

The Osteo-Mancer's Son by Greg Van Eekhout

Greg van Eekhout's stories have appeared in Asimov's, F&SF, Starlight 3, Realms of Fantasy, and Year's Best Fantasy and Horror, among other places. His story "In the Late December" was nominated for the Nebula Award last year. A year ago, Greg's first story for us, which he co-wrote with Michael J. Jasper--"California King" (April/May 2005)--was about several generations of a conjuring family. He returns to our pages with a new tale that looks at another family whose magic runs deep in their bones.

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The bus comes to a stop at Wilshire and Fairfax, just a few blocks from the La Brea Tar Pits. When the doors hiss open, the tar smell washes over me. Thick and ancient, it snakes through my sinuses and settles in the back of my brain like a ghost in the attic.

"Get off or stay on," the driver says. So I step off into the haunted air.

The walk to Farmer's Market is too short. Not enough time for me to change my mind. For a moment, I wonder if looking at my wallet photo of Miranda might give me some more courage. I know every detail by heart: She's smiling and squinting into the camera, her face sun-dappled and brilliant. The ice cream cone I bought her on her third birthday is a pink smear across her face.

It's easier to think of her that way than to contemplate the handkerchief inside my bowling bag and the small bone contained within its linen folds.

I put my head down and keep walking, entering a maze of stalls and awnings, of narrow paths crowded with bins and baskets and little old ladies with sharp elbows. Shopping carts bark my shins and roll over my toes. Ranchero music and some kind of Southeast Asian pop bounces off my head.

"Hey, you got problem?" A man behind the counter beckons with a hooked finger, his face brown and creased like a cinnamon stick. "You got problem, yeah. I can tell. I got just what you need." With a knife, he sweeps bright orange dust into a little paper envelope. It looks like that dehydrated cheese powder that comes with instant macaroni.

"What's that?" I ask.

His smile reveals several gold teeth. "Come from dragon turtle. You see giant dragon turtle wash up in San Diego? You see that on news?"

"I'm not really up on current events." Especially not as regurgitated by state-controlled news organizations.

He nods enthusiastically and edges more powder into the envelope. "This come from San Diego dragon turtle. Wife's younger brother, he lifeguard. He scrape some turtle shell before Hierarch's men confiscate whole carcass."

"What's it for?" I ask, indicating the powder-filled envelope.

"All sorts of stuff. Rheumatism, kidney stones, migraine, epilepsy, bedroom problems ... All sorts."

"No, thanks," I say as I try to shoulder my way back into the crowd.

"Get you girls," he calls after me. "Make you animal! Guaranteed!"

Dragon turtle can't do any of those things, of course. Not that it's genuine turtle he's selling. I figure it for flour and sulfur, with maybe the tiniest pinch of rhinoceros horn thrown in. You can't even put a street

value on the genuine stuff these days.

I know. I've experienced the genuine stuff. It's in my bones.

* * * *

One Sunday afternoon I found a piece of kraken spine while walking down Santa Monica Beach with Dad. It was a cold day, the sand a sloping plain of gray beneath a slate sky, and we were both underdressed for the weather. But it was Sunday, the one day of the week we had together, and I had wanted to go to the beach.

I spotted the spine in the receding foam of the surf. It was just a fragment, like a knitting needle, striped honey and black. I showed it to Dad.

"Good eye," he said, resting his hand on my shoulder. "I don't see many of these outside a locked vault." In his white shirt and gray slacks, he looked like one of the seagulls wheeling overhead. I imagined him spreading his long arms to catch the wind and float to the sky.

I, on the other hand, took after my mom--short and stocky, skin just a shade paler than terra cotta. "Your father is made of air," Mom once told me. "That's why he's so hard to understand; he's not always down here with us. But you and me, kid, you and me are plain as dirt."

Dad held out his hand for the spine. "Kraken live in the deeps," he said. "They hunt for giant squid and sperm whale. Sometimes, in a fight, the spines break off and they wash ashore." He smelled the spine, inhaling so deeply it was almost an act of aggression. "You've found good bone, Daniel. Better than mammoth tusk."

"Really?" John Blackland had never been known to lavish idle praise.

"Better than all the La Brea stuff, in fact. The kraken is even older. Smarter."

I waited while my father's thoughts followed their own silent paths. Then, brightly, he told me to find a shell. "Abalone would be perfect, but I'll take anything from the sea I can use as a crucible."

Within a few minutes I'd located half a mussel shell. We sat on the sand, the shell between us, and Dad cooked the tip of the kraken spine over the flame of his Zippo. Thin tendrils of smoke rose from the spine, smelling of salt and earth and dark, deep mud.

When a single drop of honey-colored fluid oozed from the tip of the spine into the shell, Dad killed the flame. "Okay," he said. "Good. Now, do like me." He lifted the shell to his mouth and lightly touched his tongue to the fluid. I did the same. It burned, but not more than a too-hot mug of cocoa. The oil tasted exactly as it smelled, like something that had come from dark and forgotten places, but also from inside me.

"Quick, now, Daniel. Hold my hand."

For a few moments, the waves crashed ashore and the gulls cried overhead and I shivered in the cold. Then it started. A prickling sensation ran across my skin, raising goose bumps. The tiny hairs on my arms stood at attention. Then it was popping in my body, as though my blood were carbonated. It hurt, and I felt it in my lips and eyes, a million pinpricks.

I looked at Dad. His face was a blur. He was actually vibrating, and I realized I was, too, and he smiled at me. "Don't be afraid," he said, his voice shuddering. "Trust me."

I wasn't afraid. Or, rather, the scared part of me was smaller than the part that was thrilled at the power

of my father, the power of the kraken, the power inside me.

Lightning struck. Silver-white, cracking bursts.

Pain took me. I screamed, desperately trying to let some of it out, but there was only more. My body was a sponge for it, with limitless capacity. Pain replaced everything.

When my world finally stilled and my eyes could once again see, Dad and I were surrounded by a moat of liquefied sand. Black, gooey glass smoked and bubbled.

"The kraken is a creature of storms," Dad said. "Now, a part of it will always rage inside you. That's the osteomancer's craft: To draw magic from bones, to infuse it into your own." He looked at me a long time, as if to see if I understood.

The pain was over, but the memory of it roiled inside and around me, like smoke from a fire.

Trust me, he'd said.

"Don't tell your mom about this. That kraken spine could have paid for your college education."

* * * *

Farther back in the recesses of Farmer's Market, closer to the Tar Pits, the smell of asphalt clogs the air. Black ooze seeps through cracks in the alley, and when I walk, my shoes stick to the ground. There's black tar under the pavement. Pockets of gas lurk beneath the sidewalks like jellyfish.

Storage sheds and small warehouses line the alley, guarded by guys, teenagers, just a few years younger than me. They conceal their hands in the pockets of their roomy pants and watch me make my way down a row of cinderblock structures. I stop before a building with a steel roll-down door, and four guards converge on me, forming a diamond with me at the center.

"You must be lost," one says.

They all have eyes the color of coffee ice cream and the same face. Not just similar in appearance, but identical. Maybe they're quadruplets, but more likely they're mirror-spawn. It takes pretty deep magic to create them, but when it comes to the Hierarch and his interests, no expense is ever spared. These guys aren't just rent-a-cop security. These guys are weapons.

"Are these warehouses?" I say, waving vaguely at the buildings around us.

The four share a look and nod in unison.

"Then I think I'm in the right place."

"You'd have been better off lost," says the one behind me. "What's in the bowling bag?"

"A bowling ball."

"What kind?"

"Brunswick." That's the name written on the bag.

"I like to bowl," they all say together. Then, just the one behind me: "Let's take a peek inside."

Two of them unzip the bag, while the other two keep their eyes on me. I reach into my coat pocket and all four get ready to pounce. "Relax," I say, pulling out my leather glasses case. "Just putting on my

shades."

Which, really, is all I do.

Frowns form on the faces of the four mirror-spawn. They blink. They work their lips a little. "What are you looking at?" they all ask each other.

"Nothing," they all decide.

Their diamond formation loosens, and they go back to whatever they were doing before I showed up. I take my bowling bag and continue looking for the right warehouse.

* * * *

When my first baby tooth fell out I tucked it under my pillow, just as Mom had told me to. The next morning the tooth was gone but I found no coin. Mom and Dad were arguing in the living room. I wanted to go out and see Dad, but not until the fight was over.

I read some comics.

I glued plastic tusks on my Revel Colombian Mammoth model.

With my tongue, I probed the empty socket where my tooth had been.

Finally, the noise in the other room died down, and I heard the front door open and shut. Moments later, a car started and drove away: Dad going back to his apartment.

"From now on," Mom said, standing in the doorway, "when you lose a tooth, put it in an envelope for your father."

"What for?"

She gripped the doorjamb so tight her hand shook. "So he can eat it."

By that age, I already knew Dad worked for the Hierarch--the most powerful osteomancer of all--and I knew that made my father a very important man.

It wasn't until years later, until after the Night of Long Knives, that I knew Dad was a traitor.

This, I found out from Uncle Otis, my father's brother, who took me in after Dad was murdered and Mom defected to Northern California.

I'd left Otis when I turned sixteen and had nearly no contact with him until two weeks ago. I knew he helped out Connie and Miranda with money, dropped in on their little apartment in Boyle Heights to make sure they were okay, but I'd never asked him to do that and I refused to be grateful.

The door jingled as I entered his shop for the first time in seven years.

"You never got tall," he said by way of greeting.

He wasn't alone. On a stool behind a glass display counter of jewelry and cigarette cases and Zippo lighters sat a thin-shouldered man in a sweater the color of wilted lettuce. He gave me a smile with his lipless turtle mouth and took a sip from a Dodgers coffee mug.

"Nice to meet you, Daniel."

I took note of the turtle man's skin, teeth, fingernails. They were by no means healthy colors, but neither were they the deeply embedded telltale brown of a practicing osteomancer. I figured him for a supplier, like Otis.

I should have turned around, gone back home. Trafficking in osteomancy had been a bad idea since the Night of Long Knives--I was surprised Otis hadn't been caught yet--and I always got the feeling the Hierarch's eyes were on me, being the son of John Blackland.

Otis tried to introduce me to the turtle man. "Daniel, this is Mr.--" But the turtle man cut him off with a sharp look. Otis settled on telling me he was a friend of my father's.

I took "friend" as a codeword for former co-conspirator. Dad had been a darling of the Hierarch until he'd decided there was too much power concentrated in the Hierarch's hands, and he hadn't been alone in this belief. Magic wants to be free. But after the Night of Long Knives, what had been the seeds of a revolution had degenerated into merely a black market for osteomantic materials. Now, it was just about skimming a bit off the Hierarch's profit.

I wanted no part of it. Not a sliver. But there was the lure of money and pangs about how little I was doing for Miranda. "Is this a bag job?"

Otis nodded. "The sort of thing you're good at."

I had kept myself out of the family business, but that didn't mean I'd been walking the straight and narrow. Part of the reason I'd left Otis's care was because I felt he wasn't dealing fairly with me when fencing stuff I'd boosted from houses and businesses.

"It's a tricky job, in a place hard to get into and even harder to get out of."

"Government warehouse, I suppose?" Which was tantamount to a suicide mission.

The turtle man looked at me with dark eyes. I recognized that look. In his head, he was stripping me of clothing and skin. He was wondering what my skeleton looked like. "It's not just any government warehouse, Daniel. We're sending you into the Ossuary itself."

The Ossuary. The dragon's greatest treasure trove. The Hierarch's own private stash.

I didn't bother explaining what an impossible task that would be. These guys were veterans. They wouldn't risk exposure in a pointless exercise. But they would risk my life to get their hands on the Hierarch's riches.

I, on the other hand, would not. "Thanks, Otis," I said, turning my back and heading for the door. "Don't call me again."

I heard the turtle man's coffee cup clank against the glass counter. "You haven't even heard our terms."

"And I'm not going to," I said. "My daughter deserves a living father."

"Daniel, I have something for you." I stopped and watched Otis place a folded handkerchief on the glass counter. The look on his face was infinitely sad as he peeled back the corners of the handkerchief and revealed a small distal phalanx. A finger bone. A child's finger bone, not white, but already turning brown. The bone of a child who has been fed bone. When I was a kid, that's what my bones would have looked like, because even then, Dad was preparing me.

"It belongs to Miranda," the turtle man said. "Do the job or we'll piece her out, bit by bit."

* * * *

Dad lived in the back of his osteomancer's shop, and that's where I spent most of my time with him during weekend visits. Six years after that afternoon on the beach, I was in his workroom, watching a pair of horn-rimmed glasses bob inside a kettle of boiling oil. The lenses were blanks, but the frames were special, carved from the vertebrae of a Choctaw *sint holo* serpent. I was certain that Dad didn't have legal access to such materials. He'd probably obtained it in one of the back-alley exchanges he'd become increasingly involved with. Things had been different for him, lately. Once one of the Hierarch's chief men, now he was more and more on the fringes of things.

Dad stirred the oil with a copper spoon, sniffing the vapors that rose from the pot. He quizzed me: "Any idea what these glasses will do?"

I was bored. Only eight blocks away there was a mall full of video games and CDs to shoplift and girls. I couldn't remember the last time Dad and I had talked about anything other than bones and oils and feathers and powders. Dad's world was full of dead things that stank.

"I have no idea what they do," I said. It was true, but it wasn't what Dad wanted to hear.

He breathed a small sigh. "Smell it, Daniel. You can tell by smell. Smells are ghosts. Let them in and they'll talk to you."

He wouldn't give up until I did as he asked, so, sullenly, I admitted the phantoms. Figuring out what they were trying to tell me was a process requiring the kind of patience and attention I could seldom be bothered to exhibit. I lowered my nose to the kettle.

First, there were my father's tells, not just because he was in the room, but because the kettle contained his magic. There was clean sweat. Old Spice. And tar. Deeply embedded, way down to the marrow of Dad's bones. My father's living ghost. And also something of me. Maybe some of my baby teeth. The smells were all mixed up, and I couldn't tell where he ended and I began.

"What do you think?" Dad whispered, bending close to my ear.

"It's like ... something I can't hold onto. Like confusion."

Dad straightened. "It's in your bones, now, Daniel. You know how to let the old bones inside you. You only need to listen to them, and they'll tell you how to do whatever you need to do. That's osteomancy. That's deep magic." He gestured at his work counter, littered with jars and vials and little envelopes. "All else is merely recipe."

From outside, the sound of a helicopter rotor pounded the air. The phone rang. Dad went to the front room to answer it, and I stayed behind, eavesdropping on his conversation.

"Not a good time, Otis." Then, his voice dropped. "Yes, I've got something cooking right now."

The sound of the helicopter grew closer, and now it sounded as though there were more than one. I went to the door and saw the look on Dad's face, the way the lines deepened, the haunted shadows of his eyes. "Who else did they get?" he said into the receiver, craning his neck to peer out the living room window. Dad listened to whatever Otis's answer was, his eyes shut tight. When he opened them, he saw me standing in the doorway. "Will you take care of him, Otis? Will you promise me?" There was a pause, and then he put the receiver back in its cradle.

Out on the street, car doors slammed. Dad came over to the workroom doorway and pushed me back inside. "The glasses aren't ready yet," he said. "Wait as long as you can before putting them on. Don't

come out till you've heard the thunder. When you walk, make no noise." With that, he shut the door on me.

A few moments later, I heard shouting in the living room, a scuffle. And then cracks of thunder, so close, like bombs detonating in my head. The loudest thing I'd ever heard.

Silence followed, broken by soft footsteps outside the workroom. The doorknob jiggled. Another beat of silence, and something impacted the door. Wood splintered.

I ran to Dad's work counter. The glasses still tumbled inside the boiling oil. With a pair of copper tongs, I lifted out the glasses and put them on, hissing in pain as I burned my fingers and temples and the backs of my ears and the bridge of my nose. My skin blistered, and whatever substance Dad had used to fashion the frames leached into me.

With another blow the door gave, hanging on one hinge, useless as a broken arm. Half a dozen cops surged in. A gray-haired man in a blue windbreaker, marked with the Hierarch's skull insignia, pushed to the front of the group. I backed up against the workbench. The man in the windbreaker was close enough to touch. He looked at me, right at me, and raised his hand as if to reach out and grab my throat. I remained silent, and he only blinked stupidly in my general direction.

My heart pounding, I forced myself to walk slowly past the cops, who flinched as though brushed by cobwebs. In the living room were four charred bodies. The flesh on their faces and hands bubbled, black and red. The room stank of ozone and meat and kraken.

Dad hadn't managed to get them all. He was on his back. Three cops were cutting the skin off of him with long knives. They'd already flayed his arm, exposing the deep rich brown of his radius and ulna. And they'd peeled his face back to expose his coffee-brown skull.

That night, I ran. Away from Dad's place, away from the rotor blades and searchlights. I ran until I could only walk, walked until I could only stumble, stumbled until I could only crawl. When morning broke, I woke up in wet sand and bathed myself in the cold waves that rolled in on the edge of a winter storm. I will live here, I thought. I will live here on the beach, and I will never take off these glasses, and I will live here as a ghost.

He was already dead, I told myself. When the men cut open Dad to take his bones, he was already dead.

I would keep telling myself that until I could believe it.

* * * *

The route to the Hierarch's ossuary takes me through a network of tunnels buried so deep beneath the city that, after a while, I can no longer feel the rumble of traffic from Wilshire Boulevard. The stench of tar and magic is almost a solid wall here, the ghosts so thick I can practically scoop them out of the air with my hands. Using the turtle man's collection of lock picks, stolen keys, alarm codes, passwords, and my father's glasses, I eventually find myself at the threshold of the Hierarch's ossuary.

Let's say you're sickeningly wealthy. And let's say what you're rich in is gold, and you want a big room in which to hoard your treasure. What could be more fitting, then, than a room built of solid gold bricks? The Hierarch's ossuary is kind of like that, only it's built of bone. The walls are mammoth femurs stacked end-to-end. The floor, a mosaic of various claws and delicate vertebrae and healing jewels pried from the heads of Peruvian carbuncles. Overhead, mammoth tusks form the domed ceiling. And from the dome hangs a chandelier of unicorn horns, white as snow.

I remind myself to breathe.

Six sentries carry bayonets with basilisk-tooth blades. They exchange uneasy glances as I step deeper into the room. I've been warned by Otis and the turtle man that anyone I encounter this far inside the Hierarch's stronghold will have received advanced training. They will have tasted deep-magic bone.

"Hoss, you okay?" says one of the sentries.

Another shakes his head, looking directly at me. "Nope. Something's creeping me out."

"Yeah, me too. Think we should get the hound in here?"

"Yeah." The sentry reaches for a wall-mounted phone.

I unlace my boot and pry it off. With everything I've got, I chuck it up at the unicorn chandelier. The horns shatter like glass, the sound of children shrieking. I backpedal to avoid the rain of shards.

The sentries look up in horror. They're in charge of protecting a lot of money, and something's just gone dreadfully wrong. They flutter about the mess like maiden aunts over a collapsed soufflé.

I retrieve my boot and make a dash for a passageway into an even larger room.

The entrance of bone was made to impress. This place, large enough to berth an ocean liner, houses yet greater wealth. Floor-to-ceiling shelves occupy most of it, but there are also fully assembled skeletons in chain-link cages: a serpent at least one hundred yards long, a feline body as large as an elephant with a boulder-sized skull. And suspended overhead looms a kraken--flat, shovel-shaped head, tail half the length of a football field, and running down the tail, dozens of spines as long as jousting lances. The stench of its power makes my stomach churn.

There is really only one reason Otis and the turtle man chose me for this job. One thing I can do better than anyone else. There's a scent I'm sensitive to, one I can pick out like a bright white stripe on a black highway. I follow it to a row of towering shelves and bring over a ladder on wheels. I climb. Stacked on the shelves are long cardboard boxes. In front of my face is the one containing my father's bones.

His remains are powerful weapons. I understand why Otis and the turtle man and whoever else is in their cabal wants them.

Most of Dad is missing. Probably sold off. All that's left are some of the small bones of his hands, and some ground powder, just a pinch, in a glass vial. I unzip my bowling bag and dump the remains inside.

A voice from below: "Come down off that ladder, son."

In a linen button-down shirt and tailored black slacks, the Hierarch isn't exactly what I expect, but I recognize his face from coins and postage stamps. He's thin and dark as bones from the tar pits, his fingernails, teeth and eyes saturated with magic.

"Those glasses of yours are very clever," he says, inhaling deeply. "*Sint holo* serpent bones and Deep Rhys herbs. Two sources of invisibility, mixed together, along with your own essence. That's good work. But it's not fooling me, so you might as well come on down now."

I grip the ladder to keep my hands from shaking. I can smell him. His magic is old. "So, you really hang out in your own warehouse? Don't tell me you drive the forklifts."

He smiles indulgently. "No, that takes special training I lack. But when thieves get this far past my

defenses, I take a personal interest. Now, please, come down."

"Not just yet. I like the view from up here. You have a lot of nice things. Is that really a sphinx?" I wonder if he's noticed my legs shaking.

"Yes. One of only three ever found."

"Where are the other two?"

"I smoked them." And he spits at me. He fires up a dark brown glob that splatters on my cheek. It burns me like acid, hurting so bad, filling me with pain and surprise, that I can't even scream.

A curtain of gray descends over my vision, and I lose balance, falling off the ladder, eight feet down to the concrete floor. I huddle there at the Hierarch's feet, struggling not to give in to the tempting relief of unconsciousness. My cheek burns. And I think I've broken my right arm. But somehow--reflex, dumb luck, who knows?--I've managed to hold onto the bowling bag containing father's bones. Some of the bones have fallen out. The vial of powder lies shattered, its contents spilled.

I have to get to my feet. I can do this. I can make myself do this. Using my good arm to push myself up, I manage to drive my palm into the tiny shards of glass from the broken vial.

"Are you okay?" the Hierarch asks. I can hear the flesh on my face sizzle.

I try to say "fine," but the word won't come out.

"So, who's that in the bowling bag?"

"John Blackland," I rasp. "He was an osteomancer."

The Hierarch puts his hands in his pockets and bounces on the balls of his feet, as if stretching out his calf muscles. "This entire section of the ossuary is full of osteomancers. It's the osteomancer section. I suppose you're John Blackland's son?"

The Hierarch's spit continues to burn. "Yeah," I gasp. "Daniel Blackland."

It feels like someone's drilling into the cracked bones of my right arm. And my cheek ... the air hits exposed bone.

The Hierarch squints at the hole in my face as if checking out a door ding on a parked car. "If it's any comfort, you got farther than most. No doubt you've come equipped with some powerful osteomantic weapons. But look at me." He holds his brown hands up toward my face. "I've smoked, eaten, inhaled, and injected more ancient and secret animals than anyone alive. I'm the *Hierarch*."

"How could I have done this better?" I ask.

"I do make public appearances, you know. You could have tried a car bomb. Or a high-powered rifle. You revenge-obsessed boys have extraordinary passion, but it seems to get in the way of achieving practical goals."

He thinks this is about vengeance, not simple theft. I'm out of courage, and hope, and pretty much everything. But then Dad talks to me. He begins softly, through weak and subtle scents that waft up from his scattered bones: tar, the salt tang of kelp, and a trace of something clean and dark and old from the sea bottom.

That's the osteomancer's craft. To draw magic from bones, to infuse it into your own.

My father turned me into a weapon. And while I was off, screwing around, I let inheritors of my father's noble cause turn Miranda into a weapon. I've still got her in my bowling bag. I am a vessel carrying three generations of power. But I'll die before I use my daughter in that way.

Broken arm. Face being eaten away. Glass splinters in my good hand. I put my palm to my ruined cheek. Screaming, I rub residue of my father's ground-up bones into my raw flesh.

Firecrackers pop under my skin.

The Hierarch sees what I've done, and he begins to exude something. A toxic stench, thick as mud, fills my head, more and more until I hear myself shrieking with blind pain.

The Hierarch coughs, and he coughs and coughs, and his eyes never leave mine. His jaw unhinges like a snake's, and brown fluid gushes out of him. Where it hits the floor, concrete liquefies and boils away.

"If there's anything left of you," he says, his voice gargly, "I'll drink it with green tea."

I don't know if I'll live, but I know the Hierarch has lost. Because, overhead, the spines of the kraken skeleton vibrate and sing. And just before the Hierarch unleashes another torrent of magic from inside, the storm I called with Dad strikes. The bolts come down. The bolts come out of me. They come from Dad's bones, soaked with Dad's magic, mixed in my blood. They come from spirits and memories.

When it's over, the Hierarch's charred body melts into a puddle of brown, sizzling fluid.

Ding-dong, dead.

I should just walk out of here. With my glasses, I can get past the guards and get as far from the ossuary as a guy with a broken arm and a ravaged face can get.

But the residue of the Hierarch is rich, powerful magic. There's got to be a sponge and bucket around here somewhere.

* * * *

We've been driving all day and all night and have been for a few days. Connie rides with Miranda in the back, singing Spanish lullabies, trying to get her to stop crying. I cooked up a salve for her hand, and I don't think it hurts her any longer, but the girl misses the tip of her finger. Of course she does. How could she not? When she's older, maybe I'll give it to her and she can wear it on the end of a necklace.

And once that thought is complete, I want to hit myself. Isn't that the sort of thing Dad might do?

At least once every hour I'm tempted to turn the car around and head back to Los Angeles. There's a fight being waged between high-ranking ministers and osteomancers, between freelancers and opportunists and twisted idealists like Otis and the turtle man. I shouldn't be tempted to head back and join in, but I am. I'm pretty sure I would prevail. After drinking the Hierarch's remains, I may well be the most powerful osteomancer in all the Californias. Possibly the most powerful on the entire continent. Part of me wants that power. There's something in my bones that craves it.

But then, when the hunger gets too strong, I lean back and get a whiff of Miranda. She carries the taint of magic, a scent much older than she is, and I won't stop driving till all I can smell is baby powder and shampoo and clean, soft skin.