

Dark Flowers, Inverse Moon

by Jay Lake

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"There are only two paths to magic." Speaking from the borrowed pulpit of the tiny Episcopal church, Germaine Templar smiled beatifically. Her dark face was obscured to toothy shadow by the hood of her white aba. "One leads through the bright moonlight and the other through the dark of night."

Bullshit, thought Sally, lurking in a pew near the back, only a few scattered heads between her and the speaker. There's a million ways to get things done. Unfortunately, you only get to do one of them. And you're lucky if you get that much.

Sally had come here for the same reason she went to so many lectures and meetings—seeking a path to lead her out of the thicket of Skill and loss in which she had been trapped for too long.

"You can reach deep inside your heart," the other woman continued, "to what the ancients called the *omphalos*, the navel of the world. Standing in that place, you can see both paths."

Sally's mouth crinkled. If this Templar had the Skill her words hinted at, the real magic of the everyday world, the Colors of Sally's thoughts and mood would be a shout in the dusty church. But Sally didn't believe in this woman. She hadn't believed in anyone or anything in the four years since that night in California when Skilled had died during her Bringing, staining her own new-Brought Skill. Sally slipped from the pew and walked quietly out into the vestibule. The lecture was just another New Age fraud and she was hungry for barbecue.

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The sauce wasn't the greatest, but the smooth, smokey flavor of the beef brisket lay across the grain of the meat like butter on toast. Sally especially loved the crunchy outer shell of the end pieces, where the tang of salt and fat mixed with the crackle of burnt meat. And nothing beat the mouthwatering smell of barbecue.

Everybody from *Texas Monthly* to *The New Yorker* raved about Black's and Kreuz's in Lockhart as two of the best barbecue joints in Texas, but for Sally's money, Chisholm Trail down Highway 183 at the other end of town was just as good as either of them, with half the hassle and a quarter the price.

The place resembled a down-at-the-heels Elks' Hall, paneled walls hung with

hunting trophies and old newspaper clippings. The service was about to the level of a high school cafeteria but the sausage and brisket excelled. Who cared whether they could make a decent potato salad? Sally was pretty sure the cook was Skilled, had come to the meat recipes that way.

“You sure Colored up nice and snotty in that church.”

Sally looked up, surprised anyone was speaking to her, to see Germaine Templar again, now dressed in a Texas A&M sweatshirt with a tray of food in her hands and a smile on her face. No longer obscured by her aba, Templar was a beautiful broad-featured woman with skin the color of black coffee and liquid brown eyes, already along into her thirties—perhaps a decade older than Sally.

Templar’s voice was more gentle than her words as she said, with the faintest hint of a Caribbean accent, “Don’t usually find Skilled at my little pitches.”

“Little con jobs, more like it.” Sally chewed her mouthful of brisket. She deliberately didn’t acknowledge the leading comments about Skilled. “And somehow I doubt your Momma named you Germaine Templar.” Too much heavy-handed mysticism in that name, Sally told herself—le Comte Sainte Germaine and the Knights Templar rolled into one.

Templar laughed. “No, but that *is* what it says on my driver’s license. Impresses the natives, at least the ones that kept reading after they left high school.”

Sally noticed that the other woman didn’t respond to her remarks about con jobs.

Templar sat down at the Formica table. Her orange plastic tray was covered with small bowls filled with different colors and textures—charro beans, collard greens, mashed yams, okra, and creamed corn. They all swam in varying proportions of butter, water, and iodized salt, accented by the dank smell of the steam tables.

“No one comes here for the vegetables.” Sally nodded at the food.

“Company ain’t so good either,” the other woman said, “but you take what you get in this life.”

Sally stared at Templar, willing her to go away. She didn’t want to like the other woman’s charm and good looks, didn’t want to give Templar a handle with which to dig deeper into the conversation.

Templar stared back. “If you truly feel that way, why did you come to the lecture?”

Was this woman a Telepath, Sally wondered, to know what she was thinking? Her teacher Wei-Lin had said telepathy was not a truly useful Skill—too much garbage and nonsense in the average person’s stream of thought—but some

were entranced by the idea of it.

“Why did I come? Curiosity. Your flyers were interesting.” And loneliness, after four years of running from blood and flames, for the company of the Skilled. Sometimes she even longed for the touch of Skill itself.

Templar leaned over the table. “But you knew it was crap before you came, right?”

“Yeah. Sometimes crap is interesting.” Sometimes crap stinks, too.

Templar laughed. “With the right crap, you can meet some surprising people out here in the sticks.” She forked runny vegetables into her mouth, meeting Sally’s stare with a placid, centered smile that rolled as she chewed. The silence extended out between them, a curious absence of tension for a minute, then two, infusing Sally’s cautious hostility with the possibility of trust.

“I’m no mind reader,” Templar continued, “but some things are easy enough to see, Skill or no Skill.”

“Hmm?” Sally bit into a stale roll and wished she had some more brisket.

“I need something done by someone with Skill, someone with a different perspective than my own. You can maybe help me.”

Sally swallowed her mouthful of roll, dry throat barely taking the dusty bread. Nerves, she thought. This conversation was getting to her. She didn’t even read Colors any more, the least and smallest use of Skill. There was no way Sally was going to Skill for some smiling con artist. She shook her head in an emphatic negative.

“I said *maybe* help,” Templar said. “And maybe I can help you back.”

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US Highway 183 from Lockhart to Austin was thirty-five miles of rolling four-lane blacktop that gentled over the Central Texas hills. The countryside was splashed with springtime bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush, the brilliant colors of the flowers in turn dotted with cattle, mesquite, and live oak. An occasional stand of cottonwood followed a watercourse at the base of the slopes. Traffic was light, even for a Tuesday evening.

Somehow, Sally hadn’t been surprised when Germaine Templar said that she needed a ride into town. Sally wondered where the other woman had stashed the robes she used during the pitch. She felt vaguely ashamed that Germaine could see the rumpled sleeping bag and smell the dirty clothes in the back seat of her battered Toyota.

Somewhere around Mendoza, a town consisting only of a tractor-repair shop next to an abandoned general store, Germaine stopped staring out at the cows and

the cotton. “I once met a guy whose Skill was basically cruise control.”

Sally laughed in spite of herself. “One thing you get to do in the world special and he picked *cruise control*?”

Germaine shrugged. “Skill’s like the rest of life. You try to make choices that fit. Mike, he came to it late, already had steady work as a long-haul trucker. It made sense to him. Now he sleeps on the road while his Skill drives. He stays rested, has time to read, write, do whatever. He’s had two novels published in the last three years. His book jackets claim he’s an astronomy Ph.D.”

Sally wondered what her choices fit. Not much, not lately. Not ever.

“I’d like to meet the teacher who Brought him to his Skill,” Germaine continued in a quiet voice. “She must have been real smart about life choices.”

Sally felt a twinge of guilt and pain, those Siamese twins of the soul. She hadn’t spoken to Wei-Lin since that terrible night in California. Been afraid to at first, the wounds of Mallory’s death, then Ben’s, too raw. Later, she’d been too ashamed.

They crossed the overpass above Texas 21, heading into Mustang Ridge, speed trap extraordinaire. It was a town in name only, living off revenue from anyone driving their highway foolish enough not to be a local. Sally dropped the old gold Toyota Corolla to just under fifty-five as they swept past a junkyard.

People didn’t talk about Skill unless they were very good friends, or maybe family, or worked together with Skill. Sally didn’t have anybody like that in her life, hadn’t for years—no friends, no family, no Skilled. She didn’t want to know Germaine well enough to discuss Skill or anything else with her. But despite herself, Sally couldn’t help liking the woman’s direct approach. Sally hadn’t been met with openness in a long time.

And Germaine was ... interesting.

Germaine contemplated their brief view of Survival Haus Liquor and Ammunition. “Only in Texas. Only here.” She turned from the window to face Sally across the weathered tan interior of the car. “I’m from New York, originally, but Maman was Haitian.”

“Yeah.” Sally hid within her most neutral tones. This was worse than talking about Skill.

Germaine’s voice tightened as she spoke. “A lot of Skill comes out of Haiti, but it gets used in some odd ways. Stereotyped, like in a bad *zombi* movie.”

Necromancy had never interested Sally in the slightest. She had been told that dead people were boring, fixated on old grudges and lost loves. A lot like live people, come to think of it.

Germaine continued. “Thing about talking to dead people is, after a while, you don’t listen to the living any more.”

Sally’s hand strayed toward the radio. She wanted to shut the conversation off, smother it in NPR chatter, but felt trapped, a fly struggling through the honey of the other woman’s memories. The Toyota rolled down the slope toward the creek at the bottom of the valley among the cotton fields. Top of the hill, and she could drop Germaine at the Exxon station. Let those oil-soaked bastards do something for her.

Germaine had lost all the smile in her voice. “That’s what happened to Maman. Too many dead people.” Her tone veered into a mocking sneer, briefly picking up a Caribbean accent. “‘Where did Aunt Trudy hide the silver?’ ‘Who was it that really killed you, Tranh?’ ‘Cici, we love you.’” Germaine sighed. “After a while, Maman didn’t have any words left for me.”

“Why would anyone think they needed to tell the dead they loved them?” The Exxon was coming up, but Sally’s foot stayed on the accelerator, keeping the Toyota at a steady fifty-three miles per hour. Sally realized that she was committed to the conversation. She had broken cover and re-engaged.

“There are some things the living need to say to the dead.” Germaine’s voice had dropped to a miserable, quiet whisper. “Sometimes, there are things the dead need to say to the living.”

“Like what?”

“Did you know that there are Skilled among the dead?” Germaine asked abruptly.

“Everybody dies, sooner or later.” Except, thought Sally, those lucky few rumored to have found a truly life-extending Skill. Always a subject of speculation, that, when speaking freely of Skill. At least back when she’d been speaking freely.

“No, I mean there are dead who practice Skills. Vivimancy, for example—speaking to the living.” Germaine started to cry, small tears jumping from clenched eyes as her breath shuddered. “Control of the living. Maman calls to me from the Other Side, talks to me, and I can’t shut her out and I can’t help her and I can’t do anything and, oh, *mon Dieu*, I need *help*....”

Sally watched Maha Creek go by her cracked windshield as Germaine sobbed. The tears were pouring now, the woman had lost almost all control. They were out of Mustang Ridge, she could speed up. She could drop Germaine off at the Texaco in Pilot Knob. Easy enough to call a cab from there, then Sally could just drive away and leave this strange black woman crying her sorrow by the side of the road. Sally had been taught by the best that there was no loyalty among the Skilled. Damn Ben and Mallory, for wrecking her love life and the fate of her Bringing Five. Being dead was no excuse. They’d shown her that there was no brotherhood of the Skilled.

Or in Germaine's case, sisterhood.

Sally listened to herself in horrified fascination as she spoke the words she dreaded. "What is it you want me to do?"

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They sat in the dimly lit dining room of El Azteca, a run-down Mexican joint on Seventh Street, deep in East Austin. Their little aluminum table with its naugahyde chairs was surrounded by brightly colored doilies on every flat surface, soft-porn wall calendars, and endless shelves of Mexicano bric-a-brac. The smell of oil and red beans was embedded in the fabric of the restaurant.

The food was authentic, the place was usually quiet, and nobody ever bothered Sally there. She had at first been reluctant to share her little East Austin sanctuary with Germaine, but the peaceful restaurant seemed a good place for the woman to calm herself. And Sally wanted to show Germaine something nice about her own life, nicer than the fact that she lived in her car.

They sat at a small table in the back of the dining room, an untouched basket of chips with guacamole between them. Sally had ordered Cerveza Pacifico, Germaine drank ice water. Little puddles of condensation from the cold drinks made random rounded shapes on the table.

"So what can you tell me now?" Sally asked. They both kept their voices low, a reflex in any Skilled discussion in a public place.

"Maman comes to me in dreams." Germaine's voice, even when quiet, was clear and strong again, the Skilled speaker Sally had first heard in that church in Lockhart. "I know the dreams are true, because I can see the Colors."

Almost all of Sally's dreams were in Color. In her experience, that didn't necessarily mean they were true, but it at least signified a strong correspondence with reality. In her waking life, Sally avoided Color with the routine apprehension of a dedicated paranoid.

"Maman, she speaks to me." Germaine's smile was crooked. "Her English was never so good on This Side."

Sally felt a gentle flutter in her heart, responding to the other woman's sadness. "What does she want?"

Germaine's lip quivered as her face shook. "She has some great work of Skill she pursues, over there. Maman wants me to send Skilled to her, to the Other Side."

"Send her Skilled? How would you do that?"

Germaine drew her breath through clenched teeth. "Literally. Maman does not say it in such words, but she wants me to kill Skilled."

Sally stared at the other woman. Sally didn't doubt for a second that Germaine could and would act as she must to preserve herself and her Skill. The weak of character and purpose were not Brought to their Skill. It couldn't be done to a weak vessel. Such people tended to shatter, or die as Mallory had.

Except, thought Sally, in her own case. She was the exception that proved the rule. "I suppose Maman doesn't want me dead, huh?" Sally tried to make it sound funny.

Germaine smiled again. "Maman is, shall we say, quite specific."

Sally considered that. She had only ever known one Necromancer, Gavin in her Bringing Five, and she hadn't even stayed around long enough to see him Brought to Skill. "I've been told the dead are dull," she ventured.

"Vengeance, jealousy, that's what keeps the dead here. That much of my pitch was true, about the two paths. Love is what allows one to pass on through the Other Side to greater things. It is hate that keeps one hanging on. Only the obsessed stay."

"Just like life," Sally said. "Love sets you free. Hate lasts forever."

Germaine laughed. "And sometimes Skill can illuminate the difference."

Sally liked the way Germaine's brown eyes gleamed with her laughter. The two of them were the same height, which could be nice in romantic situations. She smiled back at Germaine. She couldn't remember the last time a smile had felt so natural. It had been so long since Sally had allowed herself to be close to anyone. "If the dead are so dull, what makes your Maman a live wire?"

Germaine didn't quite lose her smile this time, but the pain flickered back across her face. "Her great work. On the Other Side."

"What great work? What is she doing over there?"

"I don't know." Germaine tugged at her fingers. "She does not listen when I ask her questions. She only tells me what she wants me to do. As I said, she is quite specific."

Sally tried another tack. "Specific, how?"

"Which Skilled she needs from me," Germaine said.

Had Sally misheard? "You mean which Skills, right?"

"No." Germaine shook her head, stared sadly at her hands. Sally noticed the broad, blunt fingers, nails worn with work. "Which Skilled. By name."

It came to Sally then, what bothered her. "Killing people by name, that's not need, that's vengeance."

“Not Maman!” Germaine looked shocked. “She was ever too gentle. She is not that way.”

Sally shook her head. Germaine’s story didn’t hang together. Maman’s ambitions had been misstated somehow. “I can’t explain it, not yet, but I know something’s wrong here.”

“You know through Skill?” asked Germaine.

“No...” Sally laughed, her voice suddenly bare as winter trees. “That’s not how it works for me.”

Germaine took Sally’s slim, pale fingers in her large hands. The warm pressure of Germaine’s grip caused Sally to gasp, made her want to weep. She was so touch-hungry, she could have drowned in the rough calluses. She almost didn’t hear Germaine say, “Maman can wait. The dead are patient. Girl, tell me, you wear pain in your Colors like a bloodshot eye. What has happened to you?”

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In four years, Sally had never once told the story of her Bringing Five—Mallory’s cerebral hemorrhage at the Bringing, Ben’s dying in the van wreck as they fled, Wei-Lin Bringing Sally to Skill while they both stood knee-deep in a culvert, Sally’s panicked desertion of her friends and teacher—but once she began to talk, it tumbled out. As she spoke, Germaine sat with silent patience, hands upon Sally’s wrists, as if to draw her from the drowning pool of her memories.

“I was Brought to Skill as a Finder, because I wanted to help people,” Sally finally said through her memories of scrambling through Sonoma Valley vineyards in the dark.

“Oh, girl,” Germaine whispered. The other woman’s slower breathing was exactly half the tempo of hers, matching every other breath. The musky scent of Germaine’s sweat mingled with the mellow guacamole and the salty oil tang of the chips. Plates rattled in the kitchen as distant voices murmured in Spanish.

Sally wept into the intimate space between them. “Some Finder. I can’t find my car keys. Some days I can’t even find my *car*.”

“I thought you’d hotwired that little Toyota.” Germaine spoke softly, laving gentle humor on Sally’s raw heart. She kissed one of Sally’s hands.

“It’s the only way I can drive without my keys.” Sally sniffled, wishing Germaine would kiss her hand again. “If Mallory failed hard, then I’m the softest kind of failure. I ran away from the dead and the living. I didn’t ever want to hear about Skill again.” She sobbed outright. “And to hell with Skill. Germaine, I’ve never even read Colors since.”

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Sally woke to the sharp smell of eggs and onions. A bitter tang of coffee

wafted through the sunlit room. She rolled over, hugging a pillow. It was faintly oily, a hair scent, overlaying the aroma of another person's sleep. Sally smiled. She was in Germaine's bedroom, on her futon, looking out into the spring pecan trees and the warm sunlight of an April morning in Austin.

Clinking plates echoed gently from the kitchen. Sally sat up and looked for her socks. They hadn't made love, they hadn't even kissed, but Germaine had held Sally while she cried, then rocked her to sleep.

Sally hadn't been touched on purpose by another human being since Wei-Lin had pressed her forehead with blood and ditchwater, to seal the Skill. She had come to believe she would never be touched again.

"I can hear you breathing," called Germaine from the kitchen.

"Yeah, I'm awake." Sally immediately yawned. "Where's the john?"

"To the right, next to the closet. Mind the litter box."

Sally shuffled into the bathroom, wondering what Germaine's late Maman had to say about last night.

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The eggs were firm, with runny yolks staring up like the eyes of surprised clowns. The onions were lightly grilled, just enough to ease the sting, and Germaine had yesterday's sourdough from Texas French Bread, still chewy and full of body. Sally turned down the threatened soysage, preferring to hold out for greasy meat later in the day somewhere else.

"Vengeance, hmm?" Germaine sipped on a mug of Central Market roasted blend as Sally buttered her bread.

Sally had been deciphering the coffee mug's animal shelter logo, and was caught off guard. "What?"

"You said vengeance, not need. Talking about Maman. Yesterday evening at El Azteca."

"Oh, yeah." Sally cut around the yolks with the side of her fork, shoving the peppered white slivers through a little pile of salsa. "Here's how I see it," she said, recapturing last night's train of thought. "If your Maman needed Skills for her, uh, great work, she would ask you for Skills. Why ask for individuals? She should be saying, 'Germaine, I need a Finder,' not 'Germaine, I need Sally Prescott.'"

"I don't know," Germaine said. "It seemed logical to me. It's not like the Skilled have a directory or something. You can only get so much from reading Colors. I mean, look at you. I knew you were Skilled, I knew you were deeply upset, and I knew you were very sharp. That's why I followed you into that crummy little restaurant in Lockhart."

Cold stole into Sally's heart. "So you just wanted something from me, that was it, huh?"

Germaine seemed much less frightened and angry in the morning sun of her little apartment. "Because I thought you could help me discover whether Maman is lying."

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Dishes cleared, they sat across the kitchen table from one another holding hands. Germaine cleared her throat, then launched into the formal introduction of the Skilled. "My Five was Brought by Aristides, a Skilled from Haiti. He was Brought by Marie-Paul, who was Brought by Carlito, and so on back to Izangoma Mbele, Master at the head of our Bringing. Ours is a slave line, Brought generation to generation in the dark of night in fire and blood."

Sally bowed her head in respect. Skills from slave lines often had great power, but it was power bought with a multiplicity of pain.

"I was first of my Five," Germaine went on, "Brought to Skill as a Seeker. Pallas was second, Brought to Skill as a Healer. Michel-Michel was third, Brought to Skill as a Venator—a huntsman. Joseph was fourth, Brought to Skill as an Advocate. Lisette was fifth, Brought to Skill as a Temptress."

Germaine stopped talking. She sat quietly, looking into Sally's eyes with a formal expectancy.

"My Five—" Sally stopped for a moment. Even as she'd told Germaine the story last night, she'd never laid it out in the simple formalisms. "I ... was Brought by Wei-Lin, a Skilled from San Francisco. She had been Brought by Cassidy, who was Brought by Hiroshige, and so on back to Hildegard, Mistress at the head of our Bringing."

"Thank you," said Germaine.

"Thank you." Sally stared at her hands clasped within Germaine's for a moment, then spoke again. "Aristides must have liked powerful Skills. No Butchers or Bakers or Candlestick Makers in your Five."

Germaine made a face, holding in a laugh. "In none of his Fives, most likely."

"That's not how Wei-Lin taught our Five to think about Skill."

"Hmm?" Germaine invited without demand.

Sally sighed, stared out the window at the mockingbirds in the pecan trees as she remembered brocaded chairs and the maroon fall of tapestries in opulent rooms above the Mission District. Five of them, with their Bringer, sipping a tawny port while they eagerly discussed the ways they each wanted to work in the world.

She thought of Wei-Lin's words. "My Bringer taught us that Skill is, well, it's a way to get things done," she told Germaine. "In our Five Mallory wanted to be a Projective. She saw that as a path to power in business and politics. Petra just wanted to sculpt." Sally paused. "Wei-Lin said everyone has Skill, even though most people never display more than a little bit of talent. She said that's why there are Wild Skills, people that were never Brought. We're all born with it. But however we come to our power, we only get to choose once."

"The old problem of Skill." Germaine tugged her lip. "Aristides hates that. All things are possible, but you can choose only one. He has dreams of organizing a world of Skilled, building powerful Fives to make changes for everyone." She laughed. "He also thinks reading Colors is little more than a parlor trick. But that's most of what there is to Seeking. My Skill."

Sally felt the same little mental jump she had in the restaurant, like a puzzle piece falling into the pattern. Was her Skill stirring once more? The idea frightened her, but it also pleased her. She turned the newborn puzzle around in her head, considering what Germaine had told her. This wasn't about Maman. Aristides' ambition underlay Germaine's problem, surely as the sun rose in the east. "Aristides told you that?" she asked. "About organizing the world of Skilled?"

"Yes." Germaine slipped one hand out of Sally's lingering grasp to sip from her coffee. Her face settled into an unaccustomed stillness. Sally wondered what echoed in Germaine's memories.

"Slave lines," Germaine continued, "we have a different view. Kind of like witch lines among the white folks. Having a few predecessors burned, not too different from having a few hands chopped off. 'Never more' is what Aristides says. Skill is a way to make sure things get done, to make sure some things never happen again. At least," she paused to sip again, "not to us."

"Skill is a way to make sure things get done.' That's very coercive," Sally said in a careful voice. Her thinking was getting better, clearer, like being back in the apartment with Wei-Lin. Being pushed to think was a good feeling. "Top down, authoritarian logic. Not at all how my Five was taught. Not how I was led to believe that Skilled work together."

"Hmm." Germaine continued. "Aristides wants things to happen, for him, for his people. He sees Skill as a way to make it so. I wanted to be a Seeker, so I Sought for him for a few years before I moved on."

"And the rest of your Five?"

"Still with Aristides, I suppose. We don't talk much since I left New York."

Sally worked the puzzle in her mind. It was like rediscovering muscles she'd forgotten she ever had. "Tell me, did Maman come to you last night?"

Germaine smiled broadly. “I never slept, girl. I spent all night with my nose in your honey hair and thought bad thoughts.”

This time, they both laughed for real.

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The two of them looked at the tattered sheet of paper Germaine had pulled from the refrigerator door from under a pair of “Free Tibet” magnets. Nine pairs of names and skills were written on it, each line of words radiating out from an invisible center. They were like a penciled sunburst coming from a blank hole in a paper sky.

“This is them?”

“Yes,” said Germaine heavily. “Maman’s list. I woke up one night standing at the kitchen counter. Had a twelve-inch kitchen knife in my right hand and a pencil in my left. Don’t usually write left-handed.”

“I can tell.” The writing was blocky, odd, uneven. Sally turned the paper in a slow circle on the kitchen table. Unsurprisingly, she didn’t know any of them. “Five of these names look French to me.”

“Six or seven, maybe. George is a perfectly good French name, and so’s Nancy.”

“Or Haitian?”

Germaine shrugged. “Maman knows who Maman knows.”

“I don’t see any pattern in the Skills.”

“And?”

“Well, there was a pattern in your Bringing Five. Wei-Lin would have called that a ‘power Five.’ My Five, we were mixed. She used to call us a ‘basketball Five.’”

Germaine sputtered coffee as she laughed, spraying brown drops across the hit list. “What, girl? You jacking me!”

“No, no, like a pick-up basketball team. You know, a Crafter *and* a Necromancer *and* a Projective. No theme, no mission. Just teaching people to use what they have. Not all organized like Aristides’ dark-side social activism.”

“And these Skills?”

“If your Maman is executing a great work on the Other Side, there would be a pattern. She would look for binding Skills, or reaching Skills, or destructive Skills. Not this random collection.”

“Maybe she’s filling in gaps.” Germaine didn’t seem to believe her own

words.

Sally tried again, the puzzle in her head continuing to shift. “What obsesses Maman enough to keep her close on the Other Side for this great work, as you put it? Vengeance? Hatred? She must have been a good human being to raise a nice girl like you. How did she find so much bitterness later in her life?”

“I don’t know,” said Germaine. “I just don’t know. As Maman got older, she drifted away. Too many dead to talk to. But she never held things hard in her heart, not even near her end.”

“And now this woman wages war in heaven?” Sally snorted. “Come on, Germaine. Something doesn’t fit. Your Maman wouldn’t be stalking Skilled now, not if she never did in life.” Aristides, on the other hand, she thought, sounded like a man who would do anything.

“But it is truly Maman in my dreams. I see her Colors.”

“All right. You see Maman’s Colors in your dreams. So tell me, what do these people have in common besides being known to Maman?”

Germaine stared at the paper. “I cannot say. But I know of a Venator, a huntress, out on the west side of town. She’s a busy woman, but she sometimes makes time for Skilled with problems. She might help us.”

“Venator, huh?”

“They’re pretty close to what the unSkilled think of as psychics. Object resonance, clairvoyance, that kind of stuff.”

“Speaking of psychics, I think I can find my car today,” Sally said.

They both smiled.

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The Venator’s house was up on Cat Mountain in West Austin, a rambling brick ranch home of the sort usually found with expensive British or Japanese four-wheel-drive vehicles out front. The green Range Rover in the driveway was true to form. A little Mexicano in dark blue work clothes hunched over in the pansy bed, ignoring Sally’s battered gold Toyota as it pulled into the concrete driveway.

Sally’s nerves had gotten the better of her. “So, what, we knock and say, ‘Hi, we’re Skilled?’”

Germaine pursed her lips. Somehow, Sally thought, even that was cute. “You been running since that night in the wine country, girl. There’s an etiquette to these things that you’ve forgotten.”

Or never learned, thought Sally, as Germaine rang the doorbell. Sally wished she had gone to the Laundromat for a change of clothes. Germaine looked terrific in

a pale green silk pantsuit with a little round cap in red, black, and green Afro-Caribbean colors. Sally wore the same cotton print blouse from yesterday, the one with the flying fish and the beer bottles. Not to mention barbecue stains. Her jeans felt grungy and tight.

The woman who answered the door was pure Junior League, a former debutante without a hair out of place. She looked at them both briefly, then glanced down the street. "You all'd better come on in."

The Venator wore a starched white oxford shirt, khaki pants, and a pair of high-heeled cowboy boots with silver toe-clips. Her frosted blonde hair was stacked up in an echo of a beehive do, and she wore more makeup than Sally used in a year. Her accent was the pure dee corn pone you found among successful attorneys and advertising executives around Austin. She could have been any age from thirty-five to fifty.

"In the kitchen," the woman said, leading them through a limestone-walled living room done in about thirty shades of taupe.

They all gathered at a large butcher-block table under a rack of shiny copper pans that showed no signs of use. The big steel-door refrigerators had some half-hearted children's drawings clipped to them with Bible verse magnets, but the pictures looked lost in the brushed metal immensity. The hum of compressors buzzed in Sally's ears. The kitchen smelled new, like no one had ever cooked in it.

Germaine smiled at the Venator. "Thank you for your time, ma'am," she said in a quiet, formal voice.

"Don't thank me yet." The Venator sounded almost kindly. "You have come to me, so you should begin."

"My name is Germaine, and I am a Seeker. I was Brought by Aristides, a Skilled from Haiti. Aristides was Brought by Marie-Paul, who was Brought by Carlito, and so back to Izangoma Mbele, Master at the head of our Bringing. Ours is a slave line, Brought generation to generation in the dark of night in fire and blood."

Both women looked expectantly at Sally. She trembled, palms sweating. Yesterday when she had told Germaine her line of Bringing was the first time Sally had recited the formula since the night of fire and water where Mallory and Ben had died. But this ritual was expected, even normal among Skilled. Sally was terrified, her new-found confidence in Skill deserting her.

"I can see fear in your Colors, young woman," said the Venator, "but life has certain patterns. Believe that I will honor your trust."

Refusing to think about it further, Sally opened her mouth and spoke. "My name is Sally, and I am a Finder." The lie lay easily on her lips before she realized that, perhaps, finally she wasn't lying any more. "I was Brought to Skill by Wei-Lin,

a Skilled from San Francisco. She was Brought by Cassidy, who was Brought by Hiroshige, and so on back to Hildegard, Mistress at the head of our Bringing.”

The Venator looked surprised. “I might have guessed you were of a witch line.”

“In a manner of speaking, she is,” Germaine said, “as fire and water both dominate her past. But quite recently and not in the way that you think.”

“No matter. I am Billie Sue, and I am a Venator. I was Brought to Skill by Laytha, a Skilled from Fentress. She was Brought by Wayne, who was Brought by Flora Lee, and so on back to Joanna, Mistress at the head of our Bringing. Ours is a witch line, Brought generation to generation in the face of trial by fire and water.”

“Thank you, Billie Sue,” said Sally.

“There’s always a price to pay somewhere, even though I don’t often collect it personally. Now what brings you girls here?” It was clear Billie Sue was pressed for time, but she spoke with patience and grace even as she glanced at the clock above the sink.

“I have a problem in the Skill.” Germaine smoothed the hit list out on the butcher block. “Sally thinks I am not seeing it properly.”

“We’re looking for the connection between these Skilled,” Sally added in a rush.

Billie Sue picked up the paper, rotating it slowly in her hand. She touched the scrawled graphite of the penciled words, gently rubbed the vacancy in the middle. She held it up to the light, examined the watermark in the paper, then glanced at Germaine. “This your hand that wrote this?”

“Asleep, with my off hand.” Germaine flexed her left hand, studying it as if it were newly sprouted from her wrist.

“Not you, then.” Billie Sue handed the paper back to Germaine. “Someone writing through you. I reckon you have a theory about whom, but I don’t want to hear it yet. Give me a telephone number, and copy that list in your true hand. I need to think, to hunt some on this.”

Germaine pulled a business card out of her silk jacket, scribbled on the back with cramped, tiny writing as she rewrote the hit list. Sally caught a glimpse of the face of the card as Germaine passed it to Billie Sue, saw the words “at law.” She gave Germaine a sidelong glare.

“Thank you, Billie Sue,” said Germaine. “I am in your debt.”

“And I will answer for her debt at need,” Sally added, dredging up the formula from Wei-Lin’s lectures years earlier.

“The debt belongs to all of us.” Billie Sue rubbed Germaine’s card with the fingers of her right hand. “You all know where to find the door. I’m fixing to leave in a moment myself, so don’t set around in the driveway too long.”

* * * *

Sally drove down Cat Mountain toward Ranch Road 2222, finding their way back into town. The steep street lined with juniper confounded her perspective, so she concentrated on following the curb line. “I saw your card. Back there.” It was a challenge, the first fight brewing in their not-quite relationship.

“So?”

“You apparently forgot to tell me you were a lawyer.” Sally found her voice hardening in spite of herself.

“What does it matter?” Germaine’s voice rose in pitch. “I told you about my dead Maman, I’m supposed to mention Columbia Law? Would you care if I was a glass blower?”

“Lawyers are different.” Sally felt sullen, stupid, even as she said it. Out of the corner of her eye, Germaine seemed to flare red. Was she seeing Colors as well, now?

“Lawyers are people too,” Germaine grumbled. “We get bills in the mail and pee sitting down just like everyone else.”

That last image broke Sally’s concentration, completely derailed her anger. Relationships, like Skill, took practice. Thank God this was just a little stumble. Giggling, she said, “I thought you paid law clerks to pee for you.”

Germaine’s big smile returned. “No, they just wipe for us.”

They laughed together all the way to the highway.

* * * *

“Look, honey.” Billie Sue’s voice crackled over Germaine’s cell phone, dropping in and out. Sally hated the gadgets, but Germaine had pulled it out of her jacket and handed it to Sally before disappearing into the Travis County Courthouse, “on business.” Sally drove repeatedly around the block, looking for a place to park and watching her gas gauge fall. “I found a connection, but there’s a powerful lot of Skill watching those names. You girls need to be careful.”

Sally tapped the brakes, slowing to make a turn. “We’re careful, I promise. What did you find?” She hung a left onto Lavaca Street, to quarter the far side of her little drive while passing the Governor’s Mansion for the seventh time in the past few minutes.

“Those names, they were all Brought to Skill by teachers who were Brought by Marie-Paul. She’s the one that Brought your friend’s teacher Aristides to Skill.”

Billie Sue pronounced the name wrong, “Heiress-titties.” “Everyone on that list is from the same slave line as Germaine, all from three teachers, including hers.”

* * * *

“Who Brought your mother to Skill?” Sally asked Germaine. Sally drove too fast down Guadalupe, toward the river.

Germaine bit her lip for a moment. “Marie-Paul, who was Brought by Carlito. Maman and I, we’re out of the same slave line.”

Marie-Paul, who’d Brought the teachers of everyone on Germaine’s hit list. More of the puzzle fell together in Sally’s head. Her Skill seemed to itch, like new skin growing under a scab. She pulled over to the curb in a bus zone, drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “You said her English is better, too. Better how?”

“Maman is speaking to me in English, not French or Creole.”

Sally plunged into the depths of her intuition. “Germaine, it ain’t your Maman talking to you from the Other Side. It could be her voice and her Colors, but it ain’t your Maman. It’s Aristides, and maybe Marie-Paul through him. They want you to hunt down people from the Fives of Marie-Paul’s Fives. You’re being pushed to kill people from your own slave line.”

“We don’t ever do that.” Germaine whispered to the window glass. “That’s against everything we stand for. ‘Never again,’ he said.”

Sally grinned her nasty grin. The puzzle in her head made more sense all the time, the pieces sliding together in increasingly complex patterns. “Coercive, ain’t it? I think Aristides is tracking down people who know too much about him, people that don’t want to play his game any more. Eliminating loose cannons in his effort to organize Skilled, maybe picking up a posse on the Other Side in the process—just as a little bonus. All through your Maman.”

Germaine sucked her breath through her teeth, her entire body seeming to loom larger inside the little car. “Nobody uses my Maman that way and walks free, not on This Side or the Other.”

“Agreed,” said Sally, “but we need help for this.”

* * * *

Sally grabbed a space in the parking lot of the Faulk Central Library, the mother ship of the Austin Public Library system. She marched in the glass doors, driven by the shifting puzzle in her head, while Germaine shoved quarters into the parking meter, then hurried to catch up.

“Where you going, girl?” Germaine gasped as she followed Sally up the stairs inside. “You peeled away from that curb and made for the library like your hair was on fire.”

“Reference.” Sally continued to work her mental puzzle as she marched across the second floor reading area and through the open book stacks.

Germaine persisted. “Reference to what?”

Sally walked to the aisle stocked with telephone directories from around the country. In one swift move, she grabbed a Pacific Bell directory for Marin County, opened it in her hand, and stabbed a finger down, without ever looking. Sally stared Germaine in the eye, defensive pride overflowing her face.

Germaine craned her neck down to read the listing over the tip of Sally’s finger. “Stabile, Petra. It shows a Mill Valley post office box for the address.”

“From my Five.” Sally’s voice was tight. “You came to me for help, I Found us help.”

“I thought you said you didn’t know where she was.”

“Germaine, I couldn’t remember where the *library* was until I led us through the door.”

The two women looked at each other, sharing big, stupid smiles. Sally wondered when she and Germaine had become “us.”

She felt good to be an “us.”

* * * *

Back in Germaine’s apartment Sally sat on a Bedouin pouf, clutching the cordless phone like a safety line. The receiver clicked as someone answered. “Hello?” A woman’s voice.

Sally wasn’t sure from the sound that it was Petra, but the puzzle in her head added more pieces. “Petra, this is Sally.”

There was a silence, only the echo of the line and very faint crosstalk in some tonal Asian language. Sally waited out the silence. She could hear Petra breathe, slow and ragged. “Sally. Sally Prescott?”

“Yeah.” They’d had months of continuous contact, a fellowship deeper than most siblings ever had, followed by four years of absolute silence.

“I—we—thought you were dead.” Petra took another deep breath. “In the hills above Highway 12 that night.”

“I’m right here. On This Side.”

“Gavin looked for months, on the weekends, trying to find your, um, your body.”

Sally could imagine pale, wiry little Gavin in Doc Martens and old blue jeans

crossing estate fences and climbing through culverts searching for her. It was the kind of thing he would do.

Petra continued. “Wei-Lin died, two weeks after you disappeared. Internal bleeding from the wreck.”

“Oh.” Sally’s eyes stung. Ben’s fighting in the van had caused the wreck where he’d died. But Wei-Lin ... a third fatality from her Bringing Five. “Oh.”

Had Wei-Lin worried over her? Perhaps not. There were failures from time to time among the Bringing Fives, although few as spectacular as theirs.

The years stood between her and Petra, blocking the telephone line, guarding the three deaths they shared. Sally felt her nerve eroding, her certainty of the solution ebbing away under the pressure of the lost time, the lost lives. Even Ben, whom she had cursed ever since that night, was a sudden tear in her eye.

“Girl?” whispered Germaine, stroking Sally’s hair.

“Where are you?” Petra suddenly snapped, her voice back to life, colored with anger and relief. “Are you safe?”

“Safe, yes.” Sally realized it might be a lie, but in another sense was also truer than it had been in years. “Safe for now, and trying to solve a big problem.”

“All right.” Petra’s voice was still tense. “If it brought you out of the woodwork after all this time, it must be a real prize-winner.”

Urged by the puzzle in her head, Sally rushed into her solution. “I need your help. You and Gavin, if you can find him, and we need a Projective.”

“Gavin’s right here, dear. And we have lots of friends, if you know what I mean. When and where do you need us?”

Sally realized that Petra wasn’t even going to ask what was wrong, or why it had taken this long for Sally to tell them she was alive. Petra didn’t have to know more than Sally’s need. The trust of the Five, that she had envied, that she had longed for since her terrible Bringing, was as real for her as she had ever dreamed.

“Austin, Texas, as quickly as you can get here.” Sally had Germaine’s American Express on the low table before the pouf. It was a platinum card, the first Sally had ever seen. “I have a credit card here.”

“Oh, Sally.” Petra sighed. “Don’t worry about money. We’ll be there. Just give me a number to call when we get in.”

* * * *

Against all her expectations, Sally slept well that night. She wasn’t willing to share a bed with Germaine again yet, especially so soon, but they had kissed goodnight before Sally curled up in the basket chair in Germaine’s living room and

passed out into a dark, dreamless sleep.

The next morning she awoke to another fresh-cooked breakfast. The odors were a little more challenging than yesterday's as Sally slipped into a seat at the kitchen table.

"Cheese and eggplant on toast. Grow my own vegetables, you know, over at the Sunshine Community Gardens." Germaine was too damned cheerful in the mornings. "All the vitamins and minerals nature ever intended for you."

Sally thought it tasted like a salted sponge, but still she gulped hers down. The puzzle slid back and forth in her head, trying different configurations. Sally felt whole for the first time in years, her Skill returning in confident strength. "Did you dream last night?"

Germaine nodded, her mouth full of eggplant. "Maman," she mumbled.

"Speaking English?" Sally's voice was sharp as her eyes narrowed.

"Don't be like that. You know I believe in you."

"Well, what did she say?"

Germaine shook her head, eyes now on her plate. "I don't remember."

Sally stared at Germaine, willed her to speak, flexing her newfound power of silence.

"Maman..." Germaine's words stumbled. "Maman says she just needs one Skilled right now."

Sally waited out the pained pause.

"Sally, Maman wants you."

How did Sally's name get on the hit list so fast? She wondered if the Venator had sold them out. It didn't matter. The puzzle writhed in her head. "Not Maman, Germaine, but Aristides," Sally said firmly. "Aristides wants me."

Germaine stared at her plate again. "I'm sorry."

Sally ignored her. It all made sense, the puzzle clicking and shifting in her head. "If I'm on the hit list, it's because Aristides knows about me. Maman might even have given you my name to warn you, depending on how much control she still has. But if I'm right about Aristides working up a power grab, building Fives of Skilled on the Other Side while eliminating his loose ends on This Side, then I've become one of those loose ends. The most dangerous one. Aristides must have people flying here from New York right now, surely a good Venator at the least. Guns kill a hell of a lot faster than Skill."

“What will you do?”

Sally realized that she hadn't told Germaine her plan with respect to Petra and Gavin. Hell, she hadn't told herself her plan yet. She and the puzzle in her head were making it up as they went along, running on Skilled intuition and low-grade panic. “I'm going to lead us on a great work of our own. We're going to assemble a Five with Gavin and Petra and whoever they bring for a Projective, and that Five is going to help Maman. But we need a sacred space, a spiritually safe place close to the Other Side. I think I know where, not far from the airport, actually. That number you had me give Gavin and Petra was your cell phone, right?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. They'll call when they get in. We've got to get moving.”

Germaine stood, walked to the sink and set her plate down. “Where to?”

“Got any bolt cutters? We're going to church.”

* * * *

The abandoned Montopolis Church of Christ stood in four or five acres of wildflowers, mostly bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush. It was an old black church in an old black neighborhood, hand built from scrap timber and corrugated sheet metal. An enormous live-oak tree rose just to the east side of the ragged building, punctuating the wide carpet of blue and red flowers. The congregation was long departed for better quarters, but the church still anchored the neighborhood within the flow of history.

Sally drove past the church, turned off Montopolis Drive to park along Walker Lane. The neighborhood around the church had never been wealthy, but it had decayed to a serial palimpsest of low riders, rusted pickups, unmowed lawns, abandoned swing sets, and all the other paraphernalia of urban poverty in the New South. Sally and Germaine left the gold Toyota parked behind a burned-out Cadillac frame-down on the pavement and walked back toward the church. Germaine carried the bolt cutters from her tool kit wrapped in an Indian blanket, while Sally had a small gear bag.

“How'd you know about this place?” Germaine asked.

Sally laughed. “You mean, because I'm white?”

“No. Because it's an odd part of town.”

“Best wildflowers within twenty miles of downtown, right here. Come Sunday, all the kids will be out here in their Easter clothes for the annual photo. When I was in high school I used to drop by every spring to take pictures and admire the scene.”

They crossed the sandy turnout that marked the remains of the church's

driveway and walked a narrow path through the wildflowers toward the church door. Bees buzzed, servicing the riot of red and blue as well as their more reticent neighbors, pale wild clover and maroon wine cups. The meadowed yard smelled of green and growing things.

The church steps led to a narrow white door, made of one-by-four planks. For all that the church exuded an air of elegant decay, someone from the congregation must have been maintaining it. The door was clean, the white paint bright, Bible verses painstakingly lettered in black across the header trim and the planks of the door itself.

“The entrance of thy words giveth light,” Germaine read.

“For a great door and effectual is opened,” Sally added. “Strive to enter in by the narrow door.”

“I can see why you wanted to come here.” Germaine unwrapped the bolt cutters. “This whole building has powerful Colors.” She stood close to the door, shielding her hands with her body as she worked the bolt cutters.

Sally didn’t yet feel fully comfortable with reading Colors, although the thought no longer frightened her. She looked back across the bees and the wildflowers at the desultory traffic on Montopolis Drive. No one was watching them.

The padlock snapped under the pressure of the bolt cutters. Germaine grunted as she eased it off the hasp. She shoved at the rusted knob, wincing as the hinges shrieked. “Open the door and let your sister in.”

Sally took the bolt cutters from Germaine’s hand and stepped inside. “Don’t forget the phone.”

* * * *

“Hello? Sally?” Petra’s voice echoed from the church doorway.

Sally stepped back from the makeshift workspace she and Germaine had created. Two Indian blankets lay in front of the old pews shoved away from the preacher’s lectern, surrounded by candles and incense boats, with lavender scattered about. Several hand mirrors and two small basins filled with bottled water hastily purchased at Eckerd’s perched on the blankets. It was as close as she could come to the feel of the teaching room Wei-Lin had used for their Five. Her heart jumped with memory and anticipation. “Come in.”

Germaine hurried over to the door. “Come on, girl, don’t let anyone see you out there.”

Petra stepped in, followed by Gavin and a trim, handsome, white-haired man in a worn pilot’s jacket, one of those green ones, not leather. Sally looked over the old man for a moment—was he really a pilot?—then turned to Petra.

Her Five-mate was tall and pale, just over six feet, with a nose so large it would have ruined the looks of a smaller woman. Petra's black hair was cut in the same Prince Valiant she had worn years earlier, shot now with lines of gray. Her large brown eyes stared steadily at Sally. Petra's mouth creased into a smile. "Sally, it's really you."

Small, wiry, with that indefinably English pasty complexion, Gavin stepped past Petra. "Lovey, you *do* live and breathe."

He gathered Sally into a tight hug, which Petra joined. Sally felt as if she was among family, the way she had always imagined family was supposed to look and act.

"Gavin, Petra, I ... thank you."

Petra shook her head. "You're alive, that's enough for me." She let go of Sally, stuck a hand out toward Germaine.

"Germaine, I'm Petra."

"I gathered." Germaine's voice was dry as she took the offered hand. "And the little man glued to Sally must be Gavin."

"Guilty as charged," said Gavin over Sally's shoulder, all grinning yellow teeth with bad British dental work.

"Sally, Germaine, this is Robert."

"Suits," Robert said, in a gentle voice with just a trace of the Midwest, slow, polite ... charming. Sally warmed to him immediately. "Robert Matthew Suits. A Projective. Ain't crashed one yet."

Sally watched Germaine shake Robert's hand, formal as two bankers meeting. As Robert turned toward her, Sally shook his hand as well, and smiled. "I'm glad you're here, Robert. You've come a long way for someone you don't know."

Robert met her eye, a bright smile of his own dawning. "I owe Petra a debt of Skill. We agreed an urgent service for her long lost Five-mate seemed worthy repayment."

Gavin paced the interior of the church. "Nice place you gels have here. Good Colors, too. Perfect for power Skill work."

Sally looked around the dusty church. It was hot in the late afternoon, even for Texas in April. Smudged windows high up covered with chicken wire let in muted light. Mismatched old pews, wood dried and cracked with years of neglect, filled the sanctuary at random angles. Sally and Germaine's vandalism of the church had been as respectful as possible.

The walls were odd patches of paneling, cut wood and bare beams where the

corrugated skin of the building showed through. It was a place of hand-built quiet, of peace, of spiritual centering. Sally felt the echo of generations of choirs calling and responding, congregations clapping their way to a vision of glory she had never shared but would nevertheless borrow shelter from now.

“What are we doing here?” Robert asked softly. “What is your need?”

The puzzle in Sally’s head rolled into a new position with such a firm movement she expected to hear an audible snap. “Going to the Other Side to stop a very dangerous man.”

Robert and Gavin shared glances, while Petra just stared at Sally, her mouth crooked with pride. Sally smiled at all of them as they gathered into a circle, like any good Five. “First, though, let us greet each other properly.”

Sally let her Color sense focus for the first time since Ben had died, since Wei-Lin had Brought her to Skill. Their ad hoc Five blazed with strength, curiosity, impatience, love, all the Colors of active, healthy minds, all of them tinted with the overlay of Skill. It was her turn to lead, finally after all these years. “My name is Sally, and I am a Finder. I was Brought to Skill by Wei-Lin, a Skilled from San Francisco....”

* * * *

They each sat cross-legged, in a circle on the Indian blankets. Outside, the day faded into a burnt orange sunset, the creaky screech of the gathering grackles subsiding into the lonely peeps of nighthawks and the chittering shrill of Mexican freetail bats. Scored with the smoky odor of a single candle, the smell of lavender hung in the air around them, mixed with the old paper scent of stored hymnals and the gentle rot of the aging church.

“Finder, Seeker, Crafter, Necromancer, Projective.” Petra shook her head, smiling at Sally. “You don’t do anything the customary way.”

“I go my own way.” Sally shrugged. “I guess we all go my way, for now.”

“We are your Five,” said Gavin formally.

“We are your Five,” echoed the others.

“We are here to craft with Skill.” Sally saw the Colors of her Five blaze with expectation. The puzzle continued to slide and click in her head, helped her to the right words. She surprised herself as the formalisms came to her lips. “We are here to right a wrong done with Skill, by Skilled, to Skilled. This is not a matter for the authorities, nor is it a matter for the ultimate judge of our spirits. This is a matter for Skill. And so we are here to perform a great work of Skill.”

One by one, she made eye contact around the circle. The other four of her Five stared back, eyes clear in the gathering dark, gleaming in the light of the single candle.

Sally studied the puzzle in her head for a moment longer, then laid out her plan. “We are here so that the Necromancer can open the way to the Other Side. The Crafter will make forms for the Seeker and the Finder to travel there without the death of our bodies. The Projective will propel those forms across the opened way to the Other Side. Once there, we will release a deceased Necromancer who is under compulsion, and Bring her to Vivimancy. As a Vivimancer she shall reach into This Side and compel her tormentors to lay aside their plots and snares. This is our great work of Skill, to remedy a greater misuse of Skill.”

Petra reached into her small satchel and removed a block of modeling clay. She looked at Sally and Germaine, her expression mild. “Very well, Sally. Gavin and Robert will take counsel together on the best opening of the way to the Other Side. From you and Germaine, I need a lock of hair and a drop of blood.” She began to roll the clay between her fingers, then added without looking back up, “I hope we will eventually learn the story behind all this.”

“But of course,” Sally said as she caught Petra’s small smile.

Germaine reached over, stroked Sally’s hair. “May I?” Sally glanced at Germaine, who held a small pair of silver scissors twinkling in the candlelight, matching the twinkle in the other woman’s eye.

* * * *

Sally had begun to see almost purely with her Color sense. Gavin had said it was the only way to see on the Other Side, and that they should quickly find the habit. After years of fearful avoidance, Sally was amazed at how easy and comfortable it seemed.

They were on their third candle. In Color, it glowed red and green, the Colors of heat and life. The entire church around them had a purple glow, the Color of old magic and contented souls. Ripples of paleness ran through the purple, the simple self-awareness of the building layered into place from generations of worship, fervor, and belief.

“Never seen a church so alive,” Petra remarked over her working fingers. “Been in European cathedrals with less power.”

“A century of gospel choir will do that.” Germaine spoke with obvious effort. Her voice was distant from Sally, for all that they sat with arms and thighs touching. Perhaps it was Sally herself who was distant. Her thoughts echoed in her own head, immersed in Color, while her Skill’s puzzle throbbed gently in time with her breath.

Gavin and Robert sat on each side of Petra, their Colors shot with the white and black of death and the foaming blue of transitions.

Gavin shifted, a ripple in his Color preceding his words. “The door to the Other Side is ready. While you are there, be wary. And do not leave the protection of the church. The further you go from us, the more difficult it will be to retrieve

you.”

Robert’s gentle voice warmed her ears. “When I send the forms to carry you to the Other Side, something may be returned to us. Be forewarned.”

“I am ready,” Petra announced into the silence that followed Robert’s statement.

Sally could feel herself slip into Colors, the puzzle in her head softening with her dissipating sense of self. She heard Germaine’s voice, very distant, whispering words of love. As Petra’s fingers plucked Sally’s Colors to draw her into the form, Sally’s puzzle sharpened again, providing a jerky vision. In the focus of her mind, she saw an automobile, moving fast, passengers Colored with frustration, anger, and violent intent.

“Be wary, Aristides sends his men for us.” From her distant place in the clay between Petra’s fingers, Sally couldn’t tell if she had spoken aloud.

“Hush, sweet Sally,” soothed Petra. “It doesn’t matter now. You have a job to do.”

As she slipped into Robert’s kind hands for the sending, Sally realized her Five had not heeded her words. Guns kill faster than Skill, she thought, having Found a distant matte-black shotgun on its way to her body.

* * * *

“Germaine.” Sally felt ordinary.

The grip on her arm closed a bit tighter. “Here.”

Sally tried to open her eyes, found that indeed she could see only with Color. “Gavin was right.”

“Damnedest Colors I ever saw.”

They sat in the old church, in the circle of the Five. Everything was shades of gray, darkening around the edges of vision like the frames of a very old movie.

“It’s like watching *King Kong*,” Sally whispered to Germaine.

“Or *Battleship Potemkin*.”

The other three of their Five were the only colors within the Colors—dark shapes with a faint red glow at the core, like a banked fire. Sally stood from her lotus seat, looked down to see her own body exude the same muted glow. Germaine appeared translucent, absent of color, as she rose out of her glowing body. The world around them was absolutely devoid of sound other than their own voices. There was no scent at all.

“You have already brought us further than I ever thought to go.” Germaine

noded briefly to Sally, a measure of respect that thrilled Sally's heart. "Now, how do you propose find Maman on This Side?"

"She will be close to you." The puzzle in Sally's head was faint, quiet, but still with her. It agreed.

Hands clasped, they stepped out of the circle of their Five and passed through the door of the church to the porch outside.

The field of dark flowers around the church was filled with old cars, spoke wheels and canvas tops glimmering in the inverse light of a dark moon. Men and women dressed in the style of generations past lounged against the cars and talked quietly to one another. Other than the faint voices, the entire world shared the preternatural quiet of the church. A large old black woman in a flowered shirtwaist dress stood in front of the church door watching them as they emerged.

"Children, you all do not belong here."

"I'm sorry, ma'am." Sally used her best Sunday voice. "We have work that brings us."

"T'ain't your time yet." The old woman's smile was boundlessly sad. "And you'd best not step off that porch unless you want your time to come ahead in a righteous hurry."

Germaine glanced around the churchyard, then back at the old woman. "Why are you still here, ma'am?"

The woman waved at the automobiles behind her. "We're here to help others what need it. Volunteers, to assist as guides for them newly come." She chuckled. "We ain't among the angry ones, nor those so muddled they don't know they passed on. And there's plenty enough folks with sense left after crossing over to come first to a church for help."

"It's good that some have the heart to still give," said Sally. "Bless you and your work, ma'am."

"Thank you, child," the old woman said, bowing her head. "And blessings on you as well."

"Thank you," said Sally. "Ma'am, in your watching here, have you seen a Haitian woman, seeking her daughter?"

The old woman frowned. "Don't reckon I know no Haitians."

"She died in Queens," said Germaine. "New York. But she follows me in my dreams."

"Oh, child. She don't know enough to let go. I'm so sorry."

Germaine shook her head. “Maman was a Necromancer. She knows better.”

The old woman nodded. “I figure you for Skilled, too. Don’t hardly ever get no one from That Side here, unless they’re mighty lost or a powerful dream walker.”

“You were Skilled?” asked Sally.

“My name is Gran Rosie, Brought by Verta Mae of the line of Tituba, with the Skill of Preparation.”

“Witch and slave line both,” said Germaine. “That’s a powerful Bringing, ma’am.”

Gran Rosie’s sad smile slipped onto her face again. “That’s why I’m here. So why are you here, then? No one crosses over with breath in their body just to settle dream ghosts, not even for their momma.”

“A Skilled in New York has abused Maman, forced her to his service,” Germaine replied. “We are here to free her.”

The old woman stepped back, growing smaller as she did so, as if falling down a tunnel. “Lord preserve us. There’s servitude enough in life and here you’re on the trail of slavers of the dead. You all watch your step, girls.” She vanished into a thin dot.

Sally looked around at the field of dark flowers. The old cars, the men and women, were all gone. She could feel the approaching shotgun.

“Maman?” said Germaine.

A thin, small Caribbean woman dressed in black-on-gray gingham check shuffled through the dark flowers toward the porch. At her own back, Sally could feel warmth from the door of the church, the life of the Five inside. She and Germaine were still within their protection. The newcomer was old and wrinkled, with a silver-rimmed tooth in her crazed smile, trailing a thin black thread behind her.

“Louise-Germaine.” Maman spoke crisp English with a neutral accent. “You have not listened to me.”

“Maman.” Sally could hear the desperation in Germaine’s voice, even among the accents of her childhood. “*Qu’est-ce que c’est que vous faites?*”

“Louise-Germaine, you must listen to me.”

“*Non, tu es morte, Maman.*” Germaine kept trying, her voice desperate. “*Ecoutez-moi, tu es morte. Tu jamais n’as bien parlé anglais, pas jamais, Maman.*”

Maman stepped forward, shaking her head, her gait stiff and her face as unemotional as any mask. Even Sally could tell something was wrong with Maman,

more wrong than simply being dead.

Germaine dropped her grip on Sally's arm. Sally looked down at Germaine's hand. The silver scissors hung loose and dull. Sally twisted them from Germaine's grasp, slipping her fingers through the loops, and opened them to cut. Or stab.

"Louise-Germaine." Maman acted as if Germaine had never spoken at all. "Listen."

Sally watched the black thread stretching away from Maman, hanging low across the dark flowers like a drifting spider web, and on down the ghost of Montopolis Drive to disappear into the shadows of the inverse moonlight. Could Aristides' hold on Maman be that literal? Sally set one foot off the porch to try to step around Maman, but felt the puzzle twist in her head, tugging her backward.

Her Skill was fighting her decision. The protection of the church, of her Five, was too strong to abandon. Her left foot, placed down on the ground among the dark flowers, was suddenly corpse cold.

She really should not leave the church, Sally thought. She kept her other foot on the porch.

Maman raised a hand toward Germaine. Sally saw more threads twined between Maman's fingers, like cobwebs clinging to an old rake. Those threads twisted, narrow, blind worms that struggled toward Germaine, who stood facing Maman as a helpless child, mouthing silent words of prayer or pleading.

Sally couldn't reach the thread without stepping away, couldn't free Germaine and Maman without leaving the safety of the porch, and probably her own life.

Germaine had rescued Sally from years of misery, brought her back to face Petra and Gavin and her old ghosts. Sally had wasted so much of her time, her gift, before getting back her Skill—recovered only because of Germaine.

She owed Germaine more than she could ever repay. Sally couldn't let Germaine end this way. She didn't know how much she truly loved the other woman, but her love was sufficient to gift Germaine with her protection.

Ignoring the puzzle in her head, accepting the cold pain from the ground below, Sally stepped off the safety of the porch to walk behind Maman. She brought the silver scissors down and cut the black thread that spun out of Maman's back.

Maman shrieked as if she had been thrown into a fire, Germaine screamed, and, very distantly, Gavin yelled, "Bloody hell, we're not losing you again!"

Then the dark flowers spun together and dragged her down into the cold, hard ground.

* * * *

Sally sat on the running board of a 1935 Cadillac Dual Cowl Phaeton, leaning against the spare tire cover. She felt very cold. She adjusted her bonnet. Her spit curls were slipping loose. The dilapidated church seemed unattainably far away, a lifetime's journey across the sandy driveway. A handsome young black man with natty leather suspenders and a canvas motoring cap leaned against another car a few feet away.

"Gran Rosie asked me to check up on you," he said in a very polite voice. "Seems she was quite taken with you. Are you sure you should be here, ma'am?"

"I'm here to help others what need it." Her prim words echoed somewhere else.

His smile was even more handsome, pale teeth gleaming in the vast gray darkness surrounding them. "Ain't we all? But pretty white girls like you don't usually find their way down to a colored folks church."

"I am Color blind." Sally wondered at the emphasis in her own voice.

"Can't hardly be that," the young man said amiably. "You'd see nothin' at all here, otherwise."

Faint shouts sounded from the distant ramshackle church.

"Sounds like someone's fightin' hard not to come over to This Side." The young man chuckled. "Might ought to have a couple of us strapping lads go help out the side of the angels. You gonna be all right here, missy?"

He touched his cap without waiting for an answer and sauntered across the dark flowers, passing between the old cars. He vanished into a distance much farther than her sight suggested was possible.

Sally adjusted her bonnet again. She didn't think the young man was right about what was happening at the church door. Behind her, tires hissed on sand. Surprised at the sound in the silence, Sally stood to look across the hood of the car on which she had been leaning.

A modern automobile—a new Cadillac, a dark, low wedge with wide black tires—pulled into the sandy drive of the old church. It passed through a 1947 Chrysler Windsor Business Coupe before lurching to a halt. The new Cadillac glowed a faint red, with coruscations of black and white.

Real Colors, thought Sally. Life and death travel together in that car like twins in a formaldehyde bottle. She wanted to step back into the safety of the church—watching dead, wanted to sit in the passenger seat of one of the beautiful old cars and drive off to glory in the inverse moonlight.

The world, her real life, came rushing back to her. Sally wondered if this was how it had been for Ben, drowning inside the van. Germaine's Maman, what had she

seen when she died?

The matte-black shotgun got out of the Cadillac, solid and real to her in the faint hands of a man with the Colors of the Skilled. There were powerful Necromancers in that car, Sally thought, who broadcast their very existence to the Other Side while just drawing breath.

Such a waste of Skill.

Skill, she thought. The puzzle clicked again in her head. Sally pulled at her bonnet, plucked at her antique dress, realizing she already counted herself among the dead. But these were slavers of the dead, the men she was here to stop. She could see the shotgun because she had Found it, and it was here on the Other Side to stop her Five.

Sally didn't know if she could be killed here, but she was certain she could suffer, be cut away forever from her body in pain and fear. Sally would have bet a kidney that the shotgun was loaded with some Skill-wrought shot, perhaps silver and myrrh and old blood mixed to reach the Other Side and tear apart the unlucky dead. Or the unlucky living, as the case might be.

If she yet lived.

Once the shotgun was carried into the church, her Five would be in deadly danger. Silver shot would kill living Skilled just as well as buckshot. Germaine's Maman would be trapped again, Skilled would die now and later, and Aristides' ambitions would march onward, to some bitter end—a tyranny of the Skilled, perhaps.

Find, she thought, even if you *are* dead, you are still a Finder. Find a way to take their Skilled gun away. Then these would be just angry men that her Five could fight, if not on equal terms, at least with a chance of success.

Sally walked toward the shadowed men assembling in front of the new Cadillac. She sharpened her Color focus, tried to pick out the Skills of the others. There were five of them, and she assumed that at least one was a Venator, the huntsman who was searching for her Five.

Around her, the old cars faded away. She heard shouting at the distant church door. That was Germaine's problem, Germaine and the rest of Sally's Five. Sally knew she wouldn't ever find her way back to the church now, but she could save the rest of her Five from her fate.

She had their Five now—two Necromancers, a Venator, a Finder, and the crisp yellow lines of an Advocate. She wondered about the Advocate, then remembered Germaine had mentioned an Advocate in her Bringing Five. Was he here to finger Germaine? Either that or to handle problems with local law enforcement.

Both, likely, she realized.

“Away,” said one of the shadowed men, the living men, as she approached. His voice echoed hollow on the Other Side. “You have no business with us.”

You bet your ass I do, Necromancer, thought Sally. The Venator was the one who flickered with the Colors of life, violence, and speed. Could she Find something to use against them?

The shotgun swung in Sally’s direction, not quite aimed at her yet. “Away, departed,” repeated the Necromancer. “This does not concern you.” The shotgun fired the Skill-wrought shot into the Other Side, caught Sally in the gut and spun her around. She collapsed onto her back in the dark flowers, a deep chill blooming through the core of her body. She had moved too slowly, waited too long to take action.

What would happen now that she *had* been killed here, Sally wondered? She stared up at the blank sky, then turned her head to see Aristides’ shadow men stalking through the flowers toward the church door. Sally imagined the little red-and-blue blossoms crushed beneath their thousand-dollar New York shoes. Like they had crushed her.

Then the handsome young black man reached down, grabbed her hand. “Gran Rosie said you might could use some more help.” He pulled Sally to her feet.

She felt her body sag, as if she had bled to death all at once. She seemed in danger of folding forever to the ground. The young man steadied her elbow. “Thank you,” Sally whispered.

“What is it you want to do now, missy?” The young man’s voice was both kind and careful. Sally noticed she had been demoted from ma’am to missy. It must be the blood loss. “I do believe time is running out,” he added.

She had to stop Aristides’ men before they caught up with Maman, Germaine, and the rest of the Five. Then Sally knew that the doors of the car were open, the keys in the ignition, knew it by Skill as surely as she knew her name. These men were so confident in their strength and hurried in their purpose that they didn’t stop for little details.

Car keys, Sally thought. Local law was always interested in automotive misbehavior. The rented Cadillac was so overloaded with Necromantic Skill traces and the violence of their intent that it had projected into the Other Side, while also still firmly anchored in the living world. Like the shotgun that had taken her life.

She didn’t need the puzzle in her head now—her next actions were plain there. “I can never find my own damned car keys,” she told the young man. Sally coughed as blood dripped from the corners of her mouth. “But I can Find theirs. Can you start that car?”

“No, missy.” The young man shook his head. “I can’t reach out to That Side no more. But I reckon I could help you get over there if we hurried.”

He carried her to the car, in fact. Her legs were numb, and the coldness in her torso had turned to fire. Sally could no longer feel herself breathing, not even the false habit of breathing she had brought here to the Other Side. “I’d be dead if I was alive,” she mumbled.

“I reckon so, missy.” The young man laid her in the driver’s seat of the Cadillac. He reached down to place her foot on the accelerator. “Excuse my familiarity, missy. Don’t see as how you’ll need the brake.” He smiled up at her from the foot well, touched his cap, and stepped back from the car.

Sally fingered the keys in the ignition, the plastic tab from the rental car agency dangling. Somehow the young man had placed her in the car within a slice of time so small the shadowed men had barely moved any further toward the church.

It would have been too easy if one of them had been Aristides, she thought. Much too easy.

Fingers on the key, she closed her eyes and thought of Ben. She couldn’t remember his face, only Germaine’s. Germaine smiled in her heart, brown eyes and brown skin the same shade as the handsome young man. Sally was glad she had stepped from the porch, glad she had done something worthy as the last moments of her life became the first moments of her death.

Sally opened her eyes, and, with one forced motion, turned the ignition and stamped on the accelerator. She felt the car come to life. The shadowed men paused and turned. Sally’s ghostly fingers tugged on the shifter, and the car lurched forward over the dark flowers.

The shotgun, the only real thing on This Side, raised in the inverse moonlight, and fired into the glass in front of her as she ran down three of the shadowed men with the Cadillac.

The wall of the church filled her vision as a body tumbled through the smashed windshield. Sally threw her hands up, trying to protect her face, only to find a sodden mess. The Skill-wrought shot had done its damage. Still seeing Colors, Sally tugged at the door handle. She would be damned if she would just lay down and die inside this evil automobile.

The door popped open suddenly. Maman caught Sally as she fell out of the car. “*Ma petite fille,*” Maman whispered, “*vous avez fait tellement très bien.* So well, *cherie,* you have done so well.” The old woman picked up Sally as if she was no more than a child, and carried her toward the church door. Thunder echoed from inside, and a sharp scream.

“Germaine?” Sally asked.

Maman smiled as they stepped onto the porch and through the open door. She kissed Sally's forehead, then Sally felt herself pulled like taffy. One part of her sought to begin the long journey onward through the Other Side. Another part of her was called back into her Form by Robert, gentle as a babe plucked untimely from its mother's womb.

* * * *

"Girl, you've got to wake up!" The voice was urgent.

Warm dampness coated Sally's cheeks, but she wasn't crying. Sally never cried.

"Let her be." A twitty voice, tense and tired. "I'd know if she were dead, believe me."

"Gavin?" Sally asked, opening her eyes. Had they all died?

The gray felt headliner of a van filled her vision. Her head was pillowed on Germaine's lap. Gavin leaned over the back of the next seat forward. Sally felt warm, so much warmer than she had before.

Germaine's voice rose to a pained shriek. "You come back from a bad trip to the Other Side, and first thing you ask for *that* little runt?" She leaned over to hug Sally, their bodies pressed together lengthwise as Sally's nose filled with the scent of tired Germaine, sweat, and old church smells. Germaine whispered to her in a voice meant just for the two of them. "Thank you for my life, girl. And for setting Maman's death to rights."

Sally struggled to sit up, quickly stopped as her vision blacked in and out. "Where are we?"

"Getting away from south Austin as fast as our little wheels can carry us, for one," said Germaine. "Texas state bar card or no, I couldn't have talked us out of a wrecked car and five dead guys. I'm just an everyday attorney. Joseph the Advocate, maybe he could have, but Robert broke Joseph's neck for him." She glanced toward the front of the van. "Moved fast and hard for an old guy."

"Maman?"

Germaine smiled. "Off practicing her Vivimancy on Aristides as we speak. You cut the binding on her, then killed his two best Necromancers with their car. That was what needed doing."

"So we succeeded. We're away from there." Sally mused at her hands, at her breathing, at the mixed scents of vinyl seats, weary people, and cold night air. Everything around her was a miracle. "And I'm alive."

"When that car came through the wall," said Petra, "carrying a few bodies, we figured you were helping from the Other Side."

“That was when I pulled your forms back.” Robert’s voice, unseen from the front. “Germaine was simple, but you were very, very difficult. There was a lot of unfocused Skill energy bleeding from the men you killed. I used it to reach you. Then Gavin and I took care of a couple of rude boys.”

“The old man’s having you on, Sally.” Gavin flashed his grin full of bad teeth. “Pulling you back was bloody dangerous. You’d gone over too far. It was like picking a grain of salt off a beach under a running tide, but Robert did a right handsome job. He could have lost himself on the Other Side reaching so far.”

Germaine smiled at Sally, gripping her fingers. Sally pushed her body a little closer to Germaine. The warm pressure of their touch worked past the phantom pain from the killing wounds.

The puzzle in her head slid. “We’re going to Lockhart, right?”

“Yeah,” said Petra from the front.

The puzzle, her Skill, showed her what she wanted to know. “Germaine’s car is in the parking lot of Methodist Golden Age Home at the south end of town, third space over from the dumpster.”

“Yes, dear, we know, you can Find things.” Germaine’s voice brimmed with exaggerated tolerance.

Sally closed her eyes. She desperately needed to sleep. Something bothered her, something mixed in her recollections of the evening. “Robert. Did something come through when you sent us? Was it dangerous?”

“Nothing when you went over.” His voice still soothed her. “But this came back with you.”

Gavin passed back a flat canvas motoring cap from more than half a century earlier.

Sally clutched it, looking up at Germaine. “A reminder from Gran Rosie and her family.”

“Hush, child.” Germaine stroked Sally’s hair. “You’re not making any sense.”

The Five’s rented van rolled down Highway 183 toward Lockhart, through fields of bright flowers under a silver moon, making all the sense in the world.

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