Fred would probably just stand there blinking.

But what else could she do? What else had Fred taught her?

Trust what you actually see not what you think you see.

They'd already gone after Fred once.

What will you do if they come after you again?

No wonder the ambulance attendants were so terrifying. Their eyes were a deep, blood red.

As she pulled her hands apart creating a cat's cradle of light, the closer shadow turned to face her. She froze.

"They should take all these sorts of people off the streets and put them in institutions where they belong."

Thank you, Mrs. Harris. Shadows held no terror for her; she spent her life surrounded by shadows of her own making.

For the second time that night, Isabel slapped her palms together.

When she could see again, the shadows were gone and Fred was gone—was safe, she knew that for a certainty without knowing how she knew. Unfortunately, Mrs. Harris and the cop remained.

"Well, you have your daughter home safe and sound, Mr. Peterson. I'll leave you to handle it." From the look the constable shot her, he clearly thought rather too much had been made about a sixteen-year-old girl who stayed out late on a Friday night.

Her father looked like he had every intention of making even more about it. "I'm sorry to trouble you, Officer."

"No. This isn't right." Mrs. Harris stared wide-eyed around the foyer. "Where are the others? There were other men here. A filthy one and two strong men to carry him away."

"Uh, ma'am, there were only the three of us until the young lady came home."

"No. That's wrong!"

The constable exhaled once, through his nose, and moved behind Mrs. Harris. "Just the three of us, ma'am. It's late, I'll escort you safely home."

She could walk out the door, or she could be pushed. She chose to walk.

Isabel turned to face her father. "So. How was your trip, Dad? Have a good time?"

"Apparently not as good as you did."

Isabel was out on the terrace at dawn, holding a three-day-old salmon steak.

With a poof of displaced air, a broad-shouldered blond in a cable-knit sweater appeared by the table. Throwing the piece of fish at him seemed like a perfectly reasonable reaction.

He frowned and deflected it with a glance. As it bit the floor, he turned his bright blue gaze back to Isabel. "Congratulations, you are passing your test."

"Am passing?"

"Are passed?"

"Let me guess. English as a second... Are there going to be many more of you?" she asked as a small Asian woman and a tall, distinguished looking man in a turban appeared as well.

All three of them ignored her, turning instead on each other.

"What are you doing here?"

"I came to inform her..."

"No, we agreed I would tell her..."

"Iare telling her, yah."

"Oh, no, not you.Me."

Shouting simultaneously, they disappeared.

"Well, you can see how much help they'd have been to you," Godfry muttered, dropping out of the sky beside the salmon. "Is that for me?"

"Yes. Let me guess; three more of the nine?"

"Who else?Do you know what they call a group of wizards?An argument."

Made sense.She shifted her weight to one hip and waited until the crow finished eating. "They said I passed my test."

"Yep."He flew up to his regular perch on the chair."Last night, when you didn't immediately try to save your own ass and saved Fred."

"The first time or the second time?"

"The second time.The first time you were thinking that once they finished with him, they'd come after you." Wings folded, he cocked his head up at her. "As Fred would say, the world doesn't need wizards that tastegood, they need wizards with good taste. You have to be worthy of the power."

"So Fred wasn't teaching me how to pass the test?"

"Wasn't he?"

Try compassion.

Isabel sighed. "Where is Fred?"

"Having breakfast."

"At The Second Cup garbage bin?"

"Nah.Not on a Saturday. Saturdays it's the dumpster behind the Royal York. You get in much trouble with your old man?"

She shrugged and, greatly daring, stretched out one finger to stroke an ebony shoulder. "I've been grounded for a month with no TV, but Dad says he understands teenage rebellion— as if—and I can probably pay my scholastic debt with a thousand-word essay on responsibility. It could have been worse."

"You could have been swallowed by shadow. Not a problem now," Godfry continued before Isabel could respond. "You got control, so you're in no immediate danger. The rest of the lessons can wait for a month."

"The rest of the lessons?"

"Oh, yeah. A wizard's apprenticeship lasts seven years."

"What?" Stepping back, she kicked the chair leg, sending Godfry flying. "I *amnot* spending the next seven years looking into dumpsters!"

"Hey, you agreed; don't take it out on the bird! Besides, there's a lot more than dumpsters—there's garbage cans, landfill sites, soup kitchens, overpasses, winters in cardboard boxes, summers in storm drains, roadkill . . ."

Isabel slammed the terrace door, cutting off the crow's litany.

It was going to be *along* seven years.