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About the Authors

Brad Beaulieu likes writing both short and novel-length fiction. His first sale of any kind was to the *Deep Magic* online zine in the summer of 2004. His first professional sale was “Flotsam,” which won second place in the Writers of the Future 20 Contest and debuted in August of 2005. Brad works as a software security consultant and lives in Racine, Wisconsin, with his wife, daughter, and two cats. He enjoys cooking spicy dishes, playing tennis, and hiding out on the weekends with his family. His Web site can be found at www.quillings.com.

Donald J. Bingle is a top-ranked (but now retired) RPG gamer, an avid writer, and a reluctant attorney. His published game materials include adventures and source materials for Dungeons & Dragons, Paranoia, Chill, and Timemaster. His novels include *Forced Conversion*, a near future science-fiction tale, and *Greensword*, a darkly comedic eco-thriller. He has had stories in a variety of themed anthologies, including *All Hell Breaking Loose*, *Renaissance Faire*, *Time Twisters*, *Slipstreams*, *Transformer’s Legends*, *Historical Hauntings*, *Civil War Fantastic*, *Sol’s Children*, *Furry Fantastic*, *Fantasy Gone Wrong*, *Players of Gilean*, *Carnival*, *The Search for Magic*, *If I Were an Evil Overlord*, *Pandora’s Closet*, and *Front Lines*. You can contact him and/or find out about his latest projects at www.orphyte.com/donaldjbingle.

Brenda Cooper has published fiction in *Nature*, *Analog*, *Oceans of the Mind*, *Strange Horizons*, in the anthologies *Sun in Glory*; *Maiden, Matron, Crone*; *Time After Time*; and more. Brenda’s collaborative fiction with Larry Niven has appeared in *Analog* and *Asimov’s*. She and Larry have a collaborative novel, *Building Harlequin’s Moon*, available now in book-stores. Her solo novel, *The Silver Ship and the Sea*, come out in March 2007. Brenda lives in Bellevue, Washington, with her partner Toni, Toni’s daughter Katie, a border collie, and a golden retriever. By day, she is the city of Kirkland’s CIO, and at night and in early morning hours, she’s a futurist and writer. See www.brenda-cooper.com for more information.

Russell Davis has written numerous short stories and novels in a variety of genres under several different names. Some of his most recent work can be seen in *Slipstreams*; *Maiden, Matron, Crone*, and *Under Cover of Darkness*. He lives in Nevada, where he writes, rides horses, and spends time with his family.

Alan Dean Foster's writing career began when August Derleth bought a long Lovecraftian letter of his in 1968 and much to Foster's surprise, published it as a short story in Derleth's biannual magazine *The Arkham Collector*. His first attempt at a novel, *The Tar-Aiym Krang*, was bought by Betty Ballantine and published by Ballantine Books in 1972. Since then, Foster's short fiction has appeared in all the major SF magazines as well as in original anthologies and several "Best of the Year" compendiums. Six collections of his short form work have also been published. His work to date includes excursions into hard science-fiction, fantasy, horror, detective, western, historical, and contemporary fiction. His work has appeared and won awards throughout the world. His novel *Cyber Way* won the Southwest Book Award for Fiction in 1990, the first work of science fiction ever to do so.

Paul Genesse told his mother he was going to be a writer when he was four years old, and has been creating fantasy stories ever since. He is a registered nurse on a cardiac unit in Salt Lake City, Utah, where he works the night shift keeping the forces of darkness away from his patients. Paul lives with his incredibly supportive wife Tammy and their collection of frogs. He hopes to turn *Almost Brothers* into a full-length novel, but his current project is *Medusa's Daughter*, a fantasy set in ancient Greece. He encourages you to contact him online at www.paulgenesse.com.

Over the past twenty years, **Nina Kiriki Hoffman** has sold novels, juvenile and media tie-in books, short story collections, and more than two hundred short stories. Her works have been finalists for the Nebula, World Fantasy, Mythopoeic, Sturgeon, and Endeavour awards. Her first novel, *The Thread That Binds the Bones*, won a Stoker Award.

Nina's young adult novel *Spirits That Walk in Shadow* was published in 2006. Her short science fiction novel *Catalyst* was published in 2006. *Fall of Light*, a fantasy novel, will be published in the future. She lives in Eugene, Oregon, with several cats, a mannequin, and many strange toys.

Fiona Patton was born in Calgary, Canada, and grew up in the United States. In 1975 she returned to Canada and now lives on seventy-five acres of scrubland in rural Ontario with her partner Tanya Huff, six and a half cats, and a tiny little Chihuahua that thinks he's a great dane. She has written five fantasy novels for DAW Books; the latest, *The Silver Lake*, came out in hardcover in November 2005. She is currently working on her sixth book, a continuation of *The Silver Lake* entitled *The Golden Tower*. She has written over two-dozen short stories. "Revenge Is a Dish Best Served with Beers," is her sixth story set in The County.

Chris Pierson was born in Canada, and now lives in Boston, Massachusetts, with his wife Rebekah. He works as a writer and designer of online games, including *Lord of the Rings Online: Shadows of Angmar*, and is the author of eight novels set in the Dragonlance world, including the Kingpriest Trilogy and the Taladas Trilogy. His short fiction has recently appeared in the anthologies *Time Twisters* and *Pandora's Closet*.

Alexander B. Potter resides in the wilds of Vermont, editing and writing both fiction and nonfiction. His short stories have appeared in a wide variety of anthologies including the award-winning *Bending the Landscape: Horror* volume and a number of DAW anthologies. He edited *Assassin Fantastic*, the award-winning *Sirius: The Dog Star*, and coedited *Women of War* with Tanya Huff, all for DAW Books.

Jody Lynn Nyel lists her main career activity as "spoiling cats." She lives northwest of Chicago with two of the above and her husband, author and packager Bill Fawcett. She has written over thirty books, including *The Ship Who Won* with Anne McCaffrey, a humorous anthology about mothers, *Don't Forget Your Spacesuit, Dear!*, and over ninety short stories. Her latest books are *Strong Arm Tactics* and *Myth-Gotten Gains*, cowritten with Robert Asprin.

Born in Wisconsin in 1967, **Steven Schend** fell into the world of fantasy quite quickly, growing up on L. Frank Baum's Oz books, Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan and Barsoom novels, and Ray Harryhausen movies. For the past seventeen years, Steven worked full-time or freelance as an editor, developer, designer, writer, or assistant manager for TSR, Inc., Wizards of the Coast, Bastion Press, Green Ronin, and the Sebranek Group. Steven has written scores of magazine articles and role-playing game products, though he hopes to match that track record with his current stint as a fiction author and freelance novelist. Steven now hangs his hat in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where he teaches writing at a local college and works feverishly on novels and stories of his own.

S. Andrew Swannis is the pen name of Steven Swiniarski. He's married and lives in the greater Cleveland area where he has lived all of his adult life. He has a background in mechanical engineering and—besides writing—works as a computer systems analyst for one of the largest private child services agencies in the Cleveland area. He has published seventeen novels with DAW Books over the past fourteen years, which include science fiction, fantasy, horror, and thrillers. His latest novel is *The Dwarves of Whiskey Island*, a fantasy set in Cleveland, published in October 2005. He is currently working on a sequel to the *Hostile Takeover Trilogy*, an epic space opera.

ALMOST BROTHERS

Paul Genesse

The rope sawed into Finn's wrists as he struggled to escape from the heavy wooden chair, which was still stained with the blood and urine from the last child Nagel had captured. The leathery-skinned brute sat on a stool, grinning at the young boy as he sharpened a long rusty razor.

Nagel locked his gray eyes on Finn's wiry twelve-year-old frame, then lubricated the crumbling whetstone with blood-tinged spittle. Finn realized that hitting Nagel in the mouth with the rock had not been a good idea, but he wasn't going to be captured without a fight.

Finn shifted on the sticky chair, and a splinter poked into the naked flesh on his bum, beaten red and raw by Nagel's calloused hands. The much-too-thin boy glanced at the fireplace. His filthy clothing smoldered there, permeating the shack with a swampy odor mixed with burning hair.

Despite his hands being securely lashed behind him, Finn arched his back, fighting to escape the fate all the other orphaned refugee children had fallen victim to. Even his best friend Owen had received the "special treatment" at the hands of the Bloody Barber.

Nagel's fierce gaze met Finn's terrified green eyes. "Listen, you rat-hunting turd, if you don't stop squirming the first thing I'll do is shave off that little mushroom cap between your legs."

Knees clenched together, Finn tried in vain to hide his nakedness. He wished he had one of the dried animal skins or furs hanging on the dingy walls to cover himself. If only he could slip his hands free, he could escape out the side window of the trapper's shack. In desperation he thought, *Perhaps the Barber will listen to reason*. Finn searched for the right words, summoning his beggar's voice, "Please, sir. If you let me go I'll—"

"You'll what?!" Nagel furrowed his brow. "Steal more food? Damn Tarnite orphans like you are all the same."

"I swear I didn't eat it! I catch my own food. I swear it on the twelve saints of the Celestrum."

"Eleven saints, stupid boy. You're not in Tarn. Everyone here knows Vivianne is a witch, not a saint."

Nagel shook his bald head. "And don't expect me to believe that you be surviving on them skinny rats your ratter dogs kill in the barns."

"We do. The food I . . . found . . . was for—"

Nagel pointed the razor at Finn's crotch.

Trembling uncontrollably, Finn felt blood oozing from where the ropes sliced into his skin. He stopped

struggling as pain and cold fear washed over him.

“And don’t you go pissing on my chair either. The last one of you orphans to piss themselves was sorry she did.”

Finn guessed he was talking about Lynn, and saw what remained of her long blond hair in the corner of the fireplace. The sticky stain on the chair had to be from her.

The Bloody Barber stopped sharpening the folding razor knife and gave Finn a wicked grin, showing all three of his front teeth.

Finn’s eyes opened wide as the hulking man lumbered toward him. He almost had a hand free when cold iron pressed against Finn’s dirt-smudged cheek. Nagel grabbed Finn’s unkempt sandy brown hair and stepped behind him.

“No, please!” Finn squeaked. “I swear I won’t—”

A rough hand squeezed Finn’s throat, choking off his plea.

The razor scraped against Finn’s scalp, shearing off a swath of hair over his right ear and opening several small stinging cuts. Finn screamed, “Stop! Please!”

The Bloody Barber’s chortling made Finn gnash his teeth. He wished his friends were there to save him, but he was alone. Captured. Helpless. Just like Owen, Lynn, Hazel, and the others had been when Nagel had caught and killed them.

High-pitched barking and loud scratching came from the front door of Nagel’s shack. Finn knew it was Pip and Fyse. His little black-and-white rat terriers were still free, and at least they hadn’t abandoned him.

“Quiet!” Nagel shouted at the door, but the dogs kept scratching and barking. The barber threw a discarded child’s shoe—probably Lynn’s—at the door and the dogs stopped.

A yellow puddle of urine came under the threshold. *Good dogs!*

Nagel stormed toward the expanding puddle. “Stupid mutts!”

Finn pulled at his bonds as excruciating pain swept through him. Skin tore loose from his wrists. *Almost there. Just . . . keep . . . pulling*. The blood made it slippery enough to wrench a hand free. He slid off the chair and nearly fainted as the flesh on his backside separated itself from the splintery wood.

Cursing, Nagel opened the front door and tried to kick the little black-and-white dogs. Both darted away and growled at the huge man brandishing the rusted razor. Pip and Fyse bared their teeth. The dogs weighed less than twenty pounds each, but they lunged and snapped at Nagel, determined to save their beloved Finn from a gruesome fate.

The sight of his tiny dogs facing Nagel gave Finn a burst of strength. He slipped his other hand free and darted to the side window and clambered over the sill—remembering too late that he was supposed to grab some clothing. He landed in mud that smelled like it contained Nagel’s cast out nightsoil. “Oh, sh—” Hands grabbed Finn from behind and pulled him up. He expected a cuff on the head, but saw Owen’s clear blue eyes—and newly shaved scalp—staring at him.

“Owen, you’re alive.” Hope for the others flashed through Finn’s mind as he stared at his lanky boyhood friend, already much taller than Finn.

“Come on!” Owen pulled Finn away from the hovel as Nagel came charging around the side of the house with Pip and Fyse yipping and barking at his heels.

“Get back here!” Nagel shouted.

Owen and Finn sprinted away from Nagel’s shack and into the muddy streets of Ryeland. Pip and Fyse caught up as the boys ran past a column of Celestrian soldiers marching south toward the invading Tarnite army. A mounted knight from the Order of Saint Mathias lifted his visor to watch them flee.

The sight of a naked boy running in the street made a few of the villagers shake their heads, but most ignored Finn. A gang of Ryeland’s children—all with full heads of hair—laughed and pointed at Finn, making snide comments about the size of his manhood. It took every bit of control for him not to stop and start another fistfight, but his ribs still hurt from the last brawl with the locals and the thought of facing the boys naked gave him pause. And Owen had said Finn was on his own if he started another fight.

After running far from Nagel’s shack the boys stopped behind Widow Tillwell’s chicken coop to catch their breath. Finn squatted down and covered himself as Pip and Fyse snuffled at his legs before rolling

on the ground and showing him their bellies. “Good girl, Pip. Good boy, Fyse.” Their soft brown eyes showed their love for him as Finn tenderly rubbed his little dogs.

Owen got a whiff of Finn and wrinkled his nose. The brown mess on Finn’s knees definitely wasn’t mud. “You’ve smelled worse.” Finn shrugged. “And I should have taken some clothes.”

“Nagel gave everyone new clothes once he finished. He was just going to shave off your hair.”

“What?” Relief and shame washed over Finn. *They’re all still alive.* “How was I supposed to know? I thought—”

“If you hadn’t run off you would’ve known.”

“But the locals said he skinned the children he caught alive and—”

“You listened to them?” Owen shook his head in disbelief.

Finn’s face turned red as he realized what a fool he’d been by believing the Ryelanders. His shame turned to boiling anger. “I’m not letting anyone shave my head. Especially the Bloody Barber!” Finn stroked the bare spot by his ear, and grimaced when he felt the fresh cuts. Finn glanced at the scabs on Owen’s freshly shaved head and the little bumps and knots revealed by the absence of his blond hair. “I can’t believe you let him do that to you.”

“Sir Luther and the Deacons ordered all of us to let him.” Owen gestured to the abbey’s bell tower dominating the skyline over Ryeland, as if pointing explained everything. “Finn, you’ve got lice, just like the rest of us did.”

“I do not.” Finn’s scalp started to itch fiercely, but he resisted scratching. Owen was right, but Finn wouldn’t yield. “Why do you do everything they say? The Deacons aren’t going to let you be a knight.”

“Sir Luther’s teaching me to ride.”

“Only when you’re not cleaning steaming piles of shit out of the stables or polishing his shield. We might as well be slaves back home in Tarn.”

Owen shook his head. “Sir Luther said he would teach me the lance and sword when I’m fourteen.”

“That’s two years away! They’ll cart us off to the orphanage in Templemore, just as they did the others.”

“No. The Deacons said they’re keeping a few of us here to be in a proper orphanage—like a school—for devout Celestians like us.”

“You mean like you.” Finn rolled his eyes.

“They say the Saints have a plan for us. If you’d come to the prayer services you might understand better.”

“I’ve been to plenty back home. I’m not going again. The Saints abandoned us.” Finn stared at the dirt, remembering when the Tarnite soldiers dragged away his mother and sister during the attack on their refugee column.

“Here.” Owen handed him his tunic, leaving himself with only a pair of rough brown breeches. “It’s long enough to cover your—”

“Thanks.” Finn put on the itchy wool garment, stitched together by the holy sisters for the refugee children. “I’ll give it back later.”

“Keep it. Sir Luther gave me an extra one with the coat of arms of Saint Mathias on it. I’ll get some breeches for you tonight, but we better not go back to the abbey now. Nagel will catch us for sure.”

Finn pulled the tunic down. The rough material chafed against his bum and he raised an eyebrow at Owen. “Hey, what were you doing outside the Barber’s shack?”

Owen grinned. “I figured you’d do something stupid, and we’re supposed to watch out for each other. We’re almost brothers, you know?”

Finn’s stomach growled. “Brother, I don’t suppose you have any food?”

The boys laughed and Owen explained, “The holy sisters won’t feed us again until sunset. They wanted to get rid of us while they deloused the dormitory, and they won’t let you in with that hair on your head.”

“I’m not going back anyway.”

“You’ve been hiding out for two days!”

“The farmers feed me and the dogs for killing barn rats.”

“You can’t stay out there forever.”

Finn rolled his eyes.

“Everyone misses you, especially Lynn.”

A needle of guilt poked into Finn. “Where’d the gang go?”

“To the river. To find lunch.”

“Those carp taste like mud.” He thought about stealing some eggs from Widow Tillwell’s coop, but Owen would probably object.

“The fish taste better than the rats you catch.”

Finn sighed. “I know a perfect place to find trout. Nagel will never find us and it’s just a little ways up the Little Iden, by the road to Ashkirk.”

“But Deacon Nethers said not to go near the road. Bandits and such.”

“Who cares? There’re lots of trout and big crayfish. Aren’t you hungry?”

Owen nodded, then chuckled. “Just be careful.”

“Why?” Finn’s brows narrowed.

“You don’t have any breeches on and that thing looks like bait.” Owen laughed and Finn couldn’t help but smile—then he punched Owen in the arm. Hard.

Owen ran to get the others, while Finn and the dogs headed for their meeting place at the marshy area outside of town. He snuffled at the swampy air and let the cool mud on the shore soothe his bare feet.

His raw backside ached. Just when he was going to sit in the mud Owen and the gang arrived.

The kids, ranging in age from six to ten, almost all held crude fishing poles as they marched behind Owen. Finn hadn’t seen any of them since he’d been hiding out and was surprised at how excited he was to see them, even though he barely recognized them with their bald heads and newly sewn baggy clothes.

Trailing behind Owen came Lynn, Hazel, Brek, Gael, Lilly, Baird, Watt, Salty, Rhyssa, and little Tupper. Hazel squinted as she approached. “Finn, what happened to your breeches?”

Finn wanted to say something witty to the ten-year-old girl, who once had had long beautiful raven tresses—often filled with leaves. But the sight of her stark white scalp with nicks all over it made him bite his lip.

“They’re still making his clothes.” Owen winked at Finn.

“Finn!”

“Hey, Finn!” The youngest orphans, Brek and Tupper, both six, ran over to Finn to show him the tiny frogs they had caught. Tupper held up three miniature amphibians, each with a tadpole’s tail. “See my frogs?”

“Look!” Brek dug a mass of gray worms and one little frog out of his pocket.

Finn nodded his approval, then made eye contact with Lynn. Fuzzy nubs of blond hair shone in the sunlight. Finn remembered seeing strands of her hair in Nagel’s fireplace—*Bloody Barber!* Tear marks streaked through the dirt on her face and Finn decided Nagel would pay for cutting off her beautiful hair.

At least she didn’t have many nicks on her freckled scalp. He hugged her close and remembered when he had decided to be Lynn’s big brother, when her own family had disappeared in the flight from the Tarnite soldiers. Plus, Pip and Fyse really liked her. The little dogs ran around her legs yipping. Lynn smiled and Finn took the ten-year-old girl’s hand. “Come on, Lynn. Let’s catch us some fish.”

Finn guided the children toward the Little Iden and the fishing place, a bend in the river where the current slowed and flies swarmed. The kids put their poles into the green water and Finn wondered how many fish they would catch. Soon, half of the kids took off their barely stained clothes, and jumped into the warm water. The kids splashed and dunked each other, screaming with glee as they all frolicked in the shallows.

“You’re going to scare the fish away!” Owen shouted, his child’s voice becoming deeper for a moment. Finn’s nostrils flared. “Nagel will hear us back in Ryeland if they keep this up. And the road to Ashkirk isn’t that far either.”

The games and shouting persisted off and on and Finn kept an eye out for Nagel. After midday Pip and Fyse barked at something in the forest, but Nagel didn’t appear. Finn guessed it must have been a squirrel or maybe one of the barn cats that despised him and his dogs.

Late in the afternoon, hungry bellies forced the gang of Tarnite children to man their poles in earnest. But

still, no fish were caught.

“Look what I found!” Lynn’s high voice made everyone turn away from the river.

The little girl clutched a big clay honey pot against her body. She could barely lift it, and leaned backward as she waddled forward.

“What’s in the pot?” Tupper asked, bounding over to her as Pip and Fyse pranced at her feet, wagging their little tails.

“Honey.” Lynn licked her lips and plopped down the pot.

Owen put his hands on his hips. “Where’d you steal it?”

“I didn’t steal it!” Lynn’s face flashed with indignation. “I found it right over there on the path.”

“Some farmer must have forgot it.” Finn swished away the flies. “Let’s eat it!”

The kids squealed with delight and swarmed around the little girl, dipping their hands into the pot and licking the sticky honey off their fingers. Owen stepped in and made certain the younger ones got their share. Everyone was soon swallowing the sweet, syrupy nectar and joking about sticky fingers.

“How’d we get so lucky?” Hazel asked.

“Who knows?” Finn shrugged, letting Pip and Fyse lick his hands as he yawned. “I need a nap.” Finn almost forgot about his tender backside and closed his eyes. Moments later, all of the orphans lay down along the riverbank and fell asleep.

Finn felt himself flying, then he slammed into something hard and wet. River water went up his nose as the ground shifted. He realized he was in the bottom of a leaky boat as two pointy sacks landed on him—then whimpered. Finn could barely open his eyes, but realized the sacks were sleeping children: Lynn and possibly Tupper. Owen lay beside them, apparently asleep, along with others in the boat, probably the rest of his friends.

Pip and Fyse barked savagely from somewhere close by, and Finn tried to lift his head when a brown boot caked with river mud stepped beside his head. An older man with a shaggy gray beard snatched up a crossbow and loosed a quarrel.

A dog’s shrill yelp made Finn shudder. “*No!*” Finn’s shout came out as a whimper. The barking stopped. Finn tried to sit up, but his body wouldn’t move. “*Pip! Fyse!*” Finn could only mumble as the sweet flavor in his mouth turned bitter. Oars splashed into the water and he fell asleep as lethargy overwhelmed him.

Finn awoke as his body crashed onto a bouncing wooden floor. The sound of horses’ hooves clapping on the ground and squeaking wagon wheels made him realize he was no longer in the boat. His hands were tied in front of him and his feet bound tightly together with twine. Owen and the other orphans lay in the wagon, similarly bound.

A vague memory of barking surfaced in his mind. “Pip! Fyse!”

“Shut your mouth, or I’ll fill it with sand,” a shaggy-bearded man cloaked in darkness warned from the bench in front of the wagon.

Panic filled Finn’s entire being as the wagon rumbled down a rocky road that snaked through the gloomy woods.

“You all right?” Owen whispered.

Finn nodded, but he wanted to vomit—or maybe cry. “What happened to . . . the dogs?”

Owen shook his head.

The crack of a whip made Finn shrink down.

“They’ll never catch us,” the driver said, then whipped the horses again.

Shaggy-beard nudged the driver with a dirty elbow. “Them Ryelanders wouldn’t give the ass end of a skunk for these Tarnite whelps. They’re not coming after us.”

“Who are they?” Finn scowled at Shaggy-beard and the wagon driver—Whip.

“Slavers.”

“How’d they get us?” Finn asked, already knowing as waves of nausea spread from his gut.

“Poisoned honey.” Owen shook his head and Finn dry heaved.

Five men on horses charged out from shadowy trees. The wagon jerked to a halt, and the horses snorted

with displeasure.

“Celestrian soldiers!” Lynn shouted, sitting up beside Finn.

Shaggy-beard and driver bellowed with laughter and Lynn withered.

A man on a tall horse with braided red hair asked, “How many?”

“Twelve.” Shaggy-beard glanced back. “Half are girls.”

“Good catch.” Red-braid peered into the wagon, a hard smile on his ruddy face. “You two wait in the trees. We’ll ride ahead and tell the Tarnite soldiers what these will cost them. And don’t touch any of them little girls. Sir Maddox is buying, and you know he likes them unspoiled. But you can have one of them boys if you want.”

The horseman snickered as Shaggy-beard cast a hungry gaze at the children. Red-braid and the other three rode off and the terrified kids stared at Finn and Owen. Finn wasted no time in trying to get his hands free. The slavers had bound his hands in front and he quickly set to work. Owen shielded him from Shaggy-beard and Whip as Finn easily untied his feet, then chewed on the twine, wishing his teeth were as sharp as the rats he hunted.

The two slavers waited until the horsemen were long gone, then both made water beside the wagon.

“Doesn’t matter to me,” Shaggy-beard told Whip, “they both squeal the same when I’m with ’em.”

Shaggy-beard growled and shook the wagon, thrusting his hips against it. Lynn and Rhyssa began to cry. Tupper asked for his mother and Hazel curled into a tight little ball beside Owen.

“What are they going to do to us?” Lynn sniffled as big tears fell from her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Owen soothed, “the twelve angels of the Celestrum will watch over us. Say your prayers and you’ll be safe.”

Finn bit into his bindings, wanting to say the saints who had supposedly become angels weren’t going to lift a precious wing to help them. He knew the Ryelanders—probably Bloody Nagel—had sold them to the slavers. *We’re on our own. No one’s coming to save us.*

Shaggy-beard stalked toward the back of the wagon. Finn stopped chewing at the frayed twine and held still.

“This one’s a boy, isn’t it?” Shaggy-beard asked Whip, and seized Lynn’s leg, pulling her toward the rear of the wagon.

“She’s a girl!” Finn shouted.

Owen sat up. “Leave her alone.” His voice sounded like a man’s, not a skinny twelve-year-old’s.

Lynn screamed as Shaggy-beard pulled her closer. Owen dove forward and grabbed Lynn. “Please, not her. She’s just a little girl. That man said take a boy.”

Shaggy-beard’s eyes flared at Owen. “You want to take her place, *boy?* ”

Finn shredded the twine with his teeth, not caring if they saw him.

Shaggy-beard dragged Lynn out of Owen’s grasp and let her fall to the ground.

“No!” Owen shouted, and crawled forward on his elbows.

“Don’t worry. You’re next, *boy.* ” Shaggy-beard slapped Owen hard in the face.

Finn tore his hands free and sprang out of the wagon, landing on the grass. Shaggy-beard put a foot on Lynn’s neck and pointed a dirty finger at Finn. “Don’t you run, or she’ll wish she was dead.”

Finn found a fist-sized rock. “Shut your mouth!” He hurled the stone as hard as he could. It struck Shaggy-beard in the throat, staggering him.

Owen leaped out of the wagon, his feet and hands still tied. He landed on Shaggy-beard’s back and wrapped his bound hands around the man’s throat. Owen pulled the twine as hard as he could and Shaggy-beard’s face turned red, the veins in his neck bulging.

The driver laughed so hard he fell off the wagon bench.

Finn sprang toward Shaggy-beard, who stumbled backward as Owen choked him. Finn knelt behind the man’s legs and the slaver tripped over Finn’s body and hit the ground, pinning Owen under him.

Shaggy-beard pushed Owen’s arms away from his throat and rolled off the boy.

Finn kicked Shaggy-beard in the groin and smashed an apple-sized rock into the slaver’s skull. He whirled around to see what the driver was doing, and spotted the man shuddering and gurgling on the ground as blood leaked out of his slit throat. A huge bald man in fur boots stood over the dying slaver.

The man wiped the bloody razor on his deerskin breeches.

"Bloody Nagel." Finn dropped the rock beside Shaggy-beard's body, stifling the urge to run away as fast as he could.

"Bloody *Barber* Nagel." The big man bared his three front teeth and stomped toward Lynn.

"You betrayed your slaver friends?" Finn's mouth hung open, wondering how much they had paid Nagel to help them.

"I'm a hunter, you stupid boy. And the Deacons wanted you tracked down." Nagel pulled Lynn up. She yelped as he sliced the twine binding her limbs.

"They sent you . . . for *us*?" Finn couldn't believe it.

Owen stood, trying to catch his breath. "Thank . . . you . . ."

Nagel cut Owen free and stared at Shaggy-beard. "He's not dead . . . yet."

Finn noticed the man's chest rose, despite the blood oozing out of his scalp.

Nagel offered the razor to Finn. "Boy. You're going to have to learn to kill men soon enough. Now cut his throat."

Finn reached tentatively for the blade, but Owen snatched it out of Nagel's hand. Owen glared at Finn.

"This man should face judgment in Ryeland. In front of the Deacons."

"Maybe so, but we ain't in Ryeland." Nagel's eyes focused on Owen, who turned away and jumped into the wagon where he started cutting the other children loose.

Horses on the road made Nagel duck behind the wagon. "They're coming back."

Owen ushered the children out of the wagon, some of their hands still bound. Nagel lifted the little ones out and Finn herded them toward the woods. Nagel and Owen came behind and they all rushed into the forest as five horses arrived at the wagon.

Nagel picked up Brek and Tupper, then carried them under his arms. Finn held Lynn's hand and guided her through the brush, while Owen held Hazel's. Nagel took the lead and they found the Barber's brown gelding tied near a willow tree. Nagel lifted five of the smallest children onto the horse. "Hold on. And no one cry. You boys don't let the others get lost." He pointed at Finn and Owen, who ushered Lynn, Hazel, Watt, Baird, and Rhyssa through the forest.

Nagel led the way through the brush; moonlight flashed off the hilt of a massive sword strapped to Nagel's saddle. Finn recognized the two-handed greatsword, and knew it was taller than he or Owen. A stout crossbow also hung on from the saddle and Finn imagined shooting it would be like getting kicked by an angry plow horse.

"Shhh." Nagel raised a big hand and they stopped. Finn heard horses moving ahead of them. A lot of horses. Nagel crept forward, then came back with a foul expression and whispered, "Tarnite cavalry." Behind them, a horse whinnied and a man cursed loudly. Faint torchlight appeared in the forest. Finn's heart raced.

"Slavers. Come on." Nagel guided them through the trees, away from the Tarnite column and the slavers. For two hours they tramped through the brush. Finn noticed the five exhausted children atop the horse had fallen asleep. Lynn was nearly asleep on her feet; eventually Finn had to carry her on his back for a while. She wasn't that heavy at first, but his strength ran out when the forest opened up onto a burned field. Nagel marched them forward without mercy. Lynn kept up with Finn leading her along by the hand. Lightning flashed, then thunder boomed in the distance. Moments later, rain fell in fat drops. Finn grimaced as Tupper and Brek began to shiver uncontrollably. Tupper nearly fell off the horse as cold, fatigue, and the residual effects of the poison took their toll. Finn poked Nagel in the leg and the big man turned.

Finn craned his neck to stare upwards. "Listen, you heartless bastard. We've got to stop."

The hulking man scowled at Finn as rivulets of water ran off Nagel's bald pate.

"Finn's right." Owen's voice didn't waver.

Nagel turned and kept marching, but he headed toward a razed homestead in the distance. The house was a pile of scorched timbers, but lightning revealed an intact barn with a patched roof and rotting walls. Finn entered the empty barn and sniffed a fresh rat pellet. "If Pip and Fyse were with me we'd clean all the rats out of here in one night."

Nagel frowned at Finn. "How long with one dog?"

Finn's heart pounded. "One?"

Nagel sighed. "Your male one is dead."

"Dead? Fyse is . . ." Finn fought back the tears as Lynn hugged him. Brek and Tupper wrapped their arms around Finn and Hazel sobbed. After hugging them back, Finn stomped into one of the empty stalls. All of his friends hovered outside, but Owen held them back.

Finn pounded his fists against the wood. *First, Father doesn't come back from the war with the Murhatans, then we lose our farm to the baron's taxmen, then Mother and my sister are taken by soldiers. Now Fyse is killed by slavers? It's not fair! This can't be happening to me!*

Finn slumped to the floor in the darkness. Owen stepped into the stall and sat beside Finn for a long time before saying, "He was a good dog."

Finn's chest shook, but he held in the sobs, taking a shuddering breath. *I'm never going to cry again .*

"Now all I've got left is Pip."

Owen punched Finn hard in the arm.

Finn's anger built, but the hurt look in Owen's eyes made him pause. "What?"

"You've still got me." Owen pointed at the other kids. "Us."

Finn fought back the tears, and a frown mixed with hope spread across his face. "I guess we're still almost brothers."

Owen smiled, then Finn punched him in the arm.

The other children came into the stall and surrounded the two boys. They all fell asleep on the moldy hay, sleeping like a litter of puppies.

The pounding rain on the roof finally stopped, but water dripped down into murky puddles.

"Riders on the road," Nagel whispered.

Owen and Finn crept out of the stall where the children huddled together in the darkness.

"Too late to run." Nagel barred the doors with a plank. "Boys, close the back way."

Finn and Owen quickly finished their task, returning to find Nagel had loaded his crossbow and unsheathed his greatsword. The big man's eyes were nearly invisible in the darkness, and he kept peering out a crack in the barn doors, watching the riders come ever closer. Finn stared into the night through a knothole at six riders bearing torches.

"What do we do?" Owen asked.

"Tell the little ones to be quiet."

Owen held up a pitchfork. "We can help."

Finn raised a stout ax handle.

"Damn Tarnite orphans," Nagel grumbled.

Six horses stopped outside the barn. In the torchlight, Finn saw Shaggy-beard with a bloody cloth around his head. The red-haired man pointed at tracks in the mud. Two men rode to the rear of the barn and Red sent another man—a skinny fellow with a hooded cloak—to the front. Skinny held an ax in one hand as he sloshed through the mud, then peered into the barn.

Nagel plunged his sword through the gap between the doors. The tip pierced the man's gut. Nagel yanked the sword out and Skinny fell into a puddle clutching at his belly.

When Skinny stopped moving, Red and Shaggy-beard circled the barn and spoke with the other two horsemen. They argued. Finn heard Red say, "We took coin from Sir Maddox. We deliver tonight or he'll have our heads on pikes. He's probably after us already."

Thunder boomed in the distance as two men approached the rear, while three came at the front, all on horseback.

Nagel handed his crossbow to Finn. "Aim, then pull this lever here. Wait until he's close."

Finn nodded, intimidated by the size of the weapon and wondering how to hold it. Nagel sent Finn and Owen scurrying away to hide, and pressed himself into a shadowy alcove.

The slavers tossed ropes over the handles of the barn doors and used their horses to tear them open.

They dismounted and marched into the barn with torches held high, each carrying a club or ax. Nagel

leaped to attack, his greatsword arcing toward the slavers. Red and the other two men jumped back, recoiling from Nagel's slashing blade. Shaggy-beard came from the rear and checked the stalls, getting closer to where the children huddled together. The kids screamed when he appeared in the doorway. Finn stood in front of the little ones, squinting in the torchlight. He scowled at the grinning slaver and thought about his dead dog. Shaggy-beard sidestepped out of the way just as Finn pulled the crossbow lever. The bolt *thunked* into the chest of the other slaver as the recoil sent Finn tumbling backward. Riding Nagel's horse, Owen burst out of a stall and charged Shaggy-beard with a pitchfork held like a lance, yelling as he attacked. The slaver dropped his torch to ward off the blow. One of the tines pierced Shaggy-beard's hand as Nagel's horse knocked him down.

Finn screamed and rushed out of the stall with the ax handle held over his head in two hands. All of the children followed him out, makeshift clubs in their hands and feral screams erupting from their lips. They descended on Shaggy-beard and pummeled him mercilessly.

Smoke and flickering orange light made Finn stop hitting the slaver's bloody skull. Flames erupted all around them where the torches had been discarded. The rear of the barn was engulfed in a rapidly spreading fire.

"We've got to get everyone out!" Owen shouted to Finn as Nagel's horse bucked and screamed. Owen jumped onto a pile of hay as the horse sped out the front of the barn, past Nagel and Red.

Finn and Owen herded the children as the flames swept along the floor of the barn and up into the loft.

They stopped near the entrance where two slavers lay dead, gruesome gashes across their bodies.

Red and Nagel still faced each other, the slaver staying beyond the reach of Nagel's sword. Red held the blade of a throwing knife in one hand and an ax in the other.

Nagel could barely stand, a knife handle protruding from each of his thighs, and another in the center of his chest. A cut across the right side of Red's neck appeared to be his only wound.

Finn and the other children reached Nagel as the big man fell hard to his knees, still holding up his sword.

Finn and Owen flanked the Bloody Barber, brandishing ax handle and pitchfork. Nagel coughed and the tip of his sword hit the dirt. Bright red blood leaked out of his chest. Finn reached for the knife.

"Leave it." Nagel shook his head.

Smoke billowed around them and Red backed out of the barn, a content grin on his face as Nagel fell backward. Finn and Owen tried to ease him down, but the big man was too much for them and he fell hard.

Nagel whispered to Finn, "Take my razor. Hide it. Then cut that bastard's throat when he falls asleep."

Finn took the folded razor out of Nagel's hand. "I will."

"When he's dead . . . get the children back to Ryeland," Nagel whispered. "Protect them all. The Deacons want you there. Especially you two boys."

Finn shook his head. "But we're nobody."

Nagel managed a gurgling laugh. "I'm nobody. An orphaned bastard from Tarn who became an unworthy servant of the Deacons. But you'll both be knights in the Order of Saint Mathias. The Deacons told me that."

Finn and Owen exchanged wide-eyed glances. *Knights? Impossible.*

"Now get out of here and let me die in peace." Blood leaked out of Nagel's chest.

"But you'll burn to death!" Finn urgently grabbed onto Nagel. "We'll drag you out."

"No. I'll be dead before the fire comes. Now go."

"We'll pray for you." Owen's lips trembled.

Nagel pressed his greatsword into Owen's hands.

"Go!" Nagel commanded as he coughed and choked on the blood filling his lungs.

Sad at leaving Nagel behind, Finn helped Owen lead the children out of the burning barn.

The slaver waited as horses galloped down the road toward them. Red grinned at the children after staring through the darkness at the incoming armored warriors. "Look! Sir Maddox comes for his slaves. There's nowhere to run." The slaver smirked at the children. "That big man was a fool to steal you from me."

"Shut your bloody mouth!" Finn lunged, but Owen held him back.

“Sir Maddox will cut your tongue out for that.” Red turned as the riders emerged from the darkness. “Sir Maddox! I have your slaves.”

The leader galloped toward Red and drove a lance through the slaver’s chest. Red splashed into a puddle, gasping, “*But . . . I . . .*”

Finn knelt down and put a hand over Red’s mouth, then slowly cut his throat.

Shadowy horsemen in full plate armor ringed the children, helms down, faces hidden, lances and swords drawn.

Owen lifted Nagel’s sword, his small hands around the massive hilt. The knight who lanced the slaver dismounted, drew his longsword, and faced Owen.

Bloody razor in his hand, Finn stood shoulder to shoulder with his best friend.

“*Yield.*” The knight commanded, his voice muffled by his helm.

Owen’s arms trembled, barely able to hold up the heavy sword. “Never,” both of the boys said in unison, as Finn helped Owen lift the sword.

The other children stepped forward, some with clubs, others with rocks to throw at the shadow-cloaked knights.

“Go back to Tarn!” Finn shouted.

Laughter erupted from the riders and many raised their visors. The dismounted knight took off his helm and stared at Finn and Owen, his steely eyes and scarred face revealed in the growing firelight. “Tonight we’re headed to Ryeland.” The knight’s eyes softened. “I’m Sir Gregory. The Deacons sent us to find you. Now I understand why.”

The barn fire raged higher; in the burgeoning light Finn saw emblazoned on their shields a Celestrian angel raising a silver sword. Overpowering relief made Finn’s strength fade away. The greatsword fell as Finn realized the horsemen were knights in the Order of Saint Mathias.

Finn and Owen stared at the burning barn. Celestrian knights stood guard as Owen drove Nagel’s sword into the mud, then gathered the children for a silent prayer.

Finn wiped his eyes, telling himself it was the smoke from Nagel’s pyre that made them water. As he thought of Nagel’s sacrifice a new path for his life suddenly opened before him. He turned to Owen and looked into his friend’s clear blue eyes. “Someday, I’m going back to Tarn—as a knight. I’m going to find my mother and sister.”

Owen put his hand on Finn’s shoulder. “Brother, you’re not going back alone.”

A lump caught in Finn’s throat. He knew they would always be there for each other. No matter what. Until the day they died.

“Let’s get you all home.” Sir Gregory motioned to the horses.

“Not yet.” Finn unfolded Nagel’s razor and splashed water from a puddle onto his hair. “There’s something the Bloody Barber would have wanted.” With slow strokes, Finn shaved his head clean as tears streamed down his face.

THE QUEST

Donald J. Bingle

“Incoming!” yelled Ian over the commando headset as he dove for cover beneath the burned-out shell of an enemy troop transport. The electronics gear the members of the squad wore dampened the volume of the warning to keep the micro-speakers in the ear buds from cracking, but the static-punctuated shout was still loud enough to induce several wincing as the squad reacted. Carmen, Dweezer, and Gabe hit the ground hard, rolling into the nearest bomb crater or depression they could find. Lucinda spun in place and threw her hands upward at a sharp angle, energy coursing between her outstretched fingertips, waiting to be discharged. As her green eyes searched the smoky haze that passed for sky on this godforsaken world, the others assumed the position: legs tucked up to protect their torsos, fingers

interlaced behind their necks to protect their spinal cords, and helmets tilted back to perform the same function, as their faces pressed into what they hoped was mud on the ground below them.

They did not see the hint of a smile that flickered over Lucinda's countenance as she found her target arcing toward the squad from a battered redoubt in the hills before the distant fortress. "It's only a time-delay fireball," she called out as her fingers danced, directing the energy they held toward the sphere of red, fiery plasma that descended in a shallow, yet ballistic-defined trajectory toward them.

The flattening of the fireball's flight path was due to the .83 Earth gravitational ratio of this hellhole of a planet, Ian knew, as he risked a peek at the unfolding scenario. He realized it was safer to cover his eyes; the light-blast of an explosion, or even the flash of a successful magical countermeasure, could affect his night vision for hours to come, but he wanted to acquire an instinctive feel for the rate of fall-off on missiles in this world. Besides, he loved to watch Lucinda in action, using her arcane knowledge to save their butts, allow the squad to reach their objective, and advance yet another level toward ultimate victory.

Ian's quest for battlefield smarts meant that he was the only one who saw the look of sudden shock in Lucinda's eyes as the energy radiating from her fingertips reached the rapidly descending death from above and fritzed and fizzled across its surface, neither slowing nor deflecting it a bit.

"Oh my God!" muttered Lucinda, as she stood transfixed by the approaching annihilation. "It . . . it's . . . magic resistant."

Ian could hear the thuds of his heavy boots pounding on the dirt beneath him before he even consciously realized he was running toward Lucinda. Then there was silence, except for the rush of air, as he leaped toward her, engulfing her in a bear-hug tackle that would have constituted an ejection-worthy personal foul in any sporting league in any society anywhere. He did not roll in the air to take the punishment of hitting the ground himself, but instead remained on top, slamming her into the far bank of a small ditch that ran alongside the road, knocking the breath from her lungs as her ribs compressed and he felt one crack. The fireball detonated at the same moment as Ian and Lucinda hit the ground, a blast of compressed plasma expanding from the impact point to levitate the intertwined comrades for just a moment before slamming them again into the side of the ditch as the fire ignited the back of Ian's clothing and sprayed his neck with the mystical equivalent of burning napalm. Ian clutched Lucinda fast for several seconds until the wave of dancing flame had passed, then leaped up to his feet, automatically extending a hand to help his injured comrade up.

Lucinda looked at the outstretched hand of assistance in apparent disbelief, batting it away with her right hand as she jerked herself painfully into a sitting position, resting on her left elbow.

"You're on fire, moron!" she shouted, the over-peaking static of her protest over the com gear causing the rest of the squad to finally look up from their positions of cover. "Drop and roll, idiot! Drop and fucking roll!"

Ian, always the gentleman, stared at his own proffered hand in dazed confusion. Was Lucinda angry? Had he hurt her badly when he tackled her? Who was she yelling at? Despite the heightened reaction time afforded by his adrenaline-soaked state, he was bewildered, dithering. Maybe something in the impact or the blast had bollixed up his logic and command-processing facilities. He started to look around to assess the situation and find out who Lucinda was still screaming at, when he noticed the oily, black smoke curling around his chin line and the sudden sensation of heat from behind.

Oh, yeah, there was this incoming fireball and . . .

Lucinda clipped him on the back of his knees and he collapsed like a tower of Jenga pieces, hitting the edge of the small ditch and rolling down its mud-slicked side until he landed in the pool of slime-covered water at the bottom with an audible hiss. As his thoughts cleared, he saw the rest of the squad looking down at him, laughing and pointing. Gabe's arm was casually draped around Carmen's waist. Dweezer was practically doubled over with guffaws. And Lucinda was clutching her ribs.

"Stop looking so stupid," she protested. "It hurts when I laugh."

"Your ribs?" said Ian with obvious concern in his voice. "Dweezer, stop laughing and cure the lady," he continued, his voice taking its more accustomed tone of command.

"It's not just my ribs," said Lucinda playfully, as Dweezer began a healing incantation. "It's you, Ian."

You're so damned chivalrous on the battlefield, you made me snort Diet Dr. Pepper out my nose."

Ian rolled his eyes and muttered "Time out, everyone," over his headset before thumbing the button on his controller to "pause." The feedback sensors in his incredibly sophisticated, expensive gaming chair immediately began to cycle down, replacing the sensations of the battlefield with the sensations of sitting in his den. The cameras on his console and the sensors in his gaming glove powered off with an audible click, leaving his avatar frozen in time on the plasma gaming screen. The rest of the squad froze in place as they did the same at their own far-flung locations.

Ian toggled the switch on his headset to out-of-game communication mode. "Guys," he began (he always called them guys even though Carmen and Lucinda were definitely of the female variety), "we're never going to take the fortress and bump up to paragon level if we don't take things more seriously and work as a group."

"Hey there, flame boy," chided Dweezer, "we all did what we were supposed to when someone shouts 'incoming.' You're the one being all noble and stupid and setting yourself on fire."

"You really have got to get over the whole damsel-in-distress mentality," complained Carmen. "Lucinda had it under control, I'm sure."

"My wife is correct in every way," chimed in Gabe, as if on cue. Gabe and Carmen were newlyweds, just approaching their first anniversary.

Ian shook his head, then realized that with the game's tracking gear turned off, no one could see him doing that, so he verbalized his sentiments. "No, Gabe, she may be wonderful and charming and, when I finally meet her in person, I'm sure I'll find her to be beautiful and sexy, but she is definitely not correct in every way. In the first place, she married you, which makes her judgment questionable. In the second place, I didn't tackle Lucinda because I'm a male chauvinist. I did it to save her life. Didn't you hear? The fireball was magic resistant. She was startled and she choked. The fireball would have vaporized her if I hadn't knocked her below the equator of the powerblast."

"Uh . . . no," Lucinda retorted, with just the hint of an edge to her normally subdued voice. "I mean, I was startled, but you don't honestly think that I went into this battle without magicking myself with 'blast resistance' do you? I'm not some first level sorcerer's apprentice, you know."

"Oh," was Ian's only response.

"It's probably just as well the spell doesn't protect from melee attacks or I would have held as firm as a redwood when you did the whole macho bullshit flying tackle thing and the fireball blast would have twisted you around my rock-solid, yet comely and curvy, torso like a piece of newspaper around a parking meter."

"Sounds like fun to me," smirked Dweezer. "What slot do I put my quarter in?"

"Quarter? More like a penny, I'm sure," replied Lucinda, the edge creeping back into her voice.

"Keep it clean, guys . . ." said Ian with authority.

"And always use protection," quipped Carmen. "Unless you're married . . ."

"My wife is correct in every way," blurted Gabe, right on cue. Ian did a rim shot with his fingers on the edge of his desk.

"Let's cut the banter and get back to the quest," said Dweezer, obviously bested.

Ian looked at his watch. "We'll never finish tonight and no game pauses are allowed once you breach the fortress walls. We'd better call it a night." He flicked the screen over to his calendar. "What about Wednesday?"

"Yoga," said Lucinda with a sigh. "You know I have yoga on Wednesdays." If the tracking sensors had still been on, Ian knew he would have seen Lucinda's eyes roll and brows furrow as she spoke. "How long have we been playing as a group? Two years? Yet you keep asking if Wednesday is good. How many times are you going to keep doing that?"

"'Til you give up yoga?" volunteered Dweezer.

"Not going to happen," responded Lucinda. "Just because I spend an ungodly amount of time in front of a gaming screen doesn't mean I don't care about my body."

"Believe me, I care about your body . . ." responded Dweezer with his typical smarmy cockiness. "Tell me, just how accurate is your avatar in terms of proportions . . ."

“What about Thursday?” interjected Ian with a weary tone.

Gabe responded. “That begins to impinge on packing and travel time. We’ve got a longer trip to the cabin than you guys, you know. Toronto’s not exactly next door to Colorado. And border control has been a real pain lately.”

“I think we should wait ’til after the cabin. We can plan strategy while we’re there,” agreed Carmen.

“Are you sure there isn’t an internet hook-up at the cabin?” complained Dweezer for the umpteenth time.

“We could all bring our set-ups and game together.”

Ian looked around at his bulky and expensive gear. “Like I’m going to lug all this stuff around in a carry-on.”

“Besides,” said Lucinda. “The whole point is that we’ve been playing Armies of Blood, Fire & Magic for two years together without actually meeting in person. It’s time to connect on a different level. Chat, take a hike, make popcorn, whatever. Get to know each other in reality.”

“It’ll be nice,” cooed Carmen. “Colorado is supposed to be cool and crisp this time of year. The aspens will be golden and there will already be snow in the high passes, just to make the backdrop pretty.”

“And stars, guys,” volunteered Gabe. “Zillions of stars. They say you can really see the Milky Way in the mountains.”

“I guess,” grumbled Dweezer. “I mean, I know I said I’d come. But it seems a long way to go to sit around a cabin and look at the trees during the day and the stars at night.”

“Don’t worry,” offered Ian, always the leader. “I’ll bring some board games and cards and stuff. It’ll be fun.”

* * *

“No wonder this place was cheap,” Ian said to himself as he shifted the white Subaru Outback into second gear at the bottom of yet another 6 percent grade on the winding gravel road that led to the cabin. At least it was only early December. He would hate this drive in January when snow would make the edge of the road even more difficult to discern. He hoped whoever had already arrived at the cabin was cooking dinner. More than two hours driving since he left the airport after his delayed and snackless flight, Ian was hungry.

Twenty minutes later, he found the driveway to the cabin, a half-mile long single vehicle track that was overgrown with scrub and weeds. At least, he noted, he wasn’t the first to show up. The weeds in the middle hump of the track were bent down toward the cabin. Someone had already driven up the lane today. When he arrived at the cabin, he saw a Chevy Geo pulled over to one side of the looping turnaround. The Geo had New Mexico plates, so he knew it was Dweezer, who had promised to pick up Lucinda from the Colorado Springs airport on his way up.

Ian pulled most of the way around the driveway loop and parked, blocking the exit. That way, if they went on any excursions, he would be the one to drive. The Geo was too small for five—Lucinda no doubt had felt it was too small for two, riding for close to four hours next to Dweezer to get here. And Gabe and Carmen were so moony over each other that he doubted either one could keep his or her eyes on the road for long. Besides, the Outback had four-wheel drive and Ian, party leader, always liked to be the one in control.

He grabbed his pack and a collapsible shopping bag filled with board games and snacks and headed back along the loop toward the cabin. For such a crappy driveway, the cabin itself looked remarkably roomy and nice. There was a large porch with two rocking chairs and a side table, and a great view behind and to the east, over a small lake and then a drop off toward a ponderosa pine clogged valley. A propane tank, partially hidden by an immense stack of fire-wood, supplied fuel for cooking and heat. A few solar panels on the south-facing roof and a farmer-style windmill back by the lake obviously supplied electricity—he had seen no phone or electric wires in miles. The layout on the brochure had indicated that three out of the four bedrooms were tiny, but they would all be in the living area and kitchen most of the time anyway.

All in all, he was surprised that the cabin actually looked as good as the picture on the brochure—he knew what you could do with PhotoShop. The rent for the week had been inexpensive, especially when

split five ways. But then, it was an out-of-the-way spot. The nearest ski resort was more than thirty miles distant as the crow flies, twice that when traveling on twisty-turny little mountain roads.

He knocked on the door just to be polite, though he couldn't imagine Dweezer and Lucinda engaged in anything he couldn't interrupt without warning. A tall young woman with flaming red hair answered the door, no doubt Lucinda. She looked relieved to see him.

"Ian," she called out in a husky baritone as she moved to engulf him in a hug. "So glad you didn't get lost. We were beginning to worry."

Ian dropped his stuff and hugged his old friend—who he was just meeting for the first time—back. As he squeezed Lucinda, at first tentatively, then tighter as he realized she didn't have a cracked rib in this reality, he saw a wiry young man with greasy black hair leaning on the doorway to what looked to be the kitchen.

Dweezer was wearing a Metallica concert T-shirt. He flashed Ian the metal sign as Lucinda continued to compress the breath out of him. Either it was genuine affection for a friend or she was trying to exact a rib-cracking revenge for his faux pas in the game last weekend. Ian waved weakly with his fingertips at Dweezer in greeting.

Finally, Lucinda stepped back and held him at arm's length for a moment. "Grand to finally meet you, Sir Ian."

"Uh, great to meet you in person, too, Lucinda . . . and, uh, Dweezer." He gave Dweezer a broader wave now that his arms were not pinned to the sides of his torso.

"Don't worry. She gave me a hug, too, when we met at the airport. Freaked out the rent-a-cops who were watching me to see if I was meeting someone trafficking drugs or something." He scrunched up his face. "I don't think my hug lasted quite that long, though. I'm pretty sure, in fact, 'cause I remember it really, really well, being short and all."

Lucinda's pale skin reddened until her freckles almost faded from view. There was an awkward silence for a moment before Lucinda noticed the shopping bag Ian had dropped when he entered. She whooped in delight. "Whaddya bring? Any good games?"

"Any food?" called Dweezer from his position guarding the entrance to the kitchen.

"Just munchies," responded Ian, snatching a bag of nacho cheese Doritos from the top of the sack and lobbing them to Dweezer, the party scrounger/healer.

"Cool," said Dweezer as he snagged the bag and quickly pulled it open. "I got caffeine in the fridge. You want?"

"Yeah, Mountain Dew if you got it," replied Ian. "Otherwise anything cola-like that has sugar in it."

As Dweezer disappeared from view, Lucinda leaned in toward Ian. "Thank God you're here. I've spent almost five hours listening to Dweezer's stories about the other three massively multiplayer RPGs he's playing in. Please start a conversation about something else, anything else."

Before Ian could respond, Dweezer came back in, tossing a can of Dew toward Ian. He snagged it, without jarring it so much it would fizz, and popped it open, taking a deep swig. But before Ian could start a conversation about anything, they all heard the slam of a car door, followed rapidly by another.

"Gabe and Carmen are here," trilled Lucinda. "Let's help them with their stuff."

"Nobody helped me with my stuff," grumbled Dweezer.

"Aside from three cases of pop, I didn't notice you had any stuff," Lucinda called over her shoulder as she brushed past Ian to open the door.

Ian turned to join her in helping the couple, but they both stopped short as they spied the twosome opening the trunk of their rental car, a two-door Mustang. Gabe was the nerdy-looking computer jockey that Ian had expected, but Carmen—Carmen was not the trim fighter/tech that they knew from the game. She had a sizeable belly.

"She's preggers," Ian said softly. "Why didn't they tell us?"

Lucinda grabbed his arm. "Don't say anything until she says something about it," she whispered, squeezing his upper arm. "She might just be fat."

But after a few moments filled with exclamations of greeting and hugs and handshakes and another metal sign from Dweezer, who was now leaning on the door-jamb to the main entrance, they all found out that

Carmen was, indeed, pregnant.

“Surprise!” called out Gabe, gesturing with both hands towards Carmen’s ample belly. “We’re gonna be parents!”

“Well, I guess somebody’s been busy when they’re not playing the game,” remarked Ian.

Lucinda cuffed Gabe lightly as she breezed by him to give Carmen yet another hug, a squeeze that threatened to pop the kid out on the spot. “Why didn’t you tell us? That’s no way to treat your friends,” she chided as she ended the hug.

“I wanted to,” said Carmen, with a sidelong glance at her beaming husband, “but just as we were going to, we started to talk about getting together with all you guys in person and Gabe, well, he likes to tell people in person.”

“Just so I can see their admiration of my studly accomplishments, sweetheart.”

Back at the doorway, Dweezer gave a mock salute. “Good work, soldier. Say, did you guys bring any real food?”

“I brought the ingredients for my world-famous hot dog soup,” volunteered Gabe. “It’s got green pea soup and cream of potato soup and . . .”

“That’s a real recipe?” asked Lucinda, her nose crinkled in disgust.

Gabe looked stunned. “That’s the ingredients. The recipe is to heat the mixture until thick, then add ketchup until the green sludge turns brown.”

“So caffeine and Doritos it is,” Lucinda quipped as she turned toward the cabin with Carmen’s carry-on bag.

* * *

They guzzled soft drinks and chomped various salty, crunchy snack foods as they talked and played games late into the night, ending with a round of Oh Hell! that wound up about three AM. Then they toddled off to their assigned bedrooms (Carmen and Gabe sharing the master bedroom) and slept the dead sleep of all travelers. It was almost noon the next day when Ian woke, showering and then shaving with the gyroscopic shaver he used on camping trips before sauntering out to the common room. He heard some noise and smelled something greasy and salty from the kitchen. He pushed the swinging door open and saw the rest of the squad at a dinette table, chowing down on a lumpy brown concoction.

“I can’t believe I’m eating this,” marveled Lucinda as she took another glopping spoonful.

“Hey,” shrugged Dweezer, “it’s salty and creamy and ketchupy and has chunks of processed meat in it. What’s not to like?”

Peer pressure is an amazing force. Ian ate the hot dog soup.

It was pretty good.

The plan was to play a few games in the afternoon, then head out around four o’clock toward the nearest ski resort area, where they could find a restaurant and get a decent meal before picking up supplies and coming back to the cabin for some more late night gaming and the big strategy powwow on the quest to take the fortress in Armies of Blood, Fire & Magic. But the game of Rail Baron they had started in midafternoon dragged on forever. It was well after dark when Ian finally managed to squeak past Dweezer’s pursuit and complete his run for his home city.

“Thank God that’s over,” exclaimed Lucinda as she started to put the game away. “It only takes a half hour to play the online version.”

“You guys were just being wussy about declaring your run for home—it could have ended an hour ago,” whined Dweezer.

Ian turned to Dweezer. “Patience, my friend, is not one of your strong points, which is why we need to talk strategy for ABFM later tonight.”

“Talk later,” said Gabe as he headed to the master bedroom to wake up Carmen, who had decided to nap after being bankrupted early in the game. “Let’s go eat.”

“Wow, look at the time,” said Ian as they gathered their coats. “It’s gonna be late by the time we trek all the way to the ski resort.”

“And there could be a wait, depending on how many skiers are looking for sustenance after a day on the mostly-fake-snow slopes,” noted Carmen. “I can’t believe that game lasted four hours after I got

eliminated.”

“I’m too hungry to wait two hours to eat something,” complained Lucinda.

Dweezer shrugged. “Maybe we can get pizza.”

“No way,” Ian responded. “We’re in the dead zone. Nobody delivers out in the mountains.”

“Not delivery, doofus. There’s a little town not that far northwest of here. There was a coupon on the edge of the map from a pizza place there.”

Ian considered for a moment and then looked around at the rest of the group. “Pizza?”

There was a roar of assent. Ian turned to Dweezer. “You navigate. I’ll drive.”

Dweezer nodded and opened the door. A flurry of flakes was sucked into the cabin as the group looked out over three or four inches of white smothering the landscape beyond the edge of the porch roof.

“Dude, when did it start snowing?”

“It was misting a bit when I went in to sleep,” Carmen replied.

“Not a problem,” Ian assured the others as he stepped out into the vigorous snow flurry. “It’s not like we’re going all the way to the ski resort. Besides, I’ve got four-wheel drive on the Outback.”

“Four-wheel drive doesn’t make you stop any better if you start sliding,” said Lucinda as she stepped out cautiously onto the porch, glaring at the white mass beyond with clear hostility.

Dweezer exited next, dashing past Ian and Lucinda, leaping off the porch and twirling about in the snow.

“C’mon. We’re supposed to be adventurers. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Well, it is only a few inches,” mumbled Carmen as she stepped out onto the porch.

“My wife is correct in every way,” declaimed Gabe before he realized the unintended double entendre.

Everyone laughed and headed for the car as Gabe shut the cabin door, his face reddened, and not from the flush of the cold.

“It’s a quest,” declared Dweezer. “The Quest for Pizza!”

Gabe tucked himself into the back seat with the women as Dweezer, designated mapper for the quest, took up the shotgun position. Ian started up the vehicle and brushed snow off the windows while it warmed up.

Then they took off into the dark, the headlights of the car illuminating almost nothing but swirling snow and a carpet of untracked white ahead. Every once in a while, they passed a tall, bright orange pole along the side of the road.

“What’re those?” asked Dweezer, looking up from his map.

“They’re guides for the snowplows. That way they can tell where the edge is and stay on the road, no matter how deep the snow gets.”

“Jesus,” whispered Lucinda in the back seat. “How deep does the snow get here?”

They made steady progress, turning left at a hilltop crossroads onto a narrow roadway at Dweezer’s direction. The unfamiliar route twisted and turned, hugging a mountainside as it dipped and climbed. The Outback did well on the steep slopes upward, but there was a bit of sliding on the increasingly infrequent downhills.

“Maybe you should slow down a bit,” suggested Lucinda as the vehicle picked up speed on a dip in the road.

“Momentum is the key for not getting stuck in snow,” responded Ian, goosing the accelerator as the vehicle was reaching the bottom of the dip before heading up yet again. “You need enough oomph to make it up the next slope.” The snow was more vigorous and much deeper as they progressed.

“Maybe I’ll just close my eyes,” Lucinda murmured.

“I’ll sit on the downhill side on the way back,” volunteered Gabe, “not that you can really see how far you’d fall in the snow and the dark.”

“Spidey-sense,” laughed Dweezer in the front seat. “You can’t see the danger, but you know it’s there.”

“How much farther?” asked Carmen.

Dweezer held up the map, a ragged corner showing where he had already ripped off the pizza place coupon, and pointed toward their path, before handing it to the group squeezed into the backseat. “Not far. See how much closer this place is than the ski resort? Probably cheaper prices, too, even before the 25 percent off coupon.”

Gabe flicked on the backseat light as he and the two women hunched together to look at the map.

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Lucinda.

Ian instinctively took his foot off the gas as he heard the exclamation, just in case she had seen something in their path.

“Sorry,” Lucinda said almost immediately. “I mean, I think that’s what they call this stretch—Oh My God Road, because of the drop-offs and views.”

“And there’s a town on it?” asked Carmen.

“No, it follows a string of passes. We intersected it near the north end, just south of a pass leading to Pyrite, Colorado, the pizza town.”

“Wait a second,” exclaimed Gabe, bringing the map up close to his face in the dim light. “This says the Pyrite pass is at 11,628 feet.”

“No wonder the snow’s getting so deep. That’s pretty fricking high,” grumbled Ian without taking his attention from the road.

“We should turn around,” said Lucinda with concern.

“Where?” complained Ian. “There hasn’t been an intersection or driveway or scenic lookout or even a discernable wide space since we got on this road. I don’t think there’s room to turn around.” He gave the car a bit more gas to help it reach the top of the latest rise.

“C’mon, guys,” whined Dweezer. “There’s no reason to panic . . .”

“Holy shit!” Ian braked before he was even able to discern if the dark shapes in the road were boulders or something else. As the Outback sloughed sideways on the dipping roadway, he saw a half dozen massive elk bolt off the side of the road, downhill. There was a cacophony of screams and expletives as the car tilted sharply downward, but deep snow muffled the bumps and clatters that would otherwise have accompanied the crash as the car slid front-passenger side first off the roadway and downslope, unintentionally following the frightened elk until the elk cut sharply left and scampered into the darkness. Ian prayed for a stand of aspens to cushion the car’s slide, but knew that they were above the treeline. There was a bang, more shouts, and the sound of crumpling metal as the side of the car hit a large boulder. The car spun 180 degrees before jarring to a halt.

There was a moment of stillness before Dweezer spoke. “OK, now you can panic.”

Ian killed the engine and sniffed the air for any sign that the gas line had broken or the tank had ruptured in the brief slide down the mountainside. He did not smell gasoline. “Is everyone okay?”

Fortunately, they had all been belted in, so the worst of it was a bump on Lucinda’s forehead caused by a thwack against the side window. Although Gabe fussed over Carmen with almost manic concern, there appeared to be no major injuries.

“What do we do now?” asked Lucinda finally.

“It’s still snowing hard out there and it’s bitter cold and windy,” replied Ian, taking leadership as always.

“We stay with the car. Always stay with the car.”

“Does anyone have any food?” asked Gabe. “Carmen should eat regularly for the baby’s sake.”

Everyone shook their heads no as Dweezer fumbled in his pockets. “I’ve got these,” he said finally, holding up a small tin.

“Mints?” said Lucinda, squinting at the tin in the gloom of the car, lit only by the backseat light.

“Caffeinated mints,” replied Dweezer.

“Of course,” said Lucinda. “All real food has sugar and caffeine in your world.”

“Uh . . . actually,” stammered Dweezer, “they’re . . . uh . . . sugar-free.”

“Carmen can’t have caffeine in her condition,” murmured Gabe, “or artificial sweeteners.”

“Well, the rest of us should all have some,” said Ian. “It’s going to be a long night and we should stay awake.” He turned to Gabe. “Kiss Carmen good night and turn off the light. We can’t run down the battery.”

Ian turned on the car for five or ten minutes every hour to run the heater. He also flashed the headlights and beeped the horn in bursts: three shorts then three longs then three shorts—a clear S.O.S. for anybody watching or listening. When he tried to start the car at 4:00 AM, it would seem to catch, but

stall out. He stopped trying before he wore down the battery—they might desperately need the horn or lights to summon help later. So they all sat in the dark and waited for dawn.

Dawn arrived as a pale whiteness on the other side of the windows. That's when Ian realized why the car hadn't started on the last attempt. The car had been buried by the freak early-season snowfall; the engine wouldn't run because the tailpipe was clogged. They had to be almost at the top of the pass to get so much snow that the car was buried and packed in that tight. Ian rolled down his window and crawled out of the vehicle, digging down into the snow to clear the exhaust system and the headlights, then clearing both of the downhill-side doors.

Everyone took care of their biological functions and surveyed their situation. Gabe, the driver most used to snow conditions, attempted to get the four-wheel drive vehicle to move, but they gave that up quickly as a hopeless task. Dweezer stomped out an S.O.S. in a relatively level patch of snow a couple hundred yards from the car, while Lucinda and Ian made their way back to the road. Ian cursed his choice of rental vehicle. Between the snow and the bland whiteness of the car roof, they were practically invisible from the nearby road, much less from the sky or distant peaks. Still, they laid Lucinda's scarf in an arrow shape across the top of the snow on the road, so as to point any snowplow that might pass toward their wrecked vehicle.

"It's a shame that there's not one of those snowplow poles nearby," remarked Lucinda, her breath fogging the air as she panted in the unaccustomed altitude. "It would make a great place to attract the plow's attention. Maybe we should hike down the road to the nearest one and pin a note and something colorful on it."

"Nah," replied Ian. "I didn't see one of those poles since before we took the turnoff onto . . ." His words slowed to a stop and he stared at Lucinda. "Oh my God," he whispered.

"I don't think that's the road's real name. The guy at the gas station on the way up just called it that when we were asking directions."

Ian began wading through the waist-high snow, rushing in slow-motion back toward the car. "No, not the name of the road. I mean, oh my God!"

When Ian got to the car, he lunged into the open downhill door and grabbed at the map, clutching it with snowy, numb fingers. He punched at their location, snow dislodging from his finger and wetting the map. "Look what it says. Look what it says."

There was a collective gasp from Carmen, Gabe, and Dweezer, and then Ian dropped the map back onto the seat of the car.

"What?" demanded Lucinda as she struggled to see inside after having made her way back to the car behind Ian. "What?"

Ian turned to face her. Despite the cold and exertion, his face was almost as white as the surrounding snow. "The mountain pass road is closed from November thirtieth to April fifteenth. There's no plow coming. No passing traffic."

"And no one knows we're here," said Carmen, her eyes filling.

"My wife is correct in every way," mumbled Gabe in a monotone. "We won't even be missed at home for a week."

"But when they plow the road to the cabin, they'll see we turned off . . ." exclaimed Lucinda, an edge of fear growing in her voice as she spoke.

Ian shook his head. "No. Our tracks on the road up above are buried in snow. There was probably a lot less snow back at the turn-off, but enough to cover our tracks."

"Cell phones?" asked Lucinda.

Gabe spoke up. "No signal. Tried mine last night and again this morning."

"What are we going to do?" Lucinda whispered.

"We stay with the car," replied Ian, his voice firm and authoritative. "We still have some means to stay warm and to signal for help. You don't go wandering off into unknown territory in the cold and the snow when you still have a place to hole up safely. We stay with the car."

So they huddled in the car, running the heat occasionally, though less often than during the colder night, and signaling with the horn whenever the vehicle was running or anyone heard or imagined they heard

anything that might suggest help was nearby. Dweezer tried to get the group to play Oh Hell! with a pack of cards he had found in the pocket of his jacket, but no one was in the mood for games. They searched the rental car and, of course, found nothing except a book of matches in the corner of the glove compartment. Dweezer joked about burning the deck of cards one an hour to stay warm, but no one laughed.

Night came. It was frigid but clear, not that anyone was admiring the sparkling majesty of the Milky Way. Then came another day, with no change, except they were hungrier, thirstier, and colder than before.

Shortly before sunset, Ian suddenly sat up straight. "Dweezer, give me your deck of cards."

"You wanna play?" asked Dweezer as he fumbled about for the deck.

"No. I've got a plan." Ian grabbed the deck and opened the car door. He shook out some of the cards and slathered them with grease from the door hinges as the others stared at him in confusion. Finally he looked up at them. "The tree line is twelve or thirteen hundred feet downhill from us—a quarter mile. I'm going to use the cards and the grease and the matches to set a tree or more on fire." Without waiting for a response, he started wading downhill through the snow.

Lucinda extricated herself from her body-heat conserving huddle with Gabe and Carmen and rushed after Ian, grabbing his arm. "Wait. It's almost dark. We'll be fine overnight. You can go in the morning."

Ian kept trudging. "The light from the fire will carry farther in the dark."

She kept with him. "But you won't be able to find your way back uphill to the car. You'll freeze in the snow. Besides, the smoke will show better during the day."

Ian shrugged, but did not slow down. "If I get a good fire going, it will still be smoking in the morning."

"You'll die."

"Maybe. Maybe we'll all die. It's my job, it's my responsibility to make sure that we don't . . . that all of us don't."

Lucinda grabbed his arm again and held fast as she stopped, forcing him to stop and turn toward her.

"Get over it, Ian. You're not the party leader. This is no time for your chauvinistic heroics. This is real life. It's not like splitting the party in a game—you could freeze to death in the dark."

Ian shook off her arm. "I was driving. I was in control. It's my responsibility." His eyes flicked uphill.

"They're my responsibility."

"Dweezer was mapping. Besides, this isn't the squad. We're just acquaintances. We're people you've barely met."

Ian tilted his head to one side. "I've spent more time with you than my parents in the last two years. I've fought along side of you, defeated monsters with you, had drinks with you in roadside taverns, done great deeds with you. I don't do that with people I know from home or work. You are my friends."

Lucinda simply stared at him for a long minute, then took a step backward. "After the fire starts to die down, we'll flash the lights and sound the horn every ten minutes until you're back." Then she turned and headed uphill to the car.

The first trees Ian found were short and twisty and far apart from one another, so he pressed on down the steep slope, slowing as it got darker and it was harder to see where he was going. Finally, he arrived at a stand of trees tall enough and clustered sufficiently together that he might be able to get a decent fire going.

It was tough. The tree branches were covered with a thick layer of snow and his first two attempts were extinguished when snow from higher branches put out the small flames he had kindled. Finally he learned to grab the tree branches as high up as he could and swing rhythmically until they whole tree swayed enough to dislodge the worst of the snow.

When the chosen signal tree finally did catch, Ian stayed next to it as long as possible to warm his numbed and wet body as light and flames leaped into the sky. The fire burned in earnest only for about fifteen or twenty minutes before the lack of dry fuel and the snow blanketing surrounding trees prevented it from spreading to the entire stand. As the minor conflagration began to die out, he turned back uphill toward the car. He followed his own trail through the drifts, gasping with exertion in the thin cold air. Although his trail was easy to follow, he still appreciated the signals from the car every ten minutes. It was

the only way amid the frozen, painful, and life-threatening horror of his climb up the mountain that he could tell he was making any progress.

It was, he guessed, just shortly before dawn when he pulled himself up to the door of the car and pounded on it for the gang to let him in. The door opened and he was dragged into the car. Lucinda and Carmen did their best to warm him by removing his wet coat and rubbing his arms while Gabe shifted to the front seat and started the vehicle up, turning up the heat full blast and directing it at Ian's face and hands. In his relief and fatigue, Ian was about to drift into an exhausted sleep, when a shot of adrenaline coursed through his body. He bolted upright.

"Where the hell is Dweezer?"

Carmen looked at him with alarm. "He wasn't with you? He's not taking a leak or waiting outside for a few minutes while we get you warm?"

Ian shook his head in confusion. "He wasn't with me. Lucinda knows he didn't come with me. She followed me for a bit and then came back to the car."

Lucinda interrupted Ian. "We didn't think he left with you, but about two hours ago he said he was worried that you were too tired to make it back, so he was going to meet you on the trail and help you back up the hill."

"I never . . . I never saw him."

"Maybe he got lost," whispered Carmen, in clear distress.

"No, no . . . You can follow the trail in the snow even in the dark . . ."

Gabe turned his head to look into the back seat. "I'll go looking for him."

"No," gasped Carmen.

"No," said Lucinda firmly. "Your wife is correct in every way. It will be dawn soon. We'll look in the morning."

Fog enveloped the car at first light and the snow started up yet again not long after. Ian made a brief reconnoiter downhill, then uphill from the car. A trail on the roadway suggested that Dweezer had continued on along the road toward Pyrite, but Ian knew he couldn't follow in the deep, soft snow—he was too exhausted and when he could feel his feet, which wasn't often anymore, the pain was excruciating. Lucinda offered to go, but Ian wouldn't let her. Gabe offered, but Carmen clung to him fiercely. Then the snow got even worse and they all hunkered down in the car, huddled together to keep warm.

The gas ran out that night. Conversation ran out shortly after. There was no more joking bravado, no more grand plans of daring, no more talk of games. There was just a fellowship of friends holding on to one another against the cold as they looked into the face of death because they had ventured into the cold unprepared on a quest . . . for pizza.

* * *

Ian heard the helicopter first. He disentangled himself from the body-heat preserving group in the back of the car and flung himself toward the steering wheel, honking out a distress signal with hands he could no longer feel. Then there was a flurry of lights and voices and paramedics and the next thing he knew he awoke in a hospital bed, warm, but unable to feel his hands and feet and afraid to look to find out why. A deputy sheriff sat reading a magazine in a straight-backed chair nearby. He looked up as Ian stirred.

"How . . . how are . . ." Ian croaked, his throat raw.

The deputy smiled. "Lucinda is already up and about. Carmen had the baby—a girl. They're in Gabe's room. He's about the same as you."

Ian wasn't sure what that meant and he was much too frightened at what the answer might be to ask.

"Who . . . who saw the fire?" Ian rasped out.

The deputy looked perplexed. "I don't know anything about a fire."

Ian was confused. Maybe he was hazy from drugs. It didn't make any sense. "But . . . but then how did you find us?"

The deputy's eyes flicked downward. "It was Dwayne."

Ian shook his head to try to clear it. Who the hell was Dwayne? He thought hard. Dweezer. Nobody really named their kid Dweezer. “Dweezer made it to town?”

The deputy looked away at the far corner of the room. “No. It’s the damndest thing. One of the plow guys found him sitting in the middle of the road into town, the one that intersects with the road you all were on. He was just sitting there, frozen solid, clutching a map, a coupon, and a twenty dollar bill. The map had a big ‘X’ on it and writing along the edge.” The deputy hesitated before continuing as Ian’s eyes filled with tears. “It said ‘My four best friends are trapped in a car off the road at the X. Find them and buy them a pizza for me.’ ”

They had a funeral for Dweezer on the field of battle of the forty-second level of Armies of Blood, Fire & Magic, with a salute of fireballs high in the sky and a pyre inside the courtyard of the Fortress of Krakatoa. The squad was all there, dressed in their finest, carrying no weapons. One at a time, they all spoke their thanks and their good-byes to Dweezer.

In the midst of Lucinda’s final words, the squad was attacked by about thirty avatars, apparently run by players too young to understand loss or too soulless to understand friendship. The marauders had, no doubt, heard of the online funeral and were looking for mischief and an easy kill, and they thought that they had found both when Lucinda did not stop her words to take a defensive stand. The attackers rushed in to take whatever was left from a squad that had already lost more than the attackers could ever know.

That evil plan failed when the attacking marauders were in turn fallen upon by hundreds of others in the gaming community who had secreted themselves away, sworn to protect the sanctity of the ceremony and the sacrifice of an adventurer for his friends. Each of the miscreants was slaughtered and left to rot. The bodies were looted and the weapons, gear, and magic items taken were consumed in the hot flames of the pyre for Dweezer’s avatar.

That’s what a fellowship of friends does: protect one another.

SWEET THREADS

Jody Lynn Nye

“Indeed, what could be finer than a warm September day with the sun shining, money in our pockets, and full packs upon our backs?” Olgrun asked, spreading his arms out expansively. His creased, pleasantly ugly face beamed out from under his unruly thatch of black hair.

“Not a thing,” replied Therbin, his fairer, smaller companion, a skinny, pug-nosed man of neater habits. He glanced over his shoulder at the beaten-earth road behind them. “Are they still following us?”

Olgrun held out his hand. A bee flitted out of the bright sky and lit upon it. Olgrun twitched his head in what looked like a series of nervous tics. The bee walked over his palm, its bottom twitching back and forth in reply. He nodded, and the insect flew off.

“Not a one. They’ve all dropped back toward the village.”

“Well, thank the Maker,” Therbin said, with a sigh. “I didn’t think they would let us leave.”

“How can they hold us? We belong to the road. Everyone in Rede knows that.”

“There are some who would break the king’s covenant,” Therbin said.

“Are your fingers healed yet?” Olgrun asked solicitously.

“They will be. Never again will I agree to spin the whole of a flax harvest, no matter how close to financial ruin a town falls! Can you spare a spoonful of honey for them?”

“All you want!” The honeywalker stopped under the nearest tree and swung his heavy rucksack around to set it upon the ground.

Magic didn’t grow common in Rede. A wizard or two might turn up every generation, but the average man or woman could only dream of the gift. A bit more common were the in-between talents, those who could do a spell or charm a beast, but none of the great workings. To Olgrun, that was well enough. He

made a good living traveling from place to place charming bees and their kin, according to the wishes of those who lived in the twenty towns and countless villages and hamlets of the kingdom. Ordinarily, inbetweens went solitary. He had always counted it lucky the day that he and Therbin had chanced upon the same town on the same day. You could hear the bards sing songs about true friendships as if they were as mythical as fairies and sea serpents, but he and Therbin had struck up the real thing. They had known it from the moment they started talking over a beer at the inn, when they laughed at the same jokes, and started singing the same song in the same verse—and gotten the same words wrong, or so the bard in the corner said. The two of them ended up sitting up by the fire all night, telling each other their life stories. In the morning, they set out side by side. Olgrun and Therbin swore that while they plied the road, sharing their talent with the folks of Rede, they would never be parted.

It used to be a lonely way, but with Therbin, he was never lonely anymore. King Hadrún could offer him wealth and position, and a wizard's tower with a pension, but he'd trade it all for another hour on the road with his friend at his side. Oh, neither of them was perfect, naturally not. Therbin came from a good family, and he was a fidgety sort of person about his things. His talent was spinning and weaving any thread, no matter how small or how uncooperative, and make it do amazing things. He couldn't ever stand for things to be in a muddle. It worried him, until he could straighten it all out. Olgrun was a brewer's fourth son. He learned the speech of bees before he could talk human talk. His mother's kitchen garden was the talk of the village, and the hops that went into his father's brew were larger, sweeter, and more plentiful than any ever seen. He could make possets and potions from honey, knowing what they were good for as surely as any hedgewife or doctor. Sure enough, he had to go out from his home and give other people access to his talent, though he made sure to swing around home when the plants were in bloom. He didn't understand the fuss about orderliness. His clothes and his hair were as he found them in the morning. If they were clean, that was all he cared about. He could always jolly Therbin out of his sour moods with a joke. They had the same ribald sense of humor.

"What lies along this road?" Therbin asked, once his aching fingers were daubed with honey and wrapped in fine bandages he had woven himself from spider silk.

"We're about a day from Scoter," Olgrun said. "Nice enough place."

"Scoter! The tanner there promised me a pouch, green with my initials on it," Therbin said, gleefully. "It's been six months. He ought to have finished it by now."

"And I want to see if Shelline is still serving beer at the Wheatsheaf," Olgrun said, with a wink.

"It's her beer you're interested in, is it?" Therbin asked, clapping his friend on the shoulder. Olgrun laughed.

"Well, to start with! Did I ever tell you about the first time I ever tried to brew bitter ale by meself?"

The story carried them a good long way down the road, and when it was finished, Therbin had another tale, just as involved, that got them to the top of the high hill that overlooked the dark green expanse of the Fivefold Forest. Beyond it they saw smoke curling out of the chimneys of Scoter.

"Hurry up!" Olgrun said, nudging Therbin in the ribs. "We've got a warm welcome waiting down there."

SMACK!

The barmaid's hand left a clear red imprint on Olgrun's cheek. Shelline stalked away, leaving the big man clutching his face and wearing an expression of bemusement.

"That was warm, all right. Wasn't there supposed to be some tickle with that slap?" Therbin asked, wryly. "In my experience they're hand in hand."

"I don't get it," Olgrun said. He looked at the coins in his other palm. "And she charged us double for the beer on top o't."

"Drink up, then," Therbin said, mildly. "We'll get my pouch."

The epidemic of bad temper seemed to have spread to the tanner as well. They visited his workshop on the southern edge of the village square.

"Deerhide pouch!" the man sneered. He had thin lips and a long nose, suited to sneering. "With initials, no less! You'd have to do twice as much weavin' to be worthy of any of *my* work. My three-year-old

could do better than the gap-threaded fishnetting you left me.”

Therbin was stung. “That’s not what you said before.”

The man’s face went red and he sprang to his feet. “Well, you’re hearin’ it now! Clear off out of my shop before I get the constable!”

“Funny, people are so touchy,” Olgrun said, as the door slammed behind them, leaving them standing in the sunny town square. He put a friendly hand on Therbin’s shoulder. The spinner flinched a little.

“There’s bad magic here. I can see it. But what caused it? Did someone passing through lay a curse on this place? And why?” Therbin asked, looking around. Women dragging unwilling children through the cobblestoned streets sneered at the carters who shouted at them for blocking their way. Dogs snarled at one another. “You never saw such innocent, decent folks in your life. Now look at them. No one has a civil word for one another, or the least amount of patience.”

“Wait,” Olgrun said, tapping Therbin in the chest with the back of his knuckles. He leaned close and spoke in an undertone. “Do you see the bees?”

“Bees?” the spinner echoed, looking puzzled. “Bees are your department, my friend, not mine. What are they doing?”

“It is what they are not doing that’s interesting. See them veer around them purple flowers?”

Therbin squinted. The center of the square was dominated by a handsome green filled with sheep cropping the grass. At the corners were dense, triangular gardens overflowing with flowers of every kind. With difficulty, he picked out the small striped dots of Olgrun’s particular favorite insect. Indeed, they were not landing on the purple flowers.

“What about it?” he asked. “Perhaps they’re not the right bees to harvest those flowers.”

Olgrun shot him a look of exasperation. “Those bees don’t miss a single flower in their territory. The taste of their honey varies everywhere in the country because they just ain’t too fussy.”

“Out of my way!” An angry voice interrupted them. They looked over their shoulders at a stripling, no more than fifteen, driving a herd of goats. “You have no right to be here!”

“All right, all right,” Therbin said, soothingly. “Fine goats you have there, lad.”

The boy’s face went red with fury. “Don’t you call me lad! I ain’t your lad!” He swung the crook in his hand. Olgrun intercepted it with one meaty hand.

“Easy now, we’re moving. Go about your ways.”

“Here, mind your own business!” a butcher said, charging out of his shop at them. “Leave him be!”

“You be quiet! Why are you interfering with strangers?” a stout woman asked shrilly, challenging the butcher.

“Women like you should be at home cooking and raising the children!” a prosperous merchant said, standing so he towered over the angry woman.

“What’s it to you where I am any hour?”

“Let’s let them work this out for themselves,” Therbin whispered.

“Aye. I want to get a closer look at them flowers,” Olgrun said.

Back to back, they edged toward the greensward. Townsfolk gathered toward the argument, paying little attention to the pair of strangers sidling cautiously toward the green.

Therbin leaned over the flowerbed. “They all look the same to me. I mean, they are all different kinds of plants, but they look ordinary.”

“Aye,” Olgrun said, “but see how many of the purple ones are there? And if the bees ain’t pollinating them, they’re spreading someway on their own.”

Therbin leaned over to give a half-blown blossom a sniff. As he did, the flower opened up. A puff of yellow powder issued from its throat. Therbin got a noseful of it and stood up in a hurry.

“*Ha-choo!*”

“Well, there’s your answer,” Olgrun said, with a grin. “It’s curious people like you who spread them around.”

“You think that’s funny?” Therbin said. His thin face went red.

“A bit.”

“You try it, and see how amusing it is!” The spinner plucked a handful of stems and shoved the flowers in

Olgrun's face. The honeywalker recoiled, but not quickly enough. At least one of the blossoms opened and discharged its cloud of pollen in his face.

"*Wha-cha!*" He swiped his nose with the back of his hand. He couldn't believe it! His best friend had humiliated him, right in front of all them strangers! Why, the skinny little fool! "What did you do that for?" "Think you're so smart, knowing all about bees," Therbin growled. "If you had had a real education you might have learned that physical humor is considered low."

"Low! I would have supposed that someone with your high and mighty position wouldn't know nothing about theater and comedians, hey? But maybe your father wasn't no more than a juggler, and your mam danced in circuses!"

Therbin's face went from red to white. "How dare you insult my parents! You don't know a thing about quality, you ruffian!"

Olgrun felt his face flush. He clenched his fists. "Ruffian! The king recognized me as a talent years before you. He employs no ruffians. Maybe you should think again about who you ply the roads with, then!"

"Maybe I ought to," Therbin said. "I certainly know better than to associate with the likes of you."

He turned his back on Olgrun and shouldered his way through the yelling crowd.

Olgrun watched him go, feeling bereft. His words surely hadn't come out of his mouth the way he had thought them, but he couldn't help himself. And Therbin just misunderstood them. It was *wrong*. He sat down on the ground next to the flowerbed to think. The flower's curse had affected him and his best friend just as it had the townsfolk. Olgrun had learned a lot from his bees over the years. Sometimes he found them wiser than people. One thing they knew was what the plant poisons, the honey will cure. Bees supped from bad flowers, then they raced back to the hives and ate of their sweet nectar to make themselves better. Apothecaries learned this skill, too. These people here in Scoter needed a cure worse than any folk he had ever come across.

He studied the bees. Some of them must have tried the pollen so as to know to tell their pals not to take anymore. That pollen would have made it back to some hive, somewhere.

"Let's see, where is it?"

Olgrun closed his eyes and felt out with all his senses. Since he was a boy, he could find any hive, no matter how small or remote. A hundred bees' nests were around him, within a few hours' walk. Only one of them felt wrong, uncomfortable with itself. He edged around the crowd, the argument now breaking up a bit, and followed his nose north out of town.

Scanning over the fields and meadows that flanked the roads, he knew right away he was on the track. The purple flowers were spreading like the plague they were. Once a living creature spread the pollen, the flowers seemed to pop seeds as fast as frogs spawned. Where they fell, they sprouted. By the time he passed, the newly sprouted seedlings had two leaves, then four. He broke into a run. The plague must be ended!

In the midst of a field humming with bees, there was one big, old, dead tree that had no activity around it at all. Olgrun swung himself up on the only branch within a man's height of the ground. Hugging the rough bark, he scrambled upward until he came to the source of the uncomfortable feeling. He pulled away dead leaves and branches that cluttered the crutch of the tree and realized he was looking down into a pool of gloom. The comb was dark in color, and all the bees left in the hive were dead. Olgrun turned over the small bodies, feeling sorrowful, then worried. What was bad for bees was eventually bad for man. Olgrun realized that the longer the flowers spread through Scoter, the more they would poison the people and animals. Pretty soon they would die. Passersby might pick the pretty flowers and take them along to their next destination, not knowing they were carrying a plague—a soft, sweet-smelling, harmless-looking plague, but a plague none the less. The purple flowers had to be wiped out, but first he must cure the victims.

Honey flowed toward him at his command. Instead of a golden thread snaking in between the ridges of rough bark, it was a dark, sluggish throb like a silted river. He held out a clean wineskin, and ordered the sticky, sweet mess into the spout.

"Better test it," he said sternly to himself. He tipped up the wineskin and gulped down a mouthful. Instead of the heady sweetness of healthy honey, this tasted bitter and rotten. Still, the moment he had swallowed

it, he felt the anger leave him. The flowers didn't know any better. They were just trying to propagate themselves, same as any natural creature. Better get some of it into the townsfolk, and especially Therbin.

Therbin came to a halt in a dead-end passage and looked behind him. "Just like the big oaf to abandon me," he said, aloud. His voice echoed off the closed windows and doors around him. "Let me go off by myself, will you?"

He retraced his steps to the village square, but saw no sign of Olgrun. The few townsfolk who remained denied having seen the honeywalker, let alone spoken to him. Therbin felt sour, wishing his friend had left a note or a message before haring off like a hunting dog. "When there's a problem to be solved, he's off into the wilderness."

Ah, but that wasn't fair. He had been the one to march off first, and he hadn't told him where he was going. Olgrun had always been there for him. The big man must have an idea.

Therbin didn't like feeling peevish. He prided himself on having an even nature, always ready to think the best of people. Olgrun was his best friend. The bonds that tied them were not to be broken by a fit of temper on either of their parts. The tanner was a good fellow, too, but something had turned him into a grouch. It had to be the pollen. The moment it had hit Therbin in the face, he had felt changed.

And why shouldn't he feel as he felt? he asked himself indignantly.

Because it isn't natural, he replied to himself. And I would bet that there is worse to come.

The best thing to do was to get rid of it. If people were no longer breathing the poison in, they might get over their grouchiness. Then there would be time to figure out a long-term solution to the overabundance of flowers. He knew just the thing to collect it all. Now, where could he find some spiderwebs?

The smell of leather and manure drew him toward the widest street leading off the square. The local stable was the best place, where there were no tidy housewives to sweep them down.

"Hello?" he called through the dark archway. He peered into the dusty, cool darkness. A couple of horses whinnied in reply. "Anyone there?"

"Shut up, you!" a voice bellowed.

"Me, shut up? You hold your tongue! Who thinks he is king, eh?"

The unmistakable sounds of a scuffle drew Therbin to the far end, where two youths of twenty or so rolled on the floor, kicking and punching one another. The fight, or perhaps the pollen, was making the horses uneasy. They danced from side to side in their stalls.

Therbin ducked a backward kick from a big bay horse to get to a tremendous web that stretched halfway across the back wall of the stall. The black arachnid at the center ran for the edge as he started undoing the fine net.

"Sorry, ladies," he said to the spiders, as he began to wind the nearly invisible threads around his left hand. "You can spin more. I need this now." He jumped over the wooden side barricade, cursing the splinters that stuck in his palm. The pale gray female in the next stall shied away from him. He ignored her as he plucked down the webs from her walls as well. Soon he had a thick, white ring around his wrist. From his pack he drew a skein of the lightest, thinnest thread he had ever made, no more than two strands of linen thick, but strong and true. Working as quickly as he could, he wove a gossamer net, big enough to catch a sea-serpent, but fine enough for much more elusive prey. With his magical skill, he made two tiny balls of thread stretch for yards and yards.

The wind was blowing from west to east. Therbin hurried to the east side of town, and flipped open the net. It spread out for hundreds of feet and filled with wind like a sail. Immediately, it started to take on a yellowish tint as flying pollen stuck to its weave. He guided it up the street, pulling it away from walls and eaves as it tried to adhere. A man walking with a dog headed straight for it.

"Halt!" Therbin shouted. "Don't touch the net!"

"What in hell is that?" the man asked.

"A helpful spell. Go inside for a while, Goodman," Therbin said, trying to control his unwieldy weave.

"Who are you to tell me what to do, stranger?"

"There's a danger of plague," Therbin said, trying to control his temper. "Go in, curse you! I won't tell you again!"

“Plague!” The man’s brows lifted in surprise, and just as quickly lowered. “It’s a cheat. You seek to rob us, or worse!”

“I am one of the king’s talents, you old fool,” Therbin said. The net pulled with the wind, trying to get out of his hands. Damn it, if only Olgrun hadn’t disappeared! He could have used the help clearing the way! “Get out of the way, and take your family indoors with you!”

The man looked indignant, but he looked as though he didn’t like the idea of getting tied up in the yellowing net. “King’s talent! King’s mendicant, more like!” He went into the nearest public house, pulling his dog after him.

Eddies of yellow powder began to whirl in on the surface of the street. The spider-stuff picked it up like a housewife’s duster. It seemed thicker as he went along, or perhaps he was just aware of it now. He wanted to choke the life out of the person who had brought the flowers to this place. He wanted to beat that person with a staff for ruining his day.

The pollen seemed to know it was under attack. Therbin shouted ahead of him to the townsfolk he saw to take cover. His net was fast filling with dancing yellow motes. His skin and hair were covered with them, and he spat handfuls out of his mouth. He must look as if he was trudging through blinding snow. His eyes were filled with burning dust as his heart was full of resentment. Where was Olgrun when he was needed?

A heavy figure bumped into him. Therbin looked up through the swirl of yellow powder at a grinning face.

“I’ve got it!” Olgrun said, shaking a leather bottle at him. “I have a cure! I know the answer to the problem.”

Therbin felt a moment of desperate relief, just before his temper exploded. “That’s you! Trying to ruin my plan so you can get all the credit!”

“What are you talking about?” Olgrun grabbed him by the arm. “Let’s get you out of here. It’s dangerous. The pollen can kill.”

“What are *you* talking about?” Therbin asked. “Why should I listen to you? You ran off without a word!”

“Well, you went first,” Olgrun said, maddeningly reasonable. “Why are you gathering up this pollen if you don’t think it’s harmful?”

“*Why?*” Therbin echoed, as the yellow powder spun around them, coating their clothes, skin and hair.

“Why, you . . . I . . . well, the stuff’s noxious! I knew something was wrong. I never saw flowers sprout so fast without your bees.” A gust of wind hit the net, and they both scrambled for the edges. “Innocent folks were in danger, but you weren’t there to help me!”

Olgrun shook his head. He let go of the net and shoved the wineskin to Therbin’s lips. “Take a swig of this!”

Against his will, Therbin swallowed. “Pah!” he spat. “That’s horrible! It tastes like someone boiled a goat in it.” Within seconds, he felt the terrible anger leave him, to be replaced with shame. He looked at Olgrun, full of sorrow. “Oh, my friend, I apologize for my harsh words. Can you forgive me? I wasn’t in my right mind.”

“Neither you were,” Olgrun said, placidly. He gave him a tremendous slap on the back. “Come on, let’s work our talents together and rid this place of its ills.”

Therbin felt sheepish but relieved. “As you will!”

He drew the net up the street, now heavy with the fatal dust. Olgrun summoned a skyful of bees who bumbled under the roots of every purple flower they could find and left the stalks prone on the ground. Others flitted around the edges of Therbin’s net, gathering the pollen that escaped the sticky trap. When townspeople came out of their houses to protest, Olgrun stuck a fingerful of honey into their mouths. The familiarity provoked a couple of men to start fistfights, but Therbin was there with his spiderweb ropes to hold them back until the cure took effect.

“Nearly there,” he grunted, as they reached the west end of town. “I knew we could do it if we worked together.”

“Clever to clever,” Olgrun said, with a look of pride. Therbin gave him a grin. “What better life could a man have than to come up with a clever solution to a strange problem, with an equally clever friend at his

side?”

“Why, it’s like magic,” Therbin said, almost laughing now.

The nearly invisible bag was full of yellow powder now, dragging on the ground like a reluctant child. By the time Therbin crossed the town’s border and tied the mouth closed, the two were followed by a clamoring crowd, and the air was nearly clear. Olgrun’s bees flitted away, taking their dangerous burden with them. He bid them a sorrowful farewell. Therbin put a sympathetic hand on his shoulder.

“It’s a good cause,” he said. “Olgrun, they saved the lives of everyone in this town.”

“Oh, I know,” the big man said, his eyes welled up as he watched them go. “I wish no one had to die, though.”

A prosperously dressed man bustled up to them. “You two men are amazing!” he declared. “As fine a couple of magicians as the king’s enchantress herself! I am Mayor Vorder. We are glad you happened to visit us this day. Your talents, well, they are the best magics we have ever seen!”

“It’s not the best magic we’ve got,” Therbin said, with a wink at Olgrun.

“What? I thought talents were one to a person. What is your other skill?”

“Never you mind,” Olgrun said, slapping him heartily on the back. “How about a drink of something? My friend here is dry as a skeleton’s whistle. And after he’s had his fill I might take a sip or two.”

“Nonsense,” Therbin said. “We drink together, as always.”

“It would be our pleasure to hold a feast in honor of your accomplishments,” the mayor said, and the townsfolk added their acclaim. “We would ask you to stay with us forever, but we know the king’s law prohibits us. Anything else you wish for, it shall be yours.”

“I’ve got a present for you besides the pouch I owe you, Sir Spinner,” the tanner said, coming forward with a sheepish look on his face. “And for you, too, Sir Honeywalker.”

“And I have a bit of something for you, too,” the barmaid said, attaching herself to Olgrun’s side with a cheeky grin.

“Ah, we’ve got all we need,” Olgrun said, clapping Therbin on the shoulder. “But we’d be pleased to celebrate with you. It’s not every day a man can lose a friend and find him again. Let’s drink to the threads that tie us all together.”

“Sticky ones,” Therbin said, cheerily. “Ones that don’t let go too easily, I am grateful to say. We’ll take care to keep them bound tighter in future.”

“Cheers to that, my friend,” Olgrun said, and swept a bow to their host. “Mayor, in your own time.”

TROPHY WIVES

Nina Kiriki Hoffman

Alanna and I have been together most of our lives. She is the beautiful one, and I am the worker; at least, that’s how it looks to people who see us now. It is not how we began. I was a princess in a tower, and she was a drudge who worked for my father, tending all the machinery that kept me imprisoned and alive, and trained me in my terrible purpose.

All that changed when we found and ate the bondfruit.

We live more than half our lives beneath the surface now. Inside, we are all sorts of different people, and outside, we have tried on many different roles, but we also meld into one another as we share eyes and thoughts and conversation. Still, I am the one who doesn’t mind work and is driven mad by music, and she is the one who makes plans and minds details.

Alanna laughs and thinks, *Tell them your name, Ylva. You always forget the important things!*

Very well. My name is Ylva Sif.

Gwelf Kinnowar, currently married to Alanna, is the fourth husband we have had between us, and when we first met him, we thought he was the best. He didn’t argue when Alanna told him that to marry her, he had to accept me into his household. He has plenty of money, and let us use it; and, though we live with him in various residences on planets where oppressive social conditions hold, he gives us freedom from

the prevailing mores in the privacy of his house, so long as Alanna acts the perfect ornamental wife in public.

The first time Gwelf slept with another woman after the wedding, we lost faith in him. He didn't betray us in any other way, though, so we stayed, even though in his travels he often slept with other women. The benefits of the marriage still outweigh the troubles, so we adjusted our hopes and attitudes and went on with our real job, which is rescuing people, as we ourselves have been rescued.

Alanna was in the balcony room looking out over Haladion, the planet where Gwelf's main residence was. Alanna and I loved the balcony room. The mansion was built into the side of a cliff, among a cluster of others, and below the cliff lay all the world: at the base, the market town Risen, and beyond it, farmlands, with the spaceport to the west, ringed by businesses that catered to offworld travelers. Near the spaceport was the technomall for people who liked to shop for factory-made things in person. Out beyond the farmlands lay the forest, with the Fang Mountains rising in the distance.

Alanna dialed controls on the focusing window and peered down at the central market square, where the servants of cliffside mansions bought fresh produce from the farmers. "Ripe sakal," she thought. I was in the kitchen, a level below, checking our stores and making a list. I paused and styled sakal on my list. "Much?"

"Going fast," she thought. "Oh! Perberries! Only three pints left! At the SunGlo booth."

"On my way." I shut the list, grabbed a carrybag, and headed for the door. In the purification room, I dipped into the amber scent bowl and dabbed it at my wrists. I pulled on an outer robe and hooked my veil across my lower face, then coded through the privacy portal and entered the communal elevator bank. My pod opened a moment later onto the public access foyer to the outdoors at the base of the cliff. Others came and went in various pods.

Outdoors, the heat and scents and sounds were intense. Meat cooking, bread baking, the faint taint of scoot fuel, though no mechanized transport was allowed in the city core except float carts to carry home one's purchases. Voices called as people spoke to each other in person or at a distance.

I headed to the market. At the SunGlo booth, all the perberries the vendor had on display were gone, but she saw the sigil on my hood and smiled at me. As a farm worker, she wore no veil or head covering; she was outside the life lived in houses and only another farmer would look at her as a wife. So the people professed to believe, anyway. One heard stories.

"I knew you'd be by, Ser Sif," the vendor, Vigil, said, and reached under the table for a whole flat of perberries.

"Thank you, Vigil." I pressed my thumb to her pay pad without even discussing price. Sometimes it was worth paying extra.

"Oh, no! I wanted some of those," said a low voice to my left. I turned to see a stranger, her hood unmarked by house. Her eyes were large, dark, liquid, under narrow black brows, and she wore a very plain outer robe, dusty light blue with one line of white at the hem. Her veil was opaque, giving no hint of who she was beneath. "Someone at the clay booth said you had them," she said to Vigil, "and I so hoped."

"Maybe we can arrange something." I opened the compartment in the carrybag for fragile perishables and slid the flat in, activating the stasis field that would hold my berries safe.

Ask her who she works for, Alanna thought-whispered; she was present behind my eyes, as I was behind hers.

"Whose house are you affiliated with?" I asked.

The stranger's eyes looked frightened. "I can't say," she whispered.

"Come with me for coffee and I'll sell you some of my berries. Thanks again, Vigil."

"I have other shopping," said the stranger as I tugged her toward Kalenki's Tea House. They had rooms in the back where women could unveil.

"I'll help you with it when we've finished our talk. I can see you're a stranger here. I can show you all the best bargains." I raised my voice. "Kalenki!"

"Ser Sif." He smiled at me and twirled his waxed mustache. "The sandalwood room?"

“Please.”

He gestured us toward the back, and I led the stranger to my favorite room, its walls fretted with carved wood, its scent warm and spicy. It had a heavy curtain that almost muffled outside sound and kept those within private enough to speak in low voices without fear. I took the bug zapper from the pouch at my waist and scanned the room for hidden ears. None today.

I settled onto the pile of cushions covered in white and red satin stripes, leaving the blue and green cushions for my guest, with the low inlaid-wood table between us. She looked at me, and then at the cushions, and then at her slippered feet.

She doesn't know how to sit! Alanna thought. *Who is she?*

“Sister, hold your skirts gently and sink down onto your rear,” I said.

She grasped her outer robe in both hands and let herself sit, teetering. Then she straightened and looked at me with great intensity.

“If you are here stealthily,” I said, or Alanna said, “what is it you intend? How did you even find a sigil-less robe?”

“I escaped from a ship,” she whispered. “I was sold into marriage, and the ship was carrying me to my husband in all luxury. I had a library. I knew Haladion was our only stop, and I studied everything in memory about it. I made this robe myself.” She straightened, glanced around the room, fixed on me, as though realizing she was being too direct. “You aren't police?”

Just then, Kalenki whistled a warning and came in to take our order. “A big pot of spiced coffee, Ser, if you please,” I said, “with all shades of color for it. Some of the lace biscuits as well.”

“Your wish, Ser,” he said, with a head bob, and dropped the curtain again.

I turned to the stranger.

“No, assuredly I am not police, just curious. I will not betray you.”

“How can I know that? Have I given too much of myself away already?” She pressed the heels of her palms to the sides of her head and groaned. “I am so stupid.”

Kalenki whistled again. His assistant brought the tray of purification, with its two basins of warm water, two cloths, a bowl of powdered soap, and a second basin for rinsing; also the censer with its fragrant smoke, redolent of roses, through which we could pass our hands before we drank. Kalenki himself carried in the coffee tray and set it on the table.

“Thank you. You are gracious,” I said, and pressed my thumb into the pay pad he presented, tapped a tip into the options screen.

“Always a pleasure to have you visit, Ser,” he said and followed his assistant out.

After he left, I tied the curtain closed, then settled on my cushions. “There, they have gone and we may unveil without fear of men's eyes on us.” I unhooked my veil. The stranger stared at my face as though it were a lifesaving liquid she could drink with her eyes. I wondered why. I had been to many worlds, and on most of them, I was considered ordinary. “I am Ylva Sif,” I said.

She did not drop her veil or offer a name. Rudeness, but perhaps she did not realize.

I showed her how to cleanse her hands, then poured coffee for both of us. “Have you tried our coffee before?” I asked. She shook her head. I handed her a cup with room left for colors. “Here is cream. This is cinnamon. This is pepper, and this, clarified butter. This is caramel syrup, and this holds serenity, and here is agitation. This—” I lifted a small spoonful of pale powder—“is clear-eye.” I sprinkled it over my own drink, added a dollop of cream and two lumps of dark sugar, stirred with a cinnamon-flavored stick. “Here are chocolate shavings. These are sweeteners—sugar, rain sugar, invisible sugar, low-processed sugar, flowersweet. We consider coffee an art, one it takes time to master. You can start with something sweet and something white.” I pushed the doctorments tray toward her and sat back to sip my own mixture.

Alanna was with me for the first sip. We both found that the best, and always shared. My mouth said, “Aah.” I felt hers smiling too.

The stranger mixed cream and flowersweet into her coffee, lifted it toward her mouth, and encountered the dilemma I had presented her with. As a stranger, she did not know how to drop her hood over her face and drink below the veil, as one did in the presence of strange men. Finally she unhooked her veil

and we saw her face. Alanna and I studied it closely. She was young, beautiful, tense. A small red flower hung on her left cheek beside her mouth, but whether birth-mark, tattoo, or more temporary stain, I could not tell.

She had generous lips and a narrow nose, not at all native to Haladion, but we already knew that. Dark freckles sprinkled across her nose and upper cheeks. She took a cookie and gave us a chance to study her teeth; they were narrow and pointed. She wolfed the sweet, then took another and another. “Forgive me,” she muttered. “I’m so hungry. I had only a few coins on me when I left the ship, and I dare not use my credit wand. I was about to buy food when I heard there were perberries here. They come from my world, and I haven’t tasted them since I was a child.”

“My manners,” I said. I opened the carry-bag and drew out a pint of berries. “Please accept these as a gift.”

Her skin paled, making her eyes look larger and darker than ever. Her freckles looked like fallen stars of night against a light sea. She nodded and reached for the berries, too anxious to be polite. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she whispered and plunged both hands into the little veneer box, scooped up a double handful of dark berries and pressed her face into them.

When she lifted her face from the berries, some of the small seeds clung to her face. The stain they left was the same color as the flower on her cheek. She selected one squashed berry and put it on her tongue, then leaned back with eyes closed. Her smile started small and widened.

“Oh,” she said, “it is the taste of the milk wind in the night sky on a hot summer night on Challis. My sister and I gathered these berries by starlight. They glow crimson in the dark to summon the night birds, and us. We said we were gathering for our mother. We ended up eating most of what we found. The thorns scratched us, but the berries were worth the pain.” She ate another berry, then another. “How can I taste my child-planet on this faraway place? How can that taste translate to another world?”

“You carry your home planet in your head,” Alanna said with my mouth. “The taste triggers memory; it is not the true place.”

The stranger lowered her hands. She looked toward the wall. “Challis is gone,” she said, “cindered in the Fractals War. My sister died in the attack.”

“And now you’re here, on Haladion,” I said, “running away—from what?”

“We lived on a refugee satellite for the past several years. We only had access to terminals a couple hours a day; I practiced my music, and my brother studied for exams. He is gifted. My mother sold me into marriage to give my younger brother passage to University,” she said. “She told me my intended was a Paki prince who would treat me like royalty, but I saw the ship’s manifest. My husband is not even human. He is a toad, on Linkan, and he wants me to raise his status.”

“Ah,” I said. I had married a Linkan toad—my first and only marriage, which I contracted for so Alanna could get special training in cosmetology. “Those are hard to kill. Do you know his name?”

“I can’t pronounce it,” said the stranger. She tucked her hand into a fold in her robe, came up with a small mempad. A tap, and it displayed a word in Linkan script.

“Fimkim Ruggluff,” I said. “Almost I remember that name.”

“One of the ship’s officers used to come talk to me. She said Linkans kept their wives in bubbles and invited other Linkans over to view them. She said I was cargo to live in a bubble.”

“Yes,” I said. “They stack up their wife bubbles for display and try to outbubble each other. Their status increases if they have varied wives from different species. Also, they feed you everything you most love. They like big women. The health plan is good. Electrosize, peak conditioning, key nutrients.”

“What do the wives do all day?”

“Stare at stranger toads your husband brings to look at you. There’s a bonus if you can look happy and excited. The occasional sexual congress, which is a bit cold and slimy but not actually painful. Not much conversation is necessary. You can listen to music and stories all day. It’s not a hard life, and you will be let go the minute you get wrinkled. They give good parting gifts.”

“How do you know so much about it?”

“Some of what I know is rumor, but I was a toad wife for a year.”

“You don’t look wrinkled.”

I shrugged one shoulder. "My husband and I didn't suit. We had a semi-amicable parting, though." After my fourth serious attempt to dispose of my husband, he and I had had a very intense discussion, and he had finally set me free. Sometimes we still messaged each other. Alanna and I had gone back to him twice to pretend we were his trophy wives; he had paid us well. All in all, a more satisfactory outcome for the three of us.

"The officer told me that with a Linkan, there was no possibility of divorce."

"Who is this officer? She sounds unpleasant."

"I don't know her rank, only that she wore a uniform. Was she right? Is there no way I can divorce my toad husband?"

"I'm afraid she was right about that. They lose face if their wives leave them. I made an arrangement with my ex-husband to return when he really needs to show me off; all other times, he tells his rivals I am too precious a treasure to exhibit often. There are ways to work around problems like this. But you are already in debt to this Fimkim, and he won't let you go yet. You should at least meet him."

"But then I'll be trapped!"

"You are trapped wherever you go," I said, though Alanna and I had not found this to be true. We had double vision, special training and talents, and twice the hands and feet other human people possessed, so we never felt as helpless as this stranger appeared to. We had been trapped, together and apart, but we always worked with or toward each other, and we always escaped.

I said, "You have chosen to be trapped on Haladion, unless you'd rather return to your ship. Do you know what you want to do next?"

She shook her head.

Ask for her name, Alanna thought. You always forget the important things .

"What is your name?" I asked.

"I won't tell you," she said.

"Is it such an important name I'll recognize it? Hmm," I said, "I know you're from Challis. Who could you be?" Alanna, in the house above, asked the homeputer questions about who had been lost on Challis. Unfortunately, the planet's death had been sudden, and many were missing and presumed dead. The list of living refugees was much shorter. Alanna scanned pix of survivors in a stream so fast I couldn't watch what she was doing and see what was in front of me.

"You can call me Lennox," said the stranger. Alanna put that into her search, even though we knew it was not the stranger's real name.

"All right, Lennox. What will you do if you are not a wife?"

Lennox sipped coffee and did not answer.

Alanna thought, "Hey. Lennox is a street name in the capital city of Ponder. I've got some views of the planet before it was burned. I'm mapping now. Beh. Lennox is a very long street. I'm viewing along it. Business districts. No, wait, now I'm watching houses." I could see as Alanna watched, but it was distracting; she was viewing a swoop down the street at the same time as survivors' shocked faces streamed past on the left margin. I aimed my ringcam at Lennox and snapped a shot, sent it to the homeputer. It could cross-reference much faster than Alanna, though Alanna was faster than most other people.

The stream of pix of planet-lorn people slowed, reversed, stopped as the computer matched Lennox's face with one of the people in the datafile. Alanna focused on that instead of the pix of houses. *Milla Lyan*, the caption read; *formerly of 455 South Lennox Street, relocated to orbital refugee camp, subsequently relocated to permanent resettlement on Linkan, attached to Fimkim Ruggluff; currently in transit.*

Alanna spoke the address, and the homeputer showed again the dizzying rush of Lennox Street. The view slowed, stopped on a small, decrepit black house with two cloudy front windows and a round door. We moved in closer, peered past wads of window drapery to see the back of a girl, who sat at a console with several extended keyboards. She worked her hands and music came out of small speakers inset in metal flowers on the wall. I sat back, my eyes closed, listening to music so inviting I couldn't resist it. One of my faults or gifts was to be susceptible to music, sensitive to its nuances and effects. On

occasion this had saved our lives. Other times it had almost doomed us.

There were messages in this music. It had strange overtones, and it pulsed as though it breathed. Though there were no words in it, there was enticing information encoded in melody, repeating promises. Just listen, it murmured, and you will learn things to make your life better. Here's a mystery that will save you from grief—

Fingers gripped my shoulder. "Ser? Are you all right?"

I startled, looked up at Lennox's worried face.

Alanna paused the playback, ran it faster so the audio wasn't so compelling, found a spot where the musician turned toward the window. Lennox's face looked at us.

"I'm sorry," I said, as I stared up into a face I was also seeing a younger version of through Alanna's eyes. "Have you decided who to become now that your world and your place in it are gone?"

She shook her head.

"A musician," I said.

She drew back. "What makes you say that?" she whispered.

"I'll explain if you come home with me."

Her head was shaking before I finished my invitation. "No."

"Your choice," I said. "I had better finish my shopping before my mistress' husband gets home. He likes supper ready when he arrives." I drank the rest of my coffee; still divine, though cool now. Then I washed in the second bowl of water and passed my hands through rose-scented smoke, and she copied my motions. I said, "Please. Enjoy the berries. I hope you find safe haven." I collected my carrybag.

"Ser," she said. She climbed to her feet, struggling a little to free herself from the grip of the cushions.

"Wait."

I paused in the posture of one trapped by a single thread of obligation, a good pose for getting people to open up.

"You have been nothing but kind to me. I am frightened, though, and don't know where to trust."

"I understand. You're not the only one who's run from danger. You are right to be suspicious of strangers."

"If you would help me . . ." She twisted one hand in the other, reached up to fasten her veil across her lower face, hiding the flower on her cheek. "Why would you help me?"

"That is one of my callings." I thought of the tapestry of my and Alanna's past, woven to include a number of people we had rescued. The tapestry of the one who had rescued us intersected with our early history. He had moved on, leaving us with the charge of helping others, which meant threads of his life were woven with ours as ours continued. "If I do it correctly, it becomes your calling, too. Will you accept my help?"

She looked toward the curtain, with the wide world outside that she was a stranger to. She looked at me.

I kept my face still.

"I will," she said. "Thank you."

I closed my eyes to let Alanna tell me what she thought. She thought, *Good*.

"The first thing I must do is give you a sigil," I said.

"A sign on my hood?"

"An affiliation. Will you join my household?"

"What obligations does such a choice give me?"

I frowned. "At this point, it is nothing more than a mark on your clothing. You can choose Kinnowar, my mistress husband's clan name, or you can join the houseless—that's a spiral sign and means you are without affiliation. Little protection in that, but recognized status. Or you can go unveiled and uncovered in public, and proclaim your status as a country worker. Not a comfortable existence."

"I will accept your mark," she said.

I took four of the berries from her basket and made the mark of Gwelf's house on her hood in juice. It would wash out if she changed her mind.

This was just a disguise, but after I lifted my hand, I felt a kinship shadow between us. She raised her head and stared into my eyes, and even though her face was veiled, I knew she, too, sensed that

something had changed.

She tucked her berry basket into the sleeve of her robe and followed me out of the tea house. She walked a step behind me as I finished shopping for the evening and morning meals. Then she came with me in our pod up to the mansion. We paused in the purification room to let scented smoke wash away the accretion of pollution we had picked up in our encounter with the outside world, and then moved toward the arch into the house.

Alanna waited there.

Milla saw her and hid behind me, clutching a fold of my robe. "Who is that?" she whispered.

"This is my mistress, Alanna Brigid Kinnowar. She will help you, too."

"How do you know?"

"We are good friends," I said.

Ha! thought Alanna. She smiled wide and held out her hands. "Ser, how may I help you?"

Milla collected herself and stepped forward. She bowed to Alanna. "Ser," she said in a low voice.

"Thank you for having me here."

"I welcome you, Ser," said Alanna.

"Thank you," Milla said again.

"Come into the kitchen," I said. "I've a meal to prepare." I led the way, Milla following, and Alanna after.

"I've put the name of your husband into search," Alanna said as the two of them sat in the breakfast cozy. I stored everything I had bought at the market in the proper places, cold, dry, damp, warm, what each thing needed, and assembled ingredients for the night's meal on the center table.

"You what?"

"Ylva and I have a link, so I know your story, Ser," Alanna said. "I apologize for this violation of your privacy." She put a projector on the cozy's table. "What I've discovered disturbs me. This husband of yours is an important person on Linkan. He has two hundred fifty-five wives already, and you are to make up the perfect four times four times four times four, two hundred fifty-six. This is the most wives anyone on the planet has. I think he's the king. I need to do some more checking. He has already started a massive search for you. His minions are in the marketplace now, and people are telling them things." She tapped the projector on. It showed an overview of the marketplace, people moving among the stalls, those searching for Milla tagged with red. An impressive mobilization of diverse forces. "Did your parent get much money for your sale?"

"I—I—" Milla clutched her hooded head. "She didn't say. I thought not. Just enough to send my brother to university and keep my mother in food until she can find a career."

"She sold you cheap, then," said Alanna. "What's special about you? Ah, the music."

"The music?" she said faintly. "What do you know about that?"

"You left tracks on the net," said Alanna, "and we followed them back to your home on Challis."

"How could you? Challis is dead!"

"Everything gets recorded by someone. Your planet still exists in the netmem. So does your home. Your younger self, playing some keyboard on a wall. I prefer manufactured music, but Ylva was much moved by yours."

"What?" Milla whispered.

Alanna coded instructions on the projector, and it produced a 3-D image of that view through Milla's gold-gauze-shrouded window, Milla with her back to us, her fingers working over the stacked triple keyboards; black metal flower speakers sprouted from the pale gold wall. An older woman stood against the back wall, watching Milla play, her face blank.

Music spilled from the projector. I realized this was a different view than the one Alanna and I had studied earlier. This music was not about mysteries and promises. It was about being trapped in a box. I stood by my worktable, my arms frozen at my sides, and tears flowed.

Alanna glanced at me. "Ticka!" she cursed, and tapped the pause button on the projector. "What happened, Ylva?"

I shuddered and broke loose of the residue of the music's spell. "That was a different piece," I said. Milla

reached toward the image of herself, her eyes wide. She tapped the button to start the projection moving again, and I ran from the room, closing my link to Alanna so I wouldn't hear any more of the song.

"What's this?" Gwelf said from the entry. "I don't smell my supper, and you look distressed." He slipped off his shoes in the purification room, shed his outer robe, walked through sandalwood smoke on the men's side, pulled a fresh robe from the rack near the arch into the apartment, and slid it on over his undergarments.

"We have a visitor," I said.

"Another rescue?"

"In process. Alanna's showing her her own memories."

"And this distresses you?"

"I'm sorry, Ser. I expect you're hungry. I'll get you your supper."

He frowned, grunted, then said, "I'll be in my workroom."

I returned to the kitchen. The projector was off, and Milla was crying.

I worked to trim and peel vegetables I had just bought, set a pan over heat, added oil, and fried food quickly for Gwelf. He always appreciated a freshly made meal. No matter how well I programmed the homecooker, he could tell the difference. Besides, I liked to cook for him. He had given me a home.

"Gwelf?" Alanna said as the hot oil hissed and bubbled and engulfed everything I fed it.

"In his workroom." I added spices and flavors I knew Gwelf liked. He enjoyed things that burned the tongue, but only a little. "I'll fix supper for us when I'm finished with this."

"Milla said the song she was playing that froze you was her box song," Alanna said. She widened her eyes at me, and I opened my connection to her again. I always missed her when we separated, but sometimes we did it anyway, especially when she wanted to be private with her husbands.

Reconnecting with her was like sinking into the comfort of my favorite couch, something that supported and cushioned me. I smiled at her.

I stirred Gwelf's supper one last time through the singing oil, then spilled it onto a plate, set the plate with utensils and cleansing cloth and a bowl of hot, lemon-scented water on a tray. I poured a glass of cool tea for him as well.

"My box song was the song I wrote when my mother first mentioned selling me," said Milla. "Even before the planet died, she had that plan, and she wouldn't listen to no."

"I understand." Before Alanna and I shared bondfruit, I had been in a box, no hope in my future, little comfort in my present, and very few memories of light in my past. Alanna and our rescuer opened the door to my box, and nothing had been as bad afterward, not even living in a bubble and being gaped at by toads.

I didn't want to hear the box song again, ever.

"I'll be back." I took the meal to Gwelf. He cleared space for it on his workbench, moving aside tools and sculptures-in-progress. Sometimes Alanna said his hobby was his true love. He built small, fantastic dwellings, and carved the creatures that might live in them. Here, too, he disdained the use of instant manufacture, preferring to craft things by hand.

"Thank you, Sif," Gwelf said.

"You're welcome, Ser. Again, I apologize for my lateness."

"No matter. The rescue, why does it trouble you?"

He never asked questions about these things. We managed them without troubling him with details; we needed to use his funds for some of our arrangements, but he was generous that way and never denied us. I wasn't sure what to tell him. "I am not troubled by her rescue, only by her talent. She's a musician—"

"Oh, no. Not the Ruggluff bride?"

"Ser?"

"There's a planetwide alert for her. I should have known."

"Why would a toad want a musician wife? How is she to play inside a bubble?"

"He's an innovator, and wants to turn over the old order on Linkan. To that effect, he's ordered a bubble big enough for the bride and her instrument. No one else's wives perform for company, but he took the

notion after watching too many netcasts from other cultures. It was supposed to be a bold political move and cement his popularity for the next election, but it falls flat if the bride escapes. The Federation of Fair Traders was in favor of the change, as perhaps it would lead toward more freedom for the Linkan brides.”

“But Ser, the girl—”

“Whoever aids the Ruggluff bride will have to pay a price.” He set down his food sticks and picked up a half-polished lump of wood. He frowned.

“How high is the price, Ser?”

His gaze rose, and his brows lowered. “Such an act could damage me politically,” he said. For the first time I saw the power of his actual profession, fair trader and financier, on his face, and knew that the person he had always been toward me—a slightly bumbling, pleasant, undemanding, often absent master—was perhaps a construct, not his true character.

“Must we return her?” I asked/Alanna asked. He had never interfered in a rescue before; but we had never rescued anyone politically important before.

“Do they know you have her yet?” he asked.

In the kitchen, Alanna projected the marketplace over the table again, with the searchers marked. They were spread wider through the place, though most of the shops were closed for evening. A concentration of red-tagged searchers had collected around Kalenki’s Tea House.

Alanna zoomed the spy-eye closer and turned up audio. Kalenki himself stood at the door, talking to six of these men. He offered them tea. “A woman in an unmarked robe?” he said. “No one like that left here. Ask at Sook’s, across the square. He caters more to the transient trade.” He pointed.

“Sif?” Gwelf touched the back of my hand.

“Alanna is searching,” I said. “So far, they don’t know who has her, but they’re getting closer.”

In the kitchen, Alanna rose from the table, and gestured for Milla to follow her into the living room.

“I can’t decide whether I should meet her or ignore her,” Gwelf muttered.

Music sounded from the living room. Alanna had unlocked the keyboard that was in the house when we bought it. Neither of us played, so we usually hid it in the wall. Now Milla sat at it and ran her fingers over the keys, waking answering sounds.

Gwelf groaned and rose from his workbench. “I guess I’ll have to meet her.” He glanced toward his half-eaten supper. “Next time, call me when you’re hosting one of these rescues, and I’ll stay out until you’ve sent her on her way. I can deny knowledge.”

“Alanna can hack the house records and make it so you were never here,” I said.

“Of course she can,” he said, and sighed. He snapped the code that dimmed the lights in the room and left, with me on his heels. We went to the living room, where Gwelf often entertained with Alanna at his side and me handling refreshments.

Milla was playing a third song now, an interleaving of hopes and fears. I wavered, afraid of the fears the song showed me, bonds and lashes, and the hopes that were hardly better, images of clawing through tearable sky to something Milla couldn’t imagine but only hoped would be better. Ribbons of loneliness wove through the song.

“Come, Sif,” said Gwelf; he stepped over the threshold into the living room, paused to look back at me. I was frozen, trapped in the living lace of the music. Alanna, inside my head, was intrigued by how I heard it, and able to resist its call.

At Gwelf’s voice, Milla’s hands stilled on the keys and she turned, her face panicked. She lifted a hand to raise her veil, fumbled it so it hung half across her mouth.

“Child, you’re wearing my sign; you may as well be unveiled before me, at least until we straighten out the question of who you are.”

“Gwelf,” said Alanna, “why are you here?”

He glanced at me. Alanna and I had never known how aware of our bond Gwelf was; we had found it prudent not to ask. But now I knew he knew, had perhaps always known.

Perhaps that explained why he slept with other women. Alanna had betrayed him first, by our bond, even though it wasn’t physical. My heart softened toward him.

“I heard music,” he said.

“Ser Gwelf says there’s a planetwide alert out for Ser Milla,” I said. Planetwide did not mean very wide; all settlements on Haladion were new, with Risen the largest, when you combined its population with that of the spaceport. A few other small towns had sprung up, some of them with different social structures. This was a planet ripe for strange cults to take root in it, but so far they hadn’t discovered it, despite the fact that it was a good stopover point on six major trade routes.

Alanna said, “There was a lot of activity about her being missing, but not right away. She wandered in the marketplace a while without attracting notice.”

“I left a simulacrum with life signs in my cabin,” said Milla. “But then I was so stupid with hunger and nostalgia . . .”

“It was not that so much as the unmarked robe,” I said. “Everybody will have noticed. They’re not always motivated to tell what they know to strangers, but it sounds like your husband-to-be has enough money to bribe everybody.”

“If you return now, perhaps the penalty won’t be steep,” said Gwelf. “They can chalk it up to youthful spirits.”

Tears seeped from her eyes as she stared at him. I heard again the box song, though she didn’t touch the keyboard. It had moved into my head, ready to trap me whenever appropriate. Alanna came to my side and took my hand.

With a glance at our linked hands, Gwelf said, “Sif. Tell me what’s so terrible about this fate.”

“They’ll lock her in with her gift,” I said, and realized my own cheeks were wet. Inside, I was still trapped in my father’s high-tech prison, pummeled every day by the sounds he chose—he knew I was sensitive to them, but he didn’t understand what they did to me. He only saw the outward signs—that I was made pliant and would do what he wanted, not that I was broken in spirit, losing part of myself every day. He never heard what I heard in that pounding military music, the feet of soldiers walking over the hearts of children and the death of dreams.

Every day I was trained in the art of soundstrike, vocal skills that armed me; I carried no weapons but my voice. Every day he tried to teach me to look at people as targets. Every day I listened to other music in the archives and heard life stories, from lullabies to dirges, jump rope rhymes to the songs of starships. Alanna brought the bondfruit one day when I lay on my bed and wouldn’t move, even to eat. “It’s experimental, from the labs,” she whispered as she massaged my arms. “There’s a resonance component. Animals who eat from the same batch of bondfruits at the same moment synchronize their activities. The scientists haven’t used it on humans yet. I got a matched set. If we each eat one at the same moment—” She slipped the small hard fruit into my mouth, positioned it between my teeth, used her palm under my chin to hold it steady. She put one between her teeth, too, a green thing the shape of an olive. “It could kill us,” she whispered. “I could make you bite it by pushing your teeth together, but I want you to do it yourself. I’m going to count to three. Bite on three, and so will I. Maybe it’ll work, and maybe it won’t.”

I don’t know where she got the strength to do it. I hadn’t responded to anything she said that day; I didn’t even twitch when she worked my muscles too hard and it hurt. Yet she trusted.

She counted. We bit. We were both sick for a week afterward, but when the fever went down, we had our connection. Our lifeline.

Soon after that, they shut down the bondfruit experiments.

“What’s so bad about being locked in with your talent?” asked Gwelf. “Doesn’t that give you time to refine it?”

“Some kinds of talent are cold bedmates, unkind companions if you can’t get away from them. It could kill her.” I had cut out the talent my father had been force-training me in. I still had faint scars on my throat.

“I see,” he said. “Well, then, I suppose we have to do something else.”

Alanna released my hand and went to kiss Gwelf.

“Do you have a plan?” Gwelf asked us.

“No.” I wondered why he kept asking me questions. It was all strange to me. Alanna made the plans.

“We could marry her ourselves and pay off Ruggluff,” said Gwelf.

“Oh, Ser, I’m afraid it must be a lot of money,” said Milla.

“Money is not the problem,” said Gwelf. “It is maintaining face, and encouraging him to take the same steps with a different wife so that the proposed social reforms don’t fall apart. We could manage that somehow, I suppose.”

I turned to Milla. “I have asked you this question several times already, and gotten no answer. Who do you want to be, if you are not the Ruggluff bride?”

“I don’t want to be a musician,” she said. “That was always my mother’s idea, since I was very young. She made me take the lessons and told me to write music. She entered my works in competitions. If I wrote songs that won, we ate good food for a couple of weeks. She made me get better at selling myself. That’s not a part of myself I want to work with anymore. But I never had time to find out what I like.”

“How musically knowledgeable are the toads?” Alanna asked me.

“I never noticed they had any particular taste, except for their own vocal stylings. In the bubble, I had access to music libraries imported from other cultures, but I didn’t hear anything indigenous except mating songs,” I said.

“So—any musician might do? The woman who plays evening music at Sook’s, whose rescue we’ve been contemplating for a month?” asked Alanna.

She and I smiled at each other. Cassie, at Sook’s, played for tips; Sook didn’t pay her, but he let her use the keyboard. People who went to Sook’s for the evening didn’t care about music, so she didn’t make much. She had run away from a worse place. Haladion was a good planet for runaways if you had a marketable talent and knew how to live off the land, but her skill wasn’t very useful, and she had no wood-craft. She might like to disappear to a place of plenty using someone else’s name, and she looked a bit like Milla.

Alanna says I always forget the important things. I remember what was important about this rescue. It woke many ghost wounds in me. When we succeeded in freeing Milla from the chains of her music, some of my wounds healed.

I washed the sigil from Milla’s robe. Gwelf took it down to town, found Cassie in her secret roof home (Alanna liked watching the town through the focus window, and knew where most of the homeless lived), and consulted with her. Cassie was happy to get room, board, and a chance to entertain an uncritical audience. She didn’t like sleeping out in the weather.

Milla shadows me through the mansion these days, trying everything I do, waiting for a new trade to call her, one she’ll choose for herself. The keyboard is locked back in the living room wall, but I remember the three songs I heard Milla play, whether I want to or not, and sometimes my ghost voice, the one that could kill, sings them. Only Alanna hears, and she doesn’t let them hurt her.

THE EYE OF HEAVEN

Chris Pierson

“You should leave this place before they come,” said Sir Kettigar. “You don’t need to be here.”

Torl ignored the old knight, thrusting the shovel into the mud again, leaving a hole that immediately began to fill with water. He’d been burying men in the rain all day, and he was filthy: muck soaked his clothes, his face, his long black hair. The stuff was *everywhere*. He’d been blowing it out of his nose, tasting it in his food, pouring it out of his boots.

He hurt, too—right down to his bones, in a way he never did after drilling at swordplay or tilting at the lists. The shovel was heavy, the dirt heavier—and then there were the bodies to lay in their graves. He was doing his back no favors, as the shooting pains in his spine attested. But this had to be done. A day’s aching was preferable to the stink.

The fort at Car Bandoth had become a charnel house, full of bodies that baked in the midsummer sun,

then moldered in the rain when the storms came in. Torl had spent hours gathering the corpses of men he'd known, with whom he'd shared a bottle of Dantish wine or played against at nines-and-fives. Now Torl dug, and dragged, and dumped the black, bloated, fly-blown things that had once been the fort's garrison into the holes. Then he covered them over with filth. No prayers from him. He was too tired, too stricken with grief to think of the god. Ar dai, on his throne of pearls and silver, had never seemed so distant.

He poured a last shovel of mud over the body of Baron Norral, the keep's captain-at-arms, tamped down the wet earth, and stopped to wipe muddy water from his stinging eyes. Twenty-three graves so far dotted Car Bandoth's courtyard, and nine more to go. Night was coming on. Torl would sleep hard—dreamless, if Ar dai was kind. But first he had to finish, even if he had to work by lamplight. He glanced to his right. Sir Kettigar sat upon a low stone wall, his armor gleaming as lightning split the sky above. Thunder shook the keep and Torl flinched, but the old knight didn't notice. He scratched his braided white beard. He drummed his fingers on the hilt of his sword, laid across his lap. But he didn't help; it wasn't his place. Kettigar was a protector of the realm, sworn to keep the kingdom of Mallos safe from its foes. Mucking in the earth was beneath him.

"That's what squires are for," Torl muttered, hefting the shovel again.

Seven years he'd trained under Kettigar, following the old knight from city to town, battlefield to tournament, carrying his arms and armor, cooking his meals, grooming his horse. He'd hated the old man at first: Kettigar was a hard master, and had an arrogant streak a league wide. But time, and at least a dozen battles where the old man had saved him from being cut in half, had tempered that. He'd grown fond of Kettigar, crusty and black-humored though he may have been.

At the moment, however, Kettigar was getting on his every last nerve.

"I'm serious, lad," the knight said. "There's no reason for you to stay. Norral's last messenger will have reached the Blue Citadel by now. Queen Burlas will send a replacement garrison. This fort takes at least twenty to man properly. You can't do it alone."

"I'm not alone," Torl said, and grinned. "I've got you."

Kettigar's lips puckered. "Be serious, boy. You're just punishing yourself because the plague didn't kill you. Go find safety. Take your horse and ride."

"And leave you here alone?"

The old knight shrugged.

Torl shook his head. "You won't be rid of me that easily. Now, I don't imagine you can grab a shovel and help me?"

Kettigar spread his hands. "I wish I could, lad. Truly."

Torl bowed his head, leaning on the haft of his shovel. Gods' blood, Kettigar could be infuriating—even now. "Leave me alone, then," he grumbled. "I've got work to do."

He expected an answer, but got none. When he looked over at the wall, the old knight was gone, with no sign at all that he'd been there—not even footprints in the mud. A chill feeling made Torl's skin shiver. He looked toward the next corpse, wasted and already turning green. The flies had left it alone, but decay couldn't be stopped. He knelt down beside it, stared long at the scarred and bearded face of Sir Kettigar.

"Well," he muttered. "Your turn, then."

It was hard to see his master like this, quiet and still after so many years, lying in the mire in the armor of his longfathers—the armor that had protected him all this time, but hadn't been of any use against his final enemy.

Torl shut his eyes, feeling a hurt deeper than any toil could inflict. He still didn't pray. There didn't seem to be any point. Kettigar was dead, ignobly so, and the god didn't seem to care. Ar dai could go to the six hells, for all he cared.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and though Kettigar's ghost had disappeared, Torl was sure his master heard him. "You deserved better than this."

He stabbed the shovel into the muck again, and began to bury his master.

They'd come to Car Bandoth at the command of the queen herself, riding up the rocky coast to the kingdom's northernmost spur. They'd brought dire news with them: peace talks with the realm of Veyarre, across the windswept straits, had "gone ill." To put a somewhat less fine point on it, they'd been a disaster. Talks had turned to threats, threats to violence . . . and violence to a bloodbath. When it was done, the Veyarri emissary and his men had lain dead on the throne-room floor, along with two of Her Majesty's sons and seven other men of the court. The queen herself would have fallen in the melee, too, if not for Sir Kettigar's sword and shield.

So now, unlooked for, war was at hand. On both sides of the water, armies were massing. Hostages were being hanged. And men were on the lookout for signs of attack. That was why Kettigar rode north: Car Bandoth was the best post for watching for the Veyarrim. Perched on a high spine of chalk, overlooking the gray waters, it gave vantage enough to see Veyarre's southern shore. From its six tall towers, a man with good eyesight could spot any movement on the strait's far side. If the enemy launched an invasion, the men of the fort would know at once, and they would kindle the Eye of Heaven.

The Eye was ancient, old enough that not even the sages knew who had built it. Many learned men thought it was a remnant of some ancient empire lost to history; the common folk claimed elves had built it when they still walked the world. But no one knew for certain. All they knew was that the beacon was strong in magic—more powerful than even the queen's mightiest wizards.

Perched atop a white pinnacle that loomed above the fort, the Eye was made of a metal that looked like rose gold, but was as hard as Rumassene steel. It stood more than three hundred feet tall, a tapering spire capped with a massive white crystal with a crimson stain in its center. Runes were etched at its base, in a language no man knew—but though their meaning was unclear, the letters were not. The sages had learned how to pronounce them, and that was the key to the Eye's power . . . for when they were spoken aloud, the Eye came to life and glowed with silver fire that shot high into the sky. When it shone, the light was visible as far south as the capital, more than a week's ride away.

And so Kettigar and Torl had brought word to the men of Car Bandoth: as soon as the Veyarrim moved, the Eye must be lit. If the enemy mounted an attack before Mallos' soldiers were ready, the queen must know. There were plans, if an early invasion must be repelled, but Torl didn't know what they were.

Even Kettigar, who shared more with him than most knights did with their squires, had been close-mouthed about what the queen would do if Veyarre's armies came before the defenses were ready. Torl hadn't pressed him: it probably involved sorcery, so it was better not to know.

Lord Norral had welcomed Kettigar as if he were distant kin and even Torl got a room to sleep in, rather than having to scrounge a spot in the hayloft with the servants. The plan had been for them to stay three days, long enough for a feast befitting the arrival of one of Her Majesty's own knights, then to embark on the return journey.

Instead, it all went wrong.

The first night of the feast was marvelous. There were five courses of more than twenty different dishes, ranging from red eels stuffed with crabmeat to roasted sea-goose to bacon-and-oyster pies. And wine, of course—enough to make the dourest of Car Bandoth's men flushed and merry. Torl was happy, listening while Kettigar told the same war stories he always told at such affairs. But that night, on his way back across the courtyard to his quarters in the small hours before dawn, he saw something terrible.

Even now, he remembered the creature vividly. It had been pitch-black, the size of a ten-year-old child, but far too scrawny and spindly, with clawed fingers and huge yellow eyes that shone like lanterns in the moonlight. He spotted it over by the castle's well, and it hissed like a feral cat . . . and melted away into the darkness. He stood alone in the windy night, shaking, a dagger in his hand . . . but the creature didn't reappear, and finally he convinced himself he'd only been seeing things, that too much wine and rich food had blurred his mind. He'd gone to bed and fell asleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

The next day, he woke up sick. Fever had taken him. He remembered nothing but flashes: raging red flames, faces distorted into leering corpse-grins, and frightening colors that had no name. He slipped toward death, and did it quickly—and then he lingered there, at its doorstep, for two long days.

Then his fever broke, and he found himself sweat-soaked and shivering in his bed. Kettigar slept in the corner, not far from his side.

Later, he learned that the old knight had stayed with him the whole while, even as the rest of Car Bandoth's garrison sickened and died. He'd prayed over Torl, given him water, tried to calm his raving. By the time Torl learned of this, though, Kettigar had caught the sickness too, one of the last in the fort to succumb.

Torl had fought off the plague, with his master's help. But he was the only one.

He had been there when his master breathed his last. One moment, Kettigar was curled into a ball in his bed, babbling to another knight named Harrikos—a man who'd died before Torl was even born. The next, he was cold and still, his glassy eyes empty. Torl sat beside the old knight for the better part of a day, too weak and shocked and lost to do anything but stare at the motionless body and wonder if he was going mad.

Then Kettigar spoke to him, and drove away any doubt.

"It's over, lad," his master whispered, just behind him. "They're all gone. No one left here but you . . . and me."

It was cold in the fort, but not frigid. Suddenly, though, Torl could see his breath. His stomach clenching, he turned. Kettigar was standing there, in the open doorway. Torl rubbed his eyes, too shocked to speak.

"What's the matter, boy?" Kettigar asked, eyes blazing. "You act as though you've never seen a ghost before."

Torl blinked. "I—I haven't . . ."

"I know that, lad. Just a small joke. I never was any good at it, I suppose." The old knight walked toward him . . . or *wafted*, to be closer to the truth. His body shifted like mist as he moved, only seeming solid when he stayed still. The air grew bitter as he drew alongside his squire and gazed down at his own body. "Ardai's teeth. Did I really look that old?"

"M-master," Torl stammered. "How . . . how—"

Kettigar shrugged, his shoulders dissolving into fog as they rose and fell. Torl could see through the knight, make out the peeling plaster on the wall behind him.

"You swear when you're dubbed, lad," he said. "*Kathos bir galan*, in the Old Tongue. True beyond death. Those aren't just words, you know. Her Majesty bade me light the Eye if the enemy appeared before I left this place."

"And . . . *can* you leave?" Torl asked.

"No," the old knight said, and frowned. "A bit of a problem, there. I'll only be released if I fulfill my duty."

"Oh."

"It gets worse. Only the living can light the Eye. Its magic won't respond to ghosts."

Torl thought about that. "But that's not fair!" he protested. "If you can't leave, and you can't fulfill your duty—"

"Then I'll stay here, and haunt this keep, until the book of the world is closed," Kettigar agreed. "Yes, a terrible fate—but not unheard of. I knew the dangers when I took my oath of service, lad. I'm hardly the first knight to remain in the world like this."

All at once, Torl began to wonder whether he wanted to be a knight anymore. Years of training, a lifetime of servitude . . . and now the danger of being caught in the world forever, rather than moving on, because of the vows he took?

"Preposterous, isn't it?" Kettigar agreed.

Torl blinked. "You can hear my thoughts?"

"No," Kettigar said. "But you were frowning like you wanted to grab Ardai by his blessed raiment and throttle him."

Torl sat quietly, glancing from his master's body to his spirit, then back again. Outside, rain pattered against Car Bondath's walls.

"I'll be rotting soon," Kettigar said. "Faster than you'd think, in this wet weather. Some of the others already are. You'd best be going, lad, before the stink gets too bad."

“And leave you behind?” Torl asked.

“It will have to happen, sooner or later,” Kettigar replied. “Best you do it before you see what happens when you leave thirty dead men out in the rain.”

Torl thought about that. He’d seen dead bodies before, and smelled decay—but the old knight was right. The thought of all of the fort’s garrison moldering around him was . . . unpleasant.

But . . .

“I can’t just abandon you,” he said.

“This is a bad time for sentiment, lad.”

“Maybe.” Torl got up and walked toward the door. “But someone has to stay here anyway, to light the Eye if it’s needed.”

Kettigar drifted after him. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“To find a shovel.”

The rain stopped, maddeningly, almost the moment the last man was in the ground. Muttering a few unpleasant suggestions to the god, Torl slogged through the muck, found his bunk, and was asleep before he could even pull the blankets over himself.

He awoke to his master’s voice.

“—best come see for yourself. Quickly now, lad,” Kettigar was saying. There was a moment’s silence.

“Boy, are you *listening* to me?”

Torl snorted, lifting his head. “Whuh?”

Kettigar loomed over him, imposing and stern. The sight of the knight so impatient and angry filled him with the same guilt and terror he’d felt when the old man was alive.

“Have you not heard a word I said?” Kettigar demanded. “Get up! You’ve got a duty to see to, and little time to do it!”

Duty? Torl wondered. But I already buried you all.

Then it came to him.

“The Veyarrim,” he said. “They’re coming, aren’t they?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling you!” snapped the knight. “I spotted them at sunrise. Now get your sorry bones out of bed!”

Torl’s sorry bones hurt like nothing he’d ever felt in his life—not even after his first real turn at jousting, when he’d caught a blunted lance dead in his gorget and hit the ground so hard they’d summoned a priest to pray over him. For a moment, he literally couldn’t move; every time he did, it felt like lightning was shooting up his spine.

“My . . . back,” he grunted.

“Quit whining,” Kettigar growled. “During the crusade against the Sunlands, I took an arrow through my shield arm, a sword cut across the ribs, and a mace to the side of my face that knocked out seven teeth—all in one day. Even the king thought I wouldn’t live through the night . . . but when morning came, I was up and ready for battle, damn it. Now move.”

Biting his tongue to keep from screaming, Torl sat up. Every muscle in his body tried to clench, to force him back down, but he fought it off. He reached to a pitcher beside the bed, poured himself a cup of wine, and bolted it down. Then, his back and legs and arms all shrieking in unison, he got to his feet . . . and, somehow, didn’t die from the pain. If anything, it lessened somewhat. He shot a glare at Kettigar, who stood by the door, looking sour.

“Death hasn’t mellowed you,” he muttered.

“I’m cursed to haunt this rainy keep forever,” the old knight said. “Forgive me if I seem ornery.”

Several minutes and a lot of pain later, they stood on the keep’s northern wall. Torl leaned against the battlements, trying not to vomit from the effort of climbing the stairs, and looked out across the water.

“Hang me till I dance,” he cursed.

The storm had passed, leaving the sky angry with clouds, but also shot through with shafts of sunlight. Surf thundered against the rocks below, hurling salt-smelling spume high into the air. On the strait’s far side, the shores of Veyarre lay dark, dotted with castles. And between them, on the broad back of the

water, was a fleet of red-sailed warships.

There were at least a hundred of them, long and sleek, tacking back and forth against the wind so that the whole line undulated like a serpent. Every one was crowded with men: Torl couldn't count them all, but he guessed there must be thousands. And they would be across the channel by nightfall.

"They'll make a beachhead," growled Kettigar. "At this very fort. With that kind of foothold, the scum can bring the rest of their forces across."

Torl rubbed his eyes. "I don't understand. Where did all those boats come from? We would have seen them days ago if they were massing on the coast."

"Look closer, lad. Mallos isn't the only realm with sorcerers, you know."

Swallowing, Torl stared at the ships. There was something unnatural about them, and now it struck him: every single boat was identical, from the eagle's head on its prow to the rigging of its sails. It was eerie. And there was a strange shimmer about them, almost invisible. The Veyarrim wizards had conjured the armada.

"As I feared," Kettigar muttered. "The plague wasn't just chance—it's too much of a coincidence. It was intentional, to empty this fort before the invasion began."

Torl thought of the creature he'd seen, the first—and, as it turned out, last—night of the feast. He saw its yellow eyes glaring at him across the courtyard, and how it vanished like smoke before him. It had been standing by Car Bandoth's well. Poisoning it. More sorcery.

He chose not to mention any of this to Kettigar. He was angry enough.

"Enough dawdling," the old knight said, turning away from the ships. "We've got a job to do—or rather, *you* do."

Torl followed his master's gaze up and east, to the pinnacle above the fort. The Eye of Heaven gleamed red in the morning light, gulls wheeling about the glittering jewel at its tip. He regarded the stairs carved into the rock, worn smooth, dotted with bird's nests and guano. There were hundreds of them. It would take him an hour, in his spent and broken state, to climb them all.

"Best get started, then," Kettigar said. "This is your trial, Torl: do this, and you'll prove yourself worthy of Knighthood." With that, he faded, dissolving into the air. He was still there—there was still a chill bite to the air atop the wall, and the hairs on Torl's arms that weren't plastered down with dried mud stood erect. But the old knight was leaving Torl alone. This was *his* task now, not Kettigar's.

Torl glanced back at the water, at the enchanted ships crossing the strait, a bit closer now than before. In them he saw the doom of Mallos. His master had taught him enough of tactics to know that it would take years of battle to get rid of the Veyarrim if they captured the northern coast. There was nothing else for it now.

He turned toward the Eye of Heaven and started walking.

The climb was every bit as grueling as he'd expected. He had to stop three times to gather his strength, get his breath back, stave off the jolts of agony that shot through him. Once he slipped on the spray-slick stairs, and would have tumbled down into the churning sea if there hadn't been an old, dried vine for him to grab before he toppled over the edge. He took the last twenty steps on his hands and knees, sobbing with pain as every part of his body rebelled against him.

Finally, he reached the top of the pinnacle, chalk now dusting the mud that caked his body, and laid down on his back, gasping for breath beside the base of the Eye. Black spots swirled before his eyes. The sound of the pounding waves seemed to fall away.

No, he thought, you will *not* pass out. Not now.

He shook himself and pushed up to his knees. There, graven in the rose gold of the spire, was an image of the Eye itself, silver fire blossoming from crystal into the sky. The runes that must be spoken were etched to either side. He dragged himself over and ran his fingers across them. They meant nothing to him, for he could only read the Mallosi tongue—but Kettigar had told him what they said, had coached him into repeating the words exactly on the ride north from the capital.

Torl licked his lips, tasted chalk and mud and blood: he'd bitten his tongue when he almost fell. He looked up at the crystal glittering high above against the tattered clouds. He cleared his mind, centering

himself, preparing for what he was about to do.

Then, feeling calm, he turned away from the Eye.

He sat on the edge of the precipice, watching across the water as the Veyarri fleet writhed nearer and nearer. He stayed there for the better part of an hour, trembling, refusing to look back at the runes. It was hard to do, knowing Kettigar was watching.

At last, the ghost appeared. He was, as Torl expected, furious. He floated in the air before his squire, with nothing between him and the jagged, surf-battered rocks but several hundred feet of wind and winging birds. His eyes flashed with anger, and his hands were clenched into fists. His braided beard trembled.

“What are you doing, boy?” Kettigar demanded. “You’re here now. The hard part’s over. Now light the beacon and have done!”

Torl met his gaze and shook his head. I will not be afraid, he thought. I must do this.

“No,” he said.

Kettigar gaped at him. “*What did you say?*”

“You heard me,” Torl replied. “If I light the Eye, you’ll be damned. There’ll be no way for you to fulfill your oath because someone else will have done it already. You’ll be a ghost forever.”

“That doesn’t matter,” Kettigar said. “I *can’t* fulfill my oath now. We’ve been through this. The Eye will only allow a living man to use its magic.”

“That’s true,” Torl said. “And you’ll *be* that living man.”

He watched the old knight’s expression change. Anger gave way to confusion, then to slow understanding—which yielded to anger again.

“You cannot be serious,” Kettigar said.

Torl said nothing, only looked at his master without a hint of humor in his eyes.

“I can’t do that,” the old knight protested. “The pain it would cause you . . .”

“I’m already *in* pain,” Torl said. “What’s a little more? And you know it will work. If your spirit is inside me, if you possess me and speak through my mouth, you’ll fulfill your oath. You’ll be free.”

Kettigar was silent a moment. “You would do this for me?”

“You’re my master. And you’re my friend.”

“I could refuse.”

Torl nodded. “You could. But I will not light the Eye. The Veyarri will come ashore, and Mallos may fall. And it will be *your* choice that caused it to happen as much as mine.”

Kettigar saw the trap, saw how cleverly Torl had set it. One of his eyebrows rose—a quiet sign of approval that Torl knew well. *Well played*, the gesture said.

“If that’s truly the way you want it,” Kettigar murmured, and dove into Torl’s chest.

The cold was shocking, unreal—as if there was no warmth left in the world, and every drop of blood in Torl’s body had turned to ice. Kettigar had been right: the pain was terrible, far worse than the aches and spasms he’d been feeling since he awoke. Those, at least, came in waves; this was constant, like he was burning from inside. He could sense Kettigar’s mind mingling with his, felt a flood of unfamiliar memories flow through him. It was like he was being ripped in two. He ground his teeth, trying not to scream.

Then, suddenly, his jaw unclenched. He stood, and turned toward the Eye. But it wasn’t him doing any of it. He felt his body move, one foot coming forward to take a step, then the other. His eyes shifted to peer at the engravings on the spire’s side. His mouth worked, opening and closing, forming silent words as Kettigar got used to it, breaking it in like a new pair of boots.

Thank you, the old knight thought inside his head. *This is more than I could ask.*

Torl would have nodded, but couldn’t. *And it is the least I could give.*

For the first time in quite a while, Kettigar smiled.

I noticed you didn’t bury my sword with me.

Torl felt a flush of guilt. *I’m sorry, master. I should have—*

No, Kettigar thought, cutting him off. *You misunderstand. I am glad you didn’t. Take the blade, lad—it’s yours. You earned it.*

Thank you, master.

Torl felt his head nod, once. Then he began to speak—but it was his master’s voice, not his, that issued from his mouth.

“Bhurget an-shuvak thalkos. Dotho malkeshur gargarinam.”

It happened at once; there was no time even to take a breath. The ground beneath his feet shook, driving him to his knees. A ripple of power bent the air around the spire, and with a shattering sound the Eye of Heaven spewed fire high into the sky. It billowed thousands of feet tall, a white pillar of light that pierced the clouds and kept on going. Heat washed down from above, driving back the chill that suffused Torl’s body. He fell flat as the ground beneath him bucked and lurched.

The Eye blazed for the better part of an hour, lighting the land around it as if it were a second sun. When it finally stopped, it seemed like night had suddenly fallen over Car Bandoth. Torl raised his head—and stopped, stomach clenching, when he realized he’d done it himself.

Master? he thought, and searched his mind for thoughts, memories that weren’t his own.

Nothing.

Sorrow took him, but also joy. Kettigar was gone, his duty accomplished. He would not haunt the fort, nor would he be trapped in the world until time’s end. He was free to feast and drink wine in Ar dai’s halls. And he would be waiting there when Torl’s time came.

As Torl lay there, considering this, a new sound arose from below. Thousands of voices were screaming at once. His throat suddenly tight, he crawled to the edge of the precipice, looked down at the sea, and cringed at what he saw.

The Eye’s signal had been seen. Far away, the queen had given her command to the royal sorcerers, and they had set to work. Now the straits were burning, ghostly blue flames rising up out of the water to engulf the Veyarri fleet. The enchanted ships flared bright, then vanished, casting the soldiers aboard them into the fiery water. Men howled in agony and panic . . . then, one by one, they fell silent.

Torl watched until it was done, his stomach a hard knot. He wasn’t sure he wanted to be a knight anymore—not if his oaths led to carnage like that. Perhaps it was better than what the Veyarrim would have done to Mallos had their invasion worked. He didn’t know. All he knew was thousands of men were dying all at once and it was partly his doing.

He wondered about that as he limped back down the stairs to look for his master’s sword.

OVERCAST

Alan Dean Foster

Eric had always enjoyed lying on his back and looking up at the clouds. Though he had been doing it for thirty years, Sunday was the first time one looked back at him.

Or maybe he was just anthropomorphizing. That was, after all, one of the joys of cloud watching. For example, the bunch of fluff off in the western sky looked like his twelfth-grade science teacher, Mr. Atkins. The swirl of cirrus directly overhead could easily be transmogrified in his mind into a distant memory of his beloved aunt Grace. Those spotty stratus off to the north were dead ringers for the lines of troops with whom he had marched in Iraq. But until now not a one of them—not Mr. Atkins, not Aunt Grace, not his buddies in the corps, had looked back at him.

Furthermore, it seemed to him as if it was coming closer.

Well, why not? he thought. As easy to experience two hallucinations as one. It was a small cumulus, not much bigger than his Saturn four-door and almost as faded. As it descended, he could not escape the feeling that it was looking at him. It had no eyes, of course. Not even Eric, with his expansive imagination, could transform puffs of vapor into eyes.

It halted a little more than an arm’s length above him. Tugged by the wind, bits and pieces would be pulled away, reminding him of how as a child he used to tear pieces of cotton candy off the main mass and pop them into his mouth. Yet the cloud did not shrink in size. Renewing itself by gathering moisture from the air, he supposed. It was much too small to retain its shape. It was much too close to the ground.

It was much too close to him. Alone on the forested hillside above Puget Sound, he sat up. The cloud retreated a few feet and continued to regard him.

This, Eric decided firmly, *was ridiculous*. He had a vivid imagination, but he was not crazy. He did not drink and did not ingest mind-altering substances. Whatever the source of the phenomenon, he knew he could simply walk away from it. He proceeded to do so.

The cloud followed.

It followed him down the slope, which was absurd. It followed him through the trees, which was impossible. It followed him all the way to the parking lot at the end of the trail. He half expected the persistent illusion to follow him into his car. Thankfully, it did not.

Feeling better, he headed home. Halfway back to Olympia it began to rain, heavily. Not unusual in western Washington. Except while it was raining all around him, puddling up against curbs and filling parking lots with temporary ponds, not a drop of moisture struck his car. He changed lanes, accelerated, slowed almost to a stop. Nothing he did made any difference. Stopped at a red light, he stuck his head out the window with an eye toward scanning the sky. He found he could see it everywhere except overhead.

A thick mass of heavy and very localized cumulus hovered directly above his vehicle.

When the light changed to green, he accelerated gradually. Repeated glances outside showed that the cloud continued to keep pace, shielding his car from the storm. Aware that he was now gripping the wheel so tightly that his knuckles were beginning to cramp, he forced himself to relax as considered the possibilities. Since not a one of them made any sense whatsoever, he decided he might as well go with the atmospheric flow, as it were. He had done so all his life, and while he might never be rich or famous, he could boast of low blood pressure and a general air of peace and contentment that escaped the high-tech hordes who had made an anthill out of the east side of the Sound.

I have acquired a cloud. So be it. He smiled to himself, wondering if it was the sort of smile that might cause others to edge carefully away from him should they meet him on the street. He checked it in the rearview mirror. It was a perfectly normal smile, not crooked or twisted in any way.

His house was small but set outside town on a couple of acres of forested land. His nearest neighbor had considerably more land and raised horses. Eric preferred to raise Cain, but only on weekends and with close friends. He wondered how they might react to his new companion, assuming it stayed around. He opened the front door and entered. The cloud followed him right into the house.

Sitting down on the worn but welcoming old couch in the less-than-immaculate den, he flipped on the TV, watched three minutes of news, then turned the set off. He was not used to having a cloud in the room with him and it was proving hard to ignore.

“What am I going to do with you?” he wondered aloud. The cloud did not respond verbally. Instead, it drifted from one side of the den to the other, changing from puffy cumulus to leaner cumulo-stratus, and settled itself quietly into a corner. From time to time it would emit a puff of odorless wind in his direction. He could do worse, he supposed. Ever since Orton, the street mongrel he had rescued, had died last year, he had gone petless. Could one pet a cloud? Rising from the couch, he walked over to it and extended a hand. It flinched slightly, reverting to full cumulus, but did not try to flee or evaporate.

“Steady,” he heard himself murmuring, “easy there.” He was very glad there was no one around to see what he was doing. His hand touched the cloud and slipped partway into it. Cool and damp caressed his fingers. He withdrew them. When he did so, the cloud moved closer. After a couple of minutes of restrained human-atmospheric interaction, it turned cirrus, zipped several times around the room, and finally gathered itself as cumulus again into a tight, dense ball of cloud-stuff in front of the window that looked out onto the back of the property.

“I guess I’m going to have to let you stay,” Eric murmured thoughtfully. In response, the cloud bobbed up and down in what might have been an indication of assent, or simply a momentary fluctuation in internal air pressure caused by the building’s central heat coming on. “Guess I’ll call you Aerol.” He chuckled to himself. “Aerol Flynn.”

The name didn’t stick. For whatever reason, he soon came to believe that the cloud was by nature more female than male. This determination constituting only one more foolishness in a rapidly growing list of

meteorological absurdities, he saw no problem in changing the cloud's name from Aerol to Aerial. Certainly the cloud did not object.

While it only whispered to him via the occasional breeze and did not purr like a cat or bark like a dog, there were undeniable advantages to having a cloud as a companion. He did not have to walk it. When it had to go, it let him know by bumping repeatedly up against the back door. And when it relieved itself, which was no more than once or twice every several days, the hollyhocks and wildflowers in the yard were immediate beneficiaries.

At night it snuggled itself into the air above the master bedroom bathtub, though not before brushing past him to gently stroke his face. These repeated caresses imparted to his skin a healthy glow that others could not fail to notice. Female coworkers stopped him in the halls at work to ask what kind of moisturizer he was using. He could only reply that it was a natural substance he concocted himself, and in quantities too minuscule to share.

On weekends and days off he would sit outside in the backyard, reading and soaking up the sunshine, a tiny bit of Mt. Rainier visible in the distance. If the sun became too harsh, the cloud would interpose itself between him and the sky. On the camping trips and long solo hikes in the Olympics that he so enjoyed, he no longer worried about finding a place to bathe. He would strip, stand wherever the view was satisfying, and Aerial would run him through a personalized sprinkle, douse, and rinse cycle as required. In return, the cloud asked little. A place to condense at night, occasional trips to a lake or the Sound to graze on moisture, sometimes play behind the house during which he would attempt to squirt her with a hose while she dodged or attenuated. She was always waiting for him when he came home at night. Dinner was usually pasta or fish for him, always a bucket of spring water for her. When it came time to do the dishes, he would soap them up and stick them, one at a time, into her. When he withdrew his hand and the glass or pot or dish, it was invariably sparkling clean. All he had to do was dry. Then she would settle down in the air behind him as he read or watched TV. Sometimes he read to her, and she would express her feelings with breaths of fresh air that were either warm or cold, depending on how she felt about the subject matter at hand.

He became a more than casual viewer of the Weather Channel. She loved it, hovering close at his shoulder as reports were filed and charts displayed, only occasionally whipping away to hide in the bedroom if a report of a hurricane or tornado came on the screen. Eric was content. The cloud was content.

Then he met a girl.

He brought her home.

Jessica was short and vivacious, with bobbed black hair and obsidian eyes and a personality that was wonderfully unimpeded by convention. They met at work, then after work, then after after work and occasionally on into the early mornings. Ideas were exchanged, notions were swapped, and before long it was mutually agreed that they were more than a little agreeable. He visited her apartment. She wanted to see his house. He wanted her to see his house, except . . .

"I have a pet," he told her uneasily as they headed out of town on an overcast Saturday evening.

She laughed and pushed playfully at his shoulder. "Why do you think that would be a problem, Eric?"

Holding the wheel with both hands, he looked across at her. "You don't have any pets."

"No, but I feed half the stray cats in my neighborhood, and the occasional dog, and you always see seed in the birdfeeder outside my window."

He stared at the road ahead. The distance between her place and his kept getting shorter, and there was nothing he could do about it. "Mine's not a cat or a dog. Or a bird. Or a giant tortoise or a lemur. It's not like any pet you've ever seen or heard of."

"Oh, come on, Eric!" She was shaking her head now, but affectionately. "What is it, tell me. A lion? Do you have a lion? A poisonous snake? Is it something that's likely to bite me, or claw me?"

"No, no." He turned off the highway and down the street that meandered in the direction of his property. The forest that dominated the landscape seemed to close in around him. "It doesn't have any teeth, or any claws."

"I know," she declared excitedly, clapping her hands together, "it's a parrot! You've got a big,

foul-tempered, dirty old parrot, or maybe a macaw, and you're afraid it won't like me and it's going to beak me to death."

He looked over at her. He had to smile. "Her name is Aerial. At least, I've always thought of her as a 'her.'"

She frowned at him. "You mean you have a pet and you don't know what sex it is?"

"It's not easy to sex," he argued. When she started to protest, he raised a hand. "When you meet her, you'll see what I mean."

"Okay." Grinning, she sat back in the passenger seat. "Now you've got me really curious!"

The sun, insofar as its location could be determined on a typical northwest Washington day in late fall, was setting when they reached the house. Instead of pulling into the garage, Eric parked the car in the driveway. Outside, the air was cool and quiet.

"Now don't be shocked," he warned her as they walked up the paving stones he had set by hand.

"Whatever you're anticipating, Aerial's not going to be what you expect."

"I'm ready for anything." Taking his arm in hers, she snuggled close and batted goo-goo eyes at him.

"My big bwave software progwammer will pwotect me." Her voice shifting back to normal, she asked, "Is there a chance this mystery companion of yours might, um, leap into my arms?"

"Unlikely," he told her as he slipped the key into the front door lock, "but if she does, I guarantee she won't knock you over."

Sometimes the cloud was waiting for him in the hallway. Other times it waited elsewhere, giving him time to unburden himself of laptop, groceries, and any other baggage before greeting him. This evening it was waiting in the kitchen.

"Aerial?" Tentatively, Eric entered the den. "Aerial, we have company."

The cloud was hovering in the kitchen, above the stove. He often left it on for her. She loved to hover in the column of warm, rising air. It was one of her favorite places.

As the cloud drifted out of the kitchen and into the den, Jessica's beautiful black eyes got bigger than marbles. "Eric, what . . . ?"

He took a deep breath. "Jessica, meet Aerial. Aerial, this is Jessica—my fiancée."

Cloud and woman regarded one another. Jessica started to say something, stammered, turned to look sharply at Eric, returned her gaze to the drifting cloud. As she did so, the cloud began to change.

Normally a pleasant, puffy cumulus shading to a relaxed altostratus, Aerial was undergoing a metamorphosis that was as ominous as it was swift. She began to swell and expand, puffing herself up mightily, spreading upward and outward until she filled half the den and her roiling crest and splintering edges pushed threateningly against the walls and ceiling. She grew dark, darker than Eric had ever seen her before. She was cumulonimbus gray, then nimbus charcoal, then—she was black, black, a glowing, rumbling anvil-head.

She moved toward the couple.

Jessica took a step backward, and fell down. Mesmerized by the turbulent, roaring thunderstorm that now dominated the room, she started edging backward on her backside, pushing with her hands and feet. An anxious Eric hurried to place himself between his fiancée and the glowering cloud. Within the den, a wind was rising.

"Aerial, you don't understand! There's no reason to be angry. This is the way people are, this is the way they're meant to be. It doesn't mean that you and I . . ."

A sudden blast of wind, cold and wet, sent him staggering to his left. He stumbled up against the wall, denting the plaster, and fought for balance. The howling wind held him pinned there. From deep inside the cloud, lightning had begun to flash and crackle. A furious rain filled the room, soaking furniture and the carpet. Jessica tried to rise, to run, but the wind knocked her legs out from under her.

"Aerial!" Eric was shouting, "listen to me! Everything can be . . .!"

Lightning lanced. It wasn't a very large bolt, but it was bright and intense enough to momentarily blind him. The smell of ozone filled the room. When he could see again, Jessica was no longer backing up. She was lying flat on the floor, eyes shut, curled up in a fetal position. An ugly black scar streaked her chest just below the right shoulder blade. Wisps of smoke were rising from the ragged slit that had appeared in

her blouse.

Battling his way forward through the wind, Eric fell to his knees beside her. When he put a hand beneath her back and raised her up, her head hung free and loose. The moisture that welled up in his eyes was entirely self-generated. Today was supposed to have been a happy day, a joyous day. Whirling, he turned his furious gaze on the hovering, rumbling, ferocious thundercloud.

“Look what you—look what you . . .” He swallowed hard, clenched his teeth. “Get out! Get out of my house, get out of my life! I don’t want you here anymore! I don’t want to see you ever, ever again!”

For an instant the cloud was illuminated by so much internal lightning that its mere presence shorted out both the TV and the refrigerator in the kitchen. Eric held the limp form of Jessica tightly to him and closed his eyes. For a split second, the smell of ozone was in the air once again. There was a flash of light as bright as the sun and thunder shook the room, shaking books from their shelves and loosening plaster from the ceiling. A violent blast of hurricane-force wind rattled the house and blew out the picture window that dominated the back of the den.

Trailing thunderstorm-force winds in its wake like the cry of some long-extinct animal, the cloud swept out through the shattered window and was gone.

A trembling Eric crouched on the floor, still holding Jessica in his arms. It was the smoke that finally roused him. The last bolt of lightning had passed over their heads and set his old easy chair on fire.

Letting Jessica down easy he stumbled into the kitchen, dragged out the fire extinguisher he kept stored in the cabinet beside the dishwasher, and returned to snuff out the flames before they could get a purchase on another piece of furniture or part of the house. By the time he was certain the fire was out, Jessica had begun to moan. It was the most wonderful sound he had heard in his life.

When the paramedics arrived, a dazed Eric managed to invent a disjointed but credible story about an arc springing unexpectedly from the TV to catch the chair on fire. The fact that the den and kitchen were soaking wet he explained by saying that the fire had caused the house’s automatic sprinkler system to come on. Preoccupied as they were with the stunned but still alive Jessica, neither of the paramedics took the time to check the system to see if it actually had been activated.

Jessica recovered. When necessary, makeup covered the thin, jagged scar that now ran down the right side of her chest. She would not see him or speak to him for a long time. Then one day there came a phone call—hesitant, conciliatory if not exactly inviting. They met. Conversation resumed, then meetings. A love that had never entirely been blasted away by the lightning in Eric’s den was rekindled, though when speaking of it both of them were careful not to employ any metaphors that involved mention of fire. Gradually, the memory faded until the reality that it had once been passed into the realm of dream. They got along too well to leave their personal lives in stasis at the expense of a nightmare. Marriage brought closure, success at work brought peace, and in the manner of things, time brought first a boy, then a girl. Eric had to enlarge the house.

Years passed. The joy of living in a beautiful part of the world brought rewards that could not be counted in dollars. The Sound remained the Sound, a uniquely beautiful part of the planet. Rainier continued to brood over its domain and sustain its long, peaceful sleep. The Olympic Mountains still thrust snow-streaked spires into oceans of white cloud and cerulean blue.

They were on a family hike in those mountains one day when, slowly but unmistakably, one many clouds showed signs of descending.

“The car.” A grim-faced Eric stood his ground, facing the lowering mass of bulging whiteness. “Get the kids to the car.” He knew how hopeless the suggestion was even as he said it. The car was miles away, downslope at the head of the trail. Eyes wider than they had been in many years, Jessica drew Andrew and Cissy to her.

The children were not frightened: they were fascinated. Cissy raised a hand and pointed. “Daddy, mommy, look! The cloud is coming to say hello!”

“Wow,” was all the older Andrew could think to say. “I didn’t know clouds could drop down like that.” Only certain clouds, an increasingly tense Eric knew. Only one cloud.

As it dropped steadily lower, he took care to keep himself positioned between the descending cumulus and his family. “Get back into the trees, Jessica. Take the kids into the forest.” It was a good quarter mile

sprint off the ridgeline trail to the nearest firs and spruces, but it was the only chance they had. If he could keep himself between the cloud and them . . .

The cloud was almost on him now. Behind him, Jessica and the children had hesitated, had failed to make a run for it when they'd had the time. Now it was too late. A finger of cloud, a cold front in miniature, extended itself toward him. From within its depths came a first faint rumbling. The cloud touched him. Caressed him.

No words were spoken. No words had ever been spoken between them. Like the tentacles of some ghostly cephalopod, wreaths of soft cloud wrapped themselves around him, stroking his hair, his face, his upper body. Unaware of the antecedents, the children looked on in fascination as their mother held them close. Then it rose to drift over and past him, heading for his family.

"Eric," Jessica began, unable to suppress the quaver in her voice.

"Mom, you're hurting me." Her arm was tight, tight, across Andrew's neck.

Eric started to move to intercept the cloud. What could he do if he got in its way? You couldn't fight air. But there had been something about the way it had touched him, caressed him. A familiar touch, from many years gone by. He was anthropomorphizing again, he knew. But unlike the first time, history gave him reason to do so without questioning his sanity.

"Jessica, relax. I think . . ." He gazed at the slowly drifting cloud mass, "I think it's going to be okay."

As it had when facing him, fingers of cloud emerged from the main mass. Reached out toward Jessica, and touched. Touched and stroked. Eric relaxed, then he smiled. Time, he reflected.

Tentative at first, Jessica reached out too, inserting a hand into part of the cloud. It drew back, then paused, finally returning to envelop her up to the shoulder. She smiled.

"It tickles," his wife told him. "*Shetickles*." Having been released from their mother's grasp, her children were laughing and giggling, jumping up and down as they, too, tried to touch the cloud.

It was all right now, Eric knew. Even the weather changes with time. Advancing, he put an arm around Jessica. The cloud did not object. Instead, it ascended slightly. As they moved off, resuming their hike and continuing on down the trail, the cloud moved with them, flattening out and spreading sideways to shield them from the glare of the midday sun.

Andrew and Cissy followed in their parents' wake. Occasionally they would pause to inspect this flower or that bug, sometimes smiling, sometimes fussing, occasionally pushing gently at one another.

Above each of them, a very small but bright cloud paced their progress.

FRIENDS OF THE HIGH HILLS

Brenda Cooper

Lisa glanced at her mother, hunched in twin shafts of light pouring through the trailer window, rearranging bright blue, green, and fuchsia chips of tile in mosaic patterns. She winced at her mom's scraggly gray ponytail and ragged pajamas. If only her mom paid half as much attention to her hair and clothes, or even the dishes, as she paid to her tile creations.

Lisa's own golden hair shone, and her jeans and T-shirt were at least clean if not exactly new. She tip-toed to the door, pushing the squeaky screen open as quietly as possible. A mumbled, "Have fun," crept absently from her mother's mouth, but the older woman didn't even turn to acknowledge her daughter's daily escape.

Lisa closed the door behind her, walked about ten steps, then skipped twice before heading down the hill. Early morning washed a gold aura onto two huge white adobe and red-roofed houses with wrought-iron gates. The only thing the mega-mansions shared with her mom's old silver trailer was a great view of the eucalyptus-laden hills rising in waves from Laguna Canyon.

At the main road, Lisa turned left, toward town, and the Sawdust Festival. She began passing early visitors jostling for parking places and local artists who had walked or come in by bus from studios in town. Unwilling to wait for the festival to open in a half hour, Lisa lined up behind two artists and snuck in

the open door at the side. Checking on mosaics her mom had consigned made Lisa enough of a regular that no one stopped her. Sawdust-strewn paths muffled her footsteps as she streaked through the hubbub of preparation for the festival's last day without speaking to anyone.

The waterfall above the food booths was already on, the water singing to her on its fall down the solid rock surface into the small pool in front of it. She walked across the wooden boardwalk in front of the fountain, stepped into the pool, and into the waterfall. The cool wet soaked her hair and clothes, her feet squished, her skin tingled, and the rock accepted her, fading to mist.

For short seconds, two worlds pulled at her. She chose.

In the High Hills, the first stars were beginning to fade as blue tinged the sky. She let out a long sigh of pleasure and twisted her fingers through her hair. She was always dry once she made it through, but the waterfall still wreaked havoc with her hair. Like it mattered. But she kept caring, stubborn about it, even though no one else did.

The waterfall door to the High Hills and the festival would disappear tomorrow. The knowledge rushed her feet toward her best friend in either world. Daylight thickened as Lisa forded the stream, wetting her shoes for real, and she finally reached the small town. She threaded through a copse of old California oaks with thick, twisted low branches and stopped at the last one before the trees opened into the common area. She looked up.

Brandy's bright face and green-gold eyes flashed a welcoming smile. She kicked a lithe bare calf back and twisted down to land on a lower branch, the stones and shells braided into her long gold hair flapping against her cheeks. "About time! I'm going to do it."

"What about your grandmother?"

Brandy frowned, then shrugged. "She always says no. I don't care anymore—I'm thirteen, and that's old enough for a day over there."

Lisa bit back a protest. She'd wanted to spend the day on this side, with the magic and the great, ripe blackberries and the open space. "What if Grandma Nelson follows you?"

Brandy plucked a maroon backpack from a low-hanging stub of a branch and shouldered it. "Then we'll just have to lose her at the festival."

Lisa resigned herself to losing her last day. After all, it was Brandy's, too. The last day she'd see her friend until next summer. And Brandy'd never been on Lisa's side of the waterfall door.

Brandy bounced up and down on her feet, excitement tightening her cheeks. "Besides, remember when I told you my mom got lost over there? When I was three? I want to find her." She tugged at Lisa's sleeve. "We need to go now. Before grandma beats me there."

Lisa nodded, grabbed her friend's hand, and started back the way they came. Brandy pushed the pace, and Lisa's breath came hard by the time they reached the back side of the door. The two girls stood panting, looking back.

A small, slightly bent figure swathed in bright purple and red was just crossing the stream behind them, barely two hundred feet away. "Damm it," Brandy breathed out hard. "I told you she knows everything." "And I never doubted you." Although she had, at first. But Grandma Nelson *did* seem to be able to look anywhere in the High Hills and see what was happening. Once the two girls had upset a whole swarm of bees, and before they got halfway back, bitten and swollen, the old woman had met them with salves and a lecture. "But doesn't that mean she knows where your mom is?"

"I think Mom left the High Hills to get away from Grandma. I bet she isn't quite as magic over there."

"She's probably not magic in Laguna Beach at all. It's not a magic place." Grandma Nelson was close enough for Lisa to see she held her long gray hair in place with a twist of berry-bush. Lisa had trouble tearing her eyes away from the brightly clothed figure.

Brandy whispered in her ear. "We have to go. Now."

Lisa turned. "Okay. Follow me." She stepped through the stone, emerging on the other side, water pouring down her face. As always, none of the mothers or children or artists noticed her appear as if from nowhere.

But she was alone.

She stepped backward, wet to dry, to find her friend staring at the rock like a rabbit in front of a coyote.

Lisa laughed. "It's easy." She grabbed Brandy's arm and yanked, but once more she emerged alone. Back again, dizzy from the repeated trips, Lisa eyed Brandy's scraped knuckles. Lisa shook her gently. "You have to believe."

Brandy started to turn her head back toward her inexorably approaching grandmother, but Lisa fisted her palms and demanded, "Now. Before you can't. You have to *choose* to go." Grandma Nelson's pecan-brown eyes glittered, and if she'd had one, she could've hit the girls with a rock. Even Lisa would endure a lecture if they got caught. "Now!" she hissed, turned, and stepped through, her skin tingling like all the trips she'd ever made rolled into one.

Still no Brandy. Then her friend popped out of the water, suddenly whole.

So that's what it looked like for people who could see.

Brandy gasped, standing and staring as if she were a fish in a bowl. Lisa grabbed Brandy's hand.

"Follow me." The two wet girls plunged into the crowd, Lisa leading firmly, stopping behind a busy leathersgoods booth with a good view of the waterfall. "What do you want to do?" Lisa asked.

"We can watch for her here."

But there was so much to show Brandy! "Why don't we just run away? She can't possibly catch us."

"Don't bet anything on that. She'll follow me." And then Brandy's eyes (big as dollar coins at all of the new sights) narrowed to normal and the gold in them seemed to twinkle even here in the land of no magic. "Besides, I brought some ways to discourage her. She has to see how much I mean to do this, or I'll just be running from her the whole time." Brandy dug into her pocket and produced three stiff spiders with stone bodies and wire legs.

Lisa shook her head. "I told you the magic doesn't work here." She pointed. "And here she is."

Sure enough, Brandy's grandmother was stepping from the fountain to the boardwalk, shaking her wet shoes slowly and deliberately.

"But they always come alive for me," Brandy said, tossing the spiders gently in her palm. Her eyes didn't have any doubt at all. Brandy pulled a gold scarf shimmering with green and gray highlights from her backpack and draped it over the edge of the booth. She giggled, grabbed a black leather hat from the outside of the booth, and tucked her hair and all of its decorations up inside it. She cocked an eyebrow at Lisa. "Come on!"

Lisa swallowed a protest and followed. She was always almost-protesting around Brandy. Maybe that was why she liked her. She used a conversational voice to keep from drawing attention. "You can't just steal a hat."

Brandy didn't turn around. "I didn't. I traded."

Ignoring the unease feathering her spine with hollow spots, Lisa stayed beside her friend as Brandy crept up behind her grandmother, who predictably turned around just as Brandy dropped the spiders on the outside of her cloak. Brandy eeled away, leaving Lisa gaping as the spiders' metal legs softened and the stone bodies furred out, all three running up the red cloak. Grandma Nelson's eyes narrowed and her lips pursed tight as persimmons. She started hopping, swiping at the spiders. Instinctively, Lisa leaned in and brushed the closest one to the ground. It fell with a stone clink, its metal legs frozen in mid-scurry.

Grandma Nelson kept jumping until Lisa knocked all three of the spiders back to stone. Lisa knelt down and retrieved one, looking up into the Grandma Nelson's thoroughly disgusted visage. At least the old woman barked out, "Thank you."

"But—"

Grandma Nelson interrupted her. "Some gifts pass through the wall, at least between us born on the other side."

As if Lisa could help it that she was born here. She pulled away from a sharp tug on her arm until she recognized Brandy's long fingers. Shoving the rescued spider in her pocket, she turned and raced after her friend. Grandma Nelson could probably take care of herself, but Brandy'd never been on this side. She could get in big trouble.

As soon as their racing feet took them around a bend, Lisa leaned in toward Brandy. "So what were the spiders for? To scare her away?"

"She's not scared of spiders. They were messages, and she's scared of knowing how much I want to be

here.”

“What were they supposed to say?”

“They were supposed to tell her how bad I want,” she glanced at Lisa, “to see my mom. And how bad I want her to leave me alone.”

Lisa looked around. There was no sign of Grandma Nelson. “She didn’t get the message.” She opened her hand, which still held the one cold hard spider she’d retrieved. “I’m sorry.”

“I know,” Brandy said simply. “How could you? You aren’t one of us.”

Lisa flinched. “But I can go through the door. Most people can’t even do that.”

“Shhhhh,” Brandy held a hand to her lips. “I know. I have other stuff, too. But I don’t want to talk about it out loud, not here. Besides, we’re like sisters, right?”

Lisa breathed out. Maybe. She wanted that more than anything. “How are you going to find your momma anyway?”

Brandy shook her head. “I’ll have to feel for her. She can’t be dead. Grandma’s never said so. I think they just got in a fight. And Grandma’s too stubborn to ever forget, or lose.”

Lisa stepped aside for a double stroller full of fat twin babies with matching yellow clothes. She searched the crowd for any sign of Grandma Nelson. “Are they fighting about you?”

Brandy pushed the oversized hat up and arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know. Momma wanted to live here. I was only three. I just remember they screamed at each other for days. And I know what Grandma says now.”

A flash of purple. “She’s going to say it to you.”

Brandy craned her neck, using the two inches of height she had on Lisa to look around. “Nope. That’s not her. She went to get tea.”

Lisa swallowed hard. Didn’t Brandy see she was a younger version of her grandmother? Magic and stubborn and smart. Even though she was older than Lisa, she seemed to know less, as if the High Hills let her grow up slower, even though she was brave. What if she lost her friend? What if Brandy just needed someone to teach her to cross? “So do we follow her or do we try to find your mom?”

Brandy looked around. “I never saw so many people in one place in my life.”

Lisa decided not to explain that the town around the festival held a lot more. Not to mention the world outside the town.

Brandy swallowed hard. “Best check on Grandma.”

Good. Just in case the old woman was half as perplexed as Brandy looked. “I know just the place.”

After confirming that Grandma Nelson was, in fact, sipping some of Sal’s Simple Tea alone at a booth in the shade, Lisa showed Brandy how to shinny up the back of a sturdy art-glass booth and jump over to the stones above the waterfall. As they settled, Brandy looked uneasily down at the water door. “Are you afraid you’ll fall through?”

“I haven’t yet.” Lisa kicked at the stone so her tennis shoes bounced off, illustrating how secure their perch really was. The mixed scents of hot dogs, ketchup, beer, and stale frying grease made her wrinkle her nose. How come the junk food always smelled stronger than the stuff in the health food booths? She looked down. A well-muscled blond man in jeans and a festival T-shirt approached Grandma Nelson’s table.

“Maybe Jack’ll make her go back,” Brandy said.

Lisa shook her head. “Why would he do that? Jack’s the one who showed me the door.”

“He’s on my side. He stayed with us two winters ago, and I heard him tell Grandma she should let me come over. Said he’d watch out for me. But she skewered him for it, said I needed to stay safe till I was a lot older.”

Lisa swallowed. She’d forgotten this might be the last day she saw Jack, too. The end of summer had sucked ever since she learned about the door last year. Almost a year without magic and with homework. “Jack told me about you,” she said.

Brandy looked up at her, smiling. “Funny, he never told me about you. But he always knows the perfect thing.”

“Yeah.” It was, too. Nothing made Lisa feel better than a day with Brandy. Below them, Jack was sitting

down at the tale with Grandma Nelson. “Let’s see if we can hear what they’re saying.”

They scooted down the back of the rock. Once, Brandy’s black hat fell off and Lisa had to retrieve it—now with a wet brim—and wait for Brandy to tuck her hair back up into it. A three-foot high wall ran around the food court seating area, and the girls crept around it on their bellies, surprising a rabbit and two squirrels.

None of the people seemed to notice them.

The wall was far enough from Grandma Nelson’s table they had to strain to hear. Grandma’s voice was no better than a soft cadence, but Jack’s carried pretty well. “Just for the day. What’s the harm?”

Brandy whispered, “See?”

All their ears could pluck from the old woman’s reply was, “Stole . . . not again.”

Brandy’s eyes widened. “Did Jack know Mom?” she whispered, so quiet she must be asking herself.

Jack’s next words came quickly, with less respect than he usually gave the denizens of the High Hills.

“Suit yourself.” He got up to leave, and as he came by, he tossed an empty coffee cup on top of Brandy’s hat so it balanced and spun for a moment before falling down. He leaned over the wall to retrieve it, whispering, “She’s mad.” He could have meant angry or insane.

“So stall her,” Lisa suggested.

Jack grunted, but he turned back to sit with Grandma Nelson. His voice carried back to them, slower and almost apologetic. “It was more like liberation.”

Lisa didn’t wait to see what kind of reaction he got. She wedged under a bush and popped out behind a different low wall climbing up and over, Brandy right behind her. “Jack’s keeping her busy. What do you want to do?”

“Is there anyplace quiet? I want to see if I can feel my mom around here.”

Lisa led her almost to the other side of the festival, threading through a rapt crowd bathing in music and poetry near the lawn set aside for buskers. Without stopping, Lisa seemed to walk through a wall like the waterfall door, but really it was a thin passage between two booths (hard-carved wooden toys on the left and pottery on the right). After going ten feet through a space too narrow for Grandma Nelson to follow, Lisa stopped where the back of the booth flared inward. She peeked carefully through a little window into the pottery booth. It was busy—way too busy for anyone from the booth to even notice the two girls. “Come on—it’s OK,” she whispered.

A ladder in the rock wall with just four steps led the girls up to a sunny ledge behind the booths that Lisa knew about because Carly, the woman from the shelter, had warned her never to come here with a certain silversmith by herself. But it was just noon, he’d be busy, and besides, she wasn’t alone.

Brandy surveyed the small space. “This’ll do. I need you to just be quiet for a moment.”

They settled back against the ledge, sitting in almost identical cross-legged poses. Brandy took off the hat and shook out her hair so the beads and shells in it crackled against each other, glittering in the sun. She pulled out a small mirror with tiles glued awkwardly around the edges. She held it between loose palms, a beatific smile on her face.

“What’s that?”

“It was Mom’s. She loved little bits of anything. She used to make me necklaces and she and I used to collect stuff from the riverbank and from abandoned crows’ nests. Now, shhhhhh . . .” She closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Lisa tried to match her. She stayed with Brandy’s breath as it slowed and slowed and slowed until Lisa’s lungs screamed, and then she gulped in air while Brandy’s breath became even softer. Lisa let herself have three breaths and tried again. She wasn’t sure what she should feel, but she felt sure she was looking for something like a gentle peace. Sunshine heated the outside of her lids, making her drowsy. As her breath matched slow cadence with Brandy’s, a deep longing began to fill her, as if it were her mother who had been lost in a strange world.

“Gotcha!” Lisa’s eyes flew open to reveal Grandma Nelson’s face and one arm thrust through the window below the ledge. Brandy leaped straight up from her seated position and backed against the warm stone, pulling Lisa up after her. Brandy started toward the ladder, but Lisa hissed, “Climb!” and started clambering up the stone behind her, moving fast, finding slim handholds, praying forward momentum would get her the seven feet to where the rock started sloping gently into the hills. It did,

barely, and she pitched forward so she was on hands and knees. Brandy stood beside her as if transported up the wall. Well, maybe she was.

Below them, Grandma Nelson looked pissed off. She snarled, "Come back here now, young lady!" Brandy laughed at her and took two balls from her pocket, throwing them gently down the side of the ledge. Lisa's mouth dropped in a wide O as the balls grew wings and fluttered toward the old woman. Yellow and blue butterflies the size of Lisa's hand surrounded the balls, and then the balls were butterflies, swarming through the open window.

Grandma Nelson stepped back to avoid the onslaught of color.

Brandy tugged on her arm. "Where?"

Lisa shook her head to clear it of the magic operating here. She'd never seen anything like the butterfly balls, even in the High Hills. But she dragged her attention away and led Lisa in a quick jog up and around the rocks and along a path that ran behind the festival.

They jumped down near the silversmith's booth, startling the young blond man Lisa'd been warned about. Two booths down, they stopped behind a rack of tie-dyed dresses. "You can't just do magic here!" Lisa whispered loudly.

Brandy shrugged. "Why not?"

"Because . . . because . . . Can you teach me?"

A peal of high laughter escaped Brandy's lips. "Later. Maybe. And thanks for taking me around the back way. I'd have run directly into her if we went back down that corridor."

"Did you learn anything about your mom?"

"Just that she's alive. But I knew that. There are so many people here I couldn't get any sense of direction. But I don't think she's far." The longing in her eyes reminded Lisa of the ghostly longing she'd felt on the ledge. Brandy took off the hat and threw a long tie-dyed shawl with pink beaded fringe over her shoulders.

"I don't think it's you," Lisa commented.

As Brandy hung the shawl back up, Lisa reached for a blue sleeveless cotton dress with yellow suns all over it. She pulled it over her friend's head and frowned. "Only a little better. Maybe we need a booth that's not so retro."

"Old-fashioned." Heck, it was all new to Brandy. "Maybe you should focus on your mom. The gate closes when the festival ends, and you'll have to wait until next summer." Lisa pulled a brush out of her pocket and swiped repeatedly at her hair. So far, this wasn't even close to how she'd imagined her last festival day. "How about if I go talk to your grandmother? You can go find someplace quiet and I'll show her around the festival."

"Right. She's stronger than you are."

Lisa frowned. "Maybe not."

Brandy shook her head. "We should stay together."

There was that. Lisa sighed. "So, magic isn't working. Maybe we just need to go talk to her. Do it in a public place."

"She never just talks to me," Brandy said. "All we know how to do is fight."

Well, all she and her mom knew how to do was mumble at each other. Better than fighting, but still . . .

"Where is she, anyway? Can you tell?"

"Behind you."

Lisa turned. The old woman *was* behind her, but walking away from both girls. "What? Did she give up?"

"No. She wants more tea." A strange look crossed Brandy's face. "I think she's confused." Brandy started after her. Lisa looked at the hat left behind and Brandy walking away in the dress, her jeans and tennis shoes sticking out so she seemed like a teenage bag lady. She shook her head, but didn't have any words left to bite back. As she caught up with the blue dress, Brandy reached over and asked, "Do you have the spider?"

Lisa fished it out of her pocket. One of its legs was bent back at an odd angle. "Can I give it to her?"

Brandy shook her head. "Nope. It's my message."

“All right, then.” She dropped the spider into Brandy’s hand. She almost felt sorry for Grandma Nelson. “Let her get her tea first.”

A few minutes later they spotted her by the food court, conspicuously red and purple and way too bundled up for the heat. Lisa fished in her pocket. “I have enough for us to split a lemonade.”

Five minutes later, Brandy and Lisa, two straws, and one lemonade occupied a table. Grandma Nelson walked slowly over and sat down with a huff, sipping on a cup of Sal’s Simple Tea—with ice this time. She narrowed her eyes at the girls.

Like what? Did she think Lisa was a bug?

After the tea was half gone, she said, “You two look fine sitting there together.”

Lisa wanted to giggle. Brandy looked funny in the dress and jeans and she was sure her clothes looked a mess after being wet and dry so many times in one day.

Brandy answered by holding the spider out on her palm. It rounded and changed, waving its bent leg first and then the others, squatting as if waiting. Grandma Nelson put her hand out and the spider jumped into it. It ran up her thin arm and climbed her purple dress sleeve and her red coat and went to her ear. The old woman cocked her head, frowning. As she listened to the little spider, her frown deepened, the wrinkles around her mouth becoming chasms and ravines.

She looked at Brandy, unvoiced questions filling her dark, cool eyes.

Lisa sipped her lemonade, trying to stay small and quiet.

Brandy cleared her throat and Grandma Nelson smiled tiredly at her. She plucked the spider from her shoulder and dropped it on the table. “All right.” Before it even hit the wood, its softness started to turn, and it bounced once gently and stopped, the wire legs holding it up. Grandma Nelson said, “Jack will be right along.”

“So he does know my mom?” Brandy breathed out slowly.

Grandma Nelson put up one hand and said, “Wait,” and then folded her arms on the table, folded her head over her arms, and started snoring softly.

“So what’s that all about?” Lisa asked.

Brandy looked over at her. “Spider says I should be with you. That’s what I told her.”

Lisa grinned. “What about your mom?”

“I said that, too.” Brandy shook her head. “But mostly I said I want to be your friend.”

Well, that matched what Lisa wanted. They put their feet up and watched tanned young women tend kids dressed in fancy clothes and couples wander around with bags full of last-day bargains. A booth grilling hamburgers tortured Lisa’s stomach with the smell. What next? If they got up, would Brandy’s grandmother wake up and follow them?

A plate with fries and three burgers wafted over Lisa’s head, attached to Jack’s long arm. He sat down, his eyes twinkling. “Last day celebration. I talked Joe into making me some lunch for free.”

“Aren’t you hungry?” Lisa asked.

Jack shook his head.

The girls each took a hamburger while Brandy’s grandmother’s snores grew louder.

Jack looked tenderly at the old woman. “You two wore her out today.”

“But she never wears out!” Brandy said.

Jack shook his head. “Your mom wore her out a long time ago.”

“Where is she?” Lisa asked, still not quite buying the dead idea.

Jack shook his head. “She can’t get back to the High Hills.” He covered Brandy’s hand with his. “She’s tried. I’m sorry.”

A tear glistened in Brandy’s left eye and Lisa reached up and wiped it away. “Me, too.”

“But I’m here. I want to see her.”

Jack looked concerned, but glanced at Lisa rather than Brandy. “You might not. This place has worn her out.”

“But you do OK over here,” Lisa observed.

“But it almost destroyed your mom,” he said.

Lisa blinked at him. Her mom? “Is that why I can go through the gate?”

“That’s why you go through so easily.” He looked from Lisa to Brandy and back again. “And that’s why you two get along so well.”

“But . . . but does that make me magic? Like her?”

He laughed. “Of course you’re magic. Look, I can’t leave today. Not the last day. Go get your mom.”

She didn’t want to ask him if her mom was Brandy’s mom. Not in front of her friend. What if he said no? What if he said yes?

All the compassion in the world seemed to settle into Jack’s face, but there was steel there as well. “Go on. Tell her I asked her to come down.”

She went.

Her mom was still at the kitchen table, still in pajamas. A glorious blue and yellow sun leaped from the tiles on the table in front of her. “That’s great, Mom. You’ll get a bunch for that.”

Her mom nodded, picking up a tiny sliver of orange to highlight the stone sun’s corona. That one tiny new tile made the whole piece warmer.

Lisa headed for her mom’s closet and returned with jeans and a clean white shirt. “Mom? Can you get dressed? Jack said for you to come to the festival.”

Her mom shook her head. “You know I never go there.”

“Please? I want you to meet my friend.”

Silence seemed to stretch through minutes. “Please? I’ll help you do your hair.”

A tired sigh answered. “All right.”

Lisa helped her mom dress, brushed her hair out and put it back in a blue bow to match her eyes, and reminded her to wash the tile dust from her fingers. She stood back a bit. Her handiwork wasn’t too bad.

She took her mom through the artist’s gate. If that surprised her, it didn’t show. But her blue eyes widened as Lisa led her to the table where Jack and Brandy waited. At their approach, Grandma Nelson sat up in her seat and stared, her gaze riveted. It seemed like a lecture struggled to start on her tightly drawn lips, but as the older woman looked closely her shoulders dropped.

Brandy’s head swiveled back and forth as if she needed to see everyone at once. Lisa stepped back far enough to see both her mom and Grandma Nelson.

The last full rays of sun shone down on their faces, highlighting similar strong jaws and just slightly crooked noses. The younger woman blinked, putting a hand over her eyes as if to hide her vision. Then her hand shook, and she dropped it, and her shoulders shook, and Grandma Nelson stood up and enclosed her in a hug.

Brandy leaned into Jack, whispering, “Is that Mom?” barely loud enough for Lisa to hear.

Jack put a hand over Brandy’s slender shoulders. “Wait.”

The two women stood silently, holding each other, until Brandy’s mom stopped shaking. Jack stood and took Brandy’s hand. “Let’s leave them for a bit.”

Lisa followed them away from the food booths to stand by the waterfall door. Lisa eyed it. “Why can’t Mom go through? What happened when she tried?”

“She just ran into the rock. Tried it over and over, crying afterward. That’s what happens when people lose hope.”

Brandy grabbed Lisa’s hand. “At least you can go. You know this means we’re sisters? That’s even better than being friends.”

As Lisa stared at the water, she could smell the oak and grass of the High Hills, feel the afternoon breeze against her skin. “Yes.” She almost felt like she could fly to the High Hills and never come back.

“I think you two should stay for the last-night party,” Jack said. “Be sisters.”

Brandy smiled. “Yes. But I want to go see Mom.”

Jack grunted. “Leave her be for now. Some hurts are even deeper than yours.” He cupped Brandy’s cheek and gazed softly down at her. “You did your part. You got your grandma over here.”

Brandy nodded.

The girls wandered the booths. Brandy traded the dress for a suede coat and then a pair of high-heeled boots. It didn’t bother Lisa at all.

As night fell, a whole band of professional Celtic musicians graced the sawdust paths. Drummers

pounded from the buskers' area. Jack himself howled like a coyote from behind the wooden walls and the other maintenance people (none from the High Hills) made a big ruckus over catching him, then made him sing "Danny Boy," and Brandy stood beside him for the last chorus while Lisa clapped.

The Chamber of Commerce beer garden stopped serving anything harder than coffee or water, and revelers began fading through the doors.

The four of them found each other. Jack led them to the waterfall door. "I have to turn it off in a few minutes." Lisa's (and Brandy's!) mom stared longingly at the dancing sheet of water. Lisa spoke quietly.

"I can go through, Mom. So can you."

Lisa swore she heard fear in her mom's breath. More emotion than she'd sensed in a long time. She stepped in front of Brandy and gazed up at her mom, saying nothing, trying her best to exude confidence.

Jack spoke into the quiet waiting. "I'm going to winter in Shasta. But I can close your place up for the winter." He leaned and planted a kiss for luck on each of their cheeks in turn.

The mosaic artist handed the caretaker a key from her pocket, and took her mom's hand and her new daughter's hand. Lisa held her sister's hand. They walked forward, Brandy and Grandma Nelson tugging a little to provide encouragement.

All four of them emerged into early evening in the High Hills, tears streaming down their faces. Brandy and Lisa raced ahead, gamboling under the starlight.

"Hey, do you have any more butterfly balls?" Lisa asked.

"One." Brandy tossed it to Lisa. She threw it in the air, watching it break into fluttering dark silhouettes.

SCARS ENOUGH

Russell Davis

The soul of man is immortal and imperishable.

—Plato, *The Republic*

We shall find peace. We shall hear the angels; we shall see the sky sparkling with diamonds.

—Anton Chekov

Arizona Borderlands, Present Day

The ranch house sits on five acres with a small stable, a well, and an annual crop of tumbleweeds that cling to the wire fences when the winds rise. It's about a mile, maybe two, from an outcropping of the Chiricahua Mountains, and in the evening, the sun sets behind them, turning them into crimson and yellow giants. The view from the back porch is often spectacular, rarely disappointing.

The man remembers this view. It is a part of his everyday world.

In the high desert country of southern Arizona, it only rains a few weeks a year, and most evenings, the man can sit on his back porch in his rocking chair and sip his bourbon and watch the sun go down. The horses call to him from the pasture fence, and sometimes he brings them carrots or apples or cubes of sugar. The dogs follow him out to the fence, barking and letting the world know that this territory is theirs.

The man likes horses and dogs, but not cats and only a very few people.

The man remembers the rocking chair; he has owned it for years. He remembers the bourbon; two shots of Jack Daniels over ice is his daily allowance. More than that and he remembers too much. He knows the horses' names: Cherokee, his old paint horse, and Jug, the Tennessee walker with hooves as large as old milk crocks. He has two dogs, a keeshond he calls Stroganoff and an old mixed breed he calls Dollar.

And the sunsets and sunrises are never forgotten, each one as beautiful as the last, each one unique.

But evening memories are tricky for the man. There is something in the long shadows at the end of the day that makes his other memories more elusive, harder to grasp firmly enough to bring into clear focus.

It is easier to sit and rock and drink his bourbon and take treats to the horses and talk to the dogs—to do these things every day—than it is to force memories to come.

Easier and better, the man thinks. Memories are like scars, patterns of life branded by powerful emotions into our minds. He has scars enough. He doesn't need more memories.

He sips his bourbon and remembers something he once told his wife. She had a scar on her abdomen from a clumsy surgeon. She hated the scar and said so often. He used to tell her that scars were a *proof* of life. Signs that you were living instead of dying. Healing instead of wasting away.

She had said he was full of shit and gone back to cooking dinner. Meatloaf with barbeque sauce, mashed potatoes with gravy, and carrots cooked in brown sugar. Coffee with heavy whipping cream and pineapple upside-down cake for desert.

Those memories were easy, but bittersweet. His wife was dead, and she was going to stay dead. She was only a memory now. A ghost that only he could bring back to life. He takes another sip of his bourbon.

That was the problem with ghosts, he knew. Some ghosts were only memories, and he could sit here on his porch and think of them or not, as he chose. But some ghosts, some memories, came unbidden, and lately, there was one that came more and more often.

The man stood up and stretched—his body was old and whipcord lean and it hurt when the barometric pressure changed by more than a point or two, let alone when it rained. He looked down at his empty glass and shrugged.

The ghost would come again tonight. He knew that. Knew that nothing he could think or say or do would make any difference. He opened the door that led into the kitchen and poured himself another bourbon, picked up an apple off the counter and cut it in half. Opened the fridge and pulled out two hot dogs. He'd give the animals their treats first, then come back for the drink. Give the ice a little time to make the bourbon good and cold.

Some memories were easier to face with a stiff drink on board.

The second drink would make it easier to remember, he knew that. Would make the ghost—and the past—easier to accept.

Central Nebraska, Long Years Ago

The dirt road leading to the farmhouse is barely wide enough for a single vehicle to pass. The track is rutted and ill-used, and won't be smooth again until spring when the farmer who owns this land will run a blade over it after the spring rains have softened the dirt. The road cuts through a cornfield on either side, and this time of year, the stalks are high and brown and the leaves rattle in the night winds of autumn like papier-mâché wind chimes.

Cornfields at night are spooky and both of the young men walking the road are doing their best to conceal their fear from each other. They walk closely together and silently, dressed in black clothing and pausing from time to time to listen.

Halfway to the farmhouse, they stop again. "Are you sure about this?" Michael whispers. "Why the hell would a farmer in the middle of nowhere have that kind of thing?"

"Hell yes, I'm sure," Jake says. "He was in Second Time Pawn trying to make a deal on 'em."

"Why?" Michael presses. "Look at all the damn corn he's got. He'll be able to catch up come harvest time, and that can't be more than a week or two away."

"Corn prices are in the tank," Jake replies. "There isn't a farmer in the state who isn't hurting and the harvest isn't going to save a one of 'em. Bout the best they can hope for is to hang on until next year, and most won't be able to do that."

"And so you figure . . ." Michael's voice trails off.

"Look," Jake says, "he had two gold coins, pretty as you please, with him. He said he had forty-eight more. A total of fifty. Said they were called Double Eagles from the 1800s."

"And we're going to break into his house and steal them?"

Jake nods. "Yes, then sell them and get the hell out of here."

"To where?" Michael asks.

“West,” Jake says. “Colorado, maybe, or Nevada. Who cares, so long as we can get out of *Nebraska*?”

Michael nods. Jake was right. They couldn’t stay here anymore—there wasn’t anything left for them, no jobs, no friends, no nothing. It was as close to the blasted landscape of hell as he could imagine. “All right,” he says. “But let’s keep it simple, okay? No fucking around.”

Jake grins. “None whatsoever. We go in, get the coins, and get out. Farmers sleep hard anyway. He probably won’t even roll over.”

“Farmers sleep hard?” Michael asks. “How do you figure?”

“Ever worked on a farm?” Jake asks. “It’s a ball-buster of a job.” He looks around once more, then adds, “Let’s get moving. I want to hop the train out of Kearney before daylight.”

Michael nods and follows as Jake continues down the road. Jake doesn’t look back. He doesn’t need to. Michael is his best friend, his brother, and where one went, the other would follow. That’s what they’d promised each other.

One night, drunk, Michael had said, “Even to the gates of hell itself!”

Jake had nodded solemnly. “If only to steal the devil’s pitchfork and tweak his nose.”

Ranch darkness, desert ranch darkness, is different than any darkness the man knows. Growing up amid the cornfields of his youth, the sky was high and distant, the wind a constant melody of leaves. Here, the sky is so close that stars have halos and moonlight silhouettes the mountains. The wind whispers and swirls. The night is full of ghosts.

The man leans back in his rocking chair and sips his coffee. Ghosts are the real problem. He knows that as sure as he knows that *his* ghost will come back tonight. Time does funny things to a man all alone, getting older and remembering. The way those memories will come back, sudden and clear and focused. He had thought the past was gone, behind him and forgotten.

It wasn’t. And the ghost would come again tonight to remind him. The ghost of the boy he had left behind.

Looking back, he had been a troubled kid. There was no one at home, not really, and other than get into trouble, there wasn’t much else to do. Mostly what he had wanted was to escape. He dreamed of quiet ranches with horses and dogs, maybe running some stock, going into town on a Saturday night for dinner. It had been a good dream, damn it, and he’d achieved it all and then some. A wife. A family. The angry boy he had once been was no more than a memory now. That anger had been blunted by growing up hard, working hard . . . and trying to forget.

Long ago, he had thought that if he ran fast enough, far enough, worked hard enough, the past wouldn’t matter. But he’d been wrong. The past did matter and time had a way of catching up to a man. Sooner or later, everyone paid for their sins.

The ghost was here to pay him back for his sins.

That much he knew for certain.

He sipped his coffee again and waited in the quiet. It didn’t matter where he was and the stars were beautiful. He decided to stay out a while longer.

The ghost, he knew, would find him.

The farm is silent, dark and from the second floor the sounds of heavy snoring can be heard. Jake grins and whispers, “See what I mean?”

“That’s a hell of a racket he’s making,” Michael replies. “We could drive a truck through here and he wouldn’t hear us.”

“Probably not. Now let’s get busy and find those coins.” He looks around the kitchen, which has a small mudroom to one side where they’d entered. “You go upstairs—*quietly*—and check around the rooms. Save the room where they’re sleeping for last. We don’t want to go in there unless we have to. I’ll check the downstairs.”

Michael nods and the two boys moves like ghosts through the house. Jake keeps one ear open for the sounds of the farmer or his wife waking up, heard Michael’s near silent steps on the stairs. With any luck,

the coins would be as easy to find as the man's dogs had been to quiet. A handful of soup bones had seen to their friendliness and their silence.

The house is decorated in a sparse style: old pictures on the walls, a long well-worn sofa and chair with a table in the living room. The television is an old one, with rabbit-ear antennas and probably black-and-white to boot. These aren't people who live extravagantly in the best of times, let alone now. A pang of guilt shoots through Jake's mind, but there was no helping it. He *had* to get out of this place. The time of his life, *his* time, was slipping through his fingers the longer he bummed around and did nothing.

Above him, the farmer continues snoring and the ceiling creaks as Michael walks carefully from room to room, searching likely places for the coins. Jake finishes searching the main floor of the house and meets Michael coming down the stairs.

"You find anything?"

"Nothing," Michael says. "If the coins are here, they've got to be in his room."

"What do you mean 'if'?" Jake hisses. "I told you I heard him talking about them."

"This guy doesn't have two nickels, I bet," Michael says. "There's nothing here." He shakes his head.

"Let's blow this place."

"No!" Jake says, grabbing him by the arm. "The coins are here and we'll find them. We'll just have to look in his room."

"Are you nuts? What if he wakes up?"

"He won't," Jake insists. "Even if he does . . ." He opens his coat and removes the handgun. "I'll keep him quiet."

"Oh, damn, man. Where the hell did you get that?"

"Got it off a guy," Jake says. "Now come on and let's get those coins and get out of here. He probably won't even wake up."

For a minute, he thinks Michael was going to say no, maybe even run away. His face is pale in the dim light, an oval moon with dark, shadowed eyes. Finally, he nods. "All right, but put the gun away. If he wakes up, we split, okay?"

Jake nods. "Sure, man, whatever."

They turned and make their way back up the stairs, feet quiet on the risers, while above them, the farmer sleeps on, unaware.

Full dark had descended on the desert when the man finally goes inside. He refills his coffee, then steps into the living room and puts another log into the wood-burning stove. Desert nights are cool, but the stove would keep the house warm through the whole winter.

For a time, he simply watches the flames and sips his coffee, waiting. He knows that if he goes to bed, the ghost will come for him *after* he falls asleep. That was how it always worked. If he stays up, he'll be able to confront it head-on, deal with the thing, deal with the past once and for all.

He leans back in his favorite chair—an old, wooden-armed, heavy-padded monstrosity that he refuses to get rid of—and waits.

Outside, night birds call hunting cries and occasionally, a horse would neigh or a dog would bark. The wind would sing against the window or over the top of the chimney and echo into the room. He *wants* this confrontation, he realizes. He'd wanted it most of his life, and he'd avoided it, too.

On the nights when he'd woken, sweating and afraid, gasping for breath, and his wife would ask him what was wrong, he *knew*, but he had said . . . nothing. He blamed it on a bad dream or a leg cramp or a noise in the house. Anything to avoid telling her the truth.

Anything to avoid facing the truth.

But the truth had always been there and he would lay awake at night and think about it and know that the dream wasn't a dream, that his past was very much a dead thing, reaching out to touch him, to remind him.

And then, three weeks ago, the ghost came for the first time.

The ghost of the boy he'd left behind. An insubstantial shade, a wisp of white in the darkness of his

bedroom, but an all-too-familiar shape. His first reaction had been to scream—long and loud, a mournful wail of recognition.

Night after night it went on, always with him waking as the ghost appeared at the foot of his bed, reaching out its placating hands—which grew more substantial and solid with each passing minute—as if to say, “Why?”

The ghost wanted . . . deserved, the man corrects himself . . . an explanation. A revelation. A truth. The man knows there was no revelation and the truth was a shoddy thing indeed.

But tonight he would wait. Tonight, he would face the past and put it away forever.

Jake eases open the door to the farmer’s room one slow inch at a time. Behind him, he could hear Michael’s shallow breath. On the far side of the room, light from a small window shines down on the bed where the farmer and his wife sleeps, wrapped in heavy homemade blankets, their breathing even and calm.

Without a word, Jake slips into the room and Michael follows close behind. Neither boy speaks as their eyes scan the room for likely hiding places. The sparsely furnished room offers few choices. Two nightstands, a dresser, and a closet.

Jake touches Michael’s shoulder and points at the dresser. Sitting on its surface is a large object, a box. Too big to be a jewelry box. The other boy nods.

They cross the room and Jake stops in front of the dresser. Closer now, he sees that the box is made of old wood and has a simple latch. There is no lock. He grins at Michael and opens the lid. Inside, the coins gleam dully in the dim light. “Bingo!” he whispers. “Let’s go.”

He picks up the box—it is heavier than it looks—and tucks it under one arm.

Both boys turn to slip back out of the room when they hear the distinct *click!* of shotgun barrels. “Don’t either one of you move a damn inch,” the farmer says.

“Awww, shit,” Jake breathes.

“We . . . we’re not moving,” Michael says.

“Put up your hands,” the farmer tells them. “Nice and easy.”

“We thought you were asleep,” Jake says. “Should’ve been simple.”

“I fake sleep these days better than I actually sleep,” the farmer replies. He climbs out of bed in a smooth motion. “I’ve been listening to you two creep through my house since you came in the mudroom door. Now put up your damn hands.”

Michael shivers as he realizes that not only were they caught, going to jail, or going to get shot, but that his dreams of escape, the dreams he had never shared with anyone—not even Jake—were going up in smoke.

The farmer is still standing next to the bed, the twin barrels of the shotgun pointing at them. He repeats himself for a third time. “Put your hands up. I’m not asking you boys again.”

“I can’t,” Jake says. Michael feels his elbow nudge him gently in the ribs. “I’ve got the box under my arm.”

“Then set it down, slowly, on the dresser and put them up.”

Michael knows what he has to do, knows what Jake is going to do. He wants out of this room almost as badly as he wants out of Nebraska. The only question is if he could make it.

Jake turns and starts setting the box on the dresser. Michael senses the tightening of his muscles as he prepares to heave the box at the farmer—the box with the coins and his future!—and he moves without thinking.

He stumbles sideways, his body slamming into Jake’s, and grasps the box.

“Don’t move!” the farmer yells.

Michael keeps moving, trying not to think about what he is doing, how scared he is.

“What the—?” Jake manages even as he feels himself being propelled toward the farmer by Michael’s shove.

The shotgun fires, the blast so loud in the small room that Michael’s ears ring. He doesn’t look back as he dives out the door, still clutching the box in his hands.

He hears Jake's body hit the floor, the farmer's cursing, his wife's scream of panic. She must have still been asleep the whole time, he thinks wildly. He hits the floor with a grunt and scrambles to his feet. Behind him, he hears the sound of the farmer coming after him, and he knows he can't stop moving. He runs for his life, going down the stairs three at a time, and feels the pellets pass his head as he clears the last three steps. The sound of the shotgun in the stairwell is even louder the second time.

"Goddamn it!" the farmer shouts.

"Bill!" Michael hears the woman call. "Get in here and help me with this boy! I think he's dead."

Michael never looks back. He runs out of the house, past the dogs and the fields . . . and he keeps on running.

He runs until there was no running left to do and then he hides himself away, with a new name in the high desert of Arizona.

But in his mind he knows the truth: he'd left a friend behind—had *caused* a friend's death. And he'd never really stopped running.

The man—his name is Donner now, Donner Smith—awakes in the chair sometime after midnight. The room is still quite warm from the stove. His eyes adjust and he sees the ghost. It is on the far side of the room, waiting calmly, not moving or making a sound.

"Hello, Jake," Donner says. "I knew you'd come."

He hears the reply in his mind. "*I bet you did, Michael.*"

"I'm not Michael anymore. Donner is the name I use now. Been using it a long time."

"*It's a cheap costume. A shield to hide behind.*"

"You're right," Donner says. "But it's still mine. I earned the name. I've earned the right to some peace, damn it. I've lived a good life."

"*Earned?!*" Jake's voice wails in his ear. "*You have earned nothing! You left me to die.*"

Donner shakes his head. "No, Jake. I left you to live. I'm sorry."

"*You shoved me in front of you, shoved me toward that crazy old farmer with his shotgun and took the money and ran!*"

Jake's ghost floats closer and now Donner can see that his eyes are glaring and angry. What Jake said was true enough.

"I won't deny it," Donner says. "You'd have done the same."

"*Never!*" the ghost declares. "*We were a team!*"

Donner shakes his head. "We were boys, Jake. Young boys without a lick of sense between us. What were we thinking, sneaking into that farmer's house to steal his only valuables to finance *our* dreams?"

"*We were thinking of escape, remember? But only one of us got to go. You, Michael! You got to leave, while I got to stay behind and die. Gasping like a fish on that farmer's bedroom floor. And it was cold . . . so cold.*"

"Why now, Jake?" Donner asks. He feels strangely unafraid. What difference does it make what Jake's ghost wants or can do to him? His life here is over, his wife gone, his kids grown up. Likely, only the horses and the dogs would miss him, and then only until someone else fed them.

"*Because I couldn't manifest until you were ready,*" Jake says.

"Ready for what?" Donner asks.

"*To face the past . . . and to die for your sins!*"

Donner shrugs and gets to his feet. "All right, Jake," he says. "Then I guess I'm ready. You don't frighten me and the past is something that I've had to live with so long that death will be a welcome relief. I'm sorry for what I did, sorry for what happened."

"*Sorry?!*" Jake wails. "*Sorry won't bring me back to life, won't give me the chance you took from me.*"

"No, it won't," Donner admits. "Nothing will. I did all I could to make it right, but you may as well have been haunting me every night of my life, Jake." He puts another log in the stove and pumps the bellows a couple of times. "I guess the truth is that I'm glad you finally showed up. I'm glad I got to say I'm sorry to you face-to-face."

“What did you do with the coins?” Jake asks. *“Before I touch you, before I bring you into this cold place, that’s what I want to know. What did you do with the coins?”*

“The only thing I could,” Donner says. “After you’d died, and I got out of Nebraska on a freight car in Kearney, I took work at a ranch over in Colorado.”

“You spent them, didn’t you?” Jake accuses. *“Every last one!”*

Donner shakes his head. “No, Jake, I didn’t. I couldn’t. I could barely touch them because they felt like blood in my hands.”

“What did you do with them?”

Donner shrugs again. “For a long time, nothing. I kept them hidden away. About a year after you died, I took ten of them and mailed them to your mom—enough to pay for your funeral and then some. The rest . . . I mailed back to the farmer.”

“You . . . you gave them back?” Jake asks. *“Why? I died for nothing, then!”*

“Jake,” Donner says, sitting down in his chair again. He picks up his coffee, realizes it had gone cold and sets it back down. “Jake, you died because we were young and stupid. You died because I shoved you before you could shove me. You died because a trigger-happy farmer was trying to protect what was his and he was just as scared as we were. You died for a lot of different reasons, but the coins were . . .” his voice trails off as he notices Jake’s ghost growing slowly dimmer, less substantial.

“They were what?” Jake asks. Now his voice, which before had been full of ice and rage, is more subdued, quiet.

“Just props,” Donner finishes. “Like my name all these years. The coins were just part of the setting.”

“Props?” Jake asks, fading faster.

Donner looks at the ghost of his old friend. His dead friend. “I think maybe that even if the coins hadn’t existed, Jake, we’d have found something else, somewhere else. A wallet full of money. A jewelry box filled with rings. It doesn’t matter, my friend.”

“My death doesn’t matter?”

Donner shakes his head as he realizes that Jake’s ghost hadn’t come of its own will. It had come of his. “Everything happens as it’s supposed to, Jake,” he says. “Your death, the coins, my name. We’re all just players on God’s stage.”

The ghost says nothing, but Donner hears its soft, sad wail of mourning.

“Go back to your rest, Jake,” Donner whispers. “Everyone goes in their time. Sooner or later, everyone pays for their crimes.”

The ghost fades, swirls and then vanishes. Exhaustion washes over Donner as he leans back in his chair. It had taken him too many years to realize the truth. A lot of wasted time in there, years of guilt and self-doubt and recrimination. He’d paid back the coins, then kept on paying long after everyone involved had moved on or died. He’d paid with his *soul*.

For the first time since that night, Donner felt himself truly relax. The debt was paid. He had scars enough to prove it.

The fire pops once and outside, he hears the horses call to each other.

Tomorrow will be new and different, he thinks to himself as he drifts into sleep. Tomorrow, he’ll move on with whatever remained of his life.

Sleep was coming fast now, and one final bit of sudden knowledge came to him. In his life, he’d been almost as much of a ghost as Jake, he’d been almost as dead.

Now, finally, he could live with the scars. His last apology to a friend long dead was enough to make life, whatever it would hold, possible again.

CONCERNING A GAMBIT OF FRATERNITY

Steven E. Schend

“Cyrus is bringing his new acolyte. Hungarian lad, I’m told. Be sure to clue him into the scheme of things,

will you, Sam?"

Oscar picked up his valise and his silver-headed cane from the floor of the cab as Sam leaned forward to pay the driver. Oscar stepped onto the curb, his dark suit still impeccably pressed and dust-free despite the hot summer day. His white hair and pale skin stood out sharply in the bright morning sun.

"Yeah, sure, Oscar. Want me to put a scare into the rookie, or just show him the score?" Sam was dressed more sensibly for the weather in his loose-fitting tank top and cargo shorts. Tattoos covered much of his exposed flesh save his neck and face. Sunglasses, a full but neatly trimmed beard, and loose shoulder-length hair made Sam an unlikely associate on the face of things. Still, he fell in with the older man, stepping ahead to place his palm flat on the door ahead of both of them. Sam whispered a few phrases and grabbed the door handle, turning to the old man and nodding. "Ready."

"The basics will suffice, though I trust your discretion on how you communicate them to the boy." Oscar winced at the loud traffic noise of downtown Manhattan, then breathed out slowly. "I shall be glad to put this cacophony behind us, at least for the day." He traced a pattern on the sidewalk with the silver tip of his cane, then let the cane tip drag as he stepped forward and crossed the threshold. No passersby seemed to notice, but Sam saw that the slight silver trail of energy linked the Wall Street sidewalk on one side of the door . . . with the snug interior of a pub.

Sam smiled, hearing rain on the roof and noting the pub's windows were darker. The smells of old wood, lingering smoke, and a menagerie of spirits welcomed him. He nodded to the man behind the bar, the only other person in the place, who returned Sam's nod. The barkeep smiled at Oscar and said, "Early this time," as he continued to wipe out a beer mug. "Good. Your tab or his, this time, Mr. Kharm?"

"I believe it is mine this time, Colin. Is everything in readiness?" Oscar walked briskly down the length of the bar toward the doors at the back of the pub. His cane neither made a sound nor rose off the floor. The glistening line of silver continued unbroken.

"Aye, sir. Just about. Your room's ready, goblets and all." Colin gestured toward the door on Oscar's right, tucked into the shadowed corner of the pub. "Just let me know when you'll be wanting your meals, and I'll have 'em ready for you."

Oscar said, "Colin, thank you. I hope this hasn't inconvenienced you greatly. I'll start with my usual, please."

"Not a'tall, sir," Colin said, "The folk hereabouts can handle the occasional closed pub. Glad to be of service to you and to the guilds, sir. Least we could do, what with you wizards keeping things a-keel for us."

Oscar smiled, and then turned to his aide. "Sam, make sure Cyrus brings no tricks with him this time, hmm? I'll meet him in the chamber." With that, Oscar disappeared into the back room.

Sam went back to the door, spit into his hands, and rubbed them together. After a moment, he traced a series of sigils around the door frame and threshold.

Colin watched and asked, "You're not putting spells on me regulars, are you, Sammie?"

Sam snorted, finished tracing a sigil in the bottom right corner of the door frame, and stood up. "Nah, just doing the bidding of our own, eh? Those won't last long, but they keep him from bringing anything hostile in nature with him, other than what's agreed and allowed, by compact and creed."

"The magus won't like that, laddie," Colin chuckled, "but it serves him right. Took me three weeks to clean up after the fire he started last time he were here."

Sam sat down at the bar and extended his left arm. The two men gripped each other's forearm and shook. "Damn. Good to see you, Colin. How've you been? And how's Mae?"

"We're both doin' fairly. Cleaner living than you've been up to, boyo, apparently. What's all this ink doing under your skin? Rings of sigils around your neck, holly around one arm, oak around t'other. You selling your skin to advertisers over there across the pond?" Colin slid a pint glass under the tap and poured Sam an ale. "Or is this something getting in touch with the primal?"

Sam rolled his eyes and said, "Yes and no. They're just my protections. Can't be too careful with this business, for myself and for others. Besides, my power animals suggested this was the best way to manifest my vows and what I've learned."

"Showy, to be sure. What's with the antlers across the back there?" Colin leaned forward, and Sam

shrugged back his shirt to show a bit more of his back. Colin asked, "Is that what I'm thinking it is back there?"

"Most people don't get the significance, man. It's an icon, yeah. A mixed aspect of whom I worship—Herunos is Herne the Hunter and Cernunnos the Horned God as One." Sam explained in low tones. "He's got my back—literally—and I've got his in a few ways. It's . . . complicated."

Colin whistled and then chuckled. "You'd best be careful, making deals with those old gods, lad. They bite, you know . . . and not just for messing with their names."

"Believe me, I know." Sam replied. "Still, I've learned quite a bit since we last saw each other. Enough to fend off the Wild Hunt from consuming everyone present at the last Burning Man festival."

Colin's eyes widened, and he whispered, "Good on you, then." Colin slid the ale in front of Sam, and raised a glass of his own. They clinked glasses as Colin toasted. "To thee and thine from me and mine, may the world stay strong beneath us, the heavens stay light above us, and magic and mystery work among us all, in health, happiness, and—"

The pub door swung open and slammed against the wall, interrupting the toast. The door was held open by a bow-backed old man in a black duster. A gnarled oak cane dragged along in his right hand. The cane trailed an energy ribbon of red, and this interacted immediately with the silver line left by Oscar's cane. The two lines now intermingled and bled into the stones and mortar of the pub floor as intricate Celtic knotwork.

Cyrus fixed Colin and Sam with scowling eyes, and muttered, "Drinking as ritual. Decadent. Wasteful. Frivolous. *Pointless*." He snapped his head around, realized he stood alone, and barked out, "Andor!" As if on cue, a skinny young man, clad in a black duster similar to his elder's, stepped in through the pub door. Sam looked past them through the doorway and saw the sun was setting on Rome. The young man couldn't be more than nineteen, and his eyes darted everywhere but on the old man. In his right hand, he carried a briefcase.

Colin cleared his throat and set down his drink. Looking the old man in the eye, he said, "Bring no mischief on us, and be welcome, Magus." He turned and nodded to the younger man. "Acolyte." The boy seemed surprised to be acknowledged, and he flinched when the old man snatched the briefcase from him angrily. The pair moved into the pub slowly, letting the door close behind them. The old man glared at his assistant, who looked around the tavern, then shook his head.

Cyrus turned back to Colin. "Is he back there, then?" Cyrus growled. "Vow you've not contrived some manner of revenge for past slights."

"No vows are necessary," said Colin, "beyond those long ago sworn."

Sam interjected, "We're on the up-and-up. Can the same be said of you?"

"No picking fights, Sammie," Colin added. "You'll find all is ready, Cyrus, once you've settled accounts for damages and drinks from last time. If not, you go hungry and thirsty today."

"Bother me not with trifles, innkeeper," Cyrus said. "Andor, deal with them and make sure he sends back proper food and drink immediately!" With that, the crooked man lurched back into the back room. "Always a pleasure, Cyrus!" Sam called after him.

"You got some trickster spirit in you now, Sam?" Colin asked. "Only reason I'd think you'd be crazy enough to provoke him."

"Maybe . . . or maybe I just think he's always been a blowhard who needs to be reminded his shit stinks like the rest of ours."

Andor gasped, and his hands worked furiously, his brow angry and furrowed. His coat fell open to reveal an ornately stitched robe of midnight blue cloth.

Without turning around, Sam said, "Finish that spell, and we'll be picking your bones up from the floor, boy."

"It's true, lad." Colin said, gesturing him toward a barstool. "The only casting allowed in this pub must be benevolent in nature. Doing otherwise gives you a nasty backlash, as Cyrus was reminded last time he was here. Even if that weren't true, you're outclassed. Best come and drink with us, instead." Colin slid a pint of ale in front of a stool. "I'm Colin, he's Sam, and you're Andor, right?"

"Yes," the boy replied in a thick accent. "Why are you not in ritual garb? Are these rites not sacred and

powerful, those the wizards work tonight?"

Colin and Sam looked at each other and grinned.

"Andor, have *you* got a lot to learn . . ." Sam clapped him on the back, causing him to spill his first sip of ale.

As always, the room was snug, barely fitting the square table and four chairs, one on each side. The niches set in the walls held candles and crystals in accordance to the cardinal points of north, south, east, and west. Cyrus grunted his approval that all had been cleansed and purified for their ritual. With his entrance, the red and silver knotwork spread quickly across the floor and up the walls and ceiling, adding more light.

"So." Cyrus said. "Been a while." The vulturelike Magus took the chair to the left of the door, opposite Oscar who sat to its right.

"Yes, it has." Oscar replied. "We play for another cycle of fifty moons."

"I still think we should push the True Game—force the Paradigm Shift."

"Of course you do. You and your Cabal have always pushed to upset the apple cart. The world's not ready yet, Cyrus, and you know it."

"Exactly. Pushing our agenda foments more chaos, which leads to more magic, and thus we help heal Gaia all the sooner. Why can't you accept that?"

"Because it's brutal and it's wrong," Oscar sighed. "We await yet more signs before it is Magic's time in the sun . . . and you know it. Don't force me to rally the other guilds just to keep you in check, Cyrus."

"You and the Vanguard don't wield that kind of influence anymore. Stop trading on past glories and make your first move."

"Pushing our position ahead too soon only weakens Magic by tipping our hand and exposing us to the other Paradigms and their agents."

"Science and Religion are too wrapped up in their own squabbles to notice what we work. They've not noticed the Game's influence in all these centuries . . ."

". . . and we have to keep it that way until they cannot affect our work." Oscar rubbed his face in frustration, put his hands on the table and stared across it. The surface glowed faintly in crimson and silver. "All the guilds—we've all worked together over the centuries to keep magic alive. Why cling to our differences now, when we're all so close to the Shift?"

"Because while Magic is Change, Man is Stubborn." Cyrus cackled at his own joke. "We'll never all unite, Oscar. The guilds will *never* become one. Settle for what we've always had—common foes and the Game. We are fellows in Magic. Let us work at dividing our enemies . . . together."

"I had to try, cousin," Oscar said. "After all, we used to be friends . . . family."

"Long dead and done, *cousin*," Cyrus replied. "All we share now are common enemies and Magic. Now start the blasted Game, before we lose the alignment."

Oscar opened his valise and gestured. Silver and white chess pieces floated up onto the tabletop and arrayed themselves into place. Cyrus performed a similar feat with his red and black pieces. The two men placed their palms on the tabletop and muttered a low, shared incantation. The board, pieces, and the red-and-silver knotwork all around the room pulsed in response.

After a breath, Oscar moved a pawn . . .

"These things'd go smoother if the Players liked each other," Colin muttered.

Andor said, "Emotions can fuel magics, and hate is strongest."

Colin shook his head. "Boy, you'd not say that if you'd ever been in love."

"He also said none of you respect the Art as we do. If you would recognize his—"

Sam sighed and interrupted Andor. "Carl told me they used to be like brothers, until Gretel."

"How dare you reveal your master's private business so openly?" Andor whispered, his eyes darting toward the back of the pub.

Sam rolled his eyes and asked, "You ever meet her, Colin?"

"Yeah, once, when I was just a kid. She was like a movie star who loved you like a grandmum all in one."

She was beauty, through and through. Never knew what she saw in Cyrus, though . . .”

“Perhaps she respected his power and sought to honor him by sharing their lives together? Breed more powerful mages for the coming Shift?” Andor chimed in, his tone louder than necessary, as was his slamming his pint glass on the bar.

“Okay, chief, we’re cutting you off,” Sam said, jokingly pulling Andor’s pint away from him on the bar. “That might’ve been Cyrus’ reason, but the way I heard it she fell in love with him when he got injured for all their sakes.”

Andor asked, “You should not open secrets like this! The master will be . . .”

Colin interrupted, “Secrets aired here are secrets kept, boy. Remember that. There’s no danger in speaking of things past or learning more about your *master* .”

Andor said, “Truly?” He seemed shocked, and then smiled, a student eager to show off. “This place is very fascinating. Very old, well-kept. No dust or cobwebs anywhere. Did you know you have an infestation of . . .”

Colin yelled, “Shut it, you!” He glared at Andor before turning his back and retrieving the steaks off the grill behind him. He put together two full plates, set them onto a platter, and took that back to the Gambit room without a word.

Sam held his finger to his lips until Colin was gone before saying, “Never point out when you notice Helpers. They might feel the need to leave then, and these have been here for at least nine generations of Colin’s family.”

“Ah.” Andor said, “I am sorry. This is my gift—to notice the presence of hidden things and creatures. It is why the Magus brought me along. I have never heard them called Helpers before.”

“Well, the Brits have a unique relationship with fey creatures. They’re not as dark as the lot you’ve got among the Carpathians, though they can be nasty as all hell if you piss them off. Leave some food and they’re friends for lifetimes; insult them, and you’ve a vendetta for three. Which is why . . .” Sam strained to refill their pints by stretching over the bar, making him pause mid-sentence. “. . . we’re going to talk about you now. Where’re you from? What’s your family do?”

“I am from Eger. My family grows Kadarka grapes and makes wine.” Andor almost sound apologetic about this, his voice softening.

Colin reappeared as he said this, “Really? You and me’ll have to talk about getting some of that *egri bikaver* for me pub, but only if it’s the good stuff.”

Andor snapped, “It is the best! Why, people seek—” His face reddened and his voice dropped again to a whisper. “This is so strange. I expected to meet other mages. I was told to be on my guard at all times. I did not expect to discuss commerce.”

“Oh, who said we weren’t mages?” Colin asked, wiping a beer glass while letting Andor see that no other hand supported the bottom of the glass. With a nod from Colin, the beer glass floated up and in its place on the bar shelves. Only then did Andor notice that Colin’s right sleeve was pinned up at his shoulder.

“My apologies, mas—er, Colin. I meant no slight, sir,” Andor blushed. “I am confused. I do not know what purpose I serve here for the Magus.”

Sam said, “Our purpose out here is to keep *them* from being disturbed. Centuries past, this took more bodyguarding than now. For as long as I’ve been doing it, the toughest job is keeping those two on task and not attacking each other.”

“Remember ’91?” Colin snickered, and Sam slammed his fist on the bar. Both men shouted, “Game be damned—I’m going to eat your eyes!”

Andor gawped at these giggling men. Others had warned him the tavern was no place for the unwary and to expect all sorts of mischief. He didn’t think this was what they meant. “Um, sirs, I want to take my duties seriously. Why do you not?”

Sam wiped a tear out of his eye and smiled at Andor. “Kid, you’re young. How many other guild members and masters have you met yet?”

Andor said, “You men are the only ones I have met outside the Cabal.”

“OK, here’s the deal, kid,” Sam said. “There’s between nine and seventeen guilds of wizardry and magic

still around from the old days. You and I belong to only two of them. Colin here's a member of a third, and they're the sanest ones—they provide safehouses and neutral meeting places for the rest of us. Magic's been beaten down for so long, we've all of us got to band together to fight against the oppressive paradigms of Science and Religion. They've both abused their time on the Wheel, and when our time comes, I'm sure someone from one or more of the guilds will make some trouble. But until then, we work together on the big stuff. And the Game's a big part of that."

"How?" Andor asked, taking a big gulp of ale. "What exactly is this Game?"

"Lad," Colin asked, "didn't anybody tell you what was going on here?" Andor shook his head and all three sighed simultaneously.

Sam said, "Leave it to Cyrus to keep him as much in the dark as possible. Andor, watch that screen there. The Seers Society handles interguild communications and this channel only airs the Game and its fallout." The TV at one corner of the bar lit up and Andor could see a computer graphic representation of a chess board. Red had claimed one silver pawn. In a split screen newscast, a report talked about EU representatives embroiled in morality scandals.

Colin said, "Our boys in the back room are channeling a lot of power from their respective groups and allies to power that Game. We play the Game every fifty moons, or roughly every four years or so—like the Magic Olympics. Silver represents Science in this game, and Red represents Religion. Oscar and Cyrus subtly manipulate the existing powers to keep them at each other's throats and off balance. Then, when we're ready to bring Magic back into the mainstream reality, they won't really be able to stand against us." Colin gestured with his rag, "Now watch Oscar's move here and how the ticker responds in either immediate news or future portents."

Oscar moved his knight into position to challenge the red bishop.

Foresight Report: Another sex scandal crops up among the Catholic dioceses in the northeastern United States.

Cyrus moved his bishop back to its original position.

Seers' TV: Church attendance rises in Europe over the next four months.

Oscar moves the knight again into Red territory but not immediately threatening any other pieces.

Oraclevision: Oil and gasoline prices rise, but economic indicators suggest it will be a banner year for auto manufacturers.

Cyrus grumbled, "You're playing too defensively, Oscar. Be aggressive, or else people might start to notice the Science end of things going soft. You don't want a repeat of those silly arguments undermining evolution again, do you?"

Oscar smiled, "That weak-headed argument weakens the credibility of both paradigms equally. It's quiet, yet effective. Remember what happens when the Game gets too aggressive? Do you really want more Taliban, another Cold War, or the return of the Inquisition?"

"Oh shut up, fool," Cyrus snapped. "They did most of those things on their own with no help from the Game."

"Iran-contra." Oscar said, with a smirk.

Cyrus shrugged and grinned. "All I did was manipulate the guilt to make them make some mistakes and they undid themselves. Bet neither one of us could divine where the Game influenced the current mess anymore. I'm still not sure if that numbskull in the White House responds to Faith or Control."

"Depends on the day and the stars," said Oscar, motioning with his hand.

"Don't rush me . . . I'll move when I'm ready," Cyrus snipped.

"Andor, the sheer volume of what the Cabal *doesn't* teach you staggers my imagination!" Sam howled.

"You have got to get a pirated signal for Games Past, if only to see where the guilds have secretly influenced things in the past."

"How long have the Magus and your master been Players?" Andor asked.

"Okay, Oscar's the leader of our group, but we don't call him Master. That's a little too twelfth century for us." Sam laughed, then continued. "All the guilds play Games on local levels, winners playing other

guild winners up to the Great Game by the fiftieth moon. Oscar's been the Vanguard's Player for five Great Games now. His dad, Simon Kharm, holds the record with nine Great Games in the twentieth century—he was the Vanguard's Player from 1936 through 1979.”

Colin elbowed Andor and said, “Guess which major events came from the Games, Andor—the *Titanic* sinking, Jesse Owens winning Olympic gold in Berlin 1936, King Edward's abdication, or the Enron collapse?”

Andor shrugged. “I am Hungarian, and most of that makes no sense to me. All of them?”

“Nope,” Sam said. “Just the first two. The *Titanic* sinking undermined some faith in Science, while the other shattered some people's faith in Aryan superiority. Most times, they manage to screw things up without any help from either side.”

“Why do we play the Games again?” Andor asked as he held up his empty pint glass for a refill.

“The world runs on three reality paradigms to keep the planet—Gaia—healthy and her people moving forward. Since the rise of sentient life, reality conforms to Religion, Science, or Magic as the drive for an age. It's been locked out of Magic a long time now. Religion ran reality through the Dark Ages. The Enlightenment brought Science to the forefront. Now, most people believe reality is set by proof and reason.” Sam had affected a stuffy British accent for his lecture, and both Andor and Colin snickered. “Magic should have taken over in the late nineteenth century with the rise of spiritualism. The forces of Science wouldn't relinquish reality, just as the Inquisition refused to give up ground to Reason. The Game as it is played now was invented back in Elizabethan times, though variants and types of Great Games existed all throughout human history.”

“All right, all right,” Andor babbled, the ale gone to his head. “But why just manipulate the other sides?” Colin smiled. “Because if people notice there are other ways of thinking and seeing reality after they've been let down by Science or Religion, the Shift comes naturally and more smoothly.”

“You really want to force a gambit of my queen's rook? Honestly, Oscar?”

Next on FNC: Parochial schools come under fire for alleged civil rights violations and biased practices in hiring of teachers and student admissions. Why is the ACLU starting a war against moral education?

“All right, then. Here,” Cyrus said as he moved his knight.

Oraclevision: Reported incidents of police corruption to be up worldwide; people will look for moral leadership to lead them out of perceived secular and political morass.

“If we can manipulate Reason and Faith this easily, why do we not use the Games to force Magic to govern reality?” Andor asked. “Should it not already?”

“No, lad, sorry to say.” Colin said. “Reality Paradigms only take hold when the majority of sentient beings accept it as the ruling paradigm. And way too many people still don't believe in magic as reality.”

“So what are we doing to change that?” Andor asked earnestly.

“Teach magic to whales and dolphins. That oughter do it,” Colin said, who managed a straight face for ten seconds before he, Sam, and finally Andor burst out laughing.

“Okay, Andor, here's the skinny,” Sam said, “Have you noticed how many more stories and books there are published out there about magic and wizards and fantasy?” Sam asked with a grin. “That's one of Oscar's best garde positions in the Game—subtly get more and more people thinking about magic in more and more ways through decent fictions. See! He's done it again . . .”

“And that's another stalemate, cousin.” Oscar said.

“Dammit! I hate when you do that,” Cyrus said. “You've got to let one side win!”

“I do—the third side of those not on the board. The people unconcerned with Control or Power win every time we stalemate the leading paradigms. We're opening everyone else to wider beliefs by undermining their beliefs and showing the limits of their realities.”

Cyrus snorted. “And when they finally realize the world has far more Truths than Science reveals or Mystery beyond what Religion allows them to believe, what then?”

“Indeed. What, then? The Game will get very interesting, should it continue . . .” Oscar opened his valise and the chess pieces floated one by one off the board. “And speaking of interesting, Andor’s a curious choice for your second here.”

Cyrus coughed loudly and then stretched as he rose from his chair. “The boy was needed. He has eyes to see things unseen.”

“Of course,” Oscar replied. “No other reason, then? I know you, Cyrus, and you’ve always got three reasons for everything.”

“You mean like why you bring that tattooed monkey with you? To remind me of the many times he’s thwarted or disrupted the work of the Cabal? Bah, he’s never disrupted direct plans of mine—just those of the other six Cabal Magi.” Cyrus raised his voice as he asked, but then calmed himself, both his hands resting on his cudgel as his chess pieces marched off the board and into the briefcase. “I’m not so easily rattled, Oscar. And while I find his manner offensive, he’s always been a sharp mind and a powerful agent for Magic . . .”

Oscar smiled. “Now we get to it. You *wanted* the boy to meet Sam. To show him not everything in Magic is ritual and sacrifice?”

“Hardly,” Cyrus said. “Andor does not question. He is the most fervent of acolytes, and we know how dangerous that can be. I thought this meeting would open his eyes to other possibilities . . . see what those eyes of his see in new light. Sam seemed one of the better people for him to meet, irreverent scion of a stag that he is.”

“Well, by now, Colin and Sam will have at least shown him the Game, explained the ground rules,” Oscar said, as he snapped the valise shut.

Cyrus interjected, “And gotten the boy drunk, most likely. He’ll be useless for the morning’s work, which needs to start within the hour, if I read my watch right.” Cyrus sighed, “I’ll never agree with you about the ways we do things, but I do respect the power you bring to the Game.”

“I enjoy working with you again too, cousin.”

Cyrus smirked, then cleared his throat, restored his grim and dour look as he stamped the cudgel on the ground twice. All the red energy seeped slowly from walls and floor into the wood, causing it to glow with increasing intensity. The silver, unbidden, flowed into Oscar’s cane. The two old men stood silently for a moment before Cyrus asked, “So which one of us gets to lose his temper and threaten and bluster for the audience out there?”

“I believe it’s my turn, but you may, if you wish. It is your birthday, after all. Consider it a gift.” Oscar said.

Andor coughed into his ale when the red knotwork came undone and started unraveling and pulling out of the stones in the pub. Sam patted him on the back as he coughed a few more times.

“Time to wrap this up, Andor. They’ll be out in a minute, and I hope they’re in good moods this time. I hate having to run interference when two guys of their caliber fight.” Sam threw back the last of his drink, and stood up. “Be right back, boys.” He headed for the restroom.

Colin took up their empty pints and dropped them into dishwater behind the bar. He raised an eyebrow when he noticed Andor watching him.

“I do not know enough protective magics, should my master need me to come to his defense.” Andor’s voice wavered, then he giggled. “And I think you have given me too much to drink.”

“Just enough to loosen the mind a wee bit, lad.” Colin said, winking at him. The barkeep finished mixing something behind the bar and brought up a small glass. “Drink this. It’ll set you to rights.” Colin brought up a glass for himself and a third for Sam, all three smoking slightly above their dark brown liquid.

Andor waited until Colin drank his in one gulp. Colin saw him watching, and he said, “It’s to clear the alcohol out of your system instantly. Sam calls it—”

“The Pre-Hangover Cure! Thank Herunos!” Sam said, and he shoved Andor’s glass toward him. “Nasty taste, so do it in one gulp.” Sam threw his back, and Andor quickly followed suit as the door to the Gambit room slammed open. Andor flinched as the two old men came out, their canes glowing brightly with energy.

“Andor!” Cyrus barked, “Come get this bag!” The boy snapped to it, rushing to his master’s side immediately. Cyrus surveyed him, then said, “You’ve got some of that foul brew on your chin, boy. What’d you two do—get him drunk to ply our secrets from him?” Cyrus leveled an angry eye at Sam and then Colin.

Oscar cleared his throat as he moved in front of the two Cabalists. “Cyrus, do you honestly think you have secrets we don’t already possess?”

Cyrus fumed at the insult. “I hardly believe that, Oscar. If you held all the cards as you suggest,” Cyrus softened his voice and motioned for Andor to move closer. “you’d have stopped some of my moves. Thanks to your passive play and healthy doses of Catholic and Jewish guilt, I positioned things so secrets of four governments will come out! And that chaos will be tapped by the Cabal!”

Andor’s eyes snapped up to the monitor behind the bar. The game’s final layout remained in place, but a new report popped up. *CNN Live: Rumors swirl about Capitol Hill and Pennsylvania Avenue tonight about corrupt lobbyists and their ties with the party in power. Will indictments soon follow? Also, questions are being raised about contributions to political campaigns by religious-affiliated 527s. And tomorrow, more on the questions surrounding a growing number of pagan cults drawing people away from established religions in America.*

“Perhaps I just wanted more interesting and vibrant election seasons to watch, cousin.” Oscar replied.

“Or perhaps you convinced me to foment more chaos for the Shift, Cyrus. You never know . . .” Oscar signaled for an ale, then he turned to Sam and asked, “Do we need to be in America the next day or so?” Sam shook his head, so Oscar set his cane down and let the silver energy bleed out of it. “We’re only a few kilometers from my family’s estate. A fine evening for a walk, now that the rain’s stopped.”

“See how decadent and irresponsible they are, Andor? Wasting all that magic? It’ll only go to strengthening this pub and its magic now, rather than some better uses!” Cyrus said, placing his acolyte’s hand on his shoulder. “They have power, but they do not treat it with the proper respect as we do. We must go to prepare our morning rites. Bid them good-bye, for next time we meet may not be as allies.”

Andor, his face pale, said, “Yes, Magus. Thank you for your hospitality, Colin. You and Sam both have been kind to this humble acolyte, and I thank you.”

Sam said, “Until next time, Andor. Magus.” He tipped an imaginary hat their way.

Oscar whirled around on the barstool. “Oh, and Cyrus, be sure to watch the currency markets for Britain the next few days, will you? That energy’s not gone to waste. I just don’t need it for travel, as you do.

Until next time, Magus.”

With a growl, Cyrus stamped his cane on the floor, and in a red flash, both Cabalists disappeared.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief. “I’m glad it ended better than last time. He was almost polite there.”

“Magic is Change, Sam. Why are you so surprised that even Cyrus might do so? Besides, while we have had extreme differences at times, we are all fellows in Magic.”

REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED WITH BEERS

Fiona Patton

“It’s mine!” “Like hell it is!”

“Give it up, you little shit!”

“Bite me, jerkweed!”

“What the hell’s goin’ on here!”

The fight broke up so fast that the contended beer can flew out of two pairs of hands at once. Catching it one-handed, Fred Geoffries glared down at his two young cousins, twelve-year-old Travis Frawst and his eight-year-old brother Cody, before popping the tab and taking a long swallow. Two pairs of equally aggrieved green eyes turned black, glaring at him with equally outraged expressions.

“Don’t even think about it,” Fred warned, wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his faded Mill Valley Tractor Pull T-shirt. “It’s what you get for fightin’.”

“S’not fair, Uncle Fred!” the younger of the two boys complained. “I had it first!”

“That’s jus’ ’cause I paid you to go get it, Cody, you whiny little puke,” the older boy shot back at once.

“You musta let him see you!”

Cody’s eyes sparkled with indignant tears. “I did not!”

Fred’s own eyes narrowed. “J’ya pay him before he got it for you, Travis?” he demanded.

The older boy rolled his eyes at him. “Course not,” he sneered.

“Then it doesn’t matter if I saw him or not, you’re not out anything.” Finishing the beer, Fred tossed Cody the empty can before ambling off in the direction of the field where his own brother, Brandon, was waiting for him, leaning against a rusted manure spreader, a cigarette cupped in his left hand to protect it from the early September breeze.

Travis glared at them.

At twenty-three and twenty-five-years-old, the two men looked much alike: the same thin, rangy build, the same battered ball caps over the same longish dark blond hair, the same ragged jeans and torn T-shirts advertising local events from five years ago, and the same easy symmetry when they stood together as if they knew what the other one was thinking before he did.

In comparison he and Cody looked nothing alike, Travis noted angrily. He was blond, Cody was dark, he was tall and thin, Cody was short and stocky. They liked different games, different music, different food even. They had nothing in common.

As Brandon tossed Fred a cigarette, the beer can in Cody’s hands crushed of its own volition and the younger boy dropped it with a shout of surprise. Travis’ green eyes had darkened again. He took a single, menacing step forward, but came up short as his brother caught him by the back of his own T-shirt.

“Don’t, Trav,” Cody said urgently. “You’ll get it.”

Travis shook him off. “Shut up,” he snapped.

“You don’ even know if they’re really over there,” Cody insisted. “Mom says a Geoffries could be standin’ right beside you and you’d never even see ’em. Their illusions are that good.”

“I’d smell ’em,” Travis growled, but his eyes had already returned to their usual green. With one final glare in Fred’s direction he stalked away.

Cody watched him go for a moment, then, after stooping to catch up the beer can again, trotted quickly after him.

“I’ll walk with you, Trav.”

“Don’t be stupid! Your feet’ll fall off,” the older boy snarled. “Just get on the damn bus before I smack you one.” Ignoring his little brother’s hurt expression, Travis shoved him at the school bus door, saving a particularly withering glare for the driver who’d kicked him off the bus yesterday a mile from home. As the aging vehicle wheezed away, he shot one, defiant finger in the air, before heading up the road.

An hour later, Brandon’s Ford Taurus pulled up beside him. His older cousin said nothing, merely jerked his head at the passenger door. As Travis slid into the wrapper-littered seat, doing his best to keep the relief from softening the dusty scowl on his face, Brandon pulled the car back onto the road. “Jus’ don’t tell your mom,” he said shortly as they headed into town.

The Mill Valley Public School had closed a decade before, forcing the dwindling population of south county children to travel another thirty kilometers to Greenville. As they crossed the bridge over Mill Creek, Travis glanced at Brandon from under the bill of his own red Potter’s Feed Supply ball cap.

“So, Fred’s your little brother, right, Uncle Brandon?” he asked.

Brandon just nodded as he lit a cigarette, allowing the car to hold the road on its own for a moment. The Ford immediately headed for the right-hand ditch and, with an impatient frown, Travis’ eyes went dark and it centered itself again.

“He ever piss you off so bad you wanted to drown him?” he asked once Brandon’s left hand was back on the wheel.

“Sure, sometimes.”

“What’d ya do?”

Brandon chuckled. “Remembered that our mom’d kill me if he turned up dead.” Then he shrugged.

“Besides, who else would I have to go huntin’ with if I drowned him?”

“Cody’s too little to go huntin’ with,” Travis declared dismissively. “He’d get himself eaten by a fisher.”

His sneakered feet hit the dashboard as he hunkered down in his seat. “He’s too little to do anything,” he continued. “Last week he fell off my three-wheeler right into a patch of poison oak, busted the bike up, and I got blamed.”

“He fix it back up for you?”

“He tried, but he’s still too little to even do that right. And besides,” Travis’ voice took on a tone of outrage, “He shouldn’t be able to fix anything back up. He’s a Frawst.”

“Yeah, well, you know how it is.”

Half a dozen rocks lifted from the side of the road and slammed into the seventy kilometer sign as they passed it. The problem was that Travis did know how it was. His parents had been “on a break” when Cody had been born—looking just like Randy Akorman—and had swiftly displayed the Akorman ability with machines rather than the Frawst ability to move things with their minds. His father hadn’t seemed to care, but then why would he? Yesterday their eight-year-old fourth cousin Sha-lynn Mynaker had thrown a Hot Wheels car three hundred and fifty feet to hit her brother Tyler right between the eyes. She’d never so much as raised a finger to do it and both Travis’ dad and her “dad” had been equally proud of her. Travis couldn’t see why. Sha-lynn was supposed to have the second sight like any other Mynaker and Cody was supposed to move things with his mind like his brothers. It didn’t seem to bother anyone else that Cody couldn’t throw toy cars but could mojo any engine to run without gas or even spark plugs, but it bothered Travis. Cody should be able to move stuff with his mind or what good was he?

Beside him, Brandon considered the road for a moment, his expression neutral.

“Course, he’s not too old to go campin’ with, is he?” he said finally. “You both comin’ to the beach on the weekend, right?”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

Travis shrugged. “Mom’s kinda pissed about the school bus thing.”

“Hmm.” Brandon pulled out to pass a heavily laden grain truck before glancing over. “So, what happened there anyway? Gettin’ kicked off the bus on very first day of school’s gotta be a new kinda record, even for us.”

Travis shook his head in disgust. “Cody happened again, is what happened,” he complained. “Threw an eraser at Jordan Wallace that missed him and hit the damn bus driver an’ I got blamed. Again.”

“Why’d you get blamed?”

“Cause everybody in the damned county knows Cody can’t aim it!”

With that, Travis hunkered down in the seat again, refusing to say a word until Brandon pulled over in front of the Greenville Public School. As he got out, Brandon leaned over the seat.

“I’ll talk to your mom,” he promised. “Your uncle George’s woodpile’s ready to stack. You an’ Cody helpin’ him out after school today should go long ways towards puttin’ her in a better mood.”

“Yeah sure, but how’re we s’posed to get there?” Travis muttered.

“Fred’s comin’ into town to pick up a new chainsaw. He’ll give you a lift.”

“Great.”

“What?”

“Nothin’. Thanks.”

As the Taurus pulled away, a handful of gravel rose from the ground, hovered a few moments, then dropped as Travis made for the school’s battered side door, the scowl on his face as deep as ever.

That afternoon was clear and warm with just the hint of an autumn breeze to temper the late summer sun. As Fred’s Dodge Viper turned into the long, weed-choked driveway of George’s century-old farmhouse, the heavyset man turned from the woodpile with a relieved expression.

A retired tabloid journalist from Toronto, George Prescott had come to the county a year and a half ago

to research his grandmother, Dorothy Mynaker's, family and recuperate from his third heart attack. After ensuring that he was not going to endanger their unique lifestyle by telling his publishers about them, his many Mynaker, Akorman, Frawst, and Geoffries cousins had made it their business to keep him from doing anything too stupid or strenuous while he acclimatized to country living.

And that included giving himself a fourth heart attack by stacking his own winter wood.

As Fred pulled the car up beside the woodpile Cody rocketed from the backseat, pointing to the large piece of ironwood that the older man was struggling with.

"I can carry that, Uncle George!" he shouted.

Travis shook his head as he exited from the front seat more slowly. "No, you can't," he warned. "You're too little!"

Cody whirled on him, his expression furious. "I am not too little, you piss-head! I'm a better worker'n you are!"

"Enough! In a minute you'll both be too little, and you'll both go home!" Fred snarled, slamming the driver's side door with enough force to raise a cloud of dust from the driveway.

Both boys subsided reluctantly, but Travis' dark look at his brother promised more thunderclouds to come. Cody ignored him, accepting the piece of wood from George with a triumphant smile plastered across his face.

"So how long can we work today, Uncle George?"

Cody's disembodied voice floated out from behind the huge piece of Manitoba maple he was maneuvering toward the drive shed like a drunken man and, mopping his brow with a handkerchief, George checked his watch before answering.

"Um . . . we've been at it for how long? About ten minutes?" he asked. Surveying the still-towering woodpile with a melancholy expression, he sighed. "I think perhaps another twenty minutes should do it."

"Aw, how come we can't work for more'n a half an hour?"

"Well . . ."

"Cause the two of yous can't go more'n half an hour without fightin'," Fred stated from where he was throwing wood into a wheelbarrow for Travis to push.

Cody bridled angrily. "We can too!"

Travis rolled his eyes but subsided when Fred shot him a warning glance.

"I think twenty more minutes is about all that I can manage," George explained diplomatically and, noting how dangerously red his face had already become, the other three nodded, in agreement for the first time that day.

Exactly twenty minutes later, after Fred had obtained George's promise to drive Travis and Cody home, the older man and the two boys sat on a tree stump in the front yard sharing a six-pack of no-name cola and watching the dust cloud from the Dodge slowly dissipate. As the sound of indignant barking coming from the farmhouse rose over the last of the summer cicadas, George straightened.

"Ah. It seems that his nibs has finally woken up from his afternoon nap. I'd better bring him outside for a pee."

"I'll get him, Uncle George!" Cody shouted, jumping up and sprinting for the house.

"Bring a couple of freezies out with you," George called after him, "and the money from the dog mug on the dining room table!"

Cody's enthusiastic reply was lost in the flurry of renewed barking as he pounded through the porch door.

Moments later, he came running back, the ends of two large, blue freezies poking from the back pocket of his jeans and George's tiny brown Chihuahua, Lucky Charm, cradled in his arms. The small dog had a very superior look on his face and pointedly gave George the cold shoulder as Cody sat down with him in his lap.

George shook his head fondly. "He needs to walk," he said as gently as he could so that the boy wouldn't think he was finding fault, but Cody just wiped one grimy arm across his nose before lowering Lucky very carefully to the ground at his feet.

“Well, I woulda,” he explained, “but there was this huge bumble bee buzzin’ ’round the door, an’ he got scared, see.”

George eyed his generally fearless little dog, who was now sniffing suspiciously at a grasshopper twice the size of his front paw.

“Really?” he asked with a smile. “He got scared, did he?”

“Yep. Just about jumped outta his skin.”

Travis made to say something, but thought better of it as Cody handed him one of the freezies. “Don’t forget to give Uncle George his money,” he said instead.

“I was gonna.” Cody reached into the front pocket of his jeans. “There was only a ten in there, Uncle George,” he said as he passed it over.

“A ten will do.” Pursing his lips, George looked at the bill thoughtfully for a moment. “Let’s see, that’s five each. Travis can look after it this time, I think, until you can get change.” He handed the older boy the money. “And Cody can take charge of it the next time,” he added swiftly as the younger boy opened his mouth to protest.

“There’s not likely to be a next time too soon,” Travis warned, stuffing the money into his own front pocket. “We gotta get a ride.”

“Well, I’m sure your Uncle Fred will drive you again if you ask him to.”

Travis snorted and George gave him a quizzical look.

“Are you having trouble with your Uncle Fred?” he asked.

Reaching down to scratch Lucky behind the ears, Travis just shrugged, but encouraged by George’s interest, Cody poured out the entire story of the beer can with much waving of hands and gnashing of teeth.

“He thought it was real funny too,” Travis added angrily when his brother had finally run out of breath. George leaned back with a thoughtfully expression and Travis eyed him as suspiciously as Lucky had eyed the grasshopper, expecting a lecture on underage drinking, but the older man just pursed his lips again.

“You know I’m compiling stories about the four families for a private book I’m working on?” he asked instead.

Travis nodded, but Cody began to bounce up and down, causing Lucky to begin barking once again.

“Mom says you promised Uncle Brandon you were never gonna show it to anyone else,” he answered excitedly, “cause if you did they’d lock us all up in labs an’ do experiments on us an’ cut our guts open and spill ’em out all over the floor to see why we can do all the things we can do.”

He mimed getting his guts cut open with as gruesome an expression as he could manage, falling to the ground with a loud gurgle. Lucky immediately began licking freezie off his face, and with a laugh, he sat up again, tumbling the diminutive animal into his lap.

“Colorful, but essentially true,” George agreed. “And no, I’m not going to show it to anyone else—it’s just for the families—but the point I was making is that I was talking to your Grampa Art the other day . . .”

“I helped him fix his one-ton,” Cody stated proudly, and Travis gave him a dark look.

“Don’t interrupt,” he snapped.

Cody subsided.

“Anyway, your Grampa told me a story about your Uncle Fred when he was young that you might find interesting,” George continued.

“As young as me?” Cody asked, then gave Travis an innocent look. “What,” he demanded. “I wasn’t interrupting; I was just asking.”

“Asking is interrupting, stupid.”

“Oh.”

“Possibly he was somewhere in between your two ages,” George answered firmly. “Now, it seems,” he began, leaning forward in a conspiratorial way, “that one warm summer day your Uncle Fred had tried to . . . help himself . . . to some of his Uncle Lloyd’s beer in much the same way as you tried to help yourselves to some of his beer yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Travis asked despite himself, ignoring Cody’s indignant expression.

“Yes. And he got caught, also in much the same way as you did.”

Cody wrapped Lucky in his arms, his eyes as wide as saucers. “What happened to him?” he breathed. “Well, as to that I couldn’t say, but your Grampa Art says that Fred swore revenge on his Uncle Lloyd and that the opportunity came much sooner than he expected.”

He took a long drink of cola, evidently enjoying the boys’ now riveted attention. “Now apparently his Uncle Lloyd, that is to say, your Great-uncle Lloyd, always brought a very special case of imported dark ale whenever the four families went camping together. This case was so very special that it only came in cases of twelve, not in twenty-four like most beer, and he couldn’t get it at the beer store; he could only get it at the liquor store.”

Both boys gave a long whistle of appreciation at this piece of exotic information and George smiled.

“Now Fred determined that he was going to steal this case of beer right out from under his Uncle Lloyd’s nose,” he continued. “It took a long time and a lot of careful planning because your Uncle Lloyd was, and still is, a wily old Geoffries and time and time again, Fred failed, but finally, on the very last attempt, he managed it.” George snapped his fingers and both boys jumped.

“How?” Travis demanded, to cover up how startled he’d been.

Lifting Lucky from Cody’s lap, George set him back down on the ground before giving an eloquent shrug. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It seems that it’s as closely guarded a secret as the abilities of the four families themselves. But I do know that it took both him and Brandon working together to accomplish it. And I also know that, to this very day, your Uncle Fred buys that very same case of twelve very special dark ale from the very same liquor store whenever the families go camping together to commemorate the day he put one over on his Uncle Lloyd.”

He sat back with a satisfied smile and Cody cocked his head to one side with a frown. “What does Uncle Lloyd think about that?” he asked.

George blinked. “Hmm? You know, I don’t know that either. I’ll have to ask him.”

“The families are going campin’ this weekend,” Cody continued.

“Yes. Brandon invited me last week, but I’m going to have to call him back; I’m little confused. I thought it was held on the Island but apparently not.” He glanced at Lucky in some concern. Blind Duck Island—the ancestral home of the four families—was notorious for garter snakes, especially in late summer, and George was notorious for worrying about Lucky getting eaten whenever they went there.

“Naw,” Cody answered. “It’s on the beach.”

“The beach at the Provincial Park? Doesn’t that get a bit expensive? How many campsites have they rented?”

Cody snickered. “No campsites, Uncle George,” he said with the kind of condescension that only an eight-year-old could manage. “We’re on the beach.”

“But it’s a public beach, isn’t it? Surely no one’s allowed to . . .” he paused as his lawn mower began to sputter in response to the darkening of Cody’s eyes. “Oh, I see. A lot of Geoffries going camping this year, are they?” he asked weakly.

Cody nodded. “Lots,” he declared with a huge smile.

Beside them, Travis had remained quiet ever since his first reaction to George’s story. Now he stood abruptly, his eyes dangerously bright. “We should be gettin’ home,” he said firmly. “Mom’ll be waiting on dinner.” He handed the ten dollar bill back to George, ignoring Cody’s shout of protest. “Just come in and talk her into not being mad about the school bus thing an’ lettin’ us go campin’ this weekend and we’ll call it even,” he said.

George smiled. “Done. Wait a quick moment while I get my jacket and his nibs’ leash.”

Catching up Lucky, he made for the house and Travis waved a dismissive hand at his brother’s incredulous expression.

“Later,” he said.

* * *

The next Saturday dawned hot and humid—more like an August day than a September one. Pulling into

the westernmost end of the beach parking lot, George shook his head in disbelief as he drove past a dozen cars and pickup trucks; each had a very official-looking provincial park pass shimmering on the dashboard, gifts from the illusion-creating Geoffries members of the family. As he parked beside Art Akorman's huge old red one-ton truck, a small white piece of paper appeared on his own dashboard and he frowned at it as he very primly set a real one on top of it. Last night Brandon had called and told him not to spend the money on a weekend pass, but George had ignored him. The money went to help maintain the park and pay for the students who worked there in the summer. It was a good cause and he had no intention of aiding and abetting the families' cavalier attitude toward paying for things. Or more accurately, not paying for things.

Now, slinging his laptop case over his shoulder and tucking Lucky under one arm, he climbed out of his SUV, locked it carefully, and then made his struggling way up and over the nearest sand dune, wishing the families had chosen the westernmost beach, which was much easier to reach, as a campsite. Pausing at the top for a moment to catch his breath, he then made his down the other side with almost as much difficulty, glancing about once he reached the beach proper.

Before him, Lake Ontario sparkled brilliantly in the morning sun. To the west, a few die-hard tourists sat reading or sunbathing, completely unaware of the carnival-like atmosphere going on to the east where several dozen tents, picnic tables, and beach umbrellas had been set up against the dunes. Brandon and Fred's father, Kevin Geoffries, and their uncles, Lloyd and Albert, stood before an immense propane barbecue, handing out hamburgers and hot dogs to a constant stream of people while their mother, Bev, and her cousins Judy and Donna Mynaker piled their plates high with salads, rolls, and desserts. An army of children splashed and screamed in the water, watched carefully by pockets of adults sitting comfortably in beach chairs of every possible size and description while groups of teenagers lounged about on blankets listening to a dozen portable radios.

As George and Lucky made their way through a crowd of children and dogs pounding along the water's edge, a chorus of welcomes sounded all around them and Lucky began to squirm. Snapping off his leash, George set him very carefully down in the pebble-and-zebra-mussel-shell-littered sand. The tiny dog made like a rocket for nine-year-old Caitlin Frawst, who caught him up in her arms at once. Her fourteen-year-old brother, Jesse, deftly flipped George's keys out of his pocket from a good hundred yards away, and with several of the other older children in tow, went off to fetch his camping gear for him. As George took a seat at a picnic table where he could keep an eye on Lucky, he accepted a beer from Art Akorman and settled back with a contented sigh, taking note of the mountain of coolers, pop bottles, and beer cases stacked beside the barbecue, in particular two cases of special dark ale—as yet still unopened—which had been set prominently at the very top.

Crouched behind a huge driftwood tree trunk halfway up the nearest sand dune, Travis Frawst had also taken note of the cases and of their position.

Most of the families, including his own, had arrived the afternoon before. Brandon and Fred had shown up together with their own families in tow around five o'clock, and had spent much of that first evening helping their dad set up barbecue and the huge fire pit they would light each night after the sun set.

Fred's case of beer had been set down—tantalizingly unattended—beside a pile of fishing gear and Travis had moved in immediately, but every time he'd come within twenty feet of it, something would happen: his mother would call him, or one of the many family dogs would begin to bark, or more usually, Cody would show up. By the time Travis had finally extricated himself from the last of these distractions, the case was gone.

He'd been in a panic, afraid that Fred had taken it away to be opened but finally he'd discovered it—still miraculously intact—beside his great Aunt Gracie's huge Adirondack chair. Once again he'd moved in, but once again, he'd gotten distracted, this time by his father who'd insisted he help set up their own three tents. By the time he got back, the case had been moved again, this time placed under Great Aunt Gracie's feet like an ottoman.

The rest of the night had gone much the same way. Now, he glanced out at the lake where Randy Akorman was standing up to his chin in the water talking to Fred and holding a plastic cup of beer above

the waves with one hand and a cigarette with the other. Travis moved forward at once, but froze, cursing under his breath, as Brandon ambled over to the stack of coolers and cases, and helped himself to a bottle of hard cider. As he made to move away, Justin Mynaker joined him and the two men stood, chatting amiably with the case peeking out from behind them. Travis ducked back into the shadows of his driftwood tree trunk once again, his expression wrathful.

Out in the water, Fred was still talking to Randy Akorman and Travis' eyes went dark as he glared at them. The waves began to churn, splashing higher and higher towards Randy's cup. One more push ought to do it and then . . .

"Whatcha doin' Trav?"

He jumped as Cody appeared beside him.

"Nothin'," he snapped, his surprise causing his voice to come out much harsher than he'd planned. "Just go play with the little kids, will ya?"

Cody's face fell, then smoothed over as he watched Brandon head for the barbecue, leaving the case unattended once again. "You gonna try an' steal Uncle Fred's beer?" he asked innocently.

Travis bit back an angry retort. It wouldn't do to have Cody running to their mom with a tale that might get Travis sent home. "Maybe," he allowed casually.

"'Cause I got a good idea how to get it." Throwing himself down beside his brother, Cody fished a cold corn dog from his pocket. "Wanna hear it?"

Fred was moving toward shore now and Travis ground his teeth in frustration. Another opportunity missed.

"Trav?"

"What?"

"Do ya wanna hear it?"

Fred's wife, Lisa, joined him at the water's edge. She said something to him and he wrapped his arm around her ample waist with a laugh. As they headed for their tent, Travis nodded absently.

"Yeah sure, whatever."

"Cool." Cody stuffed half the corn dog into his mouth at once. "E mag is ar prall inna waer, fee, and ven e goos arr id, e grib is freer."

"What?"

Cody swallowed. "We make his car fall in the water, see, and when he goes after it, we grab his beer."

Travis shot him an unimpressed look. "How'er we sposed to get the car over the sand dunes?" he demanded.

"I dunno; fly it?"

"Don't be stupid! I can't fly something that big yet and you can't fly it at all!"

Cody's face fell again. He turned away, but at that moment, Randy Akorman walked by, whistling a Kenny Rogers song, and Travis hand shot out to catch his little brother by the back of his T-shirt.

"Wait!" he ordered. "I've got a better idea."

The Milky Way was a brilliant slash of stars arching across the sky, and the light from the fire pit a flickering orange glow over the beach as the two boys crouched behind the tree trunk halfway up the dune, equally triumphant expressions on their faces and Fred's case of special dark ale nestled between them.

Travis chuckled evilly.

Once put into effect, the plan had gone off without a hitch. Just before sunset, Cody had gone running to their dad, tears spilling out from his huge, green eyes, wailing at the top of his lungs that he'd forgotten his favorite toy. He'd pleaded with their dad to take him home to get it but, already three sheets to the wind, Jerry Frawst couldn't have found their car, never mind his car keys—which Travis had lifted from his pocket as easily as his cousin Jesse had lifted George's earlier that day just in case. Cody had then gone to Fred with the same loud, pathetic story and, unable to quiet him, Fred had finally taken him off to fetch it. By the time they'd returned with Cody clutching the first toy he'd seen in the bedroom he shared with

Travis—a broken ninja turtle catapult—the deed was done.

* * *

Grinning at his little brother, Travis eyes went dark and the flaps on the case of special dark ale cracked opened as if by magic. He pulled out a bottle, handed it to Cody, then caught up one for himself. The lids popped off, the bottles clinked together, and then each boy took a deep swallow of Coke.

Below on the beach, George sat in another Adirondack chair, a sleeping bag thrown over his legs and Lucky lying snoring in his lap, his little belly distended from the amount of hot dogs, potato salad, and burned marshmallows he'd managed to con out of a dozen family members. Seated around them, Brandon, Fred, Art, and Lloyd each touched their bottles of special dark ale to George's in a silent salute.

"So, it worked just like you said it would," he said to Brandon. "How did you know? You're not a Mynaker, in disguise are you?" he teased.

The younger man shrugged. "It was easy enough," he said around the butt of his cigarette. "Travis just needed to be reminded that a fella's best friend is always his brother."

"Reminded? But I thought he didn't actually like Cody."

Lloyd gave an explosive snort. "Don' be fooled by that crap," he said caustically. "Travis loves his little brother. Always has."

"He does that," Art agreed. "He practically dragged Cody around like an action figure when he was a baby."

"Then why . . . ?"

Pulling out his pipe, Art shrugged. "Tom, Dale, and Travis Frawst can all do what Frawsts do," he explained, leaning over to catch up a burning twig from the fire pit. "An' each one taught the next one how. Then Cody comes along. It's Travis' turn to teach him, but Cody can't make a toy airplane really fly or make someone's books fall outta their hands at school; he turns on the TV, or his dad's electric razor, or his mum's blender." He stuffed the twig into the bowl of his pipe and drew in a long puff of smoke. "Ya see?"

George nodded. "So the beer case story . . . ?"

"Made Travis remember that brothers always have more in common on the inside than they think," Brandon answered. "Whatever they might be able to do on the outside."

"An' two heads are always better'n one," Lloyd added with a grin. "For both makin' mischief and for thwartin' it." He clinked Art's bottle with his own and Fred gave him a sour look.

"And the Coke?" George pressed.

"Well, I wasn't gonna let them have my beers any more'n Uncle Lloyd was gonna let me have his, now was I?" Fred answered indignantly. "But just because we saw it comin' a mile away doesn't mean it wasn't a good plan." He took a long, satisfied swallow from his own bottle. "That's good stuff and they earned it," he added.

George chuckled. "You do know that they'll try again," he warned him, "Or try something else as equally devious."

Fred gave a snort very similar to his Uncle Lloyd's. "'Course I do. Hell, George, I may have been born at night, but I wasn't born last night. That's what brothers do, they go huntin' together."

"They do at that," Lloyd agreed. He turned to Art. "So, you wanna go do a little night fishin', baby brother?" he asked.

Art nodded. "Sure."

As the two older men moved off together, George watched them go with a wistful expression. "It makes me wish I'd had a brother," he said quietly.

Brandon tossed Fred a cigarette before lighting one for himself. "Well, it's not just older brothers that teach little brothers, you know," he noted. "Sometimes uncles teach nephews an' cousins teach cousins." "An' it doesn't matter what their names are, or what they can do with their minds," Fred added. He jerked his head at his brother. "So, is it time?" he asked.

Brandon nodded. As the two of them followed Art and Lloyd up the beach, his eyes went dark, the

northern lights exploded across the sky, the gathered Mynakers, Akormans, Frawsts, and Geoffries all shouted out their admiration, and Fred snatched up their Uncle Lloyd's case of special dark ale from the stack of coolers without breaking stride.

THE ENIGMA OF THE SERBIAN SCIENTIST

S. Andrew Swann

It has long been my intent to publish the details of my friend's extraordinary career. It is fortunate that I have lived long enough that, within limits, duty and the Crown have allowed me to publish some accounts of him who, for the sake of the narrative, I will name Sherwood Helms. It should be taken as an indication of his importance to the security and defense of the Empire that, even two decades after the Great War, his actual name is still a state secret.

That summer, however, the Great War was still five years in the future; only visible in the glacial movements of continental diplomacy, the rhetoric of nationalist leaders, and the challenge a rising America was presenting old colonial powers.

Of course, the coming war was also visible in the increased demands of the British Empire upon Helms, who was, after his brother, the most important agent of the Queen's Secret Service.

Helms and I had just returned from six months of travel taking us to several continental capitals as well as the Near East. And, as glad as I was to be back, I believe Helms was many times more so. Near the end of our mission, he had drifted into one of his prolonged melancholy episodes, and barely three words had passed between us from Madrid to London. Now, back in our flat on Baker Street, animation had returned to his lanky frame, and he darted back and forth arranging papers and artifacts from our recent journey until they were organized to his satisfaction.

While Helms moved about, I read through a stack of recent newspapers, casting aside my cosmopolitan interests to become a provincial Londoner again. Even so, I could not escape news of international import, as my papers were filled with stories from the United States of the death of the great former president and statesman, Abraham Lincoln, at the age of seventy-four.

Helms was at the mantle, placing there an engraved Turkish scimitar that had been the linchpin in a series of sensitive events I cannot yet relate. He had just moved the Persian slipper to hold the blade in place when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in, Mrs. Hudson." Helms said. Then, turning toward me he said, "It seems we have a telegram."

Mrs. Hudson opened the door, and Helms took the paper from her. "Thank you, Mrs. Hudson."

"You're welcome, Mr. Helms."

When she shut the door, Helms quickly read the telegram. I folded my paper and shook my head. "How did you—"

Helms smiled and tossed me the short note. "Wilson, even you should be familiar with the tread of our landlady after so long in these rooms. I heard her answer the front door and she immediately shut it and came upstairs, without anyone accompanying her. So it was obviously a delivery."

"How is it you knew it was a telegram?" I asked.

"It is too early for the post, and Mrs. Hudson climbed the stairs with a moderate urgency, showing she knew the message was of some importance. She would be too discreet to read a message addressed to us, and I heard no conversation, so the nature of the message itself alerted Mrs. Hudson to its significance—thus, a telegram."

"So simple," I muttered. I picked up the telegram and read it myself. All it said was, "P.1 TODAY'S GAZETTE—MH."

MH was Helms' brother. MH ran the Queen's Secret Service from offices somewhere on Downing Street, and I only ever knew him from his initials. Helms had often told me that his brother was his intellectual superior, and was the most important man in the government. On occasion he would refer to MH *as* the government.

I reread the cryptic telegram. “But what does it mean?”

“A great light in the world has gone from the stage,” Helms said.

I lowered the telegram and looked at the paper folded in my lap. A black-bordered picture of the late American president stared up at me. I wondered at the change of subject, but I said, “Yes, the death of Mr. Lincoln is a tragic loss.”

Of course, as I should have by then been used to, I had misjudged my friend’s comment. “No, my dear Wilson, I do not refer to the late American president. His story is not tragedy. He was a great man whose long life and great deeds should be celebrated for the ages.”

He then bent down and plucked the most recent paper, that day’s morning edition of the *Gazette*, from the stack by my chair.

“What is tragic is the death of a man whose great works are yet ahead of him.” He folded the paper so I could see the tragic event he referred to. The picture of the man held a vague familiarity for me, one that crystallized when I read the headline: AMERICAN INVENTOR AND INDUSTRIALIST THOMAS ALVA EDISON FOUND SLAIN IN LONDON HOTEL ROOM.

Helms shook his head. “In barely a decade he refined devices and machines too numerous to list. In the realm of electrical invention I know him to have only one equal—the intellect staggers at what his death might have stolen from us.” He quickly snapped the paper around so he could read fully the story of the late Edison’s demise.

I was still taken aback at my friend’s reaction to the death of Mr. Lincoln. However, I well knew that there was one thing that commanded Helms’ respect above all else, and that was the power of rational thought. Politicians, diplomats, and philosophers, however worthy, would always occupy the second rank of human achievement to Helms. In his eyes, primacy was given most to men of science and reason. For a few moments, the newspaper commanded his attention completely. Deep in concentration, Helms cast an imposing figure. In height he was rather over six feet, and even while bent over, he was so excessively lean that he seemed to be considerably taller. He read with a piercing gaze and his thin, hawklike nose gave his whole expression an air of alertness and decision. As he read, his mouth tightened, and his jaw squared in grim determination.

I had known him long enough, and had seen such miraculous displays of deduction and logic by him, that his next pronouncement did not startle me.

“Wilson, we must move quickly; dark forces are at work.” He smacked my feet with the newspaper.

“Hurry now, the game is afoot!”

* * *

We had the unfortunate luck to hail one of those dirty motorized monstrosities that were at that time overtaking the role of a proper cab in London. Our travel was mute, the noise of the smoke-belching engine making any conversation impossible. However, I could see in my companion’s face the expression of nervous excitement that told me that he had already begun work on some great problem.

I carried the paper with me, trying my best to discern exactly what had caused my friend’s urgency and his mysterious brother’s interest.

Under Mr. Edison’s picture was the following story:

AMERICAN INVENTOR AND INDUSTRIALIST THOMAS ALVA EDISON FOUND SLAIN
IN LONDON HOTEL ROOM

In the early morning hours today, the body of famed American inventor Thomas Alva Edison was discovered in his hotel room, dead from multiple gunshot wounds.

The horrible scene was discovered by Mrs. Alvin Macintosh, long-time housekeeper for the Stanford-White Hotel. Upon calling on Mr. Edison’s rooms at six o’clock, Mrs. Macintosh was alarmed to discover the body of Mr. Edison facedown in the drawing room, the victim of an apparent struggle that left his rooms in hideous disarray.

Despite the fact that there were no witnesses to the crime, and neither guests nor staff of the

Stanford-White Hotel report any disturbance, officials of Scotland Yard state that a suspect had been taken into custody.

In a statement to the press, officials declined to name the suspect, citing sensitive relations with certain continental powers. However, they did maintain their belief that the gruesome crime was the result of a long professional rivalry and a patent dispute.

Mr. Edison was in London for the First International Conference of Electrical Engineers where he delivered the keynote address last evening. He was thirty-eight years old and is survived by three children: Marion Estelle Edison; Thomas Alva Edison, Jr.; and William Leslie Edison.

I was thoroughly baffled by Helms' excitement, and upon reaching the Stanford-White Hotel and leaving the rattle and clangor of our cab, I informed him as much.

"My good doctor, I assure you that my brother was quite justified in directing our attention to this murder." A smile crossed my friend's face. "Unraveling this intrigue should provide us a stimulating welcome back to London."

Helms swept us into the hotel and through the lobby as if he was on the trail of the devil himself. We were only half a day removed from Mrs. Macintosh's gruesome discovery and there were still several policemen about. When we reached the door of Edison's room, Helms was stopped by the officer in the hall, "Sir, this is a police investigation."

"I am here on the Crown's authority; Helms and Wilson on behalf of the Secret Service."

The officer was mollified, obviously having received word of the Secret Service's interest before our arrival.

I was personally amused at the officer's sudden deference. Helms had a habit of projecting an imposing aura of authority that I suspect most observers would attribute to his position in the service of the Crown. Knowing my friend these many years, I can say that his self-possession, even his arrogance, were innate to his character. Despite his position, he had no respect to the forms of authority. It was only a combination of his brother's personal influence, and the growing international threats to the Empire, that persuaded Helms to endure his service to the government.

I knew Helms would much prefer the role of a private citizen, where he could fully control the problems that commanded his attention. But even had the tenor of the times been different, and he had never been called to service, I strongly suspect he would have endeavored to manufacture an excuse to personally investigate the more bizarre events that transpired in London; and judging by his current animated movements, Edison's death would be counted among those events toward which he would have chosen to direct his interest.

And had he done so, he would have projected the same aura of authority and commanded the same deference and respect he did now.

The officer allowed us in the hotel room, answering Helms' questions about who had been in the room before us, and what evidence had been taken from the scene. According to the officer, the scene had been largely undisturbed since Mrs. Macintosh's gruesome discovery and the police—more specifically, the Special Branch, which was the division of Scotland Yard that dealt with police matters with international implications—had removed only the body and the murder weapon from the scene.

Even without a corpse, violence seemed to permeate the very air here. The room was awash in sunlight from a set of French windows. Ornate gilt mouldings, rich fabrics, and a large Persian carpet marked this as one of the most luxurious suites of this hotel.

The setting only served to make the chaos wrought within it all the worse.

Marring the carpet was a massive bloodstain that served as the eye of a storm of upended drawers, torn fabric, broken furniture, and hundreds of sheets of white paper that reflected the golden sunlight from the French doors.

Helms paused by the doorframe examining a single bullet hole that pierced the edge of the wood. He asked the officer, "How many wounds did Mr. Edison suffer?"

"Two, Mr. Helms, one shot to the neck, the other to the head." The officer tapped the rear part of his

own skull.

Helms nodded. "He was found facedown, I presume?" He changed his attention from the door frame to the massive stain marring the carpet.

"Yes."

Helms knelt down to closely examine the darkest part of the bloodstain. I could see fragments of flesh and hair around a hole in the carpet and grimaced. Edison was clearly provided a coup de grace where he had fallen. The brutality of the crime was sickening.

Helms proceeded to the walls of the room, rapping them with his fist and placing his ear against them. He stepped over the scattered papers, and stopped to examine several of the pages in place.

He stood for a few moments, and then he strode past me and the officer, slapping me on the back. "It is time to see our alleged murderer."

* * *

Inspector Lestrade of the Special Branch met us in a private room at Scotland Yard. "Mr. Helms, Doctor Wilson." He shook our hands and smiled. "Something about this case made me think I'd see you two come round. Not to disappoint you, but this is not one of your intricate enigmas, a veritable dearth of intrigue and mystery. Only a mundane case of murder, despite the character of the players."

Helms nodded. "I am afraid, Inspector Lestrade, that there may be more to this than a simple confession."

"A confession?" I remarked.

Lestrade's expression of surprise was matched by my own. "We haven't announced this to the press, but yes, we have a confession. How did you—"

"And I believe your suspect is a Mr. Nikola Tesla, with whom I would like to speak."

Lestrade was speechless for a moment, but I could see in his eyes the realization that Helms had indeed seen something in the case that he did not. "Well, Mr. Helms," he said, "I quite respect your opinion in matters like these and I will say I am rarely sorry when I've allowed you to review the evidence in a case. I'll arrange an interview for you. Would you please wait here?"

When Lestrade left, I could contain myself no longer. "Now you must tell me how it is you knew not only who they have in custody, but the fact that they have already obtained a confession."

"Wilson, it is obvious from the news account that they have obtained a confession."

"How is that, when not a word was printed about one?"

"The morning *Gazette* is printed at seven-thirty at the latest, and stories must be final a half hour before printing. In order for the police to release a statement to the press in time to see print, the arrest must have been nearly simultaneous with the discovery of the body. There was no time to examine evidence at the scene before the arrest, and the police statement claimed no witnesses. If we assume the story was accurate, we are left with two possibilities. One, the culprit was discovered in the very act, which contradicts the story we have. Or, the remaining option, our man confessed to the crime."

"As usual, I am impressed with the inevitability of your conclusions. But how is it you know *who* confessed?"

"We have the two facts; first, the accused is significant to the Empire's relationship with some unnamed continental powers; second, the supposed motive, professional rivalry and patent disputes. Just one of these facts would narrow the possible suspects to a handful; the two together narrow the field to one significant individual."

"Mr. Tesla? The name is somewhat familiar."

"In the English-speaking world, Edison is much the better known. But as I told you, I know Edison to have had only one equal, a man who has had a very public professional rivalry with him, who would definitely be in attendance at this conference of electrical engineers, and a man whose arrest would certainly cause Great Britain to have diplomatic difficulty with the Central European powers. And that is Mr. Nikola Tesla."

Helms took the time to relate the history of Mr. Nikola Tesla. He was well versed in Mr. Tesla's achievements, which he related to me as we awaited our interview with the accused murderer.

In many ways, Mr. Tesla was Edison's European counterpart. His contributions ranged from stringing the central European capitals with electric lights to the invention of a wireless telegraph that could control machinery at a distance.

In both cases, these men found patrons in their governments. Since the quick suppression of its Civil War, the United States had been a powerful international rival to Europe. The Americans had defeated the French in Mexico after Napoleon III's ill-advised involvement in the Confederacy, and followed up with victory against the Spanish in the Caribbean. The tension between the New World and the Old had driven investments in industry and invention on both sides of the Atlantic. Tesla and Edison, on opposite sides of that rivalry, received more than their share of public largesse.

And, like the nations that claimed their loyalty, the relationship between the two men was not a friendly one. Despite never having met, Edison had given the Serbian inventor much reason to hate him. Edison had filed patents in the United States that duplicated many Tesla had filed in Europe. Edison was brazenly developing his own versions of Tesla's alternating current generators and designs. Edison used the same ideas to electrify American cities that Tesla used in Europe. The fortune this cost Tesla must have been incalculable.

"I thought you admired Edison. You called his death tragic."

"I mourn for the knowledge his loss will cost humanity," Helms said. "But I shall admit that intellectual genius does not guarantee moral character."

Saying so, Helms seemed to arrive at some conclusion, pulled out a notepad, and jotted something very quickly.

"An inquiry for my brother," he said by way of explanation, and he rose to step out of the room for a moment.

I was left to wonder at what question Helms was addressing to MH. I had no chance to ask him, as almost immediately upon Helms' return, Lestrade came to escort us into the presence of Mr. Tesla himself.

We met in a dank brick chamber, ironically lit by one of Edison's electric lamps set in the ceiling behind an iron cage. The lamp cast a grid of shadows across the whole room, enforcing an oppressive atmosphere. Seated at a wood table, in the centre of the room, was Helms' man Tesla.

Tesla was held in irons and flanked by worthy officers of the London constabulary. He was the absolute picture of dejection. He was clad in wrinkled, scuffed, and mud-spattered evening wear, and a massive bruise swelled the right side of his face, punctuated by a gruesome gash on his cheekbone. He did not look up at us as he spoke; instead he stared at his delicately manicured hands.

"It appears that I must relate my crime again to you." Tesla's voice was heavily flavored by the tongue of the Slavs.

Helms drew a chair forward and sat upon the edge of the seat, perched like some great raptor about to erupt into flight. "It would bode well for you," Helms said, "if you related every detail of last evening, precisely as you remember it."

"There are few details to relate, if you understand my history with Mr. Edison—"

"I do."

"Then you know that the man is in fact a thief and a scoundrel. He spoke at the conference of the electrification of Niagara, a project to power half a continent, based on my designs. I could no longer abide this, so late last night I called on Mr. Edison to demand satisfaction. He had me come in, only to tell me that I knew nothing of American business. He was in the employ of the most powerful empire in the world, and the American government would never allow some Slavic foreigner to profit from an American patent. He called me a fool—and worse. I . . . I defended my honor . . ."

"As any gentleman would," Helms prompted.

"Yes, sir, you do understand then."

"How then did you respond to this insult?"

Tesla nervously touched the side of his face, and his expression showed a pain at the memory that went far beyond his injury. "We came to blows. I remember little of our fight; I was too incensed, caught in the passion of the moment. One instant he was striking me, the next, I was standing over him with a gun in

my hand.”

“How did you come by this gun?”

“It was Mr. Edison’s. I had thrown him toward a table where there was a valise. He pulled the weapon out of it, spilling papers everywhere. Before he brought it to bear, I knocked it out of his hands. At some point I managed to retrieve it from the floor . . .”

“And you shot him?”

Tesla nodded, he seemed on the verge of tears.

“I shan’t force you to answer but one more question.”

“Yes?”

“When you presented yourself to the police, confessing to this crime, did they accost you in any manner whatsoever?”

Lestrade and the two officers cast unkind glances at Helms, such a suggestion besmirching their own honor. Tesla himself looked up at Helms with an expression of puzzlement, “No one has been anything but civilized. I am the villain here.”

Helms nodded. “I did not expect otherwise, but I required your confirmation. I am finished here.”

When the officers escorted Tesla back into captivity, Lestrade confronted Helms, “I say, what possessed you to make such an inflammatory accusation, in the presence of junior officers and a murder suspect, no less.”

“My dear inspector,” Helms said. “It was not an accusation, it was a question. It might reassure you to know that his answer was the single truth in that tissue of lies he just regaled us with.”

Lestrade shook his head, “Helms, you must explain—”

Helms sprang up, almost overturning his chair in the process. “Now tell me, you have retrieved the murder weapon from the scene; a newer design, a small-caliber self-loading automatic pistol.”

“Helms,” Lestrade said, “in a prior century you would have been put to the stake as a warlock.”

“I would care to see that weapon, Inspector.”

Lestrade took us to a storeroom and had a sergeant remove a box from a high shelf. Helms donned a pair of white gloves and removed the gun from the box, intently examining the weapon.

As Helms predicted, the gun was of brand-new design with no cylinder, but a removable cartridge before the trigger guard. The barrel of the weapon received most of Helms’ attention.

During the examination, an officer came in, delivering a telegram to Helms. Helms replaced the gun, spent a moment reading, and then he smiled broadly. Before he pocketed the telegram I caught a glimpse of names, dates, and amounts. One of the names was familiar to me as a minor attaché at the French embassy.

“A last question, Inspector.” Helms turned to Lestrade. “The Americans have contacted you about this crime, have they not?”

“Of course, and I expect the American interference will only grow as time passes.”

“Have they yet begun to inquire about meetings Edison might have had? Have they asked about any papers or diagrams not in evidence in his hotel room?”

“The consulate has not inquired beyond the details of our current investigation, as of yet. They seemed satisfied with Tesla’s confession.”

Helms nodded. “They would wish that, upon their loss of Edison, their rivals be denied the genius of Tesla as well.” He stepped toward Lestrade. “I suspect that once their reason overcomes their hopes, they will shortly make such inquiries. For the time being, I believe it will be in our nation’s interest to forestall them by reiterating Tesla’s fiction. Do not allow them to see you doubt the veracity of his confession until we have assembled all the pieces of this inquiry.”

Lestrade shook his head. “What is this about, Helms?”

“Something whose value would compel someone to cast aside two of the most important inventive geniuses of the century without concern for posterity.” Helms peeled off his gloves. “I am finished here, Inspector. I will contact you when I have this matter fully in hand. Come Wilson, the details are falling into place.”

I rode with him from Scotland Yard. Helms made the cab stop at a bank while I waited, and then I will swear up and down that we stopped at the offices of every newspaper on Fleet Street. He would order the driver to stop, and with an admonition to wait, he would burst forth and run into the building to remain, perhaps fifteen minutes. He would emerge and would order the driver on to the next publishing establishment. It was after nightfall when we finally returned to our lodgings on Baker Street.

While I took time to have a late supper, Helms was engrossed deeply in a notebook, which contained, I presume, notes he had taken at each newspaper we had stopped at. Occasionally, he would get up to rummage in his intricate filing system where he retained news clippings, magazine articles, and biographies.

I had settled down with a cigar and a glass of port before retiring for the evening when Helms was gripped by an epiphany. "Aha!" He cried, casting aside pages of his jottings. "Wilson, I have it! And time now is of the essence if justice is to be done and full advantage taken of these developments." He wrote down a message as he waved me forward. "You must contact Inspector Lestrade. He keeps late habits and should be at his office for another ten minutes. Use the police call box at the corner. Give him this message."

"But—"

"Fly, Wilson. If you talk to anyone else at the Special Branch you will waste precious time explaining our case. I must busy myself to be ready, and you only have nine minutes. Go!"

Without further delay I ran out the door, down Baker Street toward one of the newer police boxes that had begun to dot the major street corners of London. I had been one of many who had derided the appearance of these massive wooden cabinets as defiling the more picturesque charms of London neighborhoods, but with Helms' urgency motivating me I was suddenly glad to have one available.

I pushed inside the wooden cabinet, which was lit inside by another Edison lamp. I picked up the black metal earpiece and started shouting at the conical device mounted in the wall before me. "Hello! Hello!" "Sir," spoke a weak voice in the ear-piece, "You may speak normally. Do you need police assistance?" "I need to talk to Inspector Lestrade of the Special Branch."

"Sir, this is for emergencies and official police business . . ."

"This is an emergency! I am Dr. Wilson calling on behalf of the Secret Service. Please let me talk to Inspector Lestrade."

I managed to convince the phantom voice of my urgency, and soon I was talking to Inspector Lestrade.

"Dr. Wilson?"

"Inspector, I have a message from Helms." For the first time I glanced at the paper Helms had given me.

"He says that Mr. Edison's true assassin will be present at the vacant Desmond Imports warehouse at one AM tonight, most likely accompanied by several men of interest, and in possession of documents of national importance." I read Lestrade an address on Wapping High Street in the East End, bordering the Thames. "He is especially emphatic that only officers of the Special Branch be present."

"One AM *tonight*? Helms does not waste time."

"I will meet you there."

"What about Helms?"

I remembered what Helms had said about busying himself to be ready. He quite obviously had set himself on a course different from my own. "Just me. Helms has different business to attend to."

By the time I returned to our flat, Helms was gone, leaving only the clothing he had been wearing, tossed unceremoniously to the side upon the settee, covering the papers that piled upon it.

I decided to change my outfit as well, for the purpose of the night's intrigue. I selected a suit of dark brown color, with a black topcoat that would help conceal my form in the darkness. Once dressed, I took the precaution of pocketing my service revolver and retrieved my stoutest walking stick, one with a head of solid brass that could deliver a quite satisfying blow should the need arise.

Thus equipped, I hailed a cab and traveled to the outer edge of the East End of London. I intended to walk through the slums of Whitechapel toward the docks and the warehouse Helms had indicated. My

purpose had been to avoid the men at the warehouse taking note of the cab. However, during my short walk, a number of disreputable Whitechapel residents decided to take note of me, including several women, some no more than girls, who were offering me services for the evening.

I took an circuitous route, but even if my memory of the streets of London was not as exact as Helms', the odor of sewage and rotting fish brought me to Wapping High Street about a quarter hour in advance of Lestrade's men. I took the precaution of staying in a darkened alley across the street from the warehouse to await their arrival.

Even from a vantage removed by a hundred yards, and past gaslights whose glare made the night's shadows that much more impenetrable, I could see that the warehouse in question was not vacant this night. Through windows smudged with grease and dust, I could see the flicker of gaslight and the shadows of men moving about. As I watched, I could see a late arrival walk down the street, cast suspicious glances around, and enter the warehouse.

I had a few moments to wonder at how Helms had uncovered this meeting when a Cockney voice announced itself behind me. "Well, now, what've we here?"

In retrospect, I had suffered a patch of ill luck. I had carefully chosen an unobserved corner of the alley to station myself. However, that alley was only unobserved because the rogue who had been assigned guard duties had taken an opportunity to relieve himself around the corner.

I barely had time to turn around before the man brought something hard and heavy down on my head, stunning me.

I had a dim memory of being dragged into the warehouse, shoved into a chair, and having my hands roughly bound behind me. The smell of spoiled fish nearly choked me together with mildew and soot from an improperly vented stove. My eyes focused and I could see my Cockney assailant showing my service revolver to a cluster of men.

"He's a copper I tell you."

The man at the head of the group frowned. He was tall and pale, with oiled hair and a thin continental mustache. "That is an army revolver."

Everyone turned to face me. The last time I had felt so completely helpless was when a bullet had taken me in the shoulder during my service in the Afghan War. Even so, I could not help but notice that on the table these men had congregated around were papers of the sort used by draftsmen in their plans.

The tall man approached me, taking my gun from the Cockney. "What interest do you have with me?" He asked.

I feigned disorientation, but my captor would have little of that. He grabbed my collar and pulled me almost bodily out of my chair. "Who are you? Did the French send you?"

In my position there was little need for deception. "No, the French did not send me. My name is Dr. Wilson, and I am quite British."

At my answer he lowered me back to the chair. "Now tell me what you are doing here."

I nodded. "Certainly—if you would please answer me one question."

He chuckled and kept the gun aimed at me. "What question, Dr. Wilson?"

"What time is it?"

He opened his mouth to answer, and the gas jets that had been illuminating the room flickered out. Suddenly, the only light was a ruddy glow from the stove in the corner.

The shadow with the Cockney accent said, "Cripes, this guy was a diversion." That man rushed for the door and a sudden panic gripped the others. I was forgotten in the mass exodus, as every occupant of the warehouse dashed for whatever egress made itself available. During the scramble, the tall man grabbed the papers from the table and fed them into the belly of the stove.

I struggled in vain against my bonds. My stomach sank as I realized that these papers were the heart of the matter, and I could not move to prevent their destruction.

Around us were the sounds of chaos, men shouting, gunshots, people jumping into the Thames. Through it all, the tall man cast the papers in the fire. When the pages flared, I could see the strains of panic in the tall man's face.

Just as he cast the last page into the stove, the door burst open letting in the men of the Special Branch. The tall man offered no resistance. He stood, hands raised, watching the last page curl, blacken, and disintegrate.

* * *

Lestrade's men freed me, and the Inspector himself escorted me around the scene of the secret conclave with a jovial manner I could not share. "Helms has not disappointed me." He told me. "Seven men, all of known and dubious reputation, some of whom have been wanted for years."

The men who had been in attendance here were first and second lieutenants of criminal gangs well known in Britain and on the Continent. Present in the warehouse were satchels of gold and currency, the amount of which was still being counted.

None of the prisoners had been forthcoming, but it was obvious that the congregation had assembled to bid on the documents. The fact that the Special Branch had entered the warehouse too late to salvage the papers was a minor point to Lestrade, as every person at the meeting had a long list of crimes with which they could be charged.

I returned to Baker Street feeling dismal, certain that we had failed in Helms' intent. I knew that what had been cast into the stove had been of vital importance.

I opened the doors to our rooms in the predawn hours and saw a figure I did not recognize immediately as Helms. In fact, if he had not spoken as I entered, I might have drawn my revolver at his presence.

"Wilson, you've had quite an adventure, I take it?"

"Helms," I said as I shook my head. Even though I knew him to have perfected many elements of disguise and misdirection in his work for the Secret Service, it was still disconcerting for me to hear Helms' voice come from the garish fop in front of me. Helms had applied whiskers in the French style, delicate glasses, and had donned evening wear of a quite expensive style. From top hat and bottle-green topcoat to gleaming white spats, I had never known him to look less like the Bohemian gentleman with whom I had worked these past seven years.

"How went things with Lestrade?"

I dropped into a chair and related my sorry tale. Helms listened intently, and fortunately for my state of mind, gave no indication of the displeasure he must have felt at my performance.

"Quite a disaster." I concluded.

Helms shook his head. "Not at all, in fact. I am quite glad that the episode cost you only a knock on the head."

I smiled. "It seems that while I entertained the dregs of society, you had time to attend some event of social importance."

Helms smiled, reached up and removed the whiskers. "Not a social function. I merely had to assume the manner and habit of a certain diplomat of the French Consulate, one who will regain consciousness shortly. Tell me now, did they capture the architect of the auction?"

"Yes," I said quietly, unable to keep disappointment out of my voice.

"Wonderful news, Wilson."

I shook my head, unable to share my friend's excitement. "But Helms, the documents were destroyed."

"Not quite." He reached into a valise that bore French diplomatic markings and withdrew a cylinder of paper, the kind used by draftsmen and engineers. He tossed it to me.

"What?" I looked down at the tube of paper. "This cannot be—"

"These were the plans our villain planned to auction off to whatever criminal element would answer his summons; the root of our crime; and something of great interest for the Secret Service."

"Helms, you have dumbfounded me."

"Forgive my penchant for drama." Helms cast off his topcoat and folded into the seat across from me.

Despite his dress, his mannerisms had returned to be the Helms I knew. "These are Edison's original plans; what you saw cast into the fire were copies made by our assassin."

"Copies?"

"I shall make it all clear for you. But first you must understand that Edison's death was not one crime, but three." Helms leaned forward. "Of course the first crime was the murder of Mr. Edison himself."

"Of course."

"It was obvious from just a cursory reading of the account of Edison's death that more was involved than a professional dispute. My brother saw the implications instantly, alerting us. Consider the first peculiar fact of this case: Edison was killed in an alleged struggle that destroyed his hotel room, in the midst of a crowded hotel. Not only would such an epic struggle raise the alarm in itself, but how could a man be shot without it being heard?"

I nodded. "Some other sound must have covered the noise. Thunder, perhaps?"

"A respectable theory; one I maintained for a short while. But no storm happened that night, nor fire-works, nor anything of a volume that would account for the missing alarm."

"Perhaps the body was moved?"

"Obviously not, as the bullet holes and the blood in Edison's room attests. We are left with the possibility that he was shot with a gun that was too quiet to be noted by the other guests at the hotel."

"So that's how you knew what kind of gun was used."

"Yes. A suppressing device is available to clandestine military services and from some black marketers. Such a device is only effective on recent autoloading designs with a small caliber and an enclosed firing chamber."

"When you studied the barrel of the murder weapon, you were looking for signs of such a device?"

"Indeed, Wilson. Such a device was attached, and quieted the gunshots enough that Edison's neighbors were quite innocent of the mayhem committed in their midst. Of course, this meant Tesla's confession was a fraud."

"Yes, he mentioned nothing about such a device."

"More than that, Wilson. The entire character of the crime is different. Tesla would have it a crime of passion after a violent struggle. There was no passion or struggle. Such a silent weapon shows that Edison's death was planned, and the lack of alarm shows that Edison's room was demolished with as much care and quiet as the murder itself. Even the papers scattered around Edison's room confirm this."

"How?"

"The papers were clean, Wilson. Unstained by blood, which would be an impossibility if they had been scattered about *before* Edison was shot. Were that the case, at least some pages would have been spattered, or trapped beneath the bleeding corpse. The state of Edison's room was a planned deception, to hide the premeditated character of the crime, and its motive—"

"But the wounds on Tesla's face—he *was* in a struggle."

"Tesla was the victim of our second crime. Tesla *was* assaulted, but not in any protracted struggle in the Stanford-White Hotel. His hands were unmarked and his trousers were muddy."

"Ah! That is why you asked about the police abusing him."

"Yes. More than likely he was accosted in some alley between the conference hall and the hotel. He was struck a blow rendering him instantly senseless and in his captor's power."

"But why?"

"Most likely to extort his fraudulent confession. They held something over him, perhaps threatening a family member back in the dangerous ferment of the Balkans. No matter, it was, at most, a distraction; a misdirection to shield the true villains in this matter. The true assassin secreted himself in Edison's rooms and waited until he was able to shoot the man silently in the back. First in the neck, to prevent any screams or moans, then the coup de grace in the back of the head when Edison had collapsed on the floor. Then he systematically ransacked his rooms, quietly enough to avoid raising suspicion."

I shook my head. "I fail to see why anyone should conduct such an injustice. Why stage the struggle, and why force Tesla to implicate himself? With such a silent weapon, Edison's assassin had no fear of being caught."

"The answer is in your hands, Wilson."

I glanced at the paper tube in my hands, and Helms gestured that I should unroll it. When I did so, I was greeted with detailed drawings of the complicated mechanism, the same as I had seen in the warehouse.

Now that I had a clear view of the object depicted, it bore some resemblance to a typewriter, or a teletype machine, but there was a confusing array of interlocking cylinders, each bearing a series of letters and numbers around their edge. “Helms, I am sure I can make no sense of this.”

“Should it become clearer if I told you that it was the potential sale of these plans to one of the Central European powers that precipitated the unfortunate demise of Mr. Edison? That it was these plans that our assassin searched for as he dismantled Edison’s hotel room? That it was these plans our assassin was employed to deliver to a representative of the French Consulate, and was—with the typical duplicity of his kind—prepared to auction off to representatives of several major criminal syndicates?”

I leaned back. “One of Edison’s designs, I suppose?”

“A modified telegraph machine, a design with the potential of producing an unbreakable cipher.”

I looked at the page, trying to make sense of the mechanism. “How did you know Edison had this?”

“Oh, I didn’t know what this was until I examined the plans themselves. Until I replaced our assassin’s French contact, I only knew that what Edison had was quite valuable, and was a subject of interest to at least two major world powers. You, my friend, were responsible for making me realize that.”

“I’m sure I don’t know how.”

“Before I questioned Mr. Tesla, you prompted me to think upon the ethics of Mr. Edison.”

I remembered his comment, “*I shall admit that intellectual genius does not guarantee moral character.*”

“I had, at that point, concluded the nature of Edison’s assassination. But I was attempting to answer the question you just asked. Why stage a struggle at all, unless the object was to conceal a theft? But theft of what? No mere patent, as such are public knowledge. Nor was it likely some trade secret. Businessmen resort first to bribes and chicanery for their illicit gains, not assassination. Edison worked for the American government, so perhaps it was some state secret? But it would not make sense to carry anything like that to another country, where it would be vulnerable.”

“Unless Edison planned to sell it to some foreign power?”

“Exactly, Wilson! Edison was first a capitalist, and if some other nation would pay more for his device than his own, he felt no qualms about selling the plans to it. Unfortunately for Mr. Edison, Great Powers are often not resigned to being outbid for such things.”

He reached over and took the plans from me, rolling them back into a cylinder. “I questioned my brother about the embassies in London, who had contact with Edison, and who had recently wired large amounts of money. Such activity is closely watched, and my brother replied to me that Edison had seen members of both the French and German delegations, and that the Germans had wired the equivalent of one hundred thousand pounds sterling to the United States.”

“My word.”

“I knew then that Edison had tried to sell this device to both Germany and France, and Germany had the winning bid. The French had wired a smaller amount, twenty thousand, to a London bank, the day before Edison’s murder—most likely a payment to the assassin. So, you should now understand our first stop after Scotland Yard; I visited the bank in question to obtain a description of the gentleman who withdrew the French money and a copy of the gentleman’s handwriting. My suspicions were confirmed when the bank informed me that the account holder closed the account upon withdrawing his money, within an hour of the deposit.”

“What about the newspapers?”

“Such men, freelance criminals, assassins for hire, must communicate with their employers. They often use the classified columns of a newspaper to make assignments and set meetings. I knew that our man would have to transfer his prize. So using my handwriting sample, his description, and the fact he most likely paid for an advertisement in the evening edition with cash earlier in the day, I obtained a list of advertisements that could have come from our assassin.

“After some winnowing, I came upon two that seemed equally probable. I could make no decision on which was announcing the actual transfer, when I had the fortunate realization that *both* indicated a transfer. As the French had double-crossed Edison, their assassin had double-crossed the French. Our man had copied the documents and planned to give the originals to his French contact—” Helms

gestured at the clothing he still wore. “Whom I took to be the man who failed in his negotiations with Edison. Our assassin then also planned to auction off the copies you saw to his cohorts in the underworld. By the time his employer would have realized his deception, he would have retired to some far country with his double payment.

“While you and Lestrade made to intercept the second meeting, I intercepted the French diplomat as he left the Embassy.” Helms rubbed his hand. “I am afraid I was quite rough with him—but his testimony will only tell of a shaggy brigand striking him unconscious and stealing his diplomatic pouch.” Helms smiled.

“It was a simple matter to take his place at the meeting and retrieve the documents. I sat upon a bench and the assassin walked by me, dropping these documents next to me with hardly a look.”

“That was a brazen risk, Helms.”

Helms laughed. “The man saw what he expected to see, and was too preoccupied with his own deception to see mine. I assure you he is yet convinced that he transferred these documents into French possession. That is why he cast his copies into the fire, you see. It was his vain hope that their destruction would save him from French retaliation. In his mind, the French have their documents, and if no copies are discovered, the French have no reason to suspect him.”

“While in the French mind, he never transferred the plans at all.” I shook my head in admiration.

“I have suggested to my brother that we exchange this villain for some diplomatic consideration on the part of the French. Possibly for an assurance of safety for Tesla’s family in Serbia.” Helms smiled. “It is a fitting punishment for our murderer to disappear into the clutches of his former employer. He has committed the unforgivable French sin: he has wounded their pride, and they will exact a payment that our sensibilities might fail to consider. More important,” Helms picked up the cylinder of paper. “It will help establish that Great Britain does not have these plans.”

As masterful as he was in the art of discerning information from misdirection, Helms was an artist when it came to disinformation in the service of the Crown. He reviewed the evidence for Lestrade and produced a report, including an analysis of the ash within the stove at that warehouse. An analysis that stated, incorrectly, that the ash was from drafting paper of American manufacture.

When the French, through a known double agent, received a copy of that report, they became quite convinced that their diplomat had been intercepted by one of the assassin’s agents, and that his story of passing the documents to the French was an attempt to gain some sort of mercy at their hands. Mercy he did not receive.

The Americans, for their part, eventually discovered Edison’s duplicity. Of course it was too sensitive a matter to ever publicly admit and, uncovering the same information as the French, they came to the same conclusion; the assassin had destroyed the plans in an attempt to save himself and Edison’s design was lost.

Edison’s device became property of the Secret Service, and true to Helms’ word it provided unbreakable ciphered communications to the British Empire through the end of the Great War. It was instrumental in preserving the Empire through that decade-long conflict.

Tesla was completely cleared in the matter, to much fanfare in the press. Blame for Edison’s murder remained publicly in the hands of the criminal syndicate rounded up by Lestrade that night. It was put down to a simple robbery—though it was never made public what was stolen and the criminals, while suffering dozens of charges and trials, were never actually tried for Edison’s murder.

Tesla would never live to know who cleared his name. His biographers all tell the tale of how he was accosted by men who threatened the death of his parents in Serbia if he did not confess to the crime. Under such circumstances, Tesla viewed the unexplained French intervention on his family’s behalf as something of a miracle.

Tesla would go on to produce great things, far eclipsing his American rival, but, like Helms, he would always refer to Edison’s loss as a tragedy.

CIRQUE DU LUMIÈRE

Brad Beaulieu

Grignal stopped on a rise and leaned forward onto his huge, leathery arms. He breathed in the dry, acrid air and studied the beauty of the horizon as the troupe's wagons continued on. Far ahead, surrounded by miles of wasteland and framed by predawn clouds, the city of Ale Surçois waited. Its hemispherical shield acted as a lens, bending light like the lone remaining piece from God's own kaleidoscope. Towers and buildings and arching bridges could be seen within, each painted with an indigo brush against a harsh yellow canvas, and to the city's left, running northward, a slim line of white traced a curve over the blighted land.

This was Grignal's favorite part of their journeys through the badlands, the time when the city was alluring and full of promise. Nothing could be further from the truth—Alé Surçois was in the midst of a fierce and potentially bloody political battle—but he couldn't help pretending at times like this.

"Grignal!" Bayard, leader of their ragtag group, was waving his top hat from the rear of the line. His stained crew shirt and hanging suspenders warred with the jodhpurs and black boots. There was no question of his authority and yet he always wore his top hat like a badge of leadership.

"Keep your eyes on the line," Bayard said as Grignal approached. He pointed to a nearby wagon, doffed his top hat, and walked toward the bulk of the train.

"Sorry, boss."

The wagon—little more than a mishmash of ancient tank parts and welded scrap metal—had become stuck. Remmiau, the show's dagger thrower, stood by the front of the wagon, staring with coral-colored eyes at an ancient fusion engine. He removed his brown bowler and cleared his forehead of sweat before trying the engine again. It wouldn't be the first time Remmiau was unwilling to accept help from a *lizard*. The engine spun its bald wheels forward and backward in quick succession, trying in vain to dislodge the wagon and the bulk of canvas in its bed. Finally, Remmiau stopped and stared with a look on his red-skinned face as if it were *Grignal's* fault the wagon had become stuck.

Grignal lumbered to the wagon and cradled the rear. The musty smell of canvas struck Grignal as he lifted the wagon from the deep rut in which it had fallen and set it on even ground.

"About time, you big ugly lizard." Remmiau smiled, baring his sharpened teeth. The metallic bronze tattoos crossing his eyes glittered in the sun. Remmiau was always saying things like that. He mostly didn't mean them.

Remmiau took to the driver's seat and guided the wagon toward the rear of the line. Grignal held pace, not really wanting to talk, but not really wanting to be alone either.

"Such a sourpuss," Remmiau said. "No one would ever guess how thin that skin is, would they?" When Grignal didn't respond, Remmiau continued. "Listen, son, I might have a deal for you if you're nice."

"Not interested," Grignal said.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking. The last one went bad, am I right? But this one's simple. Simple as pie."

"They're always simple, Rem."

"No, I mean *really* simple. A pick and a pop, half now, half when we reach Balgique-en-Leurre."

He meant a body. He'd found someone who wanted to transport a person, most likely in a cryosleeve, to the troupe's next port of call. Grignal didn't care one way or another who—the troupe took on jobs like this often enough—but Remmiau seemed too eager, which could only mean trouble.

Instead of arguing, which would only serve to prolong the ordeal, Grignal stopped and waited for the wagon to continue on.

"Right, you be that way, but lizards need dosh just like the rest of us. You remember that."

When the wagon had moved far enough that Grignal could have some peace, he followed. Grignal knew Remmiau was right. He paid well enough, and he was one of the few people who would actually work with him. But his deals, no matter how simple they seemed, always managed to develop complications. The troupe pushed hard to reach the city's entrance by dusk—no one wanted to be in the open when the badwinds struck. When they were only a few hundred meters from the entrance, a tram flew toward the

city on its quicksilver track. It slowed and entered the city's outer dock, where it would be purified before being allowed to slip into the affluent upper reaches of the city.

Grignal smiled as he stared up at the glimmering shield. He didn't much believe in signs, but sometimes they were too powerful to ignore. They were entering the same time as a tram, which could only mean good things—for him, for the show, he didn't know which, but something good . . .

Several days later, Grignal stood backstage, watching Ijia ply her trade among the three rigid poles in the center of the big top. It was the beginning of Act III, the point at which her character was lamenting her decision to leave her homeland. She dove between the poles, catching herself with apparent ease and spinning about before climbing to the top with the graceful ease of a desert lynx. The diaphanous blue trailers attached to her upper arms and thighs and accentuated her otherwise naked body. Nearly every seat was filled and the audience marveled at her. Grignal was no different; he'd been with the troupe nearly seven years, and he could watch Ijia for another twenty before tiring of her.

The city had embraced the show for the most part, largely because Grignal's character suffered so much misfortune. No surprise there since Ale Surçois was one of the cities hardest hit during the war and had suffered several years of Kyngani rule. Grignal hadn't even been synthesized by that point, but it didn't stop the human race from holding it against him.

"Hey . . . Big boy . . ."

Grignal rolled his eyes.

Remmiau climbed the stairs leading up from the dressing area. Thick braids of bright purple leather and aubergine rope and eggplant cloth wrapped his body, stark against his red-tinged skin. He was due onstage in a few minutes to punish Ijia for leaving his side. He pulled himself up as tall as he could—still only coming up to Grignal's sternum—and grinned, baring his pointed teeth and accentuating the wrinkles among the bronze tattoos crossing his eyes. "Found yourself a job, have ya?"

Grignal continued to stare. The trouble in Alé Surçois was beginning to boil over. The premier of the city, Jaubert Rousseau, was locked in battle with the city senate over his own post. Grignal didn't follow such things as a rule, but he heard enough gossip from the troupe to get the gist. The senate claimed Rousseau was mentally unstable. They were trying to rally enough voter support to recall him. It was the main reason Bayard had decided on coming here as opposed to a half dozen other cities—political upheaval almost always led to more work. But, as was typical, Grignal had trouble finding work of his own; like most of the cities on Altarus, Ale Surçois didn't exactly open its arms to members of his race.

"The meet's tonight," Remmiau continued, eyeing Ijia now. "Bring you right proper cred if you lend me a hand."

"Get some of your goons," Grignal replied.

"Don't get me wrong, son. The boys are good, but a giant lizard like you"—he stepped closer and looked up into Grignal's eyes—"strikes a certain note of fear in a man's heart. Makes things go smooth."

Ijia descended from the darkened heights of the tent, igniting a chorus of gasps from the crowd. She collapsed the moment she reached the stage, unconscious from her self-inflicted frenzy. The stage lights dimmed, and when it was nearly pitch black, Ijia's body lit from within, blinding the crowd.

Cheers washed over the darkened stage.

"That's my cue. What'd'you say?"

Grignal nodded. "When?"

"Ah, that's my boy." Remmiau patted Grignal's arm, which Grignal jerked away. "Right after the show, son. Right after the show."

Late that night, hoping to avoid as many security cameras as possible, Grignal, Remmiau, and two of his mates took to the spiraled walkways and stairwells and headed down through the concrete-and-crysteel jungle. Remmiau wore his brown derby; his knives were stashed away within the coat of his tattered brown suit. He was flanked by Quidam and Jacque, who wore pinstripe suits with rapiers at their side. Grignal followed just behind, towering above them—it was better that way, Remmiau had said; put a little fear into 'em.

Grignal had seen only two other Kyngani in the three days he'd been in the city. He saw one more on the way down to the lower levels of the undercity, but once he reached the deeper thoroughfares he saw dozens. They were leftovers, like him; dregs scraping an existence off of human civilization. Perhaps they had been left behind, like many of his race, or perhaps they liked it here. He didn't know, but he felt no kinship to them whatsoever and so never bothered to ask.

Among the ground level, their group had drawn attention like a watering hole in the badlands, but here, thirteen levels below, they melded in like they'd lived here all their lives. Traffic increased sharply as they reached a wide street with sex shops and neon brasseries and stores selling cheap, prewar antiques. Several vidboards floated down the street, displaying gaudy and raucous ads, among them several political ads for Jaubert Rousseau.

"Not far now, boys," Remmiau said.

They turned up an alley and reached a dimly lit courtyard a few minutes later. Nine stories of residences stared down with disinterest. Most of the windows were dark, and those that weren't were covered with stained shades. Like a ray of hope, the faintest iridescent glimmer of the city's protective shield filtered down through tram tubes, pipes, and other arteries of the city.

Near the far end of the courtyard, stairs led down to a service door. This opened shortly after they arrived, and nine men filed out, most of them wearing black trench coats. Grignal watched for tattoos on the palms of their hands—the traditional place the undercity gangs would mark themselves. He caught what looked like the open maw of a ferocious dog. Grignal couldn't recall what group that might mean—that was Remmiau's department. Remmiau recognized every gang in every city they went to. The four men at the rear maneuvered a gray chest the size of a small coffin up the stairs to ground level. The chest had a keypad and a small readout, dark.

"Lot o' boys, Livier," Remmiau said. He was smiling, but Grignal could hear the tension in his voice. He hadn't expected so many.

Neither had Grignal.

One man stepped forward, tall, but still a half head shorter than Remmiau. His head was shaved and a jagged scar through his dark beard to the apple of his neck. "That package weighs almost as much as that big head of yours, Remmiau. Besides"—the man looked straight at Grignal—"looks like you've brought a few extra, too."

Remmiau shot a grin toward Grignal. "What? *Him*? Kind as a kitten, he is."

The man pulled his trench coat aside, allowing a clear view of the sawed-off shotgun hanging from his belt. "And kittens have claws."

"Now, now . . . You're getting it all wrong. We're businessmen, you and me, right? And we're here for business, so let's get to it."

Grignal watched Livier closely. There was an ex-military stink all over him, which would mean heightened strength, speed, and reflexes.

Remmiau and Livier stepped closer. They talked quietly for a minute, but soon the man in black was allowing a progressively more annoyed expression to show on his face. Finally, he took a step back.

"We agreed," he said loud enough for everyone to hear. "We agreed three times, once just this morning."

"Might be, but things change, son," Remmiau said, smiling.

"Nothing's changed."

"Oh, yes, it has. New info rises to the surface, don't it? The contents of that case, for example. Slight more dangerous than you made it out to be. Worth a lot more cred, too."

Grignal knew something was wrong about halfway into the ensuing pause. He started running before Livier's stance had shifted. "Get back!"

Livier, quick as a blink, tugged his trench coat aside and reached for his shotgun. He was fast. Definitely enhanced.

But Remmiau was still faster. He retreated and launched two throwing daggers in blinding succession.

Livier's eyes went wide as the first pierced his chest; the other opened a red line along his neck. He aimed the shotgun just as Grignal grabbed Remmiau's coat and yanked him backward, shielding him.

Pain tore into Grignal's back and shoulder as the shotgun roared.

Grignal howled. A warm trickle of blood crept greedily down his back. He shoved Remmiau away, then twisted toward Livier. The bald man stared up, fear contorting his face. He pumped the shotgun to chamber a new round, but Grignal grabbed his arm.

The gun fired wide.

Quidam shouted and Grignal heard him fall to the ground.

Grignal, enraged by the bleeding of one of his own, whipped Livier by the arm, sending him fifteen feet through the air like a suit stuffed with rags. He crashed against the brick wall and dropped lifeless to the ground.

Three more knives flashed through the dim night. Two men dropped. The four at the rear had picked up the case and were heading for the door they'd come through. The remaining two had drawn swords. A dagger from Remmiau clanged off the metal shield one of them was holding.

Far above, a red light began to flash. An alarm rang with it, out of sequence with the flashing. The lights in the windows began winking out.

"Get that case!" Remmiau shouted. "Grignal, get that case!"

"We're done," Grignal grunted through gritted teeth, backing up.

"Oh no, we're not!"

While Quidam remained on the ground nursing the bloody shotgun wound along his shin, Remmiau ran forward and retrieved two long dirks from their sheaths. Jacque followed, pulling his rapier. They engaged the enemy, and the sound of steel rang out.

Remmiau and Jacque were good—very good—but this was too much. They'd be overwhelmed in seconds.

Grignal had no choice.

He charged and bellowed, allowing his footsteps to fall heavy on the asphalt. The sound echoed about the small space. Jacque and Remmiau sidestepped while Livier's men retreated.

One, foolishly, tried to meet his charge with a thrust of his sword. Grignal met it with an upturned palm, allowing the blade to slip through his hand until hilt met palm. Grignal gripped the man's wrist and whipped him aside. The man's scream was cut off by a meaty thump.

Blood spurted as Grignal pulled the sword free. He slipped sideways along the stair railing and reached for the case. Two swords swiped and connected as he yanked the case from the confines of the stairs, scraping three of the enemy against the red brick.

Grignal retreated, only now feeling the sting of the wounds along his palm and massive forearm. "Can we go now?"

"Right as rain, son." Remmiau backed away and winked. "Right as rain."

As night moved toward dawn, Grignal lugged the case over his good shoulder.

"You're being unreasonable," Remmiau said behind him. He was helping Jacque with Quidam.

They were at ground level, in the western section of Ale Surçois. The park that housed the circus sat at the intersection of three major streets, the glass buildings that surrounded it looming like headmen waiting for the appointed time. One hundred feet up, the city closed back in, leaving the dozens of fiberoptic skylights to fend off the darkness.

Flocks of single- and two-person vehicles zipped counterclockwise along the narrow road rimming the park. This early, the only foot traffic was from businessmen and women in blue unisuits cutting across the park to get to work. Several of them watched Grignal with wide stares; he could only imagine what he must look like now with the amount of blood he'd leaked in the last hour. His breathing had become labored and raspy and his shoulders ached, both from the wound and the weight of the chest, but he wouldn't stop, not until he'd reached Bayard.

Ahead, the big tent stood in the center of the park, a huge canvas sign above it pronouncing, "Le Cirque du Lumière," in bold red lettering. Their personal tents hunkered like a horde of yellow-and-white yurts. Jacque brought Quidam to the troupe's medic, Le Chat, but Remmiau followed Grignal.

"Come on," Remmiau said as he ran ahead and turned to face Grignal, "you want more cut, is that it?"

Grignal ignored him. He reached Bayard's tent and dropped the case. By then, many of the three dozen

troupe members were clustering around, straining to see what was happening.

Remmiau stared them down. "You've all got things to do, don't you?"

Most of them remained until Ijia stepped into the circle. Her long black hair was pulled back into a tail and she wore only a tattered cotton robe, but she still exuded authority. She inspected the nondescript case and gave Remmiau a good long stare. Finally she gave the crowd a few quick shooing motions.

They began dispersing immediately.

"What is this?" she asked, staring up at Grignal.

"None of your business, darling," Remmiau said. "What's mine is mine."

Ijia turned to him, blinking her long lashes once. She jutted her chin toward Le Chat's tent. "When you put the troupe at risk, it's everyone's business."

A disheveled and half-dressed Bayard exited Le Chat's tent and paced over to Ijia's side. One side of his handlebar mustache was bent, which somehow made him seem angrier. "He's going to be out for weeks."

The muscles along Remmiau's jaw flexed. "No one will even notice. The boys can cover for Quidam"—he stabbed a bony finger at the case—"and that's *my* bloody catch."

Ijia returned her attention to Grignal. With one raised eyebrow, she commanded him to tell her everything. He told her as best he could, though he didn't know enough to tell her everything. Remmiau had withheld too much.

"Where was it headed?"

"Is headed, darling. *Is* headed. To Balgique-en-Leurre. It's a simple pick-and-pop."

"Not so simple anymore," Bayard said. "Who's in it?"

"No one special. No one the Boys in Red would care about."

"That's not true," Grignal said. Had Remmiau been talking with an outsider, Grignal would have kept his mouth shut, but the troupe was involved, and the troupe came first. Remmiau should know better; he was letting his greed get the best of him.

"What do you mean?" Bayard asked.

"Remmiau knows. He said as much to the men we got the case from."

Remmiau's look of hatred bore into Grignal.

Bayard stared at Remmiau as the clatter of breakfast came from the mess tent.

"It's only rumors," Remmiau said.

"And who's *rumored* to be in there?" Bayard asked.

"Aw, come on, Top Man, this is my business."

"Spill it, Remmiau, or I'm wrapping you *and* the case in a pretty little package for the Men in Red."

Remmiau tightened his lips to a thin line and shook his head. "It's the premier's daughter, all right?"

Bayard's eyes looked like they were ready to pop out. "Jaubert Rousseau's *daughter* is in there?"

"Yes, but we can use this. We'll get top money for her if we play this right."

Bayard alternated glances between the case and Remmiau. Then he stalked toward his tent. "Come with me."

Everyone but Remmiau left quickly. No one wanted to be in the line of fire when Bayard got his mustache in a dander.

The shotgun wound burned like hell until the troupe's medic, Le Chat, removed the last of the bird-shot. It would be another few days before the pain subsided, another week before it healed completely.

Throughout the day, Grignal kept expecting uniformed men to storm into the park and round everyone up. He made several mistakes at practice that afternoon until Ijia had had enough. She finally sent him away, telling him to calm himself before the show, which only made things worse.

When the show commenced, the scenes crawled. Ijia left her homeland and her lover at the behest of the devious Remmiau. She explored a world she had never seen, only to return to a place that had changed drastically in her absence. And her young lover . . . he had turned into a monster, played by Grignal. She could see little of the boy she had once loved, but the eyes, she realized—the eyes were his.

Grignal's act began by spinning two steel loops in a circle. Ijia leaped and moved between them, through

them, over Grignal in an acrobatic ballet of sadness and joy. Bayard stood backstage, studying the crowd. The rings nearly slipped from Grignal's grasp when Tinker came to converse with Bayard. Remmiau came onstage soon after, gesticulating broadly at Ijia while three white-robed sirens sang on a platform high above the stage. Remmiau took note of Grignal and drew his daggers. The final act progressed from a few missed shots to Remmiau throwing perfectly aimed daggers into Grignal's arms and legs and chest. Blood flowed. The audience gasped. Remmiau's strikes were stronger this night, and his tattooed eyes lit with a certain glee that had been absent for some time.

Grignal eventually succumbed to the onslaught; he could protect Ijia no more.

As Ijia pleaded with Remmiau to stop, Grignal cried for the loss of his love, bringing the crowd to absolute silence.

Grignal wasn't surprised, for the release of emotions had come easy. It wasn't from the pain; it was from the fact that Remmiau felt betrayed by Grignal. He felt that Grignal couldn't be trusted anymore. But it wasn't Grignal's fault. He had had no choice but to give Remmiau up to Bayard. In time Remmiau would see that Grignal had acted in his best interests—in his best interests *and* the troupe's.

In the meantime, if it helped Remmiau to be more sadistic than usual, then Grignal would let him. The wounds would heal soon enough.

After Grignal had washed the blood from his arms and chest and had given the wounds time to close, he borrowed Ijia's datalink tablet—one of only two the troupe paid the costly uplink for—and retreated to his tent. He sat gratefully on his creaking cot as the din of the crowd filtered through the tent walls. The show had been packed, and many were still wandering the park, sampling the games and fortune tellers and brica-brac stalls.

Grignal scoured the interlink for Jaubert Rousseau and any mention of his family. Oddly enough there were plenty of articles about Jaubert, but Grignal could find none that mentioned his wife or daughter. He eventually found one about Ale Surçois' last election nearly three years ago. It had a picture of Jaubert Rousseau standing on a podium, one arm around an elegant looking woman and the other, presumably, around his daughter. Grignal read the caption. "Premier Elect Jaubert Rousseau, with wife, Ettienne, and daughter, Sidanne."

Sidanne. What a beautiful name. Just like the girl herself. She had hair the color of dark wheat, styled with bold, angular cuts, the sort desert city girls seemed to favor. The article said she was twelve, but with the professional makeup and styling she looked fifteen at least.

What set of circumstances could have led her to this? Who would have the stones to do such a thing to the daughter of a premier? Remmiau had a reputation among the darker alleys for getting the job done, so it made some sense that he'd been contacted, but why transport her at all if it was merely for ransom? Perhaps whoever had taken her felt she had to be far outside the premier's reach before contacting him. Perhaps they felt it would be a protracted negotiation and keeping her in outside the city was safer.

Grignal considered the destination. That Sidanne was being sent to a city like Balgique-en-Leurre was a clue. It was a large city, larger than most shield cities, yet it had decided against erecting a shield and its rulers had chosen to remain free of the tram line circuit. The reasons, like most things on Altarus, could be found in politics. Balgique-en-Leurre was rooted firmly in the badlands. Many of its residents had been tainted by the badwinds, and many others had been rejected or ejected by the larger cities. As backward and poor as it might be, most of its residents felt like they'd found a true home, and they refused to kowtow to the tram cities.

Balgique-en-Leurre was also famed for its Temple, the home to one of several surviving religions on Altarus and the one almost universally adopted by those with psychic powers. Was Sidanne the key to some plan of theirs? Had they foreseen some event that involved Sidanne? Had they kidnapped her to prevent it? Or to *cause* it?

Grignal stared at the picture of Sidanne, imagining what she must have gone through before being put in the cryosleeve. She would feel nothing at this point, but he still imagined her lonely and helpless inside the unremarkable gray case.

One of the young trampoline acrobats popped into Grignal's tent, saying Bayard wanted to see him. He

rushed over to Bayard's tent, pausing only to send an apologetic glance to the mother of a toddler scared witless by Grignal's presence. Bayard had decided to hide the case in the city. He had researched the best place to leave it, one that might give them an option to pick it up again if they so chose.

Grignal felt uncomfortable abandoning Sidanne—it felt like he'd be leaving her to die alone and unwanted like a piece of trash—but Bayard's word was like a gavel struck, and so Grignal waited until early in the morning. In a city the size of Ale Surçois, and as large as he was, no time was perfect, but several hours after midnight was as close as he was going to get. He wrapped the case in a harness and climbed the nearest building when Ijia signaled that that park was clear enough. He reached the top and continued, higher and higher, spanning buildings and bridges and walkways.

Nearly an hour later, he made it to the top of one of the city's tallest structures—a commercial building that had fallen on hard times. Less than 70 percent of the space was filled, and few of the businesses required anything resembling tight security. As Bayard had guessed, Grignal found no cameras mounted on the top of the building. There was a crysteel communications tower and an access door leading into the building, but otherwise it was clear.

Grignal nestled the case near the base of the tower, where it met the stairwell's brick enclosure.

Wrapped by the beaten tarp as it was, it looked hidden enough.

He moved to the edge of the building, for he was breathless from the climb. City air was always stifling, but up here it was less so. Grignal had long ago learned to enjoy the small victories in life. He breathed in the dry air and the scent of ozone and the fainter smell of artificial pine. The shield glimmered. This high up, he could hear its telltale thrum. The tram yard, only a half mile away, held seven white trams, each with several hundred cars. Grignal wondered what it would be like to travel that way, to take one day to reach the next city instead of two months.

A personal transport swooped over the terminal and landed at the top of a building several dozen stories higher than the one upon which Grignal stood. What kind of power must a man like that wield? The owner of a great company? Jaubert Rousseau himself?

What sort of life might Grignal have had if he'd been *born* instead of manufactured in a Kyngani clone vat? He flexed his hands, examined the rugged skin of his forearms. It felt strange to him that there were no scars, that the Kyngani-bred ability to heal was so utterly complete. He had been grown—*grown*. He had never truly felt like a Kyngani. He felt much closer to the land and the cities and even the badwinds than those of his own race. It felt like *Altarus* had given birth to him.

And so when the armistice had been signed and the Kyngani were preparing to evacuate, Grignal had chosen to stay. How could he return to a planet he'd never seen? It meant nothing to him. It meant less than nothing. Altarus was the only home he'd ever known, and he knew even then he loved humans.

They were complex and inventive and beautiful in their own way. His own race had never treated him like more than an inventory number attached to a weapon.

Another transport flew above the building. Grignal ducked as low as he could manage and waited for it to pass.

He turned to the case in its nook. It had sounded, for a moment, like a young girl was whimpering.

Grignal told himself it was impossible, but as he stared at the case, he wondered if he could leave it here. Sidanne might be found, but then again she might not. She might find her way to safety, but unsupervised recoveries from cryofreeze did not always go well. It was too risky, Grignal thought. Why not wake her up now and make sure she was safe? She couldn't incriminate the troupe, and in fact, her safe return might ease up the attention that would surely be focusing in on the troupe even now.

Grignal, feeling like he'd given himself a direct order, dragged the case into the open and removed the tarp. Cryosleeves typically had a failsafe shutdown sequence once their integrity was compromised. The only ones that didn't, in fact, were those used to hold highly secure parties in cryogenic freeze, ones that interested parties would rather have dead than kidnapped.

Grignal picked up the case and hugged it to his chest. He locked his hands together and squeezed, compressing the case, harder and harder. The blood in his veins pounded; the tendons in his wrists screamed. The hinges of the case were pressing so deeply into his chest that he was sure it was drawing blood. And still it held.

He released a growl and renewed his effort. Minutes seemed to pass. His head throbbed. His bones were cracking. Surely they were . . .

He released one final scream.

And the case gave. A sharp hiss released into the air.

Grignal set the case onto the concrete tiles. A dent rested along one side, just below the security pad, and two of its corners had sizable gaps. Grignal tore the handle off the access door and used it to lever the gaps wider. He was finally able to creep his fingers under the lid and rip the case open.

His arms went limp; he staggered backward.

Lying within, under transparent glass, was Sidanne.

A readout and keypad were embedded within the glass near the ruined lock. The glass—or the liquid beneath it—tinted Sidanne’s skin blue. Electrodes covered her shaved head, her naked chest and arms and legs. Her skin, even tinted as it was, seemed extremely pale. The effect could be from the freezing process, but Grignal couldn’t explain away how positively emaciated she looked. Her knees and elbows stood pronounced against the rail-like limbs attached to them. The knuckles on her hand stood out like a ninety-year-old arthritic’s. Her jaw stood out against her sunken cheeks, and every single rib seemed to be fighting to escape her skin.

Grignal recalled from the article that she would be around fifteen now. She looked anything but. Had he not known her age already he would have guessed her to be ten years old, perhaps eleven. She looked more like a malnourished child from the badlands than she did a young high-society woman living in one of the planet’s most powerful cities.

Grignal shivered when, with a hiss, the cryosleeve’s blue glass hinged upward. Sidanne stirred.

“Can you hear me?” Grignal asked her after a time.

If she did, she showed no response.

“You’re safe. I’m here to help you.”

All she did was shiver.

“Hold on, I’ll get something to keep you warm.”

Grignal went to retrieve the tarp. It wasn’t much, but it was better than nothing.

One moment he was reaching for the tarp, the next he was on the ground lying prone, staring at the bright horizon. His limbs were limp and numb, and they tingled. His nose tingled too. Even his tongue tingled.

He rolled over, feeling a wetness against his cheek. Drool? Vomit?

He stared up at the sky and realized with shock that the sun had already risen. How long had he been unconscious? He’d been going for the tarp, which—turning his head—he realized was still there. Had he been attacked? Had someone drugged him and taken Sidanne?

Sidanne.

He rolled the other direction. The case was still there. He pushed himself onto his knees. He felt queasy, but the feeling passed quickly. He crawled to the case and found it empty.

Grignal realized at that moment what had happened. He hadn’t been drugged. He’d been knocked unconscious by a psi. During his indoctrination for the war, he’d been given techniques to fend off such attacks, but the armistice had come shortly after, so he’d never had the misfortune of being on the receiving end of a human psi attack.

Nearly all cities—especially a large city like Alé Surçois—required that someone like Sidanne be registered, but when the girl in question was the premier’s daughter, there would be courtesies offered and favors called in.

“Sidanne?”

He searched, much more wary now. He kept his mind sharp, ready to tighten his focus should she attack again. The tower above was clear, so he slipped along the edge of the roof, studying the dizzying number of floors below. He found her on the northern face, two stories down, naked and frail as a newborn robin. She was huddling against the biting wind that Grignal barely felt. She must have been trying to gain entrance through a window after finding the access door locked.

“Up here, Sidanne,” Grignal said.

She looked up and screamed, tried to shimmy along the ledge outside the windows, but as stiff as she

was the danger of falling was great.

“Please, no!” Grignal pulled back to keep his profile small, less threatening. “I’m here to help.”

She stared up. Grignal had never seen a child’s eyes open so wide. As gaunt as she was the expression was sickening. Grignal remained, sending her calming words, and the more he did so the more she edged away from the heights of panic.

Then her eyes rolled back in her head and her entire body jerked.

For a moment, the city tipped upside down. Grignal felt like he was going to slip over the side with Sidanne, and they would both fall to their deaths. But the feeling fled as quickly as it had come.

Grignal slipped over the side, dropped one floor, and used its ledge to slow his descent. He reached the second ledge just as Sidanne fell free. He caught her gently but firmly and laid her over his shoulder. She weighed nothing at all; it was unnatural.

The climb back to the top of the building was awkward, but he gained the roof after several aborted attempts. He laid the tarp on the ground and cradled Sidanne onto it, and, not knowing what else to do, held her body still until the convulsions had passed. When she woke a few moments later, Grignal wrapped the tarp around her for warmth and to give her some small amount of decency.

Sidanne cleared her throat several times before speaking. “Stay away from me.” Her voice was gravelly, raw.

In the distance, a horn sounded five times. A tram was leaving the terminal. Sidanne’s skin seemed to have regained a little bit of color, and her cheeks didn’t look quite so sunken now.

“I won’t come any closer, unless you try to jump again.” Grignal smiled, a gesture Sidanne didn’t return.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“A friend.”

Her look said she thought the notion dubious, but she said nothing. She did, however, take in the city around them, and the more she did so, the more relieved her expression became. “I’m still in Alé Surçois?”

Grignal failed to hide his surprise. “You knew where you were going?”

“I remember my father and mother arguing. Father wanted me to go to see a man, a specialist. Mother forbid him from sending me away.”

“What sort of specialist, Sidanne? Why did he want to send you away?”

“Because . . .” Sidanne looked utterly confused. “I was passing out, headaches and . . . My father . . . My mother, she . . .” Her expression turned to worry and then one of outright horror.

“It’s all right.” Grignal said. “Memories can be fuzzy after you wake up. It’ll pass in a few hours.”

She looked up at him, a desperate expression on her face. “I need to get back to my mother. I need to go home.”

The access door behind Sidanne creaked open. Remmiau stepped onto the roof. His eyes thinned as he alternated glances between Grignal and Sidanne. “What’s going on here, mate?”

Sidanne tried to get up, but her simultaneous attempt at keeping her decency and getting away from Remmiau caused her to tip over. Remmiau shot forward, wrapped one arm around her neck, and hauled her up to her feet.

“Stop it, Rem. We were talking.”

Remmiau stared at Grignal like he couldn’t believe his ears. “*Talking?*” He tightened his hold on her neck and with his free hand retrieved an ampoule from his coat. When he pinched it between thumb and forefinger, it emitted a tiny crunch. He then waved the activated anesthetic beneath her nostrils.

“Stop it!” Grignal wanted to intervene, but he was afraid he’d hurt Sidanne if he was too forceful.

“Like we don’t have enough trouble, you big bloody lizard.”

Sidanne’s eyes lost focus. Remmiau set her down roughly on the tarp and stared at Grignal. “It’s nearly noon. You been playing footsie this whole time?”

Grignal already felt like he was on shaky ground. Remmiau always seemed to do that to him. “She’s in trouble, Rem. We need to help her.”

“*She*’s in trouble?” He exhaled noisily. “*We*’re in trouble. The Men in Red came to the park a few hours ago. Took everyone.”

Grignal could only stare. “Everyone?”

“As far as I can tell.”

“Bayard?”

“Quick one, aren’t ya? Yes, Bayard, Ijia.”

Grignal felt his guts tighten. “Ijia?”

“Everyone. Which is why we need to get her somewhere safe. We need to make a deal with her good old dad and get the hell out of this city.”

“How did *you* get away?”

He grinned his pointed-tooth grin. “Don’t I always tell you I’m slippery as greased shit?”

Nothing was adding up. Grignal trusted Remmiau to a degree—he’d never caused him any direct harm—but if there was one person Grignal thought might sell the troupe out, it would be Remmiau. And then there was the way Remmiau had acted last night: he seemed too eager to get this deal done.

“Rem, we need to talk to her mother.”

“Why, to pick up some diapers? Nothing doing, big boy. We’re heading underside and setting up a talk with the premier. Word is he’s willing to talk to get his precious daughter back.”

“No, her mother will help. She was trying to protect her from Jaubert.”

“What’s that mean to me? Nothing. Now get your leathery backside moving, we don’t have much time.”

And with that Remmiau turned back to the girl and began tightening the tarp.

This smelled really funny and Grignal couldn’t let Remmiau run the show. Not this time. Things were too important, especially when the entire troupe and a girl’s life were in the balance.

“Come *on*,” Remmiau snapped.

Grignal picked up Remmiau.

“Hey, get off!”

Stepped to the edge of the building.

“Grignal!”

And held Remmiau out over the edge.

“Stop!”

“Listen to me, Rem,” Grignal said calmly.

“Stop it!”

“I said listen.”

Remmiau breathed in great gasps of air. He was on the verge of hyperventilating.

“We’ve never quite seen eye to eye, you and I. But I’ve put up with it for the sake of keeping the peace. But this is different. This girl is caught up in something strange, and we’re going to try to get her out of it.”

Remmiau stared.

“You need to nod, Rem, so I know you understand.”

Remmiau nodded.

“Good. Now you and I are going to figure out a way to get to her mother. She’s going to help us get Sidanne and the troupe out of this. All right?”

“All . . . right,” Remmiau croaked.

“One more thing—and this is where you need to listen real close.”

Remmiau nodded.

“You don’t have to nod, ’cause this is just the way it is. If I figure out that you’re lying, that you’ve made some kind of deal for your own benefit, I’m going to pop your head from your neck.”

Remmiau stared, fear plain in his eyes. There was indignation there, too. Grignal hoped it was sincere.

Grignal threw Remmiau to the roof. He collapsed immediately. “Now how can we get to Sidanne’s mother?”

They took Sidanne to a safe house Remmiau had set up before he’d come to find Grignal. She woke a few hours later while Remmiau was out digging for information. Remmiau turned up nothing, but Sidanne said she could get them inside her family’s apartment, where her mother would surely be. Remmiau didn’t like it, but he couldn’t think of a better plan. So with the last of their liquid credits, Remmiau bought a

digital key that would allow them inside the premier's tower. It only granted janitorial access, but it was enough to get them to the penthouse floor. Sidanne said she would take care of the rest.

They met two guards at the entrance, but since Jaubert was attending a public function, they were unprepared for this kind of opposition. As agreed, Remmiau watched the front entrance while Sidanne and Grignal searched the penthouse for Etienne. The air smelled humid, an uncommon luxury in any city. They found Etienne a few minutes later in a lush, sprawling room with a beautiful view of the entire city. Sidanne ran into her mother's arms, while Etienne stared at Grignal, her face a mixture of joy and confusion. Her hair was pulled back into a tight bun, and her green eyes shone in the dim ambient light. She was beautiful, and the resemblance to Sidanne was unmistakable: strong cheekbones, pointed chin, delicate ears.

She moved Sidanne to her side and pulled herself taller. "How?" was all she said.

"I don't know how Sidanne came into our hands," Grignal said. "I only know she needed help."

She pulled Sidanne tight and kissed her daughter's honey-blond hair. "Yes, she did need that, but she's safe now."

Grignal looked closely at Sidanne. She had *hair*. It looked just like it had in the article he'd found on the interlink. And her cheeks and arms. She didn't seem gaunt at all.

Somehow . . . somehow all this seemed right. It seemed like it had always been. Grignal knew something was wrong with that notion, but he couldn't quite explain why.

Footsteps came from behind. Grignal turned to find five men in red helmets and body armor advancing into the room. They sited down assault rifles and fanned out as they reached the expanse of the room.

Behind them walked Jaubert Rousseau holding a sleek chrome pistol in one hand and wearing a fitted, cream-colored suit. He scanned the room, passing over his wife and daughter as if they weren't there.

Remmiau was nowhere to be seen. Grignal had no idea how they had subdued him so quietly.

"Tell me what you're doing here," he ordered Grignal.

Grignal looked at Etienne, wondering if she would help.

"Sidanne?" Jaubert scanned the room again and stepped forward slowly.

Sidanne was watching her father, but she seemed distant somehow.

"Jaubert, what are you talking about?" Etienne asked.

"Sidanne?" Jaubert repeated.

"Jaubert, stop it." Etienne's voice was forceful.

"Tell me what you see." Jaubert raised the pistol and pointed it at Grignal's chest. "Now."

Grignal had no idea what was happening. "I see your wife and daughter. There." He pointed.

"Sidanne's *here*?"

Grignal nodded.

"Sidanne, please don't do this. It's time to let her go."

Grignal felt another stab of vertigo, just like on the rooftop when Sidanne had been ready to fall to her death, only this time it was much worse. He collapsed to the floor and vaguely sensed the same happening to Jaubert and the armored men.

The room spun. His life over the last several hours melted away. He couldn't remember why he'd come to the tower. He couldn't remember where he'd been before this very moment. He could barely remember coming to Ale Surçois at all.

Bit by bit, his memories slipped away. He remembered traveling through the desert to reach Ale Surçois, and then there was an emptiness. He remembered their last performance before trekking into the badlands, and then he didn't. One by one, the members of the troupe began slipping from his grasp.

The boys who performed wonders on the plank. Gone.

No.

Le Chat and his poor excuse for a nurse. The seven taiko drummers. The three singers. Gone.

No!

Remmiau. Ijia. Bayard. All of them, gone.

NO!

Grignal fought to remember his training. He was supposed to sidestep the attack. Hide from it within his

mind. Lure the psi in closer. He did, though it felt like it wasn't working at all.

But then he felt her. Sidanne's mind. Her mind was arcing through all of them—him, Jaubert, the men in uniform. She was changing their memories, rifling through them like one of Bayard's interlink bots and replacing it with what she saw fit. The only conspicuous absence was Ettienne. Sidanne wasn't connecting to her mind. In fact, Ettienne didn't seem to be there at all except to the extent that Sidanne was placing memories of her in all their minds.

Grignal did the only thing he knew how to do—he bellowed and fought back. He charged. He clawed and growled. He beat against the mind that was toying with his own.

Grignal could feel her fall back. He knew she was weakened from the cryosleeve and no doubt from depriving herself of her body's basic needs in deference to her delusions. Grignal realized a moment later that he could actually remember Bayard and the first time he'd met the troupe. The memory had returned.

He pushed harder, and Sidanne retreated. She couldn't keep up the fight against all of them. She concentrated on Grignal instead. And it was all too quickly that she was turning the tide.

But she was desperate. She hadn't been pushed like this in years, not since she'd started covering up her mother's death.

The thought struck Grignal and Sidanne simultaneously.

Her mother had died.

No. She wasn't dead.

She couldn't be.

Grignal heard a wailing at the edges of consciousness. He knew it was coming from the physical world, but he was so tied up in the battle with Sidanne he had no idea who it might be coming from.

"She's dead," Grignal said to himself, sure of it now. It was the only explanation. Sidanne was clearly a powerful psi. She was creating her own warped reality to keep her mother alive, for herself, for her father, and anyone else who got in her way.

Grignal coaxed Sidanne's mind into remembering by merely suggesting it. And within a few moments, Sidanne, in all her efforts to avoid it, uncovered it for him.

Ettienne had died while walking Sidanne home from a cello recital. It had gone so well. Jaubert, as usual, had been unavailable, but her mother had been so proud. Sidanne had been, too. They had decided to take a walk together and enjoy the night, but neither of them did so often and they took a wrong turn. They didn't notice the man standing in the dark, waiting. Ettienne had tried to protect Sidanne, but in doing so she had met with a glimmering blade. She died, right then, too quickly for any help to arrive. Sidanne had buried the memory so deep that she was sure she'd never find it again. Her mother was alive. She had to be. Sidanne would make sure of it.

Grignal regained enough of himself to look around the room once more. The Sidanne that looked so much like a normal fifteen-year-old was gone. Ettienne was still there, but she was motionless, expressionless. The guards were still prone, but Jaubert was on his knees and his face was filled with a light melancholy smile. He was staring at Ettienne.

Sitting in a chair, emaciated, listless, was the real Sidanne.

She stared up at Grignal with sunken, watery eyes.

"Your father woke up from the dream, didn't he? That's why he contracted us to send you to Balgique-en-Leurre, to the Temple."

Sidanne nodded.

"He wants you to let go of your mother."

She nodded again. "But I didn't want to. I made him forget."

"How long has it been?"

Sidanne looked so scared then, just like she had on that ledge high above the city. "I don't remember."

Grignal smiled. "That's OK. The people in the Temple can help you."

"How do you know?"

"Because a friend of mine told me so. He's the leader of my troupe." He knelt by the chair, careful not to touch her. "We can bring you to the Temple. You can be free of the pain."

“I’ll never be free.”

“No, you’re right. She’ll never be completely gone, but you can let her go and the parts you love will still be there.”

She took in a deep, quivering breath. “You’ll take me there?”

“Yes.”

Sidanne hugged herself and began to cry.

Nearby, the uniformed men curled up and vomited. Jaubert coughed and shook his head and fought his way to his feet. He blinked his eyes several times and then locked eyes with his daughter.

“Sidanne?”

They stared at one another for a long time.

“I’ll go, father. I’ll go to the Temple.”

Jaubert released the troupe within the hour. Bayard was so afraid Jaubert would change his mind that he nearly forgot several who had been held in another prison a few levels down from the bulk of the troupe. But within half a day, the entire troupe was packed and heading outside the city walls.

Sidanne rode on a wagon with Remmiau. Etienne sat on the bench beside her most of the time, always watching, never speaking.

Oddly enough, despite the eerie simulacrum of her mother, Remmiau had taken to Sidanne. He told her tales about Ale Surçois from before Sidanne had been born. Grignal kept a close ear out, though, for anything that would be too inappropriate for a girl of her age.

Late that day, Sidanne moved to the back of the wagon. It took her a long time to do so, for she was still very weak. She hung her thin legs over the edge of the piled-up tent and watched Grignal lumber behind her. Etienne followed and wrapped her arms around Sidanne, hugging her tight, as if she were only five. Sidanne had a wicked grin on her face. “Remmiau told me to call you a lizard.”

Grignal shook his head. “Then why don’t you?”

“It’s too mean.” Sidanne shrugged. “Besides, you don’t seem like a lizard to me.”

Grignal smiled and continued on in silence. Sidanne and her mother were watching the city. The wagons would soon drop over a ridge, and Ale Surçois would be lost from sight. Grignal took in the grand cityscape one last time—its glimmering shield, its walkways and towers, its tram line stretching across the horizon. “You’ll see it again,” Grignal said.

“I know,” Sidanne replied.

Grignal smiled. “How do you know?”

She shrugged. “I just do.”

“When will it be, then?” Grignal asked, only joking.

“Many years from now.” She said it in a very distant manner, as if she was viewing the event across the years between now and then.

A shiver ran down Grignal’s back.

When they had passed below the ridge, Sidanne turned to Grignal. “How long until Balgique-en-Leurre?”

“Six weeks.”

“What can I do until then?”

With abilities like hers, there were a lot of things she *could* do. Grignal was glad Remmiau wasn’t paying attention.

“Perhaps I’ll teach you how to juggle,” he told her.

And with that, completely unexpectedly, Sidanne giggled.

It was a beautiful sound.

FRIENDLY ADVICE
Alexander B. Potter

Scott Ashford, report to the Central Office. Scott Ashford to the Central Office immediately.:

Scott's head jerked up, fingers pausing on his handheld, losing his place in his notes. The senior at the front of the room glared in irritation and jerked a hand at him.

"Move it, Ashford. That sounds important. Get the rest of the briefing from someone. I'm not going over this again."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you." Bouncing to his feet, he juggled his handheld, bag, and Partokian reference disks. He could *feel* her annoyance was at the interruption, not him. She had no doubts he'd do what she ordered. He knew he should take the confidence as a compliment, but part of him rebelled at her casual assumptions. *Always the good boy. So predictable*. He sidled between the other juniors and slipped out of the briefing room, trying to ignore the curious thoughts zinging his way. *What did I do now?*

Reaching Sector Central, he took the lift straight up to third level, disembarked, and halted at the sight of the diminutive redhead balanced on the corner of the receptionist's desk. This could be either very good or very bad. "Gilly?"

Gillian Gedrick swung around and hopped to the floor. "Here he is! Thanks, Stuart." She leaned toward the brunett behind the desk and rifled his hair. "I owe you one."

"Don't think I won't collect," he called, eyes tracking the movement of her hips as she rounded the desk. He leaned forward and ran an appreciative glance over Scott as well. Scott almost didn't need telepathy to read Stuart's thoughts with embarrassing clarity. "Hey, Ashford. Have a nice lunch."

"Lunch?" Scott looked to Gilly, perplexed.

"Have you noticed the time?" Gilly demanded. "Your briefing ran late. Stuart agreed to help rescue you."

As they boarded the lift, the man behind the desk lifted his hand in a fluttering wave. Gilly waved back.

"Remind me to pay up quickly. Not good to have an outstanding debt with that one. Besides, he's fun."

As the lift descended she zipped the jacket of her flight suit back up over her cleavage.

"Gilly!" Scott tried not to sound scandalized. "You had him call me out of an official briefing—to the Central Office—so we could *eat*?"

"What are friends for? The proper response, if you're wondering, is 'thank you.'"

"But . . . Central Office! Nobody there wants me! They'll know and—"

"And what? Stuart fields for so many offices I have no idea how he keeps them straight. You think all the various high and mighty are going to sit down over afternoon tea, compare notes, and realize none of them needed a word with Junior Diplomat Ashford?" She dropped her voice to a stage whisper as the lift opened. "Hate to break the news, but you're not the center of the universe."

"I didn't mean—" he stuttered, but she just laughed and yanked him out into the hall. Even the most basic of cafeteria smells made his stomach sit up and notice how overdue lunch was. He gave up and managed a sheepish, "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Sit. I'll get food."

He waved to a few beings they knew but headed for a table away from others. For dinners they welcomed company and breakfasts . . . well, they often *had* company depending on who Gilly may have entertained the previous evening. But lunches were theirs. Scott wondered if he ought to be prepared for this Stuart to show up at breakfast soon, considering the gleam in Gilly's eye during the lift ride. He sighed, not sure how he felt about that. She had the strangest ideas about affiliating with others—human or otherwise. It was all about trades and favors, contacts and advantages with her. He smiled. Except for him. Although he supposed the freedom they gave each other was an advantage—offering at least one other person with whom neither had to pretend, from whom neither had to hide.

Gilly arrived balancing three plates and two coffees. Moving to help, he knocked the third plate askew from where it rested on her forearm. Entirely too quickly, her hand snapped out and caught it. Without anyone close enough to notice, her full reflexes extended, settling the sliding plate and the rest of the dishes on the table, then smacking him on the shoulder, all in a blur.

"Just let me *do* it."

"Sorry." He winced. She tended not to watch her boosted strength around him either. "It's the old chivalry training."

She snorted. "I'll beat that out of you yet."

"I have no doubt," he agreed. As she settled between him and the rest of the room, he felt the relaxation steal through him that always came with the presence of her blessedly quiet mind. He wondered, not for the first time, if more humans knew about the genetic modifications that made empathy and telepathy possible, if they would risk the legal repercussions and buy their children the corresponding modifications that allowed for resistance and blocking. He wished they would. His life would be so much . . . *quieter* if more people were like Gilly. "Remind me to thank your dad."

"I keep telling you, you are not going to meet my father."

"Then thank him for me."

"I'll be sure to do that, considering I have no idea when *I'll* see him."

"At least your father got it right. Unlike *my* dearly beloveds."

"Takes someone without a lot of ethics to navigate, and beat, an illegal system, Ash. *All* your parents' money couldn't keep them from getting taken if they didn't have the right contacts." Gilly's eyes sparked with familiar anger. "Unfortunately, you end up paying the price."

"Somehow, they don't see it that way. They paid a high price, and got . . ." he tilted his head. "Me. Not exactly a bargain." He caught the rising color in her cheeks and changed the subject, reaching for a topic at random. "Thanks for getting me out, I didn't realize how starved I was, and the briefings were getting boring."

"So what terribly important information ran so late?"

He instantly regretted his choice. "Gillllly."

"Aaaaassshh." She rolled her eyes. "Is this where you say 'I'm not supposed to talk about information from briefings' and I say 'I'm employed by the Diplomatic Corps, too, so it hardly matters', and you say 'It does matter because you're a pilot, not a diplomat,' and I say 'Semantics, semantics' and you say 'It's a rule' and I say 'Screw the bloody rules' and you say 'GILLY!' in that shocked uppercrust voice you do so well and I snort and say something crude and you say 'Now you're just being childish' and then I punch you?"

He lowered a chicken bone to his plate and laughed. "Yes, I think this is where that happens."

"Isn't thirteen months of playing that tune long enough?"

"I suppose. Still, I feel like I ought to make a token objection."

"You're such a strange man. Token objection recognized. So, the briefing?"

"Lots of Partokian information."

"All material you could get out of a first year diplomacy disk on Partokians, right?"

"Yes." He rolled his eyes. "Insanely boring. I sit there taking notes because that's what we're supposed to do but I'm thinking how useless it is. Although the early bits were interesting. The Earth Alliance reps have more of a vested interest in the Partokian mining of Ilma IV than I realized. Our entire delegation is being pounded backward and forward on how to handle any inquiries about mining concerns, so as not to let on. If they wanted to stick it to Earth, they'd just hold out long and strong on anything they want, with the cherry of mining rights on Ilma giving them *carte blanche*."

Gilly snorted, sipping her coffee. "Earth always has more of a vested interest than it lets on. And surprise, Earth wants more Turner's ore. That is what they're after?" At his reluctant nod she grimaced.

"But why? The stuff is almost useless to us."

"Who knows with Earth?" Gilly drawled in a bored tone. "Any good gossip on the visiting Partokians? Any excitement brewing?"

He laughed. "Sorry, nothing but a warning that we should keep a couple of the younger ones away from Karavalo's Pit."

"Oooh, that sounds good! Which ones?"

"Se' . . . Se'Thur—" He screwed up his face, struggling with the Partokian syllables. "Float a par, I took down the names." He rifled through his bag and pulled out his handheld, tapping at it. "Se'Terrell, Se'Miiter, and Xe'Weshner."

"Hmm." Her brows drew together as she reached for his handheld to look at the spellings.

"Know any of them?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure. Something is familiar, but I might just have met someone from one of the family

groups. Did they give you anything beyond the matronyms?"

"No, that's all we have from the roster. Someone's well enough informed to know who the juniors are on the other side. Or at least who the juniors are that bear watching."

"So, a couple of potential troublemakers and Earth wants Turner's ore."

"That's about the size of it. The seniors are leading with a conversation about Partoke's trade ties with Perche. I'm not certain where they expect that to go. Well, I know they want Partoke declaring independent status from Perche and not relying on those trade ties, but they're not willing to actually *help*, not in any meaningful way, so . . ." Now he trailed off. "Not much else. Unless you're interested in fourteen ways to say 'We welcome you to the table of talk' in Partokian? Didn't think so."

"I can see why you *love* your job, angel eyes. Diplomacy is so *fascinating* ."

He ducked his head. "Ambassadorial training is what I went to school for from secondary right on through. It's all I know. What else would I do?"

"You mean it's what your parents paid to put you through school for, and they would be shocked and horrified if you left given their sizeable investment," Gilly corrected dryly.

"That too," he muttered. "Considering all I've heard about all my life is investment versus payoff."

"The prenatal investment is *their* fault, not yours," Gilly snapped. "And as for the schooling, if they'd asked you and you'd picked the DiploCorps, fine. But since they just shucked you in here without even caring whether you wanted to do this or not, I'm not inclined to think they deserve any return on their *investment* . You graduated. Top of your class. That's more than they should have gotten."

"Gil. They're not . . . monsters. They just figured the Diplomacy Corps would be the only place I'd be useful with the way my genetic manips ended up. With the . . . you know. Unfortunate results." His voice feathered down to a whisper.

"Whatever. Sorry. It's just . . . you're twenty-six, Ash. Keep going the way you are, and you'll be the youngest to make ambassador since Kraiger. I'm sure your parents will be thrilled." She narrowed her eyes. "Just . . . make sure you'll be thrilled, too, before you get the fancy hat." She shook her head.

"Can't seem to stay away from parents today, can we? Your fault, bringing up my father."

"Sorry, it's just that every time I sit down with you, and I don't have thoughts and feelings pummeling me I want to thank your dad."

She pushed back from the table, stacking their plates. "He just wanted his little girl to have an edge in this big bad old universe."

"I can still be grateful." He stood and took over. "Let me. You know I hate it when you clean up after me."

"Fine."

He gathered everything, then carried it to the receptacles. By the time he headed back she was pulled up close to the table again, hunched forward, fingers working away at something. Arriving at her side he found her with her own handheld out, her schedule called up beside a set of complicated routines that looked like flight plans.

"Ready to move?" She paged through a few more screens of flight plans before standing and hooking the handheld on her belt. "We got the duty roster midmorning. I'm not flying you lot on this one. Tzudeki is."

"Well . . . that sucks." He scooped his handheld up and into his bag, following her.

"I think so, but he'll get you there in one piece."

"I like sitting up front with the pilot. It makes me feel all special."

"I could put a bug in Tzudeki's ear. Get you an invite up front." They boarded the lift and Gilly keyed in eighth level.

He gave her a dire look. "I think *not* . Tzudeki thinks I'm the biggest dork ever."

"That's not true—"

"Don't even bother." He tapped his temple. "I've got the inside story."

She avoided his eyes. "Tzudeki is an ass."

"Which is why I'll wait to fly up front until you're flying us."

"Right. This is my exit." She stepped out. "Later."

"Thanks again." He flashed a happy smile.

“Don’t mention it.”

Really. Don’t mention it. Gilly’s answering smile dissolved as the lift closed. She wished Ash wouldn’t do the sincere grateful thing so well. It was almost enough to wake up even her calcified conscience.

Almost.

Entirely too trusting. She needed to beat that out of him, too. She assumed she’d have had more impact by now, but he was a resilient bugger. Downright bizarre that he managed to remain so credulous, being friends with her, when she was doing everything in her power to train it out of him.

Granted, she was there to protect him from the rest of the known universe, but still. He needed better defenses of his own. Or he needed her on his shoulder round the clock, which even if she wanted to be, she couldn’t necessarily afford.

Of course, he could read minds and emotions, which did give him a jump in ascertaining motivations except for her own, leaving her the only person in a position to double-cross him. Whenever her mind reached that logistical point, it looped back to the basics. *Entirely too trusting* .

She jumped the outgoing shuttle for the hangars, grabbing a pole even though she didn’t need one for balance. Better to just blend, always. She’d wasted too much time waiting for Ash before using Stuart, and now she was running late. The shuttle jerked to a halt. She threaded through the crowd, deeming it safe to move just a little too fast given the heavy traffic.

Skirting the larger ship holds and the diplomatic bays, she moved on to the collection of small, nameless, government-issue hoppers. Pulling her identcard off her belt, she ran it through the slot and leaned into the retina scanner. The door slid open and the rows of tiny gleaming ships winked at her in welcome. She smiled back. “Hello, baby girls.”

Down the row to Number 708, and she keyed her handheld into the dock, setting up an open file that showed her identification working on the small ship. Once the program began, she ran the manual override command that wasn’t supposed to be allowed, and carefully disengaged her handheld. The file stayed open, and for all intents and purposes, she remained actively working on Number 708. She moved farther down the row to the grip, hooked a belt around her waist, swung down to the next lowest level, and sought out Number 914. Pulling a second keycard off her belt that *didn’t* identify her, she inserted it into 914’s slot and grinned as all the mechanisms unlocked with soft clicks, but all the indicator lights stayed red, as if everything remained locked down tight. *The benefits of keycards belonging to individuals with higher clearances than mine* .

She popped the seal, climbed in, and closed it down after herself. Winding her hair into a clip, she pulled on the headset and eyepiece, then took the hopper out, right fingers flying over the keypad as her left hand guided the control. Within seconds she was at the hangar exit, flagging the control room. If everything was on schedule, Deb should be on duty . . .

The older woman’s face appeared on screen on cue. Dark hair pulled back from her preoccupied face, glasses perched on her nose, she didn’t even turn fully around as she rattled off, “Name, rank, destination?”

“Takin’ gov’ment prop’ty out for a joyride. Wanna go for a spin?”

“Gillian.” A dry smile as Deb looked up. “What are you doing *now*?”

“My feet just got a little itchy. I needed a loop. You know us fliers.”

Deb shook her head but grinned. Her circle of friends included enough pilots that she did know. Her eyes flicked in either direction and her voice dropped. “That hopper—”

“Won’t even register as being out of dock. Check the system.” Gilly knew 914 would show up as in the bay. “Won’t be long.”

“One of these days, you’re going to get me in so much trouble.” She tapped on her screen, and the first of the airlocks began to open.

“Nonsense. I’ll defend you to the death and get someone you hate in trouble. Promise. Thanks, hon. I’ve got a bottle of that unpronounceable wine you like with your name on it.” She zipped the hopper forward and waited while the airlocks closed behind and opened in front of her. Destination programmed, she settled in and unhooked her handheld from her belt, engaging it with the hopper’s screen.

For the rest of the trip, she skimmed the briefing notes she'd downloaded from Scott's handheld while he'd returned their lunch dishes.

The small Partokian ship was bigger than her hopper, but it didn't give Gilly pause. She knew she was the better flier and could evade if necessary.

She doubted it would be necessary.

Neither ship opened communication. She settled in her seat, determined not to crack first. Watching the silent ship, she wondered if Ash could pick up empathic or telepathic emanations from this distance. It wasn't the first time thoughts of productive partnership had occurred to her in the course of her extracurricular sideline. Bringing him in appealed to her on more than one level.

Occasionally, it even occurred to her that it would mean she could stop . . . obfuscating.

Please. You could stop lying to him quite so often.

What pissed her off was that the lying even occasionally mattered to her. When the chirrup of a ship-to-ship came, she smacked her hand down on the toggle, her voice carrying her irritation. "What?"

The pause hung for a moment, then a carefully modulated voice enunciated, "Gil-lian?"

She fought back her irritation. "Brandyn. Darling. Wondered how long we were going to sit here and stare at each other." She unlocked all transmission channels. Immediately, the screen split and the visual of Brandyn Se'Terrell materialized beside the image of his ship.

"Cau-tion in all event-ual-IT-ies," Brandyn inclined his head minutely, and his shoulder spines flexed.

Gilly grinned. "Caution? You? You've been talking to your mother. How is Ell Karyn?"

The tiny slash of a mouth, half-concealed face, and the one visible opaque black eye displayed no emotion or expression at all, but both the shoulder and elbow spines flexed fluidly, extending fully and retracting before extending and remaining at a relaxed half-mast state. "My Ell-mother is well. She will be plea-sed to hear of your in-quiry."

"Good, good. Your Ling is sounding excellent," Gilly prepped her data transmission as she complimented him. Her severely edited and condensed version of Ash's notes made a potent package. "You've been practicing."

"Th-ank you." He preened. "You have the informa-tion?"

"Ready to send. I've translated into Partoke . . . I assume you'd rather not read Ling?"

"Ind-eed." His elbow spikes retracted fully, snapping closed.

Her lips twitched. "Transmission prepared. My payment?"

"Pre-par-ed. Send-ing?"

"Sending." Gilly sent the command to her third-party contact, as he did the same with her payment. As their mutual contact confirmed receipt of both, and sent each on, confirmation flashed for both almost simultaneously. Gilly breathed out an invisible sigh and did the mental calculation in her head, totaling up how many leetas her private account held now. Almost there. Almost ready. Just a few more jobs.

On screen, Brandyn's shoulder spikes extended fully, the rills of bone giving the Partokian a majestic look that belied what Gilly knew was pure youthful excitement. "As always, Gil-lian . . . a pleas-ure."

"Indeed. By the way, be careful. They've got their eye on you." She cut contact and brought the hopper around, not bothering to watch Brandyn's ship depart.

Business complete. Business as usual.

::Scott Ashford, report to the Central Office. Scott Ashford to the Central Office immediately::

In the middle of a rush assignment—tracking down which statutes applied during a species-based disagreement on art versus obscenity when humans were stuck in the middle, not even understanding why it was considered art, much less why it was considered obscene—Scott still made it out of his chair and halfway across the library before pausing, wondering if Gilly was at it again. The laconic, slightly nasal delivery was definitely Stuart. Ever since the absolute unqualified *disaster* of the Partokian talks, Gilly had pulled out all stops to cheer him up.

He couldn't control the roll of nausea at the thought of the fiasco. Knowing, without doubt, that every single Partokian delegate knew their strategy before they even opened their mouths . . . and unable to say

a word. How could he possibly explain his knowledge? The Partokians played their hand perfectly. As the mockery of talks unfolded, he'd come so close to going to the seniors—going to the *ambassadors*—and telling them the Partokians knew. Only Gilly's voice in his head held him back. “*And when they ask how you know? Don't be naïve, they're hardly going to thank you for being an illegal manip.*”

The concept of self-preservation wasn't a lost cause on him after all. The most he'd done was raise concerns, vaguely, to three different seniors. Who all ignored him with the ease of arrogance born of superior status. He'd returned from the talks feeling like an absolute traitor. Gilly'd gotten so pissed when he told her that, she hadn't spoken to him for a full standard.

::Scott Ashford, Central Office immediately:: Wavering, he glanced at the research node, then made for the doors. He couldn't risk it. He made it to Sector Central in record time.

To find no Gilly. Stuart sat at the main desk, looking attentive, professional, and controlled. And *feeling* oh-so-edgy. A cold fist of dread closed around Scott's stomach. Stuart's eyes flicked up to meet his. “Ashford is here,” he relayed into his streamlined headset, fitted so well against his ear and jaw as to be almost invisible.

A tall woman approached from the left immediately, and with a start Scott realized she'd come to collect him. Had she been lying in wait? Scary thought. Relieved he hadn't asked Stuart anything about why he'd been summoned, he faced her and received another jolt. She wasn't a woman, but a female Mor, the blue undertones in her flesh much softer than the dominant yellow, and shimmering under the Central lights in such a way as to appear reflective shadows of the deep blue suit she wore. Her pupils were fully contracted, giving her eyes a human appearance, and she wore the dark hair on her head long and straight, falling over her ears and the sides of her face to an equal length all around, straight bangs falling to her eyebrows and concealing her forehead. Unusual for a Mor, it appeared she encouraged the illusion, blending with humanity purposefully.

“Mr. Ashford,” she extended a gloved hand in the human greeting. “I'm Jaane. Follow me.” Doing so, he wasn't surprised to see her tail carefully tucked away down the back of the tailored suit. Not that most Mor would have their tails out in public, but for one so thoroughly blended as this, he wasn't surprised to note that it was almost impossible to tell a tail was being camouflaged.

The unease in the pit of his stomach grew, and the lingering taste of nausea flooded his throat again. Two hallways offered ample time to test her mind and he found it startlingly calm and quiet. Thoughts of a man—a male Mor rather—featured topmost. *Chol*. They worked together. For some time. Scott concentrated harder and let his vision blur out. Genial thoughts, some exasperated, all quite objective, and most tinted with a metallic tang he recognized from his limited experience with the species as the peculiar sense of what the Mor might term affection if they had a word for the concept in their language. Scott couldn't help but notice that *he* figured in as the barest afterthought if at all. A piece of mail to be picked up and delivered. The realization shriveled something within him. Empathically, Mors always presented a challenge, but Jaane read like a flat screen. He wondered if he could get away with brushing her actual hand or some other skin. Physical contact enhanced the empathy when a subject proved difficult. Caught by the graceful sway of her hips and hair before him and the impossibly long legs, the thought of brushing her skin took on a new meaning and he felt an inconvenient blush rise from his throat to his hairline. He swallowed hard as she paused at a door, knocked once, then entered.

Senior Wedderburn sat to one side of his own desk. In the large chair directly behind the desk sat the Mor from Jaane's thoughts. He wore full Assembly uniform, as did the human male standing just behind his left shoulder. Two Assembly officials sat against the far wall but Scott didn't recognize them, and didn't look at them long enough to ascertain their rank. The Mor behind the desk stood and the room seemed to close in.

Short dark hair spiked up, displaying the distinctive ridged ears of his species and baring his broad forehead, making the flare of bone over the eye sockets more noticeable than in Jaane's hair-softened countenance. Like hers, his pupils were contracted to human light-levels, displaying vivid green around the black centers. The fine blue cast to his flesh stood out much stronger, shading up through pale white with none of the golden tones of hers, his lips lavender in contrast to the more human-seeming

peachy-rose of Jaane's. If the face was ice, the thoughts were worse. Blue-white lightning bombarded Scott, flashing without heat but scorching just the same—striking across the distance of the desk to sum him up with a flickering glance and a mental review of pertinent points from files. Cold, hard suspicion raked every facet of his person; twisting and jiggling each tiny piece to see if it fit the larger puzzle being assembled. And at the center of the puzzle—watching how each piece lined up with Gillian Gedrick. Scott didn't remember ever experiencing claustrophobia in his life. He suddenly had an inkling what it might, conceivably, feel like.

"Junior Ashford." The rumbling voice stroked Scott's ears like a physical touch, husky, warm, and so unexpected out of *that* mouth he almost took a step backward. "I'm Chol Ghyad, Senior Investigator with the Assembly." He extended an ungloved hand, nail beds displaying the prominent claws, fully retracted. Scott stepped forward, taking the offered hand.

Already off balance, he realized a second too late that skin-to-skin contact with the investigator might not be wise considering his reaction to the Mor's thoughts, but there was no polite way around it. His hand locked with the cool grip and the force of an icy ocean wave eclipsed the lightning thought flashes. Ghyad's emotions hung closer to the surface than any Mor he'd met . . . Scott blinked, dazed, his hand squeezed in a solid, extended shake. *Testing me*, his mind whispered, while the rest of him got tumbled under the sweep of imagery his imagination painted out of the emotions.

"Have a seat." Chol indicated a chair while Scott's brain spun with pictures of hunting and stalking; teeming, twitching excitement. Swelling pride, superiority, undercut with the softest current of tickling anger. Staring at Ghyad while he backed into a chair, Scott got a ghostly overlay of the cool being in front of him lifting his left hand and casually licking blood off his claws, then his palm and fingers, with slow sweeps of a languid tongue. It did nothing to calm his stomach. He slapped back at his imagination, trying to tune the empathy down to a dull roar and *useful* information. Chol's eyes narrowed. "Mr. Ashford? Are you all right? You look . . . green."

"I'm . . . sorry, sir. I've been feeling nauseated." It was the truth ever since thinking about the Partoke talks. "I'm . . . in the middle of an assignment. I'm distracted. Forgive me." He rubbed his hands on his thighs, aware he looked and sounded nervous, panicky, and likely guilty of *something*. Wedderburn gave him a strange look.

Ghyad smiled. The velvet voice reassured where the expression did not. "I understand. I apologize, but this is important. You've met my aide, Jaane." He flicked his hand back at her, where she now stood at his right shoulder. Scott's eyes lifted and now that he was looking, he immediately found the Assembly insignia, tiny but there, on the lapel of her suit. Given it was the only Assembly sign and she was out of uniform, he guessed she was Chol's personal aide. Ghyad inclined his head to the left. "And Junior Investigator Kevin Heard."

The human stepped forward, leaning over the desk to shake his hand with a genuine smile. Scott lifted himself out of his chair to return the gesture, smiling back unconsciously. It was almost impossible not to—in his diplomatic experience he'd met plenty of people with all sorts of personalities, but the open friendliness radiating off Ghyad's coinvestigator was rare and such a welcome change from the Mor that Scott felt himself relax against his better judgment. Yanking back on the relaxation impulse, Scott shoved at the distracting mental brilliance of Ghyad and focused on Investigator Heard's thoughts and feelings, scanning for signs of Gilly.

The refreshing openness bloomed through the contact of the handshake as well, and Scott gave over to the pang of disappointment when one of the background thoughts colored with affection and contentment was of a partner back at home. He mentally slapped himself. *Been around Gilly too long. First Jaane, now this. Not everything on two legs is potential, Ashford*. He could almost hear Gilly whisper, "*Exactly; why limit yourself to two legs?*" He released the man's hand on cue and sat, cataloging the gentle rush of thoughts and emotions while ostensibly turning his attention back to Ghyad.

Kevin's thoughts didn't exhibit any preoccupation with Gilly, and Scott found himself breathing easier for it, though he knew that might be premature. Obviously, Chol was more dangerous as the more powerful. In Kevin's well-ordered, if a bit creatively smudged, thoughts, Scott easily picked out the theme of the investigation. The Partoke mess offered the latest, and worst, in a string of indications that the Diplomatic

Corps suffered a leak.

Ghyad was here to turn off the leak.

Heard thought well of his senior, which allayed some of Scott's rising paranoia. If a man of Kevin's sort liked Ghyad . . . well, *like* might be putting it strongly. Scott examined the thoughts and sifted their distinct flavor. Kevin respected Chol. Thought him an amazing investigator with superb talent. Thought at times he was borderline pathologically obsessive, then wondered if that wasn't being speciesist. Worried it might be simply a Mor trait and became extra-nice to his supervisor for a few days afterward every time he entertained that thought.

Scott knew from his trips into Mor headspace that Mors tended toward the single-minded, but also had a *feeling* from his foray into Chol's mind that Kevin was picking up on more than a species imperative. He found himself wanting to reassure the investigator that he wasn't being prejudiced.

To Kevin, Gillian Gedrick was one name—another file, another pilot who flew missions for the Diplomatic Corps. One more name among Tzudeki, Collins, Forsythe, and the rest. Whereas to Ghyad, Gillian Gedrick appeared to be some sort of cornerstone of the—

Scott's breath stopped. His entire body froze, and for a moment it felt like even his heart stilled. The rest of the room grayed out and all he could see were two brilliant flashes of green staring at him out of a ghostly pale face. Lavender lips moved, but he heard nothing.

Chol thought Gilly was the leak.

He breathed shallowly as his lungs kicked in, employing every shred of diplomatic training to keep his face expressionless. No doubt he'd gone pale. Lucky he'd already said he felt sick. Chol's voice reached his ears but the sense was lost. "I'm sorry, sir, could you repeat the question?"

Ghyad's eyes narrowed and Scott absently noticed he had the longest eyelashes he'd ever seen. He couldn't remember if all Mor tended to have longer eyelashes. Given the light sensitivity issues, it would make sense. *Focus. Bad time to go into shock.*

"—recent talks with the Partokian delegation?"

"Yes, sir," Scott hazarded.

"I was asking about your personal interpretation of the mission. How you felt the talks went, right from day one." In Scott's peripheral vision, Ghyad's left fingers spread on the edge of Wedderburn's desk, his nails flexing gently. The curved, pointed tips extended with the flex, arching toward the smooth wood, then relaxing. And again.

"Complete disaster. Sir."

"From the first?"

He swallowed hard. Too many layers to protect. He was too far off his game and wasn't the world's best liar. Which Gilly kept telling him would make him a sucky diplomat. But he was also undoubtedly on record as commenting on having a bad feeling about the talks to more than one senior. Pointless, and dangerous, to deny it now. Besides, starting with the Partokian mess was safe. Gilly hadn't even been there.

"Their entire delegation was too calm. They responded to our opening as if . . . we'd asked them to *dance*." His indignation at the mockery of the talks returned.

"Surely that's the goal of a successful diplomatic mission," Ghyad husked.

"Except when they know the steps better than we do and we appear to be wearing a blindfold and have never heard this particular version of the song before."

Ghyad laughed, and it sent a shiver down Scott's spine. Not just for the strange tactile rumble the sound carried, but because of the lingering edge of danger Chol's genuine amusement wafted to his extra senses. He didn't know why it might be dangerous for this man to find him amusing, but his empathy screamed that it was. Given the way his mind had been interpreting Ghyad's mind, he was inclined to listen.

"—admit, an appropriate analogy," Chol was saying, grinning up at Jaane, who smiled. "You spoke to your superiors about your concerns." It wasn't a question. "They did nothing. You did nothing more?" Scott shifted uncomfortably. "I'm a Junior Diplomat, sir. I didn't know what else to do." Conscious of Senior Wedderburn sitting just to the side, he tried to think how to phrase this appropriately. "I only had

this . . . sense that everything seemed too smooth from their side of the table. Nothing tangible.” *Nothing but incredibly solid, illegal, inadmissible information I couldn’t possibly admit to without getting arrested, imprisoned, and possibly vivisected* .

Ghyad nodded. “Say nothing of the fact that you were doing exactly what diplomats are supposed to do,” he drawled in that silky voice, drawing one finger along the edge of the desk. “Using your intuition, reading the beings, trying to ascertain the situation from their side of the table, noting when the proceedings seemed to be going too smoothly, notifying your superiors of your suspicions.”

Chol flashed a dazzling smile, and Scott had to fight to catch his breath. Then the laser gaze shifted to Wedderburn. The low voice took on a subtle, menacing quality. “One would think the Diplomatic Corps would be in the habit of listening to the young up-and-coming they employ. Rising stars are rising for a reason, after all.” Chol’s smile stretched as a dull flush climbed Wedderburn’s cheeks, but he cut the man off when his mouth opened. “Something tells me Junior Ashford has what it takes to go far in his chosen field.” He refocused his attention on Scott.

“Let’s talk about your colleagues. Heard and I have a number of individuals we’d like to discuss. We’ll move as quickly as we can, understanding you’re not feeling well, but we’d like your honest, candid opinion on each. And Mr. Ashford?” Ghyad leaned forward on his elbows, gaze locked on Scott’s, right hand extended to lie flat on the desk between them. The nails flexed again, Scott guessed unconsciously. “Unlike your direct superiors, I find listening to individuals with good instincts to be extremely . . . useful.”

* * *

Gilly half rose to wave Scott to her table, intending to settle back down with her drink. Catching sight of his pallor and expression, she kept rising and met him instead, gripping his arm and supporting him the rest of the way. “What is *wrong*? You look like death warmed over.” Depositing him in a chair she waved a server over and ordered him a chocolate martini. Something with a punch that he wouldn’t even taste. He looked well past his usual strawberry daiquiri.

Scott sucked in a breath and started babbling. “Gilly, I’ve been with *investigators* . . . they’re looking for a leak. Not that they said that, but I read it in their heads, and they’re awful, well, not both of them, one of them is actually really sweet, but the other one is, and he thinks it’s *you*, and—”

Pausing only long enough for the drink to be set down, Scott recounted the experience in his rambling version of highlights. Gilly listened and sipped, biting her tongue at the urge to command him to summarize, knowing it wouldn’t help. Exhaustion stood out plain on his face. Given the topic, she wanted whatever details he felt he needed to add.

She could already hear the plaintive undertone. *Tell me it’s not true, Gilly. Convince me he’s wrong. Right. Next topic please.*

He wound down and paused for breath. “Mor, eh?” She shuddered. “They’re so cold. No pun intended. Is he good-looking . . . given species-differentials?”

Scott looked horrified. “You’re *not* thinking—”

“You’ve just described an investigator who believes I’m a leak, and is therefore a danger to me.

Obviously, I need to ascertain his weaknesses. You described a *male* of a species; ergo, we begin with sexual weaknesses.”

“Gillian, you are *such* a sexist.” He sat back with an offended glare.

“Realist.” Inwardly she breathed a sigh of relief, his ire distracting him from the question of guilt or innocence, calming him down through sheer familiarity. “Weaknesses. We need weaknesses. We need to know why he’s looking at me. You say it was just in his mind that I stood out. Not in anyone else’s?”

“Exactly. Wedderburn just thinks you’re a crack flier—oh, and that you have a great ass, by the way . . . ewww . The two Assembly Internal Affairs reps just have you as another name, and that’s all you are to the junior investigator.”

“So why am I more to the Mor,” she mused. “Chol Ghyad . . . Ghyad.” Her finger tapped against her glass. Nothing. No links to her father that she could think of. She’d been careful. Why? Was he just that good? “Tell me more about them in general.”

“Um . . . he has a gorgeous aide with him. She’s Morish, too. She looks human. You know as soon as

you actually look at her, but . . . wow. Oh, and the junior I was talking about? The genuinely nice one that almost makes it seem like they're doing good cop/ bad cop, except he's not thinking that way so I know they aren't? He is *adorable* ." Scott suddenly straightened in his chair and she realized her eyes must have shown something. "Stay away from him. He's taken, and he wouldn't be interested."

Gilly arched her eyebrows. "How can you be so sure?" She snorted when he tapped his temple meaningfully. "So now *that* means you can predict the shifting sands of sexual interest?"

He sipped his drink. "You know some people are more set in their ways." He sipped again and choked, his eyes widening as he scraped his chair backward, flattening himself to the wall. "And don't turn around because he's *here* ." He pushed back into the shadow of the potted tree that stood beside their table as she ignored his protest, followed the direction of his gaze, and spotted the new arrival. Nearly Scott's height, broad-shouldered without being overly imposing, the Junior Investigator didn't actually look the part of his intimidating position. A teddy bear of a man with short dark hair, a sweet smile, and the kindest face Gilly had seen since meeting Ash, she would have been inclined to introduce them if she'd run into Kevin on her own.

Looking back at the man cowering under the potted plant, Gilly inquired casually, "What are you doing?"

"We don't want to look suspicious," he said from the shadows. "Like I immediately came to you."

"I'm sure they already know we know we're friends, and spend time together."

"Still," he whispered, though how he thought Kevin would hear him across the crowded restaurant bar, she wasn't certain.

"All right then," she whispered back, picking up her half-empty glass. "I'm going to go chat him up. I'll see if you're wrong about his interest and find out if I can't . . . compromise his investigation."

"Wait! Don't . . ."

Given his absurd antics, she took great delight in ignoring the final exhortation, walking away to the sounds of "has a boyfriend." Dodging various people, she eased up to the bar and slid in beside Kevin. His height meant she needed to look up . . . and up . . . but she tossed her hair just right and used it to her advantage as best she could. "Hello. Noticed you arrive." He looked surprised to be approached, even more surprised when she laid her hand on his arm. She kept her smile friendly, swallowing her amusement. Yes, he and Ash were a match. She carefully placed her drink down right next to his glass of wine. "Buy you a drink?" She let her finger run down his arm, smiling up at him in open invitation. He blinked, flushed, and shook his head, picking up his wine glass. "Oh, no. Thank you. I'm just . . . having this one."

"What a shame. If you change your mind . . . I'm Gilly," she extended her hand, necessitating him setting his glass down again as he shook it. He set his glass as far from hers as he could. She sighed internally.

"Gilly? Would that be Gillian? Gillian Gedrick?" He smiled and took her hand in his, as she nodded.

"You're a pilot, aren't you?"

"I am." She reassessed her opinion of his suitability for his job when his expression didn't hint at anything beyond general name recognition. "Now, how did you know that?"

"I'm here with a team conducting an investigation of some matters for the Diplomatic Corps, and we were apprised of the pilots flying for the Corps. Your flying record speaks for itself. You stand out." He inclined his head and toasted her.

She smiled and lifted her glass in turn. "But not enough," she teased.

He flushed again, but smiled as he averted his eyes. "I have a partner back home, Ms. Gedrick. Thank you, though. I'm . . . flattered."

"Ah well. Have a lovely . . . investigation." With a final flirtatious wink, she pushed off from the bar and sauntered back across the room, knowing full well his eyes were not following her. She flopped back down in her chair. "You win. I'm not his type. Which means . . ." She directed a finger across the table at Scott.

He gave her a panicked look. "What?! No! Absolutely not! I don't do that! I don't just . . . for information . . . or . . . whatever. And . . . no! He's got a *boyfriend*, and he's *happy*, and he wouldn't be interested."

She blew hair out of her face impatiently. "Just give it a try. You wouldn't be doing it just for information.

You already said you like him and you think he's hot. That means you're doing it for honest reasons." She smiled brightly. "You're only doing it for ulterior motives if you don't actually *want* to."

He blinked at her. "Oh." The confusion on his face turned thoughtful.

She smiled in triumph. *I am so fucking lucky he can't read my mind*. "This way, you're just also getting the *extra* benefit of compromising an investigation and helping out your best friend. At least go talk to him."

The chocolate martini undoubtedly made him easier to convince. She watched him step up to the bar, then turn and express somewhat overdone surprise at seeing the investigator. Oddly, some instinct coiled inside her. The hair on the back of her neck rose. Kevin smiled, honestly pleased to see Scott. Hands extended, they shook . . .

Scott's left hand went to the bar, catching himself as he staggered. Gilly watched, frozen, as all the blood drained from Scott's face. Concerned, Kevin caught him by the elbow, helped him sit on a bar stool as his knees gave out. The instinct uncoiled like a whip, snapping out through her nervous system and she ran her identcard through the table, paying for her drink and Scott's, pushing her chair back. Scott's head lifted and turned. Their eyes locked.

Go. Now. The instinct screamed. The impossible crushed look on his face said it all. Adrenaline surged and muscles *hurt* with the need to move. Then Kevin leaned back from the bartender with a glass of water.

Scott's face went diplomat blank. Eyes half-shuttering, mouth softening, he turned to the investigator. If he looked back in her direction, Gilly didn't know. She was long gone.

He tried to control the circling, repetitious thoughts with each step. He sucked in a breath and continued down the hall of the residences to the lift.

Interesting, really, that when he was confused, he always went to the one person whose mind he couldn't read. She always calmed his confusion. Now she was the confusion, where did he go?

Between his own interview and Kevin's evening drink, Chol had shared his suspicions with his junior. They'd interviewed a few other individuals. Puzzle pieces were aligning.

Interesting what a large puzzle piece he himself was.

Used, used, used. He slammed down a mental door. *Stop*.

Reaching the end of the hall, he called the lift. Rode up to her level counting his breaths.

He stared at her door, not even remembering walking down the hall. Finally he lifted his hand and knocked.

The knock stopped Gilly in the midst of sorting essentials from dross. Stepping to one side of the door she lifted the small multispecies tranq gun she carried on her sideline jobs, and adjusted her thumb on the species-selector. "Yes?"

"It's me."

"Come." She lowered the gun and touched off the door lock.

He entered and the door slid shut behind him, lock reactivating automatically. He glanced around her living room, then at the gun. She didn't speak, just slipped it back into her belt. "Well. That answers . . . that."

"You didn't even need to ask. I saw your face. Whatever you got off him in the bar . . . it was all you needed." She met his eyes squarely. She wouldn't apologize, dammit. She wouldn't apologize for who she was.

He nodded. "You're right. This . . . Chol . . . is good at his job. He's got what he needs, too. He's got a lot of the pieces. It's all very convincing. Of all the beings connected to the missions with leaks, he traced the pattern. He laid it all out for Kevin this afternoon. It was right at the top of Kevin's mind, in the bar. Even if you weren't flying a mission, I was on it—" His voice cracked. He looked away.

She swallowed hard. Not apologizing for who she was didn't mean not feeling like slime. It just meant keeping it on the inside. *Bluff it out, Gedrick*.

"So what are you here for? Turn me in?" Scott's moral code and her efforts to bend it might be a

longstanding joke, but she knew his sense of honor. She'd expected to have a lot longer to buff the shine off of it before easing him into her way of life. This was too soon. The information came too suddenly, from an external source. She knew him well enough to know that he'd think turning her in could be considered for her own good. Which was why the tranq gun was currently default set on human.

"Thought about it." He shook his head. "Couldn't even entertain the thought seriously. You should know that, but you don't, and that's part of the problem." She blinked, confused, but he kept talking so she kept listening. "I'm here to tell you Ghyad wants an airtight case, and you've got two days before he closes on you." He looked at the sorted piles. "Not that it looks like you need them. Already on your way?"

"Actually, no. Just some contingency preparations." Her mouth twisted. "I wasn't going to leave without seeing you."

"Really." He didn't sound convinced. "Well. Here I am. They'll complete the interviews tomorrow. His aide is gathering the systems data. Records of flight paths, ships taken out, time logs, personnel logs, etc. They'll call you in on the second day and spring the trap, but they're going to quietly start curtailing diplomatic travel before then. For all Kevin is a nice, fair guy, Chol has him convinced."

"That would be because I am, in fact, guilty."

"Yes, I suppose that would be why. Anyway, that's why I'm here. To . . . warn you." Scott's face suddenly looked pained. "Help you get out while you can. You can, right?"

"I'll file my resignation electronically in the morning. I can be off-station on the first transport and no one can stop me. Just another traveler . . . not a diplomatic employee." She forced a smile. "Why help?"

"What are friends for?" he said mechanically.

She tried to say thank you. What came out was, "If it's any consolation, it's just what we do."

"What?"

"My family. It's not personal. It's just how we survive, how we live. We find angles and we play them. It's why I told you that you'd never meet my dad. Why I'd never introduce you. He's a career criminal. That's why I came to fly for the Corps. The chance to deal in information."

His brows drew in, confused. "Why would I find that consolation?"

"I don't . . . know. It seems like that's what people say. That bit about consolation."

He huffed out a dry laugh. "You're not very good at this friendship thing, are you?"

"On the whole, no." She rubbed the bridge of her nose. "I thought I was getting pretty good at it, with you."

"Except for the whole using me for information you were selling off to the highest bidder thing."

"I wasn't *just* using you for information."

He looked skeptical. "No?"

"No." She shot him an affronted glare. "I use lots of people for information. Everyone. I don't get to *know* them. I don't talk to them. Not the way I do you. I don't tell them about my father." She ran a hand through her hair. "You're different. As much as I tried not to let you be. I don't want to leave you here."

"You don't have a choice. You have to leave."

"Oh, I know I have to leave."

"Then what . . . oh. Oh no." He held up both hands. "I don't know what you're thinking, but *no*. Let's recall I just found out that the person I trusted most in the world because I couldn't read her mind was *using* me to steal diplomatic secrets and sell them. Effectively making me a traitor to my own government." He backed up a step, a habit Gilly found incredibly cute, given her diminutive size.

Hands on her hips, she advanced on him. "Think about it. You don't even like your work. They don't listen to you. And you're always right. Because you've got the edge. I listen to you. I know you're right, because I *know* about the edge. You and me . . . in business together. I've got the money, almost all I need for a ship of my own. That's what I've been working toward, that's why I've been selling the information. Come in with me! I've always been planning to ask you in, I just wanted to wait until I could . . . get you a little more unbent. A little less spit and polish, a little more flexible. A little more scuffed-up around the edges. More willing to play both sides against the middle. But . . . OK . . . so here we are.

We're at the crossroads and now's the time. You and me, a team. You can relax around me. You can be you. The real you. You don't have to hide and pretend. That's the point, Ash. *That's* real friendship. You did trust me. You had to trust me the same way the rest of humanity has to do it, without the telepathic edge. You got burned because you couldn't see it all in me, the way you do with everyone else. And yes, I suck. I have situational ethics, and I used them on you. Although, to be fair, have I ever lied to you about having situational ethics?"

His brows furrowed. "Well . . . no."

"Have I ever once implied to you that I'm loyal to our dear Assembly, or even worse, to Earth?"

He laughed outright. "Emphatically not."

"Scott. I'm sorry. I honestly am. I didn't think I would be, but . . . when you looked at me, in the bar, I wished it could have been different."

His laughter died. His hand cupped her chin and lifted it, guiding her eyes back to his. The sadness on his face cracked something in her chest. "I'm sorry, too," he whispered. "I can't just . . . leave. This is all I know. All I am." He pulled her into a hug.

"And this is all I am," she whispered into his chest.

Chol slammed the door to Wedderburn's office behind Scott, pointing him to a chair. Scott jumped at the sound. Someone was pissed off.

Kevin sat calmly beside Wedderburn, who mopped at his forehead with a white handkerchief. Jaane sat to the left of Chol's chair with a data screen in front of her. In a sunny yellow pantsuit, she looked absolutely stunning, but when Chol stalked around to the front of Scott's chair, he eclipsed the view.

Chol leaned forward, hands on the arms of the chair, claws fully extended and puncturing the leather.

"Junior Diplomat Ashford." The voice remained husky, but the glacial tone made Scott shiver. "You're good friends with Pilot Gillian Gedrick."

"Yes."

Lavender lips drew into a tight line. "I assume you're aware Pilot Gedrick resigned this morning."

Scott tried for pure shock. "I . . . no!"

"Where is she?"

"I don't know."

Suddenly the investigator stood, towering in front of Scott's chair. After a moment of total silence, his spoke softly. "You remember, Mr. Ashford, my mentioning to Senior Wedderburn that you would go far in the Corps. You would be amazed at the influence a word from the Investigations Sector has over advancements of that nature."

You'll be the youngest ambassador since Kraiger. Your parents will be thrilled. Just make sure you'll be thrilled, too. He stared up at the preternaturally still investigator, then stood up. To his surprise, he found himself eye to eye with Chol. Somehow the Mor seemed . . . taller. "Actually, I wouldn't be surprised. However, that information would be much more meaningful to me if I were still employed by the Diplomatic Corps." Reaching into his pocket, he extracted the disk containing his letter of resignation and tossed it at Wedderburn, then stepped sideways, turned on his heel, and left.

Gilly shouldered the pack more comfortably. She wasn't going to miss the Corps. She was off to buy her own ship. So the miasma of depressing thoughts could just bugger off anytime, dammit. She yanked her hat on more firmly as a pair of security officers strolled by.

Settling down in a seat to wait for her transport to be called, she propped her feet on her bags and wished she'd just stolen a hopper. But that could have gotten Deb in trouble. Bad enough she'd be leaving Ash in a wash of suspicion. She'd tried to warn him, but he'd insisted on staying.

Why would he go with her, after all?

A large body dropped into the chair right next to her, despite multiple seats being open. She rolled her eyes.

"You move damn fast for having such short legs."

Her head jerked around. "What are you doing here?"

He looked ridiculous in some sort of fashionable, bright yellow glasses/visor combo, his hair gelled into spikes, but she had to grant he didn't look anything like Junior Diplomat Scott Ashford. He smiled and hugged his pack to his chest. "Taking a friend's advice. Turns out she was right about a few things. Like lingering suspicion by association. Investigator Ghyad made it clear that since I couldn't provide him with your location, I could expect to become the oldest living Junior Diplomat on record."

"Dammit, Ash, I'm sorry." She took a deep breath and stared at her packs, then reached out and gripped his hand. "We'll go back." The minute the words were out of her mouth, the rock in her stomach dissolved. The tension eating at her shoulders relaxed. Her resolve firmed. Righteous anger stirred in her gut. "They're not going to do this to you. They can't, not if they've got me. The most you're guilty of is talking about diplomatic matters with other Corps employees and damned if everyone doesn't do that. If you don't come out of it with nothing more than a reprimand, I'll eat that idiotic visor you're—" She started to rise, grabbing her shoulder pack.

His hand closed around her wrist, yanking her back into her seat. His face glowed behind the glasses.

"Gil . . ." He shook his head. "I don't even know what to say."

"Don't bother. Save it for *Chol* ." She tried to rise again, but this time he held her fast. "Seriously, the sooner we start the proceedings the—"

He shook his head. "We don't want to miss our transport." He jerked his head at the screen above them, running rapidly with numbers, times, and destinations. "Where are we headed? I just bought an outgoing and figured I could add on when we boarded."

She glared. "Back to Sector Central. *Now* . Move your ass."

"You didn't let me finish telling you about the advice I took from this friend of mine. She also told me to be careful about accepting funny hats unless I really wanted them."

Gilly stared. "You aren't serious—"

"Can I tell you something?" he whispered. At her slow nod, he leaned a little closer. "I *hate* the Diplomatic Corps."

"You're coming into business with me?"

"On one condition."

"Only *one*?"

"One I can think of right now."

"And that is?"

"That you *never* under any circumstances try to make me sleep with anyone for information ever again."

"Even if he or she is incredibly sexy?"

"Even if."

"Ashford, you have the weirdest moral code of anyone I've ever met."

"At least I *have* one."

"I have a moral code!"

". . ."

"I do!"

"And we'll be developing that as we develop a code of ethics for our business."

"Ash?"

"Yes?"

"Let me give you a little friendly advice . . ."

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Within the den, a wind was rising.

Normally a pleasant, puffy cumulus shading to a relaxed altostratus, Aerial was undergoing a metamorphosis that was as ominous as it was swift. She began to swell and expand, puffing herself up mightily, spreading upward and outward until she filled half the den and her roiling crest and splintering edges pushed threateningly against the walls and ceiling. She grew dark, darker than Eric had ever seen her before. She was cumulonimbus gray, then nimbus charcoal, then—she was black, *black*, a glowing, rumbling anvil-head.

She moved toward the couple.

Jessica took a step backward, and fell down. Mesmerized by the turbulent, roaring thunderstorm that now dominated the room, she started edging backward on her backside, pushing with her hands and feet. An anxious Eric hurried to place himself between his fiancée and the glowering cloud.

“Aerial, you don’t understand! There’s no reason to be angry. This is the way people are, this is the way they’re meant to be. It doesn’t mean that you and I . . .”

—from “Overcast” by Alan Dean Foster

Also Available from DAW Books:

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INTRODUCTION

Kerrie Hughes

I started to put together this anthology because I love to read about the dynamics between friends in action-packed or challenging relationships. As the project got going and submissions came in, I realized that fellowship is more than just stories of friendship in unique settings. Fellowship is the part of friendship that defines our character and makes us who we are. It is the moment in life when we as individuals pull together and show one another what we are made of.

Consider for a minute what you do when disaster strikes or when someone or something stands in the way of your needs and desires. Do you reveal what you truly are inside through voice and action? Are you a leader or tyrant, follower or sheep, voice of reason or dissenter? The answer probably depends on who you are with at that moment and the circumstance at hand. It also depends on your experience and talents.

I would like to think of myself as a calm, guiding influence who can lead others through crisis and calamity, but I know full well that if blood is present I'm the one who calls the ambulance, not the one who gets the compress started. I tend to faint at the sight of vital fluids spilling out of open wounds. I also know that if running is involved, you may as well give me the gun and I will buy us some time, as I'll be bringing up the rear anyway. Hopefully I'll be able to shoot all foes and you can come back for me in the car. (Given my blood aversion, I'll probably have passed out from the act of shooting someone, so hopefully my comrades will check my pulse before thinking I took a fatal hit.)

All kidding aside, as I assembled this book I noticed that fellowship can also be a quiet thing, without blood, bullets, running, and mayhem. It is also cooperation and openness between people with common goals. I knew from experience that every story would be a glimpse into the hearts and minds of the authors. What I didn't realize until now was that nearly every author was someone who has enriched my life somehow and in some way. They are all truly comrades in the fellowship of the written word and friends of the human soul.

So tip a cider and enjoy the fellowship!

Gra, Dilseacht, Cairdeas!

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FELLOWSHIP FANTASTIC



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