

What do you do when you're caught between
two unstoppable forces?

CROSSFIRE

The background of the cover is a night-time photograph of a city skyline. The Space Needle is the central focus, illuminated and standing out against the dark sky. Several bright, jagged lightning bolts are visible, with one prominent bolt striking the top of the Space Needle. The city lights are a mix of warm yellows and oranges, and some cooler blues and purples from the sky and lightning.

a Shadowrun novel

R. L. King

CROSSFIRE

a Shadowrun novel

by

R. L. King

Crossfire is fan fiction in the world of *Shadowrun*, which is the property of Catalyst Game Labs ("Catalyst") under license from Topps Company, Inc. ("Topps"), and was not created under their auspices. This work is in no way meant to challenge any copyrights or properties owned by Catalyst or Topps. All settings, characters, and situations borrowed from other *Shadowrun* properties (including sourcebooks, modules, and published fiction) remain the property of their owners. The author hereby disclaims any interest in said proprietary rights.. Ocelot and Harry are the property of Dan Nitschke. Shadowraith is the property of Steven Rosenau. Joe is the property of Ken Wilson. All are used with permission. This work is © 1998-2012 R. L. King.

Contents

Some Notes.....	6
Prologue.....	8
1.....	12
2.....	20
3.....	32
4.....	38
5.....	44
6.....	71
7.....	78
8.....	85
9.....	92
10.....	99
11.....	106
12.....	117
13.....	124
14.....	133
15.....	137
16.....	146
17.....	148
18.....	155
19.....	170
20.....	182
21.....	186
22.....	190
23.....	198
24.....	206
25.....	210
26.....	212
27.....	220
28.....	229
29.....	233

30.....	241
31.....	249
32.....	268
33.....	276
34.....	288
35.....	294
36.....	303
37.....	321
38.....	332
39.....	345
40.....	349
41.....	357
42.....	362
43.....	374
44.....	400
45.....	405
46.....	421
Epilogue.....	429
Acknowledgements.....	433

Some Notes

Crossfire was originally written in 1998. The *Shadowrun* game has evolved quite a bit since then – they're up into the 2070s now – but we've still got our feet firmly in the mid 2050s for the series of novels of which *Crossfire* is the first. If you wanted to put it into an edition of the game, figure it's somewhere between Second and Third.

Some familiarity with the basics of the *SR* universe will be quite helpful in making sense of *Crossfire*, since it does refer to events that have occurred in the "real" game world. However, I cheerfully play fast and loose with the Canon because sometimes I like things to work a little differently, so don't complain if I throw you a curveball every now and then. I promise, it all works out in the end.

Some of you who are newer *SR* players who weren't around when I first started posting these novels on my website might wonder about the connection between the Winterhawk in the story and the one in the game. Yeah, they're both the same guy – kind of. I've been a *Shadowrun* freelancer for awhile now (most of my contributions were in the early to mid '00s) and at some point I submitted 'Hawk as a possible Jackpointer. To my delight he was accepted, and he's been posting his sarcastic comments, mostly about magic, in the sourcebooks ever since. But because I wanted to use Dr. Alastair Stone in a completely different context in my own original fiction, I asked that he be given a different "secret identity" in the canon and Jason Hardy, *Shadowrun* Line Developer, graciously agreed (I'm quite amused by the name he ended up giving him, by the way). Anyway, you can figure that the two diverged quite some time ago – think of them as alternate universe versions of each other, similar but different.

That's really about it. I hope you enjoy the story as much as I enjoyed writing it. If you do, check out the other four novels in the series.

Oh, and please—if you liked it (or even if you didn't!), send me feedback. I love hearing from readers. You can reach me at rat@dragonwriter.net.

--Rat, April 2012

Prologue

The office was large, sepulchral, appointed in an opulence that was at the same time spartan and almost sinfully luxurious. The man who entered it now had been summoned; if he had not, there was no question that he would not be standing here, trying desperately to hide his nervousness. No one came up to the boss' office without having first been summoned. It was a fact that every one of the corporation's employees, from the lowliest janitor up to the most lofty executive vice president, knew almost instinctively from the moment at which they began their employ.

The man stood for a moment in front of the door, which had just closed softly behind him (bringing on the unbidden and decidedly unwelcome fear that he wasn't ever going to get out of here again) and gathered his bearings before approaching the desk on the far side of the room. Sparing a quick glance around the office, he took in the high ceilings, the fine marble floors covered with a scattering of priceless oriental rugs, and the carefully-chosen objets d'art which complemented the room without dominating it. The heavy drapes of the dramatic window behind the desk were open, revealing a stunning panorama of black sky, shimmering stars, and the tops of some of the other buildings far away.

Squaring his shoulders, the man stepped into the room and crossed toward the desk. What the objets d'art had failed to do, the desk did nicely: a long, low affair carved from a single piece of obsidian, it stretched out before the window like a malevolent presence all its own, drawing the visitor's eye immediately to it. The desk was nearly empty, uncovered by the typical clutter of the office: dataterminal, untidy stacks of papers, pens, folders, and personal effects were conspicuously absent, leaving the black surface of the desk as still and unmarred as that of a becalmed sea at midnight.

Behind the desk was a tall leather chair, currently turned around so the occupant (if indeed there was one) could gaze out

the window at the magnificent view. As the man approached, a figure rose from the chair and stood, still facing the window. "Beautiful night, is it not?" The voice was low, rich and full, and carried clearly to the man although the figure had spoken softly. The accent was very slight and almost unidentifiable.

"Y—yes, sir," the man said, trying not to stammer. "It is."

The figure did not turn around. If the thought had occurred to him that he was committing a breach of etiquette by failing to face his underling, then it did not seem to bother him. "Yes..." he said softly, as if he were speaking to himself. "Yes...it is a beautiful night. Not so beautiful as some I've seen. But it will do for now, I think."

The man, wisely, remained silent.

The figure remained in the same position, staring out over the skyline. Tall, powerfully built, he wore a gray suit of the finest tailoring. All at once he turned around, cat-quick, to face his visitor. "What do you have for me?"

The man could not meet his eyes, although he covered it well. The figure was still wreathed in shadow, but his eyes, cold and purposeful, burned into the man's psyche.

"Success, sir," the man said, his voice getting a bit stronger. He knew he had the information the boss wanted to hear, and this was always a good thing. The unlucky ones were those who were forced to report to the boss that they had failed in whatever task with which they had been charged. "I've located the one you seek."

"Excellent." The dark figure settled back down in his chair, regarding his underling over steepled fingers. "Details."

The man shifted a bit, nervously. "I—don't have many details, sir. I do have a location, though."

The boss waited.

"Seattle."

One dark eyebrow crept minimally upward. "Seattle?"

"Yes, sir."

"What would he be doing there, I wonder?" Again, the man behind the desk spoke as if to himself.

The underling chose to answer the question anyway, desperate to impart whatever information he had obtained and get out of the boss's unnerving presence. "He's involved himself in the – shadow community, sir."

The eyebrow rose slightly again. "Indeed?"

"Yes, sir. I – haven't been able to find out any more detail yet, except that he has others with him. I will, of course, continue my investigation and provide you with more information as soon as I have obtained it." The man's voice once more grew more confident. The boss had summoned him before he had had time to complete his search, but there would be more, once he was allowed to return to his decks and his contacts.

The boss digested this information, his cold gaze directed now through the underling rather than at him. "Indeed..." he repeated. After a long, uncomfortable silence, during which time the underling tried with a fair degree of success to remain standing still, the boss's eyes snapped back to focus on the man's face. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir. Not yet. But I assure you – "

"That will be all, then." With a curt nod, the boss turned his chair back around to face the window.

The man swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He took a deep breath and re-crossed the room to the door as quickly as he could manage without appearing to be retreating. Outside, the door once again closed behind him, he paused to collect himself before taking another deep breath, straightening his suit, and marching purposefully toward the elevator that would take him back down to the real world. He was certain that once he was back in his element, plugged into his decks or in contact with the numerous people who provided him with information, it would not be long at all before he could dig up something that would please the boss. As uncomfortable as he got in the boss's presence, the man took great pride in the fact that this project was a private one, commissioned directly from the top and undertaken clandestinely, in addition to his regular duties. The boss must have great faith in his abilities, he was sure.

When the next decker came on shift four hours later and discovered the man's dead, brain-fried body slumped in his chair, still connected to his deck, no one thought much of it. It was a sad occasion, of course, but these things happened. Every decker who worked for any corporation knew it. Sometimes you just found out too much about the wrong things, and you paid for it with your life.

1.

The run had been a success, but rarely had the successful completion of a job been received with such a lack of enthusiasm.

It was after midnight. The battered Gaz-Willys Nomad rumbled along the sparsely-populated Interstate 5, meticulously maintaining the posted speed limit. If anyone (such as a curious Lone Star patrol) had taken the time to look inside the Nomad's blacked-out windows, they might have discovered something that would have interested them greatly. As it was, no one seemed inclined to bother the truck as it made its way back toward Seattle. At least one thing was going right. That, along with the fact that the object of the run had been obtained, made exactly two.

The four occupants of the truck were all slumped in their seats in various attitudes of exhaustion, injury, introspection, or some combination of the above. In the rear compartment, taking up the majority of the wide bench seat, the young Amerind troll, Joe, was uncharacteristically silent. His armored jacket was torn and stained with blood from where he had, as usual, taken the brunt of the opposition's attacks. Most of his wounds had already been healed, but those that remained at this moment were claiming most of his attention.

Next to him, perched on the edge of the seat, was Ocelot. He looked worse than he felt, since his wounds had mostly been healed as well. However, healing could do nothing about the aching muscles and bone-weary exhaustion he was currently experiencing. He sat with his hands jammed in the pockets of his jacket, even now scanning the area in front of them for potential threats. Right now, he was thinking, anybody who decided to tangle with them in their current state of mind had better

have his affairs in order. Patience and restraint were two words that didn't exist in Ocelot's vocabulary at the moment.

In the driver's seat was ShadoWraith. The tall elf's eerie white eyes never stayed still, the pinprick pupils roving constantly over the view out the windshield, the side windows, and the truck's three mirrors. Other than the movement of his eyes, though, `Wraith remained almost completely still, his hands gripping the steering wheel tightly, his features set in an expression of intense resolve.

Finally, in his usual position in the shotgun seat, was Winterhawk. Slumped into the corner of the seat next to the door, the mage had his hands in the pockets of his longcoat much like Ocelot did, but his morose scrutiny was confined to the view directly in front of him. His formerly stylish suit torn and dirty, his hair disheveled, and his left arm wrapped with a makeshift bandage to hold over the bullet wound until he could heal it, `Hawk's appearance was a far cry from its usual sartorial elegance.

"Well," Ocelot said, breaking the silence. "That was fun."

"You have a very strange idea of fun, my friend," Winterhawk muttered without moving.

"Not fun. But successful," ShadoWraith said. As was always the case, `Wraith's terse comment seemed to have been run through a filter designed to remove any extraneous verbiage.

Winterhawk sighed, pulling a tiny sealed vial from his inner coat pocket. "Seems a great lot of work for this little thing." He held it up, staring at the ruby-colored liquid inside like it held the secret of the universe. "Wonder who it belongs to."

"I don't care," Joe said in his rumbling bass from the back seat. "As long as it isn't me."

"Can't imagine why a secret medical research lab would have a blood sample on you," Winterhawk said. "No offense."

"I'm just as happy not knowing who it is," Ocelot said. "The less we know, the less likely somebody's going to come after us after this is all over."

"Agreed," ShadoWraith said.

"I just want to hand it over to Johnson, get the rest of our payment, and get ourselves the hell away from this run," Ocelot continued.

"I'm with you there," Winterhawk agreed. "Easy job, indeed. I'd hate to see what he considers to be a difficult one."

They had met with Mr. Johnson in a nondescript bar two days ago and accepted the assignment, which ostensibly had been to gain entry to a medical research facility some distance outside Seattle and obtain a particular blood sample. The run had been set up through their usual fixer, Harry, and had seemed to be a fairly cut-and-dried affair. Johnson had even provided them with the codes to get them into the building, and a crude map of the facility that he had obtained from someone inside, whom Johnson had claimed was on the payroll of the people he represented.

What Johnson had not told them about, however, was how well guarded the facility had been. They had gotten in all right using the codes Johnson had given them, but beyond that the run had been a seemingly endless progression of automated defenses, traps, and security forces. They had been kept constantly on the run, barely able to stop and reassess their plans to fit with the new situation. By the time they had found the sample they were seeking and gotten out of the building, all four of them had been wounded, barely standing from exhaustion, and low on ammunition. Their escape had

been covered by ShadoWraith's sniper rifle and `Hawk's area effect magic while Ocelot had gone off with the profusely bleeding Joe to bring back the truck. They had gotten away, but not by much. A reluctant but necessary stop far off the road to wait for `Hawk's spell drain to abate to the point where he could provide some healing had gotten them where they were now, heading back for home where they could share some choice sentiments with both Mr. Johnson and Harry.

"You think Johnson set us up?" Joe said.

Ocelot shrugged. "Who knows? Could be, but what would he gain by doing it?"

"The associate," Wraith said.

"What?" Ocelot turned to look at him.

"Yes," Winterhawk said, nodding. "P'raps you're right. The inside contact who obtained the map."

"Could have been bought off," Ocelot said. "*That* never happens in this line of work."

"They were sure as hell expecting us," Joe said. "Think they'll come after us now?"

"I think we'd better hand this thing over to Johnson as soon as we can," Ocelot said. "As long as we've got it, this isn't over."

"I suggest we get cleaned up a bit before we do that," Winterhawk said.

"And healed," Joe added, wincing for effect as he shifted position.

"Your place?" `Wraith said to Ocelot.

"Yeah, good as any."

It took them another half an hour, continuing to drive at the speed limit so as not to attract unwelcome attention, to reach Ocelot's place in Tacoma. It was a tiny cinder-block house of a type that had been used in the previous century as free-standing motel rooms or short-term rentals. There had once been quite a number of the small

structures in the vicinity; now, though, most of them had been knocked down to provide more privacy for the others (or more likely had fallen down from lack of maintenance). Ocelot's had been quite a find for him: a free-standing house with an attached garage. It wasn't a large place, but he didn't need a large place. Opening the garage door from the back seat, he waited while Wraith drove the truck in next to his BMW Blitzen and Honda Viking and then closed it again behind him.

Inside, the four runners arrayed themselves around the house's front room, which served as the living room, dining area, kitchen, and bedroom. The place had an actual bedroom, but Ocelot had turned it into a workout studio and moved his bed out into the front to make more space for his mats and weapons. Joe lowered his massive bulk into the large reinforced chair that Ocelot had bought for just that purpose, while Winterhawk leaned on the edge of the kitchen counter and Ocelot paced restlessly around the room. ShadoWraith, after a few moments, sat down at the dining table, pulled out his Browning pistol, and began stripping and cleaning it.

It was a bit over an hour before everyone was healed up and feeling mostly human (or elven or troll) again. Winterhawk finished up the healing duties after waiting for most of his drain from previous spells to dissipate. After that, he had insisted that he could not function for another minute without a shower, so he had retrieved a change of clothes from the truck (after several unfortunate incidents on previous runs had resulted in similar situations, all four of the team members had taken to keeping spare clothing in one of the truck's storage bins) and disappeared into Ocelot's bathroom. By the time he had finished and the other three runners had followed suit, it was well past midnight.

"Okay," Ocelot said, popping open his second beer of the evening. "Who's gonna call Johnson?"

Everyone looked immediately at Winterhawk. Except for Joe, who started to say something but then decided not to.

"Right, then," Winterhawk said. "As soon as possible, I take it? I, for one, don't have any objection to summoning Mr. Johnson from his nice warm bed after what we've been through this evening."

"Tonight," `Wraith said. Joe and Ocelot nodded in agreement.

The meeting with Johnson went as well as could be expected, given the circumstances. They met at the Glass Spider, a bar that the team often used for meets; Johnson, anxious to get his hands on the vial, had proposed meeting at the same place where they had originally gotten their assignment, but `Hawk had nixed that after observing the vehemently shaking heads of his partners when the suggestion had been made.

The runners were not in the best of moods considering their experiences, which gave the meet a certain edgy quality; however, Johnson, for his part, seemed as surprised as they were to find out that they had apparently been set up. Surprised enough, in fact, that when Winterhawk put the group's request for supplemental recompense on the table before agreeing to surrender the vial of blood, Johnson had only offered a token protest before handing over the requested payment.

The runners sat watching as Johnson, now in possession of his precious vial, made his way out of the bar. "I see unpleasantness in *someone's* future," Winterhawk commented, pocketing the credstick containing his cut of the payment.

"Yeah, maybe," Ocelot said. "Right now, though, all I see in *my* future is a good long sleep. Maybe a few drinks and a little rented affection."

Winterhawk sighed. "Still buying your dates?"

"I'm not payin' `em to spend the night," Ocelot said patiently. "I'm payin' em to leave in the morning."

Joe rose, his huge three-plus-meter form dwarfing the rest of the table's occupants. "You guys wanta take me home first?"

"Yeah, yeah," Ocelot said, grinning. "C'mon, guys. Let's go. I think it's past somebody's bedtime."

"Nah," Joe said good-naturedly. "It's past my mealtime. Gotta keep your priorities straight, you know. This bar stuff isn't enough to get me started."

Ocelot's grin grew a bit wider, while Winterhawk smiled with an exasperated shake of his head and `Wraith raised an eyebrow. Leave it to Joe to think about food. There weren't many times when Joe *wasn't* thinking about food, they were pretty sure.

It was another hour before everyone had been dropped off at their respective residences: Joe to the ramshackle Redmond building that he shared with the rest of his gang, and Winterhawk and ShadoWraith to their downtown Seattle apartments. Ocelot drove the truck through the streets that were now nearly deserted, back toward Tacoma. He was glad he had finally learned how to drive a four-wheeled vehicle, because it made it a lot easier to get the truck back to his garage where it was stored. It was an uneventful drive back to his place; a light rain was falling, coating the streets, while the streetlamps and infrequent headlights cast eerie shifting reflections into the puddles.

Ocelot liked this time of night. Even though he was tired from the run, now that he was headed home he didn't feel particularly like sleeping. Pulling the truck into

the garage, he locked its doors, leaving the unloading for the morning, and entered the house through the door from the garage. He shrugged out of his armored jacket and tossed it over the back of a nearby chair (failing to notice—or at least care—that it immediately fell off and dropped to the floor), grabbed another beer from the fridge, and sat down to decompress for a bit. It always took awhile after the run was over for him to come down off his adrenaline rush.

It was only when he grabbed the remote to flip on the trid did he notice that the light was flashing on his telecomm unit. *Hmm*, he thought idly. *Message? Wonder who that could be...* All the people who tended to call him had been with him up until an hour ago, and calls from the team would have come from his wristphone anyway. When he was on a run, he didn't forward messages from his home comm to his wrist unit; if it was important, they'd have his personal number, and if it wasn't, it could wait.

Curiously, he got up and punched the button to replay the message. Only one, and it had come earlier the same day. He hadn't noticed it before when the guys were over. Too much on his mind, he supposed.

The machine spoke. Ocelot froze in the act of reaching for his beer as he recognized the voice. No vid, but the voice was definitely familiar. Female.

"Ocelot? It's me—Kestrel. I'm in Seattle, and I thought you might want to get together. I'd like to see you again. Let me know, all right?" A Seattle-based LTG number flashed across the darkened screen, then there was a *click* as the connection was broken.

Ocelot took a deep breath. He didn't even notice that he'd crushed the beer can in his fist.

2.

(Two Years Previously)

It was nearly midnight. This was taking too long.

Ocelot glanced down at his chrono again, then checked out the empty hallway at the end of which he was currently hidden, pressed back against the wall behind a tall supply cabinet. Nobody coming. The guards had already made their circuit, and Johnson had assured him that if he watched the patterns carefully, he could avoid the security cameras mounted at both ends of each hallway. They certainly weren't making any effort to hide them: the small boxes stuck out on ball mounts, protruding several centimeters from the walls. As long as he stayed out of the path of the cameras, the meat guards should be easy for him to stay away from.

He sighed softly to himself, beginning to regret taking this job. He almost never worked alone, but the job had sounded interesting, fairly easy, and lucrative: just get into the building, grab some hardcopy files out of one of the offices, and get back out. Probably a job that would be better suited for one person than for the whole team. Still, though, he missed his teammates' support. Especially Winterhawk's, since he'd worked with the mage the longest. The Brit might be the world's biggest smartass, but he was handy to have around when you needed things scouted or large numbers of opposition taken down quickly and quietly. But, like the rest of the group, `Hawk wasn't here, so Ocelot was just going to have to deal with things alone.

It was shaping up to be a long break between runs. Mostly, the team tried to take a job once every couple of months or so, leaving sufficient time in between to heal up, sell off any items they had acquired, work on their training, upgrade their cyberware, design spells, and do whatever else they did when they all went their separate ways after wrapping up the run-

related details. This time, though, they were looking at nearly double that time.

The run into the Chicago Containment Zone hadn't been kind to any of them mentally, physically, or financially. They'd succeeded in what they'd been sent in to do, but not without cost. ShadoWraith had experienced some fairly severe psychological setbacks brought on by his inability to cope with being confined; Joe and Ocelot were both going through separate moral crises after discovering that the ghouls that they routinely used as target practice in their respective gang territories actually numbered among them a few that could be classed as not only sentient, but compassionate; and Winterhawk was currently fighting off a nasty case of magical malaria that he'd contracted from a Mosquito spirit in the sewers under Chicago. Joe and Wraith hadn't stuck around in town long after they and Ocelot had put Hawk on a plane for England with his house's caretaker, Aubrey – once they were all gone, Ocelot had been left on his own. After a few weeks of that, he would have done just about anything within reason to avoid the boredom.

Mistake number two, he was beginning to think, was not going through Harry for the job. The team worked almost exclusively with the gruff, balding fixer, who was known throughout the Seattle shadow community (and probably further away than that) as one of the best in the business. Part of that reputation came from the fact that he didn't work with just anybody, and those he did work with could count on him to screen jobs carefully and try to weed out the freaks, the doublecrossers, and the nutcases. He didn't always succeed, naturally, but he was better at it than almost anybody else around. And, more importantly, when he did screw up, he did his best to make things right. Harry wasn't above sending some of his own people out to deliver a "message" to an errant Mr. Johnson or corporate contact who tried to play him and his teams for suckers. But Harry hadn't had anything available – at least not anything that could be handled by one guy. Ocelot had therefore been forced to choose between looking elsewhere or

spending the next three months in essentially useless pursuits. He'd chosen to look elsewhere.

Fortunately for him, it didn't take him long to find a job. The fixer was unfamiliar, but a quick check with Harry had assured Ocelot that there hadn't been any serious negative feedback about him. The new fixer, an ork named Lancer, had set him up with a meet the next day, and after hearing the Johnson's pitch and considering his offer, Ocelot had accepted both.

So here he was now, deep in the bowels of a multi-story office building, trying to locate the particular office that contained the files he was seeking. Johnson had been right about one thing: the security here (at least so far) had been fairly lax. He had said that the building was not particularly well guarded, because most of their sensitive information was not at this location. The files belonged to one of the corp's researchers who had an aversion to putting his work on the Matrix, or even on the company's internal computer system, so he used old-fashioned paper files on which to keep his notes. Supposedly, one of the administrative aides who worked with the scientist was on Johnson's payroll, and he had promised to "forget" to lock up the files before leaving for the night. Ocelot had a map of the building marked with the office location; all he had to do was get there, grab the files, and go out the way he'd come, using the maglock key provided by the spy.

All he had to do. Yeah, right. It had been an hour since he'd found the office where the files were supposed to be located. The door had even been unlocked. This is too easy, he had thought, and the thought started to set off warning bells in his head. They were still dim and distant – after all, it was theoretically possible that this run was as easy as it was presented to him – but they were there and they weren't shutting up.

They had gotten quite a bit louder when he had found the note on the desk where the files were supposed to be. He'd almost just grabbed the file folder on the desk and left, but then he had noticed that it seemed far too thin to be useful. Inside

was a single slip of paper. "Watched," it read in a hurried scrawl. "Files downstairs. Room 2B71. Basement. Sorry."

Ocelot had stood there for a moment, trying to decide what to do. Every instinct told him to just punt the job and get the hell away from here, but he hesitated. He hated to fail at a job, and the note could be on the level. People did get watched at places like this. And he did have a location. It wasn't on the map, which didn't show the basements, but it couldn't be too hard to find a labeled door, right? At last, Ocelot had made a decision: he'd go down there and try to find the room. If he wasn't able to do it quickly, he'd abort the run, get out, and tell Johnson that the plan had changed. He might take a little hit to his street cred, but his rep was not as a solo runner anyway.

He was now standing on the building's ground floor, watching the doorway to the stairs for his chance and trying to silence the bells in his head now that he'd made up his mind. He adjusted his armored coat, feeling the comforting weight of the Franchi-SPAS in its holster under his arm. That, along with the ninja sword strapped to his back and the monowhip in its sleeve compartment, reassured him that he could deal with this. Gathering himself, he darted silently toward the stairway doors when the cameras were pointed away from him, and was through it before they could swivel back around.

Quick glance for more cameras – none he could see. Down. The first landing was labeled '1B.' Good. Things were making sense. 2B should be the next one down. Down another flight, soft boots making no sound. Okay – 2B. Open door carefully, peek out. Nothing. Quiet hallway. Duck out, avoid camera, sneak down hallway. Look for room 71.

The place was a maze, and not well labeled. It took him another ten minutes to find the room he was seeking. Check door. Unlocked. Okay, this is it. If it's not here, we go home, he told himself. No more jerking around.

He slowly opened the door.

His eyes darted around, his low-light vision taking in the room in snapshots. Small lab. Cluttered benches, metal stools. Desk off to one side. Computer.

The files were there. On the desk. Bingo!

Ocelot crossed the room, grabbed the files, and stuck them in his jacket.

All hell broke loose.

From outside, the sound of gunshots. Ocelot froze. Shit! They must be on to him. Must have been spotted by one of those damned cameras. Got to get out, and fast. He cursed himself for taking the job, but that wasn't going to help now.

Gunshots outside? Why outside? Wouldn't they be shooting at him? No time to think about that now. They didn't sound close yet, but they were getting closer. Ocelot flung open the door and ran down the hall toward the stairs. If they knew he was here, there was no point in trying to be stealthy. Not until there was someplace to hide, anyway.

It was a long way to the stairs. Run down hallway. Check around corner. Run down another hallway. The gunshots were getting closer. They seemed to be ahead of him now. Ocelot drew himself to a quick stop, adrenaline pumping through his wired reflexes. What now? If they were between him and the stairs, then he'd have to fight his way out –

He reached for his gun –

A figure hurtled around the corner and slammed into him, nearly knocking him down.

Ocelot bounced off the wall. Recovering quickly, his gun was in his hand and pointed at the figure.

The figure's gun was pointed at him as well.

For a split-second, the two just looked at each other. They were both wearing helmets, but neither was dressed in the uniform corp-security style. From down the hall, the pounding footsteps of several more people could be heard heading their direction.

"You don't work here," the figure said quickly. The voice was assured and female.

"No," Ocelot said.

"Runner?"

"Yeah."

"Then help me," she said, bringing her assault rifle around toward the approaching security guards.

"Yeah," Ocelot said, making a quick decision. Together, they poked from behind cover, their guns ready.

The guards, who had expected one fleeing opponent rather than two prepared ones, hesitated. That was all Ocelot and his new associate needed. Their guns spoke as one, dropping the four guards before they could get a shot off. "Okay," the woman said. "I'm trying to find the stairs. You?"

He nodded.

"Let's go, then." Without waiting for him to answer, she was off. She was as fast as he was, Ocelot noted.

Alarms were going off inside the complex now. Ocelot was beginning to wonder if he had not been discovered after all, but rather had been caught up in whatever was after this woman. The thought didn't sit well with him, but he didn't have time to think about it now. He'd have a few words for her when they got out.

If they got out.

They reached the door to the stairs as the alarms got louder. They could hear more guards approaching from two sides. Ocelot grabbed the door and prepared to fling it open.

Suddenly, the woman yelled, "Down!" Before he could react, she had launched herself at him, bowling him over. As he caught himself in a crouch and rolled back to his feet, Ocelot got a brief glance of the woman executing a perfect roll across the hallway. The rounds from the auto-defense gun that had come silently out from the wall tore uselessly into the floor.

The woman leaped gracefully back to her feet. "Come on," she said. "Didn't see any of that coming down, did you?" She ducked through the door and held it open for him.

All Ocelot could do was shake his head. He stowed his gun in its holster and followed her up the stairs. When they neared

the top, he grabbed her arm. "Hang on," he said through his teeth. "They must be waiting for us."

She nodded. "You don't have any way to see what's going on out there, do you?"

"No."

"And there's no other way out."

"Not that I know of, unless you want to go back down and try the elevator. I don't."

She nodded in agreement. "No – bad idea." She seemed not to be terribly upset by what was taking place. "I'm Kestrel, by the way."

"Ocelot."

"A little bird and a little cat – good team," she said, chuckling.

Ocelot was still a bit keyed up to be amused by the situation. "What are you doing here?"

"Same as you, probably. I was hired to break in here and bring something back."

Ocelot looked at her suspiciously. "You got it?"

"Yep. But it wasn't as easy as it was supposed to be. You?"

"Yeah. Johnson said security would be light."

At the bottom of the stairs, there was a pounding at the door. Both runners quickly glanced down there, then back at the door in front of which they were standing. "We'd better do something," Kestrel said. "It won't take them long to break through that door."

Ocelot looked at the door in front of him, then down at the stairway below. He grabbed something off his belt, held it up so she could see it. "Got one of these?"

"No."

"Then hang on," he said, grabbing her around the waist with one arm and using the other one to fire his grapple gun straight up toward the stairs above.

"What are you doing?" Kestrel demanded, but she did hold on. "We need to get out."

"Yeah, but not the way they expect," he said. They reached the landing of the stairway four floors up. "Check the door while I reel this in. Trust me. I have an idea."

"I hope you do," she said a bit dubiously, cracking the door to the fourth floor hallway. "It's clear, at least for now."

"Good. C'mon." Together they broke out into the hallway. Ocelot looked back and forth, then started trying doors.

"Do you want to let me in on the secret here?" Kestrel asked.

"We're going out."

"How?"

Ocelot found a door that was open and swept into the room. "There," he said, nodding toward the large window on the far side of the room.

"Aha," Kestrel said approvingly. "I like the way you think." Between them, it was not hard to use a chair to break through the window. Ocelot hooked his grapple gun to the window frame, checked it, and then motioned for her to grab hold again. They were out of the building and on their way before the guards figured out that their quarry wasn't cowering behind the ground-floor stairway door.

"How'd you get here?" Ocelot asked as they ran away.

"I have a bike nearby."

"I think we need to talk some more."

She nodded. "Me too. How about before we deliver this stuff? I have a nasty feeling we've both been set up."

They arranged a meeting for an hour later at a bar Ocelot knew Downtown, then parted company. It was only after they had gone their own ways that Ocelot realized that neither of them had seen the other's face. He went home, stowed his gear, and arrived at the bar a few minutes early, scanning the faces.

"Ocelot. Over here." A familiar voice cut through the din. Ocelot looked toward it, and his eyes widened.

A woman sat alone at a small table, smiling at him. Slim and wiry, she wore jeans, T-shirt, and black leather jacket. Her hair, white-blonde and cut shoulder-length, framed a strong,

beautiful face dominated by glittering, intelligent green eyes. She was watching him with amusement as he made his way across the room. "Kestrel?"

"Who else?" She indicated the other chair at the table. "I ordered you a beer."

"...Thanks," he said slowly, sitting down. "How did you know it was me?"

Her smile grew a little wider. "I make it my business to watch the way people move," she said. "I would have known you anywhere." Looking him over appraisingly, she added, "But the face isn't bad either."

Not sure what to say to that, Ocelot retreated to business. "We need to figure out what to do about what happened," he said.

She chuckled. "I don't think there's much we can do. I made a few calls before I came here – the Johnson that hired me's skipped town, I think. The number I was supposed to reach him at is a Chinese takeout joint, and they've never heard of anybody named Mr. Johnson."

"What's the number?" Ocelot asked suspiciously, pulling out his pocket secretary. When she gave it to him, he sighed. "Same number."

"That doesn't surprise me. A setup, it looks like. If I had to guess, I'd say they were trying to test out their security system, and they hired us to try to get in and then see if we could make it out. I don't think they expected us to do that. Find the holes in their system and get rid of a couple of no-good shadowrunners in the bargain."

"I don't think they expected us to hook up," Ocelot said. "What were you hired to grab?"

"Some chips from a safe in one of the offices. They said they'd 'accidentally' leave the safe unlocked."

Ocelot sighed, anger flashing across his face. "With me it was files. Hardcopy. They were gonna leave the cabinet unlocked."

Kestrel shook her head, removing a small chip case from the inner pocket of her leather jacket. "I'll bet you anything that if we look at these chips, they'll be blank, or else they'll be full of gibberish."

Ocelot tossed his files on the table. "Yeah, same here." He slammed his fist down on the table, causing his beer glass to jump and slosh its contents over the edge. There weren't many things he hated worse than being screwed over and played for a sucker.

Kestrel shrugged. "It happens. If you don't learn to live with it, it can eat you alive." Her eyes lit up as a sly smile played across her lips. "We could salvage this night, though..." she said speculatively.

Ocelot glanced up at her. She was watching him intently. For the first time in a long while, he felt the stirrings of real desire. A series of emotions ran quickly through his mind. She was beautiful, no doubt. And interested in him – there was no mistaking that expression. He hesitated, though, reluctant to break his self-imposed code against getting involved with a woman with whom he hadn't contracted for a night's activities. Winterhawk teased him often about his "rented affection" – the mage prided himself on being able to attract women in what he called "the old-fashioned way," and he was very successful at it. Ocelot, however, was more of the opinion that in his line of work, it didn't pay to have many ties. Every person he became attached to could prove a potential liability in the future – a hook by which he could be reached. With what he paid his companions for the evening, he could get what he wanted without the connections that could cause problems. It had worked out fine for him so far, but...

She was looking at him, waiting for his answer.

He took a deep breath. The attraction was unignorable. He wanted her as much as she seemed to want him. He'd never had this reaction to a woman this quickly before. And then he realized why: This was not just any woman. Kestrel was a samurai. She was as fast and as athletic as he was; maybe more

so. She'd obviously been running for a long time, and her confidence in her abilities was clearly evident. She wouldn't be a liability for him, any more than he would be one for her –

And those eyes –

"Yeah," he said, smiling. "I'd like that."

The relationship was intense and incredible. Ocelot wasn't certain, but he thought he was in love. Kestrel was everything he thought he would never find in a woman: beautiful, smart, tough, caring – his equal (or maybe even his superior, he decided) mentally and physically. She was a fantastic and creative lover, and someone he could talk to about almost anything. By unspoken agreement, they kept their real names and their shadowrunning affiliations from each other, except the fact that both of them were part of teams, but everything else was fair game. He talked about his childhood and early manhood in the Predators; she talked about her stifling corporate upbringing and how she'd been long ago disowned by her family. They saw each other several times a week for nearly three months, but always at her place or his. Though they never discussed it out in the open, both of them seemed to feel that the relationship was more exciting if kept only between them.

Then, one evening, Kestrel came over to Ocelot's place and he knew something was wrong. Her twinkling green eyes were clouded, as if she had an unpleasant secret. "What is it?" he asked immediately. "What's wrong?"

"I have to leave," she said, her voice quiet and sad.

"Leave?" he closed the door behind her, staring at her in shock. "Why? What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "It's the team. We're moving out of Seattle. Back East. I have to go with them."

He continued to stare at her, unsure of what to say.

Kestrel took his face in her hands and kissed him. "Ocelot, I don't want to do it either. But I can't just quit the team. We've got too much history together. They're like my family. We can still see each other –"

Ocelot sighed, shook his head. "No we can't. You know that as well as I do. If you leave, it's over."

And she did know it. She didn't answer; instead, she stood there with his face still cradled in her hands. "Ocelot –"

"No," he said quietly. "No. Don't say anything. Let's just have one last night before you go, okay? To remember."

She nodded, slowly dropping her hands.

They made love for most of the night, in silence. When the sun came up and Ocelot awakened, she was gone. There was no note, no memento left on the nightstand. Just the impression on the other side of the bed where she had lain next to him.

It was one of the hardest things Ocelot had ever done to put this behind him. But the team was due back in town any day now, and there were things that had to be done. He would do what he had to do: file this away in his memory, far back in the corner where he didn't go very often, and get on with his life. Connections could be liabilities in more ways than one.

It was the only decision that made any sense, after all.

He never even mentioned her to the team.

3.

He walked into the bar slowly, wondering what the hell he was doing. He should have just ignored the message. That would have been better for everybody. Dredging up the past and trying to relive it almost always resulted in more trouble than happiness.

But he couldn't. Instead, he had listened to it again. And again, staring at the chip on the answering machine as her voice came through the speaker. And finally, he had called, leaving a message of his own. *Meet me at Mickey's tomorrow at noon*, he'd said. Like her, he'd turned off the video. He wasn't sure why, exactly.

He had purposely chosen a bar that he did not frequent. Again, better for all concerned if things didn't work out. Nobody knew him there, so nobody could point her in his direction. The fact that she knew where he lived didn't register on his mind.

When he entered the bar, a bit early, once more he noticed that she had preceded him there and was waiting for him. This time, though, he recognized her right away. She did not look a great deal different than she had the last time they had seen each other: still wearing jeans and T-shirt, although now the T-shirt was covered with a dark green leather jacket instead of a black one. She'd had her hair cut shorter, too: it now just touched the top of her collar and swept back from her high forehead in a nonsense style that was tantalizingly attractive on her.

She smiled, rose as he approached. "Ocelot. Hello."

He nodded, smiling a little but trying to keep any emotion from displaying on his face. He could already sense the beginnings of the same feelings coming back. "Kestrel."

She looked down, taking a deep breath, and resumed her seated position. "This is awkward, isn't it?"

He paused, then sat down across from her. "Yeah. I guess it is."

"I'm so sorry," she said, reaching across the table to take his hand in both of hers. "I really am. I didn't want to hurt you like that. I didn't want to hurt *me* like that. But—"

Ocelot squeezed her hand. "No, don't. No apologies. It doesn't mean anything anyway. Biz is biz. Let's just let the past go, and start over, whatever the hell that means. Okay?"

Her gaze came up to meet his, and he noticed something new in it. It was hard to read, but it seemed to be something a bit more—settled. Content. A little of the daring wildness was gone, replaced by a certain serenity. "Okay," she murmured. "I was kind of hoping you'd say something like that. I was afraid you'd be angry with me. I thought you might not even answer my message."

"I thought about not answering," he admitted. "But I'm not mad. It happens." He punched an order in for a beer and waited for it to arrive before speaking again. She had one, untouched, in front of her already. "How long are you in town?"

She looked at him as if gauging his response before replying. "I'm back," she said. "For good, I hope."

"What about the team?"

This time, she didn't meet his eyes. "Things—didn't work out."

He frowned. "What does that mean?"

"I—I really don't want to talk about it, if you don't mind," she said. "How about you? How have you been?"

"Same as always." He shrugged. "Still with the same group. We just finished up a run, and now we're getting ready to take some time off."

Kestrel nodded slowly. There seemed to be more on her mind, but she didn't volunteer anything else. A bit

hesitantly, she said, "I meant it when I said I wanted to see you again."

Ocelot watched her for a long moment. "I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to see you," he said at last. From inside his head, it almost felt like another consciousness was drawing the words from him, using his voice.

"I know it can't be like before —"

"Why not?" Ocelot said. Again, the disembodied voice was speaking for him.

She shook her head. "It's been two years. Things have changed. *We've* changed. Maybe we can get it back again. Maybe—" she looked away —"maybe we can even find something better together. But—" She shrugged, then met his eyes. "I'd like to give it a try, if you do. I've thought about you a lot in these past two years. But I want to start fresh. Not compare things with the way they were before."

Ocelot paused to stare down into his beer glass. "You might have to leave again. Who knows—I might have to leave. Can't count on much in this business."

"I know that," she said quietly. "That's what I mean. Let's not count on anything. That was our problem—or at least it was mine—last time. I'd like to just take things as they come and see where they go. I take it—" she took a deep breath "I take it that you're not...involved...right now? I guess I should have asked before I started all this."

Ocelot thought about all the women he'd slept with since he'd last seen Kestrel, and how little any of them had meant to him. "Involved?" He made a harsh, unpleasant little laugh. "No."

She sighed, touched his hand again. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said, shaking his head. "I'm not." He drained the rest of his beer and leaned back in his chair.

She nodded. "Okay. Enough about the past. I'll come right out and say it: would you like to come over tonight?"

"Yeah," he said slowly, after a pause, and smiled. "Yeah, I would." This time it wasn't the disembodied voice. He'd meant every word of it.

The lovemaking was as perfect as he'd remembered it; this time, though, it had a slower, more sensual, less immediate feel to it. It was as if before, they had both been subconsciously trying to fill every moment because those moments were finite. Now, though, they took their time, savoring the experience. As they both lay back on the soft sheets in Kestrel's small townhouse, her head on his shoulder, he murmured, "I know you said things didn't work out before, and that you didn't want to talk about it. That's okay. But are you back here looking for a new team?"

She shook her head, playing idly with his long, dusty-blond hair. "No. I'm—sort of semi-retired now. I really don't have to do this anymore."

"So you came back to Seattle?"

"Mm hmm."

"And you don't want to talk about why?"

"Hmm mmm." She kissed him. "You're a bright boy," she said playfully. "I think that's why I like you."

"Really? I thought you only liked me for my body," he said, grinning and kissing back.

"Well, now, let's see," she said as she rolled over and pulled him toward her.

Ocelot's wristphone beeped.

Kestrel sighed, exasperated, rolling back over and taking most of the sheets with her. "You'd better get that, I suppose."

He nodded. "Yeah." Rummaging around in his clothes, he muttered, "This better be good." After a

moment, he found the source of the beeping and hit the button. "What?"

The balding, jowly face of Harry the fixer popped on to the tiny video screen. "Hey, kid. Catch ya at a bad time?" Harry grinned, shifting his cigar to the right side of his mouth.

Ocelot looked down at his state of undress and pulled up the sheet. After all the times they had caught Harry in a similar state (Harry had the same philosophy with regard to commercial affection as Ocelot did, and as a result was rarely without an attractive woman—or more than one—sharing his bed), he supposed that he couldn't protest too hard about it. "What do you want, Harry?"

The fixer was going to milk this for all it was worth. "Maybe I should call back later—?"

"*What*, Harry?" Ocelot growled.

"Okay, okay. I was just callin' to see how the run went, and see if ya wanta set up a meet to get rid of anything? I heard things might not've gone so good. So sue me if I wanta make sure you guys made it through okay." Harry affected a put-upon look.

"So why'd you call *me*? You usually call `Hawk about that stuff."

Harry grinned and shifted his cigar again. "I guess `Hawk's smarter than you are, kid. He ain't answerin' his phone. Maybe he's just nicer to his company than you are."

Ocelot chose not to reply to that. "We're fine, Harry. And I, for one, would be a hell of a lot more fine if you'd get off the phone now." From the other side of the bed, Kestrel chuckled. She was propped up on one arm, watching him. "Call one of the other guys to set up the meet. I'll be there."

"Right." Harry pitched his voice a bit louder. "Sorry to bother you, Miss. Whoever you are. Carry on." He hung up before Ocelot could say anything else.

Kestrel pulled Ocelot over again, and in a moment he had completely forgotten about Harry.

4.

The meet with Harry was set for the following night at one of the fixer's usual meeting places: the back room of a smoky bar called the Black Dog Lounge. The runners filtered in, taking their places around the large table; Harry was already there, and had claimed the center spot facing the door. ShadoWraith, who had a particular aversion to having his back to the door, sat next to Harry. Joe, shoving two chairs together to accommodate his massive weight, took the place to `Wraith's right, while Winterhawk slouched casually to Harry's left. Ocelot, the last to arrive, declined a chair in favor of leaning on the wall.

Harry reached over and switched on the small, mushroom-shaped white noise generator in the center of the table. As usual, he was dressed in a nondescript gray suit that looked like he had slept in it, and he had a cigar (currently unlit) stuck between his teeth. "Okay," he said. "So how'd things go? I heard ya ran into some trouble."

"Harry: master of understatement," Winterhawk said wryly.

"We were successful," `Wraith said.

"Yeah, but they knew we were coming," Joe spoke up. "We nearly got killed in there."

"Yes — you might want to have a word or two with our latest Mr. Johnson," Winterhawk said. "It's not terribly comforting to be met with opposition so far out of line with what we were led to expect."

"Did you hand over the stuff?" Harry asked. "You don't still have it, do you?"

Ocelot shook his head. "We met with him right after the run."

"Even got some extra yen out of him," Joe added.

"Hmm..." Harry mused almost to himself. "Doesn't sound to me like he set you up. I've worked with that Johnson before—he's always been on the level. Maybe somebody else—?"

"The map," Wraith said.

"Huh?" Harry looked quizzically at the elf who, in his effort to be terse, sometimes failed to impart enough information to make himself clear.

"The chap who obtained the map for us," Winterhawk translated. "We were speculating about his being responsible for the setup, as opposed to Johnson."

"Or maybe somebody bought the guy off," Ocelot said.

Harry nodded. "Sounds a lot more likely. I'll look into it if ya want me to, but I'm thinkin' maybe it's just better if we forget about it. Ya got in, ya got out, ya delivered the goods. The way I'm lookin' at this, they got no more reason to bother ya if ya don't stir up their little party, y'know? Bad fer the bottom line."

The four runners looked at each other, their expressions ranging from frustration (Ocelot and Joe) to resignation (Winterhawk) to impassivity (Wraith). Ocelot sighed. "Yeah, I guess," he said. "I hate to just leave it hangin' like that, but I guess there isn't much else we can do."

Harry shrugged. "It's the biz. You know that. I can't look out fer everything. I can screen the Johnsons, but I ain't got much control over the rest of it." He grinned, clamping down on the cigar. "That's why they pay you guys the big nuyen, right?"

Nobody answered.

"Okay," Harry said briskly as if they had replied, "let's get on to the rest of it. You got anything ya wanta sell me?"

Ocelot shook his head. "Not this time. We were lucky to get out of there with our skins and our own stuff."

"Wasn't any time to grab anything else," Joe said with a bit of regret. One of the guards had had a light machine gun he would have liked to have gotten his hands on.

Harry nodded. "Got it. Okay, then I only got one more thing, and then you guys can get back to whatever ya do in yer spare time." This last was punctuated by a grin aimed Ocelot's way. Ocelot glared back but said nothing.

"Another job already?" Joe asked. "I want some time off first."

Harry shook his head. "No, it ain't another job. I know how much you guys need your beauty sleep." He leaned forward a bit, removing the cigar from his mouth and resting it on the edge of the table. "I don't know how well you been keepin' up on news lately, but there's a new fixer in town."

"A new fixer?" Ocelot shrugged. "So? Are you afraid we'll jump ship or somethin'?"

"Nah," Harry said, not taking the bait. "Nothin' like that. But you know how I like to keep my ear to the ground and my eyes open, right?"

None of the team even bothered to answer that, because they all knew the question was rhetorical. Harry was legendary in shadowrunning circles for having his fingers in just about every important pie in Seattle. Rumors had it that his influence extended considerably further. Very little occurred in town without his knowing about it, as he was constantly being fed information from his staggering network of contacts, informants, and retainers. Nobody knew who was and wasn't on Harry's payroll, who owed him a favor this week, or who was trying to get into his good graces, but somehow information didn't often elude him. "Well," he continued,

"I can't find out squat about this guy. And that worries me some."

"Wait a second," Ocelot said, staring at Harry. "You're tellin' us there's a new guy in town and *you* can't find out anything about him?"

Harry had the team's attention now. "Yeah. That's exactly what I'm sayin'."

"How'd you find out he's around in the first place, then?" Joe asked.

The fixer didn't even give Joe a dirty look. "I been hearin' rumors for the past few days. There's somebody been quietly lookin' for talent for awhile now. But nobody knows who he's got, and nobody knows what he wants. It's like he's purposely tryin' to stay out of the limelight."

"Interesting..." Winterhawk mused. "So what is it, exactly, that you want us to do, if anything? Certainly you don't think that if you're unable to get any information, we—"

Harry shook his head. "No, no. I'm not askin' you to scout info for me. I can do that myself. But I just found out that our mystery man's throwin' a big shindig this Friday night. I got an invite, and I managed to wangle some more for you guys, if you're interested."

"Hang on," Ocelot said, raising his hands in a `stop' gesture. "He's tryin' to stay in the shadows, but he's throwin' a *party*? Doesn't that sound weird to anybody else?"

"Damn straight," Harry said. "That's part of why I gotta see this. Whoever this guy is, he's got some serious chutzpah. I figure anybody with that kind of moxie's gotta either be a nut with some damn good connections, or else somebody I'm gonna want to keep an eye on. Either way, I'm plannin' on showin' up at that party."

"You don't know *anything* else about him?" Winterhawk asked. He'd come up from his casual slouch

and now seemed much more interested in what was going on.

Harry shook his head. "Nothin'. I don't even really know it's a guy. Could be a woman, I guess. Oh—the signature on the invitation was "G." Handwritten, but just the initial. Damn thing was hand-delivered by a courier."

"How'd you get us in?" Joe asked.

"Sent back my RSVP and asked if I could bring one of my teams. Got an email back—anonously—sayin' sure, no problem. I had one o' my best deckers try to trace it, but he gave up. Said it was like tryin' to follow a weasel through a rabbit warren."

"Where?" `Wraith spoke up. As was his usual behavior, he had been sitting back and taking in the conversation without comment up until now.

Everyone turned toward him. "Where what?" Harry asked.

"The party. Where?"

"Oh. It's at Lunar Dreamscape. You know, that new place downtown, on the top floors of the Kurusawa Building? They've got the whole thing rented out for the night. Buzz is there's gonna be some pretty big movers and shakers there. Friday night, starts at 20:00."

"I'm there," Joe said, sounding satisfied. "There's bound to be great food at a place like that."

"That's our Joe," Harry said, shaking his head in mock annoyance but grinning at the same time. "Maybe I better get back to `em and tell `em to beef up the buffet table." He stood, reclaimed his cigar, and ineffectually straightened his jacket. "Well, come if ya want to. I gotta get goin'—you know, things to see and people to do."

When Harry had left, the four runners looked at each other. "You guys goin'?" Ocelot asked, turning a chair around to straddle it.

Winterhawk shrugged. "Why not? I'm intrigued. Aren't you?"

"Could be dangerous," ShadoWraith said.

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "Besides, I hate parties. I always end up standin' around with a drink in my hand, not knowin' what to do."

"Hey, guys," Joe spoke up. "We should go—you know, keep an eye on things for Harry. Maybe we can find out something about this guy."

"Any excuse to get to that buffet table," Winterhawk said with an amused half-smile.

"He's right," Wraith said.

"Who's right?" Ocelot leaned over the back of his chair.

"Both," the elf said mildly. "Referring to Joe, though."

"*There's* a new one," Winterhawk commented. "If you're agreeing with Joe, I'm not sure I'm in favor of this after all."

Ocelot sighed, rolling his eyes. "Okay, okay. So we're goin'. Gotta admit I'm a little curious about it too. I guess I can put up with wearin' a suit for one night."

"Don't strain yourself," Winterhawk said, making a show of brushing an imaginary piece of dust off the lapel of his own suit. He stood up. "Well, I'm off. Need to go reschedule my flight home if I'm not leaving until after Friday. See you gentlemen then."

5.

Lunar Dreamscape had only a been open few months, but already it was developing the reputation as one of the hottest nightspots for Seattle's glitterati who were tiring of the same old haunts like Club Penumbra and Dante's Inferno.

Situated on the top three floors of Downtown's Kurusawa Building, the remainder of which housed corporate offices, residences, and restaurants, the club featured multiple, multi-leveled dance floors, three stages, some of the finest in food and drink to be had in the city, and its pride and joy, a lightshow that encompassed not only the walls and windows of the club's main room, but also the floor and the ceiling, delivering the highly convincing illusion that the club's patrons were suspended in space, thus allowing them to experience everything from interstellar battles to the Big Bang in a surreal glory not usually found outside the Matrix. Rumors abounded that the lightshow alone had cost the owners of the club millions of nuyen, most of it paid to the deckers who had been commissioned to create it. Other rumors about the Dreamscape's mysterious owners—none of which had ever been proven true or false—ran the gamut from speculation that they were connected with one or more of the local organized crime syndicates, to stories that the place was actually owned by a consortium of simsense stars and trid studios, to reports that it was run by a team of retired shadowrunners. More than one local wag had commented that, whoever the owners were, they must have had more than a passing admiration for the works of 20th-century author Douglas Adams. The only thing that could be proven to be true, though, was that the trail leading through the red tape to the owners' identities was a difficult and convoluted one,

and one which no decker had yet been able to crack. Even Lucius Kellraven, the elegant elven manager of the place and its face to the public, claimed to not know who it was he worked for.

Tonight's party was one of the most exclusive seen in quite some time; it was not since the premiere bash for Maria Mercurial's latest recording, held at Club Penumbra two months previously, that guest lists had been so carefully checked against invitations before entry was permitted. The bouncers, two burly trolls in stylish, perfectly-tailored threads, presided over the door as a suave elf with a datajack and a human with fetishes up and down the lapels of her jacket gave each guest the once-over before allowing them to continue through the portal and into the neon-clad archway that led to the club itself. Those foolish enough to attempt entry with weapons or obvious armor were politely and efficiently told that such items would have to be checked, and that they could reclaim them upon leaving the party.

Ocelot stepped off the elevator, feeling stiff and uncomfortable as always in his freshly-cleaned gray suit, which he had purchased more than a year ago for a team meet with some corporate bigwigs. Since he didn't trust his fashion sense enough to go out and buy another suit (his usual wardrobe consisted of T-shirts, armored leather jackets, and snug-fitting pants that didn't bind up in a fight), he'd decided to just go with the devil he knew and look drab. That was okay with him anyway: Ocelot wasn't the kind of guy who liked to stand out in crowds. If somebody mistook him for a member of the security force, all the better. At least that way nobody would expect him to schmooze.

He wished Kestrel was with him; the other team members were nowhere in sight, and at least then he'd have someone to talk to. However, he had consciously

decided not to ask her to accompany him, since he considered this to be a "working" occasion and he was determined to keep his work separate from his so-called personal life. That was okay, because she had mentioned in passing that she was busy tonight anyway. He'd said he would call her later that night if he got the chance, and they had left it at that. He suspected that it was going to be a long night.

Hanging back to let a knot of chattering *tres chic*-attired young party animals sweep by, Ocelot watched the entry procedure closely and determined that, with the possible exception of his monowhip, he wasn't going to get any of his other weapons through the security check. Thus forewarned, he joined the line and when he reached the elf, he voluntarily surrendered his armored longcoat, stun baton, and Browning Max-Power. He didn't reveal the existence of the monowhip up his sleeve, and they didn't seem to notice. Just like (almost) always. Oddly, they didn't say anything about his cyberware, either. Ocelot gave his name to the troll with the master guest list, still half expecting to be kicked out on his ear because he wasn't one of "the right people." The troll, however, just waved him in with a nearly-sincere "Have a good time" before turning his attention to the next candidate for admission.

Ocelot had never been to Lunar Dreamscape before. He wasn't the sort to go clubbing, preferring instead the quiet intimacy of a corner bar or perhaps a small blues joint. Still, though, he was impressed as he emerged from the other end of the short tunnel leading into the main room and saw the place laid out in all its glory. Even with the trademark lightshow not running yet, the view out the massive floor-to-ceiling windows was incredible. The whole of Seattle was laid out before him; on one of the city's rare clear nights, the sight was breathtaking.

He stood just to one side of the tunnel, his gaze roving over the room. Music pulsed from the large stage that dominated one side; Ocelot recognized the sound if not the band members: Selective Oblivion, the novahot young group whose debut album had recently topped the charts and whose tour was selling out in every city in which it stopped. Below the stage, crowds of cutting-edge club habitués writhed in rhythm on the dance floor as others danced around the edges while waiting for a spot in the limelight.

Arrayed around the dance floor were small tables at different elevations, with gently sloping catwalks leading between them so the guests could socialize. Waitstaff, both men and women dressed in the club's purple-jacketed tuxedos, circulated among the throng, efficiently gathering plates, glasses, and tableware and whisking it away.

This party was apparently the place to be: just on a cursory glance, Ocelot spotted several luminaries he recognized, and he did not pride himself on recognizing famous people. Off to the far side of the room near the window, Maria Mercurial chatted with her manager/husband Armando Fernandez—Ocelot smiled a bit to himself, remembering one of his team's first runs that had involved helping those two out of a problem situation. Near them, he recognized two members of The Shadows band: the band's fortunes had fallen a bit since the team had last encountered them, but they were still a solid performer on the charts and definitely a hot ticket. Others were there, too, whom Ocelot recognized but had never met: simsense stars, politicians, media producers—even a group that he identified as another of Seattle's A-list shadowrunner teams. *A little bit of everything at this thing*, he thought. *Wonder where the main man is?*

"Great party, huh?" A voice spoke from above him and to his left. Ocelot wheeled around and came face to face with a plate of food piled nearly a quarter-meter high. Above the plate was the face of a very satisfied-looking Joe.

"Hey, Joe. Uh...yeah. Whatever you say." Ocelot couldn't help being amused: the young troll unabashedly wore a Western-style suit adorned with Native American finery, including a wide beaded belt with a silver buckle, string tie, and feathers braided into his tall black Mohawk hairstyle. On anyone else, it would have looked ridiculous; on Joe, it succeeded in being merely eccentric in a vaguely daffy sort of way.

"You gotta check out the eats in there," Joe said, grinning through a mouthful of something. He pointed back toward one of the side rooms. "The spread is incredible. They got *everything*. And it's all you can eat. Guess they didn't invite too many trolls, or else they got more food stashed somewhere."

Ocelot didn't quite know what to say to that, so he just nodded. "Yeah."

"I'll see ya around," Joe said. "Gotta go find a table so I can get started on this stuff."

"Have you seen any of the other guys?" Ocelot asked quickly before Joe could leave.

"Yeah—I saw Winterhawk a few minutes ago, talkin' to some lady dressed all in blue. He didn't look like he wanted to be bothered, so I left him alone." Joe looked pleased with himself—normally, he would have prided himself on walking right up and expecting an introduction, much to `Hawk's annoyance.

"What about `Wraith or Harry?"

"Nope. Not yet. But I haven't looked too hard. I was tryin' to find the food first." the troll grinned, showing huge white tusks. "I'll get us a table."

"You do that," Ocelot said, with a sigh and a grin of his own. Some things never changed.

When Joe had disappeared into the crowd (well, as much as he could, towering as he did over most of the other guests), Ocelot abandoned his place near the wall and began a circuit around the room, doing his best to remain as unobtrusive as possible. As he made his way through the little knots of socializing guests, he remembered why he didn't like parties, and especially why he didn't like parties of this size or this level of exclusivity. Everywhere he looked, he saw the beautiful people, dressed in the height of current trendy fashion. To Ocelot, it looked as if they were all trying to outdo each other for how pretentious they could look.

Oddly, though, as he continued through the huge room, his gaze picked out some other people who looked a bit out of place among the crowd of glittering socialites. People who weren't beautiful. People who weren't dressed on the cutting edge of fashion. People who looked like they were having the time of their lives, but who on careful observation exhibited a bewilderment that looked incongruous when superimposed with the exuberant insincerity of the rest of the party. There weren't many of them, but there were enough that Ocelot began to take notice of them and file their presence away for future reference.

He continued, making a quick detour through the large room off the side of the main club which contained the bar and the buffet table. Joe had been right: the table stretched the entire length of the room, every centimeter covered over with delicacies ranging from meats to seafood to vegetables and fruits to pastas to steaming serving trays full of human and metahuman dishes of every culture and variety. Behind the table stood a cadre of purple-jacketed staff members, ready to replace a dish

the minute it became empty. *Whoever this guy is, he must be payin' a fortune for this bash*, Ocelot thought idly.

The bar was equally impressive, taking up nearly the entire side of the room opposite the food table. Ocelot ordered a beer and carried it around as he left to head back into the main room. Spotting Winterhawk from the top of the steps leading downward, he made his way through the crowd toward the window where the mage stood. "Some party."

Winterhawk turned from where he had been watching a woman lose herself in the crowd. The mage was in his element, no doubt about it: he looked right at home, champagne glass in hand, dressed in a finely tailored, fashionably loose-fitting suit of charcoal gray with a faint overlay of blue. Unlike Ocelot, who wore his own suit like an unfamiliar uniform, Winterhawk was casually at ease. No surprise there, really—the Brit was probably happy to have an opportunity to spend time somewhere like this, instead of following the team's usual predilection toward bad neighborhoods, abandoned buildings, and sewers. "Good evening," he said, smiling. "Yes, quite. You just missed Cynthia." He indicated the crowd behind him with a brief head movement.

Cynthia Cyan was a top fashion designer whom Winterhawk and Ocelot had met years ago on a run; `Hawk still occasionally dated her when she was in town. "Maybe I'll see her later," Ocelot said.

`Hawk nodded. "Quite a turnout. Whoever our mystery man is, he seems to have a fair amount of credibility for a chap nobody seems to have met."

"Yeah, no kidding. Did you see Maria and Armando?"

"We chatted a bit awhile ago, but as you might expect, she's quite popular tonight." He smiled wryly. "I also saw Joe. I didn't think one could balance that much food on a

single plate. Someone should let him know that he can go back for more."

Ocelot grinned. "I think he's afraid they'll run out before he gets back." He looked out over the crowd as he spoke, and pointed. "There's `Wraith, I think. He's coming over."

Winterhawk followed Ocelot's gesture to see the elf approaching. ShadoWraith moved easily through the crowd, slipping through spaces without ever seeming to touch anyone. He too wore a fine suit in the manner of a uniform, but rather than an unwelcome uniform, it was one in which he looked like he belonged. As always, `Wraith maintained his posture of calm readiness, like a taut spring that could come explosively uncoiled with no prior notice.

"Why don't we try to find Joe and see if he's got a table?" Ocelot said when `Wraith had arrived.

"You haven't seen our host yet, have you?" Winterhawk asked as the three of them made their way back through the crowd toward the tables.

"No."

"This is odd..." the mage said, but his voice was carried away by the music.

Joe had commandeered a largish table near one of the windows. He grinned at his teammates as they approached, gesturing with a chicken leg that was dwarfed in his massive hand. "Hi, guys. Have a seat." He'd apparently been back at least one more time to the buffet, because three plates were arrayed in front of him. Two of them were already empty, and he was working on the third. A pitcher of beer, two-thirds empty, sat before him. "Harry was by to say hi, but he's off schmoozing again. "

"What a surprise," Winterhawk commented, sitting down where he could watch the room. Partygoers

continued to mill around, completing tracks between the dance floor, the tables, and the food and drink. Idly, the mage watched a group of men: a very tall, stiff-looking human with a military haircut, two elves, and a dwarf who was currently gesticulating wildly as he tried to make his point to his friends. Then his attention was drawn off by a pair of attractive young women, followed by a close scrutiny of the guitar technique of Selective Oblivion's lead axeman. Nothing seemed terribly out of the ordinary; at least not to the point that would set off warning bells in his head. Settling back, he sipped his champagne and continued people-watching.

Ocelot sighed, finishing his beer and glancing down at his chrono. It was already nearly 22:00. Even being fashionably late, he was starting to tire of the party and wondered how soon could make an excuse to get the hell out of here. Maybe Kestrel would be done with whatever it was she was doing that night, and they could still –

He froze, his gaze stopping in mid-skip over the various faces in the crowd.

Wait a minute – had that been – ?

No...it couldn't have been. She was –

Kestrel?

She was standing high up on one of the catwalks, where she wouldn't have been spotted by anyone who wasn't specifically looking for her. Ocelot couldn't get a good look at her because of all the flashing, shifting lights – he couldn't even be certain it was, in fact, she – but whoever she was, she seemed to be watching the throng below as if waiting for something. Then, as he watched, another figure – a male figure – came up to her, leaned in close as if whispering something to her (*kissing her?*) She nodded, and then the figure turned around and went back the way he'd come.

Ocelot `s fists knotted under the table as he clenched them. Winterhawk glanced at him, noting the change in his expression. "Problem?"

"No. Nothing." Ocelot stood up, forcing his hands to relax. "Just saw somebody I think I know. I'll be back in a minute." Without waiting for anyone to comment, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving Winterhawk to stare after him and then turn back to ShadoWraith, who had also noticed the exchange. The elf raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

Ocelot pushed his way through the crowd, over toward the place where the catwalk reached the floor level. As he drew near, the woman was just arriving at the bottom. It was indeed Kestrel, dressed in a stylish pants-and-jacket outfit of glove-soft green leather complete with green boots. Ocelot stopped. "Hey," he said noncommittally.

She looked up, startled, but recovered quickly and smiled. "Ocelot! What are you doing here?" Completing her descent, she crossed the distance to him quickly. In addition to the green outfit, she wore a simple necklace of emeralds and onyx that brought out the color in her eyes.

"I was going to ask you the same question," he said, unable to keep a slight edge of accusation out of his voice.

"Business," she said. "I wish I'd known you were coming – we could have come together."

"That would have been a problem," he said bitterly. "I saw you up there with your – friend."

She looked genuinely confused. Then the light dawned. She pointed upward. "Up there?" At his nod, she laughed. "Oh, no, no! You don't understand. It's –" Suddenly, she touched her ear, which Ocelot now noticed contained a tiny bud earpiece. Her vision zoned out for a moment, then she returned her attention to Ocelot. "Listen," she said, "I need to go now – something I have to

take care of. But I'll find you in a bit and explain this to you. You've got it all wrong. Okay?"

Ocelot took a deep breath, shrugged. "Yeah, sure." He pointed in the vague direction of his table. "I'm over there. Not hard to find – I'm sitting with a troll, an elf, and a guy with white stripes in his hair."

She smiled, leaning over to brush a kiss across his lips. "Okay. See you in a bit." And she was gone, off into the crowd.

Winterhawk looked up as Ocelot came back to the table. The mage's expression was quizzical. "Everything all right?"

"Fine," Ocelot said, resuming his seat. He motioned for a waiter and ordered another beer.

The team spent the next half hour watching the crowds, chatting with occasional passersby, and drinking. Winterhawk and Joe at different times were lured out on the dance floor, the former by Cynthia Cyan and the latter by a feather-and-fetish-clad young ork shaman. Ocelot wasn't much in the mood for dancing, and `Wraith – well, `Wraith was almost *never* in the mood for dancing. Both seemed content to concentrate on their drinks and on remaining aware of their surroundings.

"So you guys made it." Ocelot looked up to see Harry, a smiling young woman in a slinky dress on his arm, coming up to the table. He was actually wearing a nice suit this time – *nice* being defined as *not looking as if it had been slept in*. "Hell of a party." He looked at the woman, then at `Wraith, Ocelot, and Joe, the latter of whom had just returned to the table. "Oh. Guys, this is Cherisse. Cherisse...these are the guys." Cherisse, apparently well aware of the fact that she was being paid to be decorative, merely flashed a dazzling smile at the runners. She didn't seem at all perturbed that she hadn't been given the names of "the guys."

"Mind if we sit down a minute?" Harry asked. When Ocelot waved him to a chair, he pulled one up for Cherisse, then plopped down on a second. "So – anybody seen him yet?"

"Who?"

"The guy who's runnin' the show," Harry said as if it was obvious. "I been hearin' a lot of buzz about him. He's around, but I ain't seen him yet. This is the weirdest damned thing I ever saw."

Winterhawk picked that moment to return from the dance floor. Noting that his chair had been claimed by Cherisse, he shot Harry an odd look and grabbed one from an adjacent table. Harry just grinned back.

Ocelot wasn't paying much attention to the back-and-forth between Hawk and Harry. He was too busy scanning the crowds, looking for Kestrel. He didn't want to admit it to himself, but the incident he had seen had shaken him a bit. Reluctant to think that he was the jealous type, he nonetheless wanted an explanation for not only Kestrel's odd behavior up above the dance floor, but also for her very presence here. What kind of "business" could she be doing at this party? Was she trying to meet up with a new fixer? But she had said that she was out of the business now. Maybe she was thinking about getting started again. He just couldn't figure it out, and that bothered him.

Since he was looking for her, though, he was the first person at the table to see her as she broke through the crowd and glanced left and right, finally spotting Ocelot's table. Smiling, she hurried over, speaking into her hand (or at least that was what it looked like) as she came. She looked a bit breathless, like she had been running around a lot (*dancing?*) but her smile looked genuine. "Sorry I took so long," she said. "I kept getting sidetracked."

Ocelot nodded, well aware that his companions were all looking at her. "It's okay," he said. Taking a deep breath, he quickly introduced her to everyone, merely as "Kestrel."

"Pleasure to meet you," Winterhawk said. He cast Ocelot another odd look, but didn't comment further.

She nodded. To Ocelot, she said, "Okay, now I can explain this to you." She pointed off toward the opposite direction from the one in which she had come. "I want you to meet somebody."

A man was approaching the table. As he drew closer, everyone stared at him, not even trying to hide the fact that they were doing so. "Everyone," Kestrel said, "I'd like you to meet Gabriel."

The man was young—very young. He could not have been more than twenty, his face smooth and unlined. He came up next to Kestrel, his movements eerily graceful. His hair was so black that it shone in the overhead light, but his skin was fair. Ocelot's eyes widened a bit; he had never seen anyone possessed of that level of sheer physical beauty before. "Beauty" was the right word, too. Not in a feminine sense, but in the sense of something that was perfect, without flaw. He wore an impeccably tailored, fine silk suit of pale gray with an air of casual indifference; his tie matched the deep purple hue of his eyes.

Still no one at the table spoke. Not even Joe could come up with something to say. Finally, the young man smiled a smile that made Ocelot think of the pictures of saints you sometimes saw in churches on the trid. "I'm pleased to meet you all," he said, his voice soft and pleasant. "I've heard good things about you."

Winterhawk was the first to get his jaw unstuck. "May I take it," he said slowly, "that you're the host of this little soiree?"

Gabriel nodded. "I am. May we?" he asked, indicating two more empty chairs at the next table. At quick nods from Winterhawk and Harry, he and Kestrel both pulled the chairs over. Kestrel situated hers next to Ocelot.

"Nice shindig," Harry said. "Good way to get started in the biz."

"I thought so," Gabriel agreed. "Everyone seems to be having a good time, and it's an excellent opportunity to meet people." He was leaning back casually in his chair, an amused twinkle in his violet eyes.

"I take it you haven't been in town long," Harry said. No one seemed inclined to take control of the conversation; the runners were content to let the fixer pump the young man for whatever information he'd provide.

"Not long," he said, but didn't elaborate. "I plan to stay awhile, though. I like Seattle – I always have."

Ocelot looked back and forth between Kestrel and Gabriel. The young fixer settled his amused, oddly comforting gaze on Ocelot for a moment, then smiled again. "Since no one has introduced anyone to me yet, let me see how well my sources are functioning. You," he said to Ocelot, "must be Ocelot. There's no doubt of that. So that would make you ShadoWraith, you Winterhawk, and you Joe." With each name, he nodded toward the appropriate person. "That leaves you, sir," he said to Harry. "You can only be Harry – soon to be a professional associate, I hope." Turning to Cherisse, an apologetic half-frown crossed his features. "Forgive me, miss, but my sources have revealed nothing to me about you."

She giggled, flashing her dazzling smile again. "That could change," she said. "I'm Cherisse." She hadn't taken her eyes off him since he had arrived. Harry glared at her, nudging her rather ungently out of her reverie.

The amusement in Gabriel's eyes stepped up a notch, but he otherwise didn't reply.

"Your sources ain't bad," Harry said. "But that info ain't hard to come by. Info on you, though – that seems to be scarcer'n smooth spots on a troll. No offense," he added as an aside to Joe.

Gabriel shrugged, smiled. "Forgive me," he said. "An unfortunate flair for the dramatic, sadly. With any success at all, you'll likely be hearing more about my enterprises in the months to come. We're still just getting started, you see."

"We?" Ocelot asked quickly.

"Yes," Kestrel spoke up. "That's what I was trying to tell you. I'm working with Gabriel. Helping him out with day-to-day operations."

"Yes," the young man agreed. "Kestrel has been a godsend – not only has she helped me begin searching for the people I'm seeking, but she's been my face to the world. Fortunately," he said, regarding her with affection, "that won't be necessary now. That is part of the reason I am hosting this affair – to allow me to meet with potential clients, team members, and contacts all at once, rather than one at a time."

"So," Harry said jokingly, "you wouldn't be thinkin' of tryin' to lure any o' my teams off, are ya, kid?"

Gabriel immediately shook his head, looking serious. "No. Not at all. You have nothing to worry about in that regard, I assure you."

"Not that they'd go anyway," Harry continued, still keeping up the joke. "You musta heard how much they all love me. Right, guys?"

"Of course, Harry," Winterhawk said, but it didn't sound like his heart was in the usual banter.

"Well, good," Harry said, then stood up, dragging a reluctant Cherisse with him. "Listen, I gotta get goin'. Still

got some people to talk to tonight. Like you said – nice ta have everybody together in one place. Thanks a lot for the invite – you throw a damn fine party, kid. It was great to meet you."

Gabriel stood as well, reaching across the table to offer his hand. "And for me as well. Undoubtedly we'll meet again. If I don't see you again tonight, thank you for coming." He made a little bow – just a slight incline of his head – to Cherisse.

When Harry had left, he settled back down in his chair, casually crossing his ankle over his knee. "He doesn't like me," he commented to the group at large, his eyes twinkling with merriment.

"He – erm – has trouble with change, sometimes," Winterhawk said, smiling wryly in spite of himself. The young man's good humor was infectious. "I imagine he'll come `round eventually."

"Yes, you're probably correct," Gabriel said. "You don't stay at the top of this business for as long as he has without being adaptable." He paused to take a sip of champagne, then regarded the team. "I was serious when I said I've heard some good things about your team. It seems that you've done just about everything."

"Really?" Kestrel asked teasingly. "You haven't told me about any of that, Gabriel."

"I didn't think you wanted to know," he said in the same tone. He turned back to the other runners. "I've been doing a bit of research on your careers since I decided to come to Seattle."

"Why?" ShadoWraith asked, a bit suspiciously.

Gabriel shrugged. "Standard procedure, isn't it? Yours is one of the more successful shadow teams in town, and has been for several years now. Since I knew I was going to be building one or two teams of my own, I wanted to

see what it was that made yours, and some of the other ones who had already reached your level, successful."

"What, if I may ask, did you discover?" Winterhawk asked with a cynical half-smile. "I've been wondering the same thing about us for quite some time now."

The young man looked serious again. "With your team, I would say a number of factors. Harry has an excellent reputation as a fixer—both for procuring runs and for making sure that steps are taken if they get out of control. But it's more than that. Harry has a number of teams, and they're not all as successful as yours. I think at the heart of your success is your versatility. There aren't many eventualities you can't deal with. Also, believe it or not, your individuality." He smiled. "From other sources who know you in one way or another, I've heard you compared to a herd of cats."

Winterhawk chuckled. "Colorful, but accurate."

"Who you callin' a cat?" Joe asked, grinning.

"All right, then: three cats and a bear, if you will," Gabriel said, his violet gaze locking for a moment on Joe before returning to its previous scan of the runners and the surrounding area.

Joe stiffened a bit at that, but said nothing.

"So," Ocelot asked, "You got a team yet?"

Gabriel nodded. "I've put one together, and expect to send them on their first run soon, after I give them a bit more time to get used to each other." Laughing a little, he added, "Remarkably, they're showing very similar catlike tendencies." He finished off his champagne and set the glass on the table. "I'm quite pleased with the turnout tonight. The band is excellent, don't you think?"

"How'd you get Selective Oblivion?" Joe asked.

"They're right in the middle of a tour, aren't they?"

The young man shrugged. "I did them a favor once. They had the next couple of days off, so they were happy to come."

"Did you do favors for Maria Mercurial and those guys from The Shadows, too?" Ocelot asked.

"And didn't I see the drummer from Concrete Dreams talking to Paulina Nouveau over by the bar earlier?" Winterhawk added.

Gabriel smiled. "You did, and I didn't. If you position the occasion correctly, you'd be surprised at whom you can get to show up. It's all in the marketing." His eyes said he was kidding, but his tone was deadly serious.

"He's right," Kestrel put in. "A little mystery, combined with the fact that it's being held here at the Dreamscape and that only certain people are being invited does wonders—people were asking to be put on the guest list. Of course, what we didn't tell them was that 'only certain people' didn't necessarily mean what they thought it did."

"What do you mean by that?" Winterhawk asked.

Kestrel grinned. "Gabriel has a lot of friends, and not all of them are—shall we say—at the top of Seattle society."

Light dawned in Ocelot's mind. "I think I've seen some of them."

"Probably. There are quite a few of them here. They're having a great time. He's doing his best to make sure they don't feel overwhelmed by it all."

"I thought you haven't been in Seattle very long," Joe said, his brow furrowing.

Gabriel smiled his beatific smile and shrugged. "I make friends easily."

At that moment, two attractive young elf women came up to the table, smiling at ShadoWraith and

Winterhawk. "You guys want to dance?" one of them asked.

Winterhawk smiled back at them. "P'raps a bit later," he said.

`Wraith shook his head. "Thank you, but—I don't dance."

"Too bad," one of the women said good-naturedly. The other one smiled back at Winterhawk, and then they moved off in search of other conquests.

"You should have gone," Gabriel said. "They were quite lovely."

"Oh, I do intend to find her again later," Winterhawk said, looking back over his shoulder at the retreating figures.

"And what's your excuse?" The young man smiled at `Wraith.

"I don't dance," the elf repeated in a *that's all there is to it* tone.

Gabriel shook his head ruefully. "That's a shame. Dancing can be a pleasant desire when you have the right partner." Again, he stared straight at `Wraith as he spoke, then broke the gaze and waved to a passing waiter for another glass of champagne.

Wraith's taut posture became ramrod straight as he locked his gaze on Gabriel, his eyes boring into the young fixer's. "What—did you say?" he asked in a quiet tone with just a hint of strain. Around the table, Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Joe were doing double-takes. Kestrel looked confused.

Gabriel waved it off. "Oh, nothing. Of course, no one is required to dance if they don't want to. It's just that the music is so infectious." He stood. "Well, I'd best get back to playing host. It was good meeting you all. I'm sure we'll encounter each other again. Coming, Kestrel?"

She shook her head. "I'll catch you in a bit. I want to dance with Ocelot first, if he wants to." Smiling at Ocelot, she stood and held out her hand to him as the rest of the runners looked on wondering what was going on that they had missed.

Once they were away from the table, Kestrel took Ocelot's hand and began leading him away from the dance floor. "I didn't really want to dance," she said. "I just thought you might want to talk, just the two of us."

"You got that right," Ocelot growled. He followed as she led him across the room and into a corner near the opposite window. "Okay—what's going on? Why didn't you tell me about this?"

Kestrel stared out over the brilliant Seattle skyline. "We weren't going to mix business and pleasure, remember?"

"If you don't mind my sayin' so, it doesn't look much like business to me."

Her gaze came around to meet his. "What do you mean by that?"

Ocelot met her eyes. "Are you sleeping with him?" he asked bluntly.

For a split-second she looked perplexed, then her eyes widened in surprise. "*Gabriel*? No, of course not. What gave you that idea? I told you, I'm working with him."

"What gave me that idea?" Ocelot sighed. "Come on, Kestrel—look at him. And I saw him up there with you before. What I can't figure out is why you called me back, if you—"

Kestrel reached out and gripped his upper arms, bringing her face in close to his. "Listen to me, Ocelot," she said quietly. "I give you my word. I'm not sleeping with him. I'm not having a romantic relationship with him at all. He's a dear friend, that's all."

"Then how come you never mentioned him before?"

"I didn't think it was important," she said, just a little bit defensively. "I didn't think you'd get like this."

"No," he said, impatient. "I mean before. Before you left the first time."

Kestrel leaned against the window, waiting for a group of chatting young women to pass before speaking. Then she shook her head. "Because I didn't know him then."

Ocelot spread his hands in resignation. "I don't get it, Kestrel. I believe you if you say you're not sleeping with him. But this still doesn't make any sense." He sighed. "Is this part of what you don't want to talk about? With what happened while you were gone?"

She paused. "Sort of," she admitted.

"And you still don't want to talk about it?"

"No. None of it is relevant to us. It's all in the past now."

"Except for him."

"*Ocelot*," she said, exasperated. "Come on—this isn't like you at all. I'm telling you, there isn't anything there. There isn't, and there won't be. I called you because I wanted to get back together with *you*. Gabriel's not even my type. Okay?"

He nodded slowly, trying to decide if the wistful note he heard in her voice was really there, or if he had just manufactured it. Inwardly, he was a little disgusted with himself. She hadn't even given him anything to be jealous *about*. Hell, Gabriel was almost young enough to be her *son*. Not that that mattered, of course. There was something weird about the guy, that was for sure. "Okay," he finally said. Teasingly, with a clearly affected hopeful tone, he added, "I don't suppose he's gay, is he?"

She laughed. "No, I don't think so. Sorry. You'll just have to trust me."

Taking a deep breath, he became serious again. "Will you at least tell me one thing?"

"If I can," she said.

"How did you meet him? And what made you decide to work with him?"

"That's two things," she said, smiling. "But I'll answer them anyway. I met him on a run. And I decided to work with him because I talked with him for a long time, and I liked what he wanted to do. I'd been thinking for awhile about getting into the fixer business myself; this was a good way for me to do it. He's one of the smartest people I've ever met, and he's got a lot of plans and ideas about what he wants to do and where he wants to go. He handles the connections, and I handle the nuts and bolts."

"Some kind of kid prodigy, huh?"

She smiled an odd smile. "Yeah – something like that. Now can we stop talking about all this serious stuff? This is supposed to be a party, remember? What are my chances of actually getting you to dance with me?"

"Not too bad," he said, taking her arm.

Back at the table, the remaining three members of the team were deep in speculation about the events that had just transpired. "Is it just me, guys," Joe said hesitantly, " – or is there something weird about that guy?"

"I don't think it's just you this time, Joe," Winterhawk said.

"No," Wraith agreed. "Did you hear what he said?"

Winterhawk nodded soberly. "You mean about dancing, and desire?"

The elf looked at him like he couldn't have meant anything else.

"Maybe it's a coincidence," Joe said. He poured the last of the beer from his pitcher into his glass and swirled it around speculatively.

"Possibly," Winterhawk admitted. "But it hardly seems likely, especially considering the way he looked at `Wraith when he said it."

"Yeah..." Joe was still speaking slowly, as if he was turning things around in his mind before voicing them. "And then he also said that thing about three cats and a bear. I thought that was weird too, but I just let it go—I figured somebody must've told him."

"He *did* seem to have good information about us—" Winterhawk mused.

"Not that good," `Wraith said. He had not relaxed his guarded posture since Gabriel had left the table. "No one knew. Only the four of us."

"And Harlequin," Winterhawk reminded him.

"You think he's Harlequin?" Joe said, surprised.

"I don't know what to think," Winterhawk said tightly. "I'd give a great deal right now to have the chance to assense him."

"Why don't you?" Joe asked. "We'll keep an eye on your body."

The mage shook his head. "Not here. The astral security `round this place, especially tonight, has to be phenomenal. Not to mention the fact that if he *is* Harlequin, or someone similar, then he'd notice me before I could discover anything."

Joe sighed. "This is just too strange," he said. "Why would he pretend to be this guy? He didn't even know we'd be here tonight. And Harlequin didn't seem like the type who liked to pretend to be other people."

"Point," `Wraith conceded.

"Yes, true," Winterhawk agreed. He leaned back in his chair, running a hand through his hair. "His sources are very good, apparently—p'raps he's talked to that woman Harlequin had with him...what was her name?"

"Jane Foster," `Wraith said.

"I just don't get it," Joe said, frowning. "Maybe he's just playing with our heads." His eyes widened. "Hey, I got it! Maybe he's got somebody who used magic on us. You know, read our minds!"

Wraith stiffened. "Can that be done?" he asked Winterhawk.

"Anything's possible," Hawk said, shrugging. "Spells do exist that allow a magician to read a target's mind, but the ones I'm familiar with are touch-only. He didn't touch any of us, other than shaking Harry's hand, and Harry doesn't know anything about this."

"Non-touch version?"

Again, the mage shrugged. "I don't see why not. It would be an extremely difficult spell, but if he—or someone he's got working for him, more likely—is that powerful a magician, I suppose it could be done. The drain would be hellish, though."

"He sure seems to have the nuyen to hire somebody like that," Joe said. "A spread like this ain't cheap."

Ocelot chose that moment to return to the table. He and Kestrel had finished their dance, and she had told him that she had to go off and take care of some official duties having to do with the party. He pulled up his chair and waved for another beer. "Did I miss anything?"

"New girlfriend?" Joe, ever the soul of tact, queried with a grin.

"Yeah," Ocelot said shortly. "But that ain't what you were talkin' about, I hope. If so, you guys need to get out more."

"Actually," Winterhawk said, "we weren't discussing your new friend at all, but rather speculating about this Gabriel chap and how he knew so much about us."

"Yeah," Ocelot said, his expression growing much more serious as he leaned forward. "Doesn't make me too comfortable either."

"So what's your speculation?" Hawk asked. "So far we've been batting around the possibility that he's either Harlequin in disguise, someone associated with him, or someone who's hired some very high powered magical talent to probe our minds clandestinely so he can dazzle us with the depths of his connections."

Ocelot shrugged. "I think it's not smart to read too much into this without very many facts. Let's look at the simple things first: maybe he's just a kid with some really heavy corp money backing him up. He might not even be as good as he looks—he could just be the face in front of a much bigger organization." That wasn't what Kestrel had said, but it certainly didn't contradict what little she had told him. It was entirely possible that she was as in the dark as they were about Gabriel's real connections.

"Never thought about that," Winterhawk admitted. "It rather makes sense, though."

Wraith mulled that over. "Headware. Getting messages."

"Yeah," Joe said. "It'd be easy to do. Somebody could watch the party from somewhere else nearby, then use that spell Winterhawk was talking about to get info from people. Then they could just send it to him with a scrambled signal or something, so nobody'd catch on—and suddenly he looks like he knows everything."

"The Great and Powerful Oz," ShadoWraith said suddenly.

All three teammates initially stared blankly at him, but then a slow smile spread across Winterhawk's face. "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain," he murmured.

The elf, apparently pleased that someone had gotten one of his obscure 20th-century references, nodded.

"Huh?" Ocelot asked, looking confused.

"It's a reference from a rather famous movie of the last century," Winterhawk said, "And I believe from a book from the one before that. Oz was essentially an average little man who used a lot of smoke and mirrors to fool people into believing that he had great power."

Ocelot nodded. "That makes sense. But there's nothin' average about this guy. I've never seen anybody who looks like that, outside of models and sim stars. But even *they* don't look like that in real life. And why pick a kid?"

"Maybe they wanted somebody who looked trustworthy," Joe said. "When he was sittin' here, I kind of felt like I trusted him. Didn't you?"

"Yeah..." Ocelot nodded again. "Yeah, I did. He's sure as hell got a way with people."

"Maybe he's got one of those spells like you have, Winterhawk," Joe said. "That makes him more charismatic."

Winterhawk considered that. "Possibly. At any rate, I'd love to get a look at him on the astral plane. But I doubt I'll get the chance. I don't expect to have any reason to have much more to do with him once we've left here."

Ocelot finished his beer. "Yeah, true. Guess there's really not much point in speculatin' about it." His gaze swept over the dance floor, where he spotted Gabriel dancing with another famous simsense starlet whose name he couldn't remember but whose face was instantly recognizable. "He's sure makin' himself popular, though." Standing up, he said, "You know, I've had about enough of this place. I think I'm gonna take off. I'll catch you guys later, okay?"

ShadoWraith stood as well. "Yes," he said. "I agree."

"Good night, then, gentlemen," Winterhawk said. "I think I'll stay `round for a bit longer and try to find that lovely young elf woman who asked me to dance before. If you'll excuse me, Joe — " With a nod, he got up and started

off into the crowd as Ocelot and ShadoWraith headed for the exit.

6.

It was nearly an hour later when Winterhawk returned to the table and found it occupied by another group. He wasn't surprised; Joe was probably either out dancing somewhere or raiding the buffet table for yet another time, or perhaps he'd left already. He hadn't seen Harry for awhile, either. It was after midnight now, and the party was still in full swing.

He had found the elf woman and had a rather nice dance with her (and one with her friend, after apologetically explaining to her that `Wraith had left, but that he would be happy to stand in his teammate's stead), but that had only taken about ten minutes of the hour in which he had remained. Both of them had been, unfortunately, a bit too young and flighty to interest him in pursuing further conversation. He had spent the remaining time wandering around, drink in hand, picking up snatches of conversation here and there. He was by nature a curious man—in fact, it was not only one of his greatest strengths, but also one of his worst failings—and he could not get the mysterious young fixer out of his mind. There were just too many things that didn't make sense about him, the most puzzling of which being his cryptic comments making reference to an experience that, as far as Winterhawk knew, only six people in the world even knew about. Gabriel was most certainly not supposed to be one of them.

Winterhawk continued his meanderings, letting his mind wander back over that strange run two years ago, and especially to the even stranger party that had taken place near the end of it. ShadoWraith, who had not had a date in any of his friends' memories, had indeed danced with Desire—just as Joe had apparently had deep conversations with Bear, and `Hawk himself had chatted

with various other shamanic totems such as Raven and Dog. The whole event was the kind of thing that none of them to this day was certain had actually occurred; even Winterhawk, who was more than passingly familiar with concepts like metaplanar quests and such, still occasionally managed to convince himself for awhile that the whole thing had just been some kind of mass hallucination. The belief never lasted longer than an hour or two, though.

He sighed, stopping to take in the view out the window for a moment while gathering his thoughts. He didn't really know why he was still here; the party was just beginning to degenerate into just the sort of affair that he didn't care for anymore (actually, that he never *had* cared for): less interesting conversations, more dancing, schmoozing, and lowering of inhibitions brought on by the free-flowing alcohol. Most of the people `Hawk was interested in seeing had already left, anyway: he'd noticed Maria and Armando making their excuses some time ago, and Cynthia had sought him out to say goodbye, saying that she had to catch an early plane for Milan tomorrow so she had to get her sleep. Now that the rest of the team, and even Harry, seemed to have disappeared, that left only Gabriel and Ocelot's mysterious new girlfriend, the former of whom was almost constantly surrounded by various groups of people, and the latter of whom looked like she was more concerned with maintaining the logistics of the party than she was with talking or dancing.

`Hawk left the party without saying goodbye to anyone, retrieving his coat (he hadn't bothered bringing any weapons; he rarely carried any except his mageblade anyway, and since he refused to check that, he'd just left it home) and stepping into the elevator to take the long ride downstairs.

He was alone in the elevator car, feeling just a bit pleasantly tipsy from the champagne. He hadn't had much to eat, which had probably been a mistake; fortunately, he had decided to take a cab to the party rather than try to drive in the snarled Downtown traffic. They'd been having sporadic problems with the grid around this area lately, and he didn't relish the idea of trying to explain to a Lone Star cop what he was doing out at one in the morning, driving under the influence and without a proper SIN. The only thing less appealing than spending a night (or more) at a Lone Star precinct house jail until Harry could pull enough strings to get him out was the possibility that he'd have to pull some of his own strings—from back home in England, where he *did* really exist—to get himself out of a mess. No, better to just take a cab.

The elevator stopped. It was only about halfway down, so it must be one of the residents, Hawk thought idly. He glanced up as the doors slid open, then froze.

There was a figure there, leering at him. Grinning face. Pointed ears. Clown makeup. Winterhawk gasped involuntarily. "What—?"

Then it was gone, replaced by the perfectly ordinary features of a young elf man, looking confused. "You all right, man?" he asked nervously, backing up.

Slowly, the mage relaxed a bit. He took a long, deep breath. "Yes—yes, I'm fine," he said, but his tone was not certain. "Sorry. Thought you were—someone else."

"S'okay," the elf said. He turned quickly around to look behind him. "Hey, I just realized I forgot something. I'll catch the next one. Sorry, chummer." He hit the button again and the elevator door slid shut.

Winterhawk leaned back against the wall of the car, swiping a hand through his hair. *I must have had a bit more*

champagne than I thought, he mused ruefully. Now I'm seeing things that aren't there.

The elevator reached the ground floor without further incident, and Hawk hailed one of the numerous cabs that were circling the block like vultures waiting to move in on a kill. Giving the ork driver his address, he settled back to watch the scenery.

"You at that big party tonight?" the ork asked.

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes."

"Heard it was some bash. I took a fare home awhile ago who said that Maria Mercurial and Selective Oblivion were there. That musta been a gig to see."

The mage shrugged. "Maria didn't perform. But yes, it was quite an event."

"You're all doomed, you know," the ork said in the same cheerfully conversational tone.

For a moment, the cabdriver's comment didn't register on Winterhawk. Then he stiffened and leaned forward, his fists clenching. "What did you say?" he asked softly, sounding strange and accusing. He stared hard at the ork's image in the rear-view mirror.

The ork turned his head to look quizzically at the well-dressed Englishman who'd suddenly gone weird in his back seat. "I said that's too bad," he replied slowly. "You know — that she didn't perform."

"That isn't what you said," Winterhawk said, eyes narrowing. "Now tell me the truth."

"Hey," the cabbie said, "Come on, mister. Make it easy on both of us. I know you've probably had a little too much — why don't you just sit back and be comfortable till I get you home, okay?"

Winterhawk closed his eyes for a moment, taking deep breaths as he leaned back on the seat again. This was getting a little frightening. He didn't normally react like this to alcohol: when he got drunk, depending on the

mood he was in when he started, he either got morose or a little silly. But he didn't see things that didn't exist. He wondered if there had been something extra in the champagne. "All right," he said wearily. "Sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me tonight."

"Null persp," the ork said, grinning. "Just don't get sick in my cab, and all's forgiven." He turned another corner and returned his attention to his driving.

Winterhawk remained silent, watching the sights of downtown Seattle go by. Idly, he switched his vision over to the astral plane, curious if anything was amiss there that might have caused his odd hallucinations. Everything seemed fine, though: the ork's aura glowed brightly, the colors indicating that he was not terribly troubled by the incident. Hawk assumed (correctly) that when one drove a cab in Seattle for any length of time, one learned not to let things get under one's skin. He shifted back to normal perception as the cab pulled up in front of his building. "You gonna be okay?" the ork asked. "Need help or anything?"

Winterhawk was so preoccupied that he didn't even notice the ork's obvious wangling for a bigger tip. "No thank you," he said distractedly. "I'm fine." Getting out, he paid the driver, tipped him, and headed into the building. Right now, the thing he wanted most was to get a good night's sleep and fight off the effects of the alcohol. He was sure he'd have a hangover in the morning, but he was willing to live with that.

He took the elevator up to his fourth-floor apartment, opening the door and tossing his overcoat over the nearest chair. Before going in any further, he switched on a light and paused to look around. Everything looked fine as far as he could tell, but he really didn't expect otherwise. The apartment was large and spacious, situated on the top floor of an older residential building.

Winterhawk had rented it on a long-term basis, long ago persuading the owners of the building, an elderly couple who lived on the ground floor, to allow him to make "renovations" to the place in exchange for a significantly higher rent than they would have otherwise received. The "renovations" had included renting all four of the fourth-floor apartments and having extensive work done to knock out walls and make the whole thing into a huge open space where the only other rooms were a single bedroom and two baths, one off the bedroom and one off the main space. Freestanding walls and partitions divided other parts of the place off from the large main room, but it was nonetheless big enough to support a decent-sized hermetic circle. So was the roof, to which Winterhawk had access as part of his rental agreement. The apartment had cost him a small fortune to whip into a state in which he would consider inhabiting it, but it had been worth it. Now, the place was quite a showpiece. Winterhawk remained on good terms with his landlords (who would have been idiots to anger him and risk losing their substantially hiked monthly rent payments), but he had still felt it prudent to drop a few subtle hints at the beginning regarding what might befall the place should the owners get greedy and try to find a yet more lucrative tenant. All in all, they understood each other quite well, and the relationship had been a mutually beneficial one for many years.

Sighing, Winterhawk shrugged out of his jacket and draped it over his arm, crossing the large living area toward the bedroom. Once in the bedroom, he clicked on the small trid unit and tuned it to a late-night news show, which then droned on quietly just above his level of perception as he continued preparing for bed. The newscaster, a plastic-faced human man with perfect teeth and shiny blond hair, was discussing some joint venture

between Renraku and Mitsuhamas; Winterhawk wasn't really paying attention, but he thought it had something to do with dedicating a new park somewhere in the city. He got into bed and aimed the remote at the trid to turn it off when suddenly he heard his name. He sat bolt upright and stared at the small picture.

"—Winterhawk," the plastic-faced man was saying, his grin gone suddenly huge and slightly manic. "Sources close to him say that the mage, a member of one of Seattle's most successful shadowrunning teams, is teetering on the brink of insanity. Reports are that —"

"*Bloody hell!*" Winterhawk yelled, jamming his finger down on the button to turn the trideo unit off. The plastic-faced anchorman faded into nothingness. "This is not *happening*. I am simply *drunk*. This will be nothing but a bad memory in the morning." He sat there a moment, holding the remote and trying to convince himself that he spoke the truth. After a few moments, though, he couldn't resist clicking the trid back on.

A different anchor, this time a woman with a plastic-looking face, perfect teeth, and shiny brown hair, was reporting on the recently-announced recall of the 2055 Ford Americar because of potentially dangerous defects in the brake system.

Slowly, just now becoming aware that he had been holding it, Winterhawk let out his breath and clicked the trid back off. Sleep. That was what he needed. This would all look much better in the morning.

7.

ShadoWraith had not gone home immediately after leaving the party. Instead, he had chosen a long and circuitous route for his walk through the dark damp streets of downtown, one that would give him plenty of time to think and to mull over the disquieting events of the evening.

By the time he arrived back at his apartment, which was only five minutes' walk from Winterhawk's, he wasn't any closer to an answer than he had been when he had started. `Wraith liked it when things made sense. Unlike some of his more volatile teammates, who sometimes seemed as if they thrived on chaos and uncertainty, the elf was most comfortable when all his ducks were, metaphorically speaking, in a row. The party this evening had presented him with one very odd duck who was nowhere near the row; in fact, duckwise, Gabriel the fixer was hovering somewhere in the next county.

It was in `Wraith's nature, when confronted with a problem, to try to solve it quickly, to fit it into his worldview somewhere where it made sense. At that point, he could relegate it to "not worthy of my attention" status, or, at the very least, "keep an eye on it but it's probably nothing to worry about" status. As someone who rarely missed anything going on around him, ShadoWraith prided himself on being able to do this with his usual calm efficiency. The fact that this problem seemed to be defying explanation disturbed him.

He didn't completely accept Ocelot's and Joe's suggestion that Gabriel was getting information from someone else. He didn't think Winterhawk had, either. The two of them tended to be the "conspiracy theorists" of the team, both of them having a habit of looking at the fantastic or supernatural explanation for a problem

(particularly one of this nature) if a reasonably cut-and-dried mundane answer didn't present itself. Joe and Ocelot, on the contrary, tended to be more down-to-earth and pragmatic, leaning toward the mundane solution unless the arcane one was staring them in the face. `Wraith didn't have a great deal of knowledge of things magical, and things he didn't know about made him paranoid. It was one of the very few things about which he was not pragmatic.

Actually – almost *everything* made him paranoid. But magical things were high up on the list.

Higher still was anything connected with the bizarre run they had completed two years ago, a run that had involved a clown-faced elven being named Harlequin, a series of increasingly unearthly magical locations, and the fate (or so they were led to believe) of the Sixth World as they knew it. The fact that Gabriel, a mystery man whose ability to hide his identity was so good that even Harry couldn't find out anything about him, was casually dropping references to something that had happened during that run was eating at `Wraith. More, probably, than any of his three teammates, he had to know how that was accomplished. If Gabriel was getting information from someone else, `Wraith wanted to know from whom he was getting it, why, and what he planned to do with it. If he was not getting it from someone else, then `Wraith wanted to know how he had found out about it, and again what he planned to do with it. The thought of someone, especially someone that odd, having information about him bothered the elf. After all, if he had something *that* personal, then what else might he have that he hadn't mentioned yet?

Ocelot, apparently, had an unexpected connection to Gabriel, through his assistant, Kestrel. Although it had been many years (with the single exception of Desire)

since `Wraith had allowed himself to experience any romantic feelings, he nonetheless recognized them readily when they manifested themselves in other people, especially people close to him. There was no question about the fact that Kestrel and Ocelot had known each other prior to the party, and that they were involved in a relationship. It was also obvious (at least to `Wraith, who made a point of observing such things and filing the information away for later use) that Ocelot had been as surprised as the rest of the team when Kestrel had shown up at their table with the striking young man. There were a fair number of things going on in the situation, and `Wraith wanted to know most of them. He was patient, though. He had time. Tomorrow, he would ask Ocelot if he had found out anything else, and then he would go on from there. There was nothing more to be gained by thinking about it tonight.

He arrived home, pausing as he always did to examine the lock on his door for any signs of tampering before entering his apartment. "Home" in his case was a converted warehouse, reachable by a freight elevator. Systematically making his way through the darkened, nearly empty space, he switched on a light and proceeded to check all the traps he had left for any unsuspecting would-be housebreakers. Everything appeared fine; of course, if anyone *had* tried to break in, he would likely have found their dead body or bodies laid out on the floor. ShadoWraith's booby traps were not of the humane variety. But the windows were still closed, their shutters welded together, and the lock on the gun safe was still secure and untouched. His Yamaha Rapier, which he parked in the apartment when he wasn't using it, was still where he had left it and also appeared untouched. It wasn't that `Wraith *expected* anyone to have entered his

apartment; he was simply prepared to notice such an intrusion should one occur.

Although it was late, `Wraith was not tired. His mind was far too active right now to allow him to sleep. Instead, he opened his gun safe (using chemsuit gloves to open the poison-covered lock), removed several of his guns, and sat down in one of his two chairs with these and his gun-cleaning supplies arrayed before him on a cloth. Working quickly and efficiently, he began stripping and cleaning each gun, meticulously laboring over each component and then reassembling the gun before moving on to the next one. The guns didn't need cleaning; `Wraith's firearms were more carefully tended than were many people's children, but the activity afforded him something to do with his restless hands while his equally restless mind wrestled with its problem.

He didn't really pay attention to how long he sat there, cleaning one gun after another until all of them were laid out in front of him, spotless and well-oiled. He leaned forward, preparing to get up and carefully transfer each weapon to its place in the locker.

Suddenly, he was tired. The feeling washed over him abruptly, a wave of fatigue that caused his eyelids to grow heavy and his head to nod. Sitting back in the chair, he told himself that he would just remain here for a moment until the feeling passed, and then he would—

It was dark, and he was running for his life.

His footfalls splashed on the wet streets, his strides propelling him farther away from the white figures who relentlessly pursued him. From somewhere behind him, he heard their cries, strident and mocking. Around him, buildings rose on both sides like a dark canyon, funneling him toward — what?

Safety?

Death?

Dimly, he became aware that there were others with him. They were running too, their breath coming in short sharp gasps as they struggled to keep up with him. He slowed down a bit, reluctant to lose them, convinced somehow that he was responsible for them. But the white figures were gaining, and the others were losing the race. One by one, they dropped back. He tried not to listen to their screams as the white-robed ones fell upon them and tore them apart. He tried not to think about the agony they were suffering. He could do nothing for them now – he had to escape, or the same fate would befall him as well. He pictured the leering, white-hooded figures and made his hatred for them a focus for his will to keep going.

The scene was changing now. The black, canyon-like figures of the buildings were giving way to smaller, squatter buildings, ramshackle places sprayed with a riot of glowing graffiti. He kept running, afraid to look back, afraid that if he did, it would give the pursuers a chance to catch up. He couldn't let them catch him. He couldn't –

Another figure, approaching from his left. A lone figure, running as he was, pursued as he was. Another knot of white-robed, pointed-hooded figures, waving clubs and baseball bats and flaming sticks. Calling. Yelling obscenities. Howling like rabid animals.

The figure grew closer, and suddenly recognition dawned. He nearly stopped, but remembered at the last moment that stopping was not an option. Instead, he matched pace with the figure, appalled at how thin and battered and terrified he looked. "Help me..." the figure pleaded. His voice was ragged as if he had been screaming. "Help me..."

"Father, I – " His own voice sounded ragged too.

But it wasn't his father. Not quite. The features were similar, but his father had been human. This man had the angular features and pointed ears of an elf. And his father was dead. How – ?

"Help me..." The man's voice was growing weaker now, and his pace was slowing. Sweat stood out in beads on his

forehead and ran in rivulets down his face. Sweat mingled with blood.

The white-robed figures were growing ever closer, but still their cries and screams were indistinct, unintelligible. There were no individuals there, only a mob. The two groups who had been pursuing them had melded seamlessly into a single larger group that seemed to take power from its augmented numbers.

Wordlessly, he grabbed his father's arm and increased his speed, dragging the man along with him. He knew the pain he must be causing, but pain was preferable to death. They couldn't keep running forever. They had to find a place to hide.

His father tripped, wrenching loose from his grasp and going sprawling down to the wet pavement with a cry of terror and anguish.

For a moment, he hesitated. The figures were coming closer. They were approaching from all sides now. He had to run. He had to get away. He had to –

He turned back to grab his father's arm and pull him back up.

That was all the white-hooded figures needed. They swarmed around the two of them like insects, their bodies hidden beneath the flowing robes, their faces behind the pointed hoods. They closed in around them, their voices becoming a single discordant hum, surrounding them from all sides. There was no escape now.

They raised their burning brands –

His father screamed –

ShadoWraith's eyes flew open and he flung himself upright. For a moment, terror gripped him as he fought the vivid images of the dream. His breath came quick and shallow, his body bathed in sweat and shivering in the chill air of the room. Quickly, his gaze darted around, taking in his surroundings.

The room was the same as he had left it. The guns were still spread out on their cloth in front of the chair; the gun safe was still closed but not locked; the shutters

and the door were still tightly closed. There was no sound save for the rattling of his breath in the back of his throat.

With agonizing slowness he got himself under control, using meditation techniques to quiet his breathing and calm his racing heart. When he got to the point where he thought he could rise, he did so and methodically returned all the weapons to their accustomed places in his gun safe, then carefully locked it up. Then he pondered what to do next.

The last time he had had a dream had been the first time in his recent memory that he had done so. The experience had frightened him so badly that he had fled from his apartment to Winterhawk's not realizing that he had arrived clad only in his shorts and carrying a gun; his mind had been so disturbed by the dream that this fact had not even bothered him. Since that time he had not had another dream, but he was a bit better equipped to deal with one now.

He took a deep breath.

He would not go talk to `Hawk about it now. It was, after all, only a dream. Almost everyone had them. It could wait until the morning.

`Wraith could wait until the morning, too. He didn't think he would be doing any more sleeping that night.

8.

The hog's engine rumbled, low and throaty, as the big motorcycle thundered through the broken streets of the Redmond Barrens. Joe didn't ride quickly; he wasn't, after all, in a hurry. On a night like this, there was no real need to be. And besides, he was one of the few who didn't have much to worry about concerning the other denizens of the godforsaken area he called home. Nobody in their right mind would mess with a troll his size. Even without any obvious cyberware, Joe had a reputation for being one tough hombre around this area. And when you added the combined might of his gang standing behind him, the whole thing became pretty much a question of how suicidal you were feeling today.

Right now, Joe was grinning, his tusks gleaming in the moonlight. That had been one fine party, at least by his definition. He'd gotten to eat as much as he wanted to (something he valued very highly), and the food was fantastic. There was enough beer, good music, and willing women to dance with to have made the evening a rousing success in his mind. As for the weird new pretty-boy fixer who was throwing the party, Joe wasn't terribly worried, or even concerned, about him. His explanation had satisfied him, especially since he didn't expect to encounter Gabriel anymore. Maybe Ocelot would, because his new girlfriend (when did Ocelot get a girlfriend?) seemed to be tight with the guy, but that didn't make any difference to Joe.

There was almost nobody out and about, which didn't surprise him at all. Occasionally he would pass the shadowy form of one of his gang members lurking in a doorway or in an alley; they nodded to him as he went by, and he nodded back. He must have looked a bit odd,

riding through the Barrens in a hybrid Western-Native American-style suit, but he didn't think anybody was going to give him any trouble about it.

He increased speed just a bit, and the hog's exhaust note obligingly increased correspondingly in volume. Earlier tonight, he had wished he had gotten the truck from Ocelot's garage, but now he was glad he had ridden. The cold wind whipped through his black mohawk and felt good on his face. He decided to take a quick circuit of the area covered by his gang's influence, then go home and hit the sack.

He had almost completed his rounds and was riding through the part of his territory that took him next to an area known to be frequented by ghouls when he saw the signs of a disturbance up ahead.

Slowing the bike with senses on full readiness, Joe tried to make sense of what was happening up ahead. Even with his natural thermographic vision, it was hard to make it out. It looked like an altercation of some type. But what—

Something bellowed. Joe stiffened, immediately recognizing the sound. His conscious mind fought against it, but the sound was unmistakable to him. It was a sound of a bear in pain. But what was a bear doing in the Barrens?

The bear bellowed again, causing Joe to grab a handful of throttle. The bike surged forward, with Joe rising up on his footpegs to try to get a better look. As he got closer, the figures resolved themselves into two large flying forms and one large, shaggy ground-bound one. *Gargoyles*, Joe thought immediately. They were seen frequently enough around here that their presence didn't surprise him, but the hulking form of the bear they were attacking certainly did. The two gargoyles worked in

concert with each other, one flying in to attack the creature while the other distracted it.

Joe didn't know what was going on, but he wasn't about to let the bear be killed by the gargoyles. Whatever it was doing here, it didn't deserve that kind of death. And Joe, who had begun following the ways of the totem Bear (in a mundane sense, anyway) after having had the chance to meet and converse with the totem at the same party where ShadoWraith had danced with Desire, was determined that he wasn't going to stand by and allow one of his totem animals to be slaughtered by the vicious urban predators.

Bringing the bike to a stop, he jumped off and ran over to the scene of the battle. The bear was in a berserk rage now, lashing out with its massive paws first this way, then that way, but always coming just short of contacting the rocky hide of the gargoyles. Joe wished he had brought his battle axe with him; wielded by his phenomenal strength, it would have made short work of the gargoyles in no time. No chance to think about that now, though. He had what he had, and that was all. It would just have to be enough.

He waded into the combat, avoiding the muscular, flailing forelegs of the bear, which was now slicked with blood from the wounds the gargoyles were inflicting on it. One of the gargoyles came in for another pass, its sharp claws lashing out to rake once more at the bear, but Joe was too quick for it. His huge hand struck, grabbing the gargoyle by its leg. He could feel the rocky, heavily armored surface of the thing's leg as his hand closed around it. It beat its wings uselessly trying to get away as Joe brought his arm around and swung the gargoyle with all his might into its fellow, who was following up the attack in hopes of catching Joe by surprise.

Two things happened then. First, there was a flash of multi-colored light as the gargoyle Joe was holding contacted the other one. Silently, both of them disappeared, causing Joe to nearly overbalance as the heavy weight suddenly vanished from his grip. Second, the bear sank down into the broken street and vanished as well. Joe was left standing in the middle of a dark, now deserted street. The only sound was the rumble of his bike's idling engine.

"What the hell...?" Joe muttered to himself, looking around for any other threats. Apparently there were none. For a moment, he just stood there, staring down at the patch of ground into which the bear had disappeared. Then, slowly, he walked back over to his bike, got on, and rode immediately home. He knew what he had to do now.

Fortunately for him, most of the gang members with whom he shared the rotting old brownstone building were either out for the night or had already sacked out, so he had the place effectively to himself. He went immediately to his room, gathered his supplies, and sat down to talk to Bear.

He wasn't quite sure how it was that he was sometimes able to talk to the totem; supposedly, anybody who wasn't a shaman shouldn't have been able to do so. It didn't always work, of course; in fact, most of the time it didn't work. When it did, he didn't really *talk* to Bear, either. It was more like Bear talked to him, by sending him visions. Sometimes the visions even made sense. He wasn't sure which parts of these visions were caused by Bear and which were caused by the peyote and other hallucinogenics he used to get into the right "meditative state," but he didn't really care. Joe believed, and that was enough.

Upon finishing his preparations, he sat down cross-legged on the old Native American-print rug in the middle of the floor of his room, holding his lit pipe in one hand and his spear in the other. The spear was Joe's most prized possession; it had once been owned by the famous Sioux chief Sitting Bull, who was Joe's idol. The spear had been a gift from Winterhawk: the team had once saved the mage from nearly certain death when he had been shot by a vampire assassin, and when he had recovered, he had expressed his gratitude by presenting his friends with lavish (and surprisingly appropriate) gifts. Joe had been speechless when `Hawk had given it to him, and speechlessness was not one of the troll's common traits. Now, the spear played a prominent role in his ritual to contact Bear.

He lost track of time, as he always did, after he began the ritual. The chant, the smoke, and the odd lightness in his head all merged into a single sensation, his vision clouded by both the physical smoke and the peyote's effect on his mind.

For awhile, it seemed as if Bear was not going to respond. That was the way it often worked, but it was always a disappointment. The rare chance to touch the totem's embrace was a wonderful thing; it made Joe feel like he belonged to something larger than himself. When it didn't happen, he always returned from the ritual feeling drained and dejected.

This was not to be one of those times, however. Within his smoky wreath, Joe's vision slowly cleared as forms began to take shape before him. He knew instinctively that it was not his physical vision that was clearing, but rather his insight into whatever realm in which Bear existed.

The image shimmered, then cleared. It was still shifting and somewhat indistinct, but Joe could make out

details with astounding clarity. He watched as the vision played out before him.

In his mind's eye, he saw a canyon. He was standing in the canyon, with the blue cloudless sky above him. It felt like the kind of place he might see in the NAN lands where he had grown up. He became aware that he was standing on four paws, rather than two feet: as he looked down, he saw brown, furry forelegs ending in clawed paws. He turned his head, and the bear's head turned as well. He was the bear. Not Bear, but a bear. Perhaps the small bear represented himself in the spiritual realm; he'd never had this sort of vision before.

A rumbling off to one side attracted his attention. He turned, and was horrified to see, far in the distance, a huge column of water heading swiftly in his direction, uprooting the little scrubby trees and bushes that grew at the bottom of the canyon. Flash flood! He knew this immediately: anyone who grew up in NAN lands knew about them and how dangerous they were. Quickly he changed direction and began to lope off toward the other end of the canyon. He had to get out before the flood reached him, or he'd be swept away just like all the other living things down here.

What he saw when he changed directions, however, drew him up short. He could see the other end of the canyon from where he was, but he saw right away that there was no escape in that direction, either. A towering fire, shooting up toward the sky like a massive funeral pyre, covered the exit. Although there was no fuel for it, it seemed to be getting closer, inexorably marching forward to meet the flood. His gaze darted back and forth, from fire to flood and back, as he realized that there was nowhere for him to run. The walls of the canyon were too high for him to climb, especially in this bear form.

Indecision gripped him. What was he supposed to do? What was Bear trying to tell him? He had to do something—he couldn't just stand here and die. Savagely, he lurched toward the flood. At least he'd have a chance there. Bears could swim, right? He just had to—

The vision dissipated, floating away on the wisps of smoke like a half-forgotten dream.

Joe opened his eyes. He was breathing hard, covered in sweat. His spear was clutched tightly in both hands, as if he were hanging on to it for dear life. He felt exhausted, like he had just run a marathon. Glancing at his chrono, he realized that he had been at this for more than two hours.

He sighed. What did the vision mean? Was it a warning? A precognition? Was Bear just having fun with him? And what about the other vision, the unbidden one, with the bear and the gargoyles? Was any of this going to come clear to him, or would it remain in maddening obscurity?

He wished he knew.

9.

Ocelot arrived home still unable to get the evening's events out of his mind. He pulled the truck into the garage, locked it carefully, and entered the house through the garage door, moving through the darkened room with the certainty of a blind man in familiar surroundings. His thoughts wouldn't stand still; they flitted madly from jealousy to paranoia to shame for feeling jealousy and paranoia to just plain fatigue. He wasn't sure what he wanted to do right now, but sleep damned sure wasn't it.

The last thing he had thought he was going to do tonight was go to a party and find out that his girlfriend (that word sounded so strange in connection to him) was not only *there*, but apparently had hooked up with a well-connected young guy with sim-star looks, and the two of them were starting up a fixer business. All of this was so unlike what Ocelot had known from his previous time with Kestrel that he couldn't force it to make sense. Okay, so she said she wasn't sleeping with him. He believed that. He had to work at it a little, but he trusted her enough that when she told him something, he believed it. If she didn't want him to know something, she let him know that. It was one of the things he liked about her: she was straightforward. No games.

But that was the *old* Kestrel, his paranoid side reminded himself. Except for the last couple of days, it had been two years since he'd seen her. A whole lot of things could have changed in that time. In the intense lifestyles usually lived by shadowrunners, two years could be an eternity. Kestrel had struck him, previously, as being a very street-smart, savvy, and levelheaded person—the kind of person who couldn't be fooled by scams or lines. But somehow she had left her team, the

people she told him were like her family (or maybe they had left her?) and hooked up with this guy with no past. Ocelot tried to figure out what might cause her to do something like that, but couldn't do it. He just didn't have enough data. If Gabriel was a front for some corp's dirty little plan, as Ocelot was convinced he was, then could he be dangerous to Kestrel? Could she have gotten herself into something over her head, and just couldn't see it?

Ocelot sighed. There were some possibilities, and he didn't like most of them. One was that everything was on the level: she had, as she'd said, met Gabriel on a run and they had become friends. Another was that he had something on her; a secret, some kind of blackmail, or some other reason that she would go along with him. A third was that he or someone connected with him was controlling her mind, either through drugs or magic. But those last two just didn't make sense. She had made a point to bring him over and introduce him to Ocelot and the rest of the team. Maybe she didn't know `Hawk, `Wraith, Joe, and Harry, but Gabriel undoubtedly knew of them if he had that kind of data, and he must have known that between them, there wasn't much they missed. Ocelot had been watching closely, and he hadn't even seen a hint of a misstep. Kestrel acted around Gabriel as if he was exactly what she claimed he was: a dear friend. A dear *platonic* friend.

Ah, screw it, he thought disgustedly. Enough about this. I'll talk to Kestrel tomorrow and see if I can get her to tell me anything else. And if she wouldn't, he reminded himself, the whole thing really wasn't any of his concern. Just because the guy was her business partner didn't mean that Ocelot had to worry about him. As long as Kestrel's behavior didn't change, he figured that just letting it go and keeping his eyes open was the smartest thing right now.

He pulled off his coat, jacket, and tie, tossing all of them mechanically toward the large troll chair without even looking in that direction, continuing through the room toward the bathroom.

There was a small *flump* sound as the clothes hit the floor.

Ocelot stiffened, turning. Sure enough, the coat and jacket lay in an untidy little heap on the floor, the tie on top. The huge chair was off two meters to the left. He stared. *I don't remember moving that chair...*

He shook his head quickly, his muscles still taut. The chair weighed more than a hundred kilos; it wasn't the sort of thing you just shoved around because you didn't like where you'd put it.

Unless you're a big troll, he thought, relaxing. He'd forgotten that Joe had been here recently. Maybe he'd moved it. With the kind of strength Joe possessed, he might have done it without even a second thought. Okay, mystery solved. He picked up his clothes and tossed them over the chair.

You're all keyed up about nothing, he admonished himself. *You're jumping at shadows*. Determining that he was far too wound up to sleep right now, he decided to run through a few katas in his workout room to relax him. He quickly changed out of the rest of the suit, glad to be back in the snug-fitting, easy-to-move-in clothes that he normally wore. He couldn't understand why anybody would want to spend all their time trussed up in a suit and tie; he could never figure out how Winterhawk put up with it.

Heading toward his workout room, his bare feet making no sound on the floor, Ocelot glanced idly around at the collection of hand weapons, both common and exotic, that passed for decorations in his multi-purpose living area. Of course, they weren't *really* decorations;

Ocelot wasn't an interior-decorating kind of guy. Every one of the weapons was fully functional and ready to be pulled off the wall and used should the need arise. The ones he liked to use for his workouts, he kept close to the door to the exercise room. Others, depending on their function, hung near the front door, on the wall by the door to the garage, or near his bed. All in all, there were more than twenty different weapons hung in various places around the room.

As he approached the door to the workout room, he reached out automatically for the bo stick that he kept nearby.

His hand fell on the hilt of a machete instead.

Ocelot stopped, yanking the machete from its place and gripping it tightly. His blood was running cold again. Slowly, his head came up and his gaze tracked around the room.

Every one of his weapons was in a different place from where he had put it.

The *dau* (Chinese scimitar) and *nunchaku* that normally hung on the wall next to the exercise room were gone, replaced by the ninja sword and *yari* spear whose regular places were close to the front door. The cat-head sword cane from next to his bed now resided by the garage door, while the gladius, his collection of *shuriken*, and several throwing axes were on the wall by the front door. Every other weapon in the room had been carefully moved and re-mounted in a different location.

Carefully, moving in utter silence, Ocelot re-crossed the room. His adrenaline was pumping now, every muscle ready to respond instantly to his command. Someone was in here, or had been. The thought of that set Ocelot's every nerve on edge. Still in the dark (it hadn't occurred to him to turn on the light, since the moonlight and the illumination from the streetlamps was plenty for

him to see by with his low-light vision), he crept over to his locked weapons cabinet, a floor-to-ceiling affair that was bolted securely to the floor, opened both locks with practiced ease, and reached in for his Franchi-SPAS combat shotgun.

Thunk.

His hand smacked into a hard metal ammo box where the shotgun should have been.

Ocelot flung open the door of the weapon cabinet.

Everything was there. All of it was carefully arranged. None of it was where he had put it.

The whole thing was quite subtle. The Franchi-SPAS he had been reaching for was right next to the ammo box, moved from its usual location by only about a quarter of a meter. All his other guns were there as well, hung in the rack, but in different locations. The ammo box, which should have been on floor at the bottom, was on the shelf below the guns.

"Okay," Ocelot muttered to himself through his teeth. "This is getting too weird now..." He pulled out the shotgun, checked to see if it was loaded, and switched on the light.

Aside from the odd place-switching among some of his possessions, everything looked fine.

He spent the next half hour in a slow, methodical search of his entire house for intruders, signs of forced entry, or anything else that might indicate how the switching had been accomplished. He checked the front and garage doors for signs of tampering, looked carefully in every location where an intruder might be lurking (including the shower stall, the cabinets in the kitchen, and under the bed—although even he had to admit that he was going a bit overboard when he checked the in the refrigerator and the dishwasher), and looked both inside and outside for obvious footprints. He checked the

windows for evidence of forced entry. He checked the camera he kept on the front door. He got down on his hands and knees and checked the floor around the troll-sized chair, looking for scrape marks. He put on his ultrasound sunglasses and scouted around for invisible beings. He even climbed up on the roof to see if any of the shingles had been disturbed. All the time he did his checking, he kept the Franchi-SPAS with him, loaded and ready. If there was anything to find, he was going to find it. If there was *anyone* to find, he was going to find them. And then he was going to beat the crap out of them for freaking him out like this.

He found absolutely nothing wrong.

There was no sign of forced entry, tampering, footprints, or anything else. Ocelot sighed, dropping back into a chair. It was as if the stuff inside had decided to move itself around, just for fun.

Move itself around —?

Magic.

Of course. Ocelot nearly slapped himself in the forehead. It had to be magic. Hell, Hawk could have done it, just by looking in through the windows and using his levitation and magic fingers spells. It wouldn't even have been hard for him. So another mage could have —

— *but what about the gun safe?* a little voice in his head spoke up. *Mages can't affect what they can't see, right?* That left the possibility that the mage (or an accomplice) had managed to get into the gun safe unnoticed, a possibility which seemed quite remote. The thing had two separate locks: a heavy-duty maglock on the outside, and a magnetic-key lock on the inside. Ocelot had both keys with him. Sure, a sufficiently determined thief could probably get through the locks, but then why just move things around? There was thousands of nuyen's worth of artillery in that safe, not to mention the weapons on the

wall. If somebody was going to go to all the trouble to break in, why hadn't they taken anything?

That was the question that was making Ocelot more than a little nervous.

Suddenly, he didn't want to be here anymore. It wasn't likely that whoever had done this would be back, but Ocelot didn't want to take the chance. Anyone capable of this kind of thing was probably not somebody he wanted to tangle with on his own. Tomorrow he'd call one or more of the team and see if they could come up with anything. Maybe `Hawk could spot something astrally, or `Wraith might notice something the Ocelot had missed. For now, though, he had to get out.

Quickly changing from his workout outfit to street clothes and armored jacket, he gathered up the Franchi-SPAS, a couple of other smaller guns, his ninja sword and monowhip, and some spare ammo, and headed out to the garage. He'd take the Blitzen and hole up in the abandoned school building in the Barrens that the team had used for that purpose on numerous other occasions. Tomorrow, he'd start fresh when his mind wasn't clouded by confusion and anger.

Whoever had done this was going to be sorry. Even if somebody had done it as a joke, they were still going to be sorry. When it came to the security of his home, Ocelot had absolutely no sense of humor.

10.

Winterhawk didn't sound too happy about meeting Ocelot the next morning. In fact, the mage's normally pleasant voice had sounded positively grim when he had answered the phone.

Of course, Ocelot realized as he hung up, he *had* called a bit early. He'd had trouble sleeping on the hard floor of one of the school's inner rooms, with every noise or movement jerking him from his light, troubled slumber. When he'd finally decided to give it up as a lost cause and get up, his chrono had informed him that it was only 5:30 in the morning. He'd waited as long as he could, going through some exercises and then getting dressed and gathering up his stuff, but by then it was still barely after 7.

He hadn't told Winterhawk anything about why he wanted to meet, which had probably added to his friend's irritation at having been awakened from what was most likely a lulu of a hangover, given the rate at which `Hawk had been tossing back the bubbly last night. He wasn't sure exactly why he didn't want to say anything, but his little voice told him that he should air this particular problem in person, rather than giving `Hawk fodder for wild speculation over the phone. He'd promised to buy the mage breakfast at a decent little coffee shop near his apartment, but aside from that he had just said that it was important. Grumbling about lack of sleep, Winterhawk had agreed. "But this had better be good," he'd warned right before he'd hung up.

The Busy Bee Coffee Shop was living up to at least half of its name when Ocelot got there around 8:15. Customers and waitstaff flowed around each other in a well choreographed dance of the commute hours,

everyone trying to serve or get served, get out as fast as possible or get on to the next customer. The place was occupied mostly by suits grabbing cups of coffee or pastries to enjoy with their morning datafaxes as they fought their way through the snarled traffic toward their jobs. Ocelot chose a table in the back (fortunately, most of the suits weren't waiting for tables) and waited for `Hawk to show up. One of the suits had left part of a datafax on the table, so he occupied himself with glancing through that—anything was better than concentrating on what had happened last night. He was getting tired of thinking about it, or at least thinking about it without any new input.

"So," said a sudden voice, "what's so important that you had to wake me up out of a sound sleep to tell me about it?"

Ocelot looked up from the datafax. Winterhawk was sitting down across from him. In contrast to his gravelly tone and vaguely miffed expression, every line of `Hawk's suit was perfect, every hair in place. Ocelot couldn't even tell if he really *was* hung over, since his eyes, normal looking except for their electric blue color, couldn't get bloodshot.

"Hey, `Hawk." Ocelot put down the datafax, letting the mage get a good look at him. He hadn't shaved, had barely run a comb through his hair and captured it into an untidy ponytail, and his clothes looked like he had slept in them. That was because he had.

"Well—you're looking chipper this morning," Winterhawk commented with a raised eyebrow. "You look worse than I feel." A waitress came by; he ordered a large coffee.

Ocelot nodded. "Make that two." When she'd left, he said, "Listen—sorry about waking you up so early. I just got something I need to talk to you about."

"This isn't one of those 'advice to the lovelorn' sort of things, is it?" Winterhawk asked suspiciously. "Because if it is, I'll warn you: my sense of tact is sorely lacking this time of the morning."

"No, no." Ocelot shook his head vigorously. "Nothing like that."

"Well, good. Tell you what: why don't you wait until I've got some caffeine in my bloodstream before you tell me anything requiring my attention. Until then, p'raps you might tell me where you encountered the charming young lady you were so smitten with last night?" Hawk smiled cynically. "I trust she wasn't rented."

Ocelot felt a flash of anger, but quickly squelched it. "No," he said shortly. "I met her a long time ago. She'd been out of town for a couple of years, and now she's back."

"I see," he said, nodding. "Well, I can see you're so obviously interested in leaving it at that, so I shan't pry. Ah," he added, as the waitress brought back two steaming cups of coffee and set them before the two men. Hawk nodded thanks to her and took a long sip. "Yes," he said, satisfied. "This place may be a bit crowded, but at least you can get a real cup of coffee here. I can't stand that ghastly soykaf swill."

Ocelot nodded, taking a sip of his own coffee. "Okay," he said without preamble. "I wanted to talk to you because I got a problem, and I need your help with it." At Winterhawk's 'go on' nod, he told the mage about the previous night's events, beginning with his arrival home and ending with his night spent at the abandoned school.

Winterhawk listened closely, occasionally pausing for another sip of coffee. As the story progressed, his attention became more and more riveted to Ocelot's words until at the end he was leaning forward, his

probing gaze fixed on Ocelot's face. Somewhere in the middle of the story he forgot about the coffee.

When Ocelot finished, he sighed. "So," he said, "what do you make of it? Am I going crazy?"

"Have you been back to your house since last night?" Winterhawk asked. All traces of hangover-induced peevishness were long gone from his voice.

"No. I came straight here from the school."

"And you're quite sure you found no evidence of entry?"

Ocelot shook his head impatiently. "Hawk, I was over every inch of that place. You know it isn't very big—I checked everywhere. Other than the stuff moved around, there was no sign of anybody."

"Interesting..." Winterhawk mused, almost to himself. "And they even managed to get into your gun safe..."

"That's the part that spooks me. The rest, they could have done with magic, right?"

The mage nodded. He rediscovered his coffee cup and waved to the waitress for a refill. "Yes, assuming that they could get a look in through the windows—or they could even do it with a clairvoyance spell, if they wanted to go through all that trouble. Wouldn't be hard at all. My guess would be that it would take at least two magicians to make a decent go of it, though. They'd need a levitation spell to get in close without leaving traces outside the windows, then a magic fingers or at least a levitate object spell to move things about in there. P'raps even an invisibility if they were worried about prying eyes." He paused, staring down into his cup. "But I don't know how they could have managed the trick with the gun safe."

"You said they could use a clairvoyance spell," Ocelot pointed out.

"Yes, but unless you keep a light burning in your gun safe, clairvoyance would be useless. With the sort of fine

control it sounds like they were exhibiting, they'd need to see what they were doing."

Ocelot nodded slowly. "So it might have been magic, or it might not."

Winterhawk shrugged. "Hard to say. I keep fairly current with spell research literature, but the sorts of spells being designed by the sorts of people who break into houses don't usually show up in the thaumaturgical journals. It's possible that someone might have designed a spell for opening locks, but it would be bloody hard to do. Your locks are fairly hefty, yes?"

"Yeah. Both of `em. And they're not even the same type."

"And there's another problem. Magic and technology don't tend to mix well. Trying to design a spell that would open a maglock would be quite an endeavor. Combine it with all the other spells they'd need to accomplish what they did, and it hardly seems worth it to me."

Ocelot sighed, picking up his coffee cup and swirling the dregs around. "I just don't get it. Why would you break into somebody's house and just move things around?"

"Are you sure they didn't leave anything?" Winterhawk said suddenly.

"Leave—?" Ocelot's eyes widened. "No. I'm not. I mean, I checked the whole place, but I wasn't looking for—" he paused. "You know, you might have something there. The whole thing might have been a front for somebody leaving a bug or a bomb or who knows what else?"

"Just a thought," the mage said. "Not really my department. You might want to call up the others in a bit, though, and have that checked out. And I'd like to get a look at the place on the astral, if you don't mind."

"I wish you would. That's part of why I called you."

"Lucky me," Winterhawk growled, but his eyes were amused. "I can go to the astral plane, so I get roused from a sound sleep at seven in the morning. `Wraith and Joe can check for bugs and bombs, so they get to sleep in."

"Not my fault you stayed out dancing all night," Ocelot said teasingly. "Shoulda gone home at a decent hour like the rest of us."

Winterhawk started to say something, but then his expression clouded a bit. "You know," he said speculatively, "I had a strange thing happen to me last night too, now that you mention it. I'd almost forgotten about it—figured it was caused by a bit too much champagne at the party."

Ocelot leaned forward. "What was it?"

He thought about it a minute before answering. "It started when I left the party, about an hour after you did." He went on to describe his strange experiences in the elevator, the cab, and his trideo unit.

Now it was Ocelot's turn to stare. "You know, that would have freaked the crap out of me. It was bad enough getting home and finding all my stuff moved around."

Winterhawk shrugged. "Unlike you, I had no tangible evidence. You could see that your furniture and your weapons were moved around. All I had was what my eyes were telling me. It's entirely possible that it could have been nothing more than hallucinations brought on by too much alcohol."

"But you didn't drink that much, `Hawk," Ocelot protested. "I've seen you falling-down drunk before, and you don't see stuff like that, right?"

"Not normally," the mage admitted.

"Ever?"

He shook his head. "Not until last night."

"Then what makes you think that would change now?"

Again, Winterhawk shrugged. "I considered the possibility that there might have been something other than champagne in the champagne, but it seems unlikely. No hallucinogen I've ever seen works like that: producing selective hallucinations of that type, then disappearing without a trace. When I woke up this morning, all I felt was the sort of symptoms normally associated with a fairly average hangover."

"But you don't know much about hallucinogens, right? I mean, that's not exactly your department."

"No," Winterhawk admitted. "It isn't. And I suppose it *is* possible. But I still think it's unlikely. It might be worthwhile doing a bit of snooping about to determine whether any of the other guests experienced similar hallucinations, and if so, whether they drank the champagne. Aside from that, I'm not terribly worried about it. I was probably just a bit more tired than I thought I was, that's all."

"Maybe..." Ocelot mused. "But I'd like to give the other guys a call and see if they had any weird experiences. Not to mention get them over to check out my place. I'm gonna be a little reluctant to go back there until we can figure out if there's any unexpected surprises." He sighed loudly, swiping his hand across his forehead. "I said I'd buy you breakfast—"

Winterhawk shook his head. "I'll take a rain check, if that's all right. I'd like to get over to your place and see if I can find anything odd on the astral."

Ocelot grinned, noting that `Hawk's early-morning ill humor and fatigue had disappeared now that he had been presented with a new puzzle. Even though he himself didn't feel that way (this whole thing was weirding him out, big-time), he was glad to see that his friend was willing and eager to take up the search for the answer.

11.

It took another hour to get everybody together. They met at Winterhawk's place, because it was centrally located and actually had decent furniture, unlike `Wraith's spartan warehouse. Once again, Ocelot didn't tell the others about the strange happenings; he just said that he wanted to talk to them about something important.

ShadoWraith arrived first. "Check your messages?" he asked Winterhawk with a raised eyebrow as he came in.

Winterhawk looked at him oddly for a moment. "No. Should I have?"

"Left you one."

The mage glanced over at his machine, where, sure enough, the light was blinking. "Sorry. I was fortunate to remember my shoes this morning, let alone checking my messages. Should I do it now?"

`Wraith shook his head. "Talk later. After."

Winterhawk shrugged assent, perching on the edge of his black leather sofa to wait.

Joe showed up in another ten minutes. "What's this about?" he asked, taking his customary spot in Winterhawk's troll-reinforced chair.

Ocelot was pacing around as he often did when he was nervous or preoccupied. "Something weird happened last night. I wanted to tell you guys about it and see what you think." He then proceeded to tell `Wraith and Joe the same story he had told Winterhawk. He was so caught up in telling the story that he didn't notice the intense stares fixed on him by the elf and the troll as he did so, nor did he notice the way they stiffened in their seats.

Winterhawk, however, did. "Something's going on," he said slowly. "You two know about this."

"Not this," `Wraith said. "Something happened. Last night." He indicated Winterhawk's answering machine with a quick head gesture.

"Me too," Joe said, sounding troubled.

"Wait a second," Ocelot cut in. "You mean to tell me that you *all* had weird things happen to you last night?"

`Wraith looked at Winterhawk. "You too?"

"I'm beginning to think so..." Winterhawk said, his tone indicating that he was deep in thought. Suddenly his head snapped up. "What kind of things?" he asked.

Joe spoke first. "I saw something really weird on the way home from the party. There was a bear, and it was being attacked by two gargoyles. When I tried to run over to help it, all three of `em disappeared."

"You saw a *bear* in the *Barrens*?" Ocelot demanded incredulously.

"I thought so," Joe said. "But like I said, it disappeared. I thought it was pretty strange, so I went home and tried to see if I could talk to Bear. Then I got a vision."

"What kind of a vision?" Winterhawk asked. He was leaning forward, watching Joe intently.

"It was even weirder...not like the kind of thing I usually get — if I get anything at all. More vivid. It was like I was a bear, and I was in this canyon. At one end of the canyon was a flash flood, and at the other end was a huge fire."

"And you were stuck in the middle?" Ocelot said.

"Yeah. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I picked a direction and tried to make a run for it, but then the vision faded. I couldn't get it back after that."

"Interesting..." Winterhawk said in the same faraway tone he'd used before. It was the tone he used when large portions of his mental capacities were off doing something else, and only a small part of his awareness

was in the current place and time. "What about you, `Wraith?"

"I had a dream," the elf said simply.

His friends stared at him. For anyone else to say that they had had a dream would be nothing special. For ShadoWraith, who claimed never to dream, it was an event.

"What was it about?" Ocelot asked. He was still pacing. This whole thing was getting a lot weirder than his wandering weapons.

"I was...being pursued," `Wraith said, choosing his words with even more care than he usually did. "Myself and...others."

"Do you know why?" Winterhawk leaned a bit more forward, drawing one knee up and clasping his hands around it.

"No. It was...somewhat like the Night of Rage. But different."

Winterhawk nodded. Most of ShadoWraith's past was still a mystery to his teammates, but he had at one point told them a few things about his experiences in New York City during the Night of Rage. He had been pursued there as well, and still apparently harbored deep and unpleasant memories of the time.

"Okay," Ocelot spoke up. "Now I'm getting real nervous. `Hawk, why don't you tell everybody about your happy little experience, then we'll go from there."

Winterhawk obligingly shared the story of his odd encounters. It was a bit easier to tell this time, in the light of day.

"You saw Harlequin?" Joe asked, his eyes widening.

"Or a reasonable facsimile," Winterhawk said. "I've utterly no idea what all this is supposed to mean, however. I'm still inclined to think that we all just had a bit too much to drink last night."

"Unlikely," `Wraith pointed out. "Didn't have much."

"Me neither," Joe agreed. "I ate a lot, but I only had a few beers."

"Okay," Ocelot said, dropping down on the couch with a loud sigh. "Let's say for a minute that we *didn't* all have too much to drink. Then what the hell's going on? Somebody plays musical weapons at my place without leaving a trace, Joe and `Hawk are seein' things that aren't there, and `Wraith is having dreams. All, coincidentally, on the same night."

"After the party," Joe added.

"Yeah," Ocelot continued. "After the party. So what's it all mean?"

There was silence as the four runners considered the question that hung in the air like a half-filled balloon.

"Maybe this has something to do with that Gabriel guy," Joe said suddenly.

When everyone turned to look at him, he shrugged. "Maybe it's dumb," he continued, "but it sort of makes sense that if weird things start happening after we go to his party, then maybe he's got something to do with it, right?"

"But why?" Winterhawk asked. "What possible reason could he have to want to do something like this? For that matter, *how* could he do it?"

"Magic?" `Wraith asked.

Winterhawk shrugged. "I don't know. Possibly. But he'd have to be a mage of someone like Harlequin's caliber to even have a chance at some of the things that happened. That hardly seems likely, does it? And that still leaves the question of motive."

"Maybe it's not him," Ocelot put in. "Remember we were discussing before that he's probably a front for some big corp money. Maybe we pissed somebody off bad enough that they want to play with our heads."

"We've sure pissed off enough corps for that," Joe agreed.

`Wraith shook his head. "Doesn't make sense. No bottom line."

"I tend to agree," Winterhawk said. "Corporations wouldn't waste the kind of money it would take to create an elaborate setup like this on creating an elaborate setup like this. If we were worth that much to them, they'd simply hire a team to kill us."

"That still doesn't explain who's behind this," Ocelot said. "I'm starting to think that whoever moved my stuff around didn't leave anything nasty behind, although I still want to check that out. It sounds like everybody's experiences were harmless, right? Like somebody wants to mess with us, but not hurt us."

"Assuming that they are, in fact, related," Winterhawk pointed out. "Mine could, after all, be explained without too much difficulty, as could `Wraith's. Granted he isn't prone to dreaming, but that doesn't preclude the possibility that it might occur at some point. Even Joe's vision could be explained away."

"How?" Joe demanded.

"Illusions," Winterhawk said. "P'raps someone was lurking in your neighborhood, just having a bit of fun, and you were the first to happen by."

"Come on, Winterhawk," Joe said contemptuously. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No," the mage admitted. "I don't. But I'm trying to come up with a way to explain this that doesn't involve one or more powerful and unknown entities having their way with us."

"And even if you do explain those three," Ocelot put in, "that still doesn't come up with any way they could have gotten into my safe."

"I suggest that before we go much further with this," Winterhawk said, "that we adjourn to Ocelot's place. It appears that it contains the only tangible evidence that anything was done, so perhaps we can examine it, both in the astral and the mundane realms, to determine whether anything else is amiss."

The others nodded agreement, so they gathered their equipment together and drove the truck over to Ocelot's house. No one said much on the trip over, each alone with his thoughts. They parked the truck outside this time rather than pulling it into the garage. "Let me have a look first," Winterhawk said. "Before we go in, I mean." He leaned back in his seat and slumped, his astral form separating from his body.

While he performed his astral scan, Joe readied his bug scanner and his chemsniffer for detecting explosives, while Wraith and Ocelot drew their guns and kept them ready should anything come out of the house unexpectedly.

Winterhawk was gone for about ten minutes. When he returned, he looked disappointed. "Nothing," he said. "I couldn't find a trace of any magical residue in there. Naturally after all this time there wouldn't be much, but I'd think if that much magic was used, there would at least be trace amounts remaining."

"Maybe it wasn't magic," Ocelot said. "Can we go in now?"

"Magically speaking, the place is clean," Winterhawk said. "I can't speak for more mundane threats, however."

The four runners, all a bit paranoid now, entered the house wearing their armored jackets. Ocelot insisted on going in first. He shoved open the door, aiming his pistol around to catch any visible threats. There were none. "Looks clear," he said. Then his eyes widened as he

stopped cold in the doorway, preventing the others from entering. "Shit!"

"What?" Joe demanded, ready to burst in and deal with whatever it was.

Ocelot stepped aside, indicating the room. "I'm going crazy. That's gotta be it. I'm going crazy."

The other runners moved in around him, looking around. "What?" Winterhawk said, perplexed. Nothing looked wrong to him. The room was just as he remembered it.

Wraith caught on first. "Nothing's moved."

Ocelot nodded, dropping into a chair with a loud *flump*. "This is fucking insane..." he mumbled.

Around the room, every weapon was in its proper place, as if they had never been moved. Even the troll-sized chair was back where it belonged. Not content to remain still for long, Ocelot got up and began pacing. "This cannot be happening. I'm telling you, everything was moved around when I left last night."

Winterhawk nodded, but his expression showed he was dubious.

Wraith and Joe set about checking the place for anything out of the ordinary. After half an hour passed, the place was pronounced threat-free by Joe, using his scanners to detect any listening devices and his chemsniffer to find any hidden bombs. Wraith, meanwhile, performed a detailed and meticulous visual scan of the entire house and also came up empty. "Are you sure you couldn't have been seeing things?" Joe asked as he packed away his gear.

Ocelot shrugged, spreading his hands in a gesture of defeat. "I dunno. I thought I was sure. It sure as hell *seemed* like it was real. If it wasn't, it was the best illusion I've ever seen in my life."

"But it would explain how they got into your gun safe," Winterhawk said. "That is to say, they didn't." He sat down at one of the chairs at the tiny dining table. "But that still leaves us with the big question: how was this accomplished?"

"And the other big question," Joe said. "Who did it?"

"Three," `Wraith added. "Why?"

Ocelot sighed. "Okay. Let's see if we can look at this with some kind of order. Let's start with who did it. Ideas?"

"Gabriel," Joe said immediately. "Or somebody connected with him."

"Someone we've annoyed on a previous run," Winterhawk said.

"Harlequin," `Wraith said.

"Coincidence," Winterhawk said. "Or doctored liquor."

"Or somebody we don't even know anything about," Joe added.

"Okay," Ocelot said. "So let's assume that whoever's behind it is one of our suggestions, except that last one. Why?"

"If it's a corporation we've annoyed," Winterhawk said, "then the answer's obvious. Some of them—I'm thinking of Aztechnology in particular—have extremely long memories."

"If it's Harlequin, maybe he's just playing around with us," Joe said. "You know, like a joke."

"Gabriel and corp could be the same." `Wraith took a seat at the table opposite Winterhawk.

"Right," the mage said. "Or he could be acting on his own. Possibly a joke there as well, similar to what Joe said about Harlequin."

"Somebody could have slipped something into our booze," Ocelot said. "Maybe testing out some new hallucinogenic drug." His fist hit his open palm with a

loud *slap*. "Whatever the hell it is, though, when we find out I want to get my hands on whoever did it. I'd like to show `em how well I take a joke."

"What about Kestrel?" Winterhawk asked suddenly.

"What about her?" Ocelot's suspicious gaze settled on him.

"Could she be involved?"

Ocelot started to make an angry reply, but caught himself. *No, of course she isn't involved*, he was going to say. But how did he know that? What did he really know about her, when he got right down to it? "I don't know," he said at last, reluctantly.

`Hawk's expression softened a bit. "I do hate to pry, but it might be important to figuring out this little puzzle. If you don't mind my asking, how long have you known her? How much do you know about her?"

Ocelot looked down at his hands in his lap. For a long moment he didn't answer; none of his friends spoke. Finally, he took a deep breath. "I knew her a couple of years ago. We saw each other for two or three months, and then she and her team moved back east. I didn't see her again until a few days ago, when she called to let me know she was back in town."

"She didn't mention Gabriel," ShadoWraith said. It was not a question.

"No." Ocelot shook his head. "I was as surprised to see him as you guys were. She told me she's working with him, helping him set up as a fixer in town."

"But she never said anything about him before?" Joe asked. "Two years ago?"

"No," Ocelot said again. "She said she didn't know him then. She claims to be semi-retired now, and not with her team anymore. Said she met Gabriel on a run."

"He ain't a runner," Joe stated.

Ocelot shrugged. "That was all she said. She met him, they talked for a while, and decided to go into business together. She said she'd been wanting to set herself up as a fixer for awhile, but she decided to work with him because he had connections and good ideas. She's handling what she calls the `nuts and bolts' of the biz."

"What happened to her team?" Winterhawk asked. "Did they all just part company?"

"It happens," Ocelot said. "She didn't say exactly." He sighed. "Dammit, I don't like it, but maybe I should give Harry a call and ask him to look into what she's been doing for the past couple years." He hated this: his good sense as a runner was warring with the fact that he wanted to trust Kestrel to tell him the truth. Unfortunately, he had been a runner too long to let trust win out over good sense. He thought he was a pretty good judge of character, and if that was true, then everything would come up fine and he could quit worrying. If everything *didn't* come up fine, it was probably better to know about it sooner rather than later. Even if he didn't like it.

"Good idea," `Wraith said.

"Yes," Winterhawk agreed. "P'raps she and Gabriel have nothing to do with this; at least that way, you'll have moved Kestrel down on the list of suspects if she checks out."

"Yeah, yeah," Ocelot said. He stood in a single restless motion. "Maybe you guys oughta go on home. This isn't the kind of call I want to make with a bunch of people around, y'know? Thanks a lot for comin' over to take a look at the place. Hopefully nothing else like this will happen."

Winterhawk stood as well. "Well, if anything *does* happen, please call me. I'd like to have a look at the area

where it occurred a bit sooner than several hours after the incident."

Slowly, the runners filtered out of the house. Ocelot stood in the doorway and watched them go, heading off in the truck with `Wraith driving. When the truck had disappeared around a corner, he reluctantly went back inside to make the call. He wasn't sure which he was more afraid of: that Harry would find out nothing useful and Kestrel would discover he'd been checking up on her, or that Harry would find out something.

Either way, though, it had to be done.

12.

It was going on three hours before Harry called back. Ocelot spent the time working out, glad to have the opportunity to take out some of his frustration in hard physical effort. He was just getting out of the shower when his wristphone rang. Still dripping, he wrapped a towel around his waist and picked it up. "Yeah?"

"Hey, kid." As he suspected, it was Harry.

"What've you got for me, Harry?" With his free hand, Ocelot ran another towel over his long wet hair.

The fixer's expression was unreadable. "I just wanted to let ya know that I got somethin'. Not over the phone, though. Can ya meet me at the Spider in about forty-five?"

Ocelot's paranoia radar notched up another level. "Anything wrong?"

"Not sure. I'll talk to ya there, okay?"

He nodded. "Yeah. I'll be there." Slowly, he hit the button to break the connection, unsure of what this could mean. Getting dressed quickly, he tried not to speculate; when he did that, his mind tended to go off and find the worst possible scenarios, and that wasn't going to do him any good at all. Harry just didn't like to talk on nonsecure lines, that was all. It was probably nothing.

Still, he arrived at the Glass Spider a full ten minutes early. This time of day, it was nearly deserted. He'd even managed to get a parking spot out front for the Blitzen. He ordered a beer and settled into a dark rearward booth to wait for Harry.

The fixer arrived right on time, dressed as usual in a rumpled gray suit. He dropped into a seat opposite Ocelot and waved for a beer of his own.

"What've you got?" Ocelot asked, leaning forward intently.

"Slow down, kid," Harry said. His eyes narrowed a bit. "This ain't like you. Sounds like you're gettin' too involved. That ain't good for yer edge."

Ocelot took a deep breath. "Tell me what you got, Harry. Did you find out anything?"

"Sure I did. She ain't nearly as hard to find stuff on as her new partner is." From inside his jacket, he pulled out a pocket secretary. "How much do you want to know?"

"What kind of question is that?" Ocelot was getting exasperated now. "Just tell me what you found out, okay?"

Harry raised his hands in a 'backing off' gesture. "Okay, okay." He consulted the pocket secretary's screen. "Lessee...Kestrel. Real name: Juliana Harvath. 32 years old. Born in Boston. Both parents worked at Renraku. Old money family. Looks like she was raised as a typical corp brat."

"Checks out so far," Ocelot said, almost to himself. Then louder, to Harry: "Parents disowned her when she left school and decided not to follow the family biz?"

"Yeah, that's right," Harry said, nodding as he checked. "Knocked around for a couple of years doing odd jobs, then met up with some shadow types at a bar. Looks like she hooked up with a decker for awhile, and he helped her siphon off the money that was supposed to be her inheritance from her parents' accounts. Shortly after that both parents were killed in a hostile extraction attempt. She used the money to get tricked out with cyberware and such—didn't get clear data here, but it looks like her first job was to nail the people who geeked her parents." He shook his head. "All this is a long time ago, though. I don't think it matters much." He tapped the screen. "Here's where it gets interesting, though."

His beer arrived and he paused for a swig before continuing. "Looks like she'd been with the same team for

about six years. They were damn good, too. Moved around a lot—never stayed in the same town more than a couple years. Got quite a rep for bein' quiet and efficient and smart."

"She said they were like her family," Ocelot said, staring down at his beer.

"Yeah, I believe it." Harry nodded. "Five person team, counting Kestrel. She was their sam. The rest of the team was a physad named Raptor—he was an elf, a human mage named Cabal, ork rigger named Indy, and human decker named Geist."

"So why'd she leave?" Ocelot asked.

"She didn't," Harry said soberly. "They're all dead."

Ocelot had been in the act of picking up his beer glass; he nearly dropped it. "*What?*"

Harry nodded, his expression still grim. "Yeah. Happened a little over a year ago. The team went out to do a run, and they got massacred. Somebody was waiting for them. Kestrel was the only one who got out alive."

Slowly, Ocelot put his glass down, his eyes never leaving Harry's face. "Do you have any details?"

"That's when it gets weird," the fixer said. "If I dig deep enough, I can find info about the run: they were supposed to break into a research facility on an island and grab some kind of prototype. But that's where the information stops. The location of the island and the facility, the details on the prototype, and the info about what happened to screw up the run are all missing. Kestrel called her fixer, told him the run was hosed and the team was dead, told him she was retired and he shouldn't call her anymore, and then dropped off the face of the earth."

Ocelot stared at him, stunned. He wasn't sure exactly what he had thought he was going to hear, but this wasn't

it. "Where —" he started, then paused. "Where did you get this information? Did you talk to the fixer?"

Harry shook his head. "Nope. He's dead too. Totally unrelated, though. I checked into it. He had a gambling problem, and the mob finally punched his ticket about six months ago. I talked to the guy who took over for him. He didn't know Kestrel and her team, but he checked into the other guy's records. That was all he found."

For a long time, Ocelot said nothing. He dropped his gaze down into the bottom of his beer glass, holding the glass with both hands. "So what do you make of it?"

Harry didn't answer right away. "I think your girlfriend's involved in something, kid. But I can't put my finger on what."

"You don't think she was responsible for her team —?"

"I dunno. Looks weird that she was the only one to make it out, but it happens. Somebody that survived somethin' like that might want to retire; that'd just be natural. The part that's makin' me nervous is the fact that she dropped completely out of sight for nearly a year, so good that I couldn't find her. People don't do things like that without reasons."

"You couldn't find her..." Ocelot said to himself. He looked up at Harry. "Like Gabriel."

Harry nodded. "I was gettin' to that. It's even weirder that after disappearin' for a year, she turns up with another guy who doesn't exist."

"You think he helped her stay underground?" Ocelot asked.

"I dunno," the fixer said again, shrugging. "Maybe. I don't mind tellin' you, that kid's got all my radar systems goin' at full capacity, and I still ain't turned up anything on him. It's like he just appeared in Seattle outta thin air right before that party. You'd think *somebody* would

remember a guy who looked like that. I'm followin' up on some other hunches I got, but so far nothin's panned out."

"Like what?" Ocelot spoke a bit too quickly.

"All the standard stuff: plastic surgery, magical masking, that kind of thing. I had one o' the best mages I know check him out on the astral when he left that party, and he looks like exactly what he looks like: a kid. Not even a kid with magical powers. Just a kid. No cyberware, either."

"Hawk'll be glad to hear that." Ocelot waved for another beer. "He was itching to get a look at him astrally, but he didn't get the chance."

"Tell him not to waste his time," Harry said. "The guy I had do it is an expert at punchin' through astral masking. I'm still followin' up on the plastic surgery angle, though." He looked at Ocelot oddly. "Tell me somethin', kid."

"What?"

"How come you're so interested in your girlfriend's past? I know you. You're like me: no connections. If you trust somebody enough to get that close to her, it ain't like you to check up on her like that for no reason."

Ocelot took a deep breath and told Harry the story of his and his friends' odd experiences of the previous night. By the time he had finished, he'd polished off the second beer and was starting on a third.

Harry listened attentively. When the story was finished, he blew air out loudly through his teeth. "Whew. That's some story, kid. You sure you didn't all just have too much to drink?"

"We thought of that, Harry," Ocelot said irritably. "We've thought of just about everything. What do you think we've been doing all morning?" He looked up. "Hey, you didn't have anything weird happen to you last night, did you? You drank quite a bit of the booze."

"Not a thing." Harry shook his head and grinned. "I made a few calls, then me and Cherisse went home and had a nice time for a couple hours, then she left and I went to sleep. Woke up with a little hangover, but that's it. No weird experiences at all."

"And your ears to the ground didn't hear about anything else like that?"

"Nope. All I heard was that the party went great. Everybody's talkin' about it, and the people who didn't get invited are jealous of the people who were, especially after they heard that Selective Oblivion was there."

"You said you had somebody check Gabriel out when he left. When did he leave?"

Harry consulted his pocket secretary again. "The party broke up around 4 a.m.; he was outta there by about 3."

"Was Kestrel with him?"

"Yeah, but they took separate cars, and went in two different directions."

"You didn't have him followed, did you?"

"Nah. I figured if he's in town now, he ain't gonna be hidin' where he's doin' business. If I need to, I'll do it later."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah..." His mind was not on the conversation; he was still too busy thinking about all the things he had found out about Kestrel. He sighed loudly. "Okay, Harry. What do I owe you?"

The fixer shook his head. "This one's on me, kid. Truth is, I woulda done most of the research anyway, so you just had me do it a little faster. Just don't jump to any conclusions, okay? There might be more to this than it looks like, but then again, it might be just like it seems. Even my sources can screw up tryin' to find somebody occasionally."

"Yeah, sure. You don't have to make me feel better, Harry. I'm a big boy."

"Yeah, I know. But you're also a hothead. Don't go runnin' off chasin' shadows by yerself. And give me a call if you need any more info. It might not be free the next time, but I'll see what I can come up with."

Ocelot nodded again. "Right. And let me know if you turn up anything about who or what might be behind all the weird stuff, okay? It's creepin' me out, and I don't like to be creeped out. It makes me even more paranoid than I usually am."

"Didn't think that was possible." Harry grinned, rising. "Gotta go. I'll keep ya posted if I turn up anything else." With a breezy wave, he left the bar.

Ocelot didn't move for a long time after Harry left. He sat there, slumped, empty beer glass in hand, and wondered what the hell he was going to do now. He didn't keep track of exactly how long he sat there, but it must have been at least half an hour before he even considered the possibility of getting up. Somehow, going home just didn't appeal to him, nor did calling the team to see if they had come up with anything. The only thing that sounded remotely interesting was to have another beer, and he didn't want to do that. He couldn't afford to be drunk right now.

He was sitting there trying to decide whether to get up when his wristphone buzzed. Thinking it was Harry again, he hit the button. "What?"

The face on the vidscreen was not Harry's. It was Kestrel's. And she didn't look happy. "I need to talk to you," she said without greeting.

He stiffened. "Something wrong?"

"Just tell me where we can meet," she said.

Ocelot looked around. "You know the Glass Spider? I'm there now."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes," she said, and hung up.

13.

She got there in fifteen, throwing herself down into the seat that had been formerly occupied by Harry. Her green eyes were flashing anger like Ocelot had never seen before. "You've been checking up on me," she said bluntly.

That caught him completely off guard. He stared at her. "Huh?"

"You've been *checking up on me*," she said again, enunciating each word slowly through clenched teeth, like she was talking to a dull-witted child. "And I want to know why."

"How—how did you know?" he asked, still blindsided by the fact that she had found out so quickly. He knew Harry's methods; they were discreet and usually untraceable.

"I have my ways," she said. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Kestrel—"

"Is it?" she demanded.

"Yeah, but—"

"Okay," she cut in. "All I want to hear from you right now, Ocelot, is why. I could have done the same to you, you know, but I didn't. I trusted you. Don't you trust me?"

Ocelot took a deep breath to center himself. "Okay. I'll tell you. But how did you find out?"

She settled back in her seat, arms crossed. "Gabriel told me."

Of course. "Gabriel told you."

"Yes. Now, *why*?"

He paused again, pushing down his anger and resurfacing jealousy. Apparently, her new friend was keeping close enough tabs on her to know when people were snooping into her past. That made him very angry. But she was right, and she deserved an explanation.

"Because something happened last night, and I had to find out if you could be involved in it."

Now it was her turn to look at him in confusion. "What do you mean, something happened? At the party?"

"No. After it. A bunch of strange things happened to me and my friends. I was just trying to verify that you couldn't be involved in them." He told her about the events, quickly. "I didn't want to snoop into your past," he finished. "I just had to know what you were doing for the past couple years. I had to know if I could still trust you."

She was giving him her full attention, her hard expression softening ever so slightly. "All that happened after you left the party?"

"Yeah."

Anger again. "But Ocelot, why didn't you just *ask* me? After something like that, I would have told you what you needed to know. Of course I'm not involved. I wouldn't even have the faintest idea how to *do* something like that."

He sighed. "Yeah, but come on, Kestrel. You've been in this biz as long as I have. Maybe longer. Tell me what you'd have done if it had been the other way. You don't see me for two years, then I turn up all of a sudden and weird things start happening. What would you think?"

She stared hard at him, then nodded reluctantly. "I'd think that you were the last person I'd want to ask. I'd probably have somebody check out your mysterious past to see if there was anything in it that might explain what happened. So," she continued, "did you find anything?"

Now it was his turn to pause. "I found out some things that made me nervous. But nothing that directly connects you to what's been going on."

"Okay," she said softly. "Tell me what you found out, and I'll try to answer your questions."

He looked down at the table, his gaze roaming over the bits of graffiti carved into its plaswood surface by countless past patrons. "I found out what happened to your team," he said.

She was silent.

"Why didn't you tell me they were dead?" he asked, bringing his eyes up again to meet hers.

"It's not the kind of thing I like to talk about," she said. Her voice was very quiet, very subdued. "I don't even like to think about it."

"What happened, Kestrel?" He tried to keep his tone soft and comforting.

She looked at him, started to say something, then dropped her gaze again. "I need a beer," she finally said. Signaling to the bartender, she ordered one and waited for it to arrive, then finished off the first quarter of the glass in one pull. "Did you find out about the team?"

"Yeah." He nodded. "Harry said you'd been together a long time."

"Six years," she said quietly. "I knew them better than I ever knew my real family." She paused for another drink before going on. "I saw the way you were with your team at the party, Ocelot. I think you understand. The way you act with those guys—comfortable. Like you've been through hell together."

Soberly, he nodded again. "Yeah, you could say that."

"That's the way I was with my team. We all knew each other, trusted each other. We'd all saved each other's lives more times than we could count." She stared down at the table. "We were there for each other even when we weren't on runs. Before I met you, I really didn't have anybody else I trusted like that, except for my team."

Ocelot remained silent, waiting for her to go on at her own pace.

She shrugged out of her jacket and tossed it into the corner of the seat, then drained the rest of her beer. "It looked like the same kind of job we got all the time. It came through our regular fixer, who we'd been working with for a couple of years. He got us the kind of jobs we liked: quick and quiet. None of us were the big loud type. Usually it was Raptor, Cabal, and me who did the actual infiltration, while Indy stayed with the vehicle and supported us with drones, and Geist took care of security systems and things like that. We had it down to a science, practically, but we never took chances. We were all going to get out of there. Nobody got left behind.

She took a long breath, composing herself carefully before resuming. "We got in all right, or so we thought. I think that was what they wanted us to believe. It was an ambush. They knew we were there, and they were waiting for us. Suddenly they were shooting at us from all directions. Geist was in the matrix, and I heard him scream over the commlink as he got brain-fried. I yelled for a retreat, but as we were getting out we got separated. By the time I got out of the building, the others had already reached the helicopter. I was too far away." Her voice caught a bit, but she steadied herself sternly. "I screamed for them to leave without me, but Indy—" a pause again—"Indy insisted on waiting for me. I was halfway there, staying under cover, when he finally realized he had to leave or everybody else was going to die too, and started to take off. They—they nailed the `copter with a missile. It went up instantly." Sighing, she lowered her head, her voice dropping to a whisper. "They didn't have a chance."

Ocelot just sat there, watching her. He didn't know what to say. He could imagine how he would react if something similar happened to his team. Like Kestrel, he

felt that they were the closest thing to a family that he had. To lose them all at once, so suddenly... "Kestrel –"

She shook her head. "You wanted to hear it, Ocelot. You can see why I don't like to talk about it."

"Yeah." A moment, and then, slowly: "How did you get away?"

"They didn't look for me. I think they thought I was on the helicopter too, when it blew. I hid under cover until it got dark, and then I sneaked down to the docks and stole a small boat. Had to kill two guards to do it. They never even saw me coming." She spoke with a certain vengeful pride.

"You need another drink?" he asked.

"No. I'm—okay. Even something like this starts to fade a little after awhile. I just don't like to think about it too much. That's the easiest way."

He nodded. "Yeah. But—you said you'd answer my questions, and I have another one." His voice was gentle but insistent.

"What?" She looked up at him, no trace of anger in her eyes now. There was nothing but sadness and resignation.

"What happened after that? You disappeared for a year. Harry found out about the job, but he didn't find out how it turned out. You just dropped off the earth for a year."

She closed her eyes and remained that way for a long time, as if steeling herself. When she spoke, her voice was still soft and carefully measured. "When I got back to the mainland, I called our fixer. I told him that the run had failed and that I was quitting the business. He'd already heard about Geist, so I think he was expecting it. After that, I wandered around the city for hours and finally ended up in a bar. I decided I was going to drink myself into oblivion, and kill anybody who tried to mess with me. At that point I didn't care what happened to me. If I

got hauled in to jail for murder, at least I wouldn't have to make any more decisions."

Ocelot nodded knowingly. He understood that feeling all too well. "Did you?"

"Did I what? Kill anybody?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head, still not meeting his eyes. "No. That's when Gabriel came in."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "Yeah..."

She looked up at him then, more composed than he expected her to be. "He asked me if he could sit down. Funny thing, but if he'd been anybody else, I might have killed him. But his voice was so kind, and he looked—" she shrugged —"I know this sounds corny, but he looked so innocent. Like there was no way he was going to try anything. So I said, *yeah, sure*, like I didn't care one way or the other. Which I didn't, at the time."

"So what did he do?"

"He talked to me," she said with a faraway smile. "He drew me out, and got me to tell him what had happened. Looking back I can't believe I actually told all that to a stranger, but I guess people get a little weird after they've just been through trauma like that. He just sat there and listened, asking all the right questions."

"Didn't that make you a little suspicious?" Ocelot asked, his paranoia radar going off again. "I mean, here's a guy who shows up right after you've been through something like this, and he's askin' questions. Didn't it even occur to you that he might have been behind it?"

She shook her head. "No, and I'm not sure why. I felt comfortable with him right from the start. I mean, it's not like it sounds—I didn't tell the guy my life story or anything. But I think he knew I just needed somebody to talk to, and he was there when I needed him." Meeting his

eyes, she said, "You're having trouble with this, aren't you?"

"Yeah," he said. "It's not like you to just trust somebody like that, that quick. Runners don't live long when they do that."

"I trusted you," she reminded him, shrugging. "Remember? I didn't know if you were with me or against me. And I recall you trusted me, too."

"Yeah, but that was in combat. That was different. I mean, what do you know about this guy? How do you know he's not some kind of mage or something, who's influencing your mind?"

"Come on, Ocelot," she said angrily. "If that's what you think, you're crazy. Can't you just believe that he was there at the right time, and we got to be friends?"

He sighed. "I'm tryin', Kestrel, but it isn't easy. Things don't just happen like that. He must have had a reason for showing up right then. Doesn't that worry you at all?"

"No." She shook her head. "No, it doesn't. He's a good person, Ocelot. He wants to help people. He helped me. He talked me through a tough time, and helped me get my life back together. He's my friend. If you can't accept that—"

He raised his hands to stop her. "Okay. Okay. And you're tellin' me that you're not involved with him. Like I told you before, I believe you. But do you mind if I ask if you were before? It sounds like you two are pretty close."

"Ocelot..." Gently, she reached across the table and took his hand. "No. I'm not involved with him. I never have been. I'll never understand the male inability to believe that a man and a woman can just be good friends. Gabriel is a good friend. If it helps, you can think of him more like my brother. And if it will really make you happy, I'll even let your mage friend take a look at my

aura and verify that I'm not under any mind control spells. Okay?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. "Okay." It didn't really make him happy, but there wasn't much else he could do. "I do need to know one other thing, though."

"What?" She kept hold of his hand.

"How did you disappear for a year? Harry's good, and he couldn't find any trace of you. Or Gabriel, for that matter. Where were you?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you that. I'm sorry, but Gabriel made me promise. I'll tell you that he has places all over the world, and that he's very good at hiding when he doesn't want to be found. I was with him, working out the details for the business we wanted to set up, but I can't tell you where."

Ocelot didn't like that answer any more than he had the last one, but again, there was not much he could do. He couldn't force her to tell him. He wasn't sure whether he would even if he could. "But you didn't have anything to do with the weird stuff last night? Or Gabriel?"

"No. I promise you that I didn't, and I'm almost certain that Gabriel didn't. I'll ask him, but I know what his answer will be. That isn't the kind of thing he would do even if he could."

Ocelot wasn't so sure, but he nodded. "Listen," he said quietly, "I'm sorry I had to ask you about all that, but I had to be sure."

"It's all right," she said in the same tone. "Like I said, I probably would have done the same thing if it'd been me. But from now on if you want to know something, ask me first, okay?"

"Yeah. Okay. I will."

She smiled. "Good. How about you take me out to dinner, and we'll call it even? Then we'll go back to my place and I'll do some snooping for a change." Her green

eyes sparkled as they lost their hauntedness, and he couldn't resist smiling back.

14.

A week passed, during which time nothing strange occurred. Ocelot, for one, was glad of that, as being in a constant state of heightened stress was not something he liked to sustain for long periods.

No one had turned up anything regarding the strange occurrences. Harry had called back and told Ocelot that his leads had all come up empty; he had once again suggested the possibility that the team had simply had too much to drink and that, added to their general nervousness, had produced the hallucinations. Ocelot was not inclined to believe that, but since he had nothing else to go on, he had just let it drop. As long as it didn't happen again, he was willing to put it behind him.

He and Kestrel had seen each other several times that week. The next time they had gotten together, she had told him that she'd asked Gabriel if he had anything to do with the occurrences, and he had assured her that he had not. She told Ocelot that Gabriel had even volunteered to do a bit of detective work of his own to try to find the cause, but that he wasn't confident that he would have any better luck than Harry had. By the end of the week, he had likewise come up with no leads.

The rest of the team was preparing to leave town as they usually did following completed runs. Ocelot knew that Joe had a piece of wild land somewhere outside Seattle where he spent time communing with the wilderness, and that `Wraith almost always went somewhere and didn't tell anybody where he went. Winterhawk, as usual, was getting ready to return to his home in England for a couple of months of relaxation and spell research. Ocelot had come by the mage's apartment to see him off; as the only team member who spent most

of his between-run time in Seattle, Ocelot wanted a last chance to talk to everybody before they scattered to the four winds.

Right now, Ocelot sat on the couch drinking a Guinness (Hawk didn't keep cheap beer around) and watching the mage finish up his packing. "Won't be coming to visit me this time, will you?" Winterhawk asked cheerfully, zipping up a small leather bag. Since he had almost everything he needed at his home outside London, packing didn't consist of much. "I'd imagine you've better things to do with your time this break."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, sorry, but Kestrel wins out over you and Aubrey."

"I'd be worried to hear you say anything else." Winterhawk grinned, tossing the bag on the couch. "Well, that's that. My plane leaves tonight, and I must say I'll be glad to get away from here for a bit."

"Why?" Ocelot asked, returning his grin. "Gray, rainy, depressing—what's the difference whether you're in Seattle or London?"

"Spoken like a true barbarian," Hawk said. "So—have you got any other plans, besides spending every spare moment with your new love?"

"You can stop that any time now," Ocelot growled, but there wasn't much force behind it. "And the answer is, I'm not sure yet. I'll probably get in some training. Maybe I'll even go down to CalFree for awhile."

Winterhawk went out to the kitchen and grabbed another Guinness, then came back and took a seat opposite his friend. "Don't listen to me," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I'm just glad to see you've finally found a woman who can stand being around you when you don't have to pay her. Didn't I tell you that was the better way to go?"

Ocelot just shook his head in mock exasperation. Nothing he said right now would save him from `Hawk's attempts at humor, so he just changed the subject. "Are you still worried about that weird stuff?"

The mage shook his head. "No, not really. I think it was just an isolated incident. Magic can do strange and unexplained things sometimes. P'raps it was just a glitch in the astral plane or something. It hasn't happened again, has it?"

"No. I've pretty much got it out of my mind now, but what with everyone takin' off—"

"I wouldn't worry about it. I'd think that if it was deliberate, it would have happened again by now, at least to one of us." He shrugged. "Have `Wraith and Joe left yet?"

"Joe did. I think `Wraith's headin' out tomorrow."

"Well, good. After that last run, it will be good to get away and relax for awhile. I believe I'll—"

Ocelot's wristphone beeped. Winterhawk stopped in mid-sentence as Ocelot hit the button. "Yeah?"

Kestrel's face showed on the tiny screen. She looked odd: concerned, or frightened. "Ocelot?"

"Yeah, I'm here. Are you okay?"

"I...don't know. I need to talk to you right away, if you can."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. He'd just seen her last night, and she had seemed fine. "Did something happen?"

She nodded. "Yes. Something...happened. Remember you were telling me awhile ago about those strange hallucinations you were having?"

He stiffened. Winterhawk, who had been trying not to listen, leaned forward. "Yeah..."

"Well, I—I had one. At least I think I did. And it scared me. I wanted to talk to you about it and make sure I'm not going insane."

Ocelot took a deep breath and glanced over at Winterhawk. "Okay. Okay. Listen, do you mind if I bring Winterhawk along? He's better at this kind of thing than I am, and maybe he can turn up something."

"Yes, fine." Her voice sounded strained; he'd never seen her look so scared. "Where?"

"Where did it happen?" Winterhawk whispered.

"Where did it happen?" Ocelot repeated to Kestrel.

"At a bar. Downtown. The—the Purple Haze. I'm calling from there."

Ocelot glanced at Winterhawk again, who nodded. "Let's meet there, then. Hawk wants to get a look at the astral in the area where it occurred." His voice got a bit more gentle. "Sit tight, Kestrel. We'll be there in a few minutes."

As Ocelot broke the connection, Winterhawk rose. "Looks like this isn't over yet after all," he said grimly. "Best if I cancel my flight, I think."

15.

When Winterhawk and Ocelot arrived at the Purple Haze, which was a runner bar about twenty minutes' drive from `Hawk's place, they found Kestrel sitting at a table near the door. She looked up quickly as they entered, as if she had been watching the door in anticipation of their arrival. "Thanks for coming so fast," she said. Her voice was tired. "I'm not quite sure what to make of this."

"Come on," Ocelot said, taking her elbow gently and steering her toward the back. "Let's go sit down, and you can tell us what happened. You remember `Hawk, right?"

She nodded a greeting to Winterhawk, which he returned. Together, the three went into the bar's back room, which was unoccupied at this early hour. The bartender, a balding elf, watched them curiously but said nothing.

"Okay," Ocelot said, putting his foot up on a nearby chair. "What's up?"

Kestrel took a deep breath and combed her fingers through her hair. "I'm not sure where to start. I'm still not convinced it really happened..."

"What really happened?" Winterhawk asked quietly.

Another deep breath. "I was—driving. Doing some errands. I'd gone by the Renraku Mall to pick up a couple of new sims, and then I was going to do some grocery shopping and go home." She paused. "I got in my car at the mall and started heading back toward the market, which isn't too far from my place. That's when it happened."

"What?" Ocelot asked, his attention focused fully on her.

"That's just it. I—I'm not sure. One minute I was driving, and then the next thing I realized, I was parked out front of this place. But I couldn't remember how I'd gotten here, or why I'd come."

"Had you ever been here before?" Winterhawk said.

She looked up at him and nodded reluctantly. "Yes. Many times, years ago." Her gaze switched over to Ocelot. "This is where the team and I used to meet, back when we were in Seattle. But I hadn't been back since—since I got back in town."

Ocelot nodded. Winterhawk looked at him questioningly, but he just shook his head as if to say, *I'll tell you later*. "Go on," he said to Kestrel.

"Here I was," she said slowly, "with no idea why I was here or how I'd gotten here. It scared me a little, because I'm not prone to memory lapses like that. In fact, I've never had one in my life. But I figured that if I was here, I might as well go inside. Maybe there was some reason I'd come, and somehow I'd just forgotten what it was." Getting up from her seat, she began pacing, catlike, around the room, pausing to inspect the threadbare old rock-and-roll concert posters that made up the room's decor. "So I went inside. And do you know what I saw when I came in?"

Ocelot and Winterhawk both shook their heads.

"I saw my team," she said raggedly. "All of them. Sitting in the booth all the way in the back. Sitting there like they were waiting for me." She looked up at Ocelot, the fear and confusion evident in her eyes.

Again, Winterhawk shot Ocelot a questioning look. This time he didn't brush it off. Quietly, he said, "Her team were all killed in an ambush more than a year ago."

The mage merely nodded; there was nothing he could say at that moment.

"What—what did you do then?" Ocelot asked.

"I was surprised," she said, dropping back down into a chair. "That's the understatement of the year, of course. Shocked. Floored. I just stood there for a minute, staring at them. A whole lot of things went through my mind then: I wondered if maybe I'd been mistaken—if they hadn't gotten out of that explosion after all. I wondered if I was dead or something. If somebody was playing a trick on me. Or if I was seeing things. And then Raptor spoke to me. Called me over."

"Did you go?" Ocelot turned another chair around and straddled it. He noticed that Winterhawk had stopped pacing and was now watching Kestrel intently.

She nodded. "Yeah. I went over there. They were all happy to see me. They asked me how I'd been, what I was doing now. It was like they were all *right there*," she added, a small note of desperation in her voice. "They were so real. Raptor was cleaning his nails with his switchblade like he always did...Indy was drinking that vile beer he liked so much, and Cabal was wearing his weird cologne—" She drew a deep, shuddering breath. "It was like they were there, that's all I can say. Then the bartender came over and tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around, and he asked me if I was all right. I said of course I was, and turned back around."

"They were gone, weren't they?" Winterhawk said gently.

Again, she nodded. "Yeah," she whispered. "They were gone. Like they'd never even been there in the first place. Even the cologne scent was gone. The table was completely empty." Leaning forward, she propped her elbows on the table and stared at her hands. "What the hell is going on?"

Ocelot looked at Winterhawk, his expression one of concern and anger. "I don't know what's going on, Kestrel," he said after a pause. "But it sure as hell sounds

like whatever it is that was messing with our heads has found you now."

"I want to know what it is," she said, raising her head. Her eyes blazed. "Nobody plays with my head like that. I want to figure out what's causing this and show it what I think of it." Looking first at Winterhawk, then at Ocelot, she added, "Will you help me?"

̀Hawk and Ocelot exchanged glances again. Ocelot spoke first. "Have you told Gabriel about this?"

She looked at him as if trying to gauge why he had asked, then shook her head. "No. He's been busy lately, getting his team set up. I don't want to bother him with this. Besides, I've been starting to feel a little lately like I've been getting dependent on him. I want to do this on my own." Her gaze challenged them, but also pleaded with them. "Will you help me?"

Ocelot sighed. "I'll do what I can. But remember, we weren't able to find out anything when this happened to us. ̀Hawk?" He turned to the mage.

Winterhawk didn't answer for several seconds; his face was unreadable. Then he said carefully, "I'm not certain how much we can do to help, Kestrel. But I'm certainly curious about what's responsible for these events, and why."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "But where do we start? You said you wanted to look at the astral plane..."

"Right. I'll do that straight away. With any luck, it will give us some more data to go on." He addressed Kestrel. "Show me the booth where you saw them, please."

She did so, opening the door out to the main bar and pointing it out to him. He settled himself in a chair. "Back shortly," he announced to no one in particular, then slumped.

Kestrel looked at Ocelot. "I'm sorry to get you two involved in this," she said ruefully. "But I was spooked, and since you said you'd had something similar –"

"Don't worry about it," he said. He squeezed her upper arm reassuringly, but his eyes were as hard as hers. "We want to know who's been doing this too. We were gonna forget about it since it didn't look like it was gonna happen again, but if they're messin' with you too now, we need to figure out what the hell's going on."

Briefly, she closed her eyes. "It was so hard seeing them again, Ocelot," she said in a voice barely above a whisper. "I'd just started getting over losing them, and now this –" Shrugging, she added, "I guess I just lost it a little."

"It's okay," he said. "Don't tear yourself up about it. It would have spooked me too. It's normal. Maybe Hawk will find something, then we can see about finding this bastard."

Winterhawk returned five minutes later. At his friends' inquiring looks, he shook his head. "Nothing," he said in disgust. "There's nothing at all amiss on the astral anywhere near that booth. I checked the entire bar, paying particular attention to that area, and came up with bugger all."

"What about the bartender?" Ocelot asked, grasping at straws.

Again Winterhawk shook his head. "There's nothing special about him. He's a mundane with no cyberware. His aura says he's vaguely curious about what we're doing back here, but other than that he seems rather a dull chap." He leaned back in his chair and jammed his hands into the pockets of his overcoat in frustration. "Assuming that your experience was magical in origin," he told Kestrel, "then whoever's behind it is good enough to mask him- or herself well enough as to leave no traces."

"How hard would that be?" Ocelot resumed his place straddling a chair on the other side of Kestrel.

Hawk shrugged. "I'm fairly decent at punching through masking. I've missed it before, but not often. And it's harder to fully mask astral traces than it is for a decent mage to mask his presence—think of it like a murderer trying to clean up all the evidence at a crime scene. Often he leaves something behind because he didn't even think to look for it."

"So what are you saying?" Kestrel asked.

"What I'm saying," Winterhawk told her, "is that either your experiences—and probably ours as well—are not magical in origin, or else we're dealing with a magician of tremendous skill here. Do you have any enemies that might fit that profile?"

She thought about that for several moments. "No...not that I can think of. I mean, the team went up against magical threats before, but nothing of that magnitude. And besides, why would one of my enemies want to mess with you guys? I hadn't even met most of you before the party."

Ocelot nodded. "You got a point there. I don't suppose it's possible that the two aren't related."

"The way you described what happened to you, it doesn't sound like it," Kestrel said.

"You've never had any dealings with an odd elf wearing clown makeup, have you?" Winterhawk asked Kestrel suddenly.

She stared at him like he had just gone crazy. "What?"

"Have you?" he pressed.

"No," she said, still staring. "I think I'd remember somebody like that. Why?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Just one of the few people I know who might be capable of this. Hardly

seems his style, but then again, we really don't know much about him."

Now it was Ocelot's turn to stare, as another thought came to him. "Hawk...?" he said slowly, tentatively. There was a strange edge to his voice.

"What?"

"You don't think—" He paused, choosing his words carefully. "You don't think that somebody *else* connected with him could be behind this, do you?"

For a moment, Winterhawk looked perplexed, but then his expression turned grim. "I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "I rather wish you hadn't either."

"What?" Kestrel demanded, watching the tennis match.

"Odd that Gabriel should mention it, too..." Winterhawk went on without acknowledging that she had spoken.

"But why would they wait this long?" Ocelot asked. "Why now? And why Kestrel?"

"You guys want to let me in on this?" Kestrel said, annoyed.

"Can't," Winterhawk said apologetically. "It's one of those things we can't talk about. Suffice it to say that Ocelot just reminded me that we *do* have an enemy—more than one, actually—who would be capable of this. But it would be difficult for them to be in a position to do so, and that still doesn't explain why they would target you."

"Unless they know Kestrel and I are—" Ocelot trailed off, his meaning obvious. He looked at Kestrel, then at Winterhawk. "Hawk, I know you. When you were astral, did you check out Kestrel too?"

Winterhawk nodded. "Of course."

She looked annoyed, but it faded quickly. "I *did* say he could before, didn't I?"

"What did you see?" Ocelot asked the mage.

He shrugged. "Nothing out of the ordinary. She's got quite a lot of cyberware, most of it inobvious. Her aura suggests that she's fearful and determined."

"You need to look at auras to tell that?" Kestrel asked sarcastically, her smile indicated that it wasn't meant as an insult.

"I do if I want to verify that it's the truth," he replied, unruffled.

"Nothing out of the ordinary?" Ocelot asked. "No mind control or influence or anything?"

"Not that I could see. Why? Should I have expected some, at this point?"

"I dunno. I don't know what to expect. I'm grabbin' straws right now."

Kestrel sighed. "If you don't mind, guys, I think I'm going to head home. This place isn't doing anything for my state of mind right now. I'm going to hope that since this only happened once to each of you, maybe it'll only happen once to me. And that whatever it is, it doesn't seem dangerous, just creepy."

Ocelot nodded. "Okay. Call if anything else happens, okay? See you tonight if I can?"

"Sure. I'll be home." She took a deep breath. "Thanks. To both of you. If nothing else, at least it was good to have somebody to talk to who doesn't think I'm crazy." Nodding to Winterhawk and gripping Ocelot briefly on the shoulder, she left the back room.

Ocelot fell back into his chair with a loud sigh. "What the hell's going on, `Hawk? Do you think it could be the Horrors? After all this time?"

Winterhawk took up pacing again. "I don't know. Something tells me that it isn't, but I don't know what, exactly. It still seems odd to me that all of this appears to

have corresponded to our attendance at that party. How much do you trust this Gabriel chap?"

"Not as far as I can throw him," Ocelot said frankly. "Kestrel does, though. That's what I meant about the mind control. We talked awhile ago, and I got her to agree to let you assense her for any sign of influence." He told Winterhawk the story that Kestrel had told him about her team's death and its aftermath. "It just sounded weird to me that he'd show up right then, at the right place to talk to her when she was in that kind of state."

"True," Winterhawk agreed. "Quite a coincidence, I'd say. But I did notice that she's got quite a strong mind. As strong as yours, to be sure. It would be difficult to influence her."

"Even when she'd just lost her whole team like that?"

"A powerful enough mage could do it, certainly. But without her knowledge—" He shrugged. "Possible, but difficult. Without knowing if he's a mage—"

"He isn't, according to Harry," Ocelot said. "I forgot to tell you. Harry had one of his best mages wait outside the party and check him out when he left. Said he assenses just like a mundane guy."

Winterhawk nodded. "That surprises me, but if Harry used who I think he did, we can be reasonably sure that it's accurate. So that means he's either got magical backup, he's doing it in a mundane way, or he isn't doing it at all and the whole thing's just a coincidence. P'raps we should try talking to him directly."

"Not yet," Ocelot said. "Let's see what else we can come up with first. Eliminate all the other possibilities."

"You sound very confident of our ability to do that," Winterhawk said dubiously. "I'm wondering if we should intercept `Wraith before he leaves town, and call Joe back from his retreat. I think we'll be needing all the help we can get for this one."

16.

In the dark and sepulchral office, the figure smiled.

The underling stood before his desk, pocket secretary in hand. Unlike his predecessor, this underling did not exhibit any sign of fear. He had delivered his report in the dry, unemotional tones of a bookkeeper reciting a particularly routine set of financials, then stopped immediately afterward, waiting for his employer to reply.

"Excellent," the man said, still smiling. The smile, however, did not reach his eyes. It never did. "It appears as if our plan is working even better than expected."

"Yes, sir," the underling said, allowing himself a bit of emotion. "They're quite concerned. They have no idea what is happening, and they have no clear leads regarding the source."

"Of course they don't," the dark figure said, contempt dripping from his tones. "Do you truly expect that they would?"

"No, sir. Of course not," the underling said quickly. "They appear to have gotten quite a number of people involved in their search for answers, especially when one considers the effort the fixer has put into the matter."

The smile grew imperceptibly wider. "I do so enjoy watching them chase phantoms. It's almost unfortunate that they haven't a chance to discover what's happening, is it not? The arrogance of assuming that they can do so amuses me. I think I shall have a bit more amusement with them before we continue with our plans. How fortuitous that recent events provide me with a means to lead them astray yet again."

"What do you wish me to do, sir?" the underling asked, his stylus poised over his pocket secretary, awaiting orders.

The boss leaned back in his chair, stretching languidly. "Hmm..." he mused. "I think that the time has come to increase the level of danger a bit. Yes, that might well produce the desired results." He returned to his upright position and leaned forward, his gaze probing the underling's face. "Yes. Take

careful notes, because everything must function with perfect precision. Here is what you will do..."

The underling, glad for a chance not to look directly at his unsettling employer, noted down his instructions with utmost care.

17.

It was later that same evening, and the team was once more arrayed around Winterhawk's living room, considering their options.

ShadoWraith and Joe had not been entirely pleased with the prospect of pursuing the new development. `Wraith had been preparing to leave town on his motorcycle when he had gotten Ocelot's call; they had been lucky to catch him at all. Joe had not even answered his phone, which was common when he was spending time on his land. Winterhawk had had to summon a watcher spirit and send it off to find him and request that he call in.

"I don't get it," Joe had said irritably when he had arrived back. "I mean, I know she's your girlfriend, Ocelot, but this whole thing seems to be over for us. Maybe it's over for her too. I'm not sure I want to get involved in this thing anymore."

`Wraith nodded. "Agreed. Already investigated. Found nothing."

"Ocelot had a new thought," Winterhawk said, perched as usual on the arm of the sofa. "I'm not sure how much I believe it, but it's something to think about." He looked at Ocelot pointedly.

"What if it's the Horrors?" Ocelot asked in a reluctant tone.

That got everyone's attention fast. "Not here," `Wraith stated.

"Maybe not," Ocelot said. "It's been two years. What if one of `em – or more, even – made it across?"

Joe looked skeptical. "Why would they waste their time doin' stuff like this?" he asked. "If they were really

here, wouldn't they be killing people? Or at least doing something dangerous?"

"I dunno," Ocelot said, shaking his head and spreading his hands in a gesture of confusion. "It was just a thought. But Hawk and I told Kestrel we'd look into this for her. We figured we'd better fill you in on the latest, and then you can make up your mind what you want to do."

"I'm not—" Joe started to say, when suddenly Ocelot's phone beeped.

Ocelot held up one finger, then hit the button.

Harry's face appeared on the screen. His expression was concerned. "Hey, kid. Glad I found you. I got some news for you."

Everyone leaned in to stare at the tiny vidscreen. "What, Harry?" Ocelot said, afraid of what the fixer was going to tell him.

"I think I found a guy who might know somethin' about your problem."

Ocelot stiffened, gripping the phone more tightly. "You did? Who?"

"A guy who saw somethin' he shouldn't have. He's real nervous, but he says he'll talk to ya if ya make it worth his while."

"Where? When? Can we set up a meet?"

Harry held up a hand. "Slow down, kid. He wants to do it on his terms. I don't know what he's scared of, but he's spooked bad. He said if ya want to talk to him, meet him at the corner of Kramer and Williams. There's an abandoned warehouse there. 21:00 tonight. Don't be late—he didn't sound like the type who'd be brave enough to wait for long."

Ocelot looked around at his teammates. Winterhawk nodded; after a moment, the others did as well. "Okay, Harry. We'll be there. Thanks."

"Hope this turns up what you want. We'll talk price later." He hung up.

Slowly, Ocelot lowered his arm and slumped back into his seat. "You guys in?"

"I am," Winterhawk said immediately.

`Wraith nodded. "Yes."

"Me too," Joe said. "If there's really something to do, I'll go along with it."

"Good," Ocelot said. "I'm wonderin' if I should call Kestrel."

"No," `Wraith said.

Winterhawk shook his head. "I agree—I wouldn't. If we come up with something, we can tell her afterward. In a potentially dangerous situation, though, I'd prefer to limit things to those we're all familiar with."

"Yeah," Ocelot said with a sigh. "Better not to get her involved anyway. Just on the off chance that Gabriel or his people are in on this somehow, maybe he won't find out if she doesn't know." He looked at his chrono. "It's a little after 19:00 now—why don't we get our stuff, grab some dinner and get over there a little early."

"Not too early," `Wraith said. "Might spook him." One of `Wraith's regular contacts, a nervous little snitch named Willie the Weasel, exhibited similar behavior to what Harry was describing. The elf knew what he was talking about.

It was 20:45 when the runners reached the vicinity of the warehouse. The combination of a near-moonless night and the paucity of streetlights wreathed the area in an inky darkness that was broken only by the headlights of an occasional vehicle. ShadoWraith, who was driving, pulled the truck into an alley about a block away. "Take a look?" he asked Winterhawk, who was in his usual shotgun position.

Hawk nodded and shifted over to the astral realm, sagging sideways against the door as the other three runners waited impatiently, preparing their weapons. All four of them wore their armored jackets: even though they didn't expect trouble, that was no excuse for lack of preparation. Some of their worst ambushes had been during times when they had been convinced that there was no threat.

They couldn't see the warehouse from where they were parked, but they had seen it as they had driven by. It rose at least three stories up, a dark form with broken windows and doors hanging at crazy angles. The largest of the doors, big enough to accommodate a large truck, was open to the world, its former roll-up closure nowhere to be seen. As was the case with the rest of the buildings in the area, the outside walls were covered with spray-painted graffiti; between them, Ocelot and Joe identified the marks of at least four different gangs. "Wonder why he'd pick down here?" Ocelot asked, checking his monowhip in its sleeve compartment.

"Maybe he lives here," Joe said. "Or else he really wanted to fool us." He was leaned over, carefully arranging the weapons and ammunition in his Native American-print duffel bag.

Winterhawk came back to himself, stretching and sitting up straight. "I don't see anyone in there," he said. "Just rats and such. But that's not surprising, considering that we're early."

"At least there's no ambush waiting for us," Ocelot muttered.

"No," the mage agreed. "I checked the immediate area, too, including the tops of buildings where snipers might be hiding. Didn't see anything."

"What do you suppose this guy saw?" Joe asked.

"We'll find out," `Wraith said. With a final check of his Ingram Smartgun, he stowed it in its holster and opened the door. "Should get going."

There was a light mist in the air; not quite a rain, but just enough to create an annoying dampness that settled on the runners' hair, clothing, and skin. The night, in addition to being almost moonless, was clouded over, rendering largely ineffective the scant light from the sliver of moon.

"Should separate," `Wraith said.

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "There's enough doors in that place."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, good idea. Maybe you two should go around the side, and `Hawk and I'll go in through the big door. Just don't do anything to scare him. We need to talk to this guy."

Joe switched on his comm unit and put his throat mike in place. "Let's keep in communication, in case anything goes wrong."

The other runners followed his lead as they drew up near the hulking form of the old warehouse. "Ready?" Ocelot asked, as if he was anything but.

Everyone nodded. `Wraith, moving as silently through the shadows as his namesake, slipped off down the side of the building. After a moment, Joe followed. The troll wasn't nearly as quiet as his elven teammate, but he made a remarkably small amount of noise for someone who weighed in at close to three hundred kilograms. After a moment, the two had disappeared, and after another moment, their whispered voices in the commlink announced that they were in position.

Ocelot turned to Winterhawk. "Ready to do this?"

The mage merely nodded. As was often the case in unknown and potentially dangerous situations, his

cheerfully sarcastic demeanor had vanished in favor of a grim single-mindedness.

As one the two men moved in through the opening, taking up positions just inside and on either side of it. The floor, made of poured concrete, was damp and littered with dirt, trash, and muck. Their low-light vision picked out the signs that the place had been used as a squat by a number of people, but no one was immediately in evidence. Ocelot moved forward, his soft boots making no sound. Winterhawk mirrored his actions on the other side of the door, moving more slowly in an effort to remain silent. Across the warehouse near one of the other doors, they could just barely see the shadowy forms of `Wraith and Joe.

Ocelot looked at his chrono. 20:58.

There was no sound in the warehouse, except for the far-off scabbling of small rodents. "See anything?" Ocelot whispered.

Winterhawk looked around, shook his head.

Ocelot stopped. "Anybody here?" he called. His voice echoed around the cavernous space.

"Over here," came a strong but quavering reply from the other side of the room. The voice was male and didn't sound young.

"Come out," Winterhawk called.

"Come over here," the voice replied. It seemed to be coming from behind a large pile of trash on the far side of the warehouse.

The two runners exchanged glances. "We're going over," Ocelot subvocalized into his throat mike. "Cover us, okay?"

"Yes," came ShadoWraith's reassuringly quick reply.

Moving slowly and with great care, Ocelot and Winterhawk approached the pile. "Let's go in from both sides," Ocelot whispered, drawing his stun baton and

motioning for Winterhawk to go off to the left while he himself went to the right. The mage nodded and complied. Together, the two of them rounded the corner of the pile.

There was no one there.

"What the hell—?" Ocelot muttered. Louder: "Where are you?"

"Come over here," said the voice. It was coming from ground level, directly between the two of them.

Ocelot and Winterhawk both looked down. On the floor, surrounded by a pile of trash, was a tiny speaker. "Hurry up!" it implored nervously.

The two men looked at each other. The thought came to them nearly simultaneously. "Run!" Ocelot yelled, wheeling around and moving at the full rate of his jacked reflexes.

Winterhawk activated his levitation spell lock and caught up with him.

They were about halfway across the warehouse floor when the bomb went off.

18.

When Ocelot woke up, he had a splitting pain in his head and a blurry troll bending worriedly over him. After a moment, the blurry troll resolved itself into Joe. "He's awake now," Joe announced.

They were in the truck, and it was moving. He was lying across the back seat, with Joe scrunched up on the end next to him. There was a wet cloth on his head. `Wraith was driving, but Ocelot was still too fuzzy-headed to tell where they were. He barely remembered what had happened at first, though the longer he lay there, the more it came back to him. The warehouse. The bomb— "What—?"

"How do you feel?" Joe asked.

"Like I got hit by a truck." Ocelot raised up a bit and noticed Winterhawk slumped in the passenger seat. The mage's face was bloody, and his armored coat was shredded. He appeared to be asleep or unconscious. Ocelot looked down at his own coat and saw that it was similarly shredded. "The bomb—"

"Yeah. It was pretty powerful. Went off a couple seconds after you came out like something was chasin' you. We heard you yell `Run!' and then the whole thing blew." Joe looked concerned. "What happened in there?"

Ocelot raised up a bit more, moving gingerly to verify that nothing was broken. Unsure about the structural integrity of a couple of his ribs, he remained in that position instead of trying to sit up fully. "Nobody there. Just a speaker. It was a trap."

ShadoWraith turned his head to face Ocelot. "Speaker?"

"Yeah. Either voice activated, or else somebody was watchin' the place from a distance." He looked at Winterhawk. "How's he doin'?"

"About the same as you," Joe said. "We were gonna head over to Trixie's unless he wakes up pretty soon." Trixie was a Dog shaman to whom they sometimes went for healing services when Winterhawk was unable to provide them.

As if on cue, Winterhawk groaned and brought a hand up to his head. Experimentally, he opened his eyes.

"Welcome back," Ocelot said sourly. Then he addressed `Wraith: "By the way, where the hell *are* we?"

"Heading to Trixie's," the elf said. He looked at Winterhawk. "Still?"

`Hawk shook his head, wincing in pain. "No—I can take care of it. Just—need to rest for a bit first."

`Wraith nodded and returned his attention to driving. At the first opportunity, he changed direction. Nobody asked him where he was going.

Joe produced another cloth, which he dampened with water from his canteen and handed to Winterhawk. The mage took it, nodding gratefully, and began mopping at the blood on his face. "I think we'll be needing to have a word with Harry," he mumbled.

Ocelot had nearly forgotten about that. "Harry. Damn straight. We need to find out who called him. Whoever it was set us up."

"Why don't we wait until you guys are healed up?" Joe said. Looking them over, he added, "It's a good thing you ran away when you did. If you'd been standing there when that thing went up, you'd be dead now."

"Thank you for that cheery thought," Winterhawk said, grimacing as he levered himself up to a fully sitting position.

"I take it you guys didn't get a look at the scene," Ocelot said.

Joe shook his head. "No way. When the bomb blew, it threw you guys into the wall and you were out like lights. We ran in, grabbed you, and got our asses outta there before Lone Star or anybody showed up."

"Didn't know your condition," `Wraith added without taking his attention from the road.

"And you didn't see anybody moving? When you were leaving?"

"No," `Wraith said.

Ocelot sighed, sinking back down to a mostly reclining position. He had a lot of things he wanted to say, but he didn't feel much like talking at the moment. Neither, apparently, did Winterhawk. That wasn't surprising, though: Ocelot was amazed that the mage was even awake, considering their relative physical toughness and the fact that they'd both taken essentially the same hit.

Nobody said much until they reached their destination, which turned out to be the abandoned school Ocelot had used as a flophouse a few days ago. `Wraith, Ingram in hand, got his other arm around Ocelot and supported him as they went inside. Winterhawk used his levitation spell lock to glide in, with Joe bringing up the rear with his combat shotgun.

Once they were inside and `Wraith and Joe had verified that they were alone, Winterhawk set about healing both himself and Ocelot. It was a slow and arduous task; by the time he finished, his drain-induced exhaustion was evident. "Talk amongst yourselves," he said faintly with a small smile as he wadded up his jacket and lay down on the floor to get his strength back. He didn't even complain about the accommodations, which wasn't like him at all.

The other three runners were all pacing. "Okay," Ocelot said. He was feeling much better now that his ribs weren't on fire and his head wasn't throbbing. "First thing we gotta do is call Harry. Agreed?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "He's gonna want to know about this."

`Wraith was looking troubled. He started to say something, then stopped as if unsure he wanted to voice it.

"What?" Ocelot asked.

"Harry," `Wraith said reluctantly. "Setup?"

"You mean you think Harry might have set us up?" Joe asked. At `Wraith's nod, he shook his head. "Why would he want to do that?"

"Examining all possibilities," the elf said.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, but I can't believe Harry would do somethin' like this to us. For one thing, it's too crude. If he wanted us dead, he'd have a million much more subtle ways to do it."

"If anybody found out about it, he'd never get another team," Joe added.

"Why don't we assume it isn't Harry until something shows us otherwise," Ocelot said. "Okay?"

The two runners nodded. None of them was in any hurry to believe that their trusted fixer would try to set them up in this or any other manner.

"Need to go back," `Wraith said.

"To the warehouse?" Ocelot asked.

"Yes. Someone was responsible."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "At least this is something we can investigate. I don't think it's gonna disappear into thin air like before." He looked at the bloody, tattered forms of Ocelot and Winterhawk. "You guys definitely got hurt, and we're not dreaming this time."

That just dawned on Ocelot. "Yeah..." he said slowly. "The whole thing was pretty crude, really. But the Star's gonna be crawling all over that place."

"So?" Joe pointed out. "I'm not even sure they will, in that part of town. What do they care about an abandoned warehouse in Puyallup? But even if they are, people aren't gonna talk to Lone Star. They're all gonna hide until they leave. But they might talk to us, though."

Ocelot nodded. He'd been away from the gang lifestyle in the bad part of town long enough that sometimes he forgot that the local constabulary didn't tend to pay much attention to areas like the Barrens, or the people who inhabited them. If a few squatters got geeked, that wasn't something they were going to care much about. Who was going to miss a few more squatters? Seattle had thousands of them. It was a sad but true fact of life in the Sprawl. "Okay, then why don't we wait until Hawk gets himself together, and then we'll call Harry and find out what the hell's going on. Then we can go back over there and see if we can't find out who set up that ambush."

"I hope we're planning to add 'clean up' to that list of things to do," came a quiet voice from the other side of the room. Winterhawk sat up, color already beginning to return to his pale face. "In case you hadn't noticed, we both look ghastly. I can't quite bring myself to believe that you don't care."

Ocelot looked down at his shredded, bloodstained coat. "Yeah...you're right. And besides, we should probably pick up spare armor before we go back over there." He held up his arm, the wristphone on which still miraculously appeared to be functional. "Who's gonna call Harry?"

Winterhawk lurched to his feet, retrieved his coat, and joined the others. "Be my guest," he said.

It rang several times before it was picked up. "Yeah?" The voice was unmistakably Harry's, although there was no video.

"Harry. Ocelot. We gotta talk."

The video switched on, revealing the fixer's face. In the background the scene was that of a fancy restaurant. "Kid, this isn't a good time —"

"No good, Harry. That meet you sent us on was a setup, and we want some answers." He switched on his own video pickup.

Harry's expression flitted from concern to alarm when he saw Ocelot, and then to confusion. "What are you talkin' about, kid? What meet? And what happened to you?" He turned off to one side for a second to wave someone off, then returned his attention to the vidscreen.

Ocelot glared at him. "What do you mean, `what meet'?" he demanded angrily. "Harry, you called us tonight. Said you had a guy who might know about what's been happening lately. We showed up at the meet and nearly got ourselves killed!" His voice rose with his anger.

Winterhawk reached over and grabbed Ocelot's arm, moving into the video's range. "Harry, as you can see, we haven't had a pleasant evening. Best if you just give us the answers we're looking for — we're not feeling particularly patient or forgiving at the moment."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Listen, `Hawk — normally I wouldn't put up with ya talkin' to me like that, okay? But I'm tellin' ya — I don't have any idea what you're talkin' about. I didn't call any o' you guys tonight. I didn't set up any meet. I don't know about any setup. Okay?"

"Then who did?" Ocelot demanded, reclaiming his arm. "Tonight about 19:00, somebody who looked like you and sounded like you called us and said he had a line on a guy who might have seen somethin' we'd be interested in.

We were supposed to meet this guy in Puyallup, at an old warehouse. When we showed up, all we found was a speaker and a bomb. If we'd been a little more out of it than we were, you'd be lookin' for half a new team."

There was a pause. The fixer now looked quite concerned. "Hang on a minute, okay? Let me get somewhere where I can talk." The video blanked. About two minutes later, it came back on. "Okay. Now let me get this straight. You say a guy who looked and sounded like me called you tonight?"

"Yeah," Ocelot growled. "If it wasn't you, it was your twin brother."

"I ain't got a twin brother," Harry said idly. His mind was obviously elsewhere. "At 19:00?"

"Right around then, yeah. The meet was set up for 21:00."

Harry shook his head. "Couldn't'a been me, then. I was at the theater with Lucinda. That *Freudiana* revival opened tonight, and she wanted to see it. I can show ya the ticket stub if ya don't believe me. We got there a little early and had a few drinks before curtain."

Ocelot sighed. It was becoming clear to him—and the rest of the team—that Harry had not been behind this, nor even made the call. Which put them back to the question of the hour: who had?

"Listen, though," Harry was continuing. "If somebody's out there impersonatin' me, that concerns me. It pisses me off, is what it does. Let me do a little investigatin' from my end and see if I can get a line on who's gonna be dead soon." His words sounded flippant; his tone did not. Harry did not take things like this, especially things like this that could interfere with his livelihood, lightly.

"You do that," Ocelot said. "We're gonna do some checking of our own. Let us know if you come up with anything."

"I will, kid." He paused. "Maybe it'd be best if you call me, though. Or at least if I call you, check back with me to verify that it was really me on the other end."

Ocelot nodded and broke the connection. He looked at Winterhawk. "Can we go by your place to get cleaned up? I got an extra coat in the truck, and that way we don't have to go back to Tacoma."

Winterhawk nodded, shrugging back into the remnants of what was once a well-tailored armored greatcoat. "Good thing I have a number of spares," he commented. "Don't think this look suits me, do you?"

Nobody answered. Quickly, they all got back in the truck and drove back toward Downtown, where they stopped at Winterhawk's apartment long enough to allow him and Ocelot to take showers and clean up. Not long after, they were back on the road and headed south for Puyallup. Once again they parked the truck down the street and approached the warehouse on foot. All four were armed and paying closer than usual attention to their surroundings.

Ocelot's eyes widened as the place rose into view. "*Holy shit...*" he muttered. Winterhawk, who also hadn't seen the aftermath of the explosion, stared as well.

An area comprising almost a quarter of the length of the warehouse's back wall and part of its roof had been blown away, leaving an enormous gaping hole open to the sleety rain. Piles of rubble were strewn around everywhere, spread over the concrete floor. The floor itself had a hole several centimeters deep in the place where the bomb had exploded.

Gingerly, the runners entered the warehouse through the door Winterhawk and Ocelot had used earlier that

evening. They picked their way over the debris until they reached the point of the blast center. The pile of trash behind which the speaker and the bomb had been hidden was gone now, its contents mixed with chunks of concrete from the floor. Joe pulled out a flashlight and squatted down next to the pile, prodding at the chunks with the handle of his currently disassembled battle axe. Then he withdrew his chemsniffer from his duffel bag and turned it on. The others watched him work, every few seconds taking glances around to make sure they were not being observed.

It was `Wraith who noticed it first. "Company," he said quietly, loosening the Ingram in its holster under his jacket. "Doorway. Left."

Everyone's eyes came up surreptitiously to look where the elf was indicating. Sure enough, five shadowy figures had separated themselves from the darkness and stood framed in one of the warehouse's large open doorways. It was difficult to make out details, but all five appeared to be human and similarly dressed. "Gangers," Ocelot whispered.

"More," `Wraith said. "Right."

Four more figures appeared in another, smaller doorway to the right. Moving with the easy, swaggering gait of those who knew they were in control of the situation, they entered the warehouse and arranged themselves around the runners. The illumination from Joe's small flashlight provided enough light to get a better view of them: young, human, mixed ethnicity, dressed almost identically in black synth-leather jackets with red sleeves. A couple of them carried what looked like light pistols; the others were empty-handed or carried various crude melee weapons.

"Stay cool," Ocelot whispered.

One of the gangers, apparently the leader of this particular group, took a step forward. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, Hispanic-looking kid of about eighteen, with long black hair and a scraggly goatee. He carried no weapon; his sleeves were shoved up to reveal extensive tattooing on his forearms. "You ain't from around here," he remarked noncommittally. "You guys in Red Death turf."

"We ain't stayin'," Ocelot said.

Joe rose from his crouch, moving slowly so as not to startle the gangers. Still, they took a couple of steps back: a troll of his size, especially one in armor, was not something they were in a hurry to mess with.

The gangleader looked the four runners over, assessing his group's chances of taking them in a fight, and stood up a little straighter. Aside from the troll, the other three didn't look particularly big and tough to him, but he could tell armor when he saw it, and there was also the matter of what kind of weapons they had concealed beneath their coats. "What you want?" he finally asked. Around him, his fellow gangers shifted position, but remained where they were.

"We're checking out the explosion," Joe said.

The gangleader stiffened. "You know `bout that?" His eyes narrowed. "You blow this place up?"

"No," Ocelot said, "But we nearly got geeked in the blast. We ain't too happy about that."

The ganger digested that for a minute, slouching with his hands in his pockets. "Maybe you should go," he said at last. Behind him, he heard the *click* of the safety being taken off a light pistol.

The runners remained still, for different reasons. For Ocelot and Joe, their gang backgrounds dictated that you did not back down, especially when you knew you had superior force. For `Wraith, it was the certainty that he

moved so much faster than the gangers that he could have at least four of them down before they moved. For Winterhawk, it was his contempt for brute street gangs like this, coupled with his knowledge that one area effect spell could take out the lot of them. "We'll go when we're done," Ocelot said. He looked up at the leader. "You help us, we'll go sooner."

The ganger snorted. "Why we gonna help you? You don't go, we make you go." The other safety was disengaged with another *click*.

From behind him, Ocelot heard `Wraith change position, and Winterhawk was tapping his foot impatiently; he put up his hand in a *stop* gesture. Taking a deep breath, he appeared to be considering the ganger's threat. "Well," he said after a pause, "We can do things one of two ways. Either you can help us out and we can make it worth your while, or we'll have to do it your way. You ain't gonna be happy with your way, I'll tell you that."

"He's right, you know," Winterhawk said conversationally. "Not to mention it will be terribly messy."

The ganger looked back and forth between Ocelot and Winterhawk. Then he looked up at Joe. Finally, his gaze traveled over to `Wraith, who had silently nudged the front of his coat open to reveal the holstered Ingram. "What'll you give us if we help you?" he demanded. "Whatta we gotta do?"

Ocelot relaxed a bit as the level of tension dropped. The ganger had been smart for a change: he'd realized that his group was outgunned, and now he was trying to save face. Ocelot was cool with that. Silently hoping that Winterhawk, who mixed with the typical gang member about as well as oil mixed with water, would keep his mouth shut, he said, "Just answer some questions. You guys know stuff around this area, right?"

"Damn right we do," the gangleader said with pride. "The Red Death, we own this `round here. We don't miss nothin'."

"Okay, then maybe we can do business," Ocelot said. "See, we're lookin' for the people who set the bomb in here. We want to—talk to them." He grinned a bit ferally, clearly revealing what he meant by "talking."

The ganger understood that very well. "We don' like guys comin' round here messin' with our turf," he said. "Bad for biz, y'know?"

"When we find `em, they won't be coming back here anymore," Joe said.

The ganger looked at Joe, then back at Ocelot. He paused again. "Okay," he said. "You guys look like you got money. You give us—say—five hundred nuyen, and we'll tell you."

Again hoping Winterhawk would keep quiet, Ocelot thought that over as if five hundred nuyen would put a big dent in the team's cash flow. He thought about bargaining, but realized that if the ganger really was able to provide the first useful information they'd had so far, five hundred *was* a bargain. He glanced at the others, each of whom nodded. "You got it," he said.

"Okay," the ganger said, looking surprised. In this part of town, five hundred nuyen was big money, especially for nothing more than information. "Gimme the money first."

`Wraith, who usually handled the team's petty cash expenditures, pulled five hundred in nuyen notes from his jacket pocket and handed it to Ocelot, who took it and shook his head. "No good. Here's the cash—you can see we're good for it. But you give us the information first."

The ganger appeared to be considering the option of trying to take the team by surprise again, but common sense won out over machismo. "Yeah, okay," he said

grudgingly. He snapped his fingers. "Alfonso! Get yo' ass over here!"

A short, powerfully built youth of about fifteen came over and stood next to the gangleader. "Yeah."

"Tell these guys what you saw."

Alfonso looked a little nervously at the team, but pulled himself up to his full height and put on a disinterested demeanor. "I saw some guys come in here. They stayed in for awhile, then they came out and went away. After the bomb went off, I saw `em runnin' for a car and they took off."

"What did they look like?" Ocelot asked. "Did you get a good look at `em?"

"Yeah," Alfonso said. "One of `em was a norm. You know, human. The other one was an ork. Norm was white. They was wearin' long coats like you guys got on."

"Did you see the car?" Winterhawk asked, finding it difficult to stay out of the conversation any longer.

Alfonso looked at him suspiciously, but shrugged. "Yeah. It was orange. Jackrabbit, I t'ink. One o' the back lights was out."

"Anything else?" Ocelot asked. "Anything weird about the guys or the car?"

"No, nothin' else," Alfonso said, then added, "Oh, yeah—it had some kinda bumper sticker on it. Couldn't read it, though. Too far away."

Ocelot nodded. "Thanks. Listen," he said, addressing the gangleader, "any of your guys sees those two around here again, you call me, okay? If they're here and we grab `em, there's another five hundred in it for ya." He handed over the payment along with his wristphone number jotted on a scrap of paper. "Okay?"

The ganger accepted the cash and the paper, squirreling both away in his jacket. "Yeah. Maybe I will. Now you guys better get out of here."

"Good doin' business with you," Ocelot said, then turned and headed for the door, followed by the other runners. The nine gang members stood silently watching the runners as they made their exit.

Once outside, Winterhawk was the first to speak. "Someone got sloppy."

"Yes," `Wraith said. "First time."

"At least we have a real lead now," Ocelot said. "Assuming those guys were telling the truth. Let's hurry up and get the word out that we're lookin' for these guys."

"Find anything?" `Wraith asked Joe, with a pointed glance toward the bag containing his chemsniffer.

"Not much," Joe said. "Looks like a pretty primitive bomb—the sniffer found traces of stuff that makes me think they just strapped some dynamite together and hid it under that trashpile."

"How'd they detonate it?" Ocelot asked. "Couldn't have been on a timer—they couldn't be sure we'd show up at the right time."

"Radio detonator," `Wraith said.

"That fits with what our young friend in there said," Winterhawk agreed. "Remember that he claims to have seen our would-be assassins leaving the scene *after* the bomb detonated."

"They were probably watching us from a distance," Ocelot said disgustedly, "and just set the thing off when we got close."

"Must have been a decent distance," Winterhawk said. "I assensed the entire area surrounding the warehouse."

"All they'd need is a good telescope or mag or something," Joe pointed out. "We can go back and look if you want—wouldn't be too hard to figure out where they must have been, if we look at the angles they'd need to see in."

"No need," `Wraith said, with a hint of an evil smile.
"We'll ask them."

19.

Harry, apparently anxious to redeem himself even though he hadn't been responsible for the ambush, wasted no time in putting his massive network of contacts to work on the information provided to him by the team. Despite the fact that all four team members had also spread the news about the two men to their own contacts, it was Harry who, late the next afternoon, sent word that he'd come up with something.

The runners insisted in meeting him in person this time, to at least try to avoid the mistaken identity problem that had gotten them into this situation in the first place. "Okay," he said at the bar where they'd gotten together, "I found your guys. Human/ork partners, one white, dark hair, orange car—don't know about any bumper sticker, but these guys fit the profile."

"So who are they?" Joe asked.

Harry blew air through his teeth. "That's the weird thing—these guys ain't in your league. Nobody with half a brain would send them against a team with your rep."

"I must remind you, Harry, that they very nearly succeeded in killing two of us," Winterhawk said.

"Either you're gettin' sloppy, then, or they're gettin' better," Harry replied. "But anyway, they go by Jenner and Magnum—Magnum's the ork. Coupla small-time muscle types who've been tryin' to break into the runner biz for a couple years now. Problem is, they've blown a few jobs and they've been havin' a hell of a time gettin' anything good."

"Any idea who hired `em?" Ocelot asked.

"Nope, not yet. I can keep checkin' if you want, but you'll probably have better luck talkin' to them yerselves. I hear they hang out at the Neon Blitz over in Redmond."

"Thanks, Harry," Ocelot said. "We'll do that." Something about his tone suggested that the talk would not be an enjoyable one.

The evening that would turn out to be the last one on earth for two minor-league shadowrunner wannabes named Jenner and Magnum began quite pleasantly, all things considered.

The Neon Blitz was a dive by anybody's reckoning, but it was *their* dive—a place where they had hung out off and on for the past couple of years, picking up a job here and there, trying to catch the attention of somebody who could score them the kind of gig that would elevate them from their street-level, hand-to-mouth existences and into the rarefied ranks of Seattle's respected shadowrunner teams. To Jenner's and Magnum's minds, this occurrence was only a matter of time; they simply hadn't caught the right eyes yet.

All that had changed yesterday when Jenner's phone had beeped.

Mr. Johnson apparently didn't like publicity, because he had blanked out the video pickup on the conversation. That didn't matter, though: it was the message that was important. He had heard of them, he'd said, and thought that they sounded like exactly the sort of talent he was looking for to carry out his job. *Talent*, he'd said. He'd actually used that word, causing Jenner and Magnum to puff up with self-important pride. Of course they were the right guys for the job, they'd assured Johnson, practically falling over each other in their enthusiasm to get the words out. All he had to do was tell them what he needed done, and it was as good as completed.

He was a very good Mr. Johnson, they thought—he even paid in advance: two thousand nuyen for each of them, all up front. He trusted them, he had said. All they

had to do was plant some explosives and set up a wireless speakerphone in a particular place; they *did* know how to plant explosives, yes? You bet we do, they had assured him. We're *experts* at it.

Jenner had once blown up a toilet at a bus-station men's room with cherry bombs; Magnum had stolen a stick of dynamite from a demolition site and nearly blown his arm off in an attempt to destroy the car of the sonofabitch who'd run off with his chick a couple years ago. He *had* managed to blow up the car, though: that made him, at least in his own mind, an expert.

Well, good, Johnson had said, satisfied. He had given them the particulars of where they were to set the explosives and how they were to arrange the speakerphone, and what they were to do once everything was set. Some men would come to investigate; they should set off the explosives when at least one of them was close by. It didn't matter whether any of the men were killed or even injured, although that would be preferred. After this occurred, they were on their own to get out of the area, and the two K each was theirs to keep.

Johnson had even given them an LTG number to call should they have any trouble, although he had cautioned them that they should not call it unless things had gone terribly wrong. They were, after all, shadowrunners, right? They should be able to deal with minor unforeseen difficulties. Still, he had insisted that both of them write down the number and keep it with them. Just in case. Once he was sure that they understood his instructions and that they had written down his contact number, he had made the transfer of cred right then and there. Suddenly Jenner and Magnum were sitting there at the Neon Blitz with two things they rarely had: a job, and cred to burn.

Conscious of their newfound status as shadowrunners, the two goons had gone out to discuss matters with a friend of theirs who was a small-time fixer. He had helped them to procure the explosives, a radio detonator, and a speakerphone of the type described by Johnson. This had put a dent in their funds, but they counted it as the cost of doing business. They had headed out to the site, planted the stuff, and gone off to hide some distance away where they could observe the festivities through high-powered binoculars.

Jenner had provided the quavering, frightened voice. Magnum had watched through the binoculars and triggered the explosion when two of the men had come to investigate. He hadn't seen the other two guys Johnson had mentioned, but that was okay. Neither he nor Jenner waited around to see the aftermath; once the explosion went off, they both got their tails out of there and made their getaway in their car, which they had parked nearby. No problem, they thought. Piece o' cake.

Now, the following night, the two of them were ensconced at a table mid-way back in the Neon Blitz, buying drinks and living the life of the successful shadowrunner (or at least their version thereof). Jenner, a wiry, blotchy-skinned caucasian human with greasy hair and a ragged military-style jacket, was getting rather sloppily drunk, leering and pawing at any woman unfortunate enough to get within his reach and loudly proclaiming his opinions on everything from the sexual prowess of Maria Mercurial to the chances that the Sonics would win the championship this year. Magnum, a large and stupefyingly ugly ork of mixed racial stock, was a bit more under control. He sat back in a haze of smoke, cigarette sticking out from behind his steel-capped left tusk, and grinned the grin of the truly dense at random bar patrons. No doubt about it—he and his old buddy

Jenner had finally hit the big time. Hell, they'd been drinking all night and they still had over a thousand nuyen left. At this rate, they could go on for days before they'd have to look for another job. By then, the Johnsons would be lining up to hire them.

So caught up were they in their celebratory imbibing that they almost didn't see the man who was approaching their table. Magnum spotted him first: a tall, chubby, nondescript-looking guy with light hair, corp suit, and fussy little wire-rimmed glasses. When it became apparent that the man was headed for their table, the ork elbowed Jenner in what he thought was a subtle attempt to get his attention. "Hey Jenner," he whispered.

"What?" Jenner's irritated voice was a bit slurred and a bit too loud; he seemed more interested in his drink and the shapely posterior of the waitress at the next table than he was in his partner.

"Shuddup, you idiot! There's a guy comin' over here!" Magnum indicated the approaching man with a quick head gesture. "Looks like a corper."

Jenner leaned forward and the two front legs of his chair, which had been tilted upward, crashed to the ground with a loud *thud* that was fortunately muffled by the loud background noise produced by the bar's other denizens. Following Magnum's gaze, he watched the corper thread his way through the crowd. There was no question that he was headed for their table. Jenner grinned, revealing a mouthful of bad teeth. "Maybe dey hearda us. Got another job for us already."

The two were spared further speculation by the arrival of the nondescript corper, who did indeed stop in front of their table. "Jenner and Magnum?" he inquired.

"Yeah, that's us," Magnum said proudly.

The man pulled a chair from another table and placed it on the other side of the table, then sat down. "Good.

You're just the gentlemen I'm looking for. My name is Mr. Johnson. I heard you might be in the market for some shadow work."

"Maybe," Jenner said cagily. "Whaddya got?"

"I heard that you're quite adept with explosives," Mr. Johnson said. "An associate of mine has recommended you; he says you performed a job for him last night."

"Oh, yeah," Magnum said, grinning. His steel-capped tusk glinted in the dim overhead light. He lowered his voice. "You need explosives, we're your guys. But you know we ain't supposed to discuss our jobs, though. Shadowrunners never talk about stuff like that. Bad for biz, if word gets around we got loose lips."

For some reason, Jenner thought that was funny. He giggled, but muffled it quickly with his hand.

Mr. Johnson nodded gravely. "Good. I can see I can count on your discretion as well. Just as I hoped. If you'll come with me, I've a car waiting. We can discuss the job and your payment. If everything is to your liking, we can finalize the arrangements and see to your advance payment this evening." He started to rise.

Jenner and Magnum were quick to rise as well; they didn't appear to notice (or at least to care if they did) that Mr. Johnson's UCAS accent sounded a bit forced. As the corper turned to head back out of the bar, the two grinned at each other. Another job this soon! They couldn't believe their good luck. Naturally, now that they were experienced runners with a successful job under their belts, they planned to ask for a bit higher payment. Visions of nuyen dancing in their befogged brains, they even allowed themselves to consider the possibility that they might make as much as three thousand each. A fortune like that would call for some major celebrating.

Their eyes widened as they saw the black, corporate-issue Nightsky limousine that pulled smoothly up in front

of the bar. They stared at each other, each of them silently upping their fee to five grand each. "Gentlemen," Johnson said, his voice as smooth as the car. The door opened, seemingly of its own volition, with a soft *click*. Mr. Johnson indicated for them to precede him into the car's rear compartment.

It wasn't until they had both piled into the limo's soft leather seats and Johnson had climbed in after them that Jenner and Magnum realized that they were not alone. As the door closed behind them with the same soft *click*, the two goons noticed three other occupants: a large troll, a tall, thin elf, and a well-built, blond human. They all sat silently, watching the newcomers. Their expressions were unreadable.

Magnum and Jenner looked at each other fearfully, then relaxed. Of course. Bodyguards. Hey, this guy must be pretty important to rate three bodyguards, yeah? They sat down and turned back around to face Johnson again, ready to begin negotiations.

Johnson was smiling, and it wasn't a pleasant smile at all. As Jenner and Magnum watched, wide-eyed, the corper's plain, pudgy features dropped away, replaced by those of a sharp-featured, dark-haired human with piercing blue eyes. "Hello, gentlemen," he said softly. Johnson's forced UCAS accent was gone; the newcomer spoke with a much more relaxed British one. His boring corp-issue suit faded into one of much finer cut, covered by a heavy wool overcoat. "How nice of you to join our little party." The man's smile was broad and superficially friendly, but even Jenner and Magnum could see the wolfish quality lurking beneath the cheeriness.

Their first instinct was to escape; unfortunately for Jenner and Magnum, they didn't often get past their first instinct to one that made a bit more sense. Almost in unison they lunged for the door, intending to dive

straight across the lightly-built Brit and bull their way out the door. Their hands went for their pockets, where Jenner had a Ceska vz/120 and Magnum had a Predator.

They didn't get very far. They had barely begun their lunge when each of them was seized in a viselike grip: Jenner by the blond human, and Magnum by the troll. The Brit and the elf remained calmly seated.

"What da fuck—?" Jenner yelled, writhing madly in an attempt to loosen the blond man's grip.

Magnum was likewise writhing. "It's a setup!" he screamed, clawing at the seats as the Brit casually shifted his leg to one side to avoid the reaching hands.

"Sit down and shut up," growled the troll, "or I'll rip your arm off."

"He'll do it, too," the Brit said pleasantly. "I fear that none of us are very pleased with you two right now. I'd sit down if I were you."

The blond human hauled Jenner back and threw him roughly down in the seat. The expression on his face was one of carefully controlled rage. One look at his eyes convinced the skinny thug that he'd best hear these people out if he wanted to live much longer.

Unnoticed, the car pulled away from the curb without a sound and merged smoothly into the late evening traffic.

"Now then," the Brit said. "First thing we'll be doing is relieving you of some of your unnecessary possessions. Then we'll have a chat. How does that sound?"

The troll and the blond man didn't give them a chance to answer. They moved in and began silently on their task. When it appeared that Jenner and Magnum were going to protest, the elf just as silently—and with inhuman speed—withdrawed a heavy pistol from a holster inside his jacket and aimed it squarely at the middle of first Jenner's, then Magnum's, forehead. The movement

had been so swift that the two thugs could not follow it: one moment, the elf was sitting there calmly, and the next, he had a gun pointed at them. His expression never changed from calm and neutral readiness. Once again, they decided to cooperate.

When the troll and the blond man had finished, Jenner and Magnum sat with their hands and feet zip-tied with plastic restraints, dressed only in their shorts. "What da hell is this?" Jenner demanded. "Who da fuck are you guys, and what do ya want?"

The Brit shook his head, still smiling. "No, I think you've got this wrong. When I said we'd be having a chat, I meant that *we'll* be doing the chatting." He indicated his companions. "You'll be doing the answering. We'd rather not hear anything from you other than answers to our questions. Do we understand each other?"

Magnum took a deep breath and started to say something, but stopped when the blond man clamped down on his arm and wrenched it backward in its socket. It wasn't enough to do any damage, but the implication was enough. "Yeah," he rasped.

"What do ya want wit' us?" Jenner whined. His bloodshot eyes, so wide that the whites could be seen all the way around, couldn't tear themselves away from the steady, unwavering barrel of the gun held by the elf. Then his expression grew sly. "Ya want money? We got money. Lotsa money. You take it, let us go. Okay?"

The Brit chuckled contemptuously, shaking his head again. "You *are* rather a thick pair, aren't you? I told you already – we want answers. If you give us the right ones, you might get out of here with your hides intact. If not –" he shrugged, letting the sentence trail off. Suddenly his expression grew cold, all trace of cheerfulness dropping away like a mask. "Who hired you for the job you did last night?"

"Huh?" Magnum was caught off guard by the both the question and the abrupt change in the questioner's demeanor. The elf's gun came around to cover him, and the troll, who was sitting on the other side of him, began cracking his knuckles in a most alarming manner.

"The job. You *can* remember back that far, correct? The little bit of demolition you did last night. Who hired you to do it?"

"We didn't see him," Jenner answered quickly, in a desperate attempt to find refuge in the truth. "He called us on da comm."

"No vid," Magnum added helpfully. He had determined that his chances of getting out of here were a lot better if he tried to suck up and go along with this very determined and obviously very dangerous foursome, as opposed to trying to snow them. Magnum knew two things very well: one, a guy in his skivvies wasn't going to last long against four armed and armored opponents; and two, his mental capacities were not up to playing mind games with them. Jenner was the fast talker of the pair, and even he seemed to have given it up as a lost cause. Their mutual goal now was to get out of this alive.

"You allowed yourself to be hired for a job by someone you hadn't even seen?" the Brit was asking. His expression grew even more contemptuous.

"He paid in advance!" Jenner said desperately.

"It was an easy job," Magnum muttered. He had not yet managed to rub the correct brain cells together to make the connection between their captors and the target of their run. "Just set off some explosives and get outta there."

"Yes," the Brit said speculatively. "An easy job. Too bad you were so sloppy in the execution. But I don't believe you've answered my question yet. What else do you know about the man who hired you?"

"Nothin'!" Jenner cried. "I told ya, it was all over the comm! Dat's all we got, is what I tol' ya!"

There was a slight *click* as the safety came off the elf's heavy pistol. The troll grabbed one of Jenner's arms, and the blond man grabbed one of Magnum's. "We're gonna have to kill `em," the troll said, almost ruefully. The blond man popped a wicked-looking cyberspur and eyed it with interest.

The Brit sighed. "I'm afraid you're right. I did so want to avoid this – "

"Wait!" Magnum screeched. "Wait! Jenner – the paper. The *number!*"

"Huh?" Jenner stared at him blankly, his fear having overwhelmed what little mental acuity he normally possessed.

"The *number*, Jenner!" Magnum struggled against his bonds. "Johnson! The emergency number! Remember?"

Jenner's eyes popped open even wider, a grin of stupid relief spreading across his features. "Yeah! Yeah, Magnum!" He addressed his captors, cocking his head down toward his greasy military jacket. "Look in dere – in da front pocket. There's a piece o' paper wit' an LTG number on it. Look!" he exhorted, jerking in his bonds like an epileptic puppet. "You'll see!"

The blond man leaned over and snatched up Jenner's jacket. Sheathing the spur, he carefully reached into the front pocket and hooked a badly folded scrap of paper.

Jenner nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, dat's it! Dat's it! Dat's Johnson's number. You call him, `n' let us go, okay?"

The blond man unfolded the scrap and looked at it. Sure enough, there was an LTG number scrawled there. "How do we know you aren't lyin' to us to save your sorry asses?" he asked, speaking for the first time. His voice was harsh and unforgiving; he popped the spur again.

"It's the truth! It is!" Magnum was nearly blubbering now. "That's the number he gave us. Said to call it if we got in trouble!"

"We didn't get in trouble," Jenner said with a certain pride underlying his fear. "We did the job right." The troll's grip tightened on his arm again, and once again he shut up.

The Brit sighed. "I don't think we're going to get much else out of them," he said. Addressing his companions, he added, "Gentlemen?"

The three others shook their heads, although the troll and the blond man maintained their grips on their respective thugs. The elf returned his Browning to its holster without comment.

"All right, then. Perhaps —"

But Jenner and Magnum were no longer listening to the words of their captors. Suddenly they had more important things with which to concern themselves. They didn't see the foursome's expressions as a pressure began to build inexorably inside their skulls, and they were beyond caring what happened to them when blood began to gush from every hole in their heads.

20.

Inside the limousine, the four runners stared in horror as the two thugs died before their eyes.

One minute they were all sitting there calmly performing their usual "good cop, bad cop" interrogation on their would-be assassins, preparing to drop them off to fend for themselves, hog-tied in their underwear, in one of the Barrens' less hospitable neighborhoods; the next minute, the two thugs' eyes had bulged grotesquely in their heads as great gouts of blood began to pour from their eye sockets, noses, mouths, and ears simultaneously.

Joe and Ocelot quickly lurched back, out of the path of the gory runnels streaming down the fronts of Jenner's and Magnum's bodies. The bodies sagged sideways, their heads lolling forward and releasing more blood down into their laps and all over the seats. They had made no sound as they died.

ShadoWraith's normally unreadable face showed a measurable amount of alarm. "Hawk?" he asked, indicating the dead thugs with a head gesture. "You?"

"No," Winterhawk said grimly. "I didn't do it. I'll be back." Without further comment he leaned back and slumped in his seat.

Ocelot and Joe were looking for signs of attack, although they knew that a high velocity round would not be able to punch through the limousine's armored glass without at least making a recognizable sound. They had rented the limo from Harry, and the kinds of things its windows wouldn't be able to stop were the kinds of things that made large and noisy holes when going through said windows.

Wraith had his Ingram drawn now, his eyes sweeping through the limo's passenger compartment

looking for anything out of the ordinary. Aside from the bleeding corpses slumped on the seats in front of him, everything looked exactly as it was supposed to. The car had no driver; it was set on autopilot to cruise around the area in a predetermined pattern until given other instruction. Still, he hit the button to lower the glass partition between the driver and passenger compartments: as expected, the driver area was empty, the steering wheel moving of its own volition as if being operated by a phantom chauffeur.

Winterhawk sat up, looking even more grim than before. "No trace," he said, shaking his head. "None whatsoever. If that was a spell, it should have been lighting up the astral that soon after it hit. There would certainly have been at least some residue."

Ocelot stared at the bodies. They were leaned forward now, blood hitting the floor of the limo with soft little *plops*. "What else could it be?" He looked at `Wraith. "Poison?"

The elf considered. "Never seen any like it. Can't tell without tests."

"Guys," Joe spoke up, "we'd better figure out what we're gonna do with `em. We can't just leave `em in the car."

"We need to find out what's caused this," Winterhawk said. "One of them dropping dead might possibly be coincidental. Two, and of the same thing—?"

"Disease?" `Wraith said suddenly.

The runners all looked nervously at the bodies. "We need to get `em out of here," Joe repeated, a bit more emphatically.

"Yeah," Ocelot agreed.

"Autopsy," `Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes, good idea. I imagine Harry must have someone on his payroll who could

perform a discreet autopsy. I, for one, will feel better once I know what's caused this."

They called Harry, who started to protest about getting tired of hearing from them lately, but shut up fast when they gave him the particulars. He told them to return the limo to where they'd picked it up, and he'd have someone there waiting to take the bodies off their hands.

"It'll take a little while to get the autopsy done, though," Harry said. "And it's gonna cost."

"It always does," Ocelot said. "Just do it, okay?"

As instructed, they took the limo to the designated area. On the way over, using Winterhawk's magic fingers spell and the handle of Joe's axe, they carefully and gingerly went through the thugs' clothing, but found nothing else of interest except two credsticks which between them held a bit over a thousand nuyen.

To their surprise, when they arrived at the meeting spot, two figures awaited them. One was the dwarf rigger who had delivered the limo; the other was an unidentifiable form in a chemsuit. Quickly and efficiently, she used a levitate spell to remove the bodies from the limo and install them in the back of her van. "I'll let you know when I have anything," she told them, looking nervously at the two unfortunate corpses. Neither she nor the rigger said anything about the small pools of blood congealing on the floor of the passenger compartment.

Back in their own truck, Ocelot said, "Okay, now what?"

"T.C.," Wraith said.

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "Maybe she can find out whose number those guys had."

"With our luck," Winterhawk said cynically, "it's a dead end just like all the others."

"But it's the only lead we got at the moment," Ocelot pointed out. "At least until and unless we find out what killed those two guys. Anybody want to make me a bet that we ain't gonna find out anything conclusive?"

He didn't get any takers.

21.

None of the team had ever seen the place the decker known as T. C. Pip called home. For all they knew, she could have just as easily lived in a palace or in the back of a van in an alley somewhere, but wherever it was that she spent her time, she chose not to share that information with anyone. The runners weren't even sure Harry knew exactly where she lived.

She was, however, easy enough to contact for those who knew the proper way to do it and who had business with her. All you had to do was call her number (the one she gave out, at least), leave a message, and wait for her to get back to you. How long it took her to do that was directly dependent on how engrossed she was in what she was doing when you called and how interesting your problem sounded.

She returned `Wraith's call in less than five minutes.

When she had identified herself, he switched on the video. Her image appeared on the little screen: a thin, rather plain Asian woman in her early thirties, her dark hair cut in a short and thoroughly no-nonsense style. "Haven't heard from *you* in a while," she said.

"No need," `Wraith replied. In the background, Winterhawk smiled a bit to himself: it was amusing to watch the elf and the decker, both of whom were get-right-to-the-point types with very little regard for social niceties, carry on a conversation. The only reason why `Wraith was the one doing the calling in this case was that of the four, he had had the most contact with her, especially since he had bought himself a cyberdeck and begun training as a "turtle" decker.

"What can I do for you?" T. C. asked.

"LTG number. Need it traced."

She considered. "Anything possibly special about it? You know: top secret military, Aztechnology CEO's personal number, anything like that?"

"Unknown."

Winterhawk, exasperated with `Wraith's monosyllabism, leaned across the seat. "It's the number of a Mr. Johnson or a fixer, most likely. Someone who hired a couple of unfortunate sods to kill us."

Again, T. C. considered. "Hmmm...could be bad, could be no problem. How about I wait on the price until I see how hard it is to trace?"

"Yes," `Wraith said as Winterhawk returned to his position in the shotgun seat.

"Okay. Give me the number and I'll get back to you when I've got something."

`Wraith transmitted the number to her. When she had indicated that it had been received, he said "Thanks," and broke the connection.

"Now we wait," Ocelot said with a sigh.

"Anybody hungry?" Joe spoke up. When they stared at him, he shrugged and grinned. "Hey, if we gotta wait anyway, we might as well eat, right? Who knows when we'll have time to stop again?"

Everyone had to admit that he did have a point. Thus, they were sitting around a table in a nearby restaurant an hour later when T. C. called back. "Okay," she said. "Got your number. Wasn't even hard." She smiled wickedly at `Wraith. "You could have done this one. Saved yourself some nuyen."

"Who?" `Wraith asked, ignoring her joking tone.

She consulted something offscreen. "Says here the number belongs to a guy named Carl Mortenson. It's his office number—he works for a place called APS—Advanced Protection Systems. They're a mid-size corp in Bellevue that makes custom cyberware and that sort of

thing. He's a security manager." A picture flashed on the screen: a black human male of about 45 years old with slightly graying temples.

The runners pondered that. As they glanced around at each other, it quickly became apparent that none of them had ever seen nor heard of Carl Mortenson or Advanced Protection Systems. "Did you find any reason why he might be hiring people to kill us?" Winterhawk asked.

"Didn't get anything else," T. C. said. "Want me to do some more digging?"

Wraith looked around at the group as he said, "Not yet. Get back to you. How much?"

She shrugged. "Easy stuff. Say two hundred?"

Wraith took care of the fund transfer and ended the conversation after asking T. C. to stay available if they needed her in the next day or so.

Ocelot leaned back and sighed. "Okay, now we got a name, lot of good it does us. Who the hell is Carl Mortenson, and what's he want with us?"

"I think we ought to find out," Joe said. "Let's set up a meet with him."

"How are we gonna do that?" Ocelot asked.

"We can pretend to be somebody else," the troll said. "Somebody who needs to talk to him for something."

Wraith nodded. "T. C. can do it. False appointment."

"Yes, somewhere where he won't be on his own territory," Winterhawk put in. "We'll question him and get to the bottom of this."

"What about Jenner and Magnum?" Ocelot reminded them.

Winterhawk shrugged. "What about them?"

"Maybe he had them killed to keep them from talking to us."

"So?" Joe asked.

"So I'd like to hear about what happened to them before we do this," Ocelot said. "This whole thing is still makin' me damned nervous."

"I don't think you're the only one, my friend," Winterhawk said. "But Harry's doctor should have those autopsy results fairly soon – perhaps we should set up the meet with Mr. Mortenson, and if something amiss turns up, we can always choose not to show."

Ocelot shoved at the uneaten remains of his dinner with his fork and sighed. "Yeah, I guess that sounds okay. If nothing else, maybe it'll feel good to beat the truth out of this Mortenson asshole. I want to know why he's hirin' people to kill us."

Over coffee, they made their plans. Then, once back in the truck, they called T. C. and asked her to plant an item in Mortenson's calendar that he was to meet them at Denny Park tomorrow night at 18:00. The meeting was ostensibly with a freelance security consultant to discuss some new (and, as gently implied by the calendar item, illegal) surveillance technology. She was also to set up a fake LTG number for the consultant, and route any calls that came to that number back to the team.

Their trap laid, the runners decided to take the night off and reconvene in the morning. They felt better than they had in quite some time, and thought that they were finally closing in on the odd goings-on that had been plaguing them.

At least the belief helped them to sleep better.

22.

Winterhawk called the team together the next day with the message that he had gotten the autopsy report back from Harry. When everyone arrived at his apartment, he gave them the news.

"They didn't find anything that caused the deaths of those two men," he said. "Obviously the cause of death was massive hemorrhage, but there was no indication of stroke, head trauma of any kind, magical intervention, poison, or disease. Also no sign of a cortex bomb, which was something we didn't even think of. According to the doctor, it was as if the blood vessels in their heads just spontaneously burst. The only thing she found was some swelling in the brains of both." He shrugged. "I don't think we're going to get anywhere with this one, gentlemen."

"But they're sure it's nothing contagious?" Joe asked.

"Quite sure," Winterhawk said. "And furthermore, there was no sign of trauma or injury to any other part of their bodies."

"Heads don't just *do* that," Ocelot pointed out. "*Something* must have caused it."

Again, the mage shrugged. "The doctor said she would continue searching for the answer, but she didn't sound confident that she would find it any time soon. P'raps when we meet with Mr. Mortenson tonight, he can shed some light on the matter."

They agreed to meet back at Winterhawk's place at 17:00 that evening, from which they could head over to Denny Park. Ocelot, still feeling more than a little spooked about the whole thing, spent the afternoon with Kestrel, although he didn't tell her about the latest developments. She seemed to have calmed down from the scare she'd had at the Purple Haze, and he didn't want to get her

upset again. Besides, it was looking more and more like whatever this was, it was something that involved the team. If Kestrel was involved at all, it was likely just tangentially.

It turned out that his preoccupation with team business was fine with her anyway; when he commented that she seemed distracted, she told him that Gabriel was still trying to get his own new team straightened out; since she was in charge of procuring weapons and other supplies for them, not to mention being on call should they need anything, she had been quite busy. She expected that wasn't going to change for awhile. Besides, she said, it was better if they didn't see each other every day—that made the times when they *did* get together more enjoyable. Ocelot, who despite his feelings for Kestrel wasn't about to get into a relationship where either partner was stifling the other, was fine with this arrangement. She had seen him off with a kiss and a promise to call him as soon as things quieted down a bit, which should be in the next day or two.

The team arrived early at Denny Park so they could check it out before Mortenson got there. It was getting dark already, making it easy for `Wraith and Ocelot to use their stealth skills to take a quick circuit around the area and determine that no one was paying too much attention to the meet site. Winterhawk, meanwhile, checked things out on the astral plane, while Joe, posing as a park-goer, surreptitiously ran his bug scanner over the immediate meet site and found nothing of note.

The various team members took up their positions at around 17:45: Ocelot climbed a nearby tree and secreted himself in the upper branches, while `Wraith hid some distance away. Winterhawk and Joe remained in the truck, which was just out of sight of the place where the meet was set, but where the scene could be viewed using

Joe's tiny camera and Winterhawk's clairvoyance spell. It was agreed that the mage would initiate the meet again, posing as the security consultant. Once he managed to lure Mortenson back to the truck on the pretense of showing him the new gear, they would grab him and take him away for questioning.

They thought the plan had a reasonable chance of success; the only thing they were concerned about was what to do if Mortenson got suspicious and brought his own security people with him. They wanted to *talk* to the man, not kill him. At least not at first. A firefight in the park was not something they wanted to deal with. Finally they decided to just wait and see what happened, as they were reasonably sure that they could deal with most eventualities adequately.

They needn't have worried. At a couple of minutes before 18:00, `Wraith's quiet voice came over the commlink: "I see him. West."

Ocelot spoke next: "Got him. Looks like he's alone."

Winterhawk switched to astral perception as Joe realigned his camera; neither of them picked up any invisible or otherwise magically hidden people around Mortenson. He appeared to be walking briskly, looking like a man who was completely comfortable with his surroundings. His aura was calm and unworried. Dressed in a dark blue suit and tan trenchcoat, he carried an umbrella and a slim briefcase. Just a guy walking in the park.

"Wait `till he sits down," Ocelot said. There was a bench at the meet site; Mortenson was supposed to proceed to it, sit down, and wait for the consultant to show up.

"Right," Winterhawk said, his hand on the door handle.

Under the unseen scrutiny of the four runners, Carl Mortenson headed directly to the specified location. He looked around and, apparently satisfied, sat down on the bench, putting his briefcase and umbrella down next to him. Hands in his lap, he bowed his head forward a bit as if examining something in them.

Winterhawk opened the truck door. "All right—I'm going." As he exited the vehicle, his mask spell covered him over with the illusion that he was a slim Asian man of medium height, wearing jeans and a leather jacket. Casually, he headed over toward where Mortenson was sitting.

"He hasn't moved," Ocelot reported over the link. "Just sitting there waiting for you."

"Good," Winterhawk said under his breath. "That means he's not suspicious. All the better." Conscious of the three sets of eyes on him (four, if you counted Mortenson's), Hawk casually headed over to the bench. Still Mortenson didn't move.

He had to get fairly close before he began to suspect that something was wrong. "Odd..." he subvocalized.

"What?" Ocelot's voice, a bit sharp, came quickly back to him.

"He's not moving at all." Louder, he slipped into his UCAS accent: "Mr. Mortenson?"

Mortenson remained in the same position.

"I've a bad feeling about this," Winterhawk muttered under his breath. Moving in a little closer with great caution, he switched his cybereyes to thermographic vision.

Mortenson's body glowed, but more faintly than it should.

"Gentlemen..." Hawk said softly, "I think our man is dead."

"What?" Ocelot demanded.

"Check for observers," `Wraith cut in.

"I don't see anything," Joe said after a moment.

"Me neither," Ocelot said. "How can he be *dead*? He just sat down less than five minutes ago!" His voice was taking on an edge of fear.

"Nothing here," `Wraith reported. "'Hawk?"

Winterhawk spoke in a distracted tone. "What? Oh—no. No observers I can see. I'm going to take a look here. Keep an eye on this area, will you?" Without waiting for an answer, he took a seat at the other end of the bench and shifted to the astral plane.

Carl Mortenson was indeed dead. Quite irrevocably so, in fact. His lifeforce had faded to the faintest of flickers, and as Winterhawk watched, it winked out. His aura, glowing strongly only a few minutes before, was nothing but the cold dark husk of a dead thing. As before, there was no indication of magical traces around the body. He spent only a few seconds examining the area, since he didn't like to leave his body unprotected in what could possibly be an ambush situation.

When he came back, voices were speaking in his comm unit. "'Hawk?" It was Ocelot, followed by `Wraith, both calling to him.

"Yes—here. What is it?"

"Get outta there," Ocelot said. "You're a sitting duck out there if anybody's watching."

Reluctantly, Winterhawk nodded. He stood and started to move away, then stopped. "Shall I grab the briefcase?"

"No, don't." Joe spoke up for the first time. "It might have a bomb in it."

"He's got a point," Ocelot said. "Get outta there."

The mage looked at the body and the briefcase. "Oh, bugger," he said to himself. But he knew his friends were

right, and in any case he wasn't the one who should be dealing with delicate demolitions-type work.

"Go," `Wraith urged.

Winterhawk hurried away from Mortenson's body, half expecting it or the briefcase to blow up before he'd gotten a few meters away. He was a bit surprised when neither did. When all four team members had made it safely to cover near the truck without anything happening to the body, he was even more surprised.

"What the hell was *that*?" Ocelot demanded, hooking his thumb back toward the scene.

Nobody answered. For a moment, they just stood there, hidden, and watched the body. Since it was almost fully dark now, there didn't appear to be anyone else in the park. The citizens who used it during the day had all left, and the gangs and chip dealers who took over it by night hadn't arrived yet. "I wish we could get that case," Winterhawk said. "I'm reluctant to — wait a moment!" He turned to Joe. "If I brought it in, could you scan it?"

"Yeah, but —"

The mage turned back to the scene. As he concentrated, the case rose up and floated, about half a meter above the ground, to a spot about three meters away from where the team hid.

Joe, as soon as he realized what Winterhawk was doing, had gone to the truck to get his chemsniffer. Now, waving the others back, he carefully approached it and waved the device over it. After a moment he shook his head. "Looks okay." Picking it up, he brought it over and climbed into the truck. The others got in as well.

`Wraith set the truck's autopilot to drive in a large circle around Downtown, and turned to face his teammates. "Now what?"

Ocelot shook his head. "This is gettin' weirder and weirder, and I'm getting nervouser and nervouser. First

we get a line on a couple of two-bit thugs who got hired to try to kill us, and when we catch `em, they die. Now, following a lead we got from them, we set up a meet with this guy and *he* dies. `Hawk, was he bleeding like the others?"

Winterhawk had retrieved the briefcase and was rifling through it. He looked up as Ocelot addressed him. "No. No blood at all. He looked quite peaceful, in fact. And obviously he hadn't been dead for long." Pulling out the items in the briefcase one by one, he handed them around: several papers, today's datafax, and a wallet.

The four runners were silent for several minutes as they perused the items. The datafax was nothing unusual. The wallet contained two hundred and ten nuyen in corporate scrip, a driver's license, a season ticket to the Mariners' home games, a dry-cleaning slip, and several holopics of a pretty young woman and three grinning children. The papers were product specifications for various pieces of cyberware, the dates of which showed that most of them had already been released. One one of the papers was scrawled, "*Denny Park, 18:00. Sec. consult.*"

Joe shook his head, handing the wallet back to Winterhawk. "This is making less and less sense as it goes on."

Ocelot nodded. For awhile, it looked like it was all going to come together: first they were going to question the thugs (and likely rough them up for having the audacity to try to blow up the team); then they were going to use the information they got from the thugs to move up the food chain until they found out who hired them and why. But now they had two mysteriously dead thugs, one mysteriously dead Mr. Johnson, and no apparent leads.

No, they did have *one* lead. "I think we need to talk to Harry or T.C. and have them check out this Advanced Protection Systems place," he said. "If this guy hired

Jenner and Magnum, then somebody there's gotta know what's going on and why they want us dead."

"Maybe he was acting on his own," Joe said.

`Wraith shook his head. "No. Not head of security."

"True," Winterhawk agreed. "He'd need to have had authority from someone before setting up a hit like that."

"All we need to do, then, is figure out who gave `em the authority," Ocelot said.

"Yeah, and get to them before somebody bumps *them* off too," Joe added. He didn't sound like he thought that was going to be an easy thing to accomplish.

23.

The team decided to try Harry first for the information they wanted before going to T. C. They met with the fixer in person the next day and gave him all the data they had: the story of the meet with Jenner and Magnum, the aborted meet with Mortenson, and Mortenson's affiliation with APS. They also handed over the briefcase and its contents, although they didn't think they were going to be helpful in the investigation and neither did Harry.

"Sheesh," he said, shaking his head in disbelief when they had finished their story. "You guys got a live one this time. I'll see what I can do."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. He was leaning back in his chair, precariously but precisely balanced on its back two legs. "That island in Tahiti is lookin' better by the day."

Harry promised to get back to them with any information that he found, and they agreed to meet back at the Glass Spider rather than allowing Harry to choose the place and taking a risk on another impersonator. When the meeting was complete, the runners parted company after promising to get in touch quickly should anything odd or unexpected occur.

Ocelot decided to try giving Kestrel a call to see if she was free for lunch. It happened that she was, so they met at a small casual seafood restaurant on the outer fringes of Downtown. "So," she said as she sat down. "How have things been? I've missed you the past couple of days." She was back in her black leather jacket and jeans, but the effect was softened a bit by a blue silk blouse under the jacket. "Any more leads on the weird stuff?"

He shook his head. "No, not really." He had decided that he still wasn't going to tell her any more about the things the team had discovered, because he was not yet

convinced that they had anything to do with the strange hallucinations. "How are things with you? Got your new team straightened out yet?"

She smiled fondly, amusement evident in her eyes. "They're getting there. They're a good group—just so *new* at this. I can't ever remember being that new, it was so long ago."

"Yeah—you're an old lady, right?" Ocelot grinned.

"Sometimes I feel like I am," she said, grinning back. "But no, I think they'll do fine, once they file off their rough edges and get used to working with each other. Gabriel has a lot of confidence in them. He says he's expecting great things."

"You two settling into the fixer business?" Ocelot was determined that he wasn't going to yield to the irrational twinge of jealousy he felt every time Kestrel mentioned Gabriel's name.

Kestrel nodded. "Getting there. For me, it's a lot different than being a runner. But we're turning out to be a pretty good team. I've got the experience as a runner, and Gabriel has some incredible contacts. I was never much on dealing with people—just never felt comfortable with it, you know? So I take care of finding them weapons and supplies and vehicles and that kind of thing, and Gabriel takes care of setting up the runs and dealing with the Johnsons."

"Are you lookin' for any more teams, or just sticking with the one for now?"

Again, she grinned. "Are you volunteering?"

"Nah. I think I'll put up with Harry for awhile longer." He couldn't help but return her smile. It was infectious. "He ain't much to look at, but he gets us the big nuyen."

"Well, that's what's important, isn't it?" Kestrel paused to sample her seafood plate and take a sip of beer, looking around at the restaurant's midday crowd. "But to answer

your question, no, he's not looking for any other teams right now. Maybe later on, when this one gets used to each other."

"He said they were same as us—cats that need herding." The image amused Ocelot, especially since it was such an accurate one. He sometimes wondered how his own team of eccentric individuals managed to not only stay together, but excel at what they did for all these years. Between his own short temper, `Wraith's moodiness, Winterhawk's sarcasm, and Joe's lack of tact, the team sometimes got seriously on each other's nerves. Despite that, though, they always managed to get it together and get the job done when it was necessary. In that respect, they were somewhat similar to a bickering family, who drove each other crazy but maintained a unified front when facing the rest of the world.

"Yeah, they are kind of an unlikely bunch. We've got a sam who's an ex-military type: he has no sense of humor and as near as I can tell he's scared to death of women." She smiled. "And an elf rigger—he seems the most normal of the bunch. Then there's the snake shaman adept who looks like an elf...good shaman, but no social skills whatsoever. We also have a dwarf: he's ex-military too, with a mouth about three meters bigger than he is."

Ocelot smiled. "Sounds like an interesting bunch."

She nodded. "They are. I like them a lot. They've all got good hearts—that's what Gabriel was looking for, primarily." Her grin got a little wider. "A hardened, cynical bunch like you and your team wouldn't be what he's after."

"Good hearts are great, but they can get you killed," Ocelot said seriously. "Especially if you're too trusting along with `em."

"I wouldn't worry about them," Kestrel said. "I think they're going to be fine."

They finished lunch while talking about various neutral topics. When they were done, Ocelot followed Kestrel out to her green Westwind. "No more weird driving maneuvers, I'm glad to report," she said, smiling.

"Glad to hear it," Ocelot replied, and he meant it. He was happy to see that she seemed to be back to normal again. "Mind if I come by tonight?"

"Wish you would. I should be busy until this evening, but I'll be home."

He kissed her, and she lowered herself down into the small car and drove off with a jaunty wave. He watched the car until it disappeared around a corner and then headed off to where he'd left his bike. In spite of all the things that had been happening lately, he felt pretty good about life in general at that moment.

Harry didn't call back until early that evening, but once he did it didn't take very long to get everyone convened in the back room of the Spider.

"You guys are runnin' up quite a tab," Harry said as he settled himself in his customary chair. "Information don't come free, ya know."

"Keep a list," Wraith said.

"Oh, I am." Harry grinned. "Maybe ya better look at it one o' these days before ya find yerselves in fer a rude awakenin'."

"What did you find out, Harry?" Winterhawk asked with some impatience. "You *have* found something, I trust?"

"Yeah, I found somethin'. You guys'll either love this or hate it, I'm not sure which." He pulled out his pocket secretary and consulted it. Shifting his cigar to the far side of his mouth, he said, "Remember yer last job?"

Everyone stared at him for a moment. Joe spoke first, after a pause. "Sure. The one with the blood sample."

"Gold star fer the guy with the big teeth," Harry said. "Any idea who that blood sample belonged to?"

"Of course not," Winterhawk said. "We didn't want to know even if we could. Safer that way, y'know."

Harry nodded. "Normally I'd agree with ya. But this time ya might want to know."

"Who?" Ocelot asked, still not sure he wanted to hear the answer.

The fixer was savoring the moment. "I did a little snoopin' around, and found out the sample belongs to a gent name o' Torval Blake."

The runners looked at each other in confusion. "Never heard of him," Ocelot finally said. "How `bout you guys?"

The others shook their heads.

"So who's Torval Blake?" Ocelot asked, turning back to Harry.

Harry tucked the pocket secretary away in his jacket. "He's the CEO of a company called Advanced Protection Systems."

To the runners' credit, it only took them about two seconds to make the connection. "That's where Mortenson worked," Winterhawk said, even though he could see from the look on his teammates' faces that they had all come to the same conclusion.

"Right on," Harry agreed. "I ain't got anything else, but I figured you guys could do somethin' with that." He stood up. "Now, if you guys'll excuse me, I got some other biz to take care of."

The runners remained seated as the door closed behind the retreating fixer. They stared at each other. "Let me get this straight," Ocelot said slowly. "Somebody hires us to grab a blood sample from a medical lab. The blood sample turns out to belong to the CEO of another company."

"Or perhaps the same one," Winterhawk pointed out. "We don't know who hired us in the first place, remember."

"True," Ocelot admitted. "Okay, so it belongs to the CEO of *some* company. More than a week after this happens, the security chief of the CEO's company hires Jenner and Magnum to take out the runner team who grabbed the sample."

"Odd," Wraith said.

"Why?"

"Amateurs. Fools. Why not professionals?"

Winterhawk nodded. "Those two poor sods struck me as not consistently being able to put their shoes on the correct feet, let alone carry out a hit against a team of our not insignificant reputation."

"Maybe they were low on money," Joe suggested.

"Possible," Wraith said.

Ocelot dropped his chair back down on all four legs. "Or maybe Mortenson *was* acting on his own. You know, without authorization."

"P'raps wangling for a promotion." Winterhawk nodded. "If he was using his own funds, then he would be by necessity limited in the level of talent he could procure."

"But how do you get a promotion by bumping off the guys who grabbed the sample?" Joe asked. "Wouldn't it make more sense to hire somebody to get it back?"

"Maybe they don't know who had it taken in the first place," Ocelot said.

Joe nodded. "Or maybe they think we still have it. That doesn't make much sense, though. Why would we hold on to it for this long? They probably wanted it for some kind of ritual, right?" He addressed this last question toward Winterhawk.

"Don't know," the mage said, shrugging. "It certainly makes sense. But then, it's always possible that there was something amiss with Mr. Blake's blood sample; something that another company – or someone else in his own company – wanted in their possession."

"Blackmail, you mean?" Ocelot asked. "Yeah, that could be true too. Maybe the sample proved that he had some kind of disease or something."

"Ritual?" `Wraith asked, looking at Winterhawk with a raised eyebrow. "Already done? Preservation?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Not necessarily. There are spells that can preserve ritual samples for quite some time—especially those given voluntarily. I'm not sure a blood test would qualify as quite so `voluntary' as consent to a ritual, but it certainly applies better than blood taken by force. So the short answer is: it's quite possible that the ritual has already occurred, and it's also possible that it hasn't. Assuming, of course, that a ritual is what they had in mind at all."

"So our answers are givin' us nothin' but more questions," Ocelot said disgustedly. "I don't know about you guys, but I'm gettin' sick of this whole thing. Somebody's jerkin' us around, and I'm gettin' fuckin' tired of it." His voice rose with his anger. "I say we go find this Blake asshole and beat the shit out of him. Nobody screws with us like this."

"Calm down," Winterhawk said, his tone soothing but his eyes serious. "Remember, that may be exactly what they want us to do. And as yet we've no proof that Blake is behind this. We don't want to tip our hand just yet, especially if they aren't aware that we know of Mr. Mortenson's affiliations."

"Yes," `Wraith said. "Not yet. Plans first."

Ocelot sighed loudly, getting up so fast that he knocked his chair over. "I gotta get the hell outta here for

awhile," he said. "If it can wait, then it can wait `til tomorrow. I'm just sick of sittin' around here talking about it. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Joe watched him go. "Maybe he's right," he said. "Wouldn't hurt to get away from this for a night."

"I suppose not," Winterhawk said. He didn't sound pleased about it, though.

ShadoWraith raised the wrist on which he wore his phone. "T.C. Need info."

"Wouldn't hurt to get someone working on it," `Hawk said. "Other than that, though, I think Ocelot and Joe might be right. We could all use a night off from this."

`Wraith didn't answer that. "I'll make the call," he said.

The three runners parted company at the door of the Glass Spider, each of them half-convinced that they were going to experience another version of the strange hallucinations, or else be plagued by another team (perhaps a better one this time) hired to kill them.

Winterhawk was quite surprised to discover that he actually had a pleasant evening. Trying to take his friends' advice, he put the entire matter behind him and called a young woman he had met a few weeks ago at one of the upscale mage bars he occasionally frequented. They had an enjoyable time over dinner at a fine restaurant and then caught a lighthearted play; by the time he arrived home in the wee hours of the morning, Winterhawk had almost managed to forget about all the events in which the team was currently embroiled.

He got almost four hours' sleep before being awakened by `Wraith's call, delivering the latest news in a clipped, two-word sentence:

"Blake's dead."

24.

The news, though not entirely unexpected, still came as a shock. The runners gathered at Winterhawk's apartment in various states: `Wraith looked like he had not slept at all, Winterhawk wasn't much better, and Ocelot had the characteristic bleary unshaven look that suggested that he might have had more than his usual few beers the previous night. Only Joe looked relatively well rested.

"All right," Winterhawk said as `Wraith sat down. "Let's have the rest of this."

`Wraith pulled his cyberdeck from its protective bag and placed it on the table in front of him. Without a datajack, the things he could do on his own in the Matrix were limited, but his skills, tutored by T.C., had been improving to the point where he was more than up to the task of obtaining the sorts of information that were only lightly guarded. Fingers flying, he punched some instructions into the deck and then turned its screen around so his teammates could see it.

Appearing on the screen was an article pulled from the *Seattle Business Daily*, a datafax concerned primarily with corporate affairs. The article was timestamped less than four hours ago.

APS' Blake Dies

SEATTLE: Torval R. Blake, 53, CEO of Advanced Protection Systems, died suddenly tonight in his home in northern Bellevue. No details regarding Blake's death are available at this time. Blake is survived by his ex-wife, Whitney Gardier, and two children. Funeral services are pending.

"Shit..." Ocelot muttered.

"Died suddenly, huh?" Joe said, leaning forward to get a better look. "Suppose the same thing happened to him that happened to Mortenson?"

"Sure sounds that way," Ocelot said. "*No details* my ass. They don't know what's going on any more than we do."

"Or they're not telling," Winterhawk added. He lounged back on the sofa, putting his feet up on the coffee table at the opposite end from `Wraith's deck. "Either way, it would probably be worth our time to look into this a bit further."

"T. C. might be able to find out some more," Joe said.

"Or Harry," Ocelot added.

ShadoWraith was tapping into his deck again. "What are you doing now?" Winterhawk asked, craning his neck to see the screen.

"Setting retrieval," the elf said, still tapping. "Blake. APS. Mortenson. Jenner and Magnum."

It was one of the things that he, as a "turtle," could do almost as effectively as a true decker: setting his deck to go out and search the Matrix for any documents or other items that made mention of the subjects in question. As long as they weren't encrypted or otherwise protected, `Wraith's deck could find them. Slow, but reliable.

"Let's call Harry first," Ocelot said. "Maybe he's already heard, since he was just talking to us about Blake last night." He looked at Winterhawk questioningly.

`Hawk was already dialing. "He's not going to be happy to hear from us this early," he commented.

"He'll survive," Ocelot replied sourly.

Surprisingly enough, Harry appeared to be awake and without company. Previous experience had told the runners that before noon, he almost never answered his phone, and when he did, he was in a foul mood from

being awakened far ahead of his normal schedule. Today, though, he picked it up on the second beep. When he saw Winterhawk's face on the vid, he said, "Kinda thought you guys might call."

"Why is that?" Winterhawk asked carefully.

"Hear about Blake?"

The mage looked around the room at the rest of the team. "We were just discussing it," he said. "We were rather hoping you might have a bit more information than 'died suddenly, no details.'"

Harry grinned. "Ye of little faith. Of course I got more information. My guys have been on it for hours. Just waitin' for you to call. Didn't want to interrupt yer beauty sleep. Really should do somethin' about those circles under yer eyes, 'Hawk."

"Harry, just tell us, all right? We're in no mood for games right now." From the expressions on the others' faces, Winterhawk was quite certain that they felt the same way.

"Okay, okay. Sheesh. You guys are no fun anymore. Anyway, seems that our friend Torval went up like a big flaming torch last night. From reports from a couple people who saw his house, looks like it happened in his study. Word on the street is that somebody got him with a pretty nasty ritual sending. Wasn't enough left of him to sweep up and put in a baggie."

The runners exchanged glances as it dawned on them what must have occurred. "So that's what the blood sample was for," Winterhawk said to nobody in particular. "Now everything makes a bit more sense." He looked back at Harry. "Have you got anything else? Such as who might have been responsible for the sending?"

"Still workin' on that. They were pretty professional about the whole thing, whoever they were. And they waited long enough after that sample got grabbed—I

think people were gettin' lazy. I'll keep checkin', though, if ya want to know."

"Why wouldn't we want to know?" Ocelot asked from across the room.

Harry shrugged. "Doesn't seem to make any difference now, the way I see it. I'll lay odds nobody's gonna be after you now. The security guy's dead and the target's been snuffed. Bad for the bottom line to kill the messengers at this point, right? Besides, with their CEO gone, I think APS is gonna have more on their minds than cacking a runner team, don't you?"

"True," Winterhawk admitted. "But we still don't know who killed Mortenson."

"I'll let ya know if I find anything else," Harry said. "For now, though, that's all I got."

Winterhawk nodded. "Thank you, Harry. You're being most helpful."

"For a change," Ocelot piped up.

"You guys ain't seen what all this is gonna cost ya." Harry hung up before anyone could respond.

Everyone was silent for a few seconds after the connection went dead. Ocelot was the first to speak. "So— you think that's it? Is it over?"

"Unknown," Wraith said. He'd finished with his deck and carefully packed it away in his bag.

"I certainly hope so," Winterhawk said. "It would not disturb me in the slightest if the death of the unfortunate Mr. Blake brought an end to this whole unpleasantness."

Joe was shaking his head. "I'm just not sure it's over yet. We still don't know what caused all those weird illusions."

"Maybe we never will," Ocelot said. "I don't like it, but if it means this is over, I can live with it."

Winterhawk didn't answer. He noticed that ShadoWraith didn't either.

25.

High above the city, the underling appeared tentatively in the doorway. He fixed his eyes on the obsidian desk, avoiding the gaze of the man behind it. "Sir?"

The dark figure looked up. He had not been expecting his underling at this time, and had been a bit surprised when he had called, saying that he had information. "Yes?" His tone was cold and clipped, clearly indicating that the interruption was tolerated but not welcome.

"Sir, I'm afraid I have bad news for you." The man, who had been so confident before, now looked as if he was barely suppressing the impulse to quiver in his shoes.

"Do you?" With a curt head gesture, the boss motioned the man forward. "Don't stand there, then. Come forward and tell me."

Slowly, the man crossed the office until he stood before the big desk. Behind it, the boss stood straight and tall, his arms crossed imperiously over his chest. "Blake – Blake is dead, sir."

The dark figure's eyes narrowed dangerously. "What?"

"He's dead, sir. There was a sending. Last night. He's been incinerated."

For a moment, the man behind the desk did not move. Then, very slowly, his posture grew rigid, his muscles clamped so tightly that they began to shake. His features, which had up until now worn an expression of mild annoyance, took on an attitude of barely controlled rage. When he spoke, it was through clenched teeth. "No. It was not to happen yet! I was not yet finished with him."

"Sir, is there anything –"

The dark figure's gaze snapped up as he once again became aware that he was not alone in the room. With a gesture that was cat-quick but almost negligently casual, he brought a hand up and directed it at the underling.

The man didn't even have time to scream as his body was consumed from the inside out in the space of less than a second. Where there once stood a nervous-looking middle aged man in a suit, there now existed only a faint burn mark on the fine marble floor and a faint odor of charred flesh. With another offhand gesture, even that evidence disappeared.

The dark figure moved out from around the desk, his posture somewhat less casual than before. This was not a positive development. Blake was not supposed to die yet. Those incompetents had held on to the ritual sample this long; why couldn't they have waited a few more days before making their move? He cursed himself for allowing any aspect of his plan to remain in the hands of incompetents. Most of them weren't capable of managing their day-to-day affairs without getting into difficulty – how could he possibly have trusted them with something of this level of importance?

Something would have to be done. There was no question about it. This new event had changed his plans a bit, but he was nothing if not adaptable. He had no doubt that he would be able to bring this around to his advantage with a minimum of effort; it was simply the frustration of having to do so that enraged him.

He continued pacing around the vast office, considering and discarding alternatives. He already knew what he wanted to do, but as always he would examine other options to verify that his choice was that which would benefit his plan in the most effective way.

Soon it would be over. The endgame was drawing close now. He smiled to himself coldly as he allowed himself to imagine the sweet taste of victory.

But that was still to come. For now, he had plans to make. This time, he would not trust them to underlings.

It was time for him to go to Seattle.

26.

Ocelot, for one, was glad that this whole thing was probably over. He didn't like this nebulous "almost on a run" feeling he'd had ever since the night the hallucinations occurred. Normally when the team was on a run, they devoted all their energies to it, using all their resources to accomplish whatever objective they'd been hired to accomplish. This time, though, there *wasn't* an objective. The circumstances were forcing the runners to be reactive rather than proactive, and there were few things Ocelot liked less than being reactive. The feeling of waiting around for something to happen—especially when it was probably something dangerous—not only made him nervous, but tended to exacerbate his short temper and his minimal sense of patience.

Fortunately, however, Kestrel's work-related activities seemed to have slowed down a bit, meaning that she was more than willing to spend the day with him when he called her after leaving Winterhawk's apartment. She suggested that they take a drive; it was a rare sunny day, and she knew some nice places outside Seattle where they could get away from the Sprawl for awhile.

She showed up in her Westwind, dressed in her ubiquitous jeans and leather jacket along with a Shadows T-shirt, hiking boots, and a Seahawks baseball cap tilted rakishly off to one side. Grinning, she motioned for him to hop in, and then peeled off at a high rate of speed. Ocelot leaned back in his seat with a smile, feeling relaxed. Although he had spent the previous night with her, he had not felt nearly so unworried. He'd spent more time drinking than relaxing; to her credit, she had not asked any questions. That was another thing he liked about her: she knew when to let something alone. Today was

different, though. He'd even left his wristphone at home. Whatever came up, it could wait a few hours.

"Aren't you even going to ask me where we're going?" Kestrel asked teasingly.

"I don't care," he said. His eyes were closed, his hands clasped up behind his head. "Wherever it is, I'll like it."

She chuckled. "My, you're trusting today. I like that." She flipped on the radio and tuned it to a bluesy elven-rock station, then settled back to drive.

Ocelot eventually opened his eyes and watched the scenery go by, noting that they were heading north, out of Tacoma and up through Seattle into the western Snohomish area. The view gradually changed from plascrete and buildings to rolling farmland, meadows, and forest. Eventually they turned off the road and on to a much less maintained one; a tiny sign marked it as Shadow Lake Nature Preserve. "Never even knew this was here," Ocelot said, "and I've lived in Seattle all my life."

"I used to like to come here, back when I was in town before," she said, a note of wistfulness in her voice. "When I wanted to get away from everything."

They continued up the road, which continued to be badly maintained but didn't get any worse, until they reached a tiny parking area with room for no more than about ten vehicles. It was currently empty. Kestrel parked the Westwind and got out. It was cool but not cold out, with just a hint of wind.

Ocelot got out and stood for a moment, savoring the smell of clean air and the sun on his body. "You're right – this is a good place to get away."

Kestrel chuckled as she opened the trunk. "Silly, this is only the parking lot. There's a bit of a hike before we get to the lake itself." Pulling out an oversized daypack, she slung it over her shoulder and closed the trunk.

"We're not backpacking or anything, are we?" Ocelot asked. A city boy, he always felt a bit edgy out in the wilderness. A nice afternoon was one thing; camping was something else.

Again she laughed. "You *are* silly." She indicated the backpack. "This is lunch. Sorry, but I couldn't find a picnic basket."

"You cook?" he asked, grinning mischievously as he caught up with her. "I never would have guessed."

"Sorry to disappoint you—it's takeout from the deli. But I *did* bring a nice bottle of wine. And even one of those red-and-white checked cloths. All very traditional, you know. Now come on—the sooner we get up there, the sooner we can eat—or whatever," she added, glancing back over her shoulder at him.

He got going.

They spent several hours at the preserve, hiking around and enjoying its natural beauty. Kestrel took Ocelot to a meadow near the small lake, where they had lunch followed by more hiking. They climbed trees, scaled hills, and leaped lithely from stone to stone across little creeks, staging contests to see who could do it without falling in. Ocelot marveled at Kestrel's dexterity and strength: she was almost as strong as he was, and moved with even more grace. He had not worked with any female runners for any length of time in his career, so with the exception of his old teacher, he had never had a chance to be involved with a woman who was his physical equal. It felt good.

He said as much as they lounged around a sunlit meadow they had found toward the end of the afternoon. She was stretched out in the grass, using her jacket as a pillow; he was draped over a thick, nearly horizontal tree limb like the cat that was his namesake. "This is great," he

said, and meant it. "I never thought I'd meet a woman who could keep up with me."

"Aren't *you* conceited?" she asked, smiling up at him. She picked up a small rock from nearby and tossed it languidly at him.

His hand snapped up and he caught it with no effort. "No, I'm serious. Hawk used to tease me because I never went out with anybody. When I was looking for that kind of thing, I always just – well –"

"Hired somebody for the night?" she suggested, looking like that didn't perturb her.

He nodded, brushing his long hair out of his eyes. She'd pulled off the band he used to keep it in a ponytail long ago, and it now hung down loose around his face. "Yeah. I could never really explain it to him, though. He teases me about not being able to get a date, but that isn't it."

She shrugged. "Maybe you just didn't find a woman you had anything in common with before now. That happens."

"That's part of it," he said. He fluidly rolled over on his back, hanging one leg off the edge of the branch. "That's not the whole thing, though."

"What is, then?"

He hesitated. He'd never told anyone this before, so it wasn't easy for him to put it into words. "I guess I've always been – scared."

"Of what?" she asked gently, sitting up a little. She smiled. "You sure don't seem to be afraid of women."

"No. I don't know – commitment, maybe. I guess I was never cut out for the wife and kids and the house with the picket fence, you know?" He fidgeted uncomfortably as he spoke, and didn't look at her.

Kestrel nodded. "I understand that. Hell, I'm not either. That's part of why I bailed on my family

responsibilities—because I saw my life going just that way. Except that on top of having the family and the nice house and all that other drek, I was supposed to run the family business too. I just couldn't stand the thought of being that tied up at such a young age."

He sighed, not answering for a long time. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and full of uncertainty. "Have you ever—gone out with anybody who wasn't a runner? I mean, after you became one."

She thought about that for a moment. "I haven't really been out with that many guys, come to think of it. I've been sort of like you, except that I didn't hire guys to go out with me. There were plenty who'd do it for free." She smiled a bit. "I think if you're a woman it's easier to get dates, as long as you don't look like The Elephant Girl. But it was always a short-term thing for me. I don't think I ever saw anybody more than twice, except you." With a deep breath, she added, "I had a little thing going with Raptor for a month or two a few months after we left Seattle, but it didn't work out. It was just physical, like the rest. He realized it too." She looked up at him. "So I guess the short answer to your question is: no, not really."

"Any idea why not?"

Considering, she shook her head. "I never really thought about it, to be honest. There was always just something that held me back."

He gracefully jumped off the limb, landing on his feet, and started exploring the clearing. "I know exactly what you mean. I can't quite put my finger on it either."

She was silent for a moment. "Why don't you tell me why you enjoy us, and maybe it will give you an idea. Or maybe it'll give *me* one."

He came back over and sat down, obviously restless but just as obviously trying not to show it. "I'm not completely sure. I mean, it's all the usual things—I enjoy

being with you, I can talk to you about anything..." He grinned. "The sex is great..."

"Well, yes," she said, grinning back. "But I don't think that's it."

"No, you're right. It's not." He stared up through the tree branches at the sky for a long time. "I think the reason I like being with you is that I don't have to worry about you."

"What's that mean?" she asked.

He sighed. "When I started this business, I wasn't sure I was going to make it to thirty. I'm still not sure I will, though I'm starting to believe that maybe it's possible. But this stuff's dangerous. I'm okay with that. I've gotten used to having people trying to kill me. I don't like it, but I'm used to it. I've trained myself most of my life to be ready for stuff like that, and deal with it when it happens."

"Sure," she said. "I'm the same way. You have to be on your toes almost all the time or someone will get you. It goes with the territory."

"That's it," he agreed. "So having to be like that, I never really had time for anybody. I always rationalized it that if I started to like being with somebody, they'd then become a liability. For me *and* for them. Now all of a sudden I have this person to worry about, and she's not safe if she's around me. Especially if she doesn't know the score."

Kestrel nodded. "As soon as you start to care for someone, your enemies can use them as a lever to get to you."

"Yeah. It's different with you. I mean, I still worry about you—but it's not the same. You can take care of yourself. You're in the same business I am. I could just as easily be a liability for you as you could for me. And I don't have to worry that if somebody tries to jump you in an alley, that you've got no way to deal with it."

"No," she said with an evil smile, flicking out her hand razors with a *snick*. "You don't have to worry about that at all." Sheathing the razors, she leaned back. "I worry about you too, you know. But I know what you mean. I know I can't be sure of anything, but at least with you I can be fairly confident that if you go down, at least it'll be fighting. Nobody's going to run you down in an alley or kill you in your bed or anything."

"I *hope* not," he said, grinning. His expression immediately grew more serious as he nodded. "I think you hit it, though. I've been trying to figure out why I feel so relaxed around you, and I think that's it. It's kind of the same reason I feel relaxed around the team: I can watch their backs, and they can watch mine."

She chuckled. "Well, I hope it's not *quite* the same reason. And you were worried about *Gabriel*."

His grin returned. "You mean I never told you about the secret thing I have going with Joe? I meant to tell you that awhile ago."

"Hmm," she said, trying to look serious but unable to completely suppress a smile. She started to rise. "Maybe I ought to go back and talk to Gabriel after all. I mean, I like trolls just fine, but I just can't picture —"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her down on top of him. She was rolling him over and slipping his jacket down off his shoulders before they hit the ground.

It was another hour or so later when Kestrel dropped Ocelot off at his house in Tacoma. The hike, the discussion, and the lovemaking under the sky had left him feeling better than he had in weeks. He grinned at her as he got out of the car, still brushing twigs out of his hair. "Great picnic," he said teasingly through the open passenger window. "We'll have to do it again. Soon."

"You got it," she said. "But next time *you* get to cook. And next time we should bring a bigger groundcloth."

Without waiting for him to answer, she nimbly leaned over and kissed him, then stomped the gas pedal and peeled off, waving out the window as she went.

Ocelot wasn't thinking about much other than Kestrel when he entered the house, so he almost didn't see the message light flashing on his machine. Sighing, he flopped down in his chair and hit the button, wondering who was trying to bother him now. Couldn't it at least wait until tomorrow, whatever it was?

The voice was Winterhawk's and the timestamp was two hours ago. "Where are you? We've been trying to call you for quite some time now. `Wraith thinks he's found something. Come over to my place when you get back, will you?"

27.

"I don't suppose it would do me any good to ask where you've been all day," Winterhawk said without greeting as he opened the door. His expression was somewhere between amusement and exasperation. "And by the way, you've got grass in your hair."

"Bugger off," Ocelot growled, but there wasn't much conviction behind it.

`Wraith and Joe were sitting in the living room, the former on the couch with this deck on the table, the latter in the heavy chair. The remains of Chinese takeout were spread out over the table, most of it in front of Joe.

"So what have you found?" Ocelot asked, coming over and dropping into an empty chair.

"P'raps nothing," Winterhawk said. "But it's possible that it might be significant. We figured we'd best keep an eye on it just in case." He glanced at `Wraith.

The elf tapped something into the deck, then looked up at Ocelot. "Programmed deck to search. Relevant parameters."

"Yeah." Ocelot nodded. "I remember you did that before. APS, Mortenson, Blake, yada yada yada. So did something turn up?"

"Possibly." He turned the screen around. "Might not be connected. Appeared for APS search parameter."

Ocelot leaned down to look at the small screen. It was another news story, this time from the *Seattle Underground*, an alternative datafax.

Hoenberg, Nuance veep, dead

Mikhail Hoenberg, vice president of magical operations for Nuance Cybertech, died

unexpectedly in his office late this afternoon. He was 42. The Underground has so far been unable to obtain any details regarding Hoenberg's death, as Nuance is not issuing a statement at this time. Sources close to Hoenberg's office say that he was not known to be suffering from ill health. Foul play is not suspected, but has not been ruled out. The Underground will update this story as more details become available.

Hoenberg's death comes as a shock to the industry, especially following the recent death of Torval Blake, CEO of Advanced Protection Systems, one of Nuance's primary competitors.

When Ocelot finished reading, he regarded his teammates questioningly. "You think the two are related?"

"Don't know yet," Winterhawk said. "We've already got a call in to Harry, and he's checking into it for us. Possible that it's just a coincidence, but considering what's been happening lately, I wouldn't bet the family fortune on it."

"Not in the other datafaxes," Wraith said. "Only the *Underground*."

Ocelot paced. "That's weird. When Blake died, it was in the business rag. Since then I've seen it mentioned in a couple other places, and it was on the trid news last night."

"Maybe they're covering it up," Joe said around a mouthful of chow mein.

"Why would they do that?" Ocelot asked. "Only reason I can think of is that it happened under some kind of mysterious circumstances – either somebody offed him, or else he died in an unusual way. Either way, they might want to keep it out of the papers until they figure out what's going on."

"Possible," `Wraith said, tapping. "Looking for more information. Nothing yet."

"Remember, though," Winterhawk pointed out, "this might have absolutely nothing to do with us, and we're just being paranoid. People *do* die suddenly on occasion. The only thing that makes me nervous is the proximity of Hoenberg's death to Blake's."

"Almost like somebody's bumping off anybody connected with the run we were on," Ocelot mused.

"There's a sobering thought," Winterhawk said, but his tone suggested that he had already come to the same conclusion.

Joe finished the last of his chow mein and dropped the empty container on the table. "Means this might not be over yet," he said. "If they're coming after these other guys, maybe they're saving us for last."

"Or perhaps they've forgotten about us altogether," Winterhawk pointed out as he absently levitated the empty chow mein carton into the trash.

"I guess we just have to wait for Harry to call back and find out if he's got anything," Ocelot said with a sigh. "Damn, I'm gettin' tired of waiting for things to happen." Already his tenseness, which had disappeared throughout the day, was coming back. Now it was bringing friends.

They had to wait another half an hour before the fixer called back; they spent it finishing up the Chinese food, clicking through trideo channels in search of news reports, and looking over `Wraith's shoulder as he continued his quest for more data about Hoenberg. When the phone rang, Winterhawk picked it up.

It was Harry, as expected. "I got some stuff for ya. Ya want it now, or should we meet? I'm on a secure line."

Everyone was getting tired of being paranoid about their fixer; Winterhawk could see that from looking

around the room. "Just give it to us," he said. "We'll call you back later to confirm it."

"Got it," Harry said, satisfied. "Okay. There's some pretty good buzz on the street about Hoenberg. Nuance hasn't been very successful about keeping the story under wraps, though far as I can tell it hasn't reached the mainstream rags yet. Give it a couple hours and it will, I'll bet.

"Anyway, as you guys might have expected, this whole thing's weird. Word has it that Hoenberg just dropped dead all of a sudden, in the space of less than five minutes. If my source is believable, his secretary was talkin' to him about somethin' in his office. The secretary left, then came back in about five minutes later because he forgot to ask Hoenberg a question. When he got back inside, Hoenberg was dead. Just like that."

"Just like Mortenson," Ocelot muttered.

"They had people in there right away," Harry continued. "Medical, magical, cops, the whole works. But Nuance is tryin' to keep this hush-hush until they figure out what the hell's going on. I don't think they've found anything yet, though."

"And they probably won't," Winterhawk commented.

"Any idea who's behind it?" Ocelot asked. "Rumors, even?"

Harry consulted something offscreen. "Number one rumor right now is that somebody at APS ordered the hit, although nobody can figure out how they accomplished it. Nobody's got any concrete evidence of that, either. Wouldn't be surprised, though—those two corps got a pretty fierce rivalry goin'. They have for a long time."

"So the odds are reasonable that Nuance was behind the ritual sending that killed Blake, then," Winterhawk said.

Harry nodded. "Almost certain. That's the other reason why it's a pretty fair bet that APS is responsible for Hoenberg's death—Hoenberg was the vice president in charge of magical stuff. He was a pretty good mage himself, and had some decent talent workin' for him. Don't have it for sure yet, but I'll bet a year's pay that he was the one who ordered the ritual that took out Blake. Another year's pay says he was leadin' the ritual. Word is that he was climbin' the corporate ladder, and there was an executive veep spot gettin' ready to open up. No secret that he was after it."

"I'm not going to take you up on those bets, Harry," Winterhawk said. "Everything's beginning to fall together, for a change."

"So then Nuance hired us to grab that blood sample?" Ocelot asked.

"Looks that way," Harry said. "I'm still checkin' into that—don't have anything conclusive yet. I'll let ya know when I do."

"Are they still after us?" Joe said from the other side of the room.

"Hard to say," Harry said. "If I had to give ya a gut feeling, I'd say that right now they don't give a damn about you guys. Look at it from their point o' view: here's two corps that are major competitors. One of `em just bumped off the other one's head o' security and their CEO, and now that one maybe retaliates by offing their VP of magical doodah in what sounds like a damned mysterious way. If you were them, would you be worried about the some group o' shadowrunners?"

"Depends," `Wraith said. "We did start this."

"He's right," Ocelot agreed. "I mean, we grabbed the blood sample that set all this in motion."

"Yeah," Harry said, "but that's what runners *do*. If corps went around cackin' runner teams every time they

did somethin' like that, pretty soon there'd be no runners left to hire. You guys gotta remember that corps usually only do things to support the bottom line. You already did yer job. Comin' after ya now would just be throwin' good money after bad."

"Then why *did* they?" Winterhawk asked. "We've been over all this among ourselves, Harry, and the unanswered question remains: if it isn't in their best interest to come after us, then why did they hire assassins—and rather blundering assassins, to add insult to injury—to try to kill us? And why did they set up these bizarre illusions or hallucinations or whatever they were, seemingly designed to do nothing more than disturb us?"

"I don't know the answer to that, `Hawk," Harry said frankly. "We can't overlook loose cannons—maybe somebody was workin' on his own. Maybe Mortenson was. I dunno. All I know is what I hear on the street, and so far nothin's come up."

"Is it possible," Winterhawk said, almost as if talking to himself, "that APS *isn't* behind Hoenberg's death?"

"Huh?" Ocelot and Harry spoke in unison, both staring at the mage.

"Just a thought," he said, shrugging. "You said you've no proof that they were. What if it was someone else?"

"Who else would it be?" Joe asked.

"And why?" `Wraith added.

Winterhawk shook his head. "I don't know. I'm just throwing things up in the air to see if any of them might take wing."

"What about the place we took the sample from?" Joe asked suddenly.

Harry tapped something into his computer. "Medical Arts Laboratories."

"Yeah, that's the one," Ocelot said. "Maybe Joe's got something there. We made them look bad when we

managed to get in there and take off with one of their samples. Maybe they still got a score to settle with us."

"Listen," Harry said, "I ain't got time to stay on the phone speculatin' all day, but I'll make a note of that and put it on my list. I'll call ya back later on when I got more. You guys can speculate on yer own, okay?"

"Yeah. Great," Ocelot said with no conviction. "Thanks, Harry."

Winterhawk broke the connection and shoved the phone aside, putting his feet back up on the coffee table. "Well, we still certainly seem to be in `get an answer, raise two more questions' mode, don't we?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "I'm startin' to wonder if we're ever gonna get to the bottom of this."

"Let's look at what we got," Ocelot said. "It's gettin' so I can't tell all the players in this thing without a scorecard. How `bout we start with what we know for sure, or are at least certain enough of that we won't worry about it."

"Blood sample was Blake's," Wraith said.

"Someone killed Blake via a ritual sending," Winterhawk said. "Which strongly implies that it was whoever had the blood sample."

"Harry didn't set up that meet with Jenner and Magnum," Joe said.

"We all had odd hallucinations following our leaving Gabriel's party," Winterhawk said.

"Mortenson was alive when we saw him," Joe said. "Somebody killed him while we watched, with no traces."

"Someone hired Magnum and Jenner to set us up," Wraith said.

"They died mysteriously right in front of us," Ocelot said. "Anything else?"

The others thought about it for a few moments, then shook their heads.

"Okay, then," Ocelot continued. "Now, what do we suspect but not know for sure?"

"Hoenberg was behind the ritual that killed Blake," Joe said.

"APS was responsible for Hoenberg's death," Winterhawk said.

"Mortenson hired Jenner and Magnum," `Wraith said.

"Nuance Cybertech is somehow responsible for Mortenson's death," Winterhawk said.

"Whoever's behind this is either a hell of a magician or has one working for him," Joe said.

"Nuance was responsible for hiring us to get the blood sample," Ocelot said.

"Kestrel claims to have had a similar hallucination to those we had," Winterhawk said. When Ocelot looked at him oddly, he shrugged. "All we have is her word. It's good enough for strong suspicion, but we can't take anything for granted at this point."

"Hallucinations and this situation aren't related," `Wraith said.

There was a pause. "Okay," Ocelot said, "Now how about wild-assed stabs in the dark?"

"Someone other than APS had Hoenberg killed, perhaps for a completely different reason," Winterhawk said

"Gabriel is either behind this or knows who is," Joe said. "Since everything started happening right after that party."

"No one is going to bother us anymore, since the principals are all dead now," Winterhawk said.

"Someone is setting Nuance and APS against each other," `Wraith said.

"And we're just caught in the middle?" Ocelot nodded slowly, rolling that over in his mind. "That actually sounds halfway plausible, you know."

"So this is all fine," Joe said, leaning back in his chair, "but how are we gonna find out for good? I don't really want this hanging over my head for the next who knows how long."

Ocelot sighed. "I guess we just have to wait for Harry to call back with any more info. I'll tell you, though, I agree with you. This whole thing is startin' to really get on my nerves. Nothing makes sense, and it seems like everything's goin' around in circles. The more we try to figure it out, the more confusing it gets. It's almost like somebody's *tryin'* to confuse us."

"It's worse," Joe added, "not knowing whether the whole thing's over or not. It seems like it is, and then something else happens to start it up again. I'm gettin' to where I'd be happy to just let the whole thing go if it would just leave us alone."

"P'raps we should all consider taking long vacations until it blows over," Winterhawk suggested.

Wraith nodded. "Away from here."

"But what if it follows us?" Ocelot pointed out. "If it catches us alone somewhere, we might all end up dead. At least when we stay together most of the time, it seems like whoever it is isn't too anxious to go after us too hard."

"So you think we should stick around?" Joe asked.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, for awhile anyway. I sure want to believe Harry, that it's done now. Those corps are gonna have a lot more to worry about than us. Only thing I can think of that we can do that we haven't already done is check out Medical Arts. Once Harry gets back to us on that maybe we can do some snooping of our own." He slammed a fist into the sofa arm in frustration. "If somebody's *tryin'* to piss the hell out of us, though, he's sure doin' a damn good job."

28.

Harry called back a few hours later, but the news he gave the group did not provide them with all the answers they were hoping for.

"Okay, I got some more," he said when Winterhawk answered. "It's hit the papers now, so people are a little more willing to talk. Looks like they're still up in the air about what killed Hoenberg. They haven't got all the test results back yet, but so far everything's inconclusive. No sign of foul play, though. Like I said, the forensics boys have been over that place with a fine-tooth comb, and they ain't turned up a thing."

"What about us?" Ocelot asked. "Anything?"

"I checked into Medical Arts," the fixer said. "All I found out was the deal Johnson set up with you guys, and why they knew the blood would be there. Seems that MA is the lab used by Torval Blake's personal physician to do bloodwork analysis and that kind of stuff. Blake had some kind of viral thing, so he went to his doc, who took a blood test. Nuance—oh, by the way, it was definitely Nuance who hired you—had one of the nurses at MA on their payroll. When she let them know that Blake's sample had come in, that's when they hired you guys to go in and get it. Sounds like you trashed that lab pretty good, so they never did figure out exactly what you took. Naturally, the nurse wasn't talkin'. From what I'm finding out, it looks like they were playin' a little CYA by not reporting that the samples had been taken. Either that or they figured they just got destroyed in the fight."

"So Blake didn't know that his sample was missing?" Winterhawk inquired. "Interesting..."

Wraith looked at him and raised an eyebrow, but didn't speak.

"But are they still gonna come after us?" Joe asked. "Did you find out anything about that?"

Harry sighed. "It's hard to say, but like I said before, my gut is that you're off the hook. Both Nuance and APS are in tizzies right now, tryin' to plug all the leaks in their organizations, fill the positions that are open now—and believe me, they ain't gettin' too many people who want `em, especially with all these mysterious deaths floatin' around—and just generally tryin' to dig out of this whole nightmare. By the way, APS is fallin' over themselves sayin' that they didn't have anything to do with Hoenberg's death, for what it's worth. There's a pretty strong rumbling that there's gonna be some—uh—escalation of hostilities between the two o' them, and that some of the other corps are gonna have to get involved to prevent those two from eating each other alive. Does that sound like the kind o' climate that's gonna leave much room for vendettas against shadowrunners?"

"Not really," Ocelot admitted. "You'll forgive me if I keep my eyes open, though."

"Smart kid," Harry said. "Listen, I gotta go. I been lettin' a lot of stuff slide to keep on top o' this for you guys, and I gotta get back to it now. I'm guessin' this is probably over, so maybe you could only call me if somethin' big comes up. Okay? I'll catch you later, with the tab for all this." He clicked off.

"So that's it," Ocelot said. "Most of it actually makes sense after all."

"I almost hate to bring this up," Winterhawk said, "but there's something that still doesn't make sense." He'd been sitting back staring pensively out the window as Harry had spoken, but now his attention turned back to his teammates.

"The hallucinations?" Joe asked.

"Those too," the mage said. "There's something else, though."

"Blake didn't know," `Wraith said suddenly.

Winterhawk nodded. "He didn't know the sample was missing, according to Harry."

"So?" Ocelot looked confused. "He didn't have to, did he?"

"How did Mortenson know, then?" `Wraith asked.

"Exactly." Winterhawk sat up and leaned forward. "How did Mortenson, the security chief for APS, know to hire someone to try to kill us for stealing the sample if he didn't even know it was missing?"

"Blake didn't know," Joe mused. "But maybe Mortenson did." His tone was a bit tentative, as if he was trying out the hypothesis for the first time.

"Wait a second," Ocelot said. "So you're sayin' that maybe Mortenson had something to do with gettin' his boss killed?"

"It's possible," Winterhawk said. "Remember, we never did get to talk to Mortenson personally. The only contact we had with him was indirect, when T. C. planted our false appointment in his schedule."

"Didn't talk to Jenner and Magnum either," `Wraith said.

"You're right," Joe said quickly. "Remember, they said there was no video. Winterhawk was insulting them about taking a job without seeing who was hiring them."

"Yes," Winterhawk said. "Absolutely correct. One of them had his LTG number in his pocket."

"So nobody saw Mortenson," Ocelot said. "You guys are thinkin' that he didn't make that call at all, aren't you?"

"We'll never know," Winterhawk said. "Since the only three people who know are all dead."

"Convenient," `Wraith commented.

"Isn't it though?" Winterhawk said. "Almost as if someone planned it that way."

"But who?" Joe spoke up.

"That's the big question," Ocelot said.

Winterhawk settled back on the sofa with a disgusted sigh. "I'm wondering if we'll ever get the answer to it."

29.

Although officially the team had decided not to pursue the affair any further now that it appeared to be over, none of them could let it go that easily without at least talking to their various contacts about it. Each of them wondered if perhaps one of the people from whom they often got leads might have some bit of information that had eluded Harry, and that might provide the key that would unlock the whole thing and cause it all to make sense.

To each member of the team, the mystery had begun to represent a challenge that was not easily put aside, especially after all the time they had spent pursuing it. To each, the fact that there were still a number of loose ends hanging in the wind was tantalizing; Winterhawk and ShadoWraith, especially, were unwilling to simply let it pass into history without at least attempting to determine the reasons behind some of the unanswered questions.

This effort, however, was doomed to failure from the start. The runners kept in contact sporadically with each other over the next couple of days, comparing notes and trying to put pieces into place, but without much success. Wraith got back in touch with T. C. and asked her to dig into APS, Nuance, and Medical Arts in search of any data about the hits that they didn't already have, and also any files indicating that any of those corps had the desire and the capability to stage a long-running psychological war with the runners. T. C. came back with next to nothing that Harry had not already told them. APS was still proclaiming their innocence, she said, but there were signs that they were digging in for a long fight if Nuance should decide to start its own little corporate war. She examined their employee rosters, confident that she had

cracked into the file containing everyone from the CEO down to the shipping clerks, and discovered no one who could legitimately be able to magically create the sorts of hallucinations experienced by the runners. Although she wasn't sure whether there was anyone who could do it pharmacologically, she did say that it appeared that prior to all this upheaval, the best scientific minds at both APS and Nuance were hard at work on their latest projects.

Wraith also discussed the matter with another acquaintance of his who was an expert with poisons, and as an afterthought, put the word out to Willie the Weasel, an aptly-named little snitch who was sometimes able to turn up data that slipped through the cracks in Harry's well-oiled information machine. He didn't expect to get much back, and wasn't surprised when he didn't. The poison expert told him that he knew of no poison that would both act that quickly and leave no trace of itself to be found; the closest thing he was aware of were poisons that could mimic other causes of death, like heart attacks. But since the autopsy had turned up nothing of the sort, the man said, it either had to be a new poison—in which case he was very interested in finding out more about it—or else it wasn't a poison at all.

Joe talked to his friend inside Lone Star and didn't get any further. All he could turn up was that there had been no evidence that anyone had gotten into Hoenberg's office prior to his death, and that the autopsy results were still inconclusive. He also told Joe that according to the report of the Lone Star team that responded to Torval Blake's girlfriend's frantic call from Blake's home in Bellevue, she had been in the room with him when he had suddenly caught fire and been incinerated, taking part of the house with him before fire crews could extinguish the blaze. Therefore, the cop told Joe, there was no doubt about the

fact that it was indeed Blake who had died. Magical examination had confirmed this.

Winterhawk, since he didn't have any contacts that could help him directly, spent his time doing magical research, trying to find out if there was any obscure spell that could do the sort of thing that had been done to Hoenberg, Mortenson, and, in a little different fashion, Jenner and Magnum. He called a good friend in England who was the head of London University's Department of Thaumaturgy and asked him to look into it as well, but the man immediately told Winterhawk that he didn't expect to find anything. When he called back, he confirmed this. Two more days' worth of research with full access to the University's magical libraries made Winterhawk inclined to agree. The closest he was able to come to an answer was that all the deaths had been brought about by means of massive rituals, wherein some of the participants were charged with killing the target, while others' responsibility was to erase all traces of their having been there. It seemed to Winterhawk to be a difficult and expensive way to do something that was probably much more easily accomplished using other methods.

Ocelot was the only one of the four who didn't spend too much time searching for more answers. He was still a bit nervous about the whole thing and couldn't shake the feeling that something else was going to happen, but as the two days went by without any further incidents, he found himself more and more willing to believe Harry that maybe it was over after all. He was used to runs that had well defined beginnings and ends: you took the job, you did the job, you got screwed over by somebody, you figured out who that was and dealt with them, you got paid, and that was it. Occasionally the target of a former run would decide they wanted a piece of you, but even

that was most often fairly well defined, and you could find out about it if you kept your ears open and knew where to look. It was bothering Ocelot that this one wasn't working out that way, but then again, he told himself, there's no *Rules for Shadowrunning* book that tells you how it's supposed to go. Sometimes things were messy, and you just had to deal with it.

When he wasn't making his minimal efforts to find out information or catching up with his workout schedule (which took several hours of each day), Ocelot spent much of his remaining free time with Kestrel. Her fixer duties were starting to heat up again, as the new team was right in the middle of what was looking to be a fairly long-running operation, so she had to be on call in case they needed anything. Still, though, she found time to spend several hours with him over the next couple of days. Late on the afternoon on the second day, they made plans to have dinner together at one of the restaurants they'd discovered Downtown, then catch the latest action trid that had just opened a couple of days ago. The plan was to meet at the restaurant and then go from there.

Ocelot was therefore surprised to hear his phone beep a few minutes before he was going to leave for Downtown. Kestrel's face appeared on the screen. "Hi," she said. "Need to change the plan a little bit."

"Why? What's up?" He sat down and adjusted the screen, putting his feet up on the table.

"It's the team again," she said ruefully. "I need to meet them with a van and some hardware. `Fraid I'm going to have to miss dinner, but we can still make the show if you can pick me up."

He shrugged. "No prob. Where?"

"You know where the Petrucci Playhouse is? That little small-time live theatre out in north Bellevue? I'm meeting them in there—need to give them some

information and hand over the hardware we've got stashed inside. The place is closed for the season, but Gabriel knows the owner so we can get in."

Ocelot shook his head. "Don't know where it is, but I'll find it. When?"

"I'll be there in about half an hour. The west door will be open, but it won't look like it is. Just come in there."

"Yeah. I'll be there. Hope you like ridin' on the back of my bike." He grinned.

"The way *you* ride?" She grinned back. "Maybe I'd better catch a cab."

"No sense of adventure," he told her. "See you in a bit."

The Petrucci Playhouse was a small, elegant-looking building about twenty-five meters off a tree-lined road in a posh area of northern Bellevue. Ocelot pulled his Blitzen into the large parking lot and looked around for a moment before proceeding on. It was about half an hour after Kestrel had called.

Like a few others of its kind scattered around the greater Seattle area, the Playhouse catered to the small minority of Sprawl citizens who liked their entertainment performed by live actors rather than trideo representations. This particular theatre specialized in classic light operas of the Gilbert and Sullivan type, and seated approximately three hundred people. Ocelot had found this out when he had gone searching through the LTG directory for their address. He also found out that, in keeping with its high-class address, it also had high-class prices. *Foo-foo entertainment for foo-foo corporate types*, he thought contemptuously. Even though he could easily afford it, Ocelot much preferred a good Urban Brawl game or action trid to this sort of thing.

He rode around to the west side of the building, noting that there was in fact a door there, right where Kestrel had said it would be. Parked in the lot behind the theatre was a nondescript white van. *Good—she's here already.* He parked the bike next to the van and headed for the door.

The inside was dimly lit, with only the several EXIT signs providing illumination. Ocelot switched to low-light vision as he closed the door behind him.

He was standing in what looked like the backstage area. Dark shapes around him resolved themselves into stacks of props and scenery, some of them covered with black cloths. In front of him, a few meters ahead, heavy velvet curtains hung down, obscuring the front of the stage and the auditorium from the backstage area. "Kestrel?" he called, not too loudly. If she was back here, she'd hear him.

There was no answer.

Checking his pistol and monowhip in their respective places, Ocelot inched forward toward the curtain. He wasn't nervous yet, but it paid to be prepared just in case. Moving off to one side to put one of the wings between him and the rest of the theatre, he pulled the curtain slightly aside and peered out into the darkened seating area. "Kestrel?" he called, a bit louder.

A figure rose up from one of the seats and quickly turned toward the sound of his voice. "Ocelot?" It was Kestrel, but her voice sounded uncertain. "Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me," he said, coming out from behind the curtain and nimbly leaping down off the stage. "Where's the team?"

She stared at him, her expression warring between suspicion and confusion. "What are you doing here?"

Ocelot stopped. "Huh? You asked me to meet you. Remember?" A faint tingle began at the back of his neck, raising the fine hairs there. Something wasn't right.

Suspicion gave way to confusion as she came forward, shaking her head. "No I didn't. I called you to say I'd be late for dinner. I left you a message. Gabriel called and asked me to meet the team here."

His gaze darted around the room, looking for movement. "You called me. You said that you were gonna be here meeting the team to give `em some hardware, and you wanted me to pick you up so we wouldn't miss the trid show."

She took a deep breath, joining him in his scan of the area. "No. I haven't talked to you at all tonight. Just the message. Gabriel called about twenty-five minutes ago, and asked me to bring the van over. He said the team would give me a ride back."

Ocelot drew his pistol, wishing he'd brought something better. "Something's up here, Kestrel. We need to get out—"

The door in the back of the auditorium opened, slowly. "Ocelot?" came a familiar British-accented voice.

"Hawk?" Ocelot wheeled around, pointing the gun at the door. "That you?"

The door opened a little wider. Joe came through first, followed by ShadoWraith and finally Winterhawk, all of them wearing their armored coats. Joe and `Wraith both carried firearms drawn and ready. For a second, they and Ocelot covered each other with their respective guns, and then all three lowered them.

"What the hell is going on?" Ocelot demanded. "What are you guys doing here?"

"You called us," Joe said. "You wanted to meet. Don't know why you picked *this* place, but you said you found something."

"We were a bit suspicious, so I assensed the place before we came in," Winterhawk said. "When we saw you and Kestrel here, we decided it was safe enough to check it out. So what have you found?"

Ocelot raised his hands in a *stop* gesture. "Hang on. So you're sayin' I called you?"

`Wraith nodded, raising an eyebrow. "Yes."

He turned to Kestrel. "And Gabriel called you?"

"Right."

"And *you* called *me*," he said to Kestrel.

"No, I didn't. I told you that." She looked around nervously again.

"Shit..." Ocelot said under his breath, tightening his grip on his pistol.

The rest of the team was looking equally suspicious. "Out," `Wraith said urgently, turning to head back for the door. "Quickly."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "Come on. Let's get out of here, before—"

The doors slammed shut and locked with loud *clicks*.

The lights went out.

The room began to change.

30.

"Head for the door!" Ocelot yelled.

"Back! Straight up the aisle!" Joe shouted, reversing direction.

A low, almost subliminal sound of laughter filled the auditorium, echoing in the darkness as it grew gradually louder.

Ocelot switched to thermographic vision, nearly running into Joe as both quickly made their way up toward the door. He could see the heat-traces of Winterhawk, Wraith, and Kestrel as they tried to do the same.

The lights came back on.

Ocelot blinked. "Holy shit..." he muttered.

They were not standing in the Petrucci Playhouse anymore. The runners stared around them, wide-eyed with fear and amazement. Now, instead of the carpeted aisleway of the auditorium, they stood on dirt covered in sawdust and wood shavings. It was still night, but now they were outside under a black sky with a large full moon shining overhead.

There might have been stars, but they were invisible amid the riot of colored lights suspended directly above their heads and all around them. The runners were standing in a wide walkway bounded on either side by garishly colored booths and tents. Far off in the distance, the sound of a calliope could be heard playing a familiar circus tune in a dirgelike minor key. Even the *smell* was right: old popcorn mingled with sawdust and the vague scent of animal dung.

"It's a fuckin' *carnival*," Ocelot said through his teeth, very close now to coming thoroughly unhinged. His gaze darted around, trying to take in everything at once,

certain that death would come from whichever direction he was not covering.

"Welcome back my friends to the show that never ends," Winterhawk muttered, causing ShadoWraith to halt his scrutiny for a split-second to give him an odd look.

"What the hell is going on?" Kestrel demanded. She had her Predator out and was trying, like Ocelot, to keep everything in sight at once. "Where are we?"

She didn't get an answer, because at that moment things began to move all around them. The laughter grew louder, fading in and out in waves and providing macabre counterpoint to the calliope's grim refrain. The runners barely noticed that, though, as they had more pressing things with which to contend.

From all directions, forms were moving. They were coming up from the ground, slithering out from inside the tents and booths, dropping down from the sky.

"Oh, *shit!*" Ocelot yelled. "*Bugs!*"

He was right. The insect spirits came in from every angle, crawling over each other in their zeal to reach the runners. There were ants, cockroaches, mantids, beetles, mosquitos—the runners recognized every type of spirit that they had ever fought in their careers, snapping and tumbling toward them.

"Spread out! Get room!" Ocelot shouted, pulling out his monowhip. The pistol wouldn't do any good against spirits, and he preferred to fight hand-to-hand anyway. He wondered if the booths would support him so he could get above the bugs, but a quick glance upward confirmed that they were constructed of flimsy wood and plastic and would not hold his weight. One of the bugs lashed out at him with a foreleg, opening up a burning gash in his thigh.

The other runners spread out. Those who had been holding firearms holstered them in favor of melee weapons: `Wraith drew his katana, and Joe reached around his back to pull out the top section of his battle axe, wishing he had brought the rest. Kestrel had only a knife and her hand razors, while Winterhawk was in good shape with his black mageblade.

The bugs danced in and then retreated, nimbly staying out of reach of the runners' weapons. More of them surged forward from their hiding places, bursting out of the ground beneath the runners' feet and then scuttling away. "We can't fight `em all!" Joe yelled. "We need to get out of here!"

"How are we gonna do that?" Kestrel demanded, sweat pouring down her face as she lashed at a bug with her razors. "They're all around us!"

"This can't be real!" Winterhawk rasped. "It's got to be some sort of hallucination, like the others!" He swung his blade at a mantid spirit, which ducked beneath the blow and sliced its sharpened mandibles across the mage's side, leaving a bloody wound in its wake. `Hawk staggered back, nearly dropping his sword.

"How do we see through it?" Ocelot flicked the monowhip at a beetle and was rewarded by the sight of its head separating from its body. The reward was short-lived, however, when two more came up from beneath the sawdust to take its place.

"Focus!" the mage said through gritted teeth. He fell back another meter under the onslaught of the mantid spirit, which had now been joined by a pair of ants. "It's not real – you have to convince yourself of that! You have to *believe* it, or it won't work!"

ShadoWraith was surrounded. His lightning-swift attacks were finding their mark, but there were simply too many bugs. Joe waded toward him, using his massive

bulk to shove the chitinous forms out of his way like they weren't there. They surged back in behind him, slicing at his back. "It's no use!" the troll yelled desperately. "There's too many of `em!"

"Every time we kill one, more come back!" Kestrel was slashing from two sides now, her arms bloody from their attacks.

Winterhawk tried to fight through the pain to focus his mind enough that he could see through what he was certain was another illusion. *We're not here*, he thought sternly, trying to marshal his ordered, magically-trained mental processes into line. *There are no bugs here. This isn't happening. We're right where we were before. We aren't –*

He thought he got a brief glance of the auditorium. Then an enormous ant foreleg whacked him in the side of the head, and with a strangled cry, he went down in a pile of writhing bug bodies.

Ocelot noticed immediately. "Hawk's down!" he yelled, shoving through bugs with strength he didn't know he had. Kestrel followed behind him, turned the other way and keeping the bugs from his back.

Joe and `Wraith were trying to cover each other's backs as well, but it was a losing battle. More bugs were appearing, scuttling over the tops of the booths and through the spaces between them. There were big bugs, small bugs, bugs in clown suits –

–bugs in clown suits??

Joe did a double-take, sure he had been mistaken. But no, there it was: a big cockroach spirit, its huge bloated body and six spindly legs covered in a cheerful, brightly-colored, polka-dotted clown suit with ruffles around the legs. As he stared, unable to take his eyes off it, it grinned and waved its foreleg back and forth like a mad parade-goer.

"Joe?" `Wraith's voice was strained. "Can't – go – on –"

The bugs washed forward in a wave and covered them over.

Ocelot's head was constantly moving, his eyes darting back and forth. He saw Joe and `Wraith go down. "Kestrel!"

"I see it," she said grimly, slicing away. "What do we do?"

"I don't *know!*" he yelled, his voice bright with panic. "If you got any great ideas, now's the time!" They couldn't retreat now, he could see that: the sea of bugs stretched as far as he could see in both directions, as well as clogging the booths and tents. The calliope, louder now, continued its merry, eerie tune.

The laughter had been increasing in volume throughout the battle; now it rose to a horrific crescendo, drowning out the sounds of the chittering bugs, the harsh breathing of Kestrel and Ocelot, and the sound of the calliope. The bugs moved in, surrounding the two remaining runners, inexorably inching forward –

They made one last lunge, their hard-shelled bodies coming down on top of Ocelot and Kestrel. Ocelot felt himself falling, falling, and then –

He was back in the theatre.

The silence, suddenly was deafening. He stood for a moment, leaned over, catching his breath. His heart was thudding in his chest, both from fear and from exertion. Slowly he rose to take stock of the situation.

The dim EXIT lights were back on, bathing the place in a small but sufficient amount of illumination. Joe and `Wraith were draped across each other, balanced on the backs of several of the theatre seats. They were awake and in the process of extricating themselves from the seats and each other. Kestrel was on her hands and knees a couple of meters away from him, her back heaving up and down with her harsh breathing. Winterhawk was slumped over

another seat a few rows back: as Ocelot watched, he brought his arms up and shoved himself to a sitting position, gasping.

"I'm – not hurt," Kestrel said between breaths, rising to her feet with effort. There was uncertainty in her tone.

Ocelot did a quick inventory. The slash on his thigh was nowhere in evidence; even the rip in his pants was gone. "Me neither." He looked around. "Anybody else hurt?"

Winterhawk had stood and was making his way unsteadily down the aisle. "No, not I," he said. With care and a shaking arm, he stowed his mageblade. "It – had to be – an illusion. I think – I saw through it – just before I passed out."

Wraith and Joe had gotten themselves out of the seats and came over as well. "They're getting worse," Joe said. He appeared to be the least exhausted of the group, no doubt due to his trollish constitution. "Whatever this is, it's sure not over yet." He looked around, taking in the entire area. "Anybody else want to get out of here?"

That idea met with general agreement, so the five tired runners slowly retraced their steps up the aisleway, through the lobby, and out the front door.

Outside in the parking lot, it was cold and a bit foggy, with just a hint of mist in the air. The runners stood in a rough circle, each one occasionally taking glances at the area in general to verify that no one was sneaking up on them. Paranoia, at that point, was running high. Ocelot shook his head. "This beats the hell outta me," he said. "I'm fresh out of ideas."

Winterhawk nodded, buttoning up his longcoat. "I fear I must agree," he said. "I can go back and look at the theatre astrally, but I don't hold out any hope that I'll find anything, if the other incidents are any indication."

"So, what," Joe said, "this thing is just going to keep hounding us forever?" He looked back over his shoulder at the theatre, his face clearly betraying his nervousness.

"Got us again," Wraith said. "Phone trick."

Ocelot nodded in disgust. "Yeah. I really believed it was Kestrel on the other end. Whoever it was, they even knew about our plans for tonight."

"So our adversary is watching us closely," Winterhawk said. This caused everyone to take another glance around the area, but nothing appeared to be amiss.

"Looks that way," Ocelot said. "All we can do is call Harry again, see if he's come up with anything else—"

Kestrel sighed. "Maybe it's time to tell Gabriel about this, and see if he can come up with anything. I've been trying to keep him out of this because he's got enough on his mind right now, but I don't see any other options."

"Come on, Kestrel," Ocelot said, trying to keep the skepticism out of his voice. "I know he's your friend and all, but Harry's been in this biz longer than Gabriel's been alive. He's got contacts all over the world. If he can't turn up anything, what makes you think—"

"What's Harry come up with so far to explain this?" she cut in, her gaze challenging.

The runners looked at each other. Ocelot realized she had him there. "Not much," he admitted reluctantly. "Not about this stuff. But—"

Kestrel shook her head and zipped up her jacket. "No buts. I think we need some fresh eyes looking at the situation. I'll talk to him, and then get back to you if he finds out anything." She smiled apologetically at Ocelot. "If you don't mind, I think I'll take a rain check on the trid show tonight."

He nodded wearily, returning her smile. "Yeah. No problem. Call me tomorrow, okay? Even if Gabriel doesn't

come up with anything, I'd like to hear what he says about this whole mess."

"I promise," she said. She waved at the other three runners, but it was forced; it was clear that she was one step above exhaustion. "Bye, guys. Catch you later."

The runners watched as she climbed into the white van and drove off. "Well," Winterhawk said in a faint imitation of his usual sarcastic cheer. "That was fun, wasn't it?"

"No," Wraith said. He did not seem to be able to stop scanning the vicinity, convinced that something was going to jump out and attack.

Ocelot shoved his hands in his pockets. "I'm gonna call Harry, and then I'm gonna go home," he said. "There doesn't seem to be any way to get away from this, so I'm gonna quit lettin' it jerk me around."

Joe nodded. "Yeah, I guess. I sure don't like all these fake phone calls, though. I'm almost to where I don't believe anybody's who they say they are anymore."

"Perhaps we should avoid any calls asking us to go anywhere unusual until this is well and truly over," Winterhawk said. "At least if we confine ourselves to familiar places, we have some chance of dealing effectively with the situation."

The others nodded even though they, like Winterhawk, knew that it wasn't going to help. Whoever was pulling the strings in this little puppet show seemed quite able to manipulate them in whatever way they chose. And so far, it didn't look like it was going to be over any time soon.

31.

Ocelot was getting more and more nervous as the day went on.

It was the day following the events at the theatre, and he had spent most of it lounging around his house, working out, and vegging in front of the trideo with procession of beers. Somehow, he couldn't get up the urge to go out and do anything; he figured it was a combination of being tired from his ordeal last night and Kestrel's failure to call him back as she had promised.

He had called Harry as soon as he'd gotten home last night to give him the latest. The fixer, who had been awake and back to keeping his normal hours, had been quite surprised to hear about the incident at the theatre, and had agreed that this was important enough that he could take a bit more time away from his other business deals to look into it. He had called back two hours later reporting that Nuance and APS were completely absorbed in glowering at each other across their metaphorical chasm and were, as far as he could find out, showing no interest at all in hassling the team in any way, shape, or form. Harry's best intelligence was still telling him that they never *had* had such an interest, although if that were true, he had no idea about who *was* interested.

Harry had also helpfully checked—very discreetly, given the state in which the runners had left it—into the Petrucci Playhouse. He found out that it had a long and untarnished reputation, and that it was owned almost completely by a family headed by a little old lady who currently resided in Miami. They, too, had a long and untarnished reputation. The fixer said that he doubted that Gabriel knew the owners of the Playhouse, although, in Harry's words, "Nothing was beyond the realm o'

possibility. That kid's got his fingers in more pies than anybody I know `cept me." Since the information had come from the bogus Kestrel phone call, Ocelot immediately wrote it off as another falsehood used to lull him into a sense of security regarding the meet with her.

After Harry's call, Ocelot had grabbed a couple hours' catnap and then remained close to home, waiting for Kestrel to call back. By mid afternoon, he was getting a bit nervous. By late afternoon, his nervousness had grown to the point where he decided to call her. Maybe she'd tease him about being too anxious, but if that was the worst he got to make sure everything was okay, he could take that.

First he called her home number, the one she didn't give out to very many people. It rang a number of times, then her machine picked up. He left a message and then called her wristphone. This time, he expected a quick answer, because she always had it with her.

It rang several times, followed by a voicemail message.

Ocelot stared at the phone, then left a brief message there as well. When she got back to her phone, she was going to have quite a trail of messages following her. It was bothering him that she didn't answer the wristphone, though. She always answered the wristphone, unless —

Unless she was with him.

A brief but surprisingly strong surge of jealousy spiked through him as an image flashed across his mind: Kestrel and Gabriel together, the phone beeping away, ignored, on the nightstand —

No, you idiot, he told himself angrily. Don't be an asshole. Maybe she's in the shower or something.

He got up and threw on his jacket, making sure he had his own wristphone with him, and headed out the garage door to the Blitzen. He felt a little foolish doing it, but he was getting more and more worried about her with

each passing minute. He would just go by her house and see if she was there, and then they'd have a good laugh over the whole thing. He comforted himself with that thought as he rode at a high rate of speed toward her townhouse.

When he pulled up in front of the neat little house and parked the bike in the driveway, nothing looked out of the ordinary. He knocked on the door and waited, hoping that he'd soon hear the sound of her coming down the stairs to open it.

There was no answer.

He knocked again, more loudly this time, tapping his foot impatiently.

After another minute's wait, there was still no answer.

He had a key to the place; she had given it to him awhile ago, but he was reluctant to use it without her permission. This time, though, concern won out over good manners, and he quickly used it to open the door and slip inside before anyone saw him. "Kestrel?" he called. "Are you in here?"

No answer.

Ocelot drew his monowhip and kept it gripped loosely in his hand as he hurriedly but thoroughly searched the house. It wasn't a large place: two bedrooms, living room, kitchen, bathroom, garage. As he made his way through, he didn't see anything that looked out of the ordinary. Everything was as he remembered it: neat in most places except the bedroom, where clothes were strewn around on the floor just like they always were. It was hard to tell if the bed had been slept in, since she hardly ever made it. He checked her walk-in closet, the shower stall, and the closet in the other bedroom (which she used as an office), and found nothing. In the garage, her green Westwind was parked in its usual spot, next to her rarely-used Suzuki Aurora; the hood on the Westwind

was cool, as was the Aurora's engine. There was no sign of the white van she had been driving last night.

Ocelot stood in the garage doorway, considering his next option. She wasn't answering her phone, and she didn't appear to be home. Where would she be likely to be if she wasn't home? One of her hangouts, maybe, or—

Gabriel. He'd know where she was. This time, Ocelot didn't chide himself for the thought, because it didn't have anything to do with romantic rivalry. It was simple fact: she worked with the guy. If anybody knew where she was, he would.

He shoved up his sleeve to call, then realized that he didn't know Gabriel's number. He considered calling Harry, but then another thought came to him and he spun around, closing the door to the garage and taking the stairs three at a time up to Kestrel's office room.

There was a desktop comm unit on the big, cluttered desk. Ocelot sat down in the chair and looked it over, immediately spotting what he was hoping for: a series of speed-dial buttons, labeled in Kestrel's haphazard hand. Only three were labeled: "O," "R," and "G."

Ocelot punched the button marked "G," flipped on the vid, and sat back to wait.

It was picked up after the second ring. The vid from the other end came on as well, revealing the handsome young fixer. He looked puzzled for only a brief second, then smiled as recognition dawned. "Hello. Ocelot, isn't it? What can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for Kestrel," Ocelot said bluntly. He was in no mood for pleasantries right now.

"You're calling from her office," the young man said mildly, showing no indication that he was bothered by Ocelot's lack of manners. "I would think that would mean that she's with you."

"Look, kid," Ocelot said, trying hard to control his anger and frustration. "I don't know where she is. If I did, I wouldn't be calling you. Now, if you know where she might be, please tell me."

Gabriel's expression grew more serious. "I haven't heard from her since yesterday," he said. "She told me she was going to spend the evening with you, so she would appreciate it if I didn't call her last night."

Ocelot leaned forward. "So you didn't call her to meet with your team at Petrucci's Playhouse?"

"No, of course not."

"And she didn't talk to you about any of this?"

Gabriel's violet gaze fixed itself on the video pickup. "No. Perhaps you should give me more information."

Out of video range, Ocelot's fists clenched. "Look," he said. "I want to talk to you. In person. I'm gettin' tired of gettin' screwed around by people on the phone. You meet me at the Glass Spider in half an hour. The back room. I want to get this straightened out."

Gabriel considered that for a moment, then nodded once. "All right. I'll be there."

"Good." Ocelot stabbed the connection button and stood up too fast, almost knocking the chair over behind him. He righted it and hurried out of the house, locking the door behind him.

He had picked the Glass Spider because it wasn't far from Kestrel's place, allowing him to get there early and be waiting when Gabriel arrived. He spent the intervening time pacing around the back room, trying not to consider all the dire fates that might have befallen Kestrel, or those that might befall Gabriel if he had anything to do with her disappearance. Ocelot's tether was not all that well strung under normal circumstances, and events over the past couple of weeks had unraveled it almost to the breaking point. He was not about to accept

any fancy talk from some pretty boy kid, connections or no connections.

The door to the back room opened a couple of minutes early, and Gabriel entered. Dressed in a dove-gray suit of fine silk, dark blue tie, and charcoal gray wool overcoat, he looked more like a young fashion model than a man who was on his way to becoming one of the top movers and shakers in Seattle. "Sit down," Ocelot said without greeting.

Gabriel, no trace of annoyance on his smooth features, shrugged out of his coat and laid it over a chair, then sat down in another one. He looked up at Ocelot, waiting for him to speak.

"I want to know where Kestrel is," Ocelot said. He did not sit down, but remained standing over Gabriel, about a meter away.

"I don't know," Gabriel said. "I told you, I haven't seen her since yesterday."

"Yeah, I know you said that. But when I saw her last night, she said she was gonna go talk to you about some things."

"What things?" He leaned forward a bit, watching Ocelot. His expression was unreadable.

Ocelot put his foot up on a chair and propped his elbow on his knee. "She didn't tell you about any of this."

Gabriel shook his head. "No. She told me nothing, other than that she was going out to dinner and the trideos with you last night. If there's more, I'd appreciate it if you would fill me in."

"Where does she hang out when she's not working?" Ocelot demanded, ignoring Gabriel's question.

"I don't know," he said again. "From what I understood, she spends a great deal of her time with you. Other than that—" he shrugged minimally. His eyes

narrowed just a bit. "Please tell me what you know. If Kestrel is missing, it concerns me as well."

Ocelot glared at him, trying to gauge whether he should reveal the information he had. On the one hand, Gabriel had the connections to help him find her quickly, but on the other, he might have been responsible for her disappearance.

The fixer remained calmly seated, watching him and waiting patiently for his reply. Finally, what decided the matter for Ocelot was the fact that Kestrel trusted him. Whether that trust was misguided was another question, but for now, he had to go with something. He dropped into a chair with a loud sigh and ran his hands through his hair. "Did she tell you about the weird hallucinations we all had awhile ago, right after your party?"

"She mentioned them," he said. "I did a bit of checking at the time, but wasn't able to determine the cause. She didn't say anything about their recurring, so I assumed that the matter had been taken care of."

"Yeah, that's what we thought too. We were wrong. Did she tell you that she had one too?"

His gaze sharpened as his expression grew concerned. "No. She didn't tell me about that. When?"

"A few days ago. She was driving her car and ended up at the Purple Haze without knowing how she got there." Ocelot watched Gabriel's face carefully for any sign of recognition.

"The place she used to frequent with her team," he said quietly.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. And she saw them there. They were sitting there waiting for her. She said they spoke to her, but then when she turned away they disappeared. It spooked her out pretty bad."

"I wonder why she didn't mention it to me?" Gabriel said as if to himself. He continued to watch Ocelot with the same calm, concerned gaze.

"She said she didn't want to," Ocelot told him. "She said that you were busy with your team, and that she was startin' to feel dependent on you."

Gabriel closed his eyes briefly, sighed. "Yes, how very like her. She's quite an independent woman, and I can see that she still sometimes longs to be back with her team instead of what she's doing now." He paused. "Were you or your friends able to find any source for the hallucinations at that point?"

"No. Right after that some other stuff happened that started us believin' that the whole thing was because of a run we'd done a little bit before all this started happenin'. It was all a little weird, but we were okay with that as long as nobody was playin' with our heads." Ocelot blew out a long breath and leaned back in his chair, balancing it on two legs. "Then last night happened."

Gabriel's attention was fully riveted on Ocelot now. "Tell me about it. Please don't leave out any details."

Ocelot regarded the fixer with mild suspicion, but found himself wanting to trust him. The kid was either a hell of an actor or else he was genuinely concerned about Kestrel; his voice was soft but insistent, gently persuasive. "Okay," Ocelot finally said. *Let's go for the whole thing if we're gonna do it...* "It started when I got a call from Kestrel a little before I was gettin' ready to head out for the restaurant..." Forcing himself to slow down and remember the details, he continued telling Gabriel the story, including the mysterious phone calls, the slamming doors and the lights going out, and the frightening illusions. Just thinking about the bugs made his breath come faster. By the time he had finished, his heart was racing.

Gabriel listened, his eyes never leaving Ocelot's face as he spoke. When Ocelot stopped speaking, he said, concerned, "Are you all right?"

Ocelot waved him off. "Yeah, I'll be fine. It was just so damned vivid. All of us kind of have a problem with bugs. Don't know if Kestrel does..."

"She's fought them before," Gabriel said. "I think they would disturb anyone who has." He paused. "So then, the last you saw of her, she had left you in the van and had plans to discuss this with me. That would have been —?"

"Around 21:30 or so last night."

Gabriel nodded. "So it's conceivable that she went home and planned to discuss the situation with me today."

"Yeah, that makes sense." Ocelot got up and began pacing again. Gabriel's soothing voice and his aura of knowing what was going on was calming him somewhat; even if it was all bullshit, at least it was *good* bullshit. Then a sudden thought struck him. "You don't think she's taken off, do you?"

Gabriel raised an eyebrow questioningly. "Do you know of any reason why she might?"

"No..." He shook his head. "I'm just tryin' to come up with an explanation that doesn't mean somebody's grabbed her." His voice took on the faint traces of desperation.

The fixer stood, his movements as graceful as a dancer's. "Ocelot, please. We have no evidence that that has occurred. I'll investigate this immediately, and contact you as soon as I find out anything. I'm confident that we'll find her before the day is done."

Ocelot wheeled on him. "Why do you say that?" he demanded. "It almost sounds like you know where she is."

Gabriel shook his head, unruffled by Ocelot's accusation. "No. I don't know where she is, and that disturbs me as much as it disturbs you. I merely meant that I will set my network of contacts on the problem."

Not completely mollified, Ocelot sighed again. "Okay. But I hope you don't mind if I bring some other people into this too."

"Not at all. The more people who are searching for her, the sooner we will find her." Gabriel smiled, but under the smile there was still an undercurrent of concern. "Please don't be worried yet. We'll probably locate her somewhere that she intended to be, and she'll be angry with us for disturbing her."

"I hope you're right," Ocelot said. His anger had all but dissipated, leaving in its place only worry and hopelessness. "You keep me posted, okay?"

"Of course." Gabriel picked up his coat and draped it over his arm. "I'd better get started, then." Nodding a farewell, he left the room, already pulling a portable phone from the inner pocket of his jacket.

Kestrel did not call back or otherwise contact Ocelot that day. He spent the rest of it making calls to everyone he could think of who might be able to help with the search: Harry (to whom he offered whatever price he asked to put aside all his other business and devote all his energies to finding Kestrel), Joe and `Wraith, T. C., and most of the other people with whom he had had contact recently. He checked the Purple Haze to see if she had been in again; she hadn't. He questioned people who lived in the houses near hers. He went back to her house with `Wraith and together they did a thorough search, looking for anything that might indicate why she had left, who she had left with, and/or where she had gone.

He wasn't sure exactly why he waited until later that evening to call Winterhawk. He knew that, of all his

teammates, `Hawk probably had the best chance of finding her. Since he had assensed her aura previously, and since they had access to her personal items at her house, Ocelot knew that the mage had a good chance of being able to locate her. He didn't want to admit that the reason why he waited was that he was afraid of what `Hawk might find, but that was it.

Finally, though, he could wait no longer. All of his feelers had come up empty: Harry and T. C. hadn't turned up anything, nor had Joe and `Wraith, although all of them promised to keep looking. Gabriel hadn't called back yet, but Ocelot was giving him until the end of the day.

When he asked Winterhawk to help, the mage had agreed readily, admonishing Ocelot for not getting him involved sooner. He had immediately gone out and purchased the materials necessary to perform a ritual, then returned to his apartment with Ocelot and set about constructing the hermetic circle. "There's a possibility that this might be dangerous," he told Ocelot, "depending on where she is. P'raps you might call the others and ask them to come over here before I start."

Joe and `Wraith arrived to find Winterhawk's apartment somewhat resembling `Wraith's own in bareness, except that in `Hawk's case, the furniture was merely shoved up against the walls to create a huge empty space for the circle. They watched curiously as he completed the circle and stepped inside, instructing them to stay well away from it as the ritual progressed, and not to break it unless something nasty appeared inside that he didn't seem able to deal with. "That last part's important," he said. "If I'm handling it, then breaking the circle could cause unexpected things to occur. Not that I expect anything like that—this is a simple detection spell, after all." He spoke with the confidence of someone who had

found a number of people by magical means, and who fully expected to add another to that total tonight. Arranging the personal item of Kestrel's—a sweatshirt that Ocelot had found on the floor next to her bed—in front of him, he began.

The ritual took about three hours from beginning to end. Ocelot, Joe, and `Wraith killed time by taking turns keeping an eye on Winterhawk as he worked inside the circle while the other two watched the trid, paced around looking out the windows, and raided the refrigerator. During the three hours no one called, which made Ocelot nervous. Gabriel had sounded so confident that his people would be able to find Kestrel; Ocelot began to wonder if the young fixer had not been lying to him. His old suspicions about Gabriel's being behind all this began to rise to the surface again, but he kept them under control for the moment.

He watched Winterhawk in the circle. He knew that these kinds of rituals were hard on the mage; he had only seen him perform one other, but the effort of it had exhausted him for quite some time after the ritual had been completed. That time he had been successful; Ocelot hoped that he would be this time as well. `Hawk's face was drawn, his hair plastered to his head as the sweat trickled down his neck and raised damp spots on his starched white shirt. His eyes were closed, his jaw set in concentration as he wove the magical energies together that would go out into astral space and locate the aura he was seeking.

The detection ritual ended abruptly two hours and fifty minutes in, startling the three other runners from their watchful but bored reveries. With a loud *phhhhhhtttt!* sound, the sweatshirt was consumed in a flash of blue flame, and Winterhawk collapsed to his knees, his breath coming in fast, harsh gasps.

Ocelot hurried over to the edge of the circle. "Hawk?"

The others joined him, but none dared breach the scrawled chalk lines and burned-out crystal obelisks that defined the hermetic circle. They watched as Winterhawk knelt there, gasping, for several seconds without speaking. When he finally did, his exhausted, whispered words chilled Ocelot's blood: "Can't—find her."

Throwing caution aside, Ocelot crossed into the circle and grabbed Winterhawk, gently pulling him to his feet. The mage was drenched with sweat, his complexion almost as white as his soaked shirt. Ocelot half-supported, half-carried him over to the sofa, where he slumped back, his energies totally depleted. Wraith and Joe resumed their seats, watching Winterhawk until he could speak again.

Ocelot couldn't wait. He gripped Winterhawk's shoulder. "Did you say you couldn't find her?"

Wearily, eyes closed, Hawk nodded. "Nothing—there."

"What does that mean?" Ocelot demanded. "What do you mean *nothing there*?"

"Hey, back off a minute, Ocelot," Joe said. "Let him rest."

Ocelot ignored him. "Hawk—"

"Couldn't—find—aura..." Winterhawk pushed the words out between breaths, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he fought to get himself under control. He looked like a man who had just run a marathon.

"What does that *mean*?" Ocelot asked again, louder. "Does it mean she's—" He couldn't say it. He let the sentence trail off. Was the thing he had feared most coming true? Was Kestrel dead?

The mage's breathing began to slow a bit, and he opened his eyes. Trying to manage a comforting look, he

shook his head. "Not—necessarily. Could mean—she's behind wards. Magical—protection of some sort."

Ocelot's eyes widened as he dared to let hope creep in again. "You mean somebody might have her in some kind of magical fortress thing?"

"Crude—but accurate."

Ocelot settled back to consider that as Joe went out to the kitchen to get a glass of water, which he gave Winterhawk. The mage accepted it gratefully, polishing it off in one long drink. Slowly, his unhealthy pallor was fading to his normal, still rather pale, complexion, and strength was returning to his body. He sat up a bit more, running a hand through his damp hair to get it out of his face.

"Next step?" `Wraith asked.

"Soon as `Hawk's recovered, I'm goin' back out," Ocelot said. "I can't just sit around and wait for things to happen."

Winterhawk started to protest, then thought better of it. "I'll be fine," he said, his voice getting stronger. "Just need a hot shower and a few hours' sleep, that's all."

`Wraith and Joe rose. "Will keep searching," `Wraith said.

"Me too," Joe added. "I still have a few more people I can talk to."

"Forgive me for not seeing you out," Winterhawk said from the sofa. "I'll call you tomorrow."

After they had gone, Ocelot regarded his old friend. "Is there anything else, `Hawk?"

Winterhawk looked at him strangely. "Such as?"

"I don't know. I just thought maybe you might have seen something else."

"I wish I could say I did," the mage said ruefully. "But I've told you everything I know. Perhaps a more powerful ritual—"

"Not for awhile," Ocelot said. "You nearly wiped yourself out with this one. Maybe Harry's come up with something by now. Or Gabriel —"

"How did your meeting with him go?" Winterhawk asked. "I was meaning to ask you about that before."

Ocelot shrugged. "All right, I guess. There's something about him that I don't get, but he seemed concerned when I told him she was missing. I still think there might be something goin' on between those two — I'm just not sure what yet."

"Well," Winterhawk said, "if it will spur him to find her faster, then that's all that matters, isn't it?"

"Yeah," he said, and was a bit surprised to realize that he meant it. Getting Kestrel back meant everything to him, even if he had to lose her to Gabriel to do it. He wondered if that was what love was, and then quickly squelched the thought. He couldn't indulge thoughts like that right now. They played hell with your edge, and he needed all the edge he could get if he was going to find her. He'd worry about the rest of it once he had her back.

"All right, then," Winterhawk said. "You'd best be on your way. Call me tomorrow, if there's anything else I can do."

"You sure you're all right?"

He nodded. "Quite. I know how this works. I'll be right as rain in the morning. Now go. Find her, and bring her by tomorrow."

Ocelot smiled faintly. "Okay, you got a deal. See you then."

Once outside, Ocelot considered his next option. He realized that going out beating the bushes for Kestrel wasn't going to work; if she was being held somewhere by mundanes, Winterhawk's ritual would have found her right away. Ditto if she was just off at a bar or had gone back to the nature preserve to be alone. Besides, she

wouldn't have done any of those things without at least calling him. If she had disappeared and not called, that meant something unexpected had happened to her. He wondered if whoever was responsible for the hallucinations had her; whoever it was, they were certainly capable of constructing a ward that would keep Winterhawk from finding her. But if that was true, what did they want?

Ocelot went wearily downstairs and retrieved his bike, deciding that he'd ride home and see if anyone had left a message on his machine there. It was a useless endeavor since he had set the home phone to forward to his wristphone, but he didn't know what else to do. He had already called everyone he knew who might be able to help, and they were all doing the best they could. Like it or not, he was just going to have to wait.

He was halfway home when he felt the familiar buzz of his wristphone. Pulling off the road in what was probably a highly unsafe maneuver, he stabbed the button without getting off the bike. "Yeah?" he said quickly.

Gabriel's face appeared on the screen. He looked troubled. "Ocelot. Forgive me for not contacting you sooner, but I've been devoting all my attention to finding Kestrel."

"Did you find her?"

He shook his head. "Not yet. I'd like to discuss this with you further. Can you suggest a place to meet?"

Ocelot considered. "How about the Spider again?"

He nodded. "Half an hour?"

"I'll be there." Ocelot broke the connection, unwilling to show Gabriel his bitter disappointment. He didn't want to admit it to anyone, not even himself, but the young fixer had been his best hope. He seemed to be able to do anything—in some cases even more than Harry could do. And he cared about Kestrel, maybe as much as he himself

did. Unconsciously, his mental defenses began building the faint beginnings of the wall that would help him deal with finding out that she was dead.

Gabriel beat him to the Glass Spider this time, and was waiting in the back room. He didn't look quite as perfect as he normally did, with his tie slightly undone and a strand of inky hair hanging down over his forehead. He looked like a man who had been working hard on a problem, but his expression showed that he had not yet found a solution.

Ocelot came in and closed the door a little too hard behind him. "You didn't find her yet."

Gabriel shook his head. "Not yet, and that troubles me greatly."

"What have you done so far?" Ocelot straddled a chair, then realized that he couldn't sit still, so he got up and began pacing, moving around the room like a caged cat.

"I've sent word to my contacts, both in and out of the area, to let me know if anyone sees someone answering her description. I've checked out all the places I've known her to frequent, although you probably know those better than I do."

"Have you got any magic stuff involved? Winterhawk did a detection ritual, and he said he couldn't find her. He said that means she's either behind some kind of magical protection, or else—"

Gabriel held up a hand. "We won't speak of 'or else'," he said, a strange faraway look in his eyes.

Ocelot was fine with that. "Do you have any mages on it?"

"Of course. I know some of— not inconsiderable talent. So far they have come up with nothing as well."

"So what are you gonna do next?"

The young man shrugged. "Continue with the search. Bring in more resources. I'll continue this until I find her." The resolve in his soft voice was clear.

"Yeah..." Ocelot found it comforting that there was apparently someone else who cared as much as he did about finding Kestrel, but his thin grip on rationality was fading fast. He hated not knowing what to do, not knowing where to go next. He was a man of action. He wanted to *do* something, and there was nothing he could do. Feeling his anger and frustration rising, he threw himself into a chair and lashed out at Gabriel, his voice more desperate than threatening. "You're supposed to be the wonder boy! You're the one everybody's talkin' about! They say there's nothin' you can't do. You've got all these fantastic connections, that you can use to find out things about us that nobody's supposed to know! Why can't you use those fantastic connections to find Kestrel?"

"Ocelot."

Ocelot looked up, a quick glare. "*What?*" he snapped out.

Gabriel was regarding him with an expression of oddly comforting calm. "We *will* find her. I give you my word. I won't stop until I do."

Ocelot nodded, propping his elbows on the table and burying his fingers in the sides of his hair. "Yeah. Yeah, I know we will." His eyes came up to meet Gabriel's, though his head did not move. "You love her, don't you?"

"Yes," he said simply. After a pause, he added, "But not in the way that you think."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Gabriel rose. "Another time. For now, I think it best that we return to the search. May I suggest that you get some rest? You look quite tired, and you'll be no help for her if you exhaust yourself."

Ocelot started to protest, then realized that the young fixer was right. There were scores of people out looking for Kestrel now, so the search would not stop just because he caught a few hours' sleep. Or at least tried to. "Yeah," he rasped. "You'll call me, no matter when it is, if you find something?"

"Of course," Gabriel said. "And I trust you will do the same?"

"Yeah. I will." Ocelot pushed himself off the chair and trudged out of the room. Despite Gabriel's assurances, he was unable to shake the feeling that he would never see Kestrel again.

32.

Ocelot didn't get much sleep that night.

He tried — several times in fact — but every time he fell into a light, troubled slumber, it was haunted by nightmares of Kestrel and blood and screaming for help. Finally he gave up on sleeping and spent the rest of the night in his chair in front of the trideo. In the morning, he didn't remember anything he had watched.

One by one throughout the day, his sources checked in to inform him reluctantly that they had found nothing. Harry still had all his available people working on locating Kestrel, but as nearly as they could determine, she had disappeared without a trace. Even the white van she had been driving was nowhere to be found. `Wraith and T. C. had come up with nothing on the Matrix. Joe had even gotten his friend at Lone Star involved, but still to no avail. No one matching her description had turned up at any of the area hospitals, jails, or morgues, nor had they attempted to leave town via the airport, train, ferry, or bus terminal.

Gabriel called at mid-day to let him know that he had not yet discovered anything either. He hadn't remained on the phone long; Ocelot could see that even the always-in-control, insufferably-self-assured young man was starting to get seriously worried, though he was trying hard not to show it. That fact, more than any other, disturbed Ocelot.

The rest of the day passed much as the early part had. Ocelot spent a couple hours re-checking some of Kestrel's haunts just to have something to do; he went by her house again and found nothing had changed from the last time. He checked her answering machine and found only his own message and one from Gabriel, both of them merely

checking to see if she was home. Finally, at the end of his inspirations, he had returned home and started a long and grueling workout to get his mind off his growing fear that the longer this drew out, the greater the chance that Kestrel wasn't going to come back alive.

In the late afternoon, Winterhawk called. Ocelot was still in the middle of the workout; he swiped a towel across his forehead before answering.

"You didn't call me this morning," the mage said soberly. "I trust that means you've not yet had success?" He looked much better than he had the previous night.

Ocelot sighed, falling into a chair next to the phone. "Not a damned thing. It's like she's disappeared off the earth. Harry can't find anything, Gabriel can't find anything—" He tried to keep his voice steady, but didn't quite succeed.

"What are you doing right now?" Winterhawk broke in.

Ocelot looked at him funny. "I'm in the middle of a workout. Why?"

"Why don't you finish up and come over here. If anyone calls they can reach you here as easily as there, and it can't be doing you any good to sit over there alone and wait."

"Hawk, I know what you're tryin' to do," he said, shaking his head, "but—"

"No buts, my friend," Winterhawk said briskly. "If you don't come over here, I'm coming over there. I'd really prefer that you come over here, though. Your chairs are bloody uncomfortable." His voice grew more serious, as did his expression. "Come on. Humor me."

Ocelot thought about it for a moment, realizing that Hawk was right. It *wasn't* doing him any good sitting here by himself staring at his four walls. The information wasn't going to come any faster here than it would at

`Hawk's place, and at least there he'd have somebody to talk to. "Okay, okay," he said at last. "I'll be over in a little bit."

"Good," the mage said, returning to his brisk tone.

It was a little over an hour before Ocelot arrived at Winterhawk's apartment. He had finished up his workout, grabbed a quick shower (with his wristphone on the sink right next to it, in case it rang), and resisted the urge to call Harry and Gabriel to find out if they had any new information. *Of course they don't*, he told himself bitterly. *They'd call you if they did. Just back off and let them do their jobs.*

Winterhawk met him at the door. "I called out for pizza," he said. "Didn't think you'd be wanting to go out to get anything." He was dressed in his casual hanging-around-the-house style: jeans and a baggy black fisherman's sweater over a white T-shirt.

Ocelot nodded wearily. "Thanks." He noticed that `Hawk had put all the furniture back where it belonged; there was no sign of the chalked lines and other components of the circle that had been there last night. "You look like you're feelin' better since last night."

"Quite so. I told you — it's just the strain of having to concentrate for so long. Takes a bit out of you. But it goes away quickly with a few hours' sleep." His expression sobered. "I just wish I'd been able to find something."

"You tried," Ocelot said, sighing. "Can't ask for more than that." He threw himself into a chair. "Gabriel said he's got mages on it too, and I'll bet so does Harry."

"Well, then," Winterhawk said, taking a seat opposite Ocelot, "it'll only be a matter of time before she turns up safe as houses, won't it?"

"Come on, `Hawk," Ocelot said bitterly. "Remember who you're talkin' to? You ain't gonna fool me with all that optimistic crap. Sure I'm hopin' you're right. I'm

hopin' that more than anything in the world. But you know as well as I do that if all those mages can't find her, then she's probably – " He looked down at his lap, unable to meet Winterhawk's eyes. " – dead."

"Don't do that," Winterhawk ordered, his electric blue gaze cold and determined. "We'll believe that she's alive until we find out otherwise. All right?"

Ocelot didn't look up. "Yeah."

The pizzas arrived, and the two runners spent the next half hour in companionable silence, eating and flipping through channels on the trideo. Ocelot didn't think he was hungry until he began eating, and then he realized that he hadn't had anything all day. Between them, with Ocelot leading the way, they polished off one large pizza and half of another.

When he'd finally had enough, Ocelot leaned disconsolately back on the sofa, beer glass in hand. "Do you really think we're gonna find her, `Hawk?"

"I do," the mage said, gathering up the boxes to carry them to the kitchen. "It doesn't make any sense that she's – not alive."

Ocelot looked up at him questioningly. "Okay, tell me what you mean by that. I could sure use something to believe right now."

Winterhawk returned to the living room and sat back down in his chair. "It's simple," he said, injecting every bit of persuasion that he could muster into his voice. "If it was something random, such as a carjacking or robbery or that sort of thing, she's more than capable of taking care of herself, correct?"

"Sure," Ocelot said. "She'd rip `em to shreds if they tried to mess with her."

"So by that, we can probably assume that this isn't a random incident, right?"

"Probably...so what's that mean?"

"What it means," Winterhawk continued, hoping that he sounded more convincing than he felt, "is that her disappearance was deliberate. If I were inclined to make a bet on who's behind it, I'd bet on it being the same person or persons that are behind the bizarre happenings of late."

"Well, sure," Ocelot said. That much was obvious. "But how does that lead to her bein' still alive?"

"So far," Winterhawk pointed out, "except for the little unpleasantness with Jenner and Magnum, none of the things that have happened to us have been dangerous. It's almost as if someone is having sport with us, or trying to drive us insane."

"They're doin' a pretty damn good job of it," Ocelot growled. "And they sure as hell have been dangerous for *other* people. Look at Blake. Look at Mortenson and Hoenberg. And Jenner and Magnum."

"Yes," the mage agreed, warming to his theory, "but *look* at them. We've got Blake explained already: Nuance killed him with a ritual. As for the others, they all died in specific ways. They didn't disappear and then turn up dead; they simply died. If this person or persons, whoever they are, wanted to kill any of us, including Kestrel, I've no doubt that they could accomplish it with a minimum of fuss and bother."

Ocelot shifted position, setting the beer glass down on the table. "Yeah, but they could change their tactics, couldn't they?"

"Of course they could. But I wonder if they *will*. Perhaps they want Kestrel for some purpose. Perhaps they plan to use her as a bargaining chip against you – or against Gabriel, possibly."

"So then why haven't they contacted us?" Ocelot demanded. "It's been almost two days."

"That I don't know," Winterhawk admitted. "I didn't say I had the answer; it's just a theory."

"You're just tryin' to get my mind off this." Ocelot pushed himself up and stood, going over to the window to look out over the neighborhood. It was dark, but the streetlights and the lights on the buildings illuminated the area in a cheery glow. "Nice try, `Hawk, but it ain't gonna work." He grasped the window-frame on either side, tightening his grip until his arms shook. "Damn it, I want to *do* something!" he exclaimed. "She's out there somewhere—she needs help, and I'm just sittin' here on my ass!"

Winterhawk sighed, remaining where he was. "I won't tell you we're doing all we can. You know that. There isn't anything else we can do but wait. You can run out there and search for her on your own, but I think all you're going to do is tire yourself out and run into brick walls." He paused, then spoke very quietly. "If that's what you want to do, I'll help you. After what you've done for me in the past, I wouldn't do anything else. But ask yourself: will it help?"

Slowly, Ocelot released his grip on the window and turned back around to face Winterhawk. His grief and frustration was clearly visible on his face. "This is—the first time I've ever felt like this about anybody, `Hawk. I never let it happen before. But with Kestrel it's different." Slumping against the wall, head bowed, his voice dropped to a near-whisper. "I don't want to lose her now that I've found her. I don't know if I could take that."

"I know, Terry," Winterhawk said softly. "As you pointed out to me, remember who you're talking to here."

Ocelot nodded morosely. "Yeah. Where's all my speeches about livin' with what life throws at you now? Wouldn't blame you if you threw `em back at me."

"I wouldn't do that." Winterhawk spoke in the same calm tone. "I've never felt that way, and I'm not about to start now. I'm still confident that we're going to find her."

He paused. "I can see what you're doing. I don't know whether you should be doing it, but I won't presume to pass judgment."

"What?" Ocelot's eyes came up to meet the mage's.

"You're preparing yourself. I can see it. Perhaps you have to do it, but I wouldn't do it yet."

"Nobody can find her, Al," Ocelot said desolately. "I gotta start acceptin' that maybe that means she's not alive to find." He pushed himself off the wall, took a deep breath. "Listen—I gotta go. I need to get out and just move around, if nothing else. Maybe I'll go over to the Wharf Rat and see if I can start a bar fight or something." He picked up his coat and began putting it on. "I appreciate what you're tryin' to do. Thanks for bein' here to talk to. But I can't stay cooped up right now, you understand?"

Winterhawk nodded sadly. "Yes, my friend. I understand. Don't get yourself killed over there—Kestrel will be quite unhappy when she comes back if you do that."

"I'll try," Ocelot said, and started for the door. "No promises, though."

There was a knock.

Winterhawk's gaze came quickly up. "Wonder who that could be..." he mused, and then went astral for a second to look. When he came back, he looked confused. "No one there, or anywhere nearby."

Ocelot was already running for the door, crossing the big room in three quick steps. He flung it open, sweeping his eyes back and forth.

The hallway was empty.

Then he looked down.

"What is it?" Winterhawk asked, coming over.

Ocelot snatched up the two items that lay on the mat in front of Winterhawk's door and stared down at them as the mage drew up behind him. He held a set of keys with

a Westwind fob, and a second key attached to a generic orange plastic tag. Picking up the Westwind keys in his other hand, Ocelot squeezed them tightly. "These are Kestrel's," he said through his teeth.

Winterhawk plucked the other key from Ocelot's open hand and examined it. "Knight's Rest Motel," he said. "It's a room key. Number 111."

33.

The little black sportscar screamed around a rain-slick corner, tires squealing and back end fishtailing. "Faster!" Ocelot urged from the passenger seat. He could barely sit still.

"I'm going as fast as I can," Winterhawk replied grimly. "Unless you want to smash into a streetlight."

As soon as Ocelot had made the connection between the motel key and Kestrel's keychain, he had been out the door of Winterhawk's apartment at full speed. With effort, Hawk had gotten him to stop long enough to allow him to catch up, insisting that he was going along too. "You don't know what's waiting for you there," he pointed out as he hurriedly threw on his armored coat. "Best to have some backup."

"Then get your ass movin'," Ocelot had urged impatiently. "This is the first clue we've had for two days—I'm not gonna let it get away from me."

They had opted to take Winterhawk's little Honda-GM 3220 sportscar rather than Ocelot's Blitzen or Hawk's other vehicle, a beat-up Ford Americar. Ocelot had been ready to leap onto the Blitzen and go roaring off until Winterhawk pointed out that, with any luck at all, they would have a third passenger when they returned. The choice of the 3220 over the Americar was due to its greater speed and handling capabilities.

Ocelot fidgeted in the passenger seat, tightly gripping the two keychains and trying to keep quiet and calm. Winterhawk was right: he was driving as fast as he could, and probably far too fast for conditions. Having an accident right now, or getting pulled over by a Lone Star cruiser, wouldn't serve their purpose at all. As tightly wound as Ocelot was at the moment, he didn't hold out

much hope for the life expectancy of any Lone Star officer who tried to hinder their progress.

The Knight's Rest Motel was down in the south end of Puyallup, which turned out to be about as far away from Winterhawk's apartment that they could get and still be in the Greater Seattle area. Ocelot wondered if their unseen messenger had planned it that way.

He also wondered what they were going to find when they got there. Would Kestrel be there? Would she be alive? Or would the room be empty—just another in a continuing series of maddening taunts from whoever was pulling this puppet show's strings? Ocelot's fists clenched around the keychains; he hoped that there would be someone else there, perhaps someone guarding Kestrel. Right now he would take great pleasure (not to mention great catharsis) from making mincemeat out of anyone remotely connected with this sick little drama.

The Knight's Rest proved to be a seedy, shabby-looking motel along one of south Puyallup's side streets. Ocelot had the door open and was leaping out of the car before Winterhawk had even completely stopped it in the parking lot. "Wait!" the mage called.

Ocelot, with effort, skidded to a stop. "What?"

Winterhawk got out of the car. "Shouldn't we assense the place first? What if—?"

"Screw it! I'm goin'! Enough plans!" Ocelot took off running without a backward glance. Part of his mind knew that Hawk was right—it was probably a trap. But he couldn't shake visions of finding something horrible, like Kestrel's dismembered body, inside the room. He had to know. He was tired of waiting. He was going to know what was going on now.

Winterhawk caught up with him just as he discovered room 111, which was near the end of a row on the bottom of two levels. Ignoring the key he held in his hand, Ocelot

aimed a savage kick at the door, putting all his frustration-laden strength into the blow. Constructed of flimsy material, it couldn't stand up to the assault: it splintered and flung inward. Ocelot followed it in, crossing the threshold before the door hit the wall.

What he saw made him gasp in horror. "Oh my God..."

Kestrel lay on the room's threadbare bed, her hands tied to the headboard with heavy cord. She still wore the same jeans and T-shirt she had been wearing when Ocelot had last seen her, but now they were torn, dirty, and bloodstained. Her short blonde hair was matted with blood, her face puffed and swollen. Every part of her body that could be seen was covered with cuts and bruises. Her eyes were closed; she appeared to be asleep or unconscious. Or —

Ocelot rushed into the room and knelt down by her side. Popping his cyberspur, he used it to cut through the rope on one side, while Winterhawk hurried to cut the other side with his mageblade. Ocelot took her hand in both of his, dropping the keychains, forgotten, to the floor. "Kestrel..." he whispered. "Come on...wake up —"

"Kestrel!" A shadow appeared in the doorway, then swiftly entered the room. Ocelot, moving at full speed, was up and between the newcomer and Kestrel before he realized who it was. Gabriel, heedless of the danger he was in, shoved past Ocelot to the bed and dropped down next to it. "What are you doing here?" he asked without raising his eyes from her face.

"I was gonna ask you the same question," Ocelot growled. "How did you know she was here?"

"I got a message that led me here," Gabriel said. He put a hand on Kestrel's forehead, then checked her pulse at the neck. His smooth brow furrowed with worry.

"So did I." Ocelot regarded Gabriel with suspicion for a moment, then turned his attention back to Kestrel. Winterhawk, ignored by both Ocelot and Gabriel, hung back and kept watch to make sure no one else came in through the door.

Kestrel appeared to be waking up. She moaned softly, rolling her shoulders, and then opened her swollen eyes just a crack.

"You're all right now, Kestrel," Ocelot said, his voice shaking.

Gabriel nodded, squeezing her other hand. If Ocelot had been looking at his eyes at that moment, he would have been very disturbed by the veiled rage he saw in them. Still, though, the young man's voice was soothing and steady. "Yes. You're safe now."

Kestrel's face showed pain as she attempted to speak, but she nonetheless seemed determined to do so. "O—Ocelot..."

"Yeah, I'm here. Right here." He reached up and brushed her matted hair off her forehead.

"Ga...briel?"

"Here, Kestrel."

She nodded, then winced. Ocelot gripped her hand. "Kestrel—you have to tell us. Who did this to you?"

For a long moment she didn't answer; Ocelot was afraid that she had passed out again. Then her eyes opened a bit wider and fear crossed her battered features. "Gabriel..." Her voice was fading, but she fought on. "Gabriel...it was..."

"Who, Kestrel?" Gabriel's tone was tightly controlled as he leaned forward.

She tightened her grip on the fixer's hand. "*Stefan*," she whispered. Weakly, she pointed toward the other side of the room, and then her eyes closed again as she went limp.

The effect of the single word on Gabriel was galvanizing. He stiffened, returning Kestrel's hand to her side with utmost care. Then, very slowly, he rose.

"What's going on?" Ocelot demanded. "Who the hell is Stefan?"

Gabriel ignored him, moving across the room with single-minded purpose. As Ocelot and Winterhawk watched, he picked something up from the dresser.

Intent as they had been on Kestrel, neither runner had noticed the object, but they stared at it now in Gabriel's hands. It was a stone box, roughly square in shape and approximately fifteen centimeters on a side. The box was a deep green-gray color, its sides carved in impossibly intricate patterns. The young man held the box so tightly in his hands that they shook, his violet eyes burning with rigidly controlled rage.

Ocelot wasn't controlling his nearly as well. "I asked you a question, kid. *Who's Stefan?*" He stalked across the room and stood centimeters from Gabriel, his eyes flashing.

With visible effort, Gabriel slowly relaxed his stiff muscles and met Ocelot's gaze. "I must go now," he said carefully, as if he had to keep a rein on every word. "I have something I must attend to." He turned toward the door.

Ocelot reached out and grabbed him by the lapels. "You ain't goin' anywhere until you tell me who this Stefan is. You know, and you're gonna tell me."

A hint of something dangerous appeared in Gabriel's eyes. "Put me down, Ocelot," he said softly.

"Ocelot—" Winterhawk approached, speaking quietly so as not to startle anyone further. "Put the man down. Let's discuss this."

Ocelot hesitated a moment, then roughly loosened his grasp on Gabriel. "Okay," he said, his tone harsh and

impatient. "Talk. Tell me who Stefan is so I can go rip his head off."

Gabriel paused to straighten his jacket, but it was clear to all concerned that he was doing it not out of vanity, but rather to give himself a few seconds to get control again. "It isn't as simple as that," he said in the same quiet voice. "Ocelot, I'm sorry. This is not your fight."

"Damn straight it is!" Ocelot yelled. He'd lost all semblance of sanity now, as the red haze of rage washed over him. With a savage gesture, he indicated the bed where Kestrel lay. "He did this to her, and I'm gonna kill him!"

"Ocelot—" Winterhawk began.

Gabriel shook his head. "You don't understand. This is something that you can't do. It's out of your hands now. Please. Stay with Kestrel—"

"Like *hell!*" Ocelot's voice grew louder. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Listen, kid, I've put up with you and your crap so far, actin' all high and mighty, but this is where I call it quits. I've been in this business a hell of a lot longer than you have, and there's no fuckin' *way* you're gonna tell me to just back off and stay out of this while you go off and handle it!"

Gabriel looked at him, then at Winterhawk. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "I must go." Again he turned for the door.

Something snapped inside Ocelot. Moving at full speed, he spun the young fixer back around, lashing out with his other fist to connect with a crushing blow across Gabriel's jaw. Gabriel reeled back and slammed into the corner of the room next to the bed, nearly knocking the lamp off the night table. Somehow he managed to hang on to the stone box. Ocelot stood over him, glaring down. "Now—are you gonna tell me who Stefan is, or am I gonna have to beat it outta you?"

For a second or two, Gabriel closed his eyes, bringing the hand that wasn't holding the box up to his face. He looked at the blood on his hand from where Ocelot's blow had split his lip, then his gaze traveled up to Ocelot. With deadly calm, he made a quick gesture with the bloody hand, and Ocelot lifted up from the floor, flew across the room, and slammed into the opposite wall, stunned. Swiftly Gabriel rose. "Please take care of Kestrel," he said in a voice that was almost gentle, and then he was gone.

When Ocelot picked himself up off the floor a few seconds later, leaping to his feet and running over to the door, all he saw was a black Saab Dynamit disappearing into the distance at a high rate of speed.

"He's gone," Winterhawk said.

"*Fuck!*" Ocelot slammed both fists into the wall, putting two fist-shaped dents in the flimsy sheetrock. "Why didn't you stop him?"

"I'm not certain I could have," the mage said. "Hadn't we best attend to Kestrel?"

The reason they were here had almost been forgotten in all the commotion. Ocelot knelt down next to the bed again, his rage draining out as he took her hand. He looked up at Winterhawk. "Can you heal her?"

"Probably. Let me take a look." He sat down in the room's only chair and went astral, coming back only a few moments later. "I can heal most of it," he said. "It appears that she hasn't sustained any life-threatening injuries. No internal damage, broken bones, and so forth. Severe cuts and bruises, but it looks worse than it is."

Ocelot closed his eyes. "Thank God..."

Winterhawk dragged the chair over next to the bed and sat back down. "Give me a minute, and I'll see what I can do. It might take some time, though, since there are numerous injuries. I see some evidence of psychological trauma in her aura, as well."

"This Stefan, whoever the hell he is, worked her over good," Ocelot said, fighting to control his anger. "I want to kill him. I want to find him, and I want to kill him."

Winterhawk ignored him, concentrating on weaving his healing spell to take care of the worst of Kestrel's many injuries. When he'd finished, he settled back. "There," he said. "We'll have to wait a bit, but that's the biggest one."

Kestrel opened her eyes again and looked around in confusion.

"Hi," Ocelot said, forcing a smile. "You back?"

She nodded tiredly. "I...feel a little better now."

"That's Hawk's doing," Ocelot told her. "He's healed you up some, and he'll take care of the rest of it in a little bit." His expression turned sober. "Kestrel, I know it's hard to talk about it, but you gotta tell us what happened."

She sat up a little bit, with effort; Ocelot quickly arranged the pillow under her head and shoulders. Looking around, fear crossed her face. "Where's Gabriel?"

Ocelot glanced curtly toward the door. "He left." Right now, he didn't feel like saying any more about the guy than he had to.

The fear increased. "Did he—say where he was going?"

"I think he's gone to talk to this Stefan chap," Winterhawk said.

Ocelot glared at him, then looked down at her. "Who's Stefan, Kestrel?"

"Oh, God—" Kestrel tried to swing her legs off the bed and sit fully up. "We have to go after him. He can't do this—"

"Wait a minute," Ocelot said firmly, taking her shoulders and gently pushing her back. "You're not ready for that yet. Whoever this guy was, he beat you up pretty

good. Just tell us who Stefan is so we can go find him make sure he never does anything like this again."

She shook her head. "I can't," she said.

"What do you mean, you can't?" Ocelot demanded. "Gabriel knows who he is, doesn't he?"

"Yes."

"Then we gotta know too. Come on, Kestrel. Tell us so we can get you fixed up and then we can all go after this asshole."

Again she shook her head, this time pushing Ocelot aside as she sat up. "You don't understand what's going on here, Ocelot. I didn't either until two days ago. You have to help me. We have to go find and catch Gabriel before he goes after Stefan." She looked up at him pleadingly. "Please, Ocelot. He'll never make it in the state he's in. I don't want him to go off and get himself killed over this."

Ocelot sighed, looked up at Winterhawk. "You have to tell us more, Kestrel. What are you afraid of? Why is he gonna get himself killed?"

Kestrel shoved her hair back out of her eyes. She still looked terrible, but Winterhawk's healing spell must have done at least part of its job, because she looked much more steady than she had before. "I can't tell you that," she said. "I gave my word, and I won't break it. It's not mine to tell. But if you'll help, I'll take you to Gabriel. I know where he is. I'll talk to him. He'll listen to me. Maybe between us we can get through this." Absently, she picked at the knots in the cords that were still tied around her wrists as she spoke. "Please," she said again. "You've come here to find me, and I'm grateful that you did. But if we don't stop Gabriel, we may all be in danger."

Ocelot looked at Winterhawk again, and then back down at the battered form of the woman he feared he would never see alive again. "Okay," he said reluctantly.

"I'll help. I don't like it, but I'll do it. What do I need to do?"

Kestrel squeezed his hand, then looked up at Winterhawk. "Will you help too?"

The mage shrugged. "I'm intrigued, so I suppose I can't refuse."

"We should call the others before we go," Ocelot said. "If this is gonna be dangerous, I'd like to have their firepower along."

Kestrel nodded. "Good idea. Can you make the calls on the way?" Painfully she rose from the bed.

"Yeah. I'll have `em meet us with the truck. We ain't all gonna fit in `Hawk's car." Ocelot pulled off his jacket and draped it over Kestrel's shoulders. She started to protest, but then smiled faintly and pulled it around her.

As Winterhawk drove back toward Seattle and made the calls to `Wraith and Joe, Ocelot leaned forward from where he was scrunched in the tiny back seat of the 3220. "Where are we goin'?" he asked. "How do you know where Gabriel is?"

"I know where he lives," she said. "I think he'll be there for at least a little while before he goes. That's why we have to hurry." She was looking a bit better after another of Winterhawk's healing sessions right before they had left the motel. "How did you find me?"

"Somebody left your car keys on `Hawk's doorstep when I was over there, along with the key to the room."

She nodded. "He wanted you to find me. You and Gabriel both. That's why he grabbed me in the first place." Disgusted, she added, "I can't believe he got away with it so easily. But I suppose I shouldn't be ashamed. I'm no match for him. It would be silly to assume anything else. I'm just glad he didn't kill me, but then I guess that wouldn't have served his purposes."

"You know this guy," Ocelot said. It wasn't a question.

She shook her head. "I know *of* him. I'd never actually met him before this. But that's really all I can tell you right now. Trust me—we'll find Gabriel, and he'll tell you the whole story. I think he owes you that, after all you've been through." She pulled Ocelot's coat around her and settled back into the seat, obviously still tired and frightened from her ordeal. Ocelot didn't push it any further.

They drove in silence the rest of the way back to the rendezvous point, which was the underground garage beneath Winterhawk's apartment building. As they drove inside, they could see that the Nomad was parked in the 3220's normal space. Winterhawk pulled in next to it and the three of them got out.

Joe and ShadoWraith got out of the truck. `Wraith regarded Kestrel with a raised eyebrow, while Joe grinned. "You found her!" As he got a better look, though, his grin faded and he made no further comment.

Quickly, Ocelot and Winterhawk, with a little help from Kestrel, filled in `Wraith and Joe on the evening's developments. When they got to the part about Gabriel's abrupt departure, Joe spoke up. "I thought you said he wasn't a mage."

"That's what Harry said," Ocelot told him, as it dawned on him that the young fixer must have indeed used magic to fling him across the room. "I wonder what else he was wrong about."

"Come on," Kestrel said urgently. "We have to hurry, or we'll miss him."

Everyone got back into the truck. "Where?" `Wraith, who was driving, asked.

"It's not far from here," Kestrel said. She gave him an address, and he began driving. Ocelot leaned back in his seat as they drove, alternately keeping an eye on the scenery and Kestrel. He wondered what the hell they

were getting themselves into, but knew that, whatever it was, there was no stopping now.

34.

The address Kestrel gave turned out to be a high-rise building right in the middle of downtown Seattle. "He lives *here*?" Ocelot demanded as they drew up near the huge structure.

She nodded. "Up at the top." She directed `Wraith to pull into the underground parking garage, where she leaned out the window and tapped a code into the keypad. "He likes a place with a good view."

Once they had parked, she got out quickly and directed them to do the same. "It might already be too late," she said. "If we miss him, I have no idea where he'll go from here." Despite her remaining injuries, she still moved with the fluid grace characteristic of cybernetic reaction enhancements.

As they traversed the parking lot, Ocelot pointed out the black Dynamit. Kestrel shook her head. "That doesn't mean anything," she said. "He probably won't take the car when he goes."

They entered the lobby from the parking garage, and Kestrel quickly drew Ocelot's coat around her and buttoned it up, ducking down between Ocelot and Joe to hide her bloody hair. Fortunately at this time of night there were not many people riding the elevators, so they got one to themselves. The buttons went from B1 to 35. Kestrel punched something into the keypad next to the buttons and entered 36. The elevator doors closed and the small cubicle began rising swiftly upward.

When the doors opened again, the runners found themselves in a short hallway carpeted in rich gray. There was a single door at the end. "Come on," Kestrel said, pushing her way out and hurrying down the hallway. After a moment, the others followed.

Kestrel knocked on the heavy wooden door. "Gabriel? It's Kestrel. I'm with the others. Please let us in if you're in there."

For a long time, there was no answer. Kestrel looked fearful, knocked again. "Gabriel?"

There was the slightest of *clicks*.

Immediately, Kestrel grasped the door handle and swung the door open, motioning for the others to follow. They stepped inside and closed the door behind them.

The runners—except for Kestrel—stopped, looking around in frank amazement.

The apartment, if you could call something such as this an apartment, was magnificent. They were standing in a small antechamber area that looked out on a vast room that seemed to have glass everywhere. The roof, also glass, soared some ten meters up, and this single room must have occupied at least half of the area of this floor. The floors were covered with fine marble, scattered over with light-colored oriental rugs; the huge room was broken up only by small clusters of furniture throughout its area. Although it was dark, the place had a feeling of open airiness to it, almost as if the glass was not there at all.

Far across the room, in a cleared area near one of the glass walls, a small figure could be seen. Kestrel crept forward, indicating silence; the others followed as she approached the figure.

As they drew closer, the small form resolved itself into the familiar one of Gabriel. The young man seemed to be paying no attention to them. Dressed only in snug-fitting black pants and soft black boots, he appeared to be going through some sort of exercise, deep in concentration. Ocelot's eyes widened as he recognized the type if not the particular exercise: it was an intricate *kata* whose purpose was to center the mind and rid it of any

outside influences. Gabriel moved fluidly, his every motion performed with the grace and precision of a world-class master. When he turned so he was facing the runners, they saw that his eyes were closed, his jaw set. Ocelot noticed that the small wound on his mouth had disappeared. His chest and forehead were beaded with sweat; his hair stood up in dark spikes. Near him, on a crystal table, sat the stone box he had taken from the motel room.

The runners remained silent, reluctant to interrupt the ritual. It was nearly five minutes before Gabriel completed the last movement and came back to a straight position, feet together, hands at his sides, and opened his eyes. Despite the sweat glistening on his chest, he wasn't even breathing hard. When he looked at Kestrel, it was with the same calm serenity he had exhibited when they had first met him. "You should not have brought them here, Kestrel," he said. Once again, Ocelot was reminded of the images of saints he had seen on the trideo.

"I had to, Gabriel," she said softly, stepping forward. "You know that. They're involved now. Now that we know this part of the story, you owe it to them to tell them the rest."

For several moments, Gabriel remained standing in the same position, looking through Kestrel as if deep in thought. Finally, he nodded once, reluctantly. "Yes," he said. "You're right, of course. There is no other alternative." Moving across the room, he picked up a black *gi* jacket from the back of a chair and put it on, leaving the belt untied. "I had hoped to avoid this, though."

Kestrel nodded. "I know. But they deserve an explanation. This whole thing has been hard on all of us."

"Yes. And I am feeling quite guilty about that," Gabriel said.

"Wait a minute," Ocelot spoke up. "Will you two stop talking about us like we're not here? And what to you mean, you feel guilty? Are you behind this Stefan guy somehow?"

"In a manner of speaking, I am," Gabriel said. "You see, he is my brother."

The runners were silent, staring at him as that sunk in. "Your—brother?" Ocelot finally managed to get out.

"Yes. And there is more." Gabriel looked at Kestrel, who nodded, and then turned back to the runners. "Before I tell you the remainder, however, I require something of you."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "What?"

"An oath," Gabriel said.

"What kind of an oath?" Ocelot demanded.

The young man addressed Winterhawk. "You, I'm sure, are familiar with the sort of oaths taken by those initiating into the higher mysteries of magic."

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes, of course. The oath is normally only taken by those joining an initiatory group, but I've heard of such oaths used for other purposes as well."

Ocelot glared at Gabriel. "Why do you need it?"

"I have my own reasons," Gabriel said mildly. "They'll become clear when I reveal the rest of what I will tell you."

"What is required?" Wraith asked. "What are the consequences?"

Gabriel's gaze settled on the elf. "*Nil desperandum*, my friend. It is merely a formality, for the price of breaking my oath is not death, nor anything so dire. The oath will simply secure your promise that you will not reveal anything I tell you tonight, and ensure that if you do, I will know of it immediately."

"This must be some secret," Joe said. "But what good will it do you to just know?"

"Because I trust you," Gabriel said. "I will be asking you to trust me, so therefore I must trust you in return. As I said, merely a formality."

"This oath is magically binding, of course," Winterhawk said.

"Of course."

"Then you are a magician."

Gabriel smiled. "Yes. But that is not my secret." He looked toward the window. "Time grows short. If you do not agree to my terms, I must ask you to leave now. I have much yet to do."

The runners looked at him, and he looked back at them. Standing there dressed in the simple black uniform, he appeared very young and very vulnerable. That was, until you looked at his eyes. Clear and impossibly purple, they held both a wisdom and a compassion that were better suited to one far beyond his apparent youth. The strength of his gaze contrasted with the fragile beauty of his form.

Joe, who had mistrusted Gabriel all along, spoke first. "I'll agree," he said, and immediately knew he had made the correct choice. Something about it felt right to him. Unbidden, his strange vision of standing in the canyon between the flood and the fire flashed through his mind.

"As will I," Winterhawk said quietly. His agreement was more from curiosity than anything else, but he too felt that there was only one proper choice.

"Yes," Wraith said, his expression unfathomable.

Ocelot was the last to speak. Eyes narrowed, he looked at Kestrel, still bloody and obviously in pain. She looked back at him, hiding nothing in her gaze. He saw trust there. He saw strength. He saw —

Love.

And at that moment, it didn't matter if that love was for him, for Gabriel, or for both of them. He knew what he had to do. "Okay," he said, surprised to hear his voice come out strong and clear. "I'm in."

Kestrel's shoulders slumped in relief, and she smiled at him.

Gabriel nodded. "Thank you," he said. Approaching them, he began speaking in a low tone, in a language none of the runners had ever heard. Wraith looked at Winterhawk with a raised eyebrow, but the mage shrugged and shook his head. Gabriel stood before each runner in turn, gently touching each forehead (Joe had to lean over) and intoning something in the odd language. Ocelot, when it was his turn, felt a only a gentle tingle in his forehead, and then nothing else unusual.

"That's it?" he asked. Somehow, he'd always thought a ritual binding an oath would be more—well—*complicated*.

"That's it," Gabriel said, smiling. "You have given me your trust—now I will give you mine."

Turning, he made his way back into the center of the room, pausing to gently squeeze Kestrel's shoulder as he passed her. She, in turn, gripped his upper arm, smiling at him in spite of her pain. When he reached the room's center, he stopped and turned back to face the runners, still smiling.

And he changed.

35.

"Oh...my...*God*," Ocelot breathed.

"Holy shit," Joe got out.

Winterhawk and `Wraith were silent. They merely stared, wide-eyed, at what had appeared before them.

The lithe, youthful figure of the young fixer was no longer standing before them. It had changed, grown, stretched out, becoming something else entirely. Something large and sinuous, covered over with tiny golden scales. Something that took up nearly the entire length of the room in which they now stood, even with its long tail wrapped around its flank.

Instinctually, `Wraith's hand flew to his side, where his Ingram was holstered.

"No!" Kestrel yelled. Then, more quietly: "It's all right."

"*Don't fear*," a calm, gentle voice said in the runners' minds. "*I am not a threat to you.*"

`Wraith's hand slowly fell away from the Ingram.

The four runners continued to stare, unable to tear their gazes away.

As dragons went, the creature that Gabriel had become was not an immensely large specimen. Stretching some 15 to 17 meters from the tip of his nose to the beginning of his tail, he crouched, relaxed, in the huge cleared space in front of the runners. His massive head, bristling with sharp teeth, rested on his forelegs as he regarded the team with the same comforting expression he had worn previously, only this time it looked much more frightening than reassuring. His eyes, they all noted, were the same shade of purple as Gabriel the human's were, with slitted dark pupils and golden flecks.

"I guess I see why you needed the oath," Ocelot managed to get out, taking a couple of steps backward.

The dragon smiled—mostly in his eyes—and shifted position a bit. His golden scales, small and closely overlapping, caught the dim overhead light and made faint iridescent patterns as his muscles moved smoothly beneath his hide. He regarded them for a moment, then turned his attention to Kestrel. Reaching out with one enormous foreleg, he moved it slowly in her direction. Ocelot stiffened; the dragon's talons were large and wicked looking, and it was all he could do not to run over there to grab Kestrel from his grasp before he pierced her with them.

She didn't appear bothered, though. She remained still, looking up at him with the same smile as he, with utmost gentleness, touched her. He closed his eyes for a moment, and a faint golden light wreathed her, shimmering around her body like a glowing nimbus. Then he pulled back and returned to his former position. "Better?" the gentle voice asked, again in all the runners' minds. The dragon's mouth did not move.

She nodded. "Yes. Thank you."

Ocelot stared at her. He seemed to be doing a lot of staring lately, but he didn't care. Where she had once been covered with cuts and bruises, she now looked completely healed. Her hair was still matted with blood and her clothes were still torn and stained with it, but he could tell immediately that her injuries had been taken from her.

The dragon's scrutiny returned to the runners. "*Have you all gotten a good look?*" his mind-voice, full of good-natured merriment, inquired. "*If so, then I'll change back so we can talk.*"

"Go—right ahead," Winterhawk said, a bit nervously. "Don't let us stop you."

There was another shift, and once again the handsome young man stood in front of them, still dressed in his black *gi*. "Better," he said. "Do you realize how difficult it was to find an apartment in Seattle that would accommodate my true form?"

Nobody answered.

That didn't appear to bother Gabriel. "Come," he said, motioning for them to follow him. "I'm sure you have many questions—between us, I think Kestrel and I can answer most of them."

The runners trailed behind as he led them out of the room. Kestrel hung back and matched pace with Ocelot, who then slowed so the two of them were in the back of the group. "I'm sorry," she said under her breath. "I wish I could have told you sooner, but—"

He shook his head. "It's okay," he told her. "You took the oath too, right?"

"No."

He glanced at her, surprised. "No? But—"

"Gabriel will explain it," she said. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't angry with me."

He thought about the hours when he had been preparing himself for the news of her death. "No. How could I be? You must have had a reason for it. I'm just glad you're okay." He smiled faintly. "I guess I see what you mean about not havin' to be worried about him, huh?"

She returned the smile. "I *did* say he wasn't my type." This time, though, there was no mistaking the wistful undertone in her voice.

Gabriel led the group and into a much smaller room, this one was dominated by a comfortable looking sitting area with overstuffed leather sofas and chairs, a huge fireplace, and one of the high, sweeping windows that looked out over the lights of Seattle. "Please," he said. "Sit

down." As the runners arranged themselves, he knelt down next to the fireplace and lit it, starting a cheery blaze that flickered invitingly in the background.

"I thought you said we had to get going," Joe said, settling himself carefully down at one end of one of the sofas.

"There's time for that," Gabriel said. "Stefan has issued a challenge—the way in which I choose to answer it will be for him to wonder about, at least for the moment."

A chill ran through Ocelot's body as he made a connection: if Gabriel was a dragon, then his brother Stefan—apparently the reason behind all the odd and unexplained happenings that had been plaguing them—must be...

Oh, shit. He looked around at the faces of his fellow runners, but none revealed their thoughts. If they had made the same connection, they showed no outward sign of it. Ocelot took a seat next to Kestrel, who was perched on the end of the sofa nearest Gabriel. Winterhawk and ShadoWraith had taken seats on the opposite sofa.

"Before I say anything else," Gabriel said when they were all settled and watching him, "I want to apologize to you."

"For what?" Ocelot asked.

"For this whole affair," the young man said. He sighed, leaning back in his chair and crossing his ankle over his knee in a posture that looked casual but wasn't. "I fear that Stefan, as is his way, has used you to get to me. That fact disturbs me greatly."

"Why does he want to get to you?" Joe said.

"Let me start at the beginning, if you'll permit me," Gabriel said. He stared out the window for several seconds, watching the reflection of the fire. There was a strange, faraway look in his eyes. When he spoke again, he was not looking at the runners. "First, let me tell you,

since I'm assuming that you do not have a deep familiarity with the ways of dragons, that by the standards of my race, I am still but a child."

"Indeed," Winterhawk said with a raised eyebrow.

Gabriel nodded, bringing his attention back around to his audience. "I am what you call in your language a Great Dragon, but an exceedingly young one. If I were a human, my equivalent age would be perhaps twelve to fourteen years."

"Just a kid," Ocelot said, just a bit sarcastically.

"Yes," the young man said, ignoring the sarcasm. "Although I am in truth several thousand years old, the other Great Dragons regard me as little more than a promising youngster. Thus, since I have few obligations, I am afforded more freedom than an older member of my race might be permitted." As he spoke, his gaze traveled around, meeting each runner's eyes and then moving on, bringing them all into the conversation. "Stefan, my brother, is older than I, but still young. In human terms, he would be—" he considered "—perhaps in his mid to late teens."

"He certainly seems old enough to cause a great deal of trouble," Winterhawk said. He was leaned forward slightly, his expression clearly indicating that he was fascinated. For someone as curious as Hawk was, the chance to sit and converse with a Great Dragon—even one as young as this—was an experience to be savored.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. Dragons do not judge themselves by the standards of metahuman society, so it would be inaccurate to call him evil. He has his redeeming features, although you would likely call him amoral, since he cares little for the lives of humans and metahumans. However, he also has a great flaw—jealousy."

"Jealousy of—what?" Ocelot asked slowly, even though he was pretty sure he already knew the answer.

"Of me," Gabriel said without a trace of conceit. "I say that he is my brother, but in truth he is only my half-brother. We share the same mother, but our fathers differ. Stefan was jealous of perceived inequities in our situations from the time that my existence began. My father had great influence in our society, while his did not enjoy that privilege."

"He's too polite to say it," Kestrel spoke up, "But from what he's told me, he was kind of a draconic golden boy from the time he was born. You know, the kind of kid that everybody loves because he's so smart and handsome and well-behaved and has such good prospects. Not to mention that his father was some kind of bigwig in whatever passes for politics among dragons."

Gabriel glanced at Kestrel with affectionate exasperation, but did not contradict what she had said. Instead, he continued. "All of this occurred many thousands of years ago, of course. At the time of the closing of the Fourth World, when the levels of mana dropped below those necessary to sustain highly magical creatures such as we, the dragons secreted themselves away and slept. Now, certainly, I'm telling you things that you already know."

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes. The dragons began to re-emerge in the early part of this century, as the mana levels once again rose. They've been awakening ever since."

"Yes, exactly," Gabriel said. "And I was no exception. I've been awake for only a bit more than a year. When I awoke, it was in a deep cavern in the wilds of the Algonkian-Manitou Council lands. Though disoriented, I was able to keep myself hidden, subsisting for awhile by hunting the plentiful wild game. I stayed in the area for a month or so, but as soon as I was able, I left and found

myself in the northern UCAS. I had determined that humans and metahumans—at least some of them—still existed, so I took human form and began to explore this new world." He paused a moment, then got up and stirred up the fire with a poker. When he sat down and continued, his voice was a bit quieter. "Stefan, apparently, had been awake for considerably longer than I. He had already established himself, hiding his identity as a dragon when it suited his purpose and amassing a considerable fortune with his various holdings. Somehow, he became aware that I was back in the world. His jealousy and hatred of me had apparently simmered all those thousands of years, and he now saw his chance to be rid of me once and for all."

Kestrel got up from her place on the end of the sofa and took up a position on the arm of Gabriel's chair, gripping his shoulder comfortingly. For some reason it didn't occur to Ocelot to be disturbed by this.

"Stefan is not an insignificant magician in his own right," Gabriel continued, "and he is a far more skilled manipulator and liar than I will ever be—or ever desire to be. Using a carefully constructed false pretense, he lured me to a secret base of his. Still naive of the ways of this world, I did not think to mistrust him until it was too late. When I arrived, he was waiting. He took me captive before I was able to fight back."

Everyone's attention was riveted on the young man now. No one spoke, even when he paused.

"I don't know why he didn't kill me right away, when he had the chance," Gabriel said. "He certainly did have it. His preparations were flawless. I think, though, that he had a need to gloat—to show me that, in the end, he had the upper hand. As it occurred, he was confident enough in his supremacy that he left for awhile, to attend to some other business. By that point I was so weakened by injury

and drugs that he was convinced that I could not escape him. He told me that he planned to kill me when he returned.

"There was something, however, for which he didn't plan. It happened that the place where he was holding me captive was on a large island owned by one of his companies. Also located on that island, some distance from that place, was a research installation, also owned by the same company. What he did not count on was the shadowrunner team that had been hired to infiltrate that installation and steal one of their prototypes."

Ocelot sat up a little straighter. "Wait a minute—"

Gabriel held up a hand. "Please. Perhaps it would be best if Kestrel picked up the story from here." He looked up at her, smiling encouragingly.

Kestrel nodded. When she spoke, her first words were directed at Ocelot. "I'm sorry, Ocelot, but I've lied to you about something."

"I figured you did," he said. "How much of that story about your team was bullshit?" The words were blunt, but the tone was not.

Her expression clouded. "The part about the team was true," she said sadly. "Everything up to the point after the helicopter was destroyed. They died, and there was nothing I could do about it." She paused, getting her composure back. The day had obviously been hard on her, and thinking about her team wasn't making it any easier. "After the team got shot down and the `copter exploded, I ran away. Nobody came after me, because they thought I was inside it when it blew. I didn't know what to do—I couldn't fight all the security people there, and there was no way that I knew of to get off the island without the `copter. There weren't any boats. We knew that going in. All the personnel who worked there got flown out every day by helicopter. So unless I could either

sneak my way onto one of the `copters or else take out the pilot and steal it, I wasn't getting out of there. I decided I'd better hide out awhile and figure out what my options were. So I ran until I couldn't see the complex anymore, keeping an eye out for someplace to hole up for awhile.

"That was when I found the cavern."

36.

She skidded to a stop in front of the cavern entrance, her harsh breathing rattling in the back of her throat. Casting a quick glance back over her shoulder, she saw only the dark forms of trees, and heard only her own breath. No heat traces. No sounds of bodies crashing through underbrush. No gunfire.

She paused to take quick inventory. Miraculously, she was uninjured. She still had most of her gear: armored longcoat, utilitarian jumpsuit, heavy leather boots, AK-97, katana, Dikoted knife, medkit, backpack. Somehow she'd managed to get this far without having to drop anything, even though she had been running for her life. Her coat and jumpsuit were scratched and dirty, ripped at by overhanging branches and her numerous falls as she'd rushed headlong through the forest.

Apparently they had not seen her, though she found that difficult to believe. The vision of the fireball as the Stallion was hit by a SAM just as it was lifting off still remained at the forefront of her mind – the explosion that had destroyed her team, her friends, her livelihood. She had heard their screams over the commlink; those screams, cut off suddenly as the team had died and their links had been flash-fried, echoed in her mind despite her best efforts to silence them.

They must have thought she was on the chopper. That was the only explanation for why some heavily armed and armored squadron wasn't currently on her trail. They must have thought she was with them when they died.

I should have been with them, she thought bitterly, then quickly drove the thought away. No time for that now. They were dead, but she was still alive. They wouldn't have wanted her to give up. She was a survivor; she always had been. Today, she would survive so she could get back and raise another team to come out here and blow the hell out of this complex.

But first, she'd have to survive.

The cavern in front of her had a tall but narrow opening, about four meters high but only about half that distance wide. It was set into a high cliff face and surrounded by trees. She debated for a moment whether to go in: after all, anything could be in there. They could be lying in wait for her. Or there could be some kind of animals – she wondered what type of animals were indigenous to this area.

When it came right down to it, though, she didn't have much choice. She needed a place to rest, at least until tomorrow morning. If she could make it though the night, she might be able to sneak onto the personnel transport helicopter as it returned to the mainland after depositing its load of technicians and salarymen. This cavern looked like it fit the bill nicely. Since she didn't think they had any magicians out here, she decided that she might even have a chance of surviving the night. She wouldn't get much sleep, but she'd been through worse.

With one last glance over her shoulder to make sure that no one was watching, she slipped through the opening of the cavern.

Switching her cybereyes to low-light vision, she noted that the cavern mouth opened into a passageway, the ceiling of which gradually sloped downward until it was only about three meters high at its end. Beyond that, it appeared to grow wider, as if there was a much larger chamber there.

Moving silently, her back to one of the walls of the passageway, she crept down toward the chamber. The passage went on for about five meters before the point where it widened. At the end of it, she stopped again, listening.

It was very dark inside. Even with her low-light vision, she couldn't see much. But it wasn't what she saw that made her stop and stiffen, flattening herself even closer to the wall. It was what she heard.

Breathing. Harsh, labored breathing. Breathing that sounded very much like her own, except that it hitched

occasionally and changed rhythm, as if the breather was having a hard time keeping it going.

Loud breathing. The sound of something very large indeed.

She did not move. She was afraid to. Whatever was in there was big. Really big. Was it some kind of animal? She didn't think anything as big as this had to be lived here, but she had to admit she didn't know. Did it identify prey by sight? By smell? By movement? Would it even consider her to be prey?

She wouldn't be able to make an informed decision, she realized, until she got a look at it. Turning around and running out of the cavern might get her killed, especially if the creature had noticed her. Even if it hadn't, she couldn't stay out there. The patrols would find her for sure. Maybe, whatever this creature was, she could stun it or, if necessary, kill it before it could attack her. She didn't like it, but when it came down to a battle between her and an animal, she was determined that she would come out on top.

Very slowly, trying to make no sound, she slid her backpack down off her shoulders and set it on the ground next to her. Then, just as carefully, she slid down the AK-97 on its strap and held it at ready in her hands. Its weight felt comforting, as did the assurance that it was loaded with APDS rounds that could punch through just about anything. She'd put her skill and those rounds up against just about any critter short of a juggernaut.

Feeling a bit more confident now, she inched her way down to the end of the passageway, stopping at the end. The harsh breathing had not changed tone, although it did have a decided wheezing quantity that she hadn't noticed before. Whatever was in there certainly didn't sound well.

With one last hope that it wasn't a trap, she poked her head and her gun barrel around the corner, sweeping her gaze over the chamber.

What she saw made her gasp.

There was a creature in there, all right, and a large one. It lay near the far side of the great chamber, pressed up against the

far wall, its tail wrapped around it and its head drooped over its forelegs. Though it didn't appear to notice her at the moment, she still couldn't suppress the gasp.

It wasn't every day that you found yourself sharing a cavern with a dragon.

She hefted her AK-97 and pointed it at the creature. She didn't want to shoot it, but she wasn't sure she had a choice. Everything she had ever heard about dragons told her that they were treacherous creatures who could not be trusted, and who would trick you into giving up your advantage so they could kill you.

"Please..."

She stiffened, her grip tightening on the assault rifle. The voice was faint and ragged, and appeared to be speaking inside her head. She glared at the dragon, but it had not moved. "Who said that?" she demanded.

"Do not be afraid..." Again, the gentle voice spoke in her mind.

"Show yourself!" she called. The barrel of the AK-97 did not waver from the dragon's head.

"Please...help me." As she watched, the dragon opened its eyes. She could only see the one closest to her: it was large and had a faintly luminescent glow. The pupil was fixed on her.

Now I've done it, she thought, fear flowing through her body and turning her blood to ice. It's noticed me. "Is that you, dragon? Are you talking to me?"

The great eye closed again as the dragon shifted position. Its breathing was growing more labored. "Please..." it said again. "Help me..."

Her eyes widened and she blew air through clenched teeth. "I'm out of here," she said. "You're not fooling anybody." Turning, she prepared to head back down the passageway. Better to take her chances with the guards – at least with them, she knew what she was getting.

"Don't go," the voice in her head pleaded. "Do not let me die here, alone..."

She stopped. The voice was so gentle, so...fearful. That was an adjective she never thought she'd be applying to a dragon, that was for sure. Her back still to the chamber, she took a deep breath. "What's wrong with you?"

"Please...come back. I will not harm you. I give you my word."

That was a laugher. A dragon's word? What was the old street proverb about never dealing with one? That was because they couldn't be trusted as far as you could throw them. All they cared about were their own agendas.

Right?

"Please..." The mind-voice was fading now.

She started to move again. Stopped again. She knew was dead if she went back out there. They'd find her before she could find another place to hide. What did she have to lose by staying? If it was faking that raspy breathing and the pleas of injury, it was doing a damn good job of it. Sure, that was possible. Maybe even probable. But if it wasn't –

– could she just go away and let it die?

Sighing with exasperation, she wheeled back around and stalked into the chamber. Damn this conscience anyway! Consciences were nothing but liabilities to shadowrunners. "All right," she said brusquely. "I'm here. I'm back. If you tell me what to do, I'll help. But if you try to attack me, I'm going to shoot you. Got that?"

"I won't attack you," the mind-voice said. "I gave my word."

"Well, good," she said, her tone clearly indicating that she didn't believe it. Fishing in her backpack, she came up with a small battery-operated lantern, which she set in the middle of the cavern floor and flipped on. Soft light flooded the chamber.

For the second time, she gasped as she got a good look at the dragon.

It looked as if it had once been a creature of immense beauty, golden-scaled and sinuous, with a long, powerful body and large leathery wings folded down over its back. Now,

though, it was clear that it was right: it was dying. She stared, wide-eyed, at the bloody holes where high-velocity rounds had torn chunks from its flanks; the blood ran down and pooled beneath the creature in great red puddles. Its flesh had been ripped in many places, causing more bloody and wicked-looking wounds. The dragon's great head rested strengthlessly on its forelegs, while its tail, also bleeding in several places, wrapped tightly around its hindquarters. "My God..." she whispered. "What happened to you? Who did this?"

The dragon's eyes opened again, swiveling around to settle on her. The expression in their violet depths held pain and fear and wisdom. "It is not important," the creature said in her mind. "Please...just remain here with me. It will not be long."

She glared at him. "Hey! Wait a minute!" she protested, surprised at the strength in her voice. "I'm not going to stay here and watch you die! You think I want to spend the night in a cave with a dead dragon? If I stay, I'm going to help you. You're going to make it!" She stalked over and glared right into its closest eye, trying not to pay attention to the rows of sharp-looking teeth. "You got that, dragon?"

A flicker of amusement rippled through the voice. "Yes, ma'am."

That surprised the hell out of her. A dragon with a sense of humor? Would wonders never cease? "Okay," she said, satisfied. "Now that we've got that out of the way, what can I do?" After her outburst, she very much feared that she was not going to be able to follow up on her promise. The dragon was so gravely wounded – there was no way that her little human-sized medkit was going to be the least bit effective on a creature this size.

The dragon's eyes were closing again, slowly. "Can't –"

"Hey!" Without thinking (if she'd been thinking, she never would have done it), she smacked the creature hard on the nose with the flat of her hand. "Don't you start fading on me! I've lost too many people today. You are not going to die. I won't let you."

The dragon's head jerked a bit, and its eyes flew open. They showed surprise. "You hit me."

"Got you back to your senses, didn't it? Remember our deal? I help you out, and you don't die. Okay?"

"Yes..." the mind-voice said wearily.

"Okay," she said. "Now look – you have to help me. What do I do? I'm afraid I slept through Dragon First Aid 101 in shadowrunner school."

"Shadow...runner?"

"Right. That's me. Shadowrunner. I thought you dragons were quicker on the uptake. You know – I thought you guys knew everything."

"Attacked...complex." The dragon brought its head around slightly so it could regard her with both eyes at the same time.

"Yeah. That was us. I'm the only one who survived. I don't think it's sunk in yet."

"I'm...sorry," it said, and sounded like it meant it.

"Yeah, so am I," she said bitterly. She really didn't want to discuss the worst day of her life with an overgrown lizard. "But that isn't going to do us any good. I need to figure out what to do about these wounds."

"Drugs..." The dragon's glance flicked back toward the rear of its body. "Capsule. Sub...dermal. Must...remove."

She stared at it. "What?"

"Wounds...can heal. Too weak now." The mind-voice was drifting again. She was afraid that she would lose the creature despite her best efforts. "Remove...capsule."

She took a deep breath. What was it talking about? Capsule? Subdermal? Drugs? This dragon was starting to lose it. Still, though, she slowly moved down the creature's body, staring closely at its golden hide, looking for anything out of the ordinary.

"Other...side," the voice said in her head. "I will...move."

She stepped back quickly as the dragon levered its body up and moved over a couple of meters, then sank back down. The amount of blood pooled under it was frightening; its belly was

soaked with it. She tried not to think about how much pain the creature must be causing itself by moving. When it had settled itself back down, she hurried around behind it and focused her attention on its other, equally wounded, flank. She forced herself not to think about the fact that her fragile human body was now sandwiched between a multi-ton creature and a hard stone wall.

She saw what she was looking for almost immediately. High up on the dragon's right flank, beneath the scales, was a bulge approximately a third of a meter long and a quarter meter wide. "What is that thing?"

"Drugs. Poison. Time...release."

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Remove it," the soft voice said.

"How?" She regarded it carefully, and couldn't see anyplace where it could be slid out or removed.

"Must...cut. Implanted."

She glared at him. "You're dying, and you want me to cut you open?"

"It's...the only way. The...poison is killing me. Once...it is gone...I can heal."

Briefly, she closed her eyes. This whole situation was unreal. First the run blows up in their faces and she loses her entire team to one explosion. Then she tries to hide in a cave and finds a wounded dragon. And now she discovers that there's some sicko out there who's implanting subdermal poison capsules in dragons. What next? Elvis beaming in with a line of space aliens doing the can-can? She sighed. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please..Soon. Or I will not...be able to keep my promise to you."

She looked up at the dragon, or at least of what she could see of it. "Okay," she said reluctantly. "I'll try it. But you'll have to help me. I'm going to have to climb up on your back to do this, so don't throw me into any walls, okay? This is going to hurt."

"I...promise," it said. Its head, on the long, graceful neck, came around to watch what she was doing. After a pause, it said, "May I...know your name?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why?"

"It is...civilized...is it not?"

"You first," she said, after a pause.

"You may call me...Gabriel."

She considered that. "I can call you Gabriel. But that's not your name."

"It will do...for now."

"Okay," she said. "Gabriel. And you can call me Kestrel."

"Also...not your name."

"Hey, you dragons are quicker than I thought," she said jokingly. "But like you said, it'll do for now." She looked up at his (now that she knew his name, she thought of him as him, as opposed to it) flank again – it was almost three meters at its highest point. "Okay, I'm going up there now. I hope you're not ticklish."

He did not reply to that, so she put her gun down, gathered herself, and leaped up onto the dragon's rear leg. From there, she scrambled up on his back, her hands slipping in the copious amounts of blood. His scales were smooth and small, tightly overlapped. Sitting down and feeling very strange to be sitting on a dragon, she drew her Dikoted knife from her belt. "I'm not kidding," she said. "This is gonna hurt. Are you ready?"

"Ready," came the faint voice. "Be...careful. The poison is...deadly. Don't touch."

Kestrel took a deep breath, steeling herself. She gripped her knife tightly, poising it in position as she examined the scaled skin above the capsule. Then, before she lost her nerve, she slashed quickly downward, making a longitudinal scalpel-cut down the length of the bulge. Immediately, bright blood welled up around the cut and ran down the dragon's flank.

There was a slight shudder from below and a sharp intake of breath. Kestrel held on tight until the dragon settled down again. "Sorry," she said.

"Please...continue." *There was pain in the voice, but it was controlled.*

She nodded, directing her attention back down at the wound she had opened up. Resting just beneath the skin, now visible and slicked with blood, was a dark-colored capsule. Again moving quickly, she slid the knife under it and pried it up, using the knife's leverage to flip it up and over. It landed on the cavern floor with a squishy little thud as she felt the dragon stiffen beneath her again. "There," she said triumphantly. "Got it." Her expression clouded. "But now you're bleeding worse. What else can I do?"

"Just...stay here. I will gain strength now...soon I can risk a healing spell."

Kestrel took another look at the wicked wound she had caused. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. You have been...most helpful."

"I hope so," she said almost to herself. Sliding back down the dragon's flank and retrieving her assault rifle, she slung it over her shoulder and came back around to the other side of the creature, where she didn't feel quite so boxed in. Her hands and clothes were covered with his blood.

He was watching her. "Come," he said. "Sit with me. Tell me of why you are here." Already, his mind-voice was growing stronger.

Slowly she came forward until she was near his head. She was still not convinced completely that she could trust him, especially now that he seemed to be gaining some strength, but she reminded herself that her choices had not changed. If she went out there, they would find her. "You first," she said. "How did a dragon end up this trashed? I thought dragons were trashers, not trashees. It's pretty clear that somebody's been shooting at you, but where did that capsule come from?"

"I was a captive," the dragon said. "Your team's arrival on the island gave me the chance I had not hoped to receive."

She looked at him funny. "What do you mean?"

"Most of those guarding the place where I was held were called off to deal with the attack, allowing me to overpower those remaining, even in my weakened state."

"Wait a minute," she protested. "They had guys guarding a dragon and they just left two or three guys watching him? That's not too bright in my book."

"They did not know what they were guarding. My captor did not share that information with them."

"Then who was your captor?" Kestrel asked, looking around nervously. "Anybody capable of taking out a dragon was not somebody she wanted to tangle with when they came looking for their escape. And what was he doing at the time?"

"An old nemesis," the dragon said. "His identity is not important. He is not here. But I must leave here soon, before he returns."

She regarded him critically. "I don't think you're going anywhere for awhile," she said.

"No. But I cannot remain long."

"Why don't you tell me about that capsule?" she said, trying to change the subject. "What was in that thing? And why was it there?"

The dragon snaked his head around to look at it on the cave floor. "My captor used it to...control me. To keep me weakened. If you had not come, the poison would have killed me in less than an hour. When I was being held, he was able to control the effects, but if I were to escape, then..." the mind-voice trailed off, its meaning obvious.

"What a bastard," Kestrel said.

"That concept does not exist in my society."

Kestrel glared at him. "Is that more dragon humor? If so, I think your jokes need some work." She shivered involuntarily. Night was coming, and it was getting cold, especially with the blood soaking her clothing.

Apparently the dragon noticed. "Please," he said. "Sit down. Lean against me – I will warm you."

"Uh – no. That's okay," she said, shaking her head. "I'll be fine. Really"

"You are not fine," he said simply. "You are shivering. Please. You have nothing to fear. You have saved my life. Do you think that I would harm you now?"

She thought about that a moment. Somehow, mentioning that dragons were known for being treacherous and sneaky didn't seem like the right approach to take at that particular point in time. "We-elll..."

"Please." The mind-voice was soothing, calm, gentle.

Kestrel sighed. It was cold, and she didn't have any sleeping gear with her. The job was supposed to be in and out in no more than a couple of hours. "Where?"

"Sit down against my side."

She paused for a moment, wondering what kind of idiotic thing she was about to do, and then slowly settled herself down against the dragon's side, leaning back into the supple hide. "You are warm," she said in surprise. "I thought dragons would be cold-blooded. You know, like lizards."

"You have much to learn, small one," he said, and she was surprised to hear affection in his tone.

She was even more startled to hear her own voice speaking. "Okay, then: how about if you teach me?" Her eyes widened. Did she really just say that? Come on, Kestrel, she chided herself. You're getting crazy here. Must be the shock of everything that's happened today. You just asked a dragon to do something for you. You have got to be off your rocker.

She did not, however, retract the question.

There was interest in the dragon's mind-voice. "Is that what you truly wish?"

She started to answer, but then she paused. She realized that she had nothing to go back to. Her team was dead. Her best friends were gone, and would not be coming back. The surviving guards at this place were on her tail. She wasn't sure she even wanted to go back to shadowrunning. But here was an

opportunity you didn't get every day. There was something about the dragon's voice that spoke to something deep inside her. Maybe it was the fact that he seemed to have access to her mind. Maybe it was that she seemed to have at least limited access to his, when he was communicating with her. There was no sign of guile or deceit in him – she sensed only kindness and affection and the pain of betrayal. "You – you'd do that?"

"You have saved my life," he said softly. "Were it not for your coming, I would be no more. You shall have whatever gratitude I can give you."

Kestrel paused again. She looked up at him, at his kind, faintly luminous violet eyes, so deep and ageless. "You don't owe me anything," she said, shaking her head. "I wouldn't have let you die. I couldn't have. I told you – I've had enough death for one day."

For a long moment, the dragon was silent. At last, he said, "If you will not accept my gratitude, then, perhaps you would consider a trade."

"A trade?" The suspicion was back, but only a little. The longer she spent with this wounded dragon, the more she felt comfortable trusting him. His massive sides rose and fell gently with his breathing, which was growing stronger and less ragged with each passing minute.

"I am young," he said. "I have not been long awake in your world, and as yet know little of its ways. Perhaps in exchange for my teaching, you could teach me about this modern world. I can see already that things are very different from the way they were when I went to sleep."

Kestrel didn't answer right away. She closed her eyes as the enormity of her situation finally began to catch up with her. In the space of less than a day, her entire life had turned around. Nothing was the same anymore. She couldn't use what she knew as a gauge, because what she knew was gone. And now, here was this dragon who owed her a blood-debt. She didn't want a dragon to owe her a blood-debt! All she wanted to do was get the hell out of here, get back to the mainland, and go

somewhere to get very, very drunk until the whole thing looked like a bad dream.

But still –

"Can you get us off the island?" she heard herself ask.

"Once I have at least partially healed my injuries, yes."

"Without anybody shooting at us?"

"My magic is well capable of concealing our escape from everyone currently on this island," he said, with just the faintest touch of draconic arrogance.

"What about the guy who caught you in the first place?"

"He is not here."

"But what if he comes back? Could he find us? Could he catch you again, especially since you're hurt now?"

"Possible, but not so easily as before. Still, we must make haste if we want to avoid him. He will return soon."

"How long before you can go?" she asked.

"Soon. I am gathering my strength as we speak." He shifted position, very gradually so as not to jostle her. "You were going to tell me about why you are here."

She sighed, sinking back against his warm side. "We were hired to break into the complex on the other side of the island and steal a prototype weapon component."

"Why?" The dragon's mind-voice held genuine curiosity.

"Because that's what shadowrunners do," she said. "It's what we get paid to do."

"You are paid to be thieves? Interesting..." There was no judgment in his tone, only more curiosity.

"Sometimes. Sometimes we get paid to guard people, or prevent things from being stolen, or find people that are missing. Shadowrunners get hired to do all kinds of things that nobody else can or wants to do."

"Hmmm..." the dragon said noncommittally. "I can see that I, too, have a great deal to learn. Why did your endeavor end badly?"

Kestrel sighed, picturing the faces of the team again, and the fireball as the `copter went up. "We got set up. They were waiting for us. It happens sometimes."

"And your friends – ?"

"They were trying to get out in our helicopter. We got separated, so I didn't make it to the rendezvous point in time. I told them to go without me. They waited, but finally they couldn't wait anymore. Those bastards shot them down with a rocket launcher." She closed her eyes, angrily swiping her hands across them. Damn it, she was not going to cry. This was not the time or the place. Besides, crying was for wimps.

Softly: "You are crying."

"Yeah, well, wouldn't you, if people who were like your family got killed right in front of you?" She spoke louder and more harshly than she had intended to. Quietly, after a pause, she said, "I'm sorry."

"Do not apologize. And the answer to your question is that yes, in my way, I would. Dragons do not weep, but we do grieve when those we care for are slain."

She didn't know whether it was the dragon's soothing, understanding voice, the stress finally catching up with her, or the visions of her teammates' faces, but suddenly she couldn't take it any longer. "I can't believe they're gone..." she whispered, and began to sob. "It's just so damned unfair!" She buried her face in his side, not even trying to hold back anymore.

The dragon remained still and silent, a comforting presence from whom she could take whatever strength she needed.

She sobbed for several minutes before she began to slowly get herself under control. Gradually, her sobs quieted to hitching gasps, and then, even more gradually, subsided. "I'm – sorry," she said again, gathering her composure. "I – I loved them."

"Perhaps it would help to tell me of them," he said. "Then they could live in my memory as in yours."

She looked up at him, eyes wide and face tear-streaked. For awhile she did not speak, but then, as if disconnected from her body, she heard herself telling the dragon about the team. She started with their functions in the group, their strengths as shadowrunners, their sense of honor; as she went on, though, she found herself telling him more personal things: her tentative and bittersweet fling with Raptor; the way gruff Indy had comforted her when she had accidentally shot an innocent on a busy street; Cabal's penchant for bad puns; Geist's love of classical opera, which none of the rest of the group could stand. By the time she wound down, she was surprised to find that she no longer had the desire to weep.

"Thank you," the dragon said.

"No," she said. "Thank you. You knew that was what I needed, didn't you?"

"It is a beginning," he said. He moved, just a bit. "I think I can risk an attempt to heal some of my injuries now, and then we can leave this place if you wish."

She stood up. "If I wish? I'd like nothing better than to get off this godforsaken rock." Taking a couple of steps back, she regarded him. "Do I need to do anything?"

"No. This should not take long." The dragon turned his attention inward, closing his eyes. As Kestrel watched, his entire body stiffened, then relaxed as a golden glow bathed him. The glow persisted for a few moments, then slowly faded. Beneath it, she noticed that several of the more grievous looking wounds had closed up and disappeared. Some still remained, and the dragon's hide was still bloody and gore-strewn, but at least some of the wounds were not bleeding anymore. When he opened his eyes, he raised his head from his forelegs. The movement looked much more strong and graceful than it had before.

"Are you better?" she asked tentatively.

"Much," he said. His voice, too, sounded stronger. "Will you leave here with me?"

Now that he looked reasonably healthy and had asked the question right out, she realized that she hadn't thought this through either. All she had been thinking about was that she wanted off the island. "Where will we go?"

"I must go somewhere to rest and regain the remainder of my strength. After that, I will see to it that you reach wherever it is you want to go. Or," he added, "if you decide to accept my offer of a trade, then you can remain with me."

She stared at him. "You mean it."

"Yes."

"Wouldn't that be – " she shrugged, with a tiny mocking smile, " – you know, a little fairy-tale? The girl and her dragon? The dragon and his girl? I think we'd get a bit noticed, don't you?"

"There are ways around that," he said. "I can take other forms."

That intrigued her. "Other forms? Like what?"

The amusement was back in his tone. "Human, for instance."

She cocked her head sideways, looking him up and down. "You're kidding."

"No."

"Can you show me?"

"Not now," he said ruefully. "The magic works such that if I were to change form in this state, I would take, proportionately, the same injuries I have now. I am much better able to cope with them in this form than I would be in human form."

Mulling that over, she came around in front of him. "But you could look like a human? Or an elf, or an ork, or – "

"Or a t'skrang, or an obsidiman, or – "

"Huh?" she broke in, confused as he seemingly took a left turn into unknown territory. "What are you talking about?"

He paused. "Forgive me."

"This is one of the things you might teach me, isn't it?" she asked.

"Possibly," he said. "But yes, I can take all of those forms, and more."

Kestrel glanced over her shoulder toward the opening of the passageway. "I guess we should go, then, before somebody finds us in here."

"Are you sure?" The dragon's violet gaze settled solemnly on her.

She looked up at him, meeting his eyes. She thought about her life. She thought about the team, and all the things they had done together. She even thought about her childhood, what seemed like more than a lifetime ago. "Yeah," she said at last. "I'm sure."

As soon as the words were out, a feeling of calm dropped over her, like a warm blanket over a sleepy child. She felt safe. She felt good. She felt...right. She knew at that moment that she had made the most important decision of her life. From now on, things would be very different for her.

37.

Kestrel still sat on the arm of Gabriel's chair as she finished her story. The four shadowrunners listened as if spellbound, reluctant to interrupt her for any reason. The fire, forgotten, flickered down to embers in the fireplace. When Kestrel at last finished, she smiled. "So that's the true story, this time," she said, looking at Ocelot.

"How did you get off the island?" Joe asked.

Her smile got a bit wider. "I got up on Gabriel's back, and he turned us both invisible. Then we just flew out. Well," she amended, "*he* flew. I held on for dear life."

"I would not have dropped you," Gabriel said serenely, with his own smile. He was leaned back, relaxed, watching her over steepled fingers.

"Yeah, tell that to the chick lurching around up there," she protested in mock exasperation. "Up until then, I'd done all my flying in planes and helicopters."

"What did your brother do when he discovered that you'd gone missing?" Winterhawk asked. "Did he pursue you?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. As I said, Stefan is consumed by his hatred of me, but he is not stupid, nor is he—at least most of the time—rash. You must realize that we dragons tend to take the long view of things. If it takes a thousand years to accomplish a goal, then so be it. He had time to wait. We made our escape cleanly, and I did not hear anything about him after that. Until now, apparently," he added soberly.

"So then, Stefan's responsible for all those weird hallucinations and things?" Ocelot leaned in a little closer, his expression hard. "You didn't have anything to do with `em?"

"They were almost certainly Stefan's doing," the young man confirmed. "While I am fully capable of creating such illusions – without doubt more capable than Stefan himself is – I have no reason to do so. What would I gain by it?"

"What I don't quite follow, though," Ocelot continued, "is why? Why go through all that bullshit of messin' with our heads just to get to you? It seems like a big waste of time to me."

"There is something else you must know about Stefan before it becomes clear," Gabriel said. "He prides himself on being a manipulator. He is never more pleased than when he is acting behind the scenes, pulling strings and indirectly causing events to occur. He does not like to dirty himself by becoming directly involved. Combine this with an unfortunate lack of regard for humans and metahumans, and undoubtedly he was unable to resist this chance to reach me through those I care for."

"So you mean he just set up this whole thing – fucked with us for weeks, and had us chasing our tails like idiots – just so he could have a little fun before he killed you?" Ocelot was seething now.

Gabriel nodded. "Essentially right. He knew that when he injured Kestrel, I would have no choice but to answer his challenge – I think that was why he saved her until last." There was a definite undercurrent of something dangerous in his tone.

Something dawned on Ocelot. "That's why none of us could find her. Hawk's and Harry's friend's magic didn't have a chance of finding somebody that a dragon didn't want found." He looked at Gabriel. "But you said you couldn't find her either."

"I made an error," the young man admitted. "I had no idea that it was Stefan who had taken her, and thus I did not use a powerful enough ritual. The one I did use was

quite potent enough to find her in almost any other case." He turned to her. "I am sorry, Kestrel. Had I known, I might have found you sooner."

She squeezed his hand. "It's okay. I don't think I was ever in much danger, except for getting knocked around a little. It's happened before. I have to say, though, I could have done without the illusions. They're going to give me nightmares for months."

Ocelot's fists clenched. "He was messin' with you more than just the two times we know about?"

"That was most of what he did when he had me," she said. "The beating was just an afterthought. He only did it a couple of hours before you guys found me. Everything else was psychological." She shivered. "If you don't mind, I don't think I want to talk about it right now. It was bad."

"He was in human form?" Wraith asked.

She nodded. "The only way I knew who he was, was that he talked about finally having his revenge on his brother. I'm sure he wanted me to know, so I could tell Gabriel."

"What did his human form look like?" Winterhawk asked.

"And where did he have you?" Ocelot added.

Kestrel let go of Gabriel's hand. "He was tall – taller than Gabriel – and older, too. Athletic looking, but more like a guy who's just starting to head into middle age while still keeping himself in shape. A little distinguished, but mostly nasty. His eyes were –" she broke off, shaking her head. "I didn't like to look at them. As for where I was, I don't know. He never let me have any reference. I was unconscious when I arrived, and also when I left. I didn't wake up until I was in that motel room with you guys."

Wraith indicated the huge room from which they had come, then looked at Gabriel. "And the box?"

"Something that belonged to an old friend a long time ago," Gabriel said, a hint of sadness in his voice. "Stefan knew that I would recognize it and associate it with him, because he once took it from me."

"Was there anything inside?" Winterhawk asked.

"Yes." The young fixer stood without elaborating. "Now, though, I must beg your forgiveness, because I must ask you to excuse me. As I said, I have preparations to make before I go to confront Stefan."

Kestrel shot to her feet. "You're not thinking of going alone, are you?"

"Of course I am," Gabriel said as if that was not an issue.

"The hell you are," Ocelot growled, standing as well. "I want a piece of that bastard." He stopped for a moment as he remembered the confrontation in the motel room, and realized that he had punched out a Great Dragon. And lived to tell about it. And here he was getting belligerent about demanding the chance to go and beat up an even *bigger* one. The thought scared the crap out of the rational part of him, but it didn't matter. He was on momentum now.

Gabriel sighed. "Ocelot, Kestrel...all of you. I know your intentions are good. You want revenge for what has been done to you. I understand that. But it's simply out of the question for you to face Stefan. Please. I will take care of it."

"He'll kill you, Gabriel," Kestrel said. "You know that. You can't beat him. You've told me how much bigger and stronger he is than you are."

"I am not without my defenses," Gabriel said, again without conceit. "And my magic is by far more potent than his. I cannot allow this to go on any longer."

"Then let us help you," Ocelot said.

"We've fought dragons before," Joe pointed out.

The young man shook his head. "You've fought *dracofoms* before. Geyswain was young, and he was sickened when you fought him. Still, even then you would not have beaten him had Arleesh not been present to assist you."

"You know about that?" Ocelot demanded.

"I told you that I researched your careers," Gabriel said, brushing it off. "The fact remains that Stefan is a Great Dragon. A young one, yes. Certainly not at the height of his power, nor in any way comparable to a fully mature member of our race. But as far as the difficulty he would have in killing you, it would be like comparing your own chances against a baby to those against a small child. There is simply no measurable difference. If you were to accompany me, I would be leading you to your deaths. I will not do that."

"It's not your choice," Ocelot said. "We're all grown up now. We know the risks."

"Do you?" Gabriel fixed him with an odd gaze.

"We know it's probably the most dangerous thing, not to mention the dumbest, that we've ever done in our lives," Ocelot said, ignoring his tone. "But we've done stuff like that before. We've come out on top when nobody expected us to."

The young man shook his head. He looked much more focused now, almost distracted, as opposed to his previous attitude of calm. "I know what you did. I know how difficult it was. But again, you had assistance. The Fates themselves were standing at your back then. And the Enemy was weakened." He sighed. "I'm sorry – I won't have your deaths on my conscience." He turned as if to leave the sitting area.

Kestrel grabbed his arm. "Gabriel, please. Listen to reason. You can't just go off like this. It's what he wants

you to do. If you face him alone, he's going to kill you. You know he will."

Ocelot took up her argument. "And if he does that, what do you think he'll do next? I'm bettin' he'll come after us. Wouldn't want to leave any loose ends, right?"

"Much as it pains me to say this," Winterhawk spoke up, "since I'm in no way anxious to pit myself against a dragon, Great or otherwise, I fear that Ocelot may be correct. Consider the number of people Stefan has most probably casually killed so far in order to further his plans."

Joe nodded. "Mortenson, and Hoenberg, and probably Magnum and Jenner too. Who knows how many more that we just haven't found out about yet?" He looked around nervously. "Could he do that to us?"

"Not here," Gabriel said. "Not while you're under my protection. It would take a greater magician than Stefan to penetrate the wards on my home."

"But once you've left and we're out of your protection," Ocelot said, "what's to stop him from just killing us for spite? We sure as hell couldn't do anything to prevent it."

"You can remain here, inside the wards," Gabriel said. "Until I return."

"And if you don't return?" Kestrel demanded.

Gabriel did not answer that.

"Look," Ocelot said, stepping in front of him. "Maybe we don't have the stake in this that you do, but ever since he started screwin' with us, we're in it. We're in it up to our eyeballs. We're not gonna just sit here on our butts waiting for you to take care of this guy – if you even *can*. We may not be able to take him on our own, but we can help you. We didn't ask to be caught up in this whole thing. I think you owe us lettin' us finish it with you."

"Yes," Wraith said. "Must end, one way or another."

Winterhawk stood, his blue eyes cold as ice. "I, for one, don't intend to be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my life, wondering when your brother, in a fit of boredom, will decide to get rid of us. Or play his games with us again."

Gabriel stopped, his gaze traveling around the faces of the runners. Each of them held essentially the same expression: cold, resolute, angry, a little fearful, but determined to see this through. He sighed. "I can do nothing else," he said quietly after a long pause. "It is within my power to leave you behind, to imprison you like children in the safety of my sanctuary until it is done. But that isn't my way. Unlike my brother, I do not consider the human and metahuman races to be merely pawns for my amusement or pets in need of protection. You are beings with free will, just as I am. If you choose to accompany me, with full knowledge, to what will likely be your deaths, then I will not prevent it."

"Gabriel—" Kestrel started.

He shook his head. "No, Kestrel. Don't say anything, please. It is you most of all that I would like to shield from this. I owe you my life—I don't want to see you lose yours."

"Neither do I," she said. "But I can't just stand back and watch him kill you. I have to see this through. I know you don't like it, but you know that's the way it has to be."

Gabriel looked at them again. For a long time, he didn't say anything. He moved over to the window, staring out over the lights of Seattle glowing through the shifting mists. "All right," he said quietly at last, as if the words were being forced from him. He did not turn back to face them.

"We must prepare," ShadoWraith said.

"Yeah," Joe added. "If we're goin' after a dragon, we'll need our heavy gear."

Kestrel was watching Gabriel. He had not yet turned around. "Gabriel?"

"Go," he said. When no one spoke, he faced them, his eyes burning with passion. "Go," he said again. "Make your preparations. One hour. If you do not return by then, I will go without you."

He did not watch them as they left. Kestrel accompanied them to the door. "He's serious," she said. "I've never seen him this serious. If you want to come along, don't be late getting back."

"You're not coming with us?" Ocelot asked, surprised.

She shook her head. "No. I'll stay here with him."

The other runners went out and pressed the button to call the elevator; Ocelot remained for a moment. "Are you sure you have to go?" he asked her softly. "You've had a hard couple of days. Maybe —"

She put her finger to his lips. "Shh. Don't go macho on me. I hate macho. I have to do this as much as you do. I have to do whatever I can to make sure he doesn't get killed."

"Does he have a chance?"

Briefly, she closed her eyes. "From what he's told me, he's a better mage, and he's smarter. But Stefan is trickier, and he's also bigger and stronger. It won't be easy. He's probably right that we won't all come back."

He looked at her, heartsick at the thought of losing her again when he'd just gotten her back, but realizing that she was probably having the same thoughts about him. "Okay," he said. "I guess I'd better get going." Leaning forward, he brushed a kiss across her lips, then turned and hurried off toward the now-open elevator where his teammates waited. He watched her until the elevator doors closed. Slumping against the back wall of the elevator, he said quietly, "Holy shit."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. "We wanted to know what was going on. Now maybe I think we'd have been better off if we *didn't* know."

They remained silent until the elevator reached the lobby, where they quickly made their way out to the garage. Stopping when they reached the truck, `Wraith said. "One hour. Not much time."

"We'll likely need to separate," Winterhawk said, getting in, "but I don't think there's time for everyone to go home. Even at this hour, without much traffic, the risk of missing that deadline is too great if we try to do too much."

"Not far from home," `Wraith said to Winterhawk.

Joe nodded. "I don't need to go home—all the stuff I need is in the truck. I loaded up when Winterhawk called before." He climbed into the back seat.

Winterhawk looked at Ocelot. "What about you?"

"Yeah, I gotta leave for awhile, but I'm not going home. I need the truck."

"Maybe I should just come with you," Joe suggested, "since my stuff's already there."

Ocelot shook his head. "No, I want to do this alone. I have to go see a couple of people about a couple of things. I'll be back in plenty of time." He turned to `Wraith, looking as if he was going to ask the elf a question, but then changed his mind and fell silent.

The rest of the runners got in, and `Wraith guided the truck out of the garage. "Anybody know anything dragons are vulnerable to?" Joe asked nobody in particular.

"Not bloody much," Winterhawk said sourly. "That's sarcasm, by the way. I really don't know much about Great Dragons and what their weaknesses are. I've never had the nerve to ask one."

"We should," `Wraith spoke up.

"We should what?" Ocelot demanded.

"Ask."

Winterhawk looked at him funny, but then a look of approval crossed his face. "You have a point there. Gabriel's trusting us — p'raps we might extend that trust a bit further and see if he'll share any of the finer points of dragonslaying with us."

"I guess it couldn't hurt," Ocelot said. "I mean, what's the worst he could do — kill us? That's already gonna happen without any help, I think." He took a deep breath. "Reality check time, guys. Let's think a minute about what we're doin' here. We're going off to prepare so we can try to kill a *Great Dragon*. Does that make the rest of you as nervous as it makes me?"

"We could chicken out," Joe said, in a voice that made it clear that he had no intention of doing so. "Nobody has to go."

Ocelot shook his head. "I have to. I don't like it, but I have to. The rest of you guys, though —"

"No more of that," Winterhawk said sternly. "We've been a team this long — not about to stop now. I'll see this through to the end. I was serious about not intending to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life. I'd rather be dead than be some dragon's plaything."

"Yes," Wraith said.

Joe looked around nervously. "Uh — guys?"

"Yeah?" Ocelot looked at him questioningly.

"I just had a thought. What if Stefan tries another one of those illusions on us while we're out here?"

"Then we're screwed," Ocelot said simply. Still, he joined the troll in a nervous look around the area.

"Anyone want to hear my wild-arsed theory about why he won't?" Winterhawk asked.

"Yes," Wraith said, rather too quickly.

The mage leaned back in his seat, watching the Downtown scenery go by without really seeing it. "Apparently, he had a purpose in what he did to us, yes?"

"Yeah," Joe said. "To piss Gabriel off enough so he'd go fight him."

"Has he accomplished that objective?" Winterhawk asked.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. Or we wouldn't be doin' what we're doin' right now."

"So," the mage said in his best college-professor tone, "our usefulness has ended. We were merely the tools he used to manipulate Gabriel into a confrontation."

`Wraith nodded. "You don't kill tools."

"Right," Winterhawk said. "You don't even *think* about your tools, once you're finished with them. When you're cleaning your guns, do your gun oil and cleaning cloth occupy your mind once you've put them away?"

"Do you really believe that, `Hawk?" Ocelot said. He sounded like he wanted to.

"What's the alternative?" Winterhawk pointed out. "If we continue to split our concentration worrying about it, he'll destroy our edge just as effectively as he would with an illusion. I say let's just forget about it until it happens."

The other runners nodded, although each of them looked as if he was not quite convinced. Truth be told, neither was Winterhawk. Espousing a theory was one thing. Actually believing it was something else entirely.

38.

"So—are we ready to do this?" Ocelot asked. He wasn't surprised when no one replied.

It was a little more than half an hour after they had split up; they had now reconvened in Winterhawk's parking garage to prepare to leave for Gabriel's. Ocelot looked around at his teammates. All of them, including Ocelot himself, looked very different than they had when they had parted company. Although they had not yet gotten into all of their gear and shouldered their weapons, each runner looked like he had made his peace with the idea that there were good odds he wouldn't see the next sunrise. Even Winterhawk, who was normally never without a sardonic commentary on any situation, looked grim in his black leather longcoat. Ocelot noted that the mage hadn't even changed out of his sweater and jeans into his usual shadowrunning attire.

The drive over was unusually subdued. No one spoke, each content in the privacy of his own thoughts. Ocelot, in the back seat, leaned against the side window and considered how much his life had changed in the past month. When Kestrel had headed off back East with her team two years ago, he had never thought he would see her again. He had not been happy about that, but he'd dealt with it and eventually accepted it. It all went along with his overriding philosophy of life: that it was going to get you in the end, no matter who you were. You could tread water and stay ahead of it for awhile, but eventually something was going to blindsides you. What defined your worth as a person was how well you dealt with that. Ocelot prided himself on being able to take whatever life threw at him and come up fighting. He knew one of these

days he was going to get knocked down so hard he wouldn't get back up, but until then, he would keep on doing things the way he had ever since he was a kid on the streets of Seattle. It was the only way he knew how to do things.

He looked around at his teammates, noting, as he occasionally did, how unlike one another they all really were. It still sometimes amazed him how they worked so well together, being so different.

Joe, next to him on the back set, looked troubled and deep in thought. How they had all underestimated the young troll, when he had first joined the team. Earthy, excitable, with a tendency toward crudeness, Joe had been at first dismissed as the big dumb troll that he so carefully pretended to be. Yeah, he had a way of running off at the mouth at the wrong times, and he had very little sense of the social graces (a fact which alternatively annoyed and amused Winterhawk), but there was a lot more to Joe than immediately met the eye. Especially in the past couple of years, since he had found the ways of Bear and began exploring the heritage of both his birth tribe, the Nootka, and his adopted tribe, the Sioux, he had calmed down considerably. He was less impulsive, more contemplative and thoughtful, and possessed of a strong protective instinct toward his teammates. There was no one on the team who had not been the grateful beneficiary of Joe's newfound sense of responsibility.

In the driver's seat, ShadoWraith appeared to be concentrating on steering the truck, but Ocelot suspected that the elf's mind was far away. Easily the most secretive member of the team, `Wraith kept himself to himself during times when he wasn't involved in a run, usually taking off on his motorcycle to destinations which he did not share with the others and about which they did not ask. When he had first joined the team, he had been even

more tightly controlled than he was now, performing his duties with an absolute minimum of verbiage and interaction. He was the consummate perfectionist, seeming to care only about his twin goals of increasing his already frightening speed and bettering his skill with his firearms. Outside of the context of shadowrunning, he appeared to have few other interests. Over time, though, specifically following the team's run into the Chicago Containment Zone and the party where he had met Desire, `Wraith had begun to loosen up a bit. He had developed an effective fighting partnership with Joe where the two would watch each other's backs in combat situations (although on a personal level the two grated on each other); he had also shown evidence of a friendship (as opposed to a working relationship) with Winterhawk. Ocelot figured it was because the two were, in a strange sort of way, similar.

Winterhawk, in his way, was the biggest enigma of all to Ocelot, despite the fact that he knew more about the irreverent, sarcastic mage than he did about either of his other teammates. He still couldn't quite figure out, even after all these years that they had been working together, why someone with `Hawk's background would want to risk his life breaking into research labs and fighting bug spirits. Unlike any of the other members of the team (at least as far as Ocelot knew), Winterhawk actually had a real identity and a place to go home to. When he was not on a run, `Hawk almost always wasted no time in returning to his home outside London: a huge, drafty old mansion that had been in his family for generations. While in England, Winterhawk ceased to exist, temporarily replaced by Dr. Alastair Stone, college professor and reluctant lord of the manor. `Hawk claimed he ran the shadows mainly due to boredom, need for excitement, and fodder for his research; Ocelot used to

believe that, and used to mistrust the mage because of it. These days, though, he wasn't convinced that that was the whole reason. He also wasn't convinced that even Hawk himself knew the whole reason. When it came down to it, though, Winterhawk was damn good at what he did. Just like everybody in the team. When you were counting on somebody to help keep you alive, that was what mattered. That, and trust.

Ocelot sighed, wondering as he surveyed his friends how many of them would live through the ordeal that they were heading toward. He wished that there was another choice: for all his bravado and bluster, he would have vastly preferred not to have to do this. He was a street kid from the Barrens. He had grown up running with the Predators, a small-time gang with small-time aspirations, and had moved on when he'd outgrown both the gang and the aspirations. Still, though, he was essentially just a Barrens kid with more brains, sharper skills, and better cyberware. He wasn't a guy who fought dragons.

He thought about Gabriel, remembering again the scene in the motel room. *Guess I'm a guy who punches out dragons*, he thought wryly, but it didn't help. What was it the kid (*the dragon – mustn't ever forget that*) had said about them, way back what seemed like an eternity ago, at the Dreamscape party? He'd praised their versatility, and their individuality. Said that they were good because they could deal with anything that came their way. Ocelot's gaze returned to the window, where he watched the light rain fall on the darkened streets. *We'd damn well better be able to*, he thought. *We're gonna need every scrap of that so-called versatility to come through this one with our butts intact.*

They were approaching the towering structure that housed Gabriel's penthouse apartment now. Wraith

stopped the truck about half a block down. "Garage?" he asked.

"We don't have the code," Joe said.

Ocelot was already on the phone to Kestrel. Part of him was expecting that there would be no answer, but she picked it up on the second ring. "Ocelot?"

"Yeah."

"Cutting it short," she said, looking briefly at something offscreen. "Only five minutes left."

"We're downstairs, outside the garage. Can you let us in?"

"It's open. Just come on in, and go all the way to the rear of the first level. There's a car waiting. You can't miss it."

As promised, the security doors at the garage entrance swung silently open as the Nomad approached them. `Wraith guided the truck in and down the rows of cars toward the back. Ocelot noted as they drove by that the black Dynamit was still in the same spot where they'd seen it an hour earlier.

They rounded the last row of cars and stared. Parked lengthwise across several empty parking spaces, its trunk currently standing open, was a shining black Rolls-Royce Phaeton limousine. Standing next to it was Kestrel, watching for them.

"She *did* say we couldn't miss it," Ocelot muttered.

Winterhawk smiled cynically. "At least we'll be going to our deaths in style."

`Wraith pulled the truck up next to the Phaeton, and the runners quickly got out. "We're all going together," Kestrel said, coming over. "Gabriel insists. There's plenty of room in the trunk for all your stuff. You can leave the truck here and pick it up later."

"Where is he?" Joe asked, looking around.

"He'll be down in a couple of minutes. Let me help you move that stuff over."

Together, the runners transferred their gear from the truck to the Phaeton's spacious cargo area. By the time they finished, there wasn't much room left. Joe's gear, especially, took up quite a lot of room. Ocelot noticed before they started that there were already an Ares MP light machine gun, several spare clips of APDS ammunition, a large compound bow with a quiver of razor-tipped arrows, a Dikoted katana, and a handheld grenade launcher carefully arranged there along with an armored leather jacket and a black helmet with blue flames airbrushed on it. He also noticed that there was no longer any trace of Kestrel's earlier ordeal on her person. Clad in a military-style black jumpsuit, combat boots, web utility belt, and black sunglasses currently perched atop her white-blond hair, she looked anxious to take on just about anything, and impatient to get on the road.

"You've returned," came a quiet voice from behind them. "And just in time."

The runners turned. Gabriel stood there, watching them from a few meters away. Unlike Kestrel, who looked like she was preparing to go on a military expedition, the young man appeared ready to attend a rather festive business meeting. His white suit, purple silk tie, and pale gray wool overcoat were decidedly at odds with the attire of the runner team. His face was expressionless, completely unreadable.

"We're as ready as we're gonna get," Ocelot said.

Gabriel nodded once. "Please get in, then. But before you do—" He paused, regarding each of them. "It is not yet too late to turn back. I want to give you one last opportunity to reconsider my request that you permit me to handle this on my own."

"It won't work, Gabriel," Ocelot said. "Why don't you just put that away, okay? We're going. Now let's get on with it."

Again, the young man nodded, almost sadly this time. "Done." He indicated the doors to the limousine's passenger compartment.

Everyone climbed in and got settled in the buttery-soft leather seats. Ocelot looked around at the almost sinful level of luxury inside the car, having to suppress a twinge of anger: this was the kind of car that usually contained the fat-cat corporate bastards that he still, after all these years, hated. Even so, though, there was something nice about the turnabout. He glanced around at his fellow runners; he didn't even think Winterhawk, with his high-class tastes, had ever ridden in something this fine. "Guess we're not planning to be inconspicuous, huh?" he asked as the car smoothly started up and headed out of the garage. Nobody asked who was driving.

"There is no need to be," Gabriel said. "He knows we are coming, and I will not creep in the shadows like a thief."

"How do you know where he is?" Joe asked. "I thought you said you didn't even know he was in town until he left that box."

In answer, Gabriel slipped a hand into the inner pocket of his jacket and withdrew an old-fashioned business card. "He knew that I was the only one capable of opening the box," he said, passing it across to Joe, "so he left this inside for me."

Joe took the card and examined it, as did Wraith, who was sitting next to him. It was printed on fine, heavy cardstock of the kind that was difficult to find anymore, and read simply:

S.
Messina Corporation

"What's Messina Corporation?" Joe asked, passing the card to Winterhawk and Ocelot.

"I've heard of them," Wraith said. "New to Seattle."

"Yes," Winterhawk said distractedly. "They're bigger back east, yes? Just opened up a branch office in Seattle in the past year or so."

"That's correct," Gabriel said. "Eight months, to be precise."

"So what you're sayin'," Ocelot put in with suspicion, "is that we got *another* megacorp run by a dragon? Isn't Saeder-Krupp enough?"

"Do you want to tell him?" Winterhawk handed the card back to Gabriel.

"Stefan has covered his tracks well," Gabriel said. "Messina's corporate structure underwent a major upheaval two years ago, but it occurred quickly and showed little indication of anything out of the ordinary. He must have done this, as is his usual mode of operation, quite slowly and secretly. If I know him at all, he is not *running* the corporation as much as pulling strings behind the scenes. Although there is probably no important decision that does not go the way he wishes it to go, it is possible that very few souls at Messina have actually seen him, in human form or otherwise." He shrugged, putting the card back in his pocket. "No matter. We will find him. He wants us to find him."

"I've...uh...been meaning to talk to you about that," Ocelot ventured. "I'm a little uncomfortable just waltzing

in like this. If he's really that tough, he'll make mincemeat out of us before we even get to him. It seems to me like you're walkin' right into the trap he's set for you."

The young man's expression did not change. "There is no other way. Even were I capable of shielding us from him in his own domain, I won't do it. I don't fear him — why should I behave as if I do?"

Joe decided it was time to change the subject. "Hey — do you mind if I ask you a question before we get there? It's been bugging me for awhile."

Gabriel nodded once, turning to face the troll. "Go ahead."

"How did you know the things you knew at the party? About Bear, I mean, and Desire?" Joe shifted position a little, trying to get comfortable. Even in a spacious car such as this, there wasn't sufficient room for his massive frame. "Did you read our minds? I mean — you guys can do that, right?"

"We can," Gabriel confirmed. "But I did not. And I would not, without your consent." He smiled just a bit, a faint echo of the smile from the party. "Caimbeul told me," he said.

All the runners looked perplexed. "Who?"

"You probably know him as Harlequin."

Winterhawk sighed in exasperation, slumping back into the seat. "Why does it not surprise me that you know Harlequin?" he asked the air.

Now it was Kestrel's turn to look perplexed. "What are you guys talking about? Gabriel, who's Harlequin?"

"Another one of those things you didn't want me to tell you," Gabriel said.

"So you knew about us all along," Joe said.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. I didn't think I would get the opportunity to meet you, though."

Ocelot glanced out the window; they were still in Downtown, but headed north, up toward the Queen Anne Hill area. "So why a fixer?" he asked suddenly. "That's the part that I don't get. I mean, you're a *dragon*. There must be hundreds—thousands—of things you could do with yourself to make more money than you know what to do with. Why get your hands dirty in the shadows? You don't seem like the greedy type to me."

Kestrel smiled mischievously. "He likes the parties he gets invited to."

The young man returned the look. "You make me sound like a social degenerate, Kestrel," he protested.

"If the shoe fits —"

The runners watched the interplay between the two with some astonishment. Here they were, heading off to a confrontation that could possibly mean all of their deaths—including Gabriel's—and yet the two of them were acting like a couple of longtime buddies on their way to a ball game. Ocelot, especially, had noticed the way their relationship had loosened up, gotten more playful, since Gabriel's "secret" had come out. He figured it must be because she didn't think he considered Gabriel to be romantic competition anymore, so she was free to act more naturally with him. He wasn't so sure about that—the guy might be a dragon, but right now he still looked like a very desirable young man, who most likely had all the things he needed to make a woman very happy. Ocelot knew he had to work through that; he planned to do it, assuming he lived long enough. For now, though, he was too busy worrying about what would happen when they finally got where they were going to allow any other feelings to sway him from his focus.

"I'm sorry," Gabriel was saying, still smiling a little at Kestrel. "Forgive me, please. I've gotten off the subject. As

for why I decided to become a fixer, let me leave it at the fact that doing so gave me an excellent opportunity to observe all segments of society firsthand. There is more, but I think I'll keep my other reasons to myself for the time being." Taking a quick look out the window, he added, "We're getting close now. If you have anything else you want to ask me, best if you do it now."

The runners looked at each other, all of them with a single question on their minds but each of them reluctant to ask it, unsure of the effect it would have on their new ally. You didn't, after all, win friends and influence dragons by requesting that they share their weaknesses and vulnerabilities with you. Finally, as was usually the case in exchanges requiring bluntness rather than finesse, Joe broke the silence. Even so, his tone was somewhat hesitant: "Can you — uh — give us any tips for how we can hit Stefan? Weak points, maybe?"

Gabriel returned his nervous gaze calmly. "Why are you reluctant to ask me such a question? It's always wise to know your enemy before you go into his den."

"Yeah, that's the truth," Ocelot agreed, spreading his arms in a *go on* gesture. "So...?"

"Dragons aren't invulnerable," Gabriel said, settling back in his seat and occasionally flicking his attention off to check the view out the window. "Even Great Dragons. Our sadly departed ex-President is proof of that." The words sounded a bit flippant, but the tone did not. A look of brief sadness crossed his face, then was gone as he continued. "We are, however, quite resistant to almost all attacks, owing not only to our natural armor and magical defenses, but also to the fact that most of us have other sorts of protections, both mundane and magical, in effect at almost all times."

"The guards on the island hurt you, though," Ocelot pointed out.

"Yes, but only because I was weakened by the drugs. Even then, only the highest-powered of their firearms were able to get through my defenses." He considered for a moment. "Stefan's greatest vulnerability, I think, is his arrogance. I suspect that if there is a physical confrontation—and I will avoid one if possible—he will ignore you to concentrate fully on me. If you can somehow make your attacks effective when he is not paying attention to you, you might have a chance of injuring him."

Again the runners exchanged glances. He made it sound so easy! *Just hit him when he's not paying attention, and you'll hurt him. Suuuurrrre.*

Gabriel didn't appear to have noticed them. "As for weak points," he went on, "if I can manage to get through some of his magical barriers, I suggest that you aim for logical unarmored areas: eyes, nose, mouth, ears, and joints. I warn you that that is highly simplistic advice, but I'm afraid it's the best I can give you." He smiled wryly. "This isn't Tolkien. Every Great Dragon is an individual, and we're all as different in the ways we choose to defend ourselves as you humans and metahumans are. Since I haven't fought Stefan for several thousand years—and even then it was only brief skirmishes—I have no way to know what kind of precautions he's taken. To our advantage, though, the converse should be true as well."

"Let's hope so," Ocelot said in a tone that suggested that he wasn't convinced.

"Never forget his arrogance," Gabriel said seriously. "If anything will be his downfall, that is it. I expect him even to underestimate me, since I am nothing to him but the hated younger brother. If he doesn't discount your presence completely, I'll be quite surprised." He looked up, and paused briefly. "We've arrived."

The words, though he clearly did not mean them to, held an ominous note.

39.

The Seattle headquarters of Messina Corporation was a tall, black-glass tower that stood flanked by its pair of dull gray corporate neighbors like an elegantly beautiful woman between her two dumpy sisters. In the darkness of a cloudy, moonless night, it was barely visible against the sky, rising like some malevolent giant from amid a sea of concrete and steel.

Messina had been a respected old player in the game of corp politics for many years, firmly entrenched in the ranks of the second-tier organizations – those that did not attempt to compete with the juggernauts like Ares, Aztechnology, Saeder-Krupp, Fuchi, and the other so-called "Big 8" multinationals, but who nonetheless managed to successfully carve out their empires around the fringes of those titans. Based in Boston, Messina had branch offices in most of the larger cities in the eastern UCAS, as well as several in Europe, and had enjoyed a healthy but moderate period of growth over the previous ten years.

Two years ago, all of this had begun to change.

The employees of Messina Corporation, from the vice presidents down to the cleaning personnel, heard nothing. There were no rumors. There were no rumblings. There were no articles in the financial journals. In fact, the first indication that the controlling interest in Messina had been covertly purchased by a consortium of unnamed investors was when the overwhelming majority of high-ranking company officials had received cryptic messages informing them that their services were no longer required. By the time the bloodless coup was done, a good 90% of Messina's former officers, board members, and executives had been given their walking papers, and the mysterious consortium had managed to purchase enough

of their holdings to secure its position fully. Those who resisted initially (and there were many, especially those who held some of the larger blocks of stock) began, after a short time, to experience inexplicable changes of heart. The longest of them held out for a month, but his resistance was cut short by the unexpected suicide of his wife, a woman who had previously showed no signs of depression. No investigation was launched; no charges were filed. It was a takeover, some said at the time, worthy of Lofwyr the Great Dragon; some speculated that he might be involved. Lofwyr denied any involvement, stating that had he been behind the takeover, it would have occurred much more smoothly than it had.

When the takeover was complete, life went on without much change for the average Messina employee, with a few notable exceptions. The first was the subtle change in the corporate culture. As an old-line Eastern conglomerate, Messina's culture had always been rather rigid and hierarchical, but with the coming of the new personnel, it became positively military. Strict chains of command were implemented, defining which decisions were permitted at which level, which specific functions were permitted to make them, and to whom and under what circumstances those functions were to move the decision up the ladder. The employees (at least those at the middle management level and below) found the new policies to be stifling and dehumanizing, but the corporation still paid them well enough that they were reluctant to move on without giving it a fair chance. The turnover among professional and managerial personnel was surprisingly low, given the circumstances.

The second exception was the occasional disappearance. By unspoken agreement among the employees, these were never referred to or otherwise mentioned. If you got to work one day and discovered

that your office-mate was missing, his desk and workstation stripped clean of personal belongings, his name removed from the company telecomm directory, you simply did not ask. You went about your business and you waited for the suits to assign you a new office-mate. If you thought about it at all, you convinced yourself that Bob or Mary or Juan had committed some unforgivable sin against the Corporation, and therefore he or she deserved whatever had happened. And you prayed that you would not be next.

The third, and most unnerving, of the exceptions was the way in which the suits who acted as proxies for the mysterious consortium (who were never seen) always seemed to know exactly what was going on in the halls of the company. Eventually, after a couple of employees had been made examples of—before making their own disappearances—for what was deemed "conversation unhealthy to the spirit of corporate teamwork," everyone began to keep their mouths tightly shut even when they thought there was no way that they could be observed. Although everyone quickly picked up the habit of looking for cameras and listening devices, none were ever found.

Despite its frightening downsides, however, the employees of Messina Corporation mostly remained with the company for the one reason that allowed them to rationalize their decisions: the company was making money hand over fist. Something about the new ownership and the new policies must have been working, because for the first time in ten years, Messina's healthy but uninspiring financials had begun to take a decided upswing. If they could stand the stifling atmosphere, the workers stood to make handsome incomes both in salary and in bonuses given for exceptional service and loyalty. As the company grew, the unseen powers at the top

began opening more branch offices, including the most recent one in Seattle.

On this cloudy, moonless night in Seattle, the entire membership of the mysterious consortium stood near the window in a vast office on the top floor of the black tower and smiled slightly to himself.

It would not be long now.

40.

The runners stared up at the black building with a sense of foreboding.

The limousine had rolled to a smooth stop in front of the tower, directly opposite the main entrance. The team and Kestrel had wasted no time in getting out and donning the rest of their gear; they had been briefly worried about being seen, but Gabriel assured them that they were cloaked in an illusion that would prevent prying eyes from observing them. He did not think that he could shield them from Stefan, but there was no need for that. Stefan knew they were coming.

They stood now on the sidewalk in front of the Messina Tower. Save for Gabriel, all of them were now dressed in their armored jackets and helmets, with their weapons slung over their shoulders and packed away in their appropriate places.

Joe looked the most physically impressive, with his heavy machine gun attached to a gyro-mount, his Panther cannon over one shoulder, and his massive Dikoted combat axe over the other. To the brief amusement of his teammates, he had filled his pockets full of fist-size rocks, which he used, along with shuriken the size of dinner plates, as highly effective throwing weapons. Rounding out his stash was a handheld grenade launcher, a grapple gun, several grenades of various types, a small satchel full of plastique, and his derringer pistol, which was specially designed to fire sniper rounds.

ShadoWraith, who relied more heavily on speed and mobility than Joe did, was more lightly laden but no less deadly. The centerpiece of his armaments was his prized Barret sniper rifle, along with a Dikoted katana on his hip, his Ingram in its quick-draw holster inside his jacket, and

his Browning. He carried a handheld grenade launcher much like Joe's, along with an assortment of grenades. Stashed in a holster in the small of his back and another in his boot were two of his aces in the hole—a Narcoject pistol and a throwing knife, each one the delivery system for the same deadly poison.

Of all those present except Gabriel, Winterhawk was the least loaded down with weapons. His lack of skill with a gun made bringing one along a somewhat useless proposition, although he did carry his AUG-CSL carbine loaded with APDS on his back. Aside from that, he carried only his black-bladed magesword, a few grenades, a couple of his custom-made monowire bolas, and a small, clear Plexiglas riot shield. He was fully convinced that his physical contributions were not going to make any difference in this battle, so there was no need for him to slow himself down with unnecessary equipment.

Ocelot, who liked to have a lot of options in a fight while not hampering his athletic prowess, carried a number of smaller items in addition to his Franchi-SPAS shotgun, including his ever-present monowhip, a selection of throwing knives, taser shuriken, grapple gun, his 2-piece Dikoted spear/staff combination, a stun baton, and a belt full of grenades. In the hour before they had to return, Ocelot had gone to a trusted weaponsmith and had a couple of "special" grenades put together; he didn't know if he would get the chance to use them, but they were there if he needed them.

Kestrel carried her compound bow over her shoulder, with the quiver of Dikoted broadhead arrows hanging down in easy reach at her side. Also within easy reach was her Ares MP light machine gun, a Dikoted katana on her left hip, an HK-227 inside her coat, a grapple gun, and a number of grenades. Like the rest of the runners, she had several spare clips of APDS for her firearms, stuck in

the numerous pockets of her jumpsuit. Also like them, she wore a throat-mike and earpiece keyed to the team's communications system.

Gabriel got out of the car as they finished their preparations, and took a moment to survey the tower and the scene around it. "Before we go in," he said quietly, "I want to clarify something. I don't like to sound heavy-handed, but every operation must have a leader. I am that leader. You will not attack without provocation. If you have difficulty with this, then there is yet time to change your mind about coming along." He regarded them each in turn, his expression quite serious. "Do I have your agreement?"

Kestrel nodded immediately, though she doubted that the request was meant for her. The other runners responded more slowly, but eventually they all nodded as well. Ocelot's nod, especially, was grudging. He still thought the idea of marching, eyes open, into a dragon's den was right up there at the top of the list of dumb things to do, even if you *did* have your own dragon with you. But the dragon was calling the shots, at least for now, so he didn't have a lot of choice.

Gabriel nodded. "Let's go, then." He took one last look up at the black tower and then proceeded forward, moving slowly and deliberately up the concrete steps to the front door.

In spite of the late hour, the door was not locked. That didn't seem to surprise Gabriel; he simply pulled it open and went inside. After a moment, the other runners followed him.

Inside, the lobby was dim. Empty. Illuminated only by the faint glow of the EXIT signs, it contained a large (and probably bulletproof) combination receptionist's desk and security station, several tall plants, and a few tastefully arranged sitting areas clustered around low

tables and telecomm units. Off to the left, past the receptionist's workstation, was an alcove containing a bank of six elevators.

The runners looked around nervously, weapons in hand, as if expecting someone to jump out and start shooting at them at any moment. No one did. The lobby was as silent as a graveyard at midnight. It seemed to be holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. In its way, that made them even more nervous.

Gabriel strode across the expanse of marble-floored lobby toward the elevators without a glance to the left or the right, paying little attention to the fact that his entourage had dropped behind. Reaching the elevators, he turned back toward them. "Coming?"

ShadoWraith looked at the elevators and then at Gabriel, raising a questioning eyebrow. "Elevator?"

The young man shrugged. "I don't want to walk up all those stairs. Do you?"

"Elevators are prime ambush points," Ocelot said, coming up next to the elf. "We're sitting ducks in there if he wants to nail us."

"May I point out," Gabriel reminded him, "that you are, as you say, `sitting ducks' anywhere within a significant radius of Stefan's location, should he choose to take advantage of this fact?"

"Nice of you to be so comforting," Winterhawk put in sourly.

Gabriel stabbed the "UP" indicator on the elevator's control touchpad. "I'm simply trying to remind you that regardless of where we are, as long as you are under my protection, it would be difficult for Stefan to attack you. You're not dealing with a conventional threat—you can't treat it as if it were one."

The bell above the elevator door bonged once: a gentle, almost pleasant sound that nonetheless caused

tiny starts in all the runners, including Kestrel. The door slid open silently, revealing a cubicle carpeted in rich gray with walls paneled in highly polished genuine mahogany. Gabriel stepped in first, without hesitation. After a moment, the others, with varying degrees of trepidation, joined him. The door slid just as silently closed.

The car began to move.

"You didn't push anything," Joe said. He was crushed into the corner on the left side of the car, taking up almost half of the small space with his troll bulk and weapons.

Gabriel didn't seem worried about that, though his expression was now focused and serious. "He's expecting us."

The car continued to move upward.

Ocelot, wedged into another of the corners with Kestrel on one side and ShadoWraith on the other, was not at all comfortable with the way the situation was going. Focused, as he always was before a battle, on the business at hand, he could not help but be distracted by the fact that, with all six of them packed this closely, a single spell or well-placed company of gunmen could take them out before they could disentangle themselves enough to retaliate. Sure, maybe Gabriel could protect them. Maybe. But Ocelot didn't like to trust people he didn't know that far. Especially when they were ignoring all the rules of good sense and insisting on marching right into the belly of the beast.

Gabriel might be powerful, but at least in Ocelot's mind he was more than a bit naive. Why else would he choose to meet his brother—whom he had admitted was bigger, tougher, and stronger than he was—on his own home turf? And worse yet, to walk right in the front door, just like he expected? Ocelot didn't buy the line about 'he knows we're coming anyway, so why hide'? He had spent most of his life looking for the edge, the unexpected, the

thing that the other guy didn't think about. It was hard for him to turn off that sort of thinking even if he wanted to.

He wondered if Kestrel was ready for this. There was nothing romantic or protective in that thought; in a combat situation, Ocelot didn't allow himself thoughts of that nature. But facts were facts, and the facts were that Kestrel had been through a highly traumatic experience today, at the hands of the very creature that they were now approaching. Sure, her physical wounds were healed. She showed absolutely no sign of the terrible beating she had received earlier that day (*had it really only been that short a time ago?*), but Ocelot had no way to know what her mental state was. What had Stefan done to her mind? What kind of illusions had he forced her to interact with, to fight through, to relive? Had he shown her her team's death again, made her hear the screams and watch as they were blown limb from limb by the force of the missile? Had he shown her his own death? Gabriel's? Had he implanted triggers in her mind that would cause her to fire on her own team when Stefan spoke the right phrase?

Ocelot closed his eyes briefly. Can't think like that. If he started to think like that, he was lost already. He'd be too busy keeping an eye on Kestrel to make sure that she didn't do anything weird to watch himself, and that would be the end of it. Forcing himself to discard the thought, he continued to focus on preparing himself for what was to come.

Around him, the others' expressions were set and as focused as his own. They did not move, but their eyes were in constant motion, roving around the small confines. ShadoWraith in particular looked tense, since he did not deal well with confined spaces. Gabriel seemed prepared but relaxed, standing at the back of the elevator with his hands clasped loosely in front of him.

The numbers on the elevator's indicator continued to increase: 37... 38... 39...

There was a brief pause. The buttons on the keypad only went up to 39.

...40.

The doors slid open.

Revealed beyond them was a long hallway, ending in ornate double doors. The carpeting here was the same gray as that inside the elevator cubicle. The runners noticed that, of the six elevators at the bottom of the tower, apparently only this one reached this floor. "End of the line," Ocelot said quietly, stepping out.

The others quickly joined him in the hallway, glad to be free of the sardine tin. "So what do we do now?" Joe asked. "Knock? Blow through the door?"

In answer, Gabriel merely approached the doors and stood waiting before them. With a brief turn back for one last look at the runners, he grasped the knob and opened the door, swinging it noiselessly into the room. Then he stepped inside.

The runners, deciding that as much as they were not anxious to enter that room, they were even less anxious to be left out here alone, quickly followed.

They were standing in what looked to be an enormous office. While not as large as Gabriel's penthouse, it was every bit as opulent in a spartan sort of way. The room, they noticed immediately, was dominated by two features: the tall, floor-to-ceiling window that afforded a magnificent view of Downtown, and a long, low desk that seemed carved from a single block of obsidian. The room was wreathed in shadow, the only illumination coming from a small lamp near the desk and the faintly filtered light from other nearby buildings. The ceiling was at least ten meters high.

There was a tall chair behind the desk. As Gabriel and the runners stood inside the door, the chair turned around, allowing its occupant to face them. Casually, moving with easy grace, the chair's occupant rose and came around the front of the desk, where he leaned, arms crossed, and smiled in a decidedly reptilian fashion. The man was tall—taller than Gabriel—and powerfully built, with dark hair swept up off a high pale forehead, strong features, thin lips, and steady, glittering dark eyes like twin chips of the same obsidian from which the desk had been carved. He wore a fine suit of dark gray in a conservative cut.

"Hello, little brother," he said softly. "I was beginning to wonder if you would ever arrive."

41.

Gabriel took a step forward. "Stefan." His voice was utterly devoid of emotion.

The other's smile grew a bit wider. "What, no greeting? No 'how have you been'? I'm surprised, Gabriel." He made the name sound like the basest of insults. "You were always the well-mannered one in the family, after all."

"I have come," Gabriel said in the same emotionless tone. "Just as you apparently hoped I would."

"Yes," Stefan agreed, nodding. "I can see that. I give you credit for more bravery than I had thought. And I see you've brought your menagerie with you." His black-eyed gaze took in each of the runners, then returned to Gabriel. "You've acquired some new pets, I see. I should thank you for the opportunity to—play with them." His voice took on a silken purr. "I especially enjoyed playing with the female. Her reactions were most amusing."

Behind Gabriel, Kestrel stiffened. So did Ocelot. "*Calm,*" came Gabriel's voice in their minds. "*Do not allow him to goad you.*" Out loud to Stefan, he said quietly, "You have no right to use these people—any people—for your amusement. I've come because I cannot allow you to continue doing so."

Stefan laughed, an unpleasant sound. "Oh, Gabriel, I think your long sleep has addled your brain! You always did have an unhealthy affection for these creatures. I've been watching you—I notice that you spend a great deal of time in their form now." He looked Gabriel up and down. "And a fine form it is, too. Very attractive. I see your vanity has not suffered for your sleep." Smirking, he added, "Perhaps you have developed a taste for them in—dare I say—other ways?"

Gabriel did not take the bait, although he did notice the slight movement behind him as the team spread out a bit. Ocelot, on left end, moved up just barely into his line of sight. "If you wished to speak with me, Stefan, you might simply have requested my presence. It was not necessary to create such an elaborate charade."

"But I didn't wish to speak with you," Stefan said. He still had not moved from his position leaning against the desk. "Speaking is not what I had in mind at all, little brother. Oh, I will indulge you if you wish, though you must know that I am not inclined to do so after the last time I saw you. I wonder—would you be interested to know how many of my employees on that island lost their lives as a direct result of your escape?"

"Not particularly."

"Thirty-two," Stefan said, ignoring him. "That includes the three that you killed in your escape—they were the lucky ones, since they remained at their posts. The others—" he shrugged minimally—"were not so lucky." Clucking in mock sympathy, he looked at Kestrel. "And such a shame about your team, too."

"You bastard," Kestrel spat out between clenched teeth.

Stefan rolled his eyes and returned his attention to Gabriel. "See? They're so predictable. Insult their loved ones, or their sexuality, or their choice of automobile, and they react with such amusing outbursts. I can almost see why you enjoy keeping them around, Gabriel. They *are* interesting to watch. I understand they get much the same pleasure from watching the primates at the zoo."

Gabriel did not react visibly to the continued insults. "It won't work, Stefan," he said calmly.

"Oh, but it will!" Stefan chuckled. "Perhaps not on you—although even your benevolent resolve is not

boundless. Your puppies, however, seem quite agitated by it."

Behind Gabriel, the runners were continuing to spread out, moving slowly and carefully so as to draw the smallest amount of attention to themselves. All of them knew how easy it would be for Stefan to hit them with a spell if they were all clumped together; chances were good that he could do it regardless of where they were, but they didn't plan to take that risk. Ocelot crept to the side, his hand gripping the smooth handle of his monowhip. His promise to Gabriel notwithstanding, he intended to take any chance he was given. Maybe Stefan was a dragon, but right now he looked as human as Ocelot himself did. That probably wasn't any advantage at all, but on the off chance that it was, Ocelot wasn't going to let the opportunity pass him by. Glancing across at his teammates arrayed behind Gabriel, he couldn't tell what they were thinking, and whether they intended to try to press the advantage themselves.

"Why do you insist on continuing with this old grudge?" Gabriel was asking. "It's been thousands of years. You've clearly made a success of yourself. Why do you continue to let jealousy and hatred of something that has ceased to be a consideration to you cloud your judgment and put you at risk?"

"Risk?" Stefan laughed, shaking his head in disbelief. "Oh, Gabriel, you do amuse me sometimes! Occasionally I consider letting you live just because I'd have to look hard to find a better source of entertainment! Do you honestly think that you represent a *risk* to me? Would I have lured you here if I thought that you did?"

Gabriel shrugged. "You do seem to be spending a great deal of time and resources seeking me out and causing trouble for my friends."

"Your *friends*." He spat the word out. "I would not have believed it had I not heard it myself. Your *friends*. You are a *dragon*, Gabriel. As puny and pathetic a specimen as you are, you are nonetheless a member of the noblest race to ever walk the face of this Earth. And yet you seek to squander that by befriending these – *creatures*. They are *pawns*, Gabriel. Pawns to be used, to be manipulated for our own ends. You treat them as if you consider them your equals. Your affection for this – this – *woman* makes me nearly physically ill."

Again, Gabriel shrugged, this time with the tiniest of smiles. "You're getting melodramatic, Stefan. As I recall, that was always one of *your* faults. Perhaps you might consider a career on the stage –?"

Stefan's face darkened, his fists shaking as they clenched in front of him. "Do not mock me, little brother," he said in a low tone, full of menace.

Gabriel's smile grew just a bit wider. "Why not? You brought me here because you wanted a confrontation. Did you expect me merely to stand before you and allow you to kill me? That isn't going to happen – although it was a close thing there for a moment, with you spouting all that deathless prose at me. At least I might have died laughing." He took a couple of steps forward, moving with calm disregard. "You've been awake longer than I have, Stefan, but I don't think you've caught up with the times yet. You're still living in the Fourth World, where you could deliver speeches like that to people with straight faces. I've learned that things are just a bit more cynical these days."

Several things happened in quick succession at that moment, although everything moved so quickly that an observer would have been hard pressed to pick out one from the other. The first was that Stefan, still in human form, struck out at Gabriel with a great bellow of rage,

hands outstretched as if intending to rip him limb from limb.

The second was that Ocelot seized his advantage, lashing out with the monowhip as soon as Stefan began to move forward.

The third was that the other runners, beginning with ShadoWraith and continuing through Kestrel, Winterhawk, and Joe, raised their various weapons or prepared their various attacks, moving into positions around the two combatants.

The fourth was that Ocelot's monowhip smacked harmlessly into something a few centimeters from Stefan's body with a sizzle and a bright flash of light.

The fifth was that Stefan, his eyes blazing with frightening inner light, turned briefly and noticed Ocelot, then barked a phrase in some unknown language.

The sixth was that the roof opened up above them, revealing the clouds and the dark sky overhead.

The seventh was that Stefan raised his hands and cried, "Begone, puppies!" The runners were snatched up before they could react, sucked into spinning whirlwinds that had suddenly and without notice appeared on either side of Stefan. Horrified, they were borne up and up, flung through the massive skylight that had opened high overhead.

The room changed.

Gabriel and Stefan lunged at each other, shifting form.

The runners were falling.

42.

The wind whipped around the team as they spun through the opened skylight, buffeted this way and that by the power of the enormous air elementals that had sprung into being at Stefan's command. Their cries of surprise and shock were torn away in the gale-force winds that carried them further and further skyward, away from the black tower.

Then, suddenly, the elementals were gone. The winds quieted. The group began to fall.

Ocelot desperately twisted his body, his eyes darting around and sparing only the briefest of glances to try to find his friends. *Don't look down*, he ordered himself as his hair and jacket fluttered madly around him. *Only got one chance at this. Don't blow it.* His hand was already on his grapple gun, his body reacting with a trained precision that was only hindered by his conscious mind. He took a deep breath, sighted on the top of the building as it flew by, and pulled the trigger.

The line shot out with a whirring noise that was swallowed entirely by the wind. Ocelot stiffened, his stomach knotting as it looked like he'd missed his mark, but then the small but strong hook settled over the lip of the skylight with a *thunk* and began to pull taut. Ocelot quickly adjusted the grapple gun's rate of payout, slowing his descent until he at last slammed, feet first, into one of the building's windows about halfway up, his arms feeling like they were on fire. Carefully adjusting his grip and then hanging on tightly, he ventured into his commlink, "Anybody out there?" He didn't expect to get any answers.

"Right here," came Winterhawk's quick but slightly shaky reply. "I've got `Wraith."

"Here," Kestrel said. "I'm all right."

There was another *thunk* off to Ocelot's right, as something large hit the side of the building. "I'm okay," Joe said. "It was close, though." Like the others, his voice was a bit breathless.

Ocelot risked a look off to both sides. Two other grapple-gun lines stretched down from high above: one held Kestrel, her dark-clad form barely visible against the polished black of the tower; the other held Joe, ten or so meters down. "Hawk? `Wraith? Where are you?"

"Don't look," Winterhawk said. "Behind you. We're levitated."

"How the hell did we do that?" Ocelot demanded.

"Dragon-boy screwed up," Kestrel said. "The elementals took us up too high before they dropped us. We had time to get a bead on the top of the building with our grapple guns."

"So what do we do now?" Joe asked. "We can't stay here. Reel ourselves back up and go through the skylight?"

"Wouldn't do that," Winterhawk said. "Can't be sure, but it looks like he's got those elementals guarding that entrance. If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not tangle with them just now."

"We can't go down to the bottom and back up," Kestrel said. "We don't have enough line on these things—at least *I* don't."

"We probably couldn't get the elevator to work anyway," Joe pointed out.

"What, then?" `Wraith asked. He was floating near Winterhawk, close enough that he could grab hold of the mage if the spell that was holding him aloft somehow went away. Winterhawk himself was held up by means of a spell lock containing his levitation spell.

"Let's bust some windows," Joe said. He rapped on the black glass with his fist. "This stuff's probably armored, but I'll bet we could blow a good-sized hole in it."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "That's the best idea I've heard all day."

"Can we hurry up a bit with it?" Kestrel asked nervously, looking upward. "I keep wondering when those elementals are going to get the idea to pull our lines loose."

Joe, holding onto his grapple gun with one hand, dug around in his bag and came up with a clump of plastique, then turned his head to look at Winterhawk and `Wraith as he shaped it the way he wanted it. It wasn't easy doing it one-handed, but he didn't have much of a choice. "One of you guys is gonna have to set it, `cause I can't get far enough away when it blows otherwise."

"I'll do it," `Wraith said. Winterhawk carefully maneuvered him over next to Joe, and the troll handed him the explosive.

"This stuff drops off pretty fast," Joe said, "So you don't need to get too far away. Between us is best – then we can all reach the hole without too much trouble. Just paste it up there and stick the detonator in, then get your ass outta there. I'll blow it from here."

Ocelot watched tensely as `Wraith floated over between him and Joe and attached the clump of puttylike explosive, then placed the detonator. The wind was still blowing hard up here; the wind chill probably dropped the temperature down at least another ten degrees. His hands were beginning to go numb despite his gloves. That wasn't a good sign.

When `Wraith was away, back over near Winterhawk, Joe said, "Everybody ready? Okay – here goes."

The explosion that blew out a hole about a meter and a half in diameter in the slick armored glass didn't make

much noise, and, fortunately for them, didn't fling much debris outward. "At least *some*thin's working right," Joe muttered. "Okay. Give it a minute to cool off, and let's get in there."

One by one, moving quickly, the runners maneuvered themselves and swung through the hole Joe had created. Joe himself went first, as he often did when unknown danger waited on the other side of a portal; reeling in his grapple gun, he raised himself up even with the hole, then swung over and went in feet first. Ocelot followed, then Kestrel went through. Last were `Wraith and Winterhawk.

By the time they got through, the other three had already disengaged their grapple-lines and were loading in new spools. "Okay," Ocelot said. "Where the hell are we?"

They looked around. They appeared to be standing in a large open area, its space broken up by row after row of cubicles. Each of the two they could see—one directly off to each side—contained a cyberdeck, a chair, a shelf unit, and not much else. No one other than the runners appeared to be moving.

Ocelot sighed. "So—we goin' back up?"

"Of *course* we're going back up," Kestrel said sharply. "Stefan will kill Gabriel if we don't get up there and help him." She paused. "And then he'll be looking for us."

"He might not," Joe said. "He probably thinks we're dead." He sighed, flipping up his visor and swiping his huge hand over his face. "But we have to go back anyway."

"We *did* rather force ourselves along on the trip," Winterhawk said reluctantly. "Seems a bit unsporting of us to quit now."

Ocelot looked at `Wraith. "You in?"

The elf nodded. "Yes."

The door on the other side of the big room flew open. "They're in here!" yelled a voice, followed by the pounding of many footsteps.

Joe, who could see over the cubicles, whispered into his comm unit, "Security! Looks like about eight of `em. Get down!"

Quickly, the runners ducked behind cover, drawing weapons and watching around the corners of the cubicles. As the security guards, dressed in armored uniforms and helmets and carrying SMGs, rounded the corner, Joe and `Wraith took aim: the former with his HMG, the latter with his Ingram. `Wraith took down the first two guards in the line at sizzling speed, while Joe got the next two. Kestrel managed to wing a fifth with her SMG before they dived around more of the cubicles and couldn't be seen.

"Looks like four more left," Winterhawk reported.

"Let's get `em before they call for reinforcements," Ocelot said grimly. "They're between us and the door."

Winterhawk was casting a spell. After a moment, his quiet voice came through the commlink: "Got `em. They're moving—two are sneaking `round the corner off to our left. The other two look like they're planning to climb on the desks and fire over the tops of the cubicles. I think they're trying to surround us as best they can."

"Got it," Ocelot said.

Kestrel moved to cover the new position, along with `Wraith. Joe kept his machine gun trained on the original spot. Ocelot, monowhip in hand, began creeping with his back to the cubicles over toward where the guards had ducked before.

From his relatively secure spot behind some more cubes, Winterhawk continued reporting the results of his clairvoyance spell. "Looks like they're getting ready to move. They're conferring now...All right—here they go."

Almost simultaneously, the two groups of guards popped out from behind their cover, thinking they had surprise on their side. They didn't have a chance. `Wraith and Kestrel picked off the two that had come around the flank, while Joe made short work of one of the others. The other one, seeing that his unit had been destroyed, attempted to make a run for it, only to get tagged by Ocelot's monowhip.

"Come on," Joe said. "Let's get out." He started heading over toward the door.

"Let's check these bodies quickly," Kestrel said. "They might have a way to get into the elevator."

"Don't want to take the elevator," Ocelot spoke up. "Without Gabriel, we *are* sitting ducks in there."

"We might need to get into it," Kestrel argued, already at the two bodies she and `Wraith had taken down. After a moment the elf joined her. "Come on—it'll only take a minute, and it might come in handy later."

Reluctantly Ocelot had to admit she was right. Together the five runners checked the guards and grabbed anything that looked like a cardkey or other access device. Each of the guards had one, but the one guard who was dressed somewhat differently than the others also had a cardkey that looked different. As they searched, shoving things into their pockets as they found them, Joe acted mostly as lookout, keeping an eye on the door. The search was completed in less than a minute.

There was no one waiting for them outside the door to the cubicle-filled room; all they saw when they poked their heads carefully out was a long, bare hallway lined with doors. "Wish we had a map of this place," Joe said.

"I wonder what floor we're on," Kestrel added, looking around. "The doors don't have numbers."

"About the twentieth," `Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded. "Looked like the hole Joe made was about halfway down. We've got a long way to go."

"Think the guards know anything about what's going on upstairs?" Ocelot asked.

Winterhawk shrugged. "I'd say no, but that's with no information. What I wonder is if Stefan's told them where we're trying to go."

"Come on," Kestrel said urgently. "If we're not taking the elevator, then let's find the stairs. Standing around talking isn't getting us up there." She seemed much more agitated than usual: this was not her normal, calmly planned and executed run.

"Shall I risk another clairvoyance spell to try to find the stairs?" Winterhawk asked the group at large.

"How long?" `Wraith asked.

"Minute, perhaps, or two. I won't take more time than that."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "It'll help in the long run. Let's get set up first, though."

They ducked back inside the room they had just left, directly inside the door where they could watch both ways down the hall. Ocelot and Kestrel stationed themselves as lookouts for the hallway, while `Wraith and Joe positioned themselves so they could keep an eye on the room itself. Winterhawk leaned against the wall and cast his spell again.

It took him considerably less time than two minutes to find the entrance to the stairs. "Got `em," he said triumphantly after only about thirty seconds. "Just down this hallway and to the left. That's where the elevators are for this floor, too." He paused. "Wait a minute. They know we're coming. They're waiting for us."

"How many?" Ocelot demanded.

"Five...no. Six. It's a bit dark, so it's hard to tell for sure. They're waiting `round the corner past the elevators. I think they expect to ambush us."

"Surprise," `Wraith said.

Winterhawk smiled evilly, but nobody could see it behind his helmet's faceshield. "Yes, I think we can provide quite a surprise for them."

The guards were being a bit more careful this time, apparently having taken something from the fact that any threat that could dispatch an eight-man team without allowing them to take a single shot was something to be treated with respect. As Kestrel carefully poked her head around the corner to scan the area near the elevators, she saw nothing. Leaning back in, she whispered, "They're hiding." She glanced at Winterhawk. "Can you see them?"

The mage closed his eyes briefly, concentrating on the unseen enemy. "Just `round the corner. Three on each side. I think they're waiting for one of us to be imprudent enough to venture out."

Joe pulled his grenade launcher off his belt. "I got one side."

"Other," `Wraith said, checking to see what he had loaded and then taking aim.

Simultaneously, the two leaned out from behind cover, Joe high and `Wraith low, each firing a tiny grenade down the hallway. The placement was perfect: the grenades landed less than ten centimeters from the point of the corners and just past them, exploding with great *booms* that took out part of the corners themselves. "Go!" Kestrel whispered harshly into the commlink, launching herself across the hallway toward the stairway door. She flung it wide and disappeared inside, using one arm to hold it open to allow easy entry.

The other runners were quick to follow, with Joe bringing up the rear to provide covering fire. One of the

guards, apparently having been mostly shielded from the blast by his teammates, made one desperate attempt to fire on the runners, but his rounds plinked harmlessly off Joe's armor. The troll crossed the rest of the short expanse and disappeared behind the slamming door. The guard decided to tend to his fallen fellows rather than play the hero and follow the team to certain death.

Inside, the door closed behind the runners. They looked around, quickly taking in their surroundings. The metal stairway stretched as high and as low as they could see, bending back and forth to snake up the building. On the inside of the door was stenciled a large 24 in institutional black text. "We're up higher than we thought," Ocelot said. "Still a long way to go, though."

"Let's get going," Kestrel said. "Keep an eye on those doors." She started moving, taking the stairs two at a time.

Ocelot looked up, wishing there was an open space between the winding flights so they could grapple-gun their way up. No point in wishing, though: even if there was, it wouldn't be big enough for Joe, which meant that they would still have to wait for the troll. Joe was a tank, but he was the slowest member of the party – although he had boosted reflexes, he couldn't match `Wraith's and Ocelot's blinding speed, nor Winterhawk's levitation-based movement. Especially not when he was carrying all the hardware he had, including the gyro-mount. They were just going to have to do it the hard way.

No more security guards came through the emergency doors as they worked their way upward as quickly as they could. By the time they got near the top, they had spread themselves out: Kestrel and Ocelot were about a floor ahead of `Wraith and Winterhawk, while Joe lagged a couple of floors below that. They were always careful to stay close enough to each other that if a threat should burst in through one of the doors they could all

deal with it, but Ocelot gave up trying to slow Kestrel down about floor 30. She was determined to reach Gabriel, and nothing short of restraining her was going to stop her.

The last door at the top of the stairway read 39.

Kestrel and Ocelot skidded to a stop in front of the door. "39!" Kestrel snapped in frustration. "Where's 40?"

"Elevator?" `Wraith asked, casting glances downward. He was still expecting more squadrons of security guards to disgorge from the lower doors at any moment, and was determined not to be taken by surprise.

"You think one of those cardkeys'll get us up to the big boss?" Joe asked.

Ocelot grabbed the door handle. "We got another choice?"

"Wait," `Wraith said. He looked at Winterhawk. "Check?"

"Right." Once more, Winterhawk cast his clairvoyance spell. "Looks clear," he reported. "Odd, though—I can't see anything above us. The whole thing must be completely shielded."

"That's not too surprising," Kestrel said. "He *is* a dragon, after all. Doesn't want people snooping in his business. Besides, I thought I saw the whole place change right before I went up through that skylight."

"So did I," Joe spoke up. "I thought I was just seeing things."

Ocelot, who had been so busy trying to twist into an upright position in the elemental's grasp that he hadn't seen much of anything, turned back. "What did it change to?"

"It got a lot bigger," Joe said. "Like the office wasn't there anymore. It was just a giant open space."

Kestrel nodded. "That's what I saw too. Didn't get a good look at it, though."

"Interesting..." Winterhawk said. He hadn't seen anything either. He looked up. "I wonder..." he mused speculatively. Before his friends could ask him if he'd gone crazy, he activated his levitation spell lock and zipped upward.

"Hawk, what are you —?" Ocelot started to demand, but shut up fast when half of Winterhawk's body disappeared, apparently up through the concrete ceiling above the landing.

Wraith caught on first. "Illusion," he said with a raised eyebrow. It now looked like Hawk was embedded in the ceiling, with only his legs hanging down. The effect was extremely unsettling.

Winterhawk popped back out of the ceiling, shoving the visor of his helmet up. Beneath it, he looked satisfied. "Crafty bugger, that Stefan. There are more stairs up there. To the fortieth floor, I'll wager."

"Can you blow away the illusion?" Ocelot said, concentrating upward. "I still don't see a damn thing but ceiling."

"I do," Wraith said, squinting at it intently. "Faint, though."

"I don't think I've a chance of breaking the illusion," Winterhawk said ruefully. "Just look hard at it, especially round the edges. Once you see through it, you won't need to do it again."

Ocelot, Joe, and Kestrel began focusing intently above their heads, as Winterhawk stood back with Wraith and offered occasional encouragement and suggestions. It took awhile, but eventually all three of them spotted the faint outlines of stairs continuing upward through the concrete. Joe, who had been pressing his hand up against it, suddenly found himself able to push through as if it were not there. "That's a damn good illusion," he said, eyes wide.

"Yeah, well, consider the source," Kestrel said. "Come on. We're almost there." She had been fidgeting ever since she had spotted the stairs, and now without waiting for an answer she started up.

Once they got up through the illusion, it disappeared completely, revealing the lower flights of stairs disappearing down into the shadows below. "Makes sense," Winterhawk muttered from his position fourth back in the line, right in front of Joe. "He doesn't need to see his own illusion."

Nobody answered.

Up above, at the top of the final flight of stairs, was a door marked 40 – Authorized Personnel Only. "That'd be us," Ocelot said, one hand on the doorknob while drawing his spear with the other. "Ready?"

Wraith's practiced gaze swept over the door, looking for hidden traps or alarms. He found none. Sliding the Barret down off his shoulder, he nodded.

Joe adjusted his machine gun and made sure his other equipment was in position. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Yeah. Ready."

Kestrel readied her LMG and adjusted her bow on her back. "Let's go."

Winterhawk loosened his mageblade in its scabbard and slid his arm through his shield. After a quick check of his magical paraphernalia, he too nodded.

Ocelot swung the door open.

43.

What they saw was a sight straight out of a nightmare.

The room had indeed changed. Where before they had been standing in what they thought was an extremely large office, the space where they now stood dwarfed that office as if it had been nothing more than a small bedroom.

The room they now occupied, if you could call it a room, stretched for the entire length and width of the building's top floor, which took up an entire large city block. The walls on three of the four sides were made of the same black, armored glass that covered the rest of the building; it soared up and curved at least fifteen meters from the floor, forming a glass ceiling dominated by the huge skylight through which the runners had been flung. The skylight was once again closed.

Most of the floor was clear – there was no sign of the obsidian desk, the art objects, the chairs, although the marble floor still covered the entire space. The ceiling was supported by four massive columns, each one a good five meters across, spaced in a wide rectangle that produced the effect of ringing the great space in the center of the room.

As impressive as the room was, though, it was not by any means the most impressive or frightening sight the runners were presented with when they opened the door. What they did see stopped them cold for a moment, staring with eyes wide, unable to look away.

In the center of the room, surrounded by the four support columns, two impossibly huge creatures from ancient legend were doing their best to tear each other apart. Gone were the strong, elegant older man and the

handsome and compassionate younger one—in their places stood their true forms, rising up on enormous hind legs bulging with muscles, slashing at each other with talons and teeth, their tremendous wings beating the air behind them.

Stefan was even bigger than Gabriel. Unlike his brother's golden color and small, smooth scales, his body was covered with larger, more armored-looking scales of a bluish green hue. His eyes were green, burning with rage and hatred. As Gabriel got through his defense and slashed at him with a claw, the bigger dragon bellowed in frustrated pain, the sound echoing deafeningly through the cavernous room.

"Holy...crap..." Joe breathed.

"Bloody hell," Winterhawk agreed.

For a moment, the runners could do nothing but stare. All of them had seen dragons before, but none had ever seen anything like this. Winterhawk wondered idly if *anyone* else in this day and age had ever seen a sight like this—two Great Dragons locked in mortal combat. As far as he knew, Great Dragons settled their differences very privately, and mere humans and metahumans were not permitted to view their battles, verbal or physical. Watching the scene here was like watching two dinosaurs the size of small apartment buildings attacking each other; it was like something out of the trideos. But this was not the trideos. The blood was real. The bellows of pain were real. The way the entire floor shook when the two dragons made contact with each other was real.

This was life or death, and it didn't look like their side was winning.

Both dragons were cut and bleeding, but it was clear to anyone watching that if they continued with this physical confrontation, Gabriel wasn't going to last long. He already had huge slashes across his right flank from

Stefan's claws; there was another gash above his eyes, causing him to shake his head to fling the blood away, and his chest was bleeding from yet another wound. It was hard to tell if he was slowing down because both of them were moving so fast, but although Stefan had his own share of gashes and injuries, he was moving with more power.

The runners didn't stand still for long. It was difficult to tear themselves away from the primal struggle going on before them, but they all knew that if they didn't do something, they were all dead.

"He's losing," Kestrel said desperately into the commlink. "Stefan's killing him! Gabriel, get away from him and use magic!"

"He said Stefan would ignore us," Ocelot said. "Let's use that."

"Wait to fire until we all get in position," Joe added. "Maybe we can hit him all at once."

Ocelot was already moving. "I'm takin' left," he said, breaking into full speed and heading for the big support column off to his left—the one closest to Gabriel. As he ran, he took a quick glance upward, trying to determine if there was anywhere he could shoot his grapple gun and get up above the combat. He didn't see one. Gripping his spear tightly, he kept going.

Wraith, also moving at full speed, was already running toward the right-side column nearest him—and nearest Stefan. The column was big enough to provide decent cover, even against the dragon. As long, anyway, as he used a physical attack rather than a magical one. Wraith planned to station himself behind the column and then set up a careful shot with the Barret before firing. He didn't know if the sniper rifle's high-powered rounds could punch through the dragon's barriers and his natural armor, but it was the most powerful weapon he had, and

he was a master marksman with it. It was his best chance, so he was going to take it.

What he hadn't counted on, though, was the dragons' speed. It was hard to tell when they were locked in a clinch like that, but the way they were lashing out with teeth and claws, and the way their powerful tails flung around behind them, `Wraith suspected that they moved even faster than he did. This surprised him. Not much moved faster than `Wraith, and he counted on that in his strategy.

Kestrel took off in the same direction as Ocelot. She had a long-range weapon in the LMG, so she didn't plan to get any closer to Stefan than she had to. She didn't think that point-blank range was going to make enough difference to matter in how much damage she did to the dragon, but it might make a difference if he tried to take a shot at her. She knew what kind of damage those claws could do—much as she loved and trusted Gabriel, she still had to fight off a small flutter of nervousness every time he brought his claws, each one almost as big as she was, near her. And this was a dragon who would die before he would hurt her. Stefan had no such compunctions.

She tried, and mostly succeeded, to block from her mind the sight of Gabriel's wicked bloody wounds. She knew she would be no help to him if she succumbed to worry, but she couldn't completely erase it from her mind. He looked so much like he had looked when she had first found him, desperate and dying, in the cavern. That time, she'd been able to help him. But he was weakening. She could see that. Stefan was too, but not nearly as much. She was well aware how much stronger the bigger dragon was from Gabriel's telling her about it, but now that she saw them together she got the true story on a much more visceral level. If Gabriel had any hope of winning this fight, he was going to have to break free of Stefan and get

into position to use his powerful magic. Stefan no doubt knew that, which was why he was trying so hard to keep his brother close.

Winterhawk saw no reason to get in close to the fight at all. As much as he hated to acknowledge it, he knew that his role in this battle was going to be one of support rather than of offense. As a combat mage with a full complement of powerful offensive spells, his usual position on the team was a much more active one. He prided himself on being able to take down, or at least soften up, large numbers of opponents quickly and easily. The team didn't really *have* a support role most of the time: between `Wraith's sniper rifle, Joe's axe and machine gun, Ocelot's melee-weapon prowess, and Winterhawk's magical punch, they generally operated on the "best defense is a good offense" philosophy.

This time, though, that strategy wouldn't work. `Wraith's Barret and Joe's HMG might—*might*—have a chance of getting through Stefan's armor at a weak point. Ocelot had a chance if he was brave enough to get in close to the dragon with his monowhip. Kestrel, `Hawk wasn't sure about, because he didn't know how good she was with her LMG. But as for himself, his strongest attacks were his magic and his mageblade. He knew that even though, according to Gabriel, Stefan's magic wasn't as powerful as Gabriel's, he was still a Great Dragon. That meant that even his *weak* magic had to be orders of magnitude more powerful than Winterhawk's. So hitting him directly with a spell was out of the question—it wasn't even worth risking the drain to try. That left the mageblade. The magical weapon might have a chance of hurting the dragon, since he was a magical creature and therefore more vulnerable to it than he would be to a normal weapon. Still, though, that was like saying that an elephant was slightly more vulnerable to a steel toothpick

than he was to a wooden one. Even with his magically-boosted prowess with the blade, `Hawk didn't think he'd have much of a prayer of being effective. If it came down to his needing to, he would give it his best go, but for now he contented himself to activate his levitation spell lock and slide noiselessly along the same wall where the door was, maneuvering himself into position where he could keep an eye on as many of his teammates as possible and provide them with magical defense support should they need it. The longer Stefan ignored them, the better off they would be.

Joe, moving the slowest of the team, headed for the same column that `Wraith had already almost reached. Like the elf, he planned to get into position and set up a shot on Stefan; unlike `Wraith, his shot didn't depend on precision and careful aim. He was counting more on the "lead hose" effect. It wasn't often that he got the chance to open up with full automatic on his machine gun, but the results when he did were usually most satisfying. He remembered the time he had blown the stuffing out of an enormous Spider spirit using this same gun, but then reminded himself that this dragon was easily ten times the size of that spirit. This was going to take some effort; however, Joe was confident that he was going to hit his mark. "Say when," he said into the comm. With the gyro-mount stabilizing the gun, he could let loose at any moment on his way over to the pillar.

Nobody answered, because things were starting to happen in the middle of the room. Suddenly, Stefan broke his grip with Gabriel and backpedaled a couple of steps, gathering magical energy and flinging it in a huge glowing ball at his brother. Gabriel reared back on his hind legs as the spell slammed into his barriers, dissipating harmlessly in a flash of bright light and a sizzle like lightning. Eyes blazing, moving faster than the

runners thought it possible, he hurled an answering spell at Stefan. The air crackled with energy as the tremendous bolt of magical force hit Stefan, sending the bigger dragon staggering backward, bellowing with pain. From where the various runners were watching, it didn't appear that much of the spell had made it past Stefan's defenses, but unlike Stefan's own spell, this one had at least gotten through.

ShadoWraith reached his vantage point behind the pillar. Raising his Barret, he sighted on Stefan's huge body and began taking careful aim. He would not fire yet: the position was not right. He knew that if he had a chance of hitting, it would have to be in one of the dragon's weak spots, as Gabriel had said. If he could punch through Stefan's magical protection, he'd need to hit a spot that wasn't covered by the thick scales. Settling back, Wraith waited for his opportunity. He was patient.

Ocelot was behind the other pillar, and he had an idea. In his mind, it was best if the team spread itself out as much as possible—at least then if Stefan started to notice them, with any luck he wouldn't be able to hit them all at once. As frightening as the dragon's magic was, even it had to have limits. With Ocelot's admittedly spotty knowledge of magic, most of it gained from Winterhawk when he was in a lecturing mood, he knew that the area of a spell's effect was governed by the power of the spell and the power of the caster. He also knew that, with some exceptions, most spells required that the caster be able to see the recipient. He didn't think Stefan was going to be able to spare time for anything too fancy, not with Gabriel breathing down his neck. Therefore, Ocelot decided that his next move would be to try to get as far over to the other side of the vast room as he could. The sight of the counterpart to the support column behind which he was now hiding gave him the means to do this. He pulled out

his grapple gun, mindful of Gabriel's long and wildly thrashing tail, which kept dropping in and out of the area where he'd have to cross. He knew that one smack from that tail and he'd be out of the fight, so he'd have to be careful. "I'm going across," he said in to the commlink. Aiming the gun at the column, he watched for his chance to act.

Winterhawk, from his spot against the near wall, continued to move along it while keeping watch on all the combatants. His eventual intent, somewhat like Ocelot's, was to get over to the other side of the room, as far as possible away from Stefan, while still being able to see his teammates. Drawing his mageblade, he looked around. *Where have those air elementals gone?* he wondered. *Odd that they'd just go away.* Perhaps they were up on top of the now-closed skylight, on guard to make sure that no one tried to enter through that point. Possibly they had discharged their last service to Stefan and had returned to the astral plane—or he had released them once they'd done their job. Or there was always the chance that Gabriel had, with nothing more than a negligent flick of his power, banished them himself. For whatever reason, though, they seemed to be gone. Winterhawk was glad of that, since it was going to be hard enough dealing with the dragon without complicating matters.

Kestrel reached the other side of the support pillar that Ocelot was just getting ready to vacate. Readying her LMG, she spoke into the commlink. "I'm in position. Ready when you are." Waiting, she watched the two dragons. *Good,* she thought. *He's back far enough he can use magic now.* In her mind, the fight just tipped a little bit over toward Gabriel's side, despite his collection of bloody injuries. She knew that even though the gashes and claw-rendings looked bad, Gabriel would be able to heal them with no trouble once he bested Stefan. She had

to keep reminding herself that in a creature bigger than a house, injuries that would look life-threatening in a human were not nearly so grievous. He was getting weak, true, but the power of his magic had not dissipated at all. In fact, the success of his latest spell seemed to fill him with more vitality than she'd seen since she'd come in.

Joe watched from his position on the other side of Wraith's pillar, machine gun still trained on Stefan's midsection. Briefly, he wondered if he should switch weapons, using his Panther assault cannon in place of the HMG. The damage from each was roughly the same when you took into account the fact that the Panther fired exploding shells, but he was reluctant to use the Panther because of the possibility of collateral damage. As long as Stefan stayed away from Gabriel, it might be all right, but if the dragons, who were both moving at truly scary rates of speed, got back together again his shot might hurt Gabriel. It was even possible, though not likely, that he could miss and hit too near one of his own team members. No, he decided, at least for now he would stick with the HMG. He had enough ammo for it to do his best to make hamburger out of Stefan.

Stefan, perhaps knowing all too well that in a battle of magic he was going to lose, seemed determined to take the fight back to Gabriel. With a great and rumbling roar that shook the chamber from floor to ceiling, he bunched his hindquarters under him and dived at his brother, wings beating the air.

Gabriel was ready for him this time, though. He glared at Stefan and jerked his head upward in a dismissive gesture. The other dragon was caught in mid-air by a wall of magical energy that drove into his belly like a giant fist, reversing his direction and slamming his body into the far wall.

The sound was deafening; it was as if a bus had just collided at full speed with a stationary object. The heavily armored glass held, but just barely. The entire chamber shook again, the floor jarring like it had just been hit with an earthquake, the glass rippling. Stefan landed hard on his back and bellowed again, adding his rage to the cacophony of sounds echoing through the room. Gabriel moved forward to press his advantage.

ShadoWraith's carefully-aimed shot was thrown off by the sudden actions of the two dragons. He was having a bit of a hard time adjusting to the fact that they were both faster than he was; it was throwing off his strategy. Quickly, he got back into position and aimed the Barret, preparing to squeeze off a shot at Stefan's exposed belly. The dragon, still off balance, rose up, beating his wings to try to regain his equilibrium. Wraith, only a few meters away and lightly built, was blown off his stance by the sheer force of the wind created by Stefan's wings. He didn't lose his footing, but he realized that he wasn't going to get a shot until the dragon's wings stopped their frantic flapping. He leaned against the pillar, held tight to the Barret, and waited. He was still patient, especially now that it seemed that the tide was turning. No need to do this fast as long as they were winning. Patience would win the day.

Ocelot quickly took advantage of the opening created when Gabriel moved forward. Pulling the trigger on his grapple gun, he held on as the line shot out and wrapped itself around the support pillar on the other side of the room, then reeled himself in, skating on his heels across the polished marble floor. Reluctant to leave the grapple line wrapped around the pillar, he took the time to swiftly disengage it and retract it back into the gun, watching the two dragons out of the corner of his eye while he did it. So intent was he on these two tasks that he almost didn't see

the shimmering form that began to manifest itself off to his left. "What the—" he yelled, snapping his head around to identify the movement he'd spotted. "Oh, *shit!*"

"What is it?" Winterhawk's voice came quickly over the link.

"Another one of those damned elementals!" Ocelot jammed the grapple gun in his pocket and raised the spear as the thing surged forward toward him.

Winterhawk, on the other side of the room, could just barely see what was going on over near Ocelot, but he had no trouble spotting the large air elemental that had come into being a few meters from his friend. Gripping his sword and almost glad to have something he could do, he rose high in the air and headed for the other side of the room. "I'm on my way," he said. "There in a minute."

Kestrel watched from behind her pillar as Gabriel sent Stefan careening across the room. "Best chance I'm going to get," she said, raising her LMG.

"Yeah," Joe said, moving forward. He wasn't going to pass up a chance like this either. Winterhawk and Ocelot were going to be occupied with the spirit, and Wraith was getting his balance and his aim back. It was now or never.

Kestrel let loose with a barrage from her LMG as Joe did the same with his gyro-mounted HMG. The heavy guns chattered in their hands, spitting out a blistering full-automatic attack from two different angles. Both Kestrel and Joe aimed at Stefan's belly as the dragon continued to twist himself back to an upright position.

The rounds plinked harmlessly off an unseen shield a few centimeters from Stefan's body.

"*Fuck!*" Joe yelled, nearly blowing out his companions' ears. "We can't *hit* this thing!" He was quite taken aback by this: he had never encountered anything that could take a full-auto hit from a heavy machine gun and not

only remain standing, but remain completely unharmed. They were in trouble.

"He's right," Kestrel cried, though not as loudly. "We hit him with everything and it just bounced off!"

Stefan twisted around, finally getting himself back on his feet, his rage-filled eyes on nothing but his brother. Joe's and Kestrel's machine gun hits seemed not to have even fazed him—he continued to ignore them completely. The dragon looked a bit shaky, but it was clear that Gabriel's hit had been more effective at knocking him off his feet and off balance than it had been in injuring him.

Gabriel wasn't going to let that go, though. Continuing forward at high speed, he stopped in the center of the room and flung another spell at Stefan. This one flew, a pulsing beam of sparkling bluish energy, from his left claw, lighting up the room and forcing the runners—at least the ones who were paying attention—to look away for a second.

The beam hit Stefan dead-on in the chest. Once again, it appeared to contact an unseen barrier like the one that had stopped the machine gun rounds, but this time, the barrier did not hold completely. The spell exploded, casting trails of blue energy out in all directions as it hit the barrier, but some of it got through, searing its way into the dragon's chest. Stefan screamed in pain and staggered backward again.

This was the shot Wraith had been waiting for. It looked to him like the dragon's barriers were weakened for the first time since the team had joined the battle. He knew he didn't have long to press this advantage. Taking careful aim, he quickly decided not to go for something obvious, like Stefan's belly or his head. Undoubtedly those vital areas would be the most well-armored of all, meaning that his shot would likely be wasted. Instead, he took aim at the junction between the dragon's back and

his wing, right where the relatively slender bone structure attached the wing. A hit there wouldn't kill the dragon, but it would hurt him. And perhaps it would hinder his ability to fly. He didn't know for sure, but he had to take a chance.

Wraith fired.

The stunned dragon screamed again. He lurched sideways, yanking his wing in tight against his body. It took Wraith a second or two to realize that he had actually managed to hit. He had claimed first blood. "Hit," he said dispassionately into the commlink. It didn't look like much of a hit, but everything was helpful. He hoped that Gabriel would take advantage of the diversion and move in with another spell.

On the other side of the room, Ocelot had his own problems. He was using his Dikoted spear to hold off the elemental, but not having much success in attacking it. Where was Hawk? He was the one who was good at taking out spirits fast, with that black sword of his. Ocelot chafed at having to waste his time messing with the underlings while the main fight was happening off on the other side of the room. He had heard Wraith's announcement and silently cheered – the behemoth could be hurt by one of the "puppies". He wasn't invulnerable. That meant that they had a chance. Okay, not a great chance, still. But a chance. Ocelot raised the spear to fend off another quick attack from the elemental. "Hawk?"

"Right here," came the mage's fast reply. Dropping down from where he had been floating high above, Winterhawk immediately waded in and slashed at the spirit with his mageblade. The spot where he had hit flared momentarily red, after which the elemental seemed to dissipate somewhat. "Take that, you bugger!" he shouted at the big elemental, then backpedaled nimbly to set up another shot.

Ocelot did likewise, noting as he usually did how Winterhawk, who was usually the last guy to get into a physical confrontation against anyone because he was such an abysmal fighter, came into his own when fighting spirits. Even though a fair amount of his swordfighting prowess was magically enhanced by his weapon-focus blade, it was still a good thing to have on your side. Especially when fighting big ornery air elementals whose only purpose, it seemed, was to keep one or more of the team busy so they were out of the main battle. The elemental didn't seem so much to be attacking as it was to be getting in his way and preventing him from getting back into the fight.

Kestrel, her spirits buoyed by `Wraith's hit, lined up for another shot with her LMG. As soon as she fired, though, she knew it was useless. Whatever had weakened Stefan's barriers appeared to have gone, because her shots plinked off the barrier just like they had last time. Frustrated, she hoped that Joe would have better luck.

Joe was setting up another shot, but the gyro-mount was slowing him down as he moved into position. He saw Kestrel take her shot and saw the rounds hit and bounce off. Deciding that the momentary breach in Stefan's armor must have been caused by Gabriel's spell, he settled back to wait until Gabriel cast another and prepared to follow that up with another full automatic barrage.

Stefan recovered quickly from Gabriel's spell and `Wraith's shot; the spell had hurt him badly, while the shot had only injured him about as much as a bee-sting might hurt a human. Still, though, the thought that he had been injured at all by one of these insects infuriated him. It was bad enough that his runt of a brother, who had improved greatly in his magical abilities, was actually hurting him. But to allow himself to be wounded by this—*elf*—that was too much for him to bear. Pulling

himself back to an upright position, he glared for a moment at Gabriel, then, cat-quick, turned his graceful neck around so his burning gaze fixed directly on ShadoWraith. Raising a claw, he lashed out at the elf with a deafening shriek of rage, intending to gut him like the insignificant vermin that he was.

Wraith, who had been taking aim for another shot with the Barret, suddenly found himself the unwilling subject of Stefan's attention. His eyes widened in fear as he realized not only what the dragon intended to do, but just how fast he was doing it. He lowered the Barret and immediately dived off to his left, attempting to put the huge column between himself and the dragon's attack. Even as he did it, though, he knew that he was not fast enough. Any second he expected to feel the sharp claws ripping through his armor, through his skin, through his muscles –

And then there was a loud war-whoop echoing in his ears, and something was moving back there.

Wraith hit the ground and rolled up, spinning around to see what was happening. Again his eyes widened at the sight.

Joe had seen what Stefan was planning to do. Overpowering the influence of the gyro-harness by main force, he had acted with more speed than Wraith thought possible for him, diving between the dragon's claw and Wraith. The elf's sharp intake of breath was heard by all of the other team members as Stefan's claws raked into Joe, driving the troll backward into the support column with a loud *thud* and a *clang* that shook the pillar so hard Wraith could feel it around the other side. The wicked claws opened up huge and bloody gashes down Joe's front, cutting through his armor like it wasn't there.

Joe cried out in pain and terror, feeling the blood running down his chest and the tendrils of insensibility

gripping the edges of his mind. Even his massive constitution couldn't take a hit like this. He felt the indentation in his back where the Panther, which had hung over his shoulder, had been driven into it, probably breaking bones. His lungs were on fire. His hands fell away from the HMG as his legs began to sag beneath him. Any second now he was going to topple like a tree. But he had saved `Wraith, given him another chance to hit the dragon. That was what he had been trying to do. The darkness began to settle –

Then, suddenly, he was angry. The red waves of rage, for just a moment, overtook the black grip of darkness, whipping up what little strength he had left into a berserk fury. Gritting his teeth, he clamped his hands around the HMG and raised it on the gyro-mount, his back flush against the pillar. He fired. Not even trying to aim, he let fly with everything he had left in the gun, spraying rounds even as his vision began to fail and his legs began to sag again. With satisfaction, he thought he saw small red wounds stitch themselves across the dragon's chest, and thought he heard it scream.

Then there was nothing.

"Joe's down," `Wraith said unemotionally, from around the other side of the column. Somehow that dead tone managed to convey more emotion than if he had been yelling in hysteria.

Gabriel had been taken by surprise by Stefan's sudden change of target. He had seen `Wraith's shot hit his brother's wing, but he didn't think that would have been sufficient provocation to convince Stefan to take his attention from the large threat – Gabriel – and redirect it to the annoying but essentially harmless non-threat. As Stefan wheeled on `Wraith, Gabriel acted on sheer instinct, starting over in the direction of the fight. There was no time to prepare a spell now – he would have to do

something to get Stefan away from the elf and the troll, and quickly. But before he could get there, Joe made his desperate dive between `Wraith and Stefan and taken the brunt of the dragon's massive attack. Gabriel winced as the claws hit the troll and knocked him back against the pillar, then stopped short when Joe managed to get himself together enough to loose a barrage of machine-gun fire against Stefan before finally going down in a heap. He saw Stefan reel back—he was only slightly wounded, but nonetheless the troll had hurt him. Gabriel hadn't thought it possible.

Across the room, Kestrel slung her LMG over her shoulder, pulling down her bow instead. She started toward the combat, staying close to the wall for now. She wasn't sure yet what she was going to do, but she knew that she wasn't going to do it with the LMG. If Joe hadn't been able to do more damage than that with a heavy machine gun, her light one wasn't going to be a factor at all.

Ocelot and Winterhawk both heard `Wraith's two-word report. "Shit," Ocelot said under his breath. Then, louder: "'Hawk, let's *kill* this fuckin' thing! They need us over there!"

"Right," Winterhawk said grimly, redoubling his efforts. He took another swing at the elemental, connecting with a solid blow. It wouldn't be long now at this rate. One or two more like that—"I just hope there aren't any more of these lurking about."

"Don't say that!" Ocelot drew back his spear and surged forward in a powerful thrust, spurred on by his frustration at being kept out of the main battle and his anger that one of their number had already gone down, perhaps permanently. The spear point penetrated the elemental and then Ocelot wrenched forward and up on the titanium shaft, ripping the point through the spirit's

form. "*Die, you motherfucking bastard!*" he yelled, focusing all his rage-borne energy on that single spear-point.

With one final flare of bright red, the air elemental disappeared.

Ocelot staggered forward, overbalancing with the spear, but caught himself quickly. "Come on, `Hawk," he said breathlessly, turning. "Fight's over there."

Stefan reeled backward, sparing a quick glance down at the front of his body. That troll had *hurt* him! This wasn't supposed to be possible. These puppies of Gabriel's were not supposed to be able to injure him. He looked in satisfaction at the bloodsoaked figure of the troll lying in a disorderly heap next to the support pillar. One down. But then his gaze darkened. The elf had started this. The elf had wounded him, and caused the troll to take the attack that had been meant for him. The elf, who was now hiding like a coward behind the other side of the pillar. Stefan smiled, showing a mouthful of nasty-looking pointed teeth. Gabriel could wait for a moment. This upstart elf was going to find out the true error of his ways for having the arrogance to attempt to involve himself in a battle that was not his to fight. He stepped back and looked up high above him, at the black-glass skylight. *Yes. That will do nicely.*

Gabriel was preparing another spell when he realized with horror what his brother was planning to do. Stefan had gone mad! That was the only explanation he could find that would explain why his brother was continuing to direct his attacks at ShadoWraith while ignoring Gabriel himself. Before Gabriel could summon another spell and take advantage of Stefan's lack of attention, Stefan directed his gaze upward and gestured with a claw down toward `Wraith.

The subsequent actions occurred in the space of only a second or two. From above, there was a loud splintering

noise as the force of Stefan's spell shattered the armored glass like it was made of the thinnest crystal. Then suddenly the air was full of a deadly hail of shards, all of them speeding toward `Wraith. They covered such an area that the elf could not hope to dive out of the way, no matter how quickly he moved.

Gabriel acted without thought, purely on instinct. Much like Joe had done but on a significantly larger scale, he launched himself toward `Wraith, interposing his huge body between the shards and the elf. `Wraith, realizing that there was now a barrier blocking the glass, flattened himself against the support pillar and waited. There was nothing else he could do. To step out now meant certain death.

"NO!" Kestrel screamed, hurling herself across the room toward them. "Gabriel, *don't!*"

The first of the glass shards slammed into Gabriel's magical barriers and bounced harmlessly off, but there were many more and Stefan had put all of his considerable strength into the attack. The great room reverberated with Gabriel's cries of pain as at last the shards began to penetrate his barriers and pierce his body. As `Wraith watched, stunned, from his place of refuge, the young dragon crashed to the ground next to him and lay still, gasping and bloody. The floor shook beneath him with the force of the impact.

Winterhawk and Ocelot got a good view of the whole thing from across the room. Ocelot gasped as Gabriel went down. Although he didn't know quite why, he stepped up his speed. What the hell was he going to do now? Their protector was down. Stefan had won. If he'd had any brains at all, he'd try to get his ass out of here before the dragon noticed him. Instead, he said into his throat-mike, "Wraith?"

"Here." The elf's voice was quiet and a more than a bit shaky.

"Gabriel?"

"Down. Not dead. Eyes open. Still breathing." `Wraith's voice came fast and harsh, sandwiched between breaths.

"*I...live*," another voice said in their minds. The voice sounded very weak.

Stefan's rage was increasing. It had barely registered on him that his attack had felled his brother, an unexpected benefit. At that moment, he was beyond caring about that. The *elf* was still alive! This was the second time now that he had been cheated out of his kill! Almost ignoring the bleeding form of Gabriel, Stefan came around the support column, his eyes blazing with hatred, his teeth bared in a snarl. Rearing up on his hind legs, he raised his forelegs and formed a massive area effect spell, which he hurled with a great bellow of rage directly toward `Wraith. The fact that its area of influence affected Gabriel as well was, at least at this particular point in time, only an afterthought.

From halfway across the room, coming in from two different sides, Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel got to see the effect of the spell. As Stefan loosed it, Gabriel raised his head slightly. The spell rolled over him and `Wraith, once again hitting an invisible wall some distance away from them. Unworldly, greenish-hued flames flickered around the barrier, hungrily seeking an entrance. Even from where they were standing, the three runners could see the strain in Gabriel's eyes as he fought to maintain the wall against Stefan's magic.

As it turned out, he almost managed to hold the barrier long enough. The flames licked at it, persisting, looking for any crack in the impenetrable armor. Slowly, they began to dissipate, decreasing in size and brightness.

They had almost gone when Gabriel's strength gave out, dropping the invisible wall. Several things happened then: the flames surged greedily inside, lapping around the dragon and the elf. `Wraith cried out involuntarily in pain, grabbing his head, and crumpled. Gabriel stiffened, his agonized cry broadcast through the runner's minds, and his head crashed back to the marble floor.

"*Gabriel!*" Kestrel yelled, running toward the fallen dragon and wrenching an arrow from her quiver.

Ocelot increased his speed toward the scene, his mind echoing with the cries of his downed teammates and the screams of the two dragons. Unbidden, Yiddish prayers from his childhood began to flash through his mind, undoubtedly trying to block out the other, much more suicidal, thoughts that were starting to take root there. He raised the spear and kept running. *Am I crazy? Am I actually considering attacking a dragon with a spear?* His next thought was even more farfetched: *I'm behind him – maybe I can run up his tail and jam the spear into the back of his neck!* He *was* crazy. But Joe was down. `Wraith was down. Now it appeared that Gabriel was down. If anybody was going to pull any rabbits out of any hats, it was going to have to be damn soon.

Winterhawk, still zipping along with his levitation spell, slowed as he reached the middle of the room, assessing the situation. He saw Ocelot and Kestrel running toward Stefan, and realized that he would be of no use doing the same thing. Hanging back momentarily, he tried to decide where he would be of the most help.

Stefan trumpeted triumphantly, rising up once more on his hind legs. There! That had taken care of the elf. Even his brother's magic hadn't been enough to stop his spell. He turned his attention back to Gabriel, taking a brief second to look him over, savoring the sight of his hated enemy bleeding and near death on the ground at

his feet. That was the way this was supposed to go. Gabriel had hurt him, true: his guts burned from the spell that had hit him and gotten through. The child was good, Stefan had to give him that. But for all his power, he was still but a child. Stefan tried to find any sorrow for the fact that Gabriel's life would end so prematurely, but he could not. He had played second to this charmed youngster for far too long. It was time for it to end now.

He raised his forelegs again, forming the pattern in his mind for the spell that would rid him of his brother once and for all. Magical energy crackled and flickered around his claws, shooting back and forth, gathering power. The spell would take a lot out of even one such as he, but it was worth it to be sure.

Ocelot saw the spell forming and skidded to a stop some distance back. Even now, he wasn't *that* suicidal. He knew that if any of that mojo hit him, he'd go up like a cinder; he wasn't sure if he would be safe from it anywhere near Stefan. Hesitating, he once more considered his options, realizing that he didn't have many. For now, he decided to wait and see what would happen next.

Kestrel, too, came to a stop when she saw the magical energy. Raising her bow, she nocked an arrow but held her fire. Torn between her desire to help Gabriel and her fear that he was already lost, she too waited.

Where Ocelot and Kestrel saw an impediment to their plans, Winterhawk saw an opportunity. Still levitating about a meter off the ground, he positioned himself so he could see Gabriel past Stefan's rearing form. The bluish energy crackled around the dragon, eerily backlighting him against the black of the glass and the polished floor. Concentrating on Gabriel's still body, he noticed something that surprised him. "Bloody hell," he whispered in the commlink. "He's getting back up."

And he was. Slowly, painfully, Gabriel was rising on shaking legs. His eyes still closed, the young dragon appeared to be gathering himself to make one last stand. The only problem was, it looked like it was going to be too little, too late.

Or was it? Winterhawk rose up a little more as he finally saw his chance to affect the battle. Narrowing his eyes, he concentrated like he had never done before in his life.

Stefan threw the spell.

Ocelot and Kestrel, from where they were standing, were in a good position to see what happened next, but they weren't certain right away that they understood it.

The powerful spell flew from Stefan's claws, its intensity almost forcing the two runners to look away. Neither of them was anxious to watch Gabriel die, and it looked as if that was what was going to occur. They didn't see any way that the dragon could avoid the spell in his present state.

But then something odd happened.

The spell's energy hit a barrier, but not the one that Gabriel had used before: the dragon's own barrier had been very close to his body, and invisible. This one was several meters out, flashing into being with a glowing translucence as the spell's energy contacted it. The spell blew through the barrier, but its light and power were dimmed as it continued on. Although there was still enough of it left when it hit Gabriel's own barrier to punch through and find its mark on the young dragon, it was clear that if it had been allowed to hit with its full energy, Gabriel would have been killed instantly. As it was, what little remained of the spell might have been enough: he collapsed again and did not move.

Off to the right and in their commlinks, Ocelot and Kestrel heard a cry of pain. Sparing a quick glance to the

side, Ocelot saw Winterhawk clutch his head and drop to his knees, tearing his helmet off and flinging it aside. His nosebleed and pale face told Ocelot the story: `Hawk had been responsible for the first barrier. The feedback when it had been blown down had hit him hard. "Hawk?" Ocelot ventured.

"Still here," came the ragged, whispered reply.

"Oh my God—" Kestrel whispered from where she had been continuing to watch Stefan. "No—Ocelot—"

Ocelot wheeled back around and gasped.

Stefan's attention was no longer on Gabriel. With a grace that didn't seem possible in a creature his size, he had turned himself around and now towered above them, his burning green eyes fixed firmly on Winterhawk. "*You have made a grave mistake, mage,*" a deep voice reverberated through all their minds. The dragon looked clearly weakened from the force of the spell he had thrown at Gabriel, but he was doing better than almost all of them at this point. Gathering himself, he prepared to leap forward on the barely-conscious mage, who was teetering alarmingly on his knees.

But now Stefan was facing them.

Ocelot's hand closed around one of the special grenades he had commissioned as a rush job during the hour they had had to prepare. He gripped it tightly and waited. He knew that if he could get this past Stefan's barrier, he had a chance. A damn slim one, but anything at this point was better than nothing.

Kestrel swung her bow around and took aim. She was well aware that they'd have only one opportunity, and if they failed they were all dead. All thoughts of Gabriel gone for now, she focused her mind on making the shot count.

Stefan leaped forward with a mighty rumbling roar.

Winterhawk staggered to his feet and tried to move backward.

Ocelot pulled back his arm, checked his aim, and flung the grenade.

Kestrel set up her shot and let her arrow fly.

For a moment, everything seemed to be moving in slow motion. Kestrel and Ocelot did not move at all; they stood back and watched their respective shots almost dispassionately, as if viewing them on a trideo screen. The tiny grenade and the razor-tipped arrow flew through the air, crossing the distance between the runners and the dragon. The arrow flew sure and true, while the grenade traced a graceful arc up and up, then settled down to meet the dragon in mid-air.

Ocelot and Kestrel held their breath.

The arrow found its mark, piercing what little remained of Stefan's barrier and burying itself in his left eye.

The grenade exploded, spraying its contents – sulfuric acid mixed with DMSO – across Stefan's face. The DMSO, a carrier compound, combined with the acid to deliver it straight through the dragon's hide – including directly into his eyes.

The dragon screamed, a high, wailing shriek that threatened to deafen the remaining conscious runners even through their protective helmets. Blinded now, his leap fell short of its mark, his tremendous bulk crashing to the ground several meters short of where Winterhawk, his hands once more clamped over his ears, was trying to stagger back. Forelegs stretched out before him, Stefan landed hard, knocking Ocelot and Kestrel off their feet. Winterhawk, not moving quite fast enough, was caught by the leading edge of one of the claws and sent spinning backward, a long bloody gash running from the top of his

left shoulder down to the middle of his chest. He fell and didn't get up.

Stefan thrashed madly, still shrieking, his wings beating ineffectually against the air and his claws alternately scrabbling at his eyes and lashing out in search of a target. Then, suddenly, before any of the remaining runners could even attempt to get back to their feet, the dragon bunched his mighty hindquarters and leaped upward, taking to the air in a movement that was frightening in its speed, especially given his current condition.

"He's heading for the skylight!" Ocelot cried, still trying to regain his balance in the wind produced by Stefan's wings.

Kestrel didn't get a chance to answer. Stefan reached the skylight, which was open following the spell that had caused the rain of glass shards. For a moment, he hesitated, hovering. Then, in a thundering voice that was even louder than his anguished screams, he spat out a single word in a language none of the runners understood.

And then he was gone, flying swiftly off into the night. As soon as he cleared the building, he winked out of sight.

44.

For a moment the runners remained where they were, stunned and overwhelmed by what had just occurred. The vast room, suddenly, was silent save for the harsh breathing of the remaining conscious team members and the whistling of the wind high above.

Ocelot recovered first, leaping to his feet now that the floor had stopped moving. "Answer!" he shouted into his mike, his voice pitched a little too high and bordering on panic. "Who's still up?"

Kestrel pulled herself up. "Here," she said, slinging her bow on her back.

Across the room, Winterhawk struggled to his hands and knees. "Still—with us," he gasped. Blood was dripping from his chest and pooling up beneath him.

Ocelot ran over to help Winterhawk up while Kestrel took off in the opposite direction. Near the massive support column Joe and ShadoWraith lay in two heaps. Not far away, Gabriel's still and bleeding body took up the better part of that end of the room.

Quickly, Kestrel checked the elf and the troll, fully expecting to find two dead bodies. What she *did* find surprised her. "Ocelot! They're still alive!" Without waiting for an answer, she raised up and took off over to check on Gabriel, hoping desperately that if those two could manage to still be alive, he could too.

Ocelot got an arm around Winterhawk and hauled him to his feet. "You gonna be okay?"

The mage nodded wearily. "Looks like—I've got a lot of—healing to do," he said. The blood flow from his nose and ears, the by-product of the feedback when his protective barrier around Gabriel had been blown down,

had almost stopped now but the gash on his chest looked nasty.

"Fraid so," Ocelot said. "We'll just —"

Far below them, there was a sound. A far-off *boom*.

"What the hell was that?" Ocelot demanded, looking around.

The floor shook, ever so slightly.

"Is he coming back?" Winterhawk muttered, looking up.

Kestrel glanced up quickly from her position next to Gabriel's head. "Oh — no —" she said slowly.

"What?" Ocelot demanded, stepping up his pace. Winterhawk winced, but didn't complain.

Another far-off *boom*, this one from a subtly different location. Again, the floor shook.

"I've heard that sound before," Kestrel said sharply, standing up.

"Well, then, what is it?" Ocelot wasn't in any mood to play guessing games right now.

Kestrel didn't look like she was playing a guessing game, though. She pulled off her helmet, and he saw that her eyes were full of fear. "Explosives."

Ocelot stopped, eyes widening. "What?"

Another *boom*. The floor shook a little more energetically this time. A couple of stray shards of glass fell down from the skylight and landed with small crashes.

"I think," Winterhawk said softly, "she's trying to tell us that we'd best get out of here quickly."

"It sounds like they're down a long way," Kestrel said, her tone grim. "Maybe he had an escape clause — you know, get out and then take down the building with us in it. He could have planted charges in the basement."

"Why?" Ocelot demanded, then shook his head. There was no point in trying to speculate about why dragons

did what they did. They were all insane. "Never mind. I don't care. You're right—we need to get the hell out." Propping Winterhawk up against the support column, he surveyed the unconscious Joe and Wraith. "How long do you think we have?"

"No more than a couple of minutes, from the sound and the timing of those explosions," Kestrel said. Another *boom* punctuated her words, bringing down another small section of the broken skylight glass.

Ocelot's gaze swept over the team again. His nervousness was stepping up in earnest now. "Okay," he said, a bit too fast. "Hawk, can you get Joe with your levitation spell? And Kestrel, if you could—"

Kestrel shook her head. "I'm not going, Ocelot."

There was another *boom*. This one was just a bit louder. The whole structure shook this time.

Ocelot was over next to her in two swift steps. "What do you mean, you're not going?" he snapped. Another piece of ceiling crashed down. He reached out to grab her arm.

She snatched it away, shaking her head. "No, Ocelot. I can't. I won't leave Gabriel."

Ocelot looked down at the unmoving dragon. His golden body was hacked and bloody, his eyes tightly closed. Blood pooled beneath his head, seeping from between his red-stained teeth. "Is he—?"

Her expression was serious. "He's alive. I don't know how much longer, but I won't leave him."

"Kestrel—" His head swiveled around and up as another explosion rocked the tower, and his voice gained volume with his desperation. "You can't just stay here and die! He wouldn't want you to do that. Come on with us, and get out, before—" Again, he reached out for her arm. If he had to, he was going to drag her along with them.

She glared at him. "Ocelot. No. You need to get out. You owe it to your friends to get them out of here before this building goes down." Her eyes were hard as two green stones. "It's not your choice, Ocelot. I have my choice to make, and I've made it. I'm staying here. If he's going to die, I'm not going to leave him here to die alone. If you try to force me to go with you, I'll fight you. None of us will make it. Now go. Get them out of here." More softly, she added, "I'll get out if I can. If I can wake him up, we'll both get out. But if we go, we're going together."

Ocelot paused, looking at her, trying desperately to come up with an argument that would sway her. Problem was, she was right. He knew it. He didn't like it, but he knew it. A vision flashed through his mind, an echo of his own voice, back in Gabriel's penthouse, telling the dragon that coming along was their choice to make. This was no different. If he forced Kestrel to go with him now, not only would he probably lose at least one of the team, but he'd also lose everything he'd built with Kestrel. It was a no-win situation. And the worst part about it was that she was right. He closed his eyes, nodded slowly. "Yeah. Okay." Taking a deep breath, he reached out and gripped her shoulder briefly. Unable to think of anything to say that wouldn't sound hopelessly maudlin, he turned swiftly and stalked back over to where Winterhawk was pulling himself to his feet.

"Ocelot –"

He turned back toward her, but said nothing.

"I'm sorry," she said. Her eyes were on him, while her hand rested protectively on Gabriel's neck. The building rumbled again, swaying a bit from side to side. On the far end of the room, one of the armored windows blew out and splintered, crashing outward.

He nodded. "Yeah. Me too."

Winterhawk was propelling himself by sheer effort of will, his face as white as a sheet against his dark hair. He reached Joe. The troll was still bleeding hard, his armor in shreds. "We'd best go," he said somewhat reluctantly, with a glance toward Kestrel and Gabriel.

Ocelot sighed, bending down to heft `Wraith's unconscious form over his shoulder. The tower was swaying almost constantly now. Drawing his grapple gun, he tightened his grip on the elf and shot the line upward, catching it on the edge of the skylight. He didn't look back as he switched on the motor and the line rewound, pulling him upward.

Winterhawk quickly attached his levitation spell lock to Joe, deciding that it would be easier to use the big troll's body as a platform for him to hold on to than it would be for him to attempt, with his minimal and fading strength, to keep a grip on the nearly three-hundred-kilo body. A sense of urgency drove him, but the blood loss and the spell feedback were disrupting his normally sharp thought processes. Pulling Joe's grapple gun from his coat, Winterhawk stowed it in the waistband of his jeans in case the spell failed, and then activated the spell lock as he climbed on Joe's shoulders and held on. As the two of them rose, he turned back to Kestrel. She was ignoring him now, desperately trying to rouse the unconscious dragon. All around him, pieces of the ceiling and the walls were starting to come down, and the building was definitely beginning to lean to one side.

Raising his hand to his forehead, he made a weak salute and smiled faintly down at them, and then he was gone, following Ocelot up through the disintegrating ceiling.

45.

Ocelot crouched on the edge of the skylight, reeling in his grapple gun. One arm was gripped tightly around `Wraith, while the other held the gun. He remained on the roof using only his finely-honed sense of balance. When Winterhawk floated up, riding on Joe's shoulders in an odd imitation of a piggy-back ride, Ocelot snapped, "Hurry up. This whole thing's goin' down any minute."

`Hawk nodded. Patting Joe's shoulder, he rasped, "Stay alive, my friend, or we're both bugged," and continued through. The spell lock, Ocelot knew, held the spell for levitating people. If Joe were to die en route, he ceased being a person and started being an object, meaning that both he and `Hawk would plummet to their deaths. `Hawk had a chance of getting his own spell up, of course, but the way the mage looked, Ocelot was afraid he wouldn't have the mental capacity to do it. Right now by even remaining conscious he was showing the strength of will that made him such a good mage, but it wouldn't hold out forever.

The wind was whipping up here, trying its best to blow Ocelot back down through the skylight. There was another explosion, louder this time, and the tower swayed again. A section of the roof only a few meters away broke free and crashed to the floor far below. "Go!" he yelled, leaping from his crouch and aiming the grapple gun. The building next door was almost the same height as this one; his only chance was to catch the lip of that building's roof and then swing down. It was going to hurt. If he didn't do it right, the impact might even kill him, or at least cause him to drop `Wraith. But in a situation like this, he didn't have another choice. He either took the option that would probably get him killed but had a slim

chance of success, or he stayed here in the doomed building and died.

With odds like that, the choice was clear.

Another loud *boom* followed by another, and suddenly the entire tower dropped a few centimeters. "Shit!" he yelled as he started to lose his balance. Teetering alarmingly to the side, balanced precariously on one foot, he fired the grapple gun at the next building, took a mighty leap, and prayed.

Next to him, Hawk and Joe sailed up and out.

Ocelot was falling. It was a good thing he still had his helmet on: if nothing else, it was protecting him from the swirling winds that snapped at his clothing and tried to tear Wraith from his grasp. Grimly, he shifted the elf's weight so he could wrap his arm around him, grabbing the grapple gun with both hands. If the hook had actually managed to connect to something up there, he was going to have to time this perfectly, paying out the line to take up the momentum of his fall. If he got it wrong, the force of the stop when he reached the end of the line would rip his arms out of their sockets. All this he had to worry about while simultaneously doing his best not to splatter into the side of the next-door building. He fixed his gaze upward, trying to determine if the hook had found its mark. In the darkness and the wind, he lost sight of Winterhawk and Joe; behind him the explosions were occurring with greater frequency, joined now by loud and ominous rumbling sounds. If there had been any doubt in his mind that the building was going to go down, it was gone now. Driving all thoughts of Kestrel from his mind, he focused on the grapple hook. Everything was up to chance and his aim now. The next couple of seconds would determine if he lived or died.

High above, the hook settled over the top of the building's roof.

The line began to pull taut.

Desperately, Ocelot tried to shuffle `Wraith, the grapple gun, and his own balance, adjusting the powerful motor to pay out the line quickly at first, and then more slowly. The gray face of the building rushed up to meet him. Too fast. It was coming up too fast! He'd never be able to take that impact. It was as if he was running at top speed toward the side of a bus.

Clamping his teeth together and tightening his grip on `Wraith, he gathered himself, twisting his body around, using every ounce of his vaunted speed and athletics skill to get into the right position. The only problem was, there *wasn't* any right position. All he could do was try to injure himself as little as possible, and keep hold of `Wraith. Those were the only goals now.

The building rushed forward —

At the last minute before impact, Ocelot spun himself sideways, holding `Wraith's body on the side away from the building. Sticking his near foot out, he tried to strike a glancing blow with it, slowing his fall enough that he could get his shoulder around and take up most of the impact there, where he was armored.

His foot hit first, sending shooting sparks of pain exploding up his leg in great red waves. Then his shoulder hit, just as he'd been planning. The armor took up some of the shock, but he never would have known it based on how much it hurt. He clamped his teeth together more tightly to avoid crying out, and cinched up his grip on `Wraith even harder. He was probably breaking the elf's ribs, but right now that thought didn't even enter his mind. Living was the priority. Feeling good was a luxury they couldn't afford right at this moment.

He bounced out and hit the building again, this time much more gently, and finally swung to a halt. Only then did he venture to examine his surroundings, trying not to

think about the pains in his foot, his shoulder, and his arm that were all fighting for his attention.

Hanging about three-quarters of the way down the Messina Tower's dumpy gray neighbor, he and `Wraith swung crazily back and forth, swept by the winds. The rumbling behind them was getting louder by the minute.

Ocelot risked a glance at the tower and gasped at what he saw. The whole thing looked like it was slowly dropping down on itself. Already a cloud of dust and debris was beginning to form around the bottom of the tower. "Shit," he whispered to himself. "We're not out of this yet." Paying out the line and forcing his injured foot to take up some of the work of getting him down the building, Ocelot rappelled toward the ground at far higher speed than was prudent. That building wasn't going to last much longer, and if he didn't get his ass out of there before it went the rest of the way, all that effort would be for nothing. "`Hawk," he said, "I don't know if you can hear me, but if you can, let's meet up around the south side of the tower to the left of the entrance we went in. Got that? South side. Left tower." He repeated it one more time, even though he got no answer. He couldn't see Winterhawk anywhere.

When he finally reached the ground, it was with a jarring crash that sent more waves of agony up his injured leg. The rumbling was deafening. It sounded like a massive earthquake was hitting downtown Seattle. Although they didn't quite register on Ocelot's battered mind, security alarms were going off everywhere—vehicles, other buildings, anything that could be triggered by motion. People were beginning to run out into the streets from nearby restaurants and nightclubs, drawn by fear and fascination. Ocelot didn't even notice them. Shifting `Wraith to a fireman's carry, he took off at a full

run toward the rendezvous point. His foot burned, but he didn't allow it to slow him down.

Rounding the corner, he saw more people running in the streets. There was a small grass courtyard in front of the gray building; he set Wraith down there behind a wall and turned to watch, his eyes pulled irresistibly up to the death of the black glass tower. All around now, pieces of the Messina building were plummeting earthward, crashing into the streets below, destroying sidewalks, streetlights, vehicles. One piece of armored glass at least two meters long flung down nearly intact, impaling a nightclub-goer who had gotten too close in her curiosity. Her scream echoed through the street and then was abruptly silenced. Other screams joined hers as pieces of concrete flattened passing vehicles and panicked pedestrians.

Still Ocelot watched. Once, a long time ago, he had been bored enough to watch a trideo documentary about a company that specialized in safe, clean demolitions – the kind that could drop a forty-story building down into its own footprint without even breaking a window in the adjacent structures. He had observed with some fascination how they had carefully placed their charges, wrapping support columns to prevent flying debris and even more carefully timing the detonations to take the building down in precisely the way in which they planned. The whole thing was orchestrated by a combination of exact computer calculations and the engineering knowledge and experience of the people who ran the show. It had been eerie watching the old footage of some of the demolitions from the previous century, where venerable old buildings were folded away as neatly as collapsible drinking cups.

Watching the Messina Tower come down was like watching an obscene parody of that process. It was almost

as if whomever had set the charges had intended a similar effect, but had been indifferent to the possibility that the destruction might cause damage to other buildings, streets, vehicles, and people. The Messina structure started out by dropping down neatly on itself as the structures in the trideo had, but as Ocelot watched from his vantage point around the corner, the explosions became more haphazard, causing the whole tower to tip. The lower floors had already sandwiched themselves together as the explosives blew out their supports and the massive weight of the ones above came down on them; now the upper floors leaned crazily to the right, the screams of protesting steel beams adding their voices to the horrific cacophony. On the ground, the debris continued to rain down, the displaced air from the collapse of the lower floors blowing out windows in surrounding buildings for several blocks' radius. More people, panicking, ran from the buildings out into the street, where they succumbed to mob mentality and scurried around like mindless insects in random directions. Ocelot winced as many of them were killed by falling chunks of concrete and by vehicles driven by still other hysterical people.

The whole process did not take long, although it had that weird stretched-out feeling that allowed witnesses to later report step by step the actions that had occurred. The top part of the tower, unable to remain upright as it overbalanced, broke off from the main building and slammed into its neighbor on the other side, tearing a huge chunk out of the side of it and then coming to rest with a tremendous crash at the bottom. The remaining few floors of the tower remained upright but with wicked-looking jagged and broken edges at the top like the teeth of some enormous beast. Everywhere there was dust, obscuring the sky, the clouds, the remaining

streetlights. The screams were all around, mixing with the alarms.

Ocelot closed his eyes briefly, trying not to imagine Kestrel's screams added to all the others as she died, trying not to wonder if they would find her body, its arms still locked around the neck of the dead dragon, when they searched through the rubble. He shook his head violently, driving the thought away. There was no time for that now. He had `Wraith to deal with.

Assuming that the elf was still alive.

Staggering over, ignoring his chaotic surroundings, Ocelot fell to his knees next to `Wraith and pulled off first the elf's helmet and then his own, and checked for a pulse. As `Wraith had been taken down by a spell, there was very little blood, except for a small trickle from his nose. He carefully applied makeup, which he used to hide from the world the fact that he was an albino, was streaked and running, creating a disquieting striped effect on his face. His skin was cold and clammy, but his pulse was still there. Weak and thready, but there. His breathing was shallow and labored. "Okay," Ocelot whispered to himself. "What now?" *Think. You're all he's got now. They're never going to get to us in time with medical attention – not with all these other injured people around.* Rummaging around in his jacket pockets, he came up with the handful of slap patches that he always carried. He fumbled through them, tossing aside the ones he didn't want, until he came to the trauma patches. He had two of them. Gently laying `Wraith down in the grass, he yanked open the elf's jacket and applied a patch to his chest beneath his T-shirt. Taking a deep breath, he settled back on his haunches. "That's all I can do for you right now," he said ruefully.

He looked around the area; it was hard to see with all the swirling dust. Where was Winterhawk? Had he and

Joe made it down? Had they been hit by falling debris, or had Hawk's will finally given out halfway to the ground? He wanted to go look for them, but he didn't want to leave Wraith. Once more, half-heartedly, he activated his commlink. "Hawk? Are you out there?"

To his shock, a weak and exhausted voice answered his call. "Still – alive," it reported. "Coming –"

Ocelot jumped up, favoring his injured foot. It was really starting to throb now. He looked around again. "Where are you?"

"Not – sure, exactly. So much – dust –" He coughed and then was silent.

"Hawk?" Ocelot's voice took on the edges of desperation. A pause. "*Hawk!* Come on, buddy – answer me!"

" – sorry –" The mage spoke between deep breaths and bouts of coughing. "Came down – near – rendezvous point – I think –" Another pause. "Coming – 'round – a corner, now –"

Ocelot switched to thermographic vision and scanned both corners of the building in front of which he now stood. It wasn't great, because of all the dust from the explosion, but it was better than normal vision. The far corner was clear, but then he looked at the near one. Two figures, the smaller one holding on to the larger one's shoulders, floated into view. Ocelot grinned in spite of himself. They were alive! "Over here!" he yelled, waving his arms. He started running toward them.

Winterhawk met him halfway. The mage was still perched on Joe's huge shoulders, while the troll's unconscious body skated along about half a meter off the ground. Ocelot wasn't sure which of them looked worse. Joe's entire front was soaked with blood, his tanned skin suffused with an unhealthy gray pallor. His head lolled forward, his chin propped on his chest. Winterhawk, so

pale he was almost translucent, slumped over the top of Joe's head, his arms hanging limply down over the troll's chest. He looked like he was going to pass out any second. Ocelot couldn't see Winterhawk's chest, but there was blood running down his shoulder from the gash there.

Ocelot ran over to the two of them. "Bring him over here," he said. "It's not far now. Then you can put him down."

"That—would be nice—" `Hawk said in a faint imitation of his old cynical tone. "He's—bloody—heavy."

Together, Winterhawk working from above and Ocelot from below, the two of them maneuvered Joe's body over by ShadoWraith's, laying him gently down on the grass next to the elf. "Can you heal `em?" Ocelot asked. "I've already got a trauma patch on `Wraith—"

Winterhawk nodded, dropping to the ground next to the two unconscious men. Now that he wasn't leaning against Joe, Ocelot could clearly see how much the mage was bleeding. He was surprised that `Hawk was still awake, let alone functional. "I've got it," he whispered. Immediately he crawled over to Joe, who was injured the worst of the two, and began work.

Ocelot, freed momentarily of his medical obligations, stood next to the little group and took his first look at the area. The dust was settling a bit, but not much; anything moving looked like a shadow flitting through an otherworldly realm.

Things were starting to happen now—it hadn't taken long, but then, they weren't far out of Downtown. The corps that owned these skyscrapers paid hefty sums for their security forces, and they expected to get their nuyen's worth. Just watching the vehicles going by near where he stood, Ocelot spotted representatives from Lone Star, Knight Errant, a couple of private security firms, the Seattle *Underground* datafax, the *Intelligencer*, DocWagon,

and a number of other official-looking but unmarked vehicles.

Nobody paid any attention to Ocelot and the team there on their little piece of grass in front of the next-door building. There was just too much carnage and disorder for anyone to worry about a small group of people who weren't causing any trouble. The alarms from the nearby structures and vehicles were still going off, some of them beginning to wind down as their power supplies were exhausted. Bodies littered the streets, showing up as faint glows in Ocelot's thermographic vision. Those that weren't dead moaned and screamed for someone to help them; the ones who were ambulatory were assisting the ones that weren't, and the DocWagon response teams were already swooping in to pick up their clients and whisk them away from this scene of death. After a bit, the number of vehicles coming into the area began to slack off; Ocelot suspected that Lone Star had cordoned off the area to keep out the curious and the thrillseekers.

He looked over at the husk of the Messina building, its shadowy, saw-edged form sticking up out of the ground like a great broken tooth. Closing his eyes briefly, he tried again not to think about Kestrel, and, as a result, was able to think of nothing else. Again he thought about heading over to search for her body, but again he realized that it wouldn't do him any good. He'd never find her in all that rubble. He might find Gabriel, but did he want to?

Another thought flitted through his mind, setting his nerves on edge and causing him to glance fearfully up at the dust-choked sky. Where was Stefan? He'd escaped – flown away up through the skylight. But was he even now healing himself up and preparing to return? Did he think they had died in the explosion? Had he triggered the explosion with his last word before leaving?

Ocelot sighed. He'd never know the answers to those questions, so it really didn't make much sense to dwell on them. Right now, all he wanted to do was get Wraith and Joe to the point where they weren't in danger of dying and get them all the hell out of here.

"I've stabilized them, I think," came a weak voice from behind him.

Ocelot turned; Winterhawk was slumped on his knees between Joe and ShadoWraith. "Are they gonna live?"

The mage nodded wearily. "I can't— heal them all the way— right now. But— they're out of danger." He swayed, his eyelids fluttering. His nosebleed had started up again.

Ocelot came over and grabbed his uninjured shoulder, steadying him. "Can you heal yourself now?"

"In—a moment." Winterhawk forced his eyes open and tried to get a handle on his wandering mind. "I'll just—"

"Ocelot?"

Ocelot froze.

A female voice. Calling him.

He shook his head vigorously. No—this wasn't happening. He couldn't be going crazy now. This was absolutely the wrong time for him to be hearing voices.

"Ocelot?"

There it was again. Winterhawk looked up.

"Did you hear that?" Ocelot demanded.

The mage nodded slowly. "It—sounded like—"

"Ocelot! Where are you? It's me—Kestrel! Please! Help!" The voice was familiar, but full of panic that was almost hysteria.

"Kestrel?" Ocelot stood back up, calling out into the darkness and the dust.

"Ocelot! Help us! Please!"

He took a step forward, in the direction of the voice, and then stopped. Stared.

Two figures staggered out of the dust. As they drew closer, it became clear that one of them was half-supporting, half-carrying the other one. "Kestrel?"

"Please—" Kestrel took a couple more unsteady steps forward. Ocelot's eyes widened and he gasped in shock as he got the whole picture.

The second figure was Gabriel. He was in human form, unconscious—or worse. Ocelot had never seen anyone with injuries like that who could still be alive. Gone was the preternaturally handsome young man they had known before—in his place was a torn and bleeding form that looked like it had been hit by a large and fast-moving vehicle. Gabriel appeared to be wearing a red suit, but Ocelot realized as he got closer that it was actually the white one he'd been wearing before, soaked through with blood. More blood poured from a deep gash in his forehead, trickled from his nose, and ran down from the corners of his mouth. Kestrel had his right arm pulled over her shoulder so she could support him; his left arm hung limply down, bent at an odd angle.

For a moment Ocelot just stood there, staring, too stunned to do anything else. The sight of Kestrel—alive—momentarily drove rational thought from his mind. "Kestrel—?"

She was scraped, grimy, and dust-covered, her jacket and pants ripped and tattered. Her blonde hair looked almost gray from dust; she'd lost her helmet somewhere. Tears streaked her face, making little light-colored tracks down her dirt-smearred cheeks. "Ocelot—*please*. Help him. He'll die if we don't do something soon!" She herself was barely staggering on, her legs shaking.

Her plea spurred Ocelot to action. Still favoring his injured foot, he hurried over. Privately, he was afraid that Kestrel was kidding herself, and that Gabriel was already dead. There was so much blood—worse, he had no idea

what kind of injuries were hidden by the suit. More to humor her than anything else, he said, "Here – bring him over." He reached out to help, hesitating because he couldn't find a place to grab that wasn't hurt. "Hawk?"

Winterhawk was slowly lurching to his feet, still swaying. "Here."

Incredibly, Gabriel's eyes flickered open as Ocelot took hold of him from the other side. Bloodshot and pained, they stared dully at nothing. He didn't seem to be aware of his surroundings. After a moment, his eyes closed again.

Ocelot and Kestrel laid him gently down next to Joe and Wraith, who were both still unconscious, and then dropped down on either side of him. "Hawk, can you do it again?" Ocelot asked urgently, slicing through Gabriel's shirt and jacket with his knife. If Winterhawk couldn't heal him, he was going to have to use the other trauma patch. Kestrel came around behind the young man, pulling his head up to cradle it in her lap. She hurried to assist Ocelot, her fear making her fingers fumble.

Winterhawk came down next to them with a thud, exhibiting none of his usual grace. "I don't know," he said grimly. "I'll do the best I can." His vision shifting, he added, "The injuries –"

Ocelot saw what he meant when he got Gabriel's shirt and jacket off. Remembering what Kestrel had said in her account of how she had first met the dragon in the cavern, he recalled what Gabriel had told her about changing to human form when he was injured. The amount of mental toughness in that fragile-looking body must have been phenomenal, because it was all that was keeping him alive. Everywhere Ocelot could see, he was slashed and torn, undoubtedly due to the glass shards that had hit him from all sides. Everything Stefan had done to him when he was in dragon form was now mirrored in miniature on

his human body. In a couple of places, the tears in his chest were so bad that Ocelot could see the pale glistening forms of ribs showing through. Swallowing hard, he averted his gaze.

Kestrel turned her pleading gaze on Winterhawk. "Please try. I can't let him go now – not after he got me out of there."

"Shh..." Winterhawk whispered, already concentrating. Running his hands over the young man's body about ten centimeters above it, he began his spell.

Ocelot watched him worriedly, hoping that he didn't kill himself trying to do too much. "How did you get out?" he asked Kestrel.

She indicated Gabriel with a quick head motion without taking her eyes off his face. "Gabriel did it. It was close, though. The building was already starting to come down when I was finally able to wake him up. He flew us out of there, invisibly. I didn't think he could do it, since he was in such bad shape, but he did." She pointed to his arm. "That's how that happened. A big chunk of concrete hit him. A couple hit me too, but not nearly as bad."

Ocelot glanced down at Gabriel. "So if it's so hard for him to change when he's hurt, why didn't he stay in dragon form?"

She shook her head, gently pushing his blood-matted hair off his forehead. "He couldn't. He couldn't reveal what he was. And where could he go? Nobody else knows he's a dragon. He was dying either way, so he decided to take a chance. This way, at least, I could get him to somebody who could help." She redirected her gaze for a moment, looking at Winterhawk's drawn face, tight with the strain of casting yet another spell when he was barely conscious himself. "Is he going to be able to do it?"

"I don't know," Ocelot said honestly. "I know he'll give it his best shot, though. We just have to wait and see." For the first time in awhile, he allowed himself to take note of his surroundings again. The cops and security forces and medical personnel and reporters were still racing around doing their jobs, while the victims lay waiting for their turn at aid and the rubberneckers milled around getting in the way. Still no one paid Ocelot and the others any attention.

Kestrel didn't answer for a long time, staring down at Gabriel with her hands gently cradling his face. When she looked up, her eyes were troubled. "I had to stay," she said, almost reluctantly.

"I know you did."

She dropped her gaze again. "I love him."

He nodded. "I know that too."

"You do?" Her tone was surprised.

"Sure. It's okay."

Again she looked up. "It doesn't change anything?"

He paused. "I don't know. Maybe it does. But I don't think so." Shifting position a bit to get more comfortable on his throbbing foot, he shrugged. "Got time to find out."

"Yeah," she whispered, and returned her attention to Gabriel.

Winterhawk looked up, blinking as he tried to focus. "There," he said with no power behind his voice. "It— isn't much—but I can't—do any more." He paused, his complexion graying. "I can't—"

Ocelot caught him as he toppled over.

Kestrel was watching Gabriel for any sign that Winterhawk's healing had done any good. He didn't look any better, but there were so many wounds it was hard to tell which ones the mage had healed. Her eyes widened as his slowly opened. "Gabriel? Can you hear me?"

The bloody figure nodded once. The purple gaze, still dull but stronger than it had been before, fixed on her face. He smiled; it turned into a wince halfway through, but the thought was there.

Ocelot turned back around from where he had been checking Winterhawk for a pulse to see Kestrel on her knees, Gabriel's head still in her lap. She held his right hand in both of hers, looking down into his eyes. She was at that moment oblivious to everything else around her.

Ocelot watched them for a moment. He surveyed the immediate area, looking at each of his unconscious teammates in turn. He thought about saying something, then decided against it. Instead, he did the only thing it made sense to do.

He called Harry.

This time he left the video on. When the fixer answered the phone, Ocelot spoke before Harry got a chance to say anything. "Harry, you're not going to *believe* what I need right now..."

46.

It was a particularly busy night at Lunar Dreamscape, but the six individuals who occupied one of the club's lesser-known back meeting rooms had not come to see the one-night-only engagement of the novahot new all-troll band Trog Nation.

It had been a week since the spectacular collapse and destruction of the Messina Building, and only now were the news stories speculating about the causes and the responsible parties beginning to die down. The datafaxes, both mainstream and underground, had been alight with facts, first-person accounts, Lone Star sources, flights of fancy, and everything in between. It seemed as if everyone who had been anywhere near the disaster and lived through it wanted to have their say about what had caused it and why it had occurred.

Almost everyone.

The death toll, after all the counts had been tallied up, stood at 34 people, most of them killed by falling debris. No one knew exactly how many people had died inside the Messina Building because that corporation, invoking its extraterritoriality rights, had refused to allow Lone Star access to the premises to investigate. Messina's own statement, issued the day after the explosion, had attributed the unfortunate incident to a faulty gas main, and regretted that fifteen of its employees had perished in the collapse. Their families, naturally, would be handsomely compensated for their losses. Messina had also announced that its insurance would cover the costs of the repairs to the Hendricks Building next door, which had sustained severe damage when Messina's tower had crashed into its side. Those repair costs would be extensive; the Hendricks Building had been closed by

order of the Seattle Building Commission until the authorities could be convinced that it was safe to enter.

Naturally, no one with an ounce of brainpower believed the story about the gas main. There were too many eyewitness accounts of what sounded like timed explosions going off inside the building, and too many people had seen the controlled way in which the tower had—at least at the beginning—gone down. A number of radical groups had immediately claimed responsibility for the blast, but both Lone Star and Messina's own investigation team had discounted their claims. Also discounted were the reports, from two unrelated witnesses, describing a large and winged creature flying out of the top of the tower and then disappearing into the night. The fact that both of these witnesses had been nightclub-goers who had indulged in a few too many drinks before venturing out into the street had not done anything to increase their credibility.

In the end, the investigation officially continued, but unofficially everyone knew that nothing would ever be found. The day after the explosion, equipment and specialized personnel were brought in to raze the remainder of the tower, and the day after that a tall fence topped with razor wire and monowire went up around the entire area where it had formerly stood. If the powers that be who ran Messina had made any decisions about where they were planning to go from there, they chose not to make these decisions public.

The six people who sat around the linen-covered table at the Dreamscape had each spent a fair amount of their time in the past week thinking about both the explosion and the powers behind Messina.

It had been most of the week since many of them had seen each other. Ocelot, dressed in jeans and a corduroy sport jacket as his concession to formality, looked around

at his companions, his gaze sweeping slowly around the table.

He was still amazed that they had all survived. It had been a close thing for some of them, particularly Joe, but a combination of a top-flight private hospital and money-is-no-object magical and medical care had brought the team through the ordeal with as few permanent effects as possible.

Harry had been surprised as hell to hear Ocelot's voice on the other end of the line that night a week ago. He'd been even more surprised to find out where he *was*. "I heard there's a war zone downtown," he'd said. "One of the big towers down there got blown up."

"Yeah, I know," Ocelot had said wearily. "I'm standin' in front of it. And we need help fast."

Harry's eyes had narrowed. "I shouldn't ask, should I?"

"No, Harry. Don't ask. Just get some ambulances and medical people down here as quick as possible." He paused for effect. "Money's no object, Harry. Just get `em here fast."

Those three words, "money's no object," had had the desired effect on the fixer. Within fifteen minutes, two large ambulances had pulled up to their location and loaded up the injured team members. Ocelot didn't bother asking how Harry had managed to get them through the Lone Star cordon—he didn't care. He'd watched as Joe and `Wraith had been loaded into the back of one of the ambulances, and Winterhawk and Gabriel into the other. Ocelot and Kestrel had ridden in the second ambulance, the former because there was more room there, the latter because she wouldn't leave Gabriel. She had pulled out her tiny portable phone and made her own arrangements as they went, and there had been yet another ambulance—a much smaller one—waiting for them in

front of the private hospital. She had seen to Gabriel's transfer into the new vehicle and then sought out Ocelot.

"I have to go with him," she'd said. "I'll see you in a few days, okay?" She looked down. "Get that foot looked at, okay? You might have broken it."

He had nodded. "Yeah. I will." Glancing up at the second ambulance, he'd said, "You guys gonna be okay?"

"Yeah," she said. "We'll be fine. Gabriel's got places he can go. You know—to be himself, so he can heal up." Leaning over, she'd kissed him, brushing her lips across his. "Go take care of your team. We'll see you soon." A pause, then: "And thanks. For everything."

And then she'd gone. He hadn't seen her again all week, until she had called yesterday with an invitation from Gabriel for them all to get together at the Dreamscape.

They sat around the table now, looking much better than they had when they'd parted company the last time. Joe, back in his Western-style suit, showed no evidence of his ordeal. The surgeons had been good: he'd ended up with only a slight scar from Stefan's vicious attack. `Wraith, too, looked completely healed. Since most of the elf's injuries were magically-induced and didn't show, his recovery had been complete. Winterhawk was back to his usual elegant self in a tailored Armante' suit, looking a tad more pale than usual but otherwise well.

As for Ocelot, it hadn't taken much effort for the magicians at the hospital to heal up his foot—which had, in fact, been broken—and fix up his bruised shoulder. He almost felt wrong about even bothering them with it when his friends were in such bad shape, but they had insisted. In the end he was glad they had.

The award for most miraculous recovery, however, had to go to Gabriel. Winterhawk and Ocelot, who had been the only two of the team to have seen him in his

near-dead state, had stared in frank amazement when he had strolled into the room, immaculately tailored and every hair in place, the smile on his face matched only by the one on Kestrel's as she came in behind him. "Good evening, gentlemen," he had said, pulling up a chair as a cadre of uniformed waitstaff swept in pushing carts full of delicacies. He waited until they put the trays in the middle of the table and departed before continuing. "I hope you all feel as well as I do tonight."

"Not bad at all—all things considered," Winterhawk said, picking up on Gabriel's good cheer.

No one talked much until they had made serious inroads into the fine cuisine and liquor laid out before them; Joe, especially, seemed more interested in eating than in conversation, but that was nothing new. It wasn't until the trays had been carried back out and the group sat comfortably back sipping their after-dinner drinks that Ocelot spoke. "You were wrong, Gabriel," he said. "We *did* all come back."

Kestrel nodded from where she sat between Ocelot and Gabriel. She had come through the events the best of any of the group, getting out with only bruised ribs and pulled muscles. She now reclined casually in her chair, dressed in jeans, white blouse, and a short jacket of bright red leather. "I don't think I ever want to cut anything quite that close again, though," she said.

Gabriel's expression sobered. "No," he agreed. "Nor do I."

"There is one thing, though—" Winterhawk ventured. "It's been troubling me all week."

"And that is—?" Gabriel turned to look at the mage.

"Stefan," Hawk said. "He isn't dead. I just can't see how what Ocelot and Kestrel did was sufficient to kill a Great Dragon."

"No," Gabriel said. Kestrel had told him the whole story when he'd awakened.

"So he's still out there somewhere," Winterhawk continued. "And undoubtedly quite unhappy with us for what we did to him."

The young man shrugged. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. It will certainly take him a while to recover from his injuries; from what Kestrel described, you hurt him badly. You might even have blinded him, though I truly doubt that. But if I know him at all, he won't allow himself to acknowledge that you were able to hurt him." He paused a moment, then sighed ruefully. "Sadly, he has very low regard for humans and metahumans, but this might work to your favor this time. He will likely not rouse himself sufficiently to exact revenge on what he considers to be insignificant beings."

Joe raised his glass and grinned. "Hey, let's hear it for us insignificant beings."

"And you?" Wraith asked Gabriel.

He shook his head. "Don't concern yourself with me. He won't fool me so easily again. If he even tries, I suspect it will be a long time before he does it. Remember, dragons think in terms of centuries the way you think in terms of years."

"There's a bloody comforting thought," Winterhawk said sourly. Only the look in his eyes indicated that he was kidding.

"I do have a bit of business I'd like to discuss with you," Gabriel said. His gaze picked out each of them in turn as he spoke. "First, I want to thank you. For everything. You were right, and I was wrong. If it had not been for your presence, Stefan would have killed me. I owe you much for that."

Ocelot shook his head. "Forget it. We made our choice to come along. We knew what we were in for – or at least we thought we did."

The others nodded their agreement.

"Still," the young man said, "if there is ever anything you need that I can provide, you have only to ask. In addition, I insist that you allow me to replace the equipment that you lost."

There had been a lot of lost equipment. Ocelot and Winterhawk, in their desperate attempts to get Joe and `Wraith out of the disintegrating building, had had to leave behind most of their heavy gear, including `Wraith's Barret and Joe's Panther cannon and HMG. "Thanks," Joe said. `Wraith nodded. The gesture was definitely appreciated.

"One more thing," Gabriel said. Closing his eyes briefly, he spoke a short sentence in an odd language. Then he opened his eyes again. "I have released you from your oaths. I have no more right to enforce them. I simply ask you to respect my desire to continue my – little masquerade."

"Then you're staying `round?" Winterhawk asked. "I had rather wondered if this whole thing might cause you to decide to take up residence elsewhere."

"No, not at all." He looked around the room, taking in the gorgeous view of the Seattle skyline out the far window. "I told you before – I believe it was right here in this building – I like Seattle."

Kestrel grinned. "He'll miss too many good parties if he moves."

Gabriel gave her a sideways look. "And I still have big plans for my team," he continued as if he had not heard her. He was smiling, though.

"Do they know?" Ocelot asked.

"About me?" Gabriel shook his head. "No. I don't think they're ready for that knowledge yet. Some day, perhaps."

Everyone fell silent, enjoying the good liquor and the feeling that the whole long thing was finally over. As hard and frustrating and dangerous as it had been, each of the runners was glad that the strange events that had been ruling their lives for what seemed like an eternity were now at an end. Gabriel hadn't been completely successful in convincing them that Stefan wouldn't come looking for them someday, but right now, in this beautiful room with the spectacular view, surrounded by friends and good food and comfort, that possibility seemed a remote one.

For now, they were going to enjoy the rest. They had, after all, earned it.

Epilogue

*In his office high above the city, the dark figure brooded.
"Sir?"*

He looked up, irritated at the intrusion. Standing just inside the door was a young man he had never seen before. The man was blond and unremarkable in appearance, dressed in a conservative suit and looking very much like all the other earnest young underlings who had passed through these portals over the years. He could barely tell them apart, and had never particularly cared to try. "How did you get up here?"

"That isn't important, sir. I've come to tell you that you have a visitor." The young man's voice held the proper level of respect and deference, but no hesitation or fear. That in and of itself captured the dark figure's attention.

"A visitor? I am expecting no visitors." He swung his chair around and leaned across the desk, fixing the messenger with his chilly gaze. "I ask again – how did you get up here?"

The young man smiled. "I'll just send him in, then."

Before the dark figure could protest, the messenger turned smartly on his heels, opened the door, and disappeared through it, the very picture of unobtrusive competence.

Another figure entered the office then, approaching the desk with an air of casual familiarity. A tall man, slightly built, clad in faded jeans, white shirt, and loose-fitting leather bomber jacket. His long silvery hair was pulled back into a ponytail; his eyes were a clear shade of aqua, wise and ageless. His face, attractive without quite reaching handsome, currently wore an expression of mild curiosity. "Hello, Sildarath."

The dark figure's eyes widened, his features rearranging themselves from annoyance to astonishment. Quickly he brought them under control. "Telanwyr," he said carefully. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Telanwyr's gaze took in the office. "Nice place," he commented. "You're doing well for yourself."

"Is there something I can do for you, Telanwyr?" The dark figure – Sildarath – leaned back in his chair, his eyes never leaving the man who stood before his desk.

The other man began to pace around the office, well aware of Sildarath's gaze following him. "Tales have reached me," he said noncommittally. "Tales that disturb me."

"Oh?" Sildarath tensed a bit, a fact that was not lost on his visitor.

Telanwyr nodded, returning to the front of the desk. Sitting down in one of the guest chairs, he hooked one leg casually over its arm. "Your name came up. Again."

"Indeed."

"This is the second time, Sildarath, in less than two years. Perhaps your corporate activities are not sufficiently occupying your time?" There was an odd undercurrent in Telanwyr's voice.

A very slight smirk crossed Sildarath's face. "Need I speculate regarding where you have heard these tales?"

Telanwyr shrugged. "If you wish. Likely you would be wrong."

"Then he has not gone to hide behind his old mentor to protect his own neck, and those of his miserable pets?" Sildarath rubbed his eye unconsciously. The pain was long gone, with no sign that there had ever been an injury, but the knowledge still plagued him.

"Gethelwain knows nothing of this." Telanwyr's voice dropped a bit. "It would please me if that fact were to remain true."

"A threat, Telanwyr?" Sildarath knew he was pushing his luck, but let the question stand nonetheless.

"Sildarath, you should know me well enough after all these years to know that I do not make threats," the other said, unperturbed. "I merely stated my wishes. You may, of course, do as you will."

"What do you want, then?"

Telanwyr swung his leg around so he was once more sitting properly in the chair, although his posture still evidenced a distinct nonchalant slouch. He smiled slightly, his clear aqua eyes meeting Sildarath's. "It would please me," he said again, "if you were to confine your interest to your own affairs, and allow Gethelwain to do the same."

Sildarath snorted. "So there it is. The favorite son once again receives the protection of the elders. Do you ever plan to let him handle his own affairs without your interference, Telanwyr?"

"I think he has done so admirably," Telanwyr said with a gentle but maddening smile. "Regarding that, I hope that your eyes are doing better than your building in Seattle."

With great effort, Sildarath submerged the tide of rage that washed over him at Telanwyr's mocking words. The other's calm courtesy could be every bit as deceptive as Sildarath's own, and it would not be wise to anger him. "Surely," he said tightly, "you do not expect me to allow those – pets – of his to go unpunished for what they have done to me?"

Telanwyr shrugged. "I expect nothing," he said. "I've merely come to inform you that I would be grateful were you to honor my request. Gethelwain is but a child. Those he chooses to associate with are nothing to you. You could end their existences with the barest flick of your thoughts. But what would it show if you did?"

"They caused me injury," Sildarath said, almost petulantly.

"They have also taught you a valuable lesson," Telanwyr pointed out. "One it would be wise for you not to forget." He spread his hands, indicating the office and, by extension, the building in which they stood. "You have much here to occupy yourself, young one. Your differences with Gethelwain are from another time. Let them go. I ask this of you." The last words were spoken in a tone that suggested cold steel encased in the softest of velvet.

Sildarath rose slowly, turning for a moment to gaze out the window at the view of the Boston skyline laid out before him. It

was a long time before he answered, and when he did, he spoke with carefully controlled reluctance. "As you wish, Telanwyr." In front of him, where Telanwyr could not see, his hands were balled into tight fists.

"I have your word, then?"

Slowly, Sildarath turned. "Yes," he said through clenched teeth. "You have my word."

Telanwyr smiled, rising gracefully. "Good. Thank you, Sildarath. It's been good seeing you again. I'm glad that we had this chance to talk. I wish you success with your ventures." Nodding, he slipped off his jacket, hooked it over his shoulder on one finger, and exited the room.

Sildarath stood behind the desk, pressing his palms down on the obsidian surface, unable to lift his gaze from the now-closed door. The child had won again. Closing his eyes, he almost involuntarily brought his fingers in until his hands were once again clenched into fists. He stood there for several moments, and then, very slowly, his hands relaxed again, and his eyes opened. A tiny smile played around the corners of his thin lips.

He had given his word, true. The puppies would be safe. But the puppies were inconsequential. Soon enough, their short lives would be over without any influence from him. However, the important thing was that he had allowed himself to be swayed from his goal, and he had paid for it. He wouldn't make the same mistake again.

Even those of his own kind did not always live forever. Some day, the child's protector might be no more and his promise would be released. Perhaps that day could even, with the right preparations, be hastened.

Yes, he thought with satisfaction. He could wait.

Acknowledgements

I wanted to acknowledge some people for their encouragement, support, and general putting-up-with-my-obsession, and then I'll shut up. This thing is getting too long as it is.

- ❖ First, as always, Dan. Not only for his patience beyond the call of duty with my spending every spare minute at the computer, but also for all those nights (mostly at Red Lobster, for whatever odd reason) helping me hash out my plot and exorcise my continuity errors. Not to mention the marathon photocopying session...
- ❖ Shapcano (<http://www.shapcano.com>), for continued encouragement and inspiration. Thanks, my friend, for all those wonderful feedback notes. They mean a lot to me.
- ❖ Steven Rosenau, the creator and player of ShadoWraith, for encouragement, lots of long e-mails about character motivation, and for letting 'Wraith play in my story.
- ❖ Ken Wilson, creator and player of Joe, for letting Joe out to play too.
- ❖ Bob, Doug, and Jim, for playing in my game and (unknowingly) helping me flesh out Gabriel and Kestrel all these years.
- ❖ DeckerM (<http://www.deckerm.net>), for lots of encouraging emails while this beastie was being posted. Check out her serial "Briar" – it's great!
- ❖ The late and very much missed Fran White, creator and maintainer of the excellent *Swamp Thing* TV Series fan web page, for general encouragement (if you like Swamp Thing, be sure to check out the fiction on her page

(<http://easyweb.easynet.co.uk/~ishtar/index.htm>) – she was a very talented writer.) Oh—I almost forgot: thanks also to Fran for naming Stefan's corporation for me.

- ❖ Everyone who has sent me comments, suggestions, or encouragement. It's made me very happy to see how many people seemed to be enjoying this thing. That's why I do this, after all! (That, and I can't stop.) Particular thanks (and a virtual Evil Chuckle) to all the folks who sent me variations on "Arrgh! You @\$%^&!" at the end of chapter 34. :)
- ❖ Toad the Wet Sprocket, Loreena McKennitt, the various artists of the "Strange Days" soundtrack, the Alan Parsons Project, Eric Woolfson, Peter Gabriel, and Rush, for providing inspirational background music. :)

--Rat

March (and September) 1998