

By the Author of *Inner Demons* and *Crossfire*

# DARK REFLECTION



A Shadowrun Novel

R. L. King

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**by**

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## Notes

Hey, look, you're back for book 3! Excellent! The usual disclaimer: if you somehow found *Dark Reflection* first, it would be really, really helpful for you if you went back and read *Crossfire* and *Inner Demons* first. I won't say it'll be *impossible* to follow this story if you start with it, but it'll be pretty difficult.

Not much needs to be said here — once again, it will be helpful if you're familiar with the world of *Shadowrun* and particularly with the adventure modules *Harlequin* and *Harlequin's Back*, the *Dragon Heart Trilogy* novels by Jak Koke, and the *Earthdawn Horrors* sourcebook by Robin D. Laws.

Also, let me reiterate my shameless beg for feedback. I love hearing what y'all think of the stories. If you have anything to say, please feel free to send it to [rat@dragonwriter.net](mailto:rat@dragonwriter.net).

— Rat, May 2012

*"He who fights with monsters,  
should look to it that he himself  
does not become a monster.  
And when you gaze long into an abyss,  
the abyss also gazes into you."  
--Friedrich Nietzsche*

# Prologue

*In the darkness, a dragon screamed.*

*It seemed as though he had been screaming forever – screaming, falling, twisting end over end, his body buffeted by chill winds that cut through him like sharp-honed knives. The sounds of his own screams mingled in his mind with the shrieks of the wind and the cries of – what? He did not know. They echoed around him, bouncing off, passing through him as if there was nothing left of his physical body, but only the essence of what he had been.*

*The falling continued as the agony of the wind lanced into his bleeding body, opening wounds, searing flesh, eating through him, consuming him – he closed his eyes, trying to block it out, trying to think only of his redemption, of the fact that he had finally ended the thing that had begun so long ago with his father. The pain could not go on forever. The body – even a body as strong and powerful as his own had been – could only take so much punishment before the light of life ceased within it.*

*Still the screams persisted – his own and those around him. The echoes were mocking him, raising their foul voices to meet his, matching the tone and pitch of his cries, dancing around him and then flitting away in the wind. In contrast to his own ungraceful tumbling they seemed at home in the wicked winds, riding the currents like malevolent surfers. There was a sense of anticipation in the air. Something was going to happen. Something big. Their eyes followed him hungrily, though he could not see their bodies. There were only brief impressions, quickly lost.*

*He did not know how long he fell. Time and space seemed fluid, at the same moment immeasurably vast and unbearably claustrophobic. Clamping his eyes shut once again, he forced himself to clear his mind, to allow the pain to wash over him and move on, to wait. It would be over soon. His brother was safe. His brother's friends – the very friends he had sworn on*



numerous occasions to kill—were safe. He had redeemed himself. There was nothing to fear now. He would continue on to the next plane of existence—whatever that proved to be—with clear conscience and free mind. He clung to that thought in desperation, as the one anchor remaining to him. Soon it would be over.

*The falling stopped.*

*There was no crash, no final shriek of agony as the momentum slammed his body down at the bottom of the chasm, impaled on spiked rocks or sinking into a quagmire of infinite depth. Instead, there was simply—nothing. No feeling. No sound. No—being?*

*He opened his eyes cautiously. All around him it was dark, the deep velvet blackness that tightens the eyes as they try to force even the tiniest bit of light from it and fail. He could not feel the ground beneath him. He could not feel the pain of his body. In fact, he could not feel his body at all. It was as if he was floating in some void. Was this what existed at the bottom of the Chasm? Nothingness? And if so, why was he still conscious? Why was he still alive?*

*Was he still alive?*

*One by one, tiny lights began to pick their way out of the blackness, like stars winking on. Around him, whispers formed—the smallest of sibilant sounds, incoherent and unintelligible. They were drawing closer, as the little lights were getting bigger. Something was approaching. He tensed—it was a strange feeling, tensing when one could not feel one's body. It was more as if his mind tensed. "Who—is there?" He could not hear his voice, only feel the impression of it inside his consciousness. He wondered if the thing had heard him, and then wondered if that concept was even a valid one here.*

*The whispers got louder, and he became aware that it was not an it—it was a they, and they were chuckling to each other. It was not a pleasant sound. It was, in fact, the sound of a large number of small and furtive predators circling a bit of prey that*

*they already knew was theirs. The essence of a cat playing with a wounded bird.*

*The darkness lifted all at once for just a moment, and with it his confusion. He only got the briefest glimpse, but a glimpse—a visual reference—was not what he needed here. That was not at all necessary to his comprehension of the situation. All at once he knew where he was, and why he was here—and what was very, very wrong. The blackness engulfed him once again.*

*In the darkness, a dragon screamed as the sensation of falling began anew. He knew now that, despite his redemption, the only thing that awaited him was hell.*

## 2.

In hell there is no time.

In hell there exists nothing but unrelieved torment punctuated by periods of nothingness. There was no frame of reference for either the periods of torment or those of nothingness, because the concept of the passing of time was as unfamiliar here as was the concept of happiness or joy or peace.

Existence simply *was*.

Eternally, without relief or respite.

Even the concept of *here* was a nebulous one, for the scene constantly shifted—it was as if he existed (*or did he even exist at all? What constituted existence?*) in the midst of a miasma of shifting perceptions, sick greenish light and impenetrable darkness, drifting in the void during those times when he was not being tormented, then ripped back to a sort of hyper-consciousness when *they* returned to him.

He had never believed in hell. Among his kind, bred from the moment of their hatching with the idea that they would be immortal, that they would be masters of the world in which they lived, the concept of a place of eternal torment had seemed to him to be just another superstition the young races had come up with to help them make sense of their infinitesimally brief spans of life. After all, of what use was an afterlife to beings who were never meant to die?

He wondered, sometimes, what the young races would think had any of their members been subjected to what had become his existence. If they were able to experience even the briefest of it and then return back to their fellows, what would that have done to their pre-existing concepts? He did not know, and in truth did not care. His thoughts were rarely that coherent. *They* did not

give that the chance to occur often. He felt fragmented, as if parts of him were irrevocably gone and other parts had drifted off, tantalizingly in sight but only just out of his reach. He wondered how he was able to think at all.

This had not been the way it was to have happened. He was not to have been here. His mind should not have remained conscious—even what little consciousness of which it was capable at this time—following the plunge he had made into the Chasm. He had been meant to die. That was what he had wanted. To die. To wash away, once and for all, the sins of his father, of himself—to leave as the final mark of his existence the fact that he had redeemed himself.

Was *this* the reward for his sacrifice?

He did not allow himself bitter thoughts like that anymore. Briefly, at the beginning, such thoughts had crept to him like furtive creatures, attempting to take root in his consciousness. For awhile, he had let them. But then he had become aware that *they*—the small creeping things that delighted in his torment—approved of such thoughts. The thoughts, in some way he did not understand, seemed to strengthen them. As soon as he realized that, he had banished them from his mind. He had not truly believed them anyway, which had made it easier to send them away. He still felt pride in what he had done. His brother had been innocent. Everything he had held against his brother had been colored through his own perceptions, and all of it had been because he had been unwilling to see the truth. Now that he had seen it, it was one of the few things that comforted him.

*They* hated the comfort. The torment increased whenever he thought of such things. When they caught him at it, their efforts increased until he either blocked out the thoughts or allowed his mind to drift away. He did

not wish to do either, but sometimes he did not have a choice.

He was weakening. He could tell.

At some point, they seemed to tire of him. The time between nothingness and torment increased, or at least he thought it did, and the periods where he floated became longer. Slowly, ever so slowly, he began to gather what little strength he had. He did not know why he was gathering it, but even now strength was important to him. He had always been strong. He did not think he could fight them—this was their domain and he did not know its rules—but still he focused his concentration and waited. For what, he did not know—but he waited.

And then the idea came to him.

He was surprised—again, it was not an accurate term because emotion *per se* was no longer something of which he was capable—that he had not thought of it before. It was such a simple idea. It was his only hope. And yet, it had taken so long for it to occur to him.

Now he had a focus for his strength. He tried not to think of *them*, to hope that they would not come back to torment him, for sometimes even thinking of them brought them down upon him. Instead, he continued to concentrate his energies.

It would be dangerous. For him it did not matter—the concept of danger, of something more horrific than that which had already occurred, did not enter his mind—but it could be dangerous for his brother as well. He did not wish to involve his brother. He was safe. He was back home with his friends—the humans he himself had hated a very long time ago, but now all of that seemed irrelevant—safe and free, partially because of what *he* had done. He had ensured it. Now would he take the chance of putting that at risk?

*I must. I cannot bear this any longer. He will understand.*

He narrowed his focus still further. It became his world within the confines of the world in which he already existed.

*I must succeed.*

They watched him from afar. They did not smile, because things such as they could not smile, but the effect was the same nonetheless. They also did not communicate with each other in any language that could be comprehended—their messages back and forth consisted largely of impressions, images, and dark emotions.

They watched him with pleasure. They had thought that if they left him alone long enough his desperation might grow to the point that he would try something like this. It was what they had counted on.

It was what they had prepared for.

Their plans were proceeding exactly as they had desired.

As their captive continued to marshal his strength, believing himself to be unseen and unmonitored, they set about putting the finishing touches on their end of the plan.

The captive's effort at communication across the planes would be successful—oh, yes. He would indeed communicate with his brother.

But fully unbeknownst to him, there would be an extra component added to that communication. A component that would allow them to at last reach the one they sought and set their plan in motion.

Within one of them, the tiny fragment of the one who had died with the captive was especially pleased.

### 3.

Kestrel settled back in her chair, set her drink on the table alongside it, and sighed with contentment. It didn't get much better than this.

Her gaze skimmed over the big room, which was crowded with *apres-ski* revelers drifting from group to group, forming and re-forming little conversation knots, enjoying the beautiful evening. Past them, a huge floor-to-ceiling window afforded a spectacular view of the moonlit peaks beyond.

It was a perfect end to a perfect day. She smiled, gracefully propping her soft-boot-clad feet up on a low table, finally allowing herself to relax. She was tired, but it was the good, invigorating sort of tired that came from a long day of exercise. She must have made twenty runs down the slopes today, each one better than the last. Now, after a magnificent dinner at the chalet's excellent restaurant, she was ready to see what the night would bring.

Across the room, cornered by the stairs with the look of amusement in his eyes visible even from this distance, Gabriel had been surrounded by a small collection of ski bunnies who appeared to be hanging on his every word. Kestrel chuckled. It was the strangest thing about going places with Gabriel: he was one of the only people she knew who tended to get more attention than she did from a crowd. She had had no shortage of it herself tonight; in fact, she had already made a mental hierarchy of the numerous men who had expressed interest in spending the evening with her and chosen the one she was planning to approach a little later, but her popularity was nothing compared to that of her traveling companion. From where she was sitting, Kestrel could see that he was being his usual polite, cheerful self, neither encouraging

nor discouraging the attention. She knew he had a way of making every person with whom he spoke feel like she was the only one there, and he was using it to its utmost right now.

She was just glad to see he was happy. That hadn't been a foregone conclusion of late.

They had been here for two days, and they were planning to leave tomorrow. Planning only, though, because they were on no set itinerary. If they felt like leaving, they would move on; if not, they'd remain here for awhile longer. Kestrel wondered if Gabriel would want to stay longer—she'd had a hard time believing that he had never been on skis before, given the prowess he had shown following his polite attention to her first attempts at giving him a few lessons. She smiled to herself, remembering how he had nodded, then taken off with the fearless abandon of a little boy, executing daredevil maneuvers and flinging up snow from his edges. Okay, so his technique still needed a lot of work, but for sheer fun he appeared to have it nailed in short order. They had spent the last couple of days skiing together, with Kestrel working on polishing her skills and delighting in revealing yet another aspect of the world to him, and Gabriel simply looking for ways to get down the mountain faster than before. She had given up worrying about him after he had emerged from tumbles that would have crippled a human skier with snow in his hair, a big grin on his face, and a look back toward the top of the mountain as if gauging how much trouble he'd cause if he eschewed the ski lift and just flew up there. Kestrel had laughed, shrugged, and given up. *Dragons!*

She sighed, taking another sip of her brandy (it was excellent brandy—she could get used to this jet-set lifestyle) and taking another look around the room. She picked out each of the four men she had her eye on,



identifying which ones seemed to have already paired off with someone, and then her eyes once again settled on Gabriel. He had moved over to the bar, and his throng of admirers were trying to be subtle about following. She noticed that occasionally one of them would take a furtive and puzzled glance over toward her, then look away when she realized Kestrel had noticed. Kestrel knew why, too: since the two of them were nearly inseparable during the day, it only stood to reason that they must be a couple. But they didn't *act* like a couple. Kestrel didn't see any reason to enlighten them, since it really wasn't any of their concern—and besides, it was more fun to let them figure it out.

She was pleased at how well he was coming along following the horrific events that had taken place a little over five months ago. She knew it was not easy for anyone to lose a mentor and a brother in such a short time, but for a Great Dragon, who expected that both he and his contemporaries would live essentially forever, it was a particularly crushing blow. Kestrel knew that the only thing that comforted him about the situation was the knowledge that his brother Stefan had died sacrificing himself to prevent the Enemy—the things that Ocelot and Winterhawk and the others called the Horrors—from crossing over to this plane and wreaking endless destruction. But that still didn't make it easy, and she knew it still hurt Gabriel. Hell, it still hurt *her*, and she had barely known Stefan and not known Telanwyr at all. In the time since Gabriel had returned after taking off on his own for three months following the events' completion, Kestrel had noticed that he occasionally seemed restless, especially in his sleep. When she asked him about it, though, he had told her he was fine and she shouldn't worry. In fact, he spent more time worrying about *her* nightmares than he did about his own. He had done what

he could to help, but short of removing the memories entirely (which he was capable of doing but which Kestrel had declined, saying she would rather have bad memories than no memories) he could only comfort and reassure her that it was over.

She had not regretted for a moment accepting his offer to go traveling the world with him. When he had returned to her, telling her that he needed to get away from Seattle because there were too many ghosts there and offering her the chance to go with him, she had not hesitated to accept. Now, two months later, she was very happy she had done so. Aside from the fact that she didn't think it was healthy for him to be alone, she was having the time of her life. The trip had been as therapeutic for her as it had for him.

It had definitely been an experience. Traveling with a young Great Dragon who was possessed of enough curiosity about the world to keep a whole shopful of cats busy was a lot different from hopping on the tour bus with Mr. and Mrs. John Q. Public from Branson, Missouri. So far in the past two months, they had visited ancient druidic ruins in Wales, ridden camels in Morocco, toured pyramids in Egypt, gone fishing in a small village on the coast of China, driven far too fast on the Autobahn in Germany (Kestrel suspected that this might have been Gabriel's favorite part of the trip so far), bicycled in Africa, and sampled numerous local cuisines ranging from insects to squid to things that Kestrel wasn't sure she wanted to think about too hard. And now here they were in an exclusive little ski chalet in Switzerland, where they had arrived after Kestrel had remarked in Africa that she wanted to go somewhere *cold* for a change. He had asked where that was and she had made a flippant remark about skiing in the Alps. At least she had *thought* it was

flippant until he had gone off and returned a few minutes later bearing tickets.

Yeah, not your average traveling buddy.

Kestrel finished the last of the brandy and started to rise with the intent to get a refill when she noticed Gabriel coming toward her. Smiling, she settled back and waited for him to thread his way through the crowd. The ski bunnies, noting his destination, decided to find other things to do elsewhere, so by the time he arrived at her chair, he was alone. "Hi," she said, waving him to another chair across from hers. "How has your evening been going so far?"

He returned her smile, dropping gracefully into the indicated chair and running a hand back through his hair. "Well," he said, his bright violet eyes showing amusement and a little exasperation, "so far tonight I've gotten four comm codes, two room keys, five offers of lunch tomorrow, one marriage proposal, one offer of a contract to model underwear...and the gentleman over there in the gray turtleneck wants to show me his etchings. You?"

"I should be so lucky," she said, laughing. "So, are you going to take anyone up on them?"

"I'll think about it," he said, affecting a mien of seriousness. "I've noticed you've been sitting over here for awhile – are you all right?"

Kestrel nodded. "I'm fine. I'm just trying to decide what I want to do with my evening." The gleam in her eye suggested that she had the general idea, she was just as yet unsure on the specifics.

"Ah." Gabriel smiled and rose. "Well, have fun." His tone clearly showed that he expected that she would.

"I hear they're going to be having some torchlight skiing tonight. It might give you some more time on the

slopes before we leave tomorrow. *If we're leaving tomorrow,"* she added.

He shook his head. "I think I'm going up to the suite. I've been feeling a bit tired today. I just wanted to make sure you were all right before I go."

She looked at him with some concern. This was the first time in quite awhile that Gabriel had admitted to being in anything but top shape. "Are you sure *you're* okay?"

"I'm fine," he assured her, reaching down to squeeze her shoulder gently. "A good night's rest should take care of it." His eyes twinkled. "Don't worry about waking me up if you bring a friend back to your room. I expect to be dead to the world tonight."

She chuckled. An odd relationship indeed, and she wouldn't have it any other way. "You just rest, okay? I'll see you in the morning."

"Breakfast? There's a little cafe down in the village —"  
"It's a date."

He nodded, and with one last smile turned to go. She watched him a little wistfully as he moved with nimble grace back through the crowd, never seeming to touch anyone and making it look effortless. She continued to watch him until he had disappeared up the stairway toward the suites, and then directed her attention back to the crowd, once more noting the positions of her potential companions. She didn't normally do this anymore, but tonight she felt inexplicably a bit lonely. It wasn't regret, but she was surprised to find herself wishing that Ocelot was here. It was the one thing that was missing, and Gabriel couldn't—or more accurately did not wish to—give it to her. She respected that, although she wasn't always happy about it. A little male companionship would be just the thing to finish off the night.

In the end she was pleased to find that her first choice was equally interested in her, and had been watching her from the other side of the room for most of the night. His name was Jean-Paul, and he was one of the ski instructors at the chalet. She drifted over toward him, and a challenging smile was all it took to initiate the contact. They spent the next half-hour or so talking—he told her about his year as an alternate on the Swiss Olympic ski team, she told him about her travels—but it was clear that both of them primarily had one goal in mind for the evening. It did not take long before they were headed to Jean-Paul's little cottage about a kilometer away from the chalet. As they drove, Kestrel idly noted that with his long blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, Jean-Paul reminded her very much of Ocelot. She wondered if that was why he appealed to her.

It was much later that night when Kestrel awoke. For a moment she wasn't sure where she was, but then she felt Jean-Paul's warm arm wrapped around her and his chest rising and falling under her head and she knew. She smiled, remembering the earlier part of the evening with pleasure. It had been just what she needed. She snuggled up a little closer and pulled up the heavy comforter over them, preparing to drift once again off to sleep.

*"Juliana..."*

Kestrel stiffened as the soft voice sounded in her mind and she immediately recognized it. She realized that she had heard it before, and recently. Could it have been what had awakened her? "Gabriel?" she whispered. Was he in the room with them? How could he be? He wasn't the type to—

*"Juliana...please..."*

Kestrel sat upright, eyes wide open. "Gabriel?" she whispered again. "What is it? Where are you?"

Next to her, Jean-Paul stirred, mumbled something unintelligible that sounded like French, repositioned his arm, and went back to sleep.

*"Please...something...wrong...help..."* Now the voice drifted, almost as if he were still asleep, but there was an edge of fear to it as well.

Kestrel didn't wait for more detail. She was already leaping out of bed, her low-light cybereyes aiding her in plucking her clothes from the disorderly heap next to it, shrugging into them at full jacked speed.

Jean-Paul stirred again, this time opening his eyes blearily. "Kestrel? What is it? Is something wrong?"

"I have to go," she said gently as she zipped up her jeans. "Thanks for a wonderful evening, but I have to go now."

"Go?" His voice was fuzzy, half-asleep still. "Go where?"

She realized that she was a kilometer away from the chalet and it was freezing outside. "Jean-Paul—I need to borrow your car, all right?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "My...car?"

"I have to get back to the chalet!" Her voice was taking on an edge of desperation. "I have to hurry. Somebody's in trouble!"

*"Juliana..."* Once more Gabriel's nebulous, fearful voice drifted through her consciousness. *"...help me...please..."*

"Please, Jean-Paul! Either let me borrow it or drive me back!"

Something in her tone seemed to get through to Jean-Paul, convincing him that if he did not act, she would take the car without his permission—or go running off into the frozen night. "All right," he said. He nodded down toward his clothes on the floor. "The key is in my pocket.

Leave it at the chalet, in the car park...but be careful. The roads are—”

But Kestrel wasn't listening. By the time he finished his second sentence, she had fished the key from his pocket and was heading for the door. “Thank you, Jean-Paul. Thanks for everything.” And then she was gone.

Jean-Paul watched the door for a moment, then shrugged, sinking back to the pillows with a chuckle. “*Les Américains...*” he muttered to himself, then slipped back off to sleep with visions of his evening with Kestrel in his mind.

Kestrel wasn't thinking about such things, but she would have done Gabriel and his daredevil driving techniques proud with her trip back to the chalet. She drove the car at a higher rate of speed than was safe on the treacherous icy roads, flinging it through curves with a combination of enhanced strength and sheer cussed willpower. Her mind was on nothing but Gabriel, wondering what could be wrong with him that he would reach out to her as he had. Was he having a particularly virulent nightmare? Was something attacking him? The latter hardly seemed likely, since there was very little on Earth that would be foolish enough to challenge a Great Dragon, and less still that one could not deal with effectively without having to call in human aid.

When she rounded the last bend and brought the car to a skidding stop in some random position in the car park, she noticed that all looked well at the chalet itself. It still looked like it belonged on a picture postcard, nestled in the foothills of the Alps, presided over by the enormous full moon that hung high overhead. There were no alarms sounding, no lights other than the normal perimeter lights, no obvious threats. She leaped out of the car, slammed the door shut, and pounded across the car park,

taking the steps up to the chalet's main entrance three at a time. The few people who still remained in the greatroom taking in the last warmth of the dying fire looked up at her with expressions of surprise, but she was already gone almost before they had noticed her, flying up the stairs toward the suites.

His voice was still in her mind as she fumbled with the code and flung open the door, her gaze darting back and forth as if she expected to see an intruder.

The suite's living room was eerily silent.

"Gabriel?" Kestrel called, running toward the door to his room. It was closed, but from experience she knew it would not be locked. She knocked anyway, insistently. "Gabriel, answer me! Are you all right?"

*"no...help me..."*

That was it. She threw open the door and moved swiftly inside, instinctively popping her hand razors. She wished she had a firearm, but even as she wished it she knew it would do her no good. If something was threatening Gabriel, the fact that she was or was not armed with an SMG would not make any difference at all.

She needn't have worried. There was nothing in the room.

Nothing, that is, except Gabriel.

He was in bed, moving fitfully around, his head thrashing violently from side to side. His teeth were gritted, and sweat stood out on his chest and forehead in little droplets that caught the moonlight through the room's big window. His hands were knotted into fists.

Immediately she was beside him, trying to take his hand. "Gabriel! Wake up! You're having a nightmare!"

He did not seem to hear her. He continued to thrash, and Kestrel could still hear the message he was broadcasting to her, growing more insistent as time went



on. His hair was soaked, stuck to his forehead; his eyes were clamped tightly shut.

“Gabriel!” Her call increased in volume as she sheathed her razors and captured his shoulders, one in each hand, pressing them back down to the bed. “Wake up! It’s me, Kestrel! I’m here!”

She was shocked at the feel of him — his skin was hot, sweat-slicked, feverish. From the dampness of the sheets and the pillow under his head, he had been at this for some time. “Gabriel! Please answer...you’re scaring me...”

For a moment it seemed as if he would not answer. His whole body stiffened as a shudder ran through him, and his eyes flew open, staring up at her unseeingly. “Help...” he whispered. Then his head dropped back to the pillow and his body went limp under her hands.

## 4.

The opening night of the long-anticipated Kenny Zane concert was sold out, of course.

It had been sold out for almost three months, following the fastest round of ticket sales since Maria Mercurial's comeback tour two years previously. In less than five minutes (owing largely to the diehard fans and even more diehard ticket scalpers buying up blocks over the Matrix), every available ticket had been snatched up. Even the seats off to both sides of the stage, normally not sold because of the poor visibility, were eagerly grabbed when the promoter had decided to put them on sale after seeing how fast the rest of the tickets were going. Although greed on the promoter's part was surely a factor, there was a bit of prudence involved as well: these fans knew their venues, and there would have been a near-riot if every potential spot for a fan to plant his or her posterior hadn't been made available.

The only reason that all the tickets hadn't found their way into fans' hands within a week of the on-sale date was because the ticket brokers had wisely chosen to hold on to some of their offerings until closer to the concert date, assuming correctly that when unfortunate Zane fans had been whipped into the proper fever pitch of desire and faced with the prospect of having to miss *the* event of their lives due to lack of tickets, they would be willing to pay almost anything to remedy the situation. By a week prior to the concert good seats were going for four figures, and even the cheap seats were commanding prices in the high threes.

The four men stationed in various places around the concert venue hadn't paid for their tickets. In fact, they didn't even *have* tickets. What they did have, hanging around their necks on unbreakable chains, were objects

that a sizable percentage of the crowd in attendance would have cheerfully committed mayhem to obtain: golden, holographic “ALL AREAS” show passes. The four had quickly learned to tuck said passes inside their coats before venturing out among the fans.

“See anything out there yet?” Winterhawk’s voice broke through the crowd noise, carried to the tiny earpieces worn by his three companions. He, along with Joe, was currently backstage, where little knots of people scurried madly around trying to make sure everything was operational before curtain time half an hour later.

“Not unless you count a bunch of kids tryin’ to impress each other by seein’ who can get high faster.” Ocelot’s tone was a bit sour; like the rest of the team with the possible exception of Joe he was getting a little old for this sort of thing and would have preferred to spend his evening doing something a little calmer — like getting into a bar fight.

“Nothing.” ShadoWraith, as usual, spoke in a near-monotone; his post was at the back of the venue, keeping an eye on the fans who were coming in past the bank of detectors: metal, weapon, and chemical. From the look of things, the concert’s organizers weren’t paying much attention to chemicals of the pharmaceutical variety; they seemed far more interested in those with a more explosive purpose. So far ‘Wraith had seen several indignant young men pulled out of line and searched, but he had relaxed when nothing more than firecrackers had been confiscated.

Ocelot sighed. “If they’re gonna do it, it makes sense that this would be the place. I damn sure hope it is. I don’t want to end up followin’ this guy around for the next month.”

“I’m with you on that one,” Winterhawk agreed. He was slouched casually out of the way next to the entrance

to the dressing rooms, watching as Kenny Zane's various attendants, hangers-on, and instrument technicians moved back and forth performing their duties.

"Yeah," Joe put in. "And besides, if it happens here, at least we're close to home." He had found a spot near the buffet table, pausing occasionally to fortify himself as he kept an eye on the other side of the backstage area.

'Hawk started to answer, but stopped as he noticed a man approaching him. Medium height, middle aged but trying desperately to hide it, the man was dressed in a suit that was just a bit too young for him. He had a slight paunch and nervous eyes. "Have you seen anything yet?" he demanded as he drew up next to Winterhawk.

The mage shook his head, trying to look encouraging. "Not yet, Mr. Carson. But don't you worry – if anything's going to happen tonight, we'll find it and take care of it. Just calm yourself. This should be an enjoyable night for you. Let us do what you've hired us to do."

Winterhawk could forgive Timothy Carson his nerves: after what the man had been through so far, it was a wonder that he was here at all. It was an even greater wonder that the Kenny Zane concert had managed to get off the ground. The accidents had not occurred at *every* concert performed by someone Timothy Carson managed, but there had been enough of them that the man had every reason to be concerned. So far this year there had been four, each one increasing in its intensity until the last, a month ago, had resulted in ten young fans of a rather obscure girl group being trampled when someone had set off the fire alarm in the middle of a concert. The injuries had been minor, but Carson was all too aware that they could have been much worse.

It was shortly after that point that Carson had made the decision that he needed to supplement the regular security force at his artists' performances with something

a bit more professional. He had done some searching and, through a few of his less above-board contacts, had discovered the team that he had now retained. After hearing about their work with Maria Mercurial, The Shadows, and the Dark Angel situation, he had determined that they were exactly what he needed to keep things safe.

Apparently he had been right. The team had been working with him for almost a month now, and the two concerts that had already taken place—a death-metal band called The Entrails at a small club in San Francisco and a retro-folk combo called Mother and the Slugs at an oversized coffee house in Vancouver—had gone off without so much as a stubbed toe. Carson had been pleased, but his nervousness was still mounting. He knew what was to come.

Kenny Zane was the biggest act Carson had ever had the good fortune to manage, even counting the unfortunate Twyla Ellindel, whose tragic death two years ago at the height of her popularity had cast ripples throughout the recording industry. In the months following that death, the agent, distraught over the loss of someone he had not only represented but mentored, had contented himself with the remaining acts in his stable, all of which were minor-league talents at best. He had been sure that he would never have the opportunity to represent someone like Ellindel again and had resigned himself to it.

Enter Kenny Zane, almost exactly one year ago. Carson had not been expecting to make a discovery the night he had ducked into the little Los Angeles club to kill a couple of hours before his plane left for Seattle. The young troll, despite performing with a band consisting of some decent-but-not-great musicians he had met on the club scene, managed to light up the room with the driving

beat and sheer outright *feeling* of his music. Carson had watched, amazed, as Zane and his guitar had time after time transcended the mediocrity of his backup group, not only sounding fantastic himself but somehow making *them* sound better as well. It was clear by the look of bliss on the troll's face that he was loving every minute of what he was doing, and it was every bit as clear that the crowd was too.

Carson had wasted no time approaching Zane at the bar after the set was over; it turned out that the troll had no particular ties to LA and had drifted out here from back East because he'd heard the club scene out here was better. An hour later, Carson had signed him to an exclusive contract, and two weeks later he was in the studio (with a different band) recording his first album.

The rest, as they say, was history.

Zane's debut album, *Monster*, had lived up to its name by becoming a runaway hit, topping the charts and propelling the slightly bewildered but very happy Zane to instant stardom. His popularity crossed all metatypes: he was one of the few troll artists who had been able to break out of the "goblin rock" genre and make it with mainstream audiences, a fact which was no doubt aided by the fact that his music was a powerful combination of thundering beat and literate, melodic lyrics. Zane himself was humble about his success, exhibiting little of the "bad boy" behavior that was almost expected among rock stars (especially troll rock stars).

Timothy Carson couldn't have been happier. Suddenly he was managing one of the most sought-after acts on the music scene, and things could go nowhere but up from here. Zane's second album, *The Two of Me*, was tearing up the charts and he couldn't see how the accompanying tour could be anything but a massive hit as well. Life was good.

That was about the time the problems had started happening.

First it had been small things, like misplaced instruments, malfunctioning connections, and other similar but minor nuisances. As time had gone on, though, the incidents had grown more serious until they had culminated in the trampling injuries to the ten young girls. Carson had given the team a rundown of everything that had happened; before he had hired them, he had cooperated fully with law enforcement in the towns where the incidents had occurred, but they hadn't been able to turn up anything. Most of them seemed convinced (at least up until the fire alarm episode) that the problems were the result of nothing more than coincidence.

Carson was *not* convinced, which was why Winterhawk, Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith were now keeping an eye on the place. Carson believed, and the four runners concurred, that if somebody was trying to sabotage his acts, there was no better time for something big, spectacular, and potentially dangerous than during Carson's biggest act's biggest concert ever.

The fans continued to filter in. There was a certain urgency about their movements now, because there were still quite a number of them outside in line and everyone who was not yet inside was worried that the concert would start without them if they didn't hurry. The venue security guards did their jobs keeping the lines orderly, processing people through the detectors, and making an effort to quickly deal with anyone who set off the detectors with something innocuous. It was not magnanimity on their part: most of these guards worked here every night and had seen just about everything, but they were all acutely aware of the problems they could have on their hands if they didn't get people into their seats as quickly as possible.

Off to the side, 'Wraith continued to watch, his sharp gaze roving over the faces. He could not watch everyone, of course — there were just too many of them — but he had been in the shadowrunning business long enough that he knew how to spot potential warning signs such as furtive expressions, attempts to get around the detectors, or simply that difficult-to-quantify quality of "looking suspicious." He glanced quickly down at his chrono. Twenty minutes to go. The radio crackled in his ear. "Anything in back?" It was Ocelot's voice.

"Nothing." 'Wraith's tone was crisp; if he was bored watching this unending stream of overexcited teens and twentysomethings hurrying past his scrutiny, he did nothing to show it.

"I'm thinkin' they've either been here all along or else they'll try to get in close to the start time so maybe the guards don't pay as much attention to 'em," Ocelot said.

"Yes. Nothing in the crowd?"

"Nope." Ocelot's job was to circulate among the crowds of spectators, using a carefully-calibrated listening device to try to pick out any suspicious conversations. "So far most of 'em are talkin' about how good the concert's gonna be, how much dope they can score, and what their chances are of getting laid afterward." When 'Wraith didn't answer, he sighed audibly. "I'll keep looking."

"Will join you soon," 'Wraith said. "T.C.?" The fifth member of their group, the one of whom they were all well aware of but did not check with often because she was offsite and would speak up if she noticed anything, was T.C. Pip, the decker they subcontracted with when they needed services that 'Wraith and his turtle connection couldn't provide. Her job was monitoring Matrix traffic in and out of the venue, including the security systems and reporting in if she saw anything out of the ordinary. So far she had been so quiet they



contacted her occasionally just to make sure she was still there.

"Nothing." Her voice came back almost immediately. "Everything looks fine."

"Good. Thank you." As agreed earlier, 'Wraith would remain where he was until they closed the doors, then come into the hall to supplement Ocelot's surveillance. Joe would do the same, while Winterhawk would prowl around the backstage areas and use his astral scouting abilities to keep watch on the network of scaffolding and rigging up above the stage. They hoped that, with the addition of the not-inconsiderable security force who came with the venue (quietly beefed up a bit from its usual numbers by Carson, ostensibly because of the popularity of Zane's act), they could stave off anything untoward and—with any luck at all—catch whoever was responsible for the attacks so everyone could get on with their lives.

Backstage, Winterhawk had just returned from one of his astral passes; he had been slumped into a chair pushed off into a back corner of the backstage area where nobody would disturb him. Joe noticed him and gave him a questioning look.

'Hawk shook his head. "I didn't see anything. Whoever our saboteurs are, they're either not here or they're keeping very low." He hadn't spent much time checking out the main concert hall—the astral energy there made it difficult for him to pick out any particular individual aura, and besides, all that youthful exuberance gave him a headache. Instead, he had concentrated on the non-public areas: backstage, the corridors leading to the venue's administrative offices, the catwalks and lighting rigs, under the stage itself, and other such places where someone might choose to secret him- or herself until it was time to act. He had found nothing out of the

ordinary—a few technicians making last-minute adjustments to the lightbars above the stage, their auras focused and professional and a little bored, a couple of corporate suit types grabbing a quickie in one of the venue offices, and several security guards patrolling their rounds. Hawk checked each person for any sign of oddnesses in their auras, but they had either been more adept than he thought they were at hiding such things or else, more likely, they simply were what they appeared to be and thus were not worth a second look.

“I’m gonna go do another round,” Joe said. “Then I guess I should get out front soon. Will you be okay back here by yourself?” As the only member of the group who was actually interested in seeing the concert, Joe found it a bit hard to believe that Winterhawk was not displeased that he was the only one of the four who would have to experience it from backstage.

The mage nodded. “Of course. Go on. I’ll yell if anything exciting happens back here. I—”

He stopped because Joe wasn’t listening to him anymore. In the space of a couple of seconds a palpable aura of excitement had come over the backstage area as a figure came sweeping in from the hallway leading to the dressing rooms.

Flanked by Carson and a man in a flashy suit, Kenny Zane towered over most of the humans and orks who made up the backstage crew. Behind them, like a pack of hyenas following a predator, trailed an entourage of various hangers-on who followed at a close but respectable distance.

Zane wasn’t as big as Joe—in fact, he was rather small for a troll at only about two and a half meters—but he had a presence that dominated a room. The only thing physically remarkable about him was the fact that his skin was relatively smooth when compared with the

lumpiness of most trolls, which gave him a surprisingly human-looking appearance if you ignored the two large, polished tusks that were his pride and joy. Other than that his longish brown hair, warm hazel eyes, and unassuming manner of dress were no different than any of the other club habitués from whose midst he had risen. His charisma came not from his appearance, but from his bearing, which somehow managed to be simultaneously cheerfully open and almost frighteningly intense. Fans who had had the chance to speak with him reported that they felt as if they were the only subject of his interest at the time of their conversation, as his eyes zeroed in on theirs and did not let go.

At this moment, he was cinching up his belt around a pair of faded jeans and a green T-shirt bearing the logo of a company that specialized in sports clothes for orks and trolls as he approached the buffet table. He grinned at Joe and Winterhawk as he went by. "Hey guys," he said. "Any nasties yet?"

The team had been introduced to Zane earlier that day; they had all found him to be pleasant if a bit preoccupied, which was understandable given what was to happen that evening.

"Not yet," Joe said.

"We're hoping not at all," Winterhawk added.

Zane nodded. "Me too. I'd hate to see anybody get hurt. I wish whoever's doing this would just find something else to do for awhile." He grabbed a small plate and selected a few light items, obviously not wanting to fill himself up before the concert.

"It'd be nice if we could catch 'em," Joe said. Timothy Carson nodded emphatically.

"Yeah—I just don't want anybody hurt, y'know?" Zane finished what he was doing and nodded to them. "I better get going. Curtain in fifteen. See you guys after."

Carrying his plate, he swept back out of the room the way he had come with his collection of hangers-on still trailing behind him. Carson cast one last worried glance back over his shoulder at 'Hawk and Joe as if to say, *Please catch them this time*, and then they were all gone.

Joe watched them go, then turned back to 'Hawk. "I'll see you later," he said, picking up one last sandwich for the road. "I want to catch this guy tonight."

"You and me both," the mage said, sounding rather more heartfelt than one might have expected. This was because he had looked at Carson's concert schedule and discovered that the next event they were slated to attend was a hardcore goblin-rock fest in Oakland featuring two bands called The Running Sores and The Skullfuckers, both of whom were known for inciting their own mayhem in addition to anything the mysterious saboteur might have planned. He was not looking at all forward to that particular evening.

The concert started twenty minutes late because the security force had determined that it would be safer to make sure everyone with a ticket was admitted before the doors were closed—the likelihood of a riot was higher if fans were turned away than if those already inside were forced to wait a few extra minutes to see their idol. After the doors were finally closed and the last of the fans had been ushered through the banks of detectors and into the hall, 'Wraith joined Ocelot and Joe in patrolling the area. 'Wraith was stationed on the right side of the tiered seating, Joe on the left, and Ocelot down on the floor. Even though their all-access passes were safely hidden away inside their shirts, the passes contained electronic chips that identified them to the venue's regular security force so they weren't hassled for their activities—not that anyone would have noticed with fans packing the aisles and heading back and forth between the concession

stands, the restrooms, the seats of their friends, and their own seats. The only movement that was strictly controlled was that between the tiered seats and the floor seats—no one without a proper ticket was allowed past security onto the floor—and any that got anywhere near the entrance that led to the luxury boxes suspended high above the floor, which were where the VIPs such as recording executives, prominent corpors, and other such luminaries were allowed to watch the concert without having to interact with the rabble. These boxes had their own restrooms, their own bar service, and were built so that their acoustics would be as close to perfect as could be managed by late-2050s tech. The “real” fans scoffed at such amenities, denouncing them as “too sterile” and “not a real concert experience,” but their opinions were for all intents and purposes irrelevant because very few of them would ever have the chance to experience a concert from such a rarefied environment.

Every few minutes the team reported in to each other, announcing their findings over the radio: “Nothing here.” “A couple of guys smoking something smelly in the cheap seats.” “Nothing.” “The buffet table is getting low but nothing else.” T. C. reported no odd activity in the Matrix or the arena security systems, except for a couple of deckers trying to patch into the mixing board in order to make bootleg recordings of the concert. Those she watched, but otherwise left alone. It was certainly beginning to appear that if their quarry was going to make a move, it wasn’t going to be before the concert started.

Winterhawk came back from another astral patrol and leaned back in his chair. Kenny Zane was out again, pacing back and forth in the wings while he waited for his cue. He was alone this time, or at least as alone as a major performer could be fifteen minutes after an opening-night

concert was due to start. His aura suggested that the wait wasn't easy for him—he was keyed up and ready to perform, and that sort of nervous energy did not take well to having to wait. Winterhawk offered Zane an encouraging smile when the young troll looked in his direction, but Zane didn't even seem to notice it. 'Hawk doubted he noticed anything about the real world right now, his mind taken over by setlists and lyrics and chord changes and whatever else musicians thought about before they went onstage.

The mage sighed and got up, preparing to make another physical check of the backstage area and the dressing rooms. As he did, he found his mind wandering back to past events as it often did when he got a chance to think.

Things had returned pretty much to normal over the last three months or so, and he was glad. He thought the entire team was probably glad—there was only so much high-intensity weirdness that one person could take before things really started getting strange. Despite the fact that this was not the sort of job he would have picked had he been given more of a choice, 'Hawk was enjoying their current assignment. Musicians, fans, concert venues, and promoters were a lot easier to deal with than some of the stuff they'd had to contend with in the last few months.

Still, though, it wasn't the sort of thing you forgot about easily, and it tended to pop up at odd times. Like now.

He wondered idly where Gabriel and Kestrel were these days, thinking that they probably would have enjoyed the concert. He wondered when—or if—they would ever return to Seattle. Gabriel had taken off on his own after they had all returned from the metaplanes last time, saying he needed time to mourn his brother and his

friend. Three months after that he had apparently returned to town just long enough to see if Kestrel wanted to accompany him on his travels to see the world, and she had accepted. 'Hawk still remembered the night Ocelot had dropped by his place unannounced to tell him that Kestrel had invited him over to her townhouse and given him the news. Ocelot had listened as she had told him about the invitation, about the fact that she didn't know when (or if) she would be back, about the fact that she too needed some time away to sort out her thoughts about all of this – and then he had wished her luck, told her to have fun, and seen her to the door. It was after that that he came to Winterhawk's place.

At first he hadn't said much, telling 'Hawk he just wanted to go have a beer or two and bullshit the night away. As Ocelot's beer count had increased, though, he had told the mage about Kestrel's visit. "Ah, hell, 'Hawk," he'd said, staring down into the depths of his glass, "We're not even together anymore. Why should I give a damn about where she goes or who she does it with?"

The mage hadn't had an answer – or rather, he hadn't had one he'd thought Ocelot had wanted to hear at the time – so he had remained mostly silent and played the combination of psychologist, father confessor, and commiserating friend until Ocelot had finally had enough of it, pulled out his phone, and looked up one of his favorite call girls. The last 'Hawk had seen of him that night was when the woman showed up and the two of them had left together. The next day, Ocelot had seemed fine and had said nothing about Kestrel, the conversation, or the woman. 'Hawk, for his part, had not mentioned it either.

After that was when things started looking normal again. They had fallen back into the groove of getting jobs, with the only difference between now and

previously being that they didn't take much time off between them these days. It used to be that they would accept a job, get it done, and then take a month or more off to rest, relax, and recuperate before seeking out another. Nowadays it seemed to be almost a compulsion among each of them that they had to stay busy. They had agreed that after this one, though, they were finally going to return to their old ways. 'Hawk was looking forward to a month or two home in England to recharge his batteries, but until this saboteur situation was handled they didn't know when their employment was going to end. *Tonight wouldn't be too soon for me*, he thought a trifle sourly as he finished checking the dressing rooms and headed back for the backstage area.

He could hear the swell of the crowd noise before he even got close. He'd been hearing it peripherally for awhile now—crowds at concerts, particularly those that were starting late and thus giving no indication of when something important might be happening—tended to cheer at anything even slightly out of the ordinary. A technician climbs up a light scaffold—cheering. A roadie comes out to check one of the guitars—more cheering. Someone peeks out from behind one of the curtains in the wings—cheering and thunderous applause. It didn't matter that the artist they'd all come to see was safely secreted away backstage and would not make even a token appearance before the start of the concert—*they* didn't know that. Every stray movement could be a chance to see their hero.

Now, though, the crowd had a different sound, a kind of subtle undercurrent of excitement that hadn't been there before. They knew that something was going to happen soon, and they were ready. There was no opening act, so the next presence they saw on stage would be the one whom they had come to see.



Suddenly the house lights went out and the speakers crackled to life. “*Awright, everybody!*” boomed a loud male voice. “*This is it! Let’s give a warm Seattle welcome to – Kenny...ZANE!!*”

The crowd went wild, their screams and cheers drowning out the speakers as the stage lights came on and Zane and his band poured out through the wings and ran onstage, snapping up their instruments and launching immediately into a loud, driving anthem that even Winterhawk, who didn’t listen to much popular music, recognized: *Not In My World*, the first breakout hit from the *Monster* album.

“Hawk, anything happening back there?” It was Ocelot.

“Not a thing. It just got quite a bit quieter here. What about out front?”

“Had to body-block a few guys trying to storm the stage past me, but everything looks good here so far. ‘Wraith?’

“Fine here.”

“Joe?”

“No problems. Everybody’s into the music.”

“T. C.?”

“Nothing yet.”

“I’ll take another look ‘round astrally and report anything I see,” ‘Hawk said. “Expect me in ten minutes or so.”

“Got it.”

Winterhawk was about to settle back into his chair, ignoring the various technicians, caterers, and others, when he saw Timothy Carson approaching. As usual, the manager looked nervous. “You guys seen anything yet? Anything at all?”

‘Hawk shook his head. “Nothing yet, Mr. Carson. Please – calm down. Between the security you’ve already

got here and the five of us, it's going to be difficult to manage anything without being seen."

Carson took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Yeah," he said, his voice full of reluctance. "I know. It's just—"

The mage patted his shoulder. "I know," he said, keeping his voice calm and soothing. "Why don't you go have a drink and try to enjoy the show. As I said before, we've got it under control. If you'll excuse me, I need to go check the astral again."

The manager nodded, at least somewhat mollified by 'Hawk's words. "Okay. Thanks. Let me know if you find anything."

"I promise." Winterhawk didn't make a 'shoo' motion, but that was only by an effort of will. He did not particularly like Timothy Carson personally—the man had the air of a nervous little dog who could be stirred into a frenzy by even a small amount of tension—but whether 'Hawk liked him or not was irrelevant. He was their employer and thus they had an obligation to at least try to assuage some of his nervous-dog worries. It wasn't as if he didn't have cause for them, after all.

They had already, along with the venue's security force and some off-duty Lone Star cops from the bomb squad, been over the entire arena looking for anything that someone might have planted previously, particularly explosives. They had found nothing. If anything was going to happen, it wasn't going to be something that had already been set up. That meant that if there was anything planned for tonight, the perpetrators and/or their agents were inside the building somewhere. That was what Winterhawk was looking for: inappropriate emotions, anyone who was where they shouldn't be, or anything else that looked suspicious in that regard. He sat down,

leaned back, and separated his astral body from his physical once again.

As he floated out over the crowd he stopped momentarily in sheer amazement. He often went to clubs that catered specifically to mages, places where more emphasis was placed on the astral component of the performance than the visual, so he was used to what the collective aura of a charged-up crowd looked like. This crowd, however, put anything he had ever seen before to shame. The sheer number of people and the levels of their emotions combined to create a staggeringly beautiful nimbus of shifting colors that extended out above the crowd to a distance of several meters. Accompanied by the glowing, multi-hued auras of the individual fans – everything from the bright yellows of happy excitement to the reds of passion to the blues of fan loyalty to the greens and purples of altered consciousness – the very air pulsated with the sound of the music and the power of the colorful display. It was a funny thing about the astral effects of music: a terrible musician who put serious heart into his music could produce a better show than a master musician who was jaded by success and bored with his art. When you combined a great musician like Kenny Zane with the kind of emotional commitment that the troll put into his music, the show could really light up the astral.

Winterhawk stared at it, entranced, for several moments, then forced himself to focus and move on. *You're not here to watch the bloody show*, he told himself sternly. *Don't get distracted.*

He didn't spend much time in the main arena itself – as beautiful as it was, it would be impossible for him to pick out any individual auras from the midst of the crowd without a great deal more concentration than he had time to spare right now. The place held 30,000 people and was

stuffed to the rafters; there was no way he could pause to examine even a tenth of the auras. Besides, that was where Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith came in. With their advanced low-light surveillance gear, they'd be able to get a pretty good picture of what was going on out there. Instead, Winterhawk concentrated once again on the fringe areas.

He had been through the dressing rooms and the office hallways enough times that day that he was getting to be quite familiar with them—this allowed him to get through them fairly quickly and get to the part where he expected the trouble would be if there was any: the rigging and scaffolding above the stage. A slower sweep of that area, though, revealed nothing more than the lighting techs at their posts, manning the boards that controlled the shows highly complex light, laser, and holographic displays. Their auras were calm and a little excited—'Hawk knew that everyone was more than a bit nervous tonight, not only because of the possibility of sabotage but also because this was the kick-off show of the tour and was therefore the first time a lot of these effects had been seen by the public. So far everything seemed to be going as smoothly as could be expected. He drifted back to his body, got up, and headed over to the wings where Carson and some of the others were watching from out of sight. "Nothing on the astral," he murmured into his throat-mike. "I'll check again in ten."

"Maybe it's just not gonna happen tonight," Ocelot said.

It was beginning to look like he might be right. Zane went through song after song, whipping the fans into a fervor with his driving guitar-playing, his passionate voice, and the sheer love of what he was doing. He was not afraid of his fans, often moving to the edge of the stage to reach down and clasp a hand here or there

despite the event security force's attempts to dissuade him. Zane liked fans up right next to the stage—it made him feel more connected to his audience.

The team had access to the setlist, which showed the order in which the night's songs would be played. When Zane had neared the end of the second-to-last song before the fifteen-minute intermission, Ocelot opened the connection again. "Intermission soon," he said.

"Already getting into position," Joe returned quickly.

"Yes," 'Wraith said. The plan was they would make their patrolling more active during the intermission because a lot more people would be moving around, so there was a greater chance that someone could slip away unnoticed. Very few fans wanted to miss even a moment of the concert itself, so the concession venues would be packed shortly.

"Hawk?" Ocelot called.

"Ready to start another astral patrol," the mage said. "I'll—"

"Wait." It was T. C.'s voice that cut Winterhawk off.

"What?" Ocelot sounded tense.

"Something's happening. Hang on—" There was silence for several seconds, and then the decker's voice came back on. "Whatever it is, I think it's about to happen, so look sharp. Something just tried to shut down all the lights in the place."

"Did you stop them?" Joe asked.

"Trace?" 'Wraith added.

"I'm working on the trace," T. C. said. "Not only did I stop them, but I made them think they've succeeded. I can't detect any communication between that location and anyone where you are, so it was probably a prearranged thing. I'll fool 'em as long as I can."

The team was already in action. Ocelot, 'Wraith, and Joe began scanning the area, moving around to take in the

most territory. 'Wraith contacted the event security command post and informed them of a possible intruder. Silently and invisibly to the oblivious fans, the machine moved into action.

Backstage, Winterhawk tapped Carson on the arm. "I think something's up," he murmured. "Look sharp, and alert security if you see anyone you don't recognize. Excuse me." Before Carson could answer he hurried off to his chair and slipped into the astral plane again.

His patrol was faster this time, less careful the first time through so he could examine a larger area. Still, it didn't take him long to spot something out of the ordinary that hadn't been there before. High above the backstage area, above the scaffolding and the catwalks, something was floating downward. Something that glowed brightly on the astral plane.

Winterhawk watched it for a moment. It continued to drift downward, heading not for the stage or the arena area itself, but remaining in the backstage area. Out of the corner of his vision, the mage could see the glowing form of Timothy Carson hurrying away and shutting himself up inside one of the dressing rooms. *Bloody coward*, he thought contemptuously. He wasn't going to spare him another thought until he realized that the glowing form was moving toward the same dressing rooms. *Damn damn damn*. He flung his astral form back into his body, keying his throat-mike as the jolt was barely wearing off. "It's backstage," he called. "Something's back here. It's going after Carson." He was already hurrying in that direction.

The team out front didn't waste time with niceties. Ocelot, who was already near the stage, yanked out his grapple gun and fired it upward—the thin line shot out and wrapped around some of the lighting rigging, drawing him up over the crowd, where he swung on to the stage. Zane glanced at him, immediately saw who it

was, and went on playing as if nothing was happening. He had already been briefed to remain calm if odd things started to happen, because the last thing they needed was a panicked crowd causing a stampede to the doors. He likewise continued to play, drawing out the bridge in the last song before the intermission, as 'Wraith, moving at lightning speed, vaulted up onto the side of the stage and flashed past, and, after a few seconds, Joe came in from the other side and disappeared into the wings.

Ocelot and 'Wraith got there at roughly the same time, only a few seconds after getting Winterhawk's call. They found the mage standing outside the door to Zane's dressing room. "Locked," he said grimly.

'Wraith was about to pull out his lockpick kit and Ocelot was preparing to make a run at the door when Joe arrived. "Let me," he called. The others moved quickly moved out of his way and, with his massive bulk, he made short work of the door.

What they saw inside stopped them in their tracks.

The dressing room was large, well-appointed, and dimly lit. On the far side, pressed into a corner as if trying to push himself through it, was Timothy Carson. On his face was a look of abject panic. It was not the sight of him, though, that had shocked the runners. It was what was standing in front of him.

It was a woman—an elf, obviously, from the delicate, pointed ear-tips that stuck up from her long, flaxen-blond hair. Her back was to them, but as the door was broken down she spun half around to face the new threat. Her face was beautiful, elegant and strong but somehow fragile too, like something that didn't quite belong in this world. Her eyes were the bright blue of a summer sky. She was naked, but she did not seem to notice or care. She also did not seem to care that there were now three assorted weapons pointed at her.

"What the hell—?" Ocelot demanded.

Winterhawk and 'Wraith seemed equally unsure of exactly what was happening.

Joe, on the other hand, stared at the woman with wide eyes. "You're—Twyla Ellindel," he gasped. "You're dead!"

She smiled, revealing gleaming white, wickedly pointed fangs, although her expression was not correspondingly wicked—in fact, her eyes were rather sad. "Yes," she said softly.

"Shoot her!" Carson screamed, scrabbling back farther into the corner, although that wasn't technically possible. "She tried to kill me! She's behind all the sabotage!"



## 5.

Kestrel looked on in horror as Gabriel lay gasping on the bed. His eyes had opened again only seconds after he had seemed to pass out, and the look in them was one of terror. He did not seem to even know she was there, even though the mental call for her had not ceased. “Gabriel,” she called again, putting her hand on his forehead and pushing his damp hair back, “please tell me what’s wrong. I can’t help you if you won’t tell me.”

*I’m not sure I can help you if you do tell me,* a little voice said in her head. If it wasn’t a nightmare—and she was becoming increasingly sure that it wasn’t, or he would have awakened by now—then what *was* it? Was he ill? She didn’t think dragons even got ill, and if they did, then she couldn’t exactly call for the chalet’s resident physician. “Hello, doc? I’ve got a sick dragon up here...do you make house calls?” hardly seemed like a prudent approach.

She got up and went swiftly to the bathroom, where she filled a glass with water and snatched up a washcloth from the towel rack. Returning to Gabriel’s bedside, she sat down on the edge of the bed, dipped the cloth in the glass, and used it to gently mop the sweat from his face. Her thermographic vision showed that he was radiating far more heat than he should be, which worried her. Swiftly her mind went over the possibilities of what could be wrong, immediately discarding each one almost as soon as it had made an appearance. Was he having a reaction to something he’d eaten? Was he allergic to something around here? Had someone figured out who and what he was and made an attempt on his life? None of them seemed plausible, and she knew that indulging in speculation wouldn’t do either of them any good. She mopped at his forehead again, then re-wet the washcloth and began on his chest, pausing a moment as the cloth

passed over the small scar on his side from that *thing's* knife during the aborted sacrifice attempt so many months ago. That scar, unlike his other injuries, had never healed. "Please..." she whispered, her tone beginning to sound a little desperate. "Please tell me...I don't know what to do for you...You're scaring me..."

He looked up at her, trembling, visibly trying to fight something. "J...Juliana..." His voice had almost no volume behind it.

Her gaze locked in on his eyes; she took his closest hand in both of hers and squeezed gently. "I'm here, Gabriel. I'm right here. What is it? What can I do?"

"You...can't..." he whispered. "...please...must...call..." His words were slow, spaced as if he had to shore up his hold on something before he could risk speaking.

Her grip on his hand tightened. "Call? Call who? Do you want me to call a doctor?"

His head moved back and forth once. He took a deep, shuddering breath, swallowed, and gathered his strength again. "No...no...call...Ne...Neferet..." He gasped, stiffening as some sort of spasm rocked his body. "...Please..."

She held his hand until the spasm passed. "Neferet? Gabriel, who's that? I don't know anyone named Neferet. You'll have to help me out here."

For a moment he didn't answer, and Kestrel feared that he had passed out again. Then he opened his eyes, his fever-bright gaze fixing on her face. When he spoke again, his voice was in her mind. "*Neferet...she is...the one I spoke of...I...visited her for a time...*"

It only took Kestrel a few seconds to realize what he meant. She remembered back to the time when he had returned to her after his three-month absence; one of the things he had told her was that he had spent some time visiting a friend he had met while mourning his mentor

Telanwyr and his brother Stefan—an older female dragon who had taken him in and helped him work through his grief. He had never told Kestrel her name, though. “Neferet...Gabriel, is she the one you stayed with after Stefan—”

He nodded wearily. *“Please...call her...”* He began reciting a series of numbers and took Kestrel a minute to realize he was giving her an LTG code. She fumbled for her pocket secretary and quickly captured the number.

“You—just want me to call her? Will she even listen to me?” She was already pulling her small portable phone from her jeans pocket.

Gabriel didn’t answer. His eyes were closed again, his body trembling, fresh beads of sweat replacing the ones Kestrel had mopped away. That did it. She couldn’t wait any longer. She pulled up the covers that he had shoved off and entered the number into the phone. Some perverse voice in the back of her mind wondered if dragons used answering machines, and hoped that if they did, this particular one did not. Her hand shook as she held the phone to her ear and listened to the connection being made. She glanced over at Gabriel, who had quieted for the moment. His eyes twitched under his closed eyelids.

The phone was answered after the second ring, a fact which so surprised Kestrel that she almost didn’t notice it. There was no video. A deep male voice spoke a single word: “Yes?”

This threw Kestrel off her game—she had been expecting a woman. Had she, in her nervousness, punched in the wrong number? “Uh...” She cast about for words. “Uh...May I speak to...Neferet, please?”

“The lady is occupied,” the deep voice informed her. “You may give me a message to carry to her if you wish.”

Uh oh. She took a deep breath, trying to keep her voice steady. “No...please...I need to talk to her now. Tell

her it's about Gabriel. He's in trouble. He needs her help. Can you please—"

Immediately the deep male tones were replaced by another voice. "Who is this?" This voice was female; it too was deep, but had more of a mellifluous quality to it.

Kestrel did not have much experience with dragon etiquette—Gabriel had no reason to observe it with his human friends, and the only other dragon she had met, Stefan, had had other things on his mind at the time. She decided to go for the direct approach. "Neferet?"

"Please identify yourself." The voice was dead even, with no trace of warmth. "And tell me where you got this number."

"I—" Kestrel swallowed hard. "Please. My name is Kestrel...I'm a friend of Gabriel's. He gave me the number. He's asked me to call Neferet...he says she can help him. I'm worried about him. I've never seen him like this before. I—"

"Calm yourself, child." The voice cut her off in mid-sentence, but it had changed tone again, softening somewhat. "I am Neferet. Tell me what is wrong."

Kestrel paused, drawing a deep breath and gathering her thoughts before she began. Then, watching Gabriel as she spoke, she told Neferet what had occurred. By the time she finished, her voice was shaking. If it had been a team member—a human or metahuman—who had been in this situation, Kestrel would have felt much more confident about dealing with it. This, though, only served to point up just how much she didn't know about Gabriel.

The woman listened silently to Kestrel's report. At its conclusion, she remained silent a few moments longer, then said, "I do not know what could cause such an episode. Without examining him, I could not begin to diagnose the problem."

Kestrel brushed Gabriel's hair from his forehead again. "I don't know how soon we can get there...I'm not even sure he can travel like this. He said before that you were in CalFree..."

"And you are far away," Neferet finished. "If you will permit me, I will send a servant—a spirit—to you, and it can attempt to aid you. If nothing else it can relay information to me."

Kestrel nodded, then realized that Neferet could not see the gesture. "Yes...please. Thank you. Anything." Anything or anyone who could make sense of Gabriel's strange attack was more than welcome to make an appearance.

"Very well," the woman's voice intoned. "It will take a few moments for the spirit to locate you. When it arrives, it will know what to do. If more is needed it will contact me."

"Thank you," Kestrel said again, a small measure of relief beginning to grow inside her.

"The child has been through much of late." Neferet's voice was soft. Then, nothing, as the connection was broken.

Kestrel turned back to Gabriel, taking his hand again. "I called her, Gabriel. She's sending somebody to help. Just hang on. Everything'll be fine..."

He opened his eyes and gave her what was clearly supposed to be an encouraging look, but it was cut short by another tremor. His hand tightened on hers.

She almost didn't notice the dark form that detached itself from the shadows on the far side of the room and stood in the middle of the floor at the foot of the bed. When she did, she started slightly, ready to leap up into a defensive position between it and Gabriel.

"I am sent by the Lady Neferet," the form said. Kestrel recognized the voice as the deep male one that had

answered the phone. As it moved into the moonlight, she could see that it had manifested in the form of a tall, well-built black man dressed in simple silk robes. The spirit's head was bald, its eyes twin pools that seemed to glow with an inner light. "I am Unekei."

Gabriel seemed to recognize the spirit. Despite his difficulty, he nodded politely to it and managed a half-smile. "It is...good...to see you again...Unekei..."

Unekei inclined his head and moved over to the opposite side of the bed from Kestrel. Without further preliminaries, he sat down and raised his hand, moving it over Gabriel's head a few centimeters above him. Gabriel held his breath and tried to remain still, but every few seconds the tremors struck again. Kestrel wondered if there was anything she could do, finally concluding that her best course of action was to simply remain where she was, providing support and silent comfort as the spirit did his work.

It was several minutes before anything definitive happened. Unekei's expression was utterly neutral, except for his slightly glowing eyes. He continued to move his hand methodically above Gabriel, occasionally nodding to himself and murmuring something under his breath. Kestrel divided her attention between watching Gabriel and sneaking glances at the spirit as he worked. She had never seen a spirit who looked so...*real*...before. If she had not known otherwise, she would have believed Unekei to be as human as she was. *Then again, if I didn't know better, I'd think Gabriel was as human as I am,* she thought a bit wryly. If there was one thing to be believed about the Sixth World, it was that nothing could be taken at face value.

Suddenly Unekei disappeared. Kestrel's startled gaze came up to the place where the spirit had been, her hand tightening reflexively on Gabriel's. He had closed his eyes

and quieted again, but at the gesture he looked up at her. "Shh..." she whispered. "Everything's fine." *I think.*

Almost five minutes later Uneke reappeared. "I have spoken with the Lady Neferet," he said formally, "and reported what I have found. She is attending to the situation now."

"What—what did you tell her?" Kestrel asked, a little nervously. "What's wrong with him? Will he be all right?"

Uneke turned his strange glowing eyes on her. "He was attacked by an astral influence of unknown origin. His symptoms resulted from his subconscious mind's attempt to repel the attack. He will be well when the Lady has dealt with the cause of the influence."

Kestrel's eyes widened a bit. An astral influence of unknown origin? That sounded suitably frightening—especially when one considered that it was strong enough to affect something as powerful as a Great Dragon. "But...you don't know what this...influence is?"

Uneke inclined his head. "I have never seen such an attack. The Lady was unsure of its origin as well, but she feels that she has sufficient resources to counter it."

Kestrel looked down at Gabriel again. It was hard to tell, but it seemed that his shaking had lessened somewhat, and his eyes had ceased their darting about behind his closed lids. "She's fighting it? Now?"

Again the spirit nodded. "She is on the astral plane as we speak. If you will give me leave, I will return to her. When the threat has been neutralized, he will be tired, but well." His voice, while not exactly warm, was oddly comforting.

"Thank you." Her tone was soft and very heartfelt. "Thank you for all you've done—and please thank the Lady for us too. I don't know what I'd have done—"

"The Lady has great fondness for this young one." Uneke rose in a graceful motion and stepped back.

"Farewell." He faded back into the shadows and was gone.

Kestrel turned back to her erstwhile patient, putting her hand on his forehead. It seemed, though again she couldn't tell for sure, that his fever was going down. She reclaimed the glass of water and the washcloth from the nightstand, using them to give his face a soothing rubdown. Then she pulled the covers up, tucked them around him, and smiled what she hoped was a reassuring smile. "Everything will be okay," she told him. "You just rest."

Gabriel, for his part, did not answer.

Kestrel realized that she did not want to leave him. What if he had another episode? What if this — *thing* — this influence — on the astral plane decided to go after him again? She couldn't do much, but at least she could call for help. Shrugging, she tossed her phone and pocket secretary on the nightstand, kicked off her shoes, and curled up next to him in the big bed. For once there was no thought of what might have been, only of deep concern for her dear friend. Whatever this was that was haunting his mind, she wasn't going to let him face it alone.

The light of the sunrise shining in through the room's massive window awoke Kestrel slowly. As her consciousness climbed up through the peaceful fog of sleep, she became aware that she was lying next to someone, her arm draped across him in easy familiarity. For a moment she thought it was Jean-Paul, but then memory of the previous night flooded back to her. Quickly moving her arm, she propped herself up and looked at Gabriel as he slept. She smiled; if she hadn't been here last night, she wouldn't have believed that he had gone through the horrific episode. He slept quietly



now, his chest rising and falling with his gentle breathing, his face relaxed. As if he had suddenly become aware that someone was watching him, he opened his eyes. When he saw her, his expression brightened. "Good morning," he said softly.

"Good morning," Kestrel realized that it must look a bit strange for her to be sleeping next to him, still wearing the clothes she had worn the previous day, but she didn't care. "How are you feeling?"

He took a deep breath. "Much better." A pause, and then: "Thanks to you. I hope I didn't disrupt your evening too badly."

*How very like him to be worried about my evening.* "I'm just glad I could help. Gabriel...what *was* that? What happened?" *And could it happen again?* The question touched her mind, but she did not give it voice.

His eyes grew troubled as he shook his head. "I don't know, and that disturbs me. I've never experienced anything like that. In truth I don't remember much of what happened—only that I knew I had to fight it, and that it was somehow—wrong." He sighed. "I don't know what caused it, which means I don't know whether it will happen again...or what might trigger it."

Kestrel gripped his arm, trying to be comforting even though his words frightened her. "Your friend—Neferet—she sent a spirit to help—"

"Uneki," Gabriel said, nodding. "He is very old and very wise, and has been in her service since before the Sleep."

"He...said that she told him it was—" she paused to make sure she got the words exactly right, in case the phrasing was important—"—an astral influence of unknown origin. He said neither he nor Neferet had ever seen anything like it, but that she could fight it."

Again Gabriel nodded. "She must have done so successfully, since I can find no trace of it now. I feel a bit tired, but otherwise well." He sat up in bed, testing his balance. When he apparently found it unaffected, he rose the rest of the way, going over to the window to look out at the day. "I must thank her, and Uneke as well, for their aid. I will introduce you to her if you like. She does not as a rule care for humans, but I think she will make an exception for such a dear friend of mine."

Kestrel watched his silhouette, backlit against the brilliance of the sun rising over the Alps, and fought back a little twinge of desire. "She seems very fond of you," she said at last, struggling for a neutral topic.

He turned back around to face her. "She is a good friend. I'll always be grateful for her help and counsel after Stefan died." He smiled a bit wryly. "I think she has decided I need a mother, and that she is the best candidate to fill that role in the absence of my true mother."

Kestrel chuckled. "Well, you *are* just a kid, aren't you?" She was just happy to see that he seemed to have suffered no ill effects from last night's ordeal. She was also, she realized, acutely aware of his state of undress and just how unchildlike he looked right now. "Uh...tell you what. Why don't I clear out of here and go back to my room—I could use a shower and a change of clothes. We can still do breakfast if you want..."

Gabriel nodded, as usual oblivious to the effect he was having on her. When he looked at her again, though, his expression was somewhat troubled. "If you don't mind, I think I'd like to leave today. Whatever that episode was, I don't think it was random. I'd like to be a bit closer to home, where I can deal with it more easily if it happens again—and more importantly, try to figure out what caused it."

Kestrel stopped midway to the door. "You want to go back? You mean to Seattle?"

"No." Gabriel shook his head. "I mean *home*. My lair." He paused a moment and looked at her gently. "You don't have to come along if you don't want to. It will probably be quite boring for you while I try to determine what happened. You could —"

"Try to keep me away," Kestrel cut him off, grinning. She shrugged. "Maybe I can make myself useful — you know, toting eye of newt or something."

His answering smile — amused, innocent, beautiful — was enough to make her decide that quickly leaving the room was the best thing she could do right now. *Shower. Yeah. That sounds like a really good idea. Cold shower.*

Alone in his room after Kestrel left, Gabriel continued to stand near the window, but his mind was far away from the breathtaking scene outside. He sighed, pressing his palms against the cool glass. His expression was no longer amused.

It was fearful.

"No..." he whispered to himself.

He did not know what had caused the attack and the nightmare visions from last night. He did not know, but he had his suspicions.

And if his suspicions were correct, he feared very much that the nightmares were not over. Not for any of them.

## 6.

None of the runners moved, although all four of them kept a very close eye on the elven woman who stood before them.

"Is that true?" Winterhawk asked her. "*Are* you behind the attacks?" Looking into her eyes, he got the impression of something not quite right—an odd light shining behind the beautiful sky blue.

"Of *course* she is!" yelled Carson. "Shoot, damn you! Don't you know how fast her kind can *move*?"

"What the hell is going on here?" Ocelot demanded again.

"Your troll friend is right," the woman said. "*I am* Twyla Ellindel."

"But—" Winterhawk ventured, "Twyla Ellindel died two years ago when the car she was driving plunged over a cliff and exploded. The body was—"

"—destroyed in the explosion," the woman finished.

"So—that wasn't you in the car," Joe said.

"No." She glanced at Carson, then back at the runners. "I was thrown free of the car. I was found by some people, near death—I would have died had they not been—" she paused "—as I am now. They made me as I am to save my life. It would not have been my choice, but I knew that once it happened, I could not return to my old life. I dropped out of sight, prepared to remain in hiding until it was safe to venture out again."

Carson had once again found his voice. "Why are you standing here *talking* to her?" he cried. "Shoot her, damn it!"

"We're not planning to let her hurt you, Mr. Carson," Winterhawk said a little coolly. "No harm in allowing her to have her say."

"So why the sabotage?" 'Wraith asked. "Why not remain in hiding?"

Before Twyla Ellindel could answer, Timothy Carson screamed "NO!!!" Plunging his hand into his pocket, he pulled out a small handgun and aimed it at the elf—

—or tried to. His hand had barely made it out of his pocket before Ocelot and 'Wraith moved simultaneously. As Joe and Winterhawk continued to keep Twyla covered, Ocelot grabbed Carson's wrist and gripped it hard until he dropped the gun. The manager pounded ineffectually at Ocelot with his fists, letting loose with a stream of obscenities that gradually dissolved into angry gibberish. Ocelot and 'Wraith dragged him out of the corner and kept hold of him.

"Well?" Winterhawk asked the elf woman. "I think we'd all like to hear the answer to our friend's question."

"Why did I come out of hiding?" Her face twisted into a mask of rage before returning once again to normal. She made a contemptuous head movement toward Carson. "Because of *this* swine."

"Explain," 'Wraith said, as Carson wriggled in his and Ocelot's grip.

Twyla bared her fangs at Carson, who shrank back. "He is a thief and a swindler. After I died, my money was intended to go to my mother and my sister. It was in my will. But somehow this—this piece of garbage managed to challenge the will, claiming that I owed him money that was never owed. My mother and my sister got nothing, while *he* stole my money!"

"You *bitch!*" Carson screamed. It was hard to tell who was more unhinged at this point—him or Twyla. "I *made* you! Without me you were *nothing!* Just some two-bit dandelion eater with a pretty voice and a way with the crowds! Do you know how many acts like that go *nowhere?* Without me, you'd still have been back in the

Tir, smelling the flowers and hugging the trees! You ungrateful *bitch!*" He made a lunge for her but was pulled up short by Ocelot and 'Wraith.

Winterhawk was looking coolly back and forth between the two of them. His gaze settled on Twyla. "So you wanted revenge against Mr. Carson here? Was it necessary to harm innocents to get it? Couldn't you have simply faced him?"

Twyla closed her eyes for a moment and bowed her head. "I never meant for those children to be hurt. I didn't want anyone to be hurt. Only him. Only him..." Tears sprang to her eyes and she began to sob.

The runners exchanged glances, keeping their eyes on their two charges. Twyla had covered her face with her hands and was crying softly, while Carson looked like he might burst a blood vessel. "You're working for me!" he cried. "I'm paying you, damn it! I order you to kill her!"

Ocelot smiled rather nastily. "Sorry, asshole. I think you're gonna get your money back."

"It might be the only money you *have* by the time this is over," Winterhawk added.

"I wonder if he's swindling any of his other acts," Joe mused, glancing toward the hallway leading to the stage. "Somebody should check."

"Let me just take a quick look at something," Winterhawk said. "I'll be back." He sat down against the wall and slumped as his astral body slipped free. In a few moments he was back. "It looks like Miss Ellindel is telling the truth," he said. "She's no mage, and there's no deceit in her aura. Mr. Carson, on the other hand, seems to be nothing *but* deceit—if you don't count rage and desire to cover his own sorry arse." His voice dripped with contempt.

Ocelot looked back and forth between them. The intermission had started and people were beginning to

filter back toward the backstage area. "So what do we do with 'em?" he asked.

"Think we've got our culprit," 'Wraith said. He wasn't looking at Twyla, but at Carson.

Twyla lowered her hands and looked at them as if hardly daring to hope. "You aren't going to —?"

"I suspect we'll initiate a full-scale investigation into Mr. Carson's financial dealings," Winterhawk said. "I have a strong feeling we'll find more dodgy dealings than just your situation. Will that satisfy you?"

"Will my mother and sister get their money?"

"I don't know at this point," the mage said. "But I think once they start investigating, there'll be quite a lot of money changing hands. There's a good chance."

She bowed her head. "That's all I can ask. I don't want publicity. I want to live quietly, with the friends I've made."

"No more sabotage?" Joe asked.

She shook her head. "It all got out of hand," she whispered. "No one else was meant to be hurt..."

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. They were getting closer.

The runners looked at each other. They all nodded. "Go," Winterhawk said to her. "Hurry."

She looked at them all for a moment, her eyes clear, her face full of the beauty that used to melt fans' hearts when she appeared on stage. "Thank you," she whispered, and then she turned to mist and was gone, out through one of the air vents.

"You — let her go?" Timothy Carson spluttered, barely able to control his anger enough to form words. "I'll *destroy* you for this. I'll see that you never work again! I'll —"

"Shove a sock in it," Ocelot said, tossing him back, none too gently, into his corner.

Several event security guards came hurrying into the room, followed by Kenny Zane and a few of his entourage. "What's going on?"

"I think you'll find that this man is responsible for your problems," Winterhawk said, pointing at Carson. "Now, if you'll excuse us, I think we'd like to go enjoy the second half of the show."

"Not bad," Ocelot said, taking another long drink of his beer. "Not bad at all."

The others nodded. They were sitting in the back of one of their favorite haunts, the Glass Spider, enjoying a last round together before they all set off for a much-needed rest and relaxation break. "Shame about old Timothy," Winterhawk said, not sounding like he thought it was a shame at all.

Upon investigation into Timothy Carson's financial records, it had been discovered that he had been siphoning money from his acts for years through various shady bookkeeping methods employed by himself and the decker he retained to keep track of his finances. Some of the worst offenses had been committed against Kenny Zane, who had lost a good thirty percent of his rightful earnings due to Carson's underhanded dealings. Fortunately Carson had squirrelled the money away in accounts that were subsequently traced and returned to their rightful owners, including Twyla Ellindel's mother and sister. They didn't get everything that was due them, but it was enough that they could live comfortably for the rest of their days.

No one had believed Carson's story, of course, about Twyla Ellindel's having been turned into a vampire. After his web of lies had begun to unravel, Carson did too. He was now awaiting trial, but it would be as long as several



months before he might have to appear because he was currently under a psychiatrist's care.

"Couldn't have happened to a nicer guy," Ocelot said. He took another sip. "You guys headin' out tomorrow?"

'Hawk nodded. "Heading home. You-know-who has probably forgotten what I look like."

Joe grinned. "It'll be good to relax for awhile."

"Indeed," 'Wraith agreed. He raised his glass. "To safe journeys – and absent friends."

The others raised their own glasses, sobering slightly. "Absent friends," Winterhawk repeated softly.

Joe wasn't about to let the mood sober. "I'll see you guys in a few months," he said, grinning again. "In the meantime, have fun but don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Nothing to worry about," 'Wraith said.

## 7.

*Wouldn't you know it*, Alastair Stone thought ironically as he settled into his seat for the flight home. *I've only seen one bloody trid show since the last time I flew home, and of course that has to be the one that's showing on the plane.*

In truth, despite this thought, the realization in question did little or nothing to dim Stone's mostly pleasant mood. It was a momentary diversion, just a tiny glitch in what was otherwise shaping up to be quite a nice flight. As usual he was in first class, which meant that the seats were comfortable, the food and drink were good, the service was attentive and polite, and as long as he didn't mind using the little personal trid unit built into the back of the seat instead of the impressive setup at the front of the small section, he had his choice of more than a dozen trideo shows (along with trideo games, up-to-the-second stock quotes, cellular vidphone capability, and the opportunity to buy any of an impressive collection of overpriced gewgaws) with which to claim his interest during the several hours it would take to get to Heathrow. He wasn't really interested, though. Right now, all he wanted to do was sit back and have some peace and quiet, a chance to gather his thoughts; later on, he planned on digging out one of the two real books he had purchased at one of his favorite antique bookstores in Seattle awhile ago and saved for just this occasion. People always looked at him funny when he pulled them out, but he didn't care. When he was in a hurry, he used a chip reader like everybody else. When he wanted to savor a book, he preferred the feel of good old-fashioned paper.

His ticket had been in the name of Alastair Stone. He smiled to himself, thinking of how glad he would be to go back to *being* Dr. Alastair Stone for awhile, instead of Winterhawk. That last run had been interesting—it was a

satisfying feeling to know that once again he and his teammates had solved a puzzle and struck a small blow for justice. It sounded trite, but the older he got, the more he thought about things like that. It always made him feel a little better to know that, in their own almost infinitesimal way, they had done something to make the world a better place. Even if it was only for one person at a time. Still, though, it was also nice to go home and put it away for awhile.

Stone sighed, leaning back. He hadn't always been like that. When he had first started in the shadowrunning business, he had been cockier, more confident not only that his magical abilities could deal with any eventuality, but that they *should*. He was still a smartass and would probably be a smartass until his dying day, but even he winced a bit when he remembered some of the things he had said and done in his youth. His sense of morality had been considerably more fluid back then.

As the flight attendant droned on with her speech that Stone had heard a hundred times before and had long since tuned out like any other seasoned traveler, he reflected on when, precisely, the change had taken place. It had been a gradual thing, he knew, but it must have started somewhere. He suspected it was probably that first go-round with Harlequin. *God, that seems a long time ago*, he thought, shaking his head in wonder. Images flashed across his mind's eye: the elf in question, his face painted with clown markings; Darke, or Oscuro, or whatever he was calling himself, malevolent and shadowy; Thayla, with her beautiful face and her beautiful song; then later on, just when he thought they had put the whole thing behind them, the young dragon Gabriel, his friend Kestrel, his brother Stefan...the wind-whipped chasm where the final battle had taken place...the screams...

Stone shook his head rather violently, startling the impeccably-clad elven businesswoman in the next seat. "Sorry," he said, infusing just the right amount of charming British self-effacement into his tone. "These flights always give me a bit of a headache." The woman gave him a sympathetic 'think nothing of it' smile and returned to her work.

Stone sighed and leaned back into the comforting embrace of the seat. The plane was taxiing now and would take off any moment. It would take about seven hours to get to Heathrow—he could have gotten there a lot faster (more like two hours) if he had chosen to take the semiballistic, but he did not like to do that unless there was some emergency requiring his immediate presence. Like all magically active individuals, Stone found being outside the Earth's biosphere to be a profoundly disturbing experience, one that always left him feeling vaguely sick for several hours after landing even though he acted like a good little mundane and didn't attempt any sort of magical activity. That was even part of the announcement on those flights—'*We must remind anyone who is magically active not to perform any activities of a magical nature during the flight, and please deactivate all magical devices.*' One of the few times Stone had flown on such a craft, he had jokingly asked the flight attendant why they didn't have a '*No Magic*' sign to light up next to the '*No Smoking*' and '*Fasten Seat Belts.*' signs. He didn't think she had been amused. He hadn't been amused either, by the time they had landed. It hadn't made it any better that he had once seen a young mage who had foolishly attempted to perceive astrally during a semiballistic flight and promptly been driven mad by whatever it was he saw—or did not see. That had been several years ago, but the image had never fully left Stone's mind. He wondered occasionally (usually when

he was flying somewhere) how the young man was doing, and suspected he didn't want to know.

The plane continued to climb until it finally reached its cruising altitude and leveled off. After a few more moments, the seat belt sign went off and normal airline life resumed. Stone tilted his seat back (you didn't have to worry about disturbing your neighbors with your seat in first class, since the rows were wide enough apart to accommodate the seats' transformation into almost-comfortable beds at a very nearly full-horizontal position) and closed his eyes, looking forward to some nice, uninterrupted rest for a couple of hours.

"Sir?"

Stone's consciousness returned to him slowly; someone was shaking him, obviously trying to be gentle about it. "Mm?" He tried burrowing into the seat and ignoring the intrusion, but it wasn't going away. "What is it?"

"I'm terribly sorry to disturb you, sir, but I must ask you to return your seat to the upright position and fasten your seat belt. We'll be starting our descent in just a few moments."

Stone's eyes flew open and immediately took in the flight attendant, the other passengers, and the time displayed on the trid unit in the back of the seat in front of him. The clock read 19:20, local time: a little more than six and a half hours since they had taken off. Around him, all the other seats were already upright. "Bloody hell..." he murmured to himself. He looked up at the attendant as he proceeded to do as she had requested. "Sorry...guess I must have been more tired than I thought I was."

"That's quite all right, sir. I hope I made the right decision not to disturb you for dinner. You looked like you'd rather sleep." The young woman looked vaguely worried through her smile.

Stone chuckled. *Yes, this is why I fly first class, all right.* "No, you made just the right decision. Thank you." He looked around again, studying the passengers around him as the flight attendant nodded, smiled again and moved on. *Six and a half hours? I've never slept that long on a plane. Must be getting old or something.* Strangely, the thought didn't disturb him; instead it amused him. *Better not tell Aubrey, or he'll think I've caught something nasty over there and try to wait on me hand and foot until I can't take it anymore.*

He was still smiling about that as the plane continued its descent and touched down at Heathrow.

Aubrey was there waiting for him, just as Stone expected him to be. The old caretaker was pacing around, looking a little worriedly at his watch; his weathered face broke into a broad grin as he saw the familiar figure exiting the gate. "Dr. Stone!" he called, bustling over. Without even being asked, he relieved his charge of his carry-on bag, slinging the strap over his own shoulder.

"Hello, Aubrey. It's good to see you again." Stone smiled, deciding against attempting to retrieve his bag: Aubrey wouldn't consider it proper for his employer to do anything as menial as carry luggage, and trying to convince him otherwise was apt to meet with nothing more than cheerful stubbornness. Instead, he matched strides with the old man and followed him toward the exit.

"It's good to see you, sir. It's been far too long. Six months already. I hope you'll be staying awhile this time." It was a statement, but Stone knew Aubrey well enough that he could hear the question in it as well.

"I think so. I definitely need a holiday." As they wended their way through Heathrow's international terminal, Stone observed the throngs of milling tourists,

business travelers, and airport workers. No one seemed to be paying any attention to them. He liked that just fine. "Yes," he said, nodding. "A holiday will be quite nice. P'raps I'll even see if Rodney has anything for me to do."

Aubrey brightened visibly. "Then...you'll be here for several months?"

"Looks that way." Stone would never admit it, but it did make him feel good to know that Aubrey was happy to have him around for awhile. "Could be as long as six or eight—p'raps longer than that. I don't know. I'm tired now, and a good long holiday is looking like just the thing."

Aubrey gave him a worried look and a not-so-subtle once-over. "You're not—hurt, are you, sir?"

Stone shook his head. "No, no, Aubrey. Nothing like that. Actually I'm feeling rather good right now—the jet-lag will catch up with me soon enough, but I had a nice sleep on the plane so p'raps it won't be as bad as usual."

"Good. Glad to hear it." Aubrey shifted the strap on Stone's leather bag to a more comfortable position and continued forward. "Maya will be happy to see you. She's missed you, I think."

"I'm sure she has. I've missed her as well. Did you tell her I was coming?"

"I did, sir, just as you asked." There was a certain amount of indulgence in Aubrey's tone, but you had to look hard to catch it. "She—uh—didn't answer."

Stone grinned. "You still don't believe she talks to me, do you, Aubrey? You're just humoring me."

"I'd never do that, sir," Aubrey murmured, but he turned his head so Stone couldn't see his amused smile.

"No. Of course not. Well, come on. Let's get home. This place has always been rather dreary."

Alastair Stone's ancestral home, Stone Manor, was located near a little village some thirty minutes south of London, which meant that on a good traffic day one could reach it from Heathrow in about an hour. As there really weren't any "good traffic days" when the M25 was involved, that measurement was rather meaningless. Still, Aubrey was an even-tempered and careful driver (unlike Stone himself, who was known to drive too fast and take unnecessary chances when he got frustrated) and as a result it took them only an hour and a half before they rolled up in front of the tall wrought-iron gates that separated the private road leading to the Manor from the rest of the world. Stone leaned back in his seat, stretching out. "Ah...it's good to be home," he said, smiling.

Aubrey echoed his smile. "I've spent the past few days putting the place in order for you, sir. I even dusted some of the things on the walls."

"As if I'd notice." Stone's reply was good-natured and obviously in keeping with a long-standing custom between them. "You know me, Aubrey—as long as nobody's disturbed my study, you could be running orgies in the main hall and I wouldn't notice them."

"The orgies were completed last week, sir."

Stone grinned. "Good man."

Aubrey didn't answer except to chuckle slightly. He drove the car around the circular graveled driveway and pulled up in front of the door.

Stone was out almost before the car stopped, grabbing up his bag from the back seat. Aubrey didn't protest; he could see just how glad his employer was to finally be here. He followed behind as Stone took the steps up to the front door two at a time and tapped in the entrance code on the inconspicuous keypad.

"Meowwwrrr..."



Stone was barely inside when he was accosted by a small black missile which seemed determined to thread its way between his feet and knock him down. He smiled down at it. "Hello, Maya. Missed me, have you? I've certainly missed *you*."

Maya backed up slightly and looked up at him with big, luminous green eyes. She was large for a cat, with luxuriant black fur and a plummy tail. She sat now with her front paws primly together. "Mrrrow?" Ducking her head down slightly, she waited.

Stone chuckled. "Yes, yes. Of course. How could I forget?" Dropping his bag, he went down on one knee and began gently scratching the cat behind the ears. Maya purred, first demurely and then with increased gusto.

Aubrey watched this scene with amusement. He had lived long enough with Alastair Stone and his unconventional companion (it wouldn't do to call her a mere *cat*—she was far more than that) to know that, regardless of whether Maya actually talked to him, he *did* seem to understand what she wanted. He smiled. Life had not been dull since she had arrived, that was certain. At least his apprehension about having a blackberry cat as a housemate had long since departed. Maya had proven herself to be not only trustworthy (she didn't even bother his old beagle Mullins anymore, but Aubrey suspected that was more because she had tired of the game than due to any particular compassion on her part) but also a surprisingly effective deterrent to thieves and poachers who might think that Stone Manor and the lands surrounding it were easy pickings.

Stone rose back to a full standing position. "It's good to see you all," he said, running a hand back through his hair. "It's been too long. I should come home more often."

"You should, sir," Aubrey agreed, trying not to show too much of his enthusiasm about that prospect. "Now...if

you'll excuse me for awhile, I'd best put dinner on. I'm sure you must be hungry after your flight."

Stone nodded, leaning down to stroke the insistent Maya again. "Slept right through dinner on the plane. That *never* happens."

He wasn't tired enough to attempt to go to bed until the early hours of the morning; the long nap on the flight had apparently been sufficient to stave off most of the effects of jet lag this time. He had dinner with Aubrey and Maya, caught up with the goings-on around the house and the small village outside which it was located, and then excused himself to head off to his study where he spent the remainder of the evening going through mail (of the e- and paper variety) and looking through the stack of books that had been delivered a few weeks back from one of the old bookstores in London. As he leafed through notices of professional conferences and seminars soliciting both his attendance and his participation, it once again struck him a little oddly how easily he was able to switch between the personas of Winterhawk and Alastair Stone, almost as if they were different people. When he was home, he rarely thought of his life as a member of a shadowrunning team—not until he was bored and ready to go back, that was. For now, though, that part of his life was nearly forgotten, tucked away in a back corner of his mind to be resurrected in a few months. In a way, the two parts together were what kept him sane. Aubrey would never understand that, but it was true. It was the reason why he knew it would be a very long time before he thought about retirement. *Unless somebody does me in first*, he thought wryly, but those thoughts were very far away.

The clock in the upstairs hall ticked inexorably along in the silent house as Stone finally finished his catching up and headed for his suite at the end of the west wing on

the second floor. Maya was gone now, undoubtedly out on one of her nocturnal prowls, but Stone knew she would be back at some point. She almost always slept at the foot of his bed when he first arrived home—sometimes much longer than that. She was far too aloof to tell him in so many words, but her actions did indicate to Stone that she missed him during his long absences. He sighed as he reached his bedchamber and began preparing for sleep, then smiled to himself as thoughts of sharing his bed with some non-feline female companionship rose up in his mind. Perhaps when he got back to the University he'd ask that lovely Dr. Boothby over in the School of Enchantment out for dinner and a show. If one thing led to another, well...that would be quite nice indeed.

The smile was still there as he fell asleep.

When he awoke the next morning, he felt more tired than he had when he'd gone to bed. He opened his eyes slowly and stretched, feeling vague aches in his muscles that hadn't been there before. The bedclothes were in disarray, and Stone realized he had been huddled up near the headboard, his pillow flung off to one side.

He sat up slowly, running his hand through his hair and discovering that it too was in disarray, mostly stuck to his head like he'd been sweating. It was only then that he became aware that Maya was in the room, sitting at the other end of the bed. She was watching him. If there was ever any doubt that she cared about him, her worried expression put that to rest. "Mrr...owww?"

Stone took a deep breath and almost without thinking cast the spell that allowed him to communicate with her. "Good...morning," he said, the uncertainty clear in his voice.

"No." She continued to eye him. "Not good. You're upset."

He tried to remember what might have caused him to be in such a state, but he couldn't. The last thing he remembered was drifting off to sleep with pleasant thoughts of Dr. Boothby in his mind. Then...this. "Do you know what happened? *Did* something happen?"

The blackberry cat tilted her head, thinking. As intelligent as she was, it was sometimes difficult for her to put things into words that the two-leggers could understand. "You were upset. For a long time. Bad dreams?"

Stone's brow furrowed a bit. *Was* he having bad dreams? He certainly didn't recall it if he had. "I...don't know. What was I doing?" His gaze sharpened. "I didn't get out of bed, did I?"

"No." Maya, seemingly convinced that he was better now, approached a little closer. "Stayed in bed. Moved around a lot. Upset."

*But yet I didn't wake up. Odd.* "Did I say anything?"

Maya was silent for several moments. "You thought something was trying to get you. Told it to go away."

"Hmm..." Stone swung his legs around and sat on the edge of the bed. "Well, that would certainly qualify as a bad dream...p'raps it's just because of all the changes." He shrugged. "Haven't been home in awhile...threw my sleep off with that nap on the plane..." He gave Maya a *well, it's done now* look and stood. "I'll wager that a good shower and breakfast ought to take care of it, don't you think?"

Maya didn't answer. She watched him with some concern as he padded off toward the bathroom, and remained where she was long after she heard the shower start up.

Needless to say, Stone didn't tell Aubrey about the incident. The shower and fresh clothes, coupled with a brisk early-morning walk around the grounds, did wonders to improve both his outlook and his muscle aches. By the time he returned to the house for breakfast, he had nearly forgotten about the incident, and by the time the meal was over and he was on the train headed into London (after having bid both Aubrey and Maya goodbye) it was as if it had never happened at all.

London University, which was located on the West side, did not have quite the prestige of its more famous sister schools Oxford and Cambridge, but it had been around almost as long and had one thing which had made it Stone's choice from the moment he had begun making University plans in his early teen years: it had the best thaumaturgy department in all of the United Kingdom. During the early part of the century, shortly after the Awakening had occurred, Oxford and Cambridge had been slower to embrace the new discipline, but London, showing foresight and perhaps seeing an opportunity to raise its fortunes a bit *vis a vis* its rivals, had almost immediately set about luring talent in the nascent specialty. In only five years' time, it had a department that was the envy of academic circles and the other schools were playing catchup. It was not surprising that London also had one of the best matrix science departments in the UK, although there were others—the University of Wales in Aberystwyth and Trinity College in Tir na nOg being the most notable—that were better.

Stone had entered London University when he was sixteen years old and had never really left, at least not in spirit. After completing his undergraduate degree in Applied Thaumaturgy in three years, he had stayed on to get his Master's. That course of study had been interrupted near its beginning by the tragic death of both

his parents in a suspicious plane crash, forcing him to take a year off to straighten out their affairs, get all the legalities of the inheritance in order (it was at that point that he also inherited his father's minor hereditary title and became Lord Stone, but he didn't like to talk or even think much about that), and get himself back into the academic swing of things. After completing his Master's, he began immediately on working toward his doctorate – however, an unfortunate series of circumstances involving a messily broken engagement and a resultant falling-out with Aubrey had sent him off to North America to spend several years travelling around, studying magical creatures and phenomena, and occasionally reporting back his progress to the University. At least, that was what the University thought he was doing. It was also during this period that Stone had begun the activities that would eventually lead to his shadowrunning career, but he didn't often think about that much either. The short version was that by the time he returned to Stone Manor and patched up his rift with Aubrey, he was well on his way to both a doctorate in Applied Thaumaturgy and a lucrative side career as a shadowrunning mage. It just so happened that these two avocations tended to complement each other, as his magical studies gave him an edge when he encountered a new creature or phenomenon, and his time as a shadowrunner allowed him to see the kind of magic that he would never see as a pure academic. His papers, infrequent as they were, were always the talk of the department.

Stone got off the train at Euston Station and caught a taxi to the University. It didn't look any different, but then it hadn't looked any different for at least two hundred years, so that wasn't a surprise. The buildings that made up its campus were stately, dignified, ageless under the

steel-gray sky. There was a stoic beauty about the place that Stone found comforting. It was one of the few places in the world where he truly felt he belonged.

The Department of Thaumaturgy was housed in one of the newer buildings, which is to say that it was only a *few* hundred years old. Stone whistled a snippet of an old Pink Floyd tune as he headed up the steps and inside, smiling at the hurrying students making their way in and out of the elevators. He himself skipped the elevator and continued up the stairs, feeling that the exercise would be good for him.

The Department of Thaumaturgy was divided into two main schools: Hermetic Studies and Shamanic Studies. Only the Hermetic school was located in this building; the shamanic types (including the druids of the shamanic persuasion) generally did not like to be confined and maintained their offices in more unconventional locations. It was rare that Hermetic and Shamanic had much to do with each other, study-wise, except in the comparative analysis classes where a group of each got together and tried to understand each other's philosophy of magic. Those classes were usually highly entertaining but rarely got much accomplished except to forge an occasional friendship or romance. Professionally, the adherents of the two philosophies respected each other but everyone knew they would never see eye to eye.

Within the School of Hermetic Studies, there were five departments: Theoretical Thaumaturgy, Applied Thaumaturgy, Enchanting, Conjuring and Elemental Studies, and Magical Theory. The latter was more of a catch-all discipline that tended to attract mundanes interested in the ways of magic; anyone with more than a scrap of magical talent gravitated toward one of the other departments unless they had absolutely no idea what they wanted to do with their magical careers and wanted to get

a taste of everything. Aside from those disciplines, there were some others that cross-pollinated with other departments, such as Parazology, Parabotany, and Paramedicine, but those were also located elsewhere, in their parent disciplines' buildings.

Stone's expertise was in Applied Thaumaturgy, which concerned itself with the application of magic in practical settings. From his arrival at the University at age sixteen, he had been fascinated by all the things magic could allow one to do. He respected theory and had a solid grounding in it, but his true love was using magic in real-world settings. During his undergraduate and graduate studies, he had established himself as a powerful if unconventional mage, one who was willing to take chances—sometimes dangerous chances—to pursue a hypothesis or produce a result. Every one of his instances of scholarly acclaim and praise for his brilliance had been counterbalanced by a reprimand, a warning, or, in a couple of cases, a threatened expulsion from the University for putting himself at risk unnecessarily. Most of the department faculty regarded him as a maverick, a loose cannon whose research produced stunning results often enough that they put up with him, much like one would put up with a gifted child scientist who occasionally blew up the garage with his experiments. Oddly, though, as often as they complained about him among themselves, Stone knew that they would defend him with equal fervor if anyone *outside* the University commented negatively about him. It amused him—he was certainly a loose cannon, but he was *their* loose cannon.

As he drew to the top of the stairs on the top floor of the seven-story building, he smiled to see that the wooden door at the end of the hall was open. That meant the man he had come to see was probably here. He had not called



ahead on purpose, preferring to surprise his old friend with a visit. They had not seen each other in quite some time.

Rodney Leifeld, head of the School of Hermetic Studies, was probably the main reason why Stone hadn't managed to get himself kicked out of London U. sometime during his career as a student. Stone had first met him at the age of fifteen while he was still attending a prestigious boarding school for young mages and Leifeld was a mere professor in the Applied Thaumaturgy department, but the two had hit it off immediately. They had met during a visit Stone's class had taken to the university—they had taken several that year, to give the students some idea of where they might choose to continue their educations—and Stone had ended up returning the next day, taking the train back to London to meet with him and discuss magic and his future. In Leifeld Stone had seen a mentor, and in Stone Leifeld had seen a potential protege. After a series of tests to determine the young man's aptitudes in both magic and academics, Leifeld had agreed to sponsor his entrance into the University early. The two had remained good friends, and as Stone had progressed in his education, Leifeld had progressed in his academic career. It was largely due to his recommendation that Stone now had his rather unconventional position as sort of a semi-visiting professor, able to drop in for a few months and conduct special seminars in odd aspects of magic, to break up the monotony of the regular course of study.

Stone peeked around the doorframe into the office, checking to see if there were too many people waiting; if there were, he would come back later. Beverley Kent, Leifeld's secretary, happened to be looking up just as he poked his head around the corner, and her face lit up in a broad smile. Before she could say anything, Stone put a

finger to his lips, returning her smile. He pointed toward the door and then moved into the office. "So," he said, loudly, "I see you lot are as lazy as ever today, sitting 'round with your feet up while the students do all the work!"

Ms. Kent grinned as after a moment a voice boomed from inside the office: "Ms. Kent, is that good-for-nothing Alastair Stone back again? Tell him to get a job and send him on his way!"

"Too late for that," Stone called.

"Well, then, send him in here!"

Stone shrugged, smiled at Ms. Kent, and headed in.

Rodney Leifeld was smiling too, rising from behind his big wooden desk. An elegant, powerfully-built man in his late fifties, he managed to convey simultaneously an air of proud tradition and a sense of mischief that would do a first-year undergraduate proud. "Alastair!" He offered his hand, motioning for Stone to sit down. "How are you? I didn't even know you were back in town."

"Just got in yesterday." Stone settled into one of the threadbare but comfortable antique chairs in front of Leifeld's desk, noting that the impressive collection of dusty magical artifacts on the office's shelves seemed to have grown since he'd been here last.

"And you've come to see me straight away. How touching. I suppose you're looking for something to do."

Stone grinned. "How did you guess?"

"Well, I didn't expect you've come because you missed my charm and witty conversation."

"No—but speaking of that, is Dr. Boothby around today?"

Leifeld chuckled. "Sorry, old boy—she's engaged these days. Has been for a couple of months now. That's what happens when you're gone so long and out of touch."

Stone sighed in mock distress. "Bother." Looking back up at Leifeld, he dropped the distressed expression like a curtain. "So – got anything for me to do?"

Leifeld had to laugh at Stone's affected look of bright, childlike eagerness, knowing full well just how much of an affectation it was. He worried about his old student sometimes; Stone seemed somehow cynical and hardened beyond his years, and never talked about what he did when he was away from England for extended periods, except for the things that he revealed in the papers he submitted. "You certainly don't waste any time," he said at last, smiling. "As a matter of fact I do have something you might be interested in. Been keeping up with the literature on the manastorm around the spot where Dunkelzahn was done in a few years ago?"

Stone nodded soberly. That was a subject in which he had particular interest.

Leifeld glanced up, startled by Stone's expression. "Are you all right, Alastair?"

"Yes...quite." Stone took a deep breath and leaned back in the chair. "I never did tell you I was there, did I?"

"There?" Leifeld asked, a quizzical look passing across his features.

"There. When Dunkelzahn died."

The older man's eyes widened. "No, Alastair...you didn't. You were *there*? You saw it happen?" He leaned forward intently.

Stone shook his head. "I didn't see it happen, although I was there, at the inaugural ball. I was inside when the actual assassination occurred, but it couldn't have been more than thirty seconds or so before I was outside."

Leifeld sighed. "I don't suppose I ought to ask you how you managed to get yourself invited to Dunkelzahn's inaugural ball, should I?"

"Best if you don't," Stone agreed. "But yes, I'm quite up-to-date on the topic at hand."

There was a long pause while Leifeld digested that information. "We'll have to talk more about this later," he said at last. "I've got an appointment in twenty minutes, and I think this sort of discussion belongs in a pub over a nice glass of ale—or perhaps several—rather than in here. For now, let me just say that I've been thinking about a seminar on the manastorm phenomenon—focusing on Dunkelzahn's but including some of the other, smaller ones—and I thought you might be just the man for the job. Didn't think you'd be around, though. Interested?" At Stone's nod he continued: "It would be one evening a week—you choose the evening—for a couple of months. I figure it will attract some of the younger students—they tend to go for that flashy stuff, and since you're the flashiest chap we've got `round the department—"

Stone couldn't help chuckling. *That* was the understatement of the year and both of them knew it. Most of London U's thaumaturgical faculty could give entire classes on stodginess and conservatism. A few of them could win prizes. "I'm flattered, Rodney. Really. And I'll be happy to take your seminar. It'll keep me off the streets and out of Aubrey's hair for awhile—especially since it appears that Dr. Boothby is out of circulation." He rose. "It's good to see you again. I won't take any more of your time now, but we'll have to have that ale one of these days."

Leifeld stood, nodding. "And one of these days perhaps you'll finally get around to telling me what you do when you're away for all these months—and how you manage to know so much about things no one is supposed to know that much about."

"P'raps someday," Stone agreed good-naturedly. "I'll see you later, Rodney." He tipped a jaunty salute and

headed out the door, nodding farewell to Ms. Kent as he left. He didn't see Leifeld shaking his head in mock exasperation behind him.

The seminar was set to begin in two weeks, and Stone had no trouble keeping busy during that time. When he wasn't studying up on the latest manastorm developments and planning out his sessions, he spent the remainder of the time visiting old acquaintances, hanging out at his favorite London pub with some of the younger and less stodgy faculty members, and prowling the older, non-touristy ends of London looking for magical goodies, old books, and additions to his collection of mid-to-late-20th-century British rock and roll recordings. He was very pleased when one day he found not only an early edition of a pre-Awakening magic book he'd been searching for, but also well-preserved compact disc recordings of Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here* and Jethro Tull's *Aqualung* in an antique store he hadn't visited previously.

All in all, things had been going very well over the past two weeks, except for one thing.

The nightmares.

It was getting to where it was hard for him to ignore them anymore. They didn't happen every night, but three times the previous week and four so far this week were bad enough. At first he hadn't even really noticed them, except for the tired, achy feeling in the mornings, and the confirmation from Maya that he'd been doing a lot of tossing and turning during the night. Each time she told him that he had attempted to ward something off, to send it away, but Stone had no memory of this and Maya couldn't provide much in the way of detail. Later on, though, as the days progressed, he found himself waking in a cold sweat in the early hours of the morning, with vague images of horrible things scuttling off into hiding

places in the corners of his mind before he could pin them down long enough to identify them. He wondered what could be causing the dreams, but came up with nothing. Life was going well right now; he didn't have anything nagging at his mind. Even meditation sessions in his study didn't help him put his finger on the problem.

He had purposely not told Aubrey about any of this, not wanting to worry his old friend with something he considered to be of little importance. However, the caretaker was a perceptive individual, and didn't miss much—especially when his employer was involved. "Sir," he said carefully one morning well into the two weeks, "Are you all right? You look...tired."

Stone looked up from his datafax and morning coffee and sighed. "I'm fine, Aubrey. Just fine."

Aubrey looked him over. "You don't *look* fine, sir. You've got dark circles under your eyes, and you look like you haven't been sleeping well. Shall I have the doctor over to have a look at you?"

"No, Aubrey. That won't be necessary." He put down the datafax and sighed. "You're right—I haven't been sleeping well. Been having bad dreams the past few nights. I don't know why. P'raps I'm getting stressed over this seminar."

Both he and Aubrey knew that was a lie. Stone loved teaching—it was in his blood. "Sir—"

"I'm all *right*, Aubrey," Stone said, smiling a little too broadly. "Really. I'll come home early tonight and try to get a good night's rest, okay? That's all it is."

Aubrey didn't look convinced, but he knew better than to try to argue with Stone when he was like this. He looked down at Maya, who had been staying close to home the past few days and was rarely far away from Stone. "Maya, perhaps you should have a talk with him. He's always been too stubborn for his own good." His

tone was good-natured but there was an undercurrent of worry in it as well.

Maya's only answer was a soft "Mrrrrrow?" and a concerned look in Stone's direction.

Stone rose and picked up his empty coffee cup. "Well, I'm off," he announced, as if nothing had happened. "I'll see you two sometime this evening. Don't worry about dinner, Aubrey—I'll pick up something on the way home."

Aubrey intercepted him as he headed for the kitchen, slipping the cup from his grasp. "I'll take that, sir. And you *will* be home early, yes?"

Stone nodded. "Early. Promise." Before Aubrey (or Maya, for that matter) could say anything else, he leaned down to scratch Maya's ears and swept out of the dining room. Picking up his overcoat and his umbrella, he left the house.

Without a clear idea of what he wanted to do, he took the train back into London. Despite his flippant replies to Aubrey, he *was* concerned about the nightmares and the resultant lack of sleep; he knew he couldn't go on like this forever. Somehow, he would have to find out what was causing the problem and deal with it. As he sat on the train he tried, for at least the dozenth time just in the past week, to nail down what was disturbing his subconscious mind to the point where it felt it necessary to interrupt his sleep. Professional problems? He wasn't having any. Relationship problems? No...despite the lovely Dr. Boothby's unexpected engagement, Stone had always had little trouble finding companionship when he bothered to look—and besides, the nightmares had started the night before he'd heard the news. Problems with his 'other' life? That didn't make sense—the last run had ended well and he hadn't had any problems with disrupted sleep when he was back in Seattle.

He sighed. Whatever it was, obviously it was going to take more than just his continued speculation to get to the bottom of it. Now it was just a matter of figuring out what to do. All he knew for sure was that he didn't want to discuss the problem with anyone at the University. Half of them thought he was strange anyway (and among mages, 'strange' came with the territory—if *they* noticed, you knew you were in a class by yourself) and he didn't want to give them any more ammunition.

An answer came to him in an unexpected way. After spending the morning puttering around lore shops and antique stores in the West End, he stopped off at a Chinese noodle house for lunch. He ate slowly, dawdling over the food as he glanced over one of the local alternative newspapers, listening but not really hearing the rattle of voices around him (most speaking some dialect of Chinese so he wouldn't have understood them even if he had been listening intently). When he finished the meal, he idly cracked open the fortune cookie next to his plate.

The tiny slip of paper read: "*An old friend from your past is seeking you.*" On the back were his lucky lottery numbers.

Stone smiled and tossed it aside next to his chopsticks and got up, preparing to leave. *Sounds like something a fortune-teller would tell me – like I'm going to meet a tall dark stranger.* He paused a moment, cocking his head. A fortune teller. Perhaps that wasn't such a bad idea after all—and he knew just the person he should see. She wasn't even far from here.

The door of the place he was headed was unmarked, but the window was stuffed full of items both mundane and fantastic. It could have been just another of the innumerable junk or antique shops that lined the streets



here, but Stone knew better. He pushed open the door, hearing the familiar soft tinkle of chimes that were not in any way connected to it.

Immediately upon his entrance, he was set upon by numerous aromas all fighting for olfactory supremacy: musk, incense, the pleasant musty odor of old things, wood, leather, and things even more exotic. The interior of the shop was every bit as much of a jumble as the window had been, with items stacked on tables, piled on chairs, hanging from the ceiling, teetering precariously from high bookshelves. Stone looked around as he made his way down one of the narrow aisles toward the rear of the store, noting a row of what looked like petrified headless fowl hanging from one side, a rack of beautifully embroidered silk wraps off to the other, a collection of jade Eastern dragons of various sizes on one of the shelves, incongruously next to two moth-eaten teddy bears. There was by no means enough time to look at everything, not unless he planned on spending multiple days here, but he knew it was not necessary. The good stuff wasn't in the front of the shop anyway. The things out front were for the tourists (if they ever managed to find the place) and the rubes.

There was one other customer in the store, a thin, bookish young man of about nineteen who was wandering around with the air of someone who had found what he had been told was a treasure trove but wasn't sure somebody wasn't pulling his leg. Stone watched him with amusement for a moment, then hung back, smiling, as a second figure appeared.

The lady who came out of the store's back room almost blended in with its eclectic decorating scheme. Small, hunched, birdlike, with raven-black hair tied into a bun and a collection of mismatched robes, shawls, and wraps covering almost every inch of her body, she could

have been anywhere from a very old thirty-five to a very young eighty. Her bright black eyes raked over the young man, sizing him up, and then she called out something to him in Chinese. It sounded like a command.

The young man glanced up sharply as if he had been caught doing something wrong instead of just the innocent browsing in which he had been engaged. "I'm sorry," he said to the lady. "I—I don't understand."

The lady moved forward, gesturing at the flustered customer. She said something else in rapid-fire Chinese, speaking more sharply than before in the tone of an accusation, and then waited to see what he would do.

This was obviously not what he was expecting. He looked at her for a moment, then set down the small dog statuette he had been examining, using the sort of care one might use to defuse a bomb. "I'm sorry," he said again. "I was—I was just browsing. I'll—be going now. Good day to you, ma'am." He nearly tripped over himself hurrying out of the store.

From the shadows, Stone chuckled. "You really shouldn't do that, you know. One of these days you're going to have one faint right here in the store."

The woman looked over toward him, her entire demeanor changing as she laughed. "Alastair Stone. It's been a long time, but I would know that voice anywhere." She spoke now with soft, cultured British tones and not a trace of a Chinese accent. Rising from her semi-hunched position, she looked at him with sparkling eyes. It was not much easier to discern her age when she stood up straight, but the range narrowed down from thirty-five through eighty to about forty through sixty.

"It has indeed, Madame Huan," Stone said, moving over to allow himself to be enfolded into Madame Huan Mei-Lin's incense-scented embrace.

She smiled up at him, looking him over. "Let me just put up the Closed sign, and we will go in the back and have tea. Then you can tell me why you have come to see me."

"Must I have a reason?" he asked teasingly. "P'raps I've just missed your charms—or watching you bully the unexpected customers."

She shook her head. "No, my friend. You have a reason. I can see it in your aura. Something is troubling you."

Stone took a deep breath. That *was* why he had come after all—because Huan Mei-Lin didn't miss anything. He certainly shouldn't be surprised that she had noticed so quickly. "I'm afraid so," he admitted. "But we've time for that." He chuckled, pointing toward the door. "How many do you get these days?"

"Oh, two or three a week," she said, smiling as she turned over the ancient *Closed* sign and locked the door. "They see the place and wander in, thinking they've found something intriguing. If they're brave enough, I let them stay."

Stone chuckled again, remembering his first trip to Madame Huan's during his third of six years at the magical boarding school. It had been on a dare from some of the older students—go into the strange old lady's shop and come back with something you've bought without letting her scare you away. She *had* scared him away the first time, just like all the others—but he had come back, disgusted with himself for letting himself be frightened by an old woman. He had come back and she had welcomed him then, as one of the few who had the nerve to do so.

It turned out, as he discovered on that second trip, that Madame Huan was only a junk-shop owner on the surface. Her *real* businesses were talismongering and divination, both of which she ran out of the ornate back

room of her tiny shop. She made enough money from both that she could scare off every bargain-hunting customer who entered the shop and still make a very comfortable living. You only got to the back room if you knew what you were looking for—or if Madame Huan took a liking to you.

She led Stone into the back, winding her way through the narrow aisles with the ease of someone who could do it in full darkness. The thick beaded curtain that separated the junk shop from the back room rustled and tinkled as they moved through it. Stone knew from past experience that at the same location on the astral plane, the curtain represented a powerful ward. Not all of Madame Huan's endeavors were of the strictly legal variety, and she did not like prying eyes.

Behind the curtain, it was as if they had entered a different building. Instead of clutter and eclectica, this room contained tasteful furniture, beautiful (and clearly very, very old) wall decorations, fine rugs, and a scattering of magnificent art objects, each of which Stone knew was worth more than the entire contents of the shop out front. Off to one side of the room was a large wooden cabinet decorated with delicate Chinese artwork; there were two other doorways, also covered by beaded curtains, leading off in opposite directions. "Sit down," Madame Huan said warmly, indicating one of the soft brocaded chairs. "Tell me how you've been. After we've had our tea, we will speak of what is troubling you."

Stone kept the conversation light, speaking of settling in at Stone Manor, of Aubrey and Maya, of the seminar he was preparing to give at the University. While he spoke, Madame Huan bustled about just past one of the beaded curtains and emerged in a few moments with a tray containing a teapot, two cups, and some small cakes. The two of them continued to chat while they drank; Stone

found himself feeling peaceful and content as he listened to his old friend's soft pleasant tones telling him of her businesses, both real and false. By the time they had finished their tea and Madame Huan had gathered up the cups and the teapot, Stone's problems seemed remote and far away. He was beginning to think it had been a little silly of him to have come here for anything more than a chance to see an old friend again.

Madame Huan had other ideas. She settled herself back down in her chair and regarded Stone with dark concerned eyes. "Tell me why you have come, Alastair. What disturbs your balance?"

Stone shook his head. "It's nothing, really. Don't know why I thought of you, except I was in the area and there was this fortune cookie..." He looked rather disgusted at himself, realizing that he was rambling.

She waited patiently, watching him as she sat silent in her chair.

"I've been having...dreams," he continued after a long pause. "Bad ones. For a couple of weeks now. They seem to be getting worse—they didn't wake me up before, but now they're starting to. I can't seem to figure out what's causing them." He looked at her. "Divination's never been my strong point—I thought p'raps you might be able to shed some light on it."

Madame Huan nodded slowly. "These dreams...when did they begin?"

"Right after I got back home."

"Where had you been before that?"

"Seattle. I spend quite a lot of time over there—I'd been there for almost three months before I returned home."

Again the woman nodded. "Did anything...unusual happen while you were in Seattle?"

"No more unusual than...well, usual," he said with a wry smile. "Nothing terribly out of the ordinary, if that's what you mean."

"Nothing that disturbed you?"

Stone shook his head. "No. In fact, things had gone rather well. I was feeling good about coming home and relaxing for awhile."

"Mmm..." Madame Huan murmured. "So something has disturbed your subconscious greatly, but your conscious mind has no idea what it might be."

"It looks that way." Stone paused a moment, then looked up at her. "Maya says I was telling something to go away, as if it were trying to...attack me?"

Madame Huan accepted this new bit of information silently. Reaching into one of the voluminous folds of her robes, she withdrew a wooden box and placed it on the table between them. From it, she removed several sticks of incense and a burner. Carefully, she arranged these items and lit the incense, causing a strong but not unpleasant aroma to waft through the air. "Are you carrying anything to which you have a strong attachment?" she asked softly.

Stone was expecting that—those who practiced divination worked in many different ways to focus their power: some used cards, some used crystals, some used tea leaves. Madame Huan's specialty was psychometry, which involved readings from items that had emotional value to their owners. He silently slid his London University ring from his finger (he had put it on the morning after he'd arrived in England) and handed it over to her.

She took it between her hands, rolling it around in her palms, closing her eyes. "All right," he said in a soothing tone, "lean back and try to relax. Concentrate on my voice, and open your mind to me."

Stone did as requested. He knew it was harder to do this sort of reading on another magically active individual, especially one as strong of mind as he. But Madame Huan was stronger and more experienced in her discipline than he was—that was why he was here. He would just have to trust her.

Madame Huan continued to caress the ring in her hands, leaning her head back, her eyes still closed as she murmured to herself in Chinese. Stone felt reality seem to swirl around him as a calm, dissociated feeling settled over him. He was here and yet he was not here, both at the same time. All that existed was here in this room—himself, Madame Huan, the smell of incense, the soft Chinese whispers. Time seemed to stop.

Stone didn't know how long it was before reality returned to normal, but the first thing he noticed was that Madame Huan looked decidedly unwell. Her smooth forehead was beaded with sweat, her skin pale, the sparkle of mischief gone from her eyes. Her hand clutched almost spasmodically around Stone's ring. Stone leaned forward, concerned. "Are you—all right?" he asked softly.

The woman appeared to snap out of a trance. She smiled wanly at him, letting the ring fall into her lap. She nodded. "Could you...get me a glass of water, please?" Her voice was soft, weary.

Stone leaped up and hurried into the kitchen, returning with a large glass of water. He put it in her shaking hands and steadied it as she drank. His eyes showed his worry. After a few moments, Madame Huan smiled at him again, looking stronger now. "I'll be all right," she said. "I just need to rest for awhile. Please—sit down." She set the water glass down and handed him his ring.

Without taking his eyes off her, he slid the ring back on his finger and lowered himself back into the chair. "What—is it? What did you see?"

She took a deep breath. The color was beginning to come back to her cheeks, but it was a slow process. A long silence hung between them as she gathered herself. "I think you're in danger," she finally said, her voice very soft. "But I can't tell you why, or from whom."

Stone tilted his head. "Danger? From nightmares?"

"No. The nightmares are only a manifestation. Someone—or something—is seeking you. I can see traces of it on the astral plane, but it is not always there. It is not there now. I think it is coming to you in your dreams because the veil is not so strong then."

Stone stared at her. "Seeking me?" He remembered the fortune cookie and chuckled mirthlessly. "An old friend from my past is seeking me."

Madame Huan looked at him quizzically.

He shrugged. "That's what the fortune cookie said. The one that reminded me that I should come here. It doesn't sound much like a friend, though, does it?"

She shook her head. "No. I cannot see much—it is very elusive, almost as if it does not wish to be seen. But whatever it is, I sense conflict in it. It is as if it is trying to warn you—and to harm you." She sighed. "I am sorry that does not make much sense, Alastair. I wish I could help you more."

Stone smiled at her. "I'm grateful for what you've done, Madame Huan. I'm sorry that it has tired you so—if I had known, I never would have asked you to do it."

"Be careful, my friend. I don't know who or what this is that seeks you, but I sense great danger, and threat to anyone who attempts to confront it."



Stone spent the next several hours walking and thinking. He had left Madame Huan's only after he was sure that she would be all right and was suffering no lingering effects from the strange divination.

Even after his friend's reaction, he wasn't terribly afraid of this person or thing that was allegedly seeking him. If all it was going to do was give him bad dreams, then he'd just have to pump up the wards around the Manor a little more to keep it out. He'd been overdue to do that anyway. Any stray astral beasts or would-be stalkers who'd latched onto him as a potential target would just have to move on to someone else. Even though the divination hadn't given him the specific answers he had been looking for, the answers he *had* gotten were enough to make him feel better about the whole matter than he had in several days.

That was before he saw the *thing*.

It was walking out of a kitchen-gadget store as Stone waited for the light to change so he could cross the street. At first he didn't notice it, because he was concentrating on the light. But then he glanced sideways – and froze.

It looked human – female, in fact – dressed in a short black skirt, stylish little yellow jacket, and high-heeled boots. It looked human, that was, until you saw its head. Stone stared at it, eyes wide, unable to move. The thing's head was vaguely insectoid, but that wasn't quite right. There was something far beyond insectoid about it – far more...*wrong*.

And then it turned toward him and grinned from across the street.

Stone staggered to his right, catching a grip on a streetlight pole. He couldn't tear his gaze off the grinning thing. Its eyes glowed, red and malevolently cheeky.

"Sir?"

He forced himself to drag his vision away from it for a moment to see who had addressed him, half expecting to see another one of them. Instead a troll boy, no more than twelve years old and already taller and broader than Stone, was watching him with concern. "Are you okay, sir? You look...sick."

Stone took a deep breath and risked another glance across the street. The thing was gone now, replaced by a cute young woman in the same outfit *it* had been wearing. He looked back at the troll boy and forced a smile. "Yes...yes, I'm fine, thank you." Before the boy could leave, he jerked his head toward the area he had been watching. "Did you...see anything...odd over there?" he asked, aware that his voice sounded somewhat strangled to his ears.

The boy looked at him strangely, then across the street, and then back at Stone. He took a step back. "No...nothing odd. Just a lady, and a couple of chaps, and some buildings. That's all." After a pause, he ventured, "Did *you*?" He was looking at Stone in a way that suggested that perhaps he had been wrong to speak in the first place.

Stone sighed and shook his head. "No...I suppose not. I guess I was mistaken. Sorry to frighten you."

"No worries, sir," the boy said, and hurried off rather more quickly than was strictly polite.

Stone watched him go, pausing a moment to take a few deep breaths and get his racing pulse under control. As he did so and the initial shock wore off, he began to feel more and more embarrassed at his display. Of course there hadn't been any weird creature standing by the kitchen-gadgets store. And furthermore, he had *not* been seeing things. No doubt it had been nothing more than a young mage or shaman having a joke with an illusion spell. He chuckled aloud to himself in the manner of a man who'd just succumbed to the scares in a horror trid

and wanted to let those around him know that he didn't *really* believe in that sort of thing. "An illusion, of course," he murmured. "What an ass I'm being. I didn't even bother to check." He had done the same sort of thing as a youngster. Obviously Madame Huan's dire predictions had settled into his mind more firmly than he'd thought.

The sun would be going down soon; he supposed he ought to start thinking about getting home. After all, he had promised Aubrey that he would be home early. Still, though, he had time. It only took about forty-five minutes to get home by train, and "early" by his reckoning didn't come for at least another two hours or so. What he needed, Stone decided, was a pint or two first—just to wash away the last lingering memories of an unpleasant experience. Yes, that would do nicely.

He caught a cab over to his favorite pub near the University, sure that he'd find at least one or two of the younger thaumaturgy faculty members or the older graduate students in attendance. He wasn't disappointed. The Rose and Crown appeared to be a popular destination that evening, and he was welcomed warmly. Before the hour was up he was settled in at his favorite table, working on his third Guinness, and both strange insect-creatures and Aubrey were the last things on his mind.

It was almost midnight when the cab pulled up in front of Stone Manor, but the lights were still on inside. As soon as the taxi's headlights were visible around the bend of the graveled driveway, the front door of the house opened and Aubrey hurried out, his entire bearing suggesting that he had been watching the driveway for quite some time with increasing levels of worry. He watched as the ork cabdriver got out and went around to

the back, helping out an obviously very intoxicated Alastair Stone.

Aubrey hustled over. "Is he all right?" he asked the driver, taking Stone's other arm. His employer was walking but just barely, humming some unidentifiable tune and looking quite pleased with himself.

The ork nodded. "He's had a few too many, but sleepin' it off'll take care o' that. Ya want help gettin' him inside?"

"m'all right..." muttered Stone, smiling up at Aubrey. "Hi, Aubrey."

"Hello, sir," Aubrey said noncommittally. To the cabbie he said, "If you'll just help me get him up the stairs to the door—"

The ork nodded and together they hustled the unresisting Stone up. "Where was he?" Aubrey asked.

"Picked him up at the Rose and Crown—one o' his mates called, said he was in no shape to take the train home."

Aubrey nodded. "Well, thank you very much for getting him home. He does this occasionally, but hasn't in a long time. How much do I owe you?"

The ork told him, and he handed over the fare and a generous tip. "Thank you, sir. Have a pleasant evening."

"Oh, quite," Aubrey muttered as he opened the door and slung Stone's arm around his shoulders.

Maya showed up almost immediately after Aubrey closed the door behind them. She looked at Stone, tilting her head and wrinkling her nose.

"Yes, Maya, I know he smells like an ale-house. Perhaps you can talk some sense into him." Aubrey looked at the tall stairway to the second floor and shook his head. "I'm afraid you're sleeping in your study this evening, sir. There's no way I'm going to get you upstairs." Suiting action to words, he half-aided, half-

carried his employer into the study and lowered him down on the leather couch, deftly removing his overcoat and shoes in the process. "There you are, sir. You sleep, and perhaps you'll tell me in the morning what happened."

Stone seemed to pick up on the slight tone of disapproval in Aubrey's voice. "Jus' had a few," he told him sleepily. "Jus' a few...was gonna come home early..."

"Yes, sir." Aubrey kept his voice even. Leaving for a moment he came back with a blanket, which he spread over Stone. Maya immediately jumped up and lay next to him. "You sleep, and I'll talk to you in the morning. Perhaps then you'll tell me why you didn't answer your phone when I called you." Without waiting for him to answer, Aubrey turned and left the room.

Stone watched him go through bleary eyes. "Night, Aubrey," he called—or maybe he just imagined that he called. Either way, he felt pleasantly content. As he drifted off to a deep sleep, he didn't even think about the thing he had seen earlier that day—or the two more that had appeared at the pub.

The next morning Stone didn't get up until almost 10:00, and it was an hour after that before he'd managed to drag himself upstairs, get a shower, and feel vaguely human again. The jackhammer headache wasn't helping matters any. Aubrey was nowhere to be found when he first got up, but when he emerged from his bedroom suite, he caught the unmistakable aroma of breakfast cooking downstairs. He wasn't sure he was ready for food yet, but he knew he had to talk to Aubrey.

He appeared in the doorway to the kitchen and leaned there, watching the caretaker as he fixed up a big plate of eggs, toast, sausages, and a pitcher of orange juice. Aubrey didn't acknowledge Stone's presence.

"Aubrey..."

The old man looked up. "Oh. Good morning, sir. I didn't hear you come down."

There was something in Aubrey's voice that disturbed Stone. "Aubrey...I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me last night. I know I said I'd be home early—" Part of him didn't like the way he sounded: like a teenager caught sneaking in after curfew. Aubrey was his employee, not his father. But still, he *had* promised—

"It's quite all right, sir," Aubrey said, his tone not changing. "You needn't explain. Are you feeling better this morning?"

The smell of the eggs and the sausage was not co-existing well with Stone's sensitive stomach, but he thought it best not to mention this fact. Aubrey had probably made the lavish breakfast partially for just that reason. Although he was neither female nor Jewish, the caretaker had the classic Jewish mother routine down cold, complete with guilt and occasional passive aggression. "Better than what?" he asked wryly.

"Well, you look better than you did when the cabbie brought you home at midnight, that's for certain."

"Midnight? Was it that late?" That was news to Stone. He'd intended to stay only a short time. "Aubrey, I *am* sorry. I—I just planned to stop by the pub for an hour or so before I came home, but—" He stopped, not sure *why* exactly he had remained now. The memories seemed indistinct, fuzzy. He spread his arms in a gesture of futility. "I don't know."

He must have looked sufficiently sincere to cause Aubrey to drop his gentle attempts at punishment. "Sir," he said worriedly, "are you sure you're all right? You've been acting rather—odd—the past few days. Are you sure I shouldn't have the doctor over?"

Stone shook his head. "No, Aubrey. Really. There's nothing wrong with me. I've been having some trouble sleeping, but that's all it is. I think I'll spend the day at home, looking over my notes for the seminar. It starts tonight, you know, and I'll need to be at my best."

Aubrey nodded. "There's some coffee brewing if you don't want breakfast. Would you mind telling me, though, sir, why you didn't answer your phone? I tried to call you several times, but there was no reply. I was getting quite worried that something had happened to you."

Stone looked sheepish, digging in his pocket to pull out his mobile phone. "Looks like I switched it off," he said. "I don't remember doing that, though."

"I suspect, from the condition you were in, you don't remember much about last night," Aubrey said a trifle archly.

"That is the truth," Stone agreed. "Forgiven?"

"Of course, sir. You go on, and I'll bring you some coffee. I'll keep breakfast warm if you want it later."

Stone nodded and headed out, shaking his head. He was still trying to remember what had happened last evening, but his mind stubbornly refused to supply that information. Perhaps he would ask one of his friends later on. Right now, though, getting rid of this headache and finishing up his notes were what he was already concentrating on.

The turnout for the seminar on manastorms was impressive, and, all conceit aside, Stone wasn't surprised. His courses always seemed to fill up fast, due partially to his reputation as a compelling speaker and partially to the students' anticipation that something strange might happen during the course's run. Stone had, in the past, blown up one lab, summoned several elementals of the type that were deemed by the university to be

inappropriate for inclusion in an undergraduate class, and taught his students numerous magical tricks that were rarely discussed in the pursuit of serious study. He was not only good with magic, he had *fun* with it. His enthusiasm was infectious.

He stood now in the old lecture hall, looking out over the semicircular rows of desks, each chair occupied. There were even a few students hanging out at the back of the room, hoping that there would be some vacancies in the list of signed-up attendees so they could get in. From the look of things, they were out of luck.

Stone smiled as he watched all of them. More than almost anything else, this was the sort of thing he enjoyed. Teaching his favorite subject to students who were obviously interested in learning about it made him feel alive. The only thing he liked better was satisfying his curiosity about new magical phenomena, but he was more likely to do that in his other life. For now, things were looking pretty good.

He took care of the administrivia first, discovering that there *were* in fact a couple of no-shows and choosing two of the hopeful lurkers randomly to take their places. After the remaining lurkers had gone on their way, he began the presentation. Never one to simply stand at the podium and impart wisdom from on high, he ranged out around the entire lecture hall, employing both visual aids and some astral demonstrations, getting increasingly animated in his excitement. The students, for their part, were eating it up. He knew he had the attention of every last one of them—he could see it in their eyes. This was only the first of eight parts of the seminar, and they were already eating out of his hand. Life was good.

This first talk was about the history of the manastorm phenomenon, sort of an introductory session before they got into the specifics in the coming weeks. Stone spent the



first half of the hour providing an overview, then moved off into some personal anecdotes about sites he had visited. Moving up and down the aisles, around the room, his gaze roamed over the faces in the dimmed space, satisfied to see that they were still all paying attention. The young man in the fourth row with the riveted expression...the woman up near the back, fascinated...the couple off to the side —

Something caught his attention, flashing briefly in the corner of his eye. He turned to the other side of the room, expecting to see someone having gotten up, perhaps to use the restroom.

There was a *thing* there.

It was sitting in the fifth row, three seats over from the side. It was dressed in a black T-shirt bearing the logo of one of the local magic shops under a plaid flannel shirt, and faded jeans. It was vigorously taking notes on a datapad, the stylus clutched in an oozy brown hand covered with wiry black hair. Stone's breath quickened as he looked at its head — it didn't look like the other one he had seen. There was nothing insectoid about it; instead, this one had the same sort of oozy brown skin covering its face. The skin was covered with vile warts, more of the strange thick strands of hair, and running sores. As Stone continued to watch, transfixed, one of the sores broke open and a putrid runnel of something milky meandered down the thing's neck and pooled up in its collar. The thing seemed oblivious.

Even more strangely — the students sitting near it appeared equally oblivious. They were watching him now, glancing at each other nervously. Stone realized he had stopped lecturing.

All at once he was angry. Someone was having a joke on him, and he didn't find it at all funny. He stalked over until he was standing directly in front of the row where

the thing was sitting, and pointed at it. "You there!" he called sharply.

The thing turned slowly toward him, looking at him with malevolent red eyes. It did not speak. Around it, the other students looked confused.

Stone glared. "What is your name?"

Its eyes glowed slightly as it made a noise that sounded like two pieces of old paper being rubbed against each other.

"I asked you a question!" Stone could tell his voice was rising, but he didn't do anything about it. "What is your name?"

Around him, feet scuffled uncomfortably. All eyes were still on him, except for the ones that were exchanging glances.

The thing made the same noise again. Another sore burst near its misshapen mouth—this time, the stuff dropped on the datapad, hissing as it contacted the plastic.

Stone felt his anger bubbling up. How dare they mock him like this? "Drop that illusion this instant!" he ordered.

The thing stiffened, but did not comply. It made more of the whispering-paper sounds.

"Dr. Stone—" The young woman sitting next to the thing was looking at him, fear showing in her eyes. "Are you—"

Stone ignored her. "All right," he said coldly to the thing, "if you won't comply, then I'll see to it that you're put up for disciplinary action. This kind of infantile behavior has no place in a university classroom. Leave here now. You are dismissed from this seminar."

"Dr. Stone!" the woman called, more urgently this time. "Please. What's wrong? Davey didn't do anything. He's answered your questions." She looked disturbed and

very confused as her gaze darted back and forth between the two of them. "What illusion are you talking about?"

The low murmur of conversation around the lecture hall increased a bit in volume.

Stone glared at the woman for a moment, then at the thing, and then turned and stalked back to the lectern where his attendance notes were kept. He snapped up the datapad and whirled back around. "Now — " he began —  
— and stopped.

The thing was gone as if it had never been. In its place sat a very bewildered looking young man with light brown hair and a scraggly little goatee. Stone stared.

The students, including the young man, stared back at him.

For a moment, Stone could do nothing else. The datapad slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor. He took a deep breath. Shifting his perceptions to the astral, he saw no trace of a spell around the young man. There had been no illusion.

But — the thing had been *there*.

Professor and students continued to regard each other warily for a few more moments, and then Stone broke the trance. He moved slowly over to the spot he had occupied previously and looked at the young man. "I don't know what just happened here," he told him quietly, "but please accept my apology. You — none of you cast an illusion spell, did you?"

The young man shook his head, as did everyone in the vicinity. "No, Dr. Stone," he said. "What — what did you see?"

Stone shook his head like he was trying to clear it. "Never mind that. I — I haven't been feeling well lately. I guess I came back a bit too soon. I think I'm going to call it a night, if you all don't mind. Please come back next week

and we'll pick up where we left off. Again, please accept my apology for my behavior."

There was a low murmur among the students as they rose and gathered their things, and more than a few of them cast odd looks at Stone as he stood at the front of the room and watched them go. He did not miss the pity in some of their gazes.

Of course the story was all over the School of Thaumaturgy by the next day, and of course that resulted in Rodney Leifeld asking Stone to come and see him later on that afternoon.

Stone hadn't told Aubrey about the incident; he'd arrived home last night and gone directly to bed, pleading fatigue. He had ignored Maya's looks of increasing worry, although he was comforted that she chose to spend the entire night curled at the foot of his bed. He didn't have any nightmares — but he didn't sleep much either.

Leifeld motioned him to a chair as he came in. There were no joking pleasantries this time; the older man looked worried. "Alastair. I'm sure you know I heard about what happened last evening."

"Everybody on the bloody *campus* seems to have heard about what happened last evening," Stone said softly, sourly.

"So why don't you tell me what *really* happened?" Leifeld settled back into the chair behind his desk, regarding Stone with a look of almost fatherly compassion. "There's got to be a logical explanation for it."

Stone sighed. "That's just it, Rodney. I don't *have* a logical explanation. It happened, and I overreacted."

"*What* happened?" Leifeld asked gently. "That's the one part of this only you can tell me. I've spoken with a few of the students who were there, but they only said

that you seemed disturbed by something, even though no one else appeared to see anything out of the ordinary."

There was a long pause as Stone gathered his thoughts. "I...saw something. A...*thing*. A—sort of monster, if you will. It was sitting where one of the students was supposed to be."

"Davey Hastings." Leifeld nodded. "He was one of those I spoke with. He was quite concerned about you, Alastair. That's quite a shock for a freshman, to have one of his professors —"

"—come unhinged right before his eyes?" Stone chuckled mirthlessly, nodding. "Well, Rodney, it was no party for me either." He took a deep breath. "I thought he, or one of the others, was having a joke on me. You know, like first-years sometimes do. Like *I* used to do when I was his age."

Leifeld nodded. "If that's what you thought, then why did you react the way you did? I know you, Alastair. You're not the type to lose your temper that quickly."

Again he sighed. "I don't know. I've not been sleeping well lately, and — well, you might have heard I stayed out a bit late the night before last at the Rose and Crown —"

"I heard," Leifeld said with a smile. "Dr. McGowan says you were quite the life of the party."

"I could well have been — I don't remember." His gaze came up to meet Leifeld's. "But Rodney, I didn't tell you *why* I did that."

"Did what?"

"Stayed out at the pub like that, after I told Aubrey I'd be home early."

Leifeld leaned forward. "All right — why?"

"Because I'd seen another of those things earlier in the day."

For a moment, Leifeld was silent, digesting that information. "Another one — like you saw at the seminar?"

Stone nodded. "And I don't remember for certain, but I think I might have seen another one still, at the pub."

"I see." Leifeld leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowing. "And you've no idea what these things are – or why you're seeing them all of a sudden."

"If I did, I'd be doing something about them." Stone looked down at his hands in his lap, sighing. "Rodney – I don't know what's wrong with me. This is starting to scare me a bit. I've never been one for seeing things."

"Have you spoken with anyone about it?" Leifeld's question was carefully phrased, but Stone nonetheless heard the word *doctor* unspoken in there.

He shook his head. "No, not yet. Well, except for Madame Huan, about the nightmares. She's –"

"– I know Madame Huan," Leifeld said with a smile. "What did she have to say?"

Stone brought his gaze back up to meet Leifeld's. "She said someone – or something – is seeking me." Slowly, he told his friend about the visit. "She couldn't shed any light on what or whom, though, and I didn't see the...apparitions until after our visit. I didn't think anything else of it, really, except that I planned on redoing the wards around the house. Then...I saw it." He shrugged. "The first time, I thought it was just a trick someone was playing. But two – possibly three times in two days?"

Leifeld nodded. "Well – perhaps it's nothing. But if you want my advice, I'd talk to a professional about it. When was the last time you saw a doctor?"

"A doctor, Rodney – or a psychiatrist?" Stone's tone came out a little more sarcastic than he really wanted it to.

"Whichever you prefer." Leifeld refused to rise to the bait. "Either way, it wouldn't be a bad idea. It's not all that uncommon for mages to occasionally – have a few things they need to sort out."

Stone fixed a sharp, bright-blue stare on Leifeld. "Do you think I'm going mad, Rodney? Is that what you're trying not to say?"

"Of course not." Leifeld's tone was calm. "I've known you a long time, Alastair. You've always been a bit – high-strung, but your feet have always been firmly on the ground. I just want you to take care of yourself. There's a lot of interest in this seminar of yours, and I want my faculty to be at their best. I know sometimes you tend to get caught up in what you're doing and neglect your health. Just a bit of advice from an old friend, that's all."

Stone ended up taking Leifeld's advice, but for all the good it did, he needn't have bothered. He made an appointment for the next day to visit his personal physician, who was a mage himself and had treated Stone since he was barely more than a boy. After a thorough physical and astral examination, the doctor pronounced Stone in fine health both physically and mentally, except for the lingering signs of fatigue brought on by lack of sleep. After the examination, Stone told the doctor about the strange visions he'd been having, but this didn't seem to worry him. "Lack of sleep can do strange things to the mind, especially in the magically active," he told Stone. "You know that as well as I do. You start sleeping better, I'm sure this will clear up straight away. Oh, and try not to hit the Guinness too hard until this has straightened itself out," he added with a smile. He gave Stone a prescription for some mild sedatives to help him sleep and sent him on his way.

That evening after dinner, he sat in his study, slumped in his chair and moodily plucking at his electric guitar. Maya, who was draped over the back of the couch, didn't seem to be enjoying the discordant sounds, but she didn't move away, either. She had been staying very close

to him when he was home over the past few days, her wise green eyes watching him from shadowed corners.

As Stone continued attempting to coax the guitar into a passable imitation of the Zombies song that was playing on his sound system, there was a soft knock on the door to the study. "Yes?" he called.

"It's Aubrey, sir. May I—come in?"

Stone twisted around and put the guitar in its stand next to his chair. "Of course, Aubrey. Come on in."

The door opened and the caretaker slowly entered the room. He carried a tray containing some warmed-up leftovers from the dinner Stone had barely picked at earlier, and a tall glass of sparkling water. "I thought you might be hungry, sir," he said a bit hesitantly. "You didn't eat much—"

Stone was about to tell Aubrey thanks but he wasn't in fact hungry when he got a look at his old friend's face. "Sit down, Aubrey," he said gently, motioning toward the couch. "I think you have more on your mind than just feeding me up."

Aubrey sighed, setting the plate and glass down on the edge of Stone's desk and sinking down into the soft leather. He seemed reluctant to speak further, but finally nodded. "Yes, sir." Looking up, he met Stone's eyes. "Sir—I—know it isn't any of my business, but—well—are you all right?"

Stone tilted his head. "What makes you think I'm not? You know I've been having trouble sleeping, but—"

"Yes, sir," Aubrey said. "I know that. But—today while you were gone, you had a call from Dr. Lennox' office, confirming your appointment for this afternoon. I had to tell them I didn't know whether you had one."

"I had one," Stone confirmed. He smiled at the caretaker. "Aubrey, it was nothing. Just a checkup. Rodney convinced me to go talk to Dr. Lennox after I had



a couple of odd episodes over the last couple of days. But you'll be happy to know that he's pronounced me to be in perfect health. He gave me something to help me sleep, but that's all. You can stop worrying."

Aubrey gave him a kindly look that suggested that the day he stopped worrying about his employer would be the day they put him in his grave. "I'm glad to hear you're all right, sir," he said at last. "And I'm glad Dr. Leifeld convinced you to see a doctor." The unspoken end of that sentence was that Aubrey knew *he* would not have been able to do so. "I just want you to remember that I'm here, sir. If you need anything, don't tire yourself out. You're supposed to be on holiday. You just rest and I'll take care of things."

Stone smiled. "I'm *fine*, Aubrey," he assured him. "If that changes, I'll let you know."

"Yes, sir." Aubrey slowly stood up, having a bit of trouble as he always did getting out of the deeply cushioned couch. He motioned toward the plate of food. "Please try to eat something, sir. You barely touched dinner."

"I will. Now go on. You should be home watching your trid shows, not over here worrying about me." Stone picked up the guitar again and laid it across his lap.

Aubrey nodded. "I'll see you in the morning, then." He still looked worried, but there was really nothing else he could do without stepping out of his proper duty. Without further comment, he left the room and closed the door softly behind him.

Stone watched the door close, then looked at Maya. "He worries too much," he said conversationally, casting his communication spell.

"He loves you."

Stone smiled. "I know. But he still worries too much."

"I worry too."

He looked at her sideways, raising an eyebrow. "Doctor said I was all right."

"Doctor doesn't know."

Intrigued now, he put the guitar once again back where it belonged and leaned forward in his chair, his elbows resting on his knees. He hadn't talked much to Maya since the visions had started. "Oh? And what is it that he doesn't know?"

"Something's wrong." Maya jumped down from the couch and came over to him, parking herself at his feet until he moved back and let her leap into his lap. "Bad things around."

"Around what?"

"You."

Stone's eyes widened a bit. He stroked her soft fur and regarded her for a moment. "What sort of bad things?"

"Don't know. Not there all the time. Just sometimes."

Stone paused. "How are they there? Do you see them?"

"Smell them, mostly. Smell bad."

Maya often described the things she experienced on the astral plane in terms of smells. As a dual being, she had access to both the astral and the material planes constantly. "Why didn't Dr. Lennox see...smell them when he looked at the astral plane?"

Cats can't shrug, but Maya was good at giving the impression they could. "Don't know. Maybe they weren't there then. Not always there."

Again Stone paused, almost afraid to ask his next question, but needing to know. "Are they there – now?"

Maya looked up and sniffed delicately. "Yes. But not much. They wait."

"Wait...for what?"

"Don't know."

Stone stared at Maya, his jaw setting a little as he considered what she'd told him. "You say they're there now—well, then, I'm going to have a look at them. I'm getting rather tired of this whole situation. Excuse me a moment, will you, Maya?" Without waiting for an answer, he leaned back in his chair and left his body.

The astral plane was, as always, alight with energy. Stone let himself float upward, looking down at the dimly-glowing form of his physical body, slumped in the chair. Next to it sat the bright, pulsing Maya, who was now watching his astral form with her brilliant green eyes. The whole room had the feel of a well-loved and often-used sanctuary—peaceful and serene in a chaotic world. He made a quick examination of the house and the garage, pleased to discover that Aubrey had returned home and was settling into his chair to watch his trideo shows. The caretaker's aura was concerned but calm; there was nothing to disturb him at the moment. Next to him, the gentle aura of his old dog Mullins was a constant loyal presence.

Satisfied that all was well at the Manor, Stone concentrated on the space around him. He stretched out his senses, trying to find anything out of the ordinary, anything that was searching for him, anything with malevolent intent. When his detection spells didn't turn up anything, he forced himself to relax, to let the energies surround him. Maya watched him worriedly, but he ignored her.

He didn't know how long he remained like that—it could have been an hour, it could have been only a few minutes—when the whispers came.

They were soft, at first, indistinct to his astral ears, blending in with the normal sounds of the living plane. Gentle, sibilant, but insistent: "...help me...someone...anyone... help me..."

Stone stiffened, and next to him, so did Maya. She made a hissing sound under her breath, a growl forming in the back of her throat as she moved forward, the hair on her back and her tail bristling in warning.

Stone paid this no heed. He reached out again, trying to bring the voices closer. "What are you?" he called. "What do you want? How can I help you?"

*"...help me...cannot exist like this...help me...please..."* The voice continued its whispers, never rising high enough to identify anything about it: no gender, no age, just whispers. As Stone continued to listen, the whispers changed, switching to a language he had never heard before. He tried to make sense of it, but it danced away from him, maddening in its urgency. Whatever it wanted, it wanted it soon.

And then abruptly the voice changed again – this time to something that was not a voice at all. The first voice, the whispering, pleading one, retreated, and Stone could almost sense the terror in it. The new not-voice, more a presence than anything else, swirled around Stone. It seemed to laugh, to mock him. There was a darkness to this new presence, an evil that did not seem to exist in the whispering, terrified voice.

Maya stiffened further, moving in, her tail now in full bristle mode. She hissed loudly at the presence, but it ignored her as if she were not even there. It continued to circle Stone as he tried to look everywhere at once, to understand it, to fend it off. His astral form spun around like a man trying to catch falling leaves, but the presence danced away.

"Go away!" Maya yelled in Stone's mind. "Bad thing. Bad thing I smelled. Go back now!"

For a moment it seemed as if Stone was not going to heed her. But then his eyes widened as he saw the fear in

Maya's eyes, and he threw himself to the side, flinging his astral body back into his physical form.

Maya didn't wait to see what the presence would do. Instead, she shifted her perceptions primarily back to the material and looked fearfully at her companion.

Stone was breathing hard, his heart beating rapidly, but otherwise seemed none the worse for wear from his astral encounter. Maya jumped into his lap and fixed her gaze on him until he got himself under control.

"Well," he said at last, "That was a lot of effort for nothing."

Maya cocked her head at him. "Not nothing. Saw bad things."

Stone looked perplexed. "Bad things? Maya, I didn't see anything. What are you talking about? You were right there with me. Did *you* see bad things?"

Maya's luminous green eyes were locked on his blue ones. "I saw. You saw too. Scared thing and bad thing."

"No—Maya, you're mistaken." He shook his head. "I didn't see a thing. Looked around a bit, saw Aubrey and Mullins, then came back and did some poking around, but not—" He looked at her oddly. "Are you sure *you're* all right, Maya?"

"Saw it," she said stubbornly. "Gone a long time."

Stone glanced at the clock, surprised to see that it was already after 2 a.m. He *had* been gone awhile. But why? He racked his brain, trying to remember seeing anything out of the ordinary, but succeeded only in giving himself the beginning of a headache. "Sorry," he said softly. "Don't know what was going on out there that I was gone so long, but there wasn't anything there for *me* to see." He made as if to rise, and Maya leaped down off his lap. "I think I'm going to bed—hadn't intended to stay up this late. Coming?"

Maya watched him with worried suspicion. She couldn't articulate the fact that he seemed far too cavalier about what had happened—even if he *hadn't* seen anything, which she knew was wrong, he should at least have been concerned that *she* had—but he simply rose slowly and headed for the door. She didn't follow—not yet.

Stone trudged up the stairs toward his second-floor bedroom suite, trying to will his hand not to shake as it gripped the wooden banister. The whispering in his mind was barely discernible now—just a slight echo far in the back corners, noticeable only on a subconscious level.

He couldn't tell Maya. He knew that. He couldn't tell anyone. If he told them, then they would take him away. They would lock him up. Perhaps they might even kill him. He couldn't take that chance. He must keep this to himself until he could deal with it.

He *could* deal with it. Something in his mind told him he could. He would just have to be patient. These things took time.

Maya might already know. She looked at him like she knew. He would have to avoid her as much as possible. Fortunately, she could only communicate with him—he had never taught anyone else the special spell he had devised to allow him to understand her, and Aubrey was half convinced he was only kidding about being able to. Maya, he was safe from. For now, anyway.

Yes...it would only be awhile longer. He would keep working, and the answer would come to him. He knew that now. He believed it.

He *had* to believe it.

He stiffened, jerking his hand away as the banister beneath it became a long black snake, its supple muscles undulating under its scales. It hissed at him and then it

was a banister again. He stared at it, breathing hard, eyes wide, and then moved on. They weren't going to have him. No matter what they did, they wouldn't get him. He would find the answer.

He went into his bedroom and closed the door behind him, closing out the little red eyes that watched him from deep shadows.

Aubrey was getting very worried.

Almost another week had passed since the night he had visited Stone in his study, and his employer had been acting increasingly erratic.

He spent most of his time closed up in the study now, when he wasn't out somewhere (he never told Aubrey where he was going anymore, and he rarely took his phone with him). When he emerged to do the things he had to do, such as attend meetings in London, he seemed fine if a bit over-enthusiastic. When he didn't think Aubrey was watching, though, his actions told another story. He jumped at shadows, kept his eyes downcast, and seemed to have developed a fear of being outside. At one point during the week Aubrey risked being far too presumptuous by calling Dr. Lennox and making an appointment for his employer, but Stone promptly called and cancelled it without informing Aubrey. He also didn't get angry, which set off even more warning bells in the caretaker's mind.

Aubrey confronted him the afternoon of his second seminar. "Sir, if I may —"

Stone stopped abruptly and turned back. There was a fever-bright, almost haunted quality to his gaze, as if he were seeing far more than the rest of humanity. "Yes, Aubrey? What is it?" His voice was a little too quick, a little too manic.

"Sir—shouldn't you perhaps call Dr. Leifeld and tell him you won't be there this evening? You don't look to be in any shape to be—"

"No, of course not," Stone snapped. It was not an irritated snap, just the sound of someone who was preoccupied and in a hurry. He gave Aubrey a rather forced smile. "I'm fine. I'm looking forward to it." He held up his old battered briefcase. "I've got all kinds of notes here—been working on them all week. Shame to disappoint the students, yes?"

"But, sir—"

"But nothing, Aubrey." Stone swept past, trying hard not to notice the cascade of brown, shiny insects that poured from the caretaker's mouth as he spoke. "I promised Rodney I'd be there, and I'm going to be there."

Aubrey sighed. "You're not going to drive, are you?" He knew he was giving up and felt disgusted with himself for doing it, but what else could he do? He couldn't exactly restrain Stone physically, after all.

Stone shook his head. "No. Got a cab coming." He reached out and clapped Aubrey on the shoulder, hiding his look of disgust as several of the insects crushed beneath his hand. "See you later on, Aubrey. Don't wait up for me, okay?"

And then he was gone.

Aubrey watched after him for a moment, then looked down as he felt something soft brush against his leg. His eyes were bright with unshed tears as he looked down at Maya. "I'm sorry, Maya. I tried. I don't know what's wrong with him, and he won't let me in anymore. I do so wish you could talk so you could tell me what you know of this..."

Maya's only answer was a look of surprising sympathy, followed by a fearful look out the door as the glow from the taxi's taillights faded into the distance.



Stone sat huddled in the corner of the cab's backseat, his eyes fixed on his hands, which were clutched around the briefcase in his lap. *They aren't there – it's all in your mind*, he told himself for what had to be the hundredth time that day. *They can't hurt you as long as you don't acknowledge them...*

"Nice evening," the cabdriver said cheerfully without turning around.

"Yes. It is." Stone glanced up for a brief moment, then quickly looked back down again. The cabbie's flesh was peeling off the back of his head in long ropy strips, revealing white skull coated with gelled blood. A single bloodshot eye peered at him from the middle of the driver's skull. *All in your mind...all in your mind...*

"What'cha doing at the University this evening?" Clearly the man was trying to make conversation, and he seemed genuinely friendly.

Stone looked up again. The eye had morphed itself into a mouth, and he caught it speaking the last of the words the cabbie had spoken.

*All in your mind...*

"Teaching a seminar," he said, lowering his gaze and clamping his eyes shut. Taking a deep breath, he added, "I'm terribly sorry, but I have a frightful headache. Would it be all right if I just rested quietly until we arrive?"

"Of course, sir. You just rest easy and we'll be there in no time at all." The driver switched on the radio, lowered the volume, and tuned it to some soothing music.

Stone didn't open his eyes the whole way to the University. When the cab stopped in front of the Thaumaturgy Building, it was all he could do to put the payment into the dripping tentacles that reached out to accept it.

*All in your mind, damn you!* he told himself savagely. *None of this is real!*

The little whispering voices in the back of his head seemed to chuckle, but he didn't hear them.

The lecture hall was once again full to capacity, and Stone wasn't conceited enough to believe that it was solely because of his legendary lecturing ability. No, in addition to their interest in the subject matter, most of them were undoubtedly here to see if he would have any more episodes like last week's. Stone was a popular professor, but human (and metahuman) nature being what it was — well, this sort of thing definitely broke the monotony of university life.

He stood at the front of the room a few minutes before the class was scheduled to start and stared down at his briefcase on the table. Contrary to what he had told Aubrey, it was not stuffed full of notes on his talk tonight. He could give that talk in his sleep, without benefit of even the most rudimentary of notes. Instead, the case was full of his increasingly illegible scribbblings as he had attempted to discover the cause for his apparent incipient madness. Despite the fact that no one else would be able to make any sense of them, Stone was reluctant to let them out of his sight. He feared that Aubrey might find them (he had already discovered that the caretaker had gone through his study, although he did not know that Aubrey had been looking for drugs, not magical secrets) and take them to someone like Leifeld, who had the power to follow his line of reasoning, reveal his madness, and have him put away. He was certain that he was getting close to an answer — closer every day. There was a certainty in his mind of which he was not sure of the origin, but he trusted it nonetheless. He had to. He trusted it in the same way that a drowning man clings to a

slowly-deflating life preserver: the trust of the man with no other choice.

He risked a quick glance up at the students as they settled into their chairs and got out their datapads and notebooks. Surprisingly, they all looked normal. Even Davey Hastings, the unfortunate young man he had picked on last week, was there. All of them waiting, anticipation hanging in the air. Would they get an entertaining, informative lecture on manastorms—or would things go weird again?

Stone began. It was a lucky thing that he did know the subject so well, because it enabled him to lecture without really thinking about what he was saying. His voice, hesitant when he started, grew stronger and more confident as he went on and the students continued to focus on him. More importantly, the students continued to be students. He took a deep breath, letting his guard down a little. Perhaps it was over—perhaps whatever was happening to him had finally run its course and was going to—

Davey Hastings' head exploded.

Stone stopped, gasping. He had been looking right at Davey when it happened: one moment the young man was there, and the next moment there was a sound like a ripe melon being dropped and then gore and bone and hair and bits of brain tissue were spraying in all directions, coating the students in his immediate vicinity. They did not seem to notice. They were staring at Stone.

Stone took a deep breath, dragging his gaze from the sight of young Davey, still sitting upright, his bloody stump of a neck oozing gore down his shoulders and chest. *Not real. None of this is real. Pull yourself together...*

He moved quickly over to the other side of the room, ignoring the scattering of murmurs rippling through the

rows. "So," he said briskly, "We'll turn now to the Mojave Desert, in the California Free State. We —"

Something dripped on him from above.

He ignored it, moving away again.

Something else dripped on him. This time it hit his wrist as he was gesturing.

Blood.

Still talking as if nothing had happened, he looked up.

*Not real...not real...notrealnotrealnotreal...*

The mantra burned itself into his mind as he stared at the thing that was hanging from the ceiling, grinning at him — although it had no discernible mouth. It glistened in the fluorescent lights, its skin green, oozing red blood from slashes and punctures all over its body. "No..." he whispered, and hurried to the middle of the room.

"Dr. Stone —" Several of the students were rising from their chairs now, concerned, but he didn't see them.

The back doors were opening.

The windows, high up on the walls, were slowly being obscured by sheets of blood.

Stone looked everywhere, trying to find a place to run, but there was no place. He snatched up his briefcase, then threw it down again as it turned into the rotten, bloated corpse of some unearthly creature. "No...no..." His breath came faster and faster. The students approached him but were afraid to get too close — the look in his eyes frightened them.

Then the doors were open. There were two sets of double doors in the back of the lecture hall; they had all been closed, but now all four doors flew open with a clang. More blood ran down the aisles, pooling up at the bottom, lapping at Stone's feet.

But he wasn't even looking at the blood. The blood was the least of his worries.

Something was coming in through the left-side double doors.

Something he recognized.

The students moved closer as Stone appeared to be distracted.

The thing grinned at him.

"NO!!!" Stone screamed, backing away. "Leave me alone!!! You are DEAD!!!"

One of the students, a tall ork, grabbed his shoulders gently. "Dr. Stone, I think – "

"NOOOOOOOO!!!" Stone struggled in the ork's grasp. The whispering voices were growing louder now. There were more of them. A soft cacophony was erupting in his head. He opened his eyes wide and felt himself lash out. There was a bright flash of light, the sound of many cries of pain, and then there was only the endless fall and the echoes of his own screams.

## 8.

It was early morning on what was looking to be one of the rare nice days in Tacoma this time of year. The sun was just coming up, coloring the faint dusting of clouds with bright pinks and yellows, just beginning to dry up the few puddles that still remained from last night's light rain.

Behind the row of tiny cinder-block houses, a black cat poked around in a dumpster looking for breakfast. The dumpster was, as usual, overflowing—it served the entire row, which at one point many years ago had been the components of an old-fashioned motel with individual self-contained units, but it had been converted sometime during the early part of the century into rental housing. Some of the units—the ones on the ends—even had small one-car garages now. The character of the place was somewhat rundown, but mostly respectable; it was the sort of place where the neighbors left each other alone, although it was hard to determine whether that was out of fear of what they might find out or out of a sense of propriety. Perhaps it was a bit of both. Either way, most of the residents liked it that way. Even better was the fact that the landlord left you alone as well, as long as you paid your rent on time and didn't make visible trouble. At no time in the memory of any of the current residents had he ever shown any interest in what they were doing inside their units. Of course, that meant that they were pretty much on their own for repairs as well, but nobody minded that too much. It was a small price to pay for being left alone and not having the rent jacked up every year.

The cat looked up as the sound of soft quick footfalls caught its ears, rising over the background noise of traffic on the street a short distance away. It stiffened a moment,

standing very still until it saw the figure round the corner, then returned to its business. As long as the sounds didn't get any closer, it wasn't worried.

The man responsible for the sounds that had momentarily disturbed the cat slowed from his quick jog as he approached the houses. Ocelot was barely breathing hard after his morning run. He hadn't been out for heavy exercise, but just a half an hour or so of the feeling of the wind on his face and the ease of his muscles doing what they were made to do. He had always been a physical person, someone who didn't like to sit still for long. He enjoyed the nearly effortless sensation of movement, of accomplishment, of the knowledge that his body was in top condition and would do without question nearly everything he asked of it. It was one of the few things anymore that truly made him feel alive.

He stopped for a moment at the entrance to the row of houses, looking down the long entryway that was half-driveway, half-street as he ran his towel across his face. He'd scarcely broken a sweat this morning. That was all right, though: later on today he would do his "real" workout inside, and he'd be sweating plenty then. Wrapping the towel back around his neck, he continued down the road toward his house. It was one of the few that had a garage—he had been lucky to find it. He'd been here several years already and had no particular desire to move. The place was small, but it had everything he needed and nothing he didn't. He liked to live as he traveled: light.

Ocelot paused again at his door, fishing in the pocket of his sweatpants for the maglock key. It didn't look like it from the outside, but the door to his place was a lot more secure than those of at least the majority of the other houses around the area. For that matter, so were all the windows. He might not have been as paranoid as 'Wraith

(then again, *nobody* was as paranoid as 'Wraith) but he nonetheless did the best he could to make sure nobody uninvited found their way into his home without a whole lot of effort.

His hand closed around the key after briefly touching the small, cylindrical form of his monowhip. He always felt a little vulnerable when he went out running because it wasn't practical to wear his armored jacket, but between his speed and his skill with the tiny but deadly weapon, he wasn't too worried. Most of the people around here had already marked him as someone not to mess with, and he usually heard from somebody if there was anyone new and unfamiliar in the area. He had long ago deemed it an acceptable risk.

Opening the door, he glanced quickly around inside before entering, a habit he had picked up so long ago that he didn't remember ever *not* doing it. Everything, as usual, looked fine. There was little in the place that you couldn't see from the door—it had three rooms: a bedroom, which he had transformed into a workout room; a main area that contained a tiny kitchenette, a dining table, a bed, a couch, and two chairs; and a bathroom which was reachable from both the main room and the bedroom. Ocelot closed the door behind him and, after glancing into the bath and the workout room to make sure nobody was lurking, he peeled off his slightly sweaty T-shirt and tossed it on the floor in a growing pile of laundry next to the bed and flopped into one of the chairs with a sigh. Then he kicked off his shoes, got up again and headed for the kitchen, where he pulled a beer out of the nearly empty refrigerator. Returning to the chair, he dropped back into it and clicked on the trid unit. For about ten minutes he drank beer and stared half-seeingly at the sports news channel.



It had been almost a week since 'Hawk, 'Wraith, and Joe had left to go their various between-run ways. 'Hawk had gone first, eager to get out of Seattle for awhile and return home to his manor house in England and his life of leisure. Ocelot couldn't really say he blamed him. He'd finally gotten his mind around the fact that 'Hawk did runs these days mainly for the mental stimulation and satisfaction of curiosity, but it was still damn nice to have a place like that to go home and decompress for awhile when it was over.

Joe and 'Wraith had left the next day, the former heading off into the hills somewhere, the latter taking off on his bike and pointed east. As usual, Ocelot wasn't sure where they went and he didn't ask, just as they didn't ask when he took off for parts unknown. It was just one of those unwritten things: no matter how close a friend somebody was in the shadows, you didn't ask something like that. If they volunteered the information, as 'Hawk had, then that was different. Otherwise you kept your curiosity to yourself. All Ocelot knew about where 'Wraith went was that it was somewhere in New York.

Ocelot sighed, finishing off the last of the beer and tossing the can at the trash receptacle (which was currently the bag his latest pair of new athletic shoes had come in). He wondered, as he occasionally did lately, what Kestrel was doing these days, and as usual the thought made him somewhat morose.

His mind drifted back to that night two months ago when she had invited him over and broken the news to him that Gabriel was back in town after his month-long absence and that she was going to leave with him for awhile. When he'd asked where they were going, she had told him she didn't know—that Gabriel wanted to get away from Seattle and see the world for awhile, he had invited her to go with him, and she had accepted. He'd

asked her how long they would be gone, and again she had been forced to tell him (a bit reluctantly) that she didn't know that either. It would depend on Gabriel. He had wished her luck—what else could he do?—and she had kissed him goodbye. Neither of them had suggested the possibility that he might stay the night. That had been the last he had seen of her for two months, except for a couple of postcards he had received: one from Cameroon and one from Scotland. The last had been more than two weeks ago. He had tried to call her once, about a week after she had left, but the message had come back that her phone was in an area not covered by the service. Knowing how few of those were left in the world, Ocelot hoped she knew what she was doing and left it at that. If she wanted to come back, she would. And besides, they weren't exactly *together* anymore, were they?

He remained in essentially the same position for about the next hour, letting his mind continue to drift, not really thinking or paying attention to anything in particular. It felt good to relax—or the closest he ever got to relaxing, at least. His gaze flitted over the impressive array of weapons he had hanging from every wall, lingering the longest on the two newest additions to his collection: a *manriki-gusari* from Japan and a *dah-dau* from China. He had been meaning to get in some practice with those for awhile now, but the run they had been on, especially with the travel involved, had made that difficult. Now that the run was over and his time was his own again, there was no reason why he couldn't get started. He decided that he would incorporate the *manriki-gusari* into his workout later today.

The sports channel had switched to live coverage of a golf tournament, so he flipped over to regular news. The talking heads were discussing a new trid movie that was coming out next week. He'd forgotten just how much

nothing was on during the day. Clicking off the trid unit, he dragged himself out of the chair and headed in the general direction of the shower.

The phone rang.

Ocelot stopped and looked at it for a moment, wondering who would be calling him this time of day. Probably another telemarketer. He picked it up. "Yeah?"

There was silence on the other end.

Ocelot frowned. "Is somebody there?"

More silence.

He shrugged, dropping the phone back into its cradle. *Probably just some wrong number who doesn't speak English.* He continued into the bathroom and started up the shower without bothering to close the door.

The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Ocelot spent about three hours in the mid-afternoon at his workout, running through *katas*, practicing both armed and unarmed combat techniques, reinforcing the moves his muscles knew without his mind's ever having to think about them. The last hour of the workout was spent with the *manriki-gusari*, and that was the hardest part because it was an unfamiliar weapon. Ocelot prided himself on knowing how to use just about every type of hand weapon that had ever been made, which meant that learning this new one wasn't as hard as it would have been had he been less skilled. The *manriki-gusari* was very much like *nunchaku*, but with enough subtle differences that he knew it would be awhile before he would take this one out anywhere where his life or his friends' would depend on his ability to use it as second nature. Every weapon, even different individuals of the same type, had a character all its own. Learning that character, becoming intimately familiar with every nuance of weight, balance, strike—that was the secret to being a fighter of Ocelot's

level of expertise. Even the short time he hadn't been practicing during the run had resulted in a slight but noticeable decrease in his skill level. He knew it would take him a few days of workouts like this to hone his abilities back to their top form.

At the end of the workout, he was drenched. His dusty-blond hair, tied back with a leather thong into a long ponytail, was darkened by sweat until it looked almost brown; his light tank top stuck to his chest and back. He was satisfied. Now *that* was a proper workout. He carefully wiped off the weapons he had used and hung them back in their spots on the walls (the weapons always came first, and were always taken care of before he attended to his own comfort) and then headed off to take another shower.

When he emerged feeling human again, he realized that he hadn't made any particular plans for the evening. He dropped down into his chair, clicking the trid back on and mentally going over his options. He wasn't a party kind of guy. The closest he got when he wasn't forced to attend such things for some run or another was a few small, smoky blues clubs scattered around greater Seattle. But even those didn't sound like what he wanted to do tonight. Normally when he didn't have anything better to do he might head down to the Wharf Rat and try to scare up a fight or two, or else call up one of his favorite purveyors of commercial affection and set up an evening's entertainment. Oddly, neither appealed to him at the moment. He sighed, wishing for the first time this week that his teammates hadn't already left town. It would have been nice to call up 'Hawk for a beer, or 'Wraith or Joe for some sparring.

The phone rang.

He reached over, stretching to pick it up. "Yeah?"

Silence.

He glared at the phone, remembering the incident earlier in the day. He occasionally got wrong numbers, but rarely two in one day. "Hey –if somebody's there, say something, willya?"

Silence...

...and then...

...a sound.

A soft, scratching sound, barely louder than and almost indistinguishable from the slight hiss in the line.

Inexplicably, Ocelot's heartbeat began to quicken. "Who the hell is that?" he demanded. "Say something!"

But there was no response, except that the scratching sound changed, just a bit. It was hard to tell how, though. It just...changed.

Ocelot's hand tightened around the phone until his knuckles grew white. "*Say something, damn you!*" he yelled. When there was still no response, he slammed the phone down with a loud clatter. He continued to stare at it, eyes wide, breath coming in short sharp gasps, for several minutes.

It did not ring again.

Gradually, after several more minutes, he relaxed, settling back down in his chair. He glanced at the now-silent phone, allowing the tension to drain out of his muscles, his heartbeat to slow back down to normal, his breath to resume its usual rate. In the background the trid unit droned on, the talking heads, unnoticed, relating the day's football scores. He reached across the table and snapped on the overhead light, bathing the room in its gentle illumination.

Suddenly he felt foolish.

He looked at the phone again, laughing under his breath, softly, self-consciously. What the hell had *that* been about?

The phone had rung. He had answered it. There'd been no one there. It wasn't exactly an unheard-of occurrence. Why had it freaked him out so?

He let out his breath slowly, running a hand back through his hair. *Maybe you're just tired. Maybe this is your body's way to tell you it's time to just get some sleep.*

Yeah. That sounded good. Sleep. Tomorrow was another day. He'd have another workout tomorrow, maybe run some errands. Hell, maybe he'd talk to Harry about picking up a little solo work while the rest of the guys were gone. Easy stuff: a little bodyguarding, a courier run maybe—nothing too dangerous. Just something to get him out of the house for awhile.

That decided, he hauled himself out of the chair, checked all the locks on the doors, stripped down to his shorts and climbed into his unmade bed. Before he turned the light off, he took one last look at the phone.

It was silent, just as he expected it to be.

He was awakened the next morning by the sound of a knock on the door.

His eyes flew open, his body immediately stiffening. His mind, instantly aware that something had happened but not aware of what it was, fought to make sense of whatever stimulus had caused it to be in that state. He sat up, listening.

The knock repeated.

He stared hard at the door and then leaped out of the bed in one smooth motion, landing cat-soft on the balls of his feet. He crossed the distance in two long strides, moving to one side of the door as he glanced at the monitor for the security camera he had set up to cover the area.

The tiny screen showed only an empty entryway. There was no one there.

Ocelot let out his breath, only then realizing that he had been holding it. People at the door were rarer by an order of magnitude than wrong numbers on the phone. Aside from the guys on the team, Kestrel, and occasionally a pizza delivery guy, nobody came to visit. There wasn't much door-to-door salesmanship going on anymore these days—it was too dangerous for the salespeople to risk themselves by soliciting unfamiliar customers. Even the pizza guys usually wore armor.

Moving slowly and deliberately, he slid sideways until he was directly in front of the door and peered out through the peephole, taking care not to make any noise that might be heard on the other side. The door was armored, but even the best armor wouldn't stand up to every attack. His muscles were tensed, a thin sheen of sweat beginning to form on his skin.

Nothing.

The street looked as it always did this time of the morning: gray and dingy in the overcast haze, with no signs of life except a delivery truck chugging by and Old Lady Yazstrcymski walking her Rottweiler, Fluffy, across the way.

Ocelot gritted his teeth. This was getting ridiculous. He snapped up his armored coat from where he'd tossed it over a chair, shrugged into it, and grabbed the nearest firearm—it happened to be his Defiance T-250 shotgun. With the Defiance held at the ready, he undid the locks on the door and flung it open, shoving the barrel of the gun out first and then following it, looking up, down, left and right.

Still nothing.

Old Lady Yazstrcymski didn't even look up. The elderly ork had seen stranger behaviors from some of the residents around here, and everybody knew you minded your own business if you wanted to stay healthy.

Ocelot remained outside for another several minutes, investigating the area around the front of the house including the roof. He switched on the thermographic vision in his cybereyes in case the unseen visitor had left any kind of heat-trails, but there were none. "Okay," he muttered under his breath as he finally gave up and went back inside. He stowed the Defiance back in its place and tossed the coat back over the chair. Maybe there *hadn't* been anyone there.

But that didn't make any sense. He'd heard the knock. The first one might have been just a dream, but the second one had been clear as day. *Somebody* had been out there. He regretted not asking Mrs. Yazstrcymski if she'd seen anyone, but she was surely long gone by now. He'd ask her later if he saw her.

Still keyed up, he dropped into his chair, his imagination working overtime. This incident was giving him uncomfortable reminders of another odd series of events that had occurred at his place a few months ago — the events that had led up to the team's first meeting with Gabriel's brother Stefan. Ocelot looked around the room a little nervously, remembering how the weapons hanging on his walls had been moved around, even the ones inside his locked safe — only they hadn't, really. It had all been an illusion perpetrated by a powerful dragon to lure his equally powerful brother into a confrontation. It had worked, but not before a lot of trouble had been caused for all concerned.

Ocelot shook his head in frustration. This *couldn't* have been Stefan. For one thing, Stefan was dead. For another, the dragon had, prior to his untimely and unfortunate demise, experienced a change of heart that even Ocelot, the ultimate skeptic when it came to that particular dragon, had accepted as genuine.

So if not Stefan, then who?



"You're bein' an idiot," Ocelot said aloud to himself. *It was just kids. Or somebody threw somethin' at the door. It happens.*

"Maybe I oughtta get outta here for awhile," he said, again speaking aloud. He considered. The idea wasn't a bad one at that. Maybe he could head down to CalFree for a month or so, visit with Sensei, maybe get in some workouts with somebody whose skill level was higher than his. At least it would be a change of pace. It was certainly better than sitting here in his shorts, staring at the four walls, and waiting for his mind (or whatever the hell else it was) to play tricks on him.

He had started to get up out of the chair when the phone rang again.

*Let the machine get it, he told himself angrily. If this is another wrong number, let 'em talk to air.*

But he was already moving toward it. With a combination of reluctance and a strange near-compulsion, he picked it up and held it to his ear. "Who's this?"

The gentle scratching noises started right away this time. Ocelot's eyes widened, his breathing increased in rate, and his heart began to pound in his chest. His grip tightened on the phone. He wanted to put it down, but he couldn't do it. His brain wouldn't send the message to his muscles allowing him to let go. Shaking, he stood rooted to the spot as the soft, strange noises continued, never rising far enough above the slight level of static in the line to be recognizable.

He wasn't aware of how long he had been standing there until the eerie transfixed feeling left him—along with the scratching sounds, although he didn't notice that fact consciously. The phone receiver slipped from his hand and clattered to the floor. He blinked a few times, looking around the room, shaking his head to clear it. As the haze lifted he was beginning to realize what was

wrong, and it spurred him to action. He was surprised he hadn't figured it out a long time ago. It was so obvious, after all.

*I have to get out of here. Now.*

Moving in a daze, he hurried around the small house, wadding up clothes and shoving them into his motorcycle bags. *They're coming. They know where I live. They've showed me that by the calls, by the knock on the door. That was just the warning. They'll be here soon.*

His movements were haphazard but efficient as he gathered up the things he needed. When he finished with the clothes he stowed his monowhip, ninja sword, stun baton, and tonfa in their customary spots, taking care to keep them well hidden and well padded. Without bothering to shower he pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, then slipped into his armored bike jacket and leather boots. All the time he was doing this his gaze was roaming nervously around the house, as if he expected someone to be sneaking in through a window. No one did, but that didn't stop him from looking anyway.

Briefly the thought entered his mind that he should call someone—Harry, maybe, or one of his teammates—and let them know what was going on. If he was in danger, perhaps they were too. But no sooner had the thought touched his mind that something within him violently opposed it. *No—you don't know how they found out about you. The guys might have told them. If they did, then you're in more danger if you let 'em know you're leaving. Just go. Get out. Now.*

He checked the locks on the front door and the windows just to make sure; they were still secure. Then, slinging his bags over his shoulder, he exited through the door to the garage. Behind him, the phone, still off the hook, called out its electronic protest unheard.

*Go.*

Less than ten minutes later he was on the road, and not a moment too soon. As he had closed the garage door behind him and double-checked it to verify that it was locked, he had noticed Old Lady Yazstrcymski and Fluffy standing outside her house a few doors down, talking to a man holding the leash of a brown mutt. Ocelot didn't recognize the man or the dog, but as he'd ridden out of the garage on his Aurora, both he and the old lady had looked over at him. *Too late*, the voice in his head told him triumphantly. *You're both too late. You won't get me now. I'm outta here.* He roared off into the morning traffic with a quick final glance back over his shoulder. They weren't looking at him anymore; they appeared to have gone back to their conversation. But Ocelot knew better.

It wasn't until he had broken free of the Seattle sprawl and settled into a fast, comfortable cruising pace on I-5 that he remembered that he'd forgotten to bring his portable phone, but in retrospect he determined that had probably been a good decision. He had already decided that he wasn't going to call anyone in San Francisco until he actually got there—too much chance that someone undesirable might overhear and be waiting for him when he arrived, or worse yet, do something to Sensei to get to him—and he didn't want anyone calling *him*. If they couldn't reach him, maybe they wouldn't be able to find him. He hoped that was the case.

He kept a close eye on the traffic around him as he rode. This time of the morning it had been quite heavy through Seattle, but once he got out of town it lightened up considerably. Not too many people traveling south in the middle of the week. *Good. You can make sure nobody's following you.* As he passed each car he glanced across at the driver. Most of them he couldn't see because a majority of the later-model vehicles had one-way glass all

around; when he encountered this he sped up until he was past the offending vehicle. He couldn't do anything about the crawling sensation on the back of his neck and his back (*they're watching me*) so he tried his best to ignore it and get as far ahead of traffic as he could.

A few miles north of the Tir Tairngire border, he stopped to gas up the bike and get something to eat. He bought extra food and stowed it in his tailbag; he didn't want to have to stop any longer than he had to in the Tir. He knew from experience that if you went straight through and stayed on I-5 they didn't usually bother you, but if you pulled off very far you increased your chances of getting hassled by the humorless elven authorities. Especially if you weren't tall and skinny with pointed ears. Humans they tolerated, mostly, if they minded their own business and didn't stick around.

His fake IDs and a good-sized contribution to the welfare of the border guards got him across the checkpoint as it always had before, with the understanding that he was simply passing through on his way to visit San Francisco and did not intend to remain within the Tir borders any longer than absolutely necessary. He knew he would be watched and his progress tracked, but oddly this time the idea didn't bother him. He was reasonably sure that the Tir authorities had more important things to do than to be in with *them*, so unless they reported him to the wrong people, he felt as safe as it was possible to feel (which still wasn't very) within the borders.

He rode straight through as promised, maintaining a speed a bit on the high side of legal and stopping only twice for gas and rest breaks. There were a few gas stations located directly off the highway that catered to those doing exactly what he was doing; they were usually staffed by non-elves, as if the elven population of the Tir

had better uses of their time than to deal with the riff-raff trying to get to Cal Free. That was fine with Ocelot. He didn't talk to anyone and they didn't talk to him.

It took him about seven hours to reach the Cal Free border, and by that point his mind and his body were thoroughly road-tired. The check to get *out* of the Tir was considerably less stringent than the one to get *in* (meaning that the bribe was not as large) so he wasn't held up long at the border. By the time he made it through, all he could think of was getting off the road for awhile and getting some sleep. From many previous trips down he knew there was a small cluster of motels north of Redding that didn't ask too many questions, so that was where he headed. He didn't want to stop—it seemed a bad idea, though he wasn't sure quite why—but he was smart enough to know that he was too tired to go on. The last thing he needed was to doze off on the bike and wind up plastered across the front end of a northbound semi. No—sleep, as ill-advised as it was, was still a better idea than the alternative.

By the time he reached Redding and checked into one of the grungy motels (this one was his favorite—it was a single story, so he could bring his bike into the room with him) he still had time to get a few hours' sleep before sunrise, when he planned to leave. He quickly made a circuit around the room, checking for obvious bugs, broken locks on windows or door, and intruders hiding under the bed, in the closet, or inside the bathroom. With his thermographic vision he verified that there were no heat spots indicating invisible lurkers. Satisfied, he parked his bike inside the room in front of the door. If anyone was going to break in during the night, they were in for a surprise. The Franchi-SPAS he brought over to the bed, where he leaned it against the nightstand, loaded and ready. He rummaged around in the bike's tailbag until he

found the food he'd put there earlier that day and took that, along with the beer he'd bought on his last rest stop in the Tir, back to the bed. Kicking off his boots he sat down on the bed, propped the pillows against the wall, and switched on the battered trid unit to drown out the sounds of the people in the room next door (who sounded both drunk and very amorous). The trid only got four channels clearly and there was nothing good on any of them, but it was better than listening to the bump and grind going on on the other side of the wall. It was just as well anyway, because even with all the distractions he was asleep twenty minutes after he finished eating. The trid and the neighbors droned on but he no longer heard either of them.

He didn't sleep very well. Most of his few hours of rest were spent thrashing around, haunted by dreams that he couldn't remember but that seemed to involve someone in very deep trouble begging for rescue, and his own inability to do anything to help. By the time he awakened he couldn't recall anything more about the dream except that it had disturbed him. He sat up, noticing that he had thrashed the sheets clear from their moorings and had them wadded up at the foot of the bed at his feet. It wasn't sunrise yet, but he knew from past experience that he wasn't going to be getting any more sleep that night; he might as well get an early start on the day. Moving in a slight daze, he gathered his things together and began re-stowing them on the bike. Behind him, the trideo (which he hadn't ever turned off the night before) was playing an infomercial that had something to do with improving your car engine's performance using magnets. Ocelot ignored it as he finished arranging his bags.

He was just about to open the door and push the bike out into the darkness when the room's phone buzzed.

Ocelot froze. "No..." he said under his breath. *They can't have found me here. Not this fast –*

He turned back toward the door, fumbling with the knob, trying to ignore the buzz. It rang several more times before his shaking hands were able to work the door and shove it open.

Barely getting the bike turned and pointed in the right direction, he threw his leg over it and fired it up, roaring off just as the sun's first faint glimmerings could be seen in the sky. As he disappeared into the distance, the door swung lazily on its off-kilter hinges. The sound of the phone, which was not ringing, echoed in his ears and his mind long after it would have been possible to hear it if it had been.

He didn't stop again until he hit Sacramento and cut over to Highway 80 toward San Fran. He didn't like the idea of stopping in the Central Valley even for a short time, but at least he was human and therefore only looked upon with the suspicion of locals for a newcomer, not with the hostility of racist humans for anyone who wasn't of their metatype. The junction where he stopped catered to travelers anyway, which meant that the most virulent of the racism wasn't in evidence here—and even at its worst it wasn't anywhere near as bad as the Chico—Oroville area, which he avoided like the plague. The whole concept usually bothered him, but not today—he was far too high on unease and adrenaline to think about anything but getting where he was going. He wolfed down a quick early lunch, gassed up the bike, and soon he was back underway, heading west on 80.

The fact that he had done this many times before allowed the whole operation to be completed smoothly, a

fact for which he was grateful. He was having a hard time concentrating—his mind was full of weird formless fears and couldn't seem to settle on a thought for very long, so it was a good thing that he had the routine down and could practically perform it in his sleep. West 80 to the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge, south on 101 across the Golden Gate, and use his forged work ID to get past the Japanese guards on the other side. He was a bit worried about getting the guns through, but he had lucked out this time: he was heading in with the rest of the morning work rush. The fact that he was human meant that he got to slip through with a nod from one of the guards after having his card examined, while the troll and ork behind him were stopped for questioning. Again he didn't like the racism, but this time he was guiltily grateful that it had worked in his favor.

From that point, it was simply a matter of riding carefully and cautiously (so as not to attract the attention of the authorities, who didn't look kindly on *gaijin* in the first place, and even less kindly on troublemaking *gaijin*) until he arrived at Sensei's hidden Chinatown dojo.

En route, though, he realized two things: first, he was hungry, and second, he still had not told Sensei that he was coming. It would be rude of him to simply show up on her doorstep, even though he knew she would welcome him as she always did with no questions. No, he'd stop somewhere first and call from there. It would be better that way.

He was passing through Fisherman's Wharf as he had this thought, which was fortuitous. The area was still set up for tourists; that meant it would be fairly easy for him to lose himself for half an hour or so among the crowds. There was a little bar and grill nearby called the Grotto that he'd been to a few times before; five minutes later he had his bike parked out back and he was seated in the



back near a window where he could keep an eye on it. A beer and a sandwich would improve his outlook, he hoped.

Sitting there gave him a little time to think, for the first time since he had left. Despite the length of the trip he hadn't really done much thinking on the bike—he'd just set his mind on the kind of hum it needed to do that kind of mileage in such a short time. Now, though, as he settled back and sipped his beer, his mind began to relax a bit.

What was going on, anyway? Why had he run away so fast? What was he running *from*? Even now he wasn't sure, but the thought gave him formless, uneasy distress. *I should call the guys. Something's wrong, and they're –*

A buzzing began in the back of his head, blocking out the thought. He shook his head back and forth quickly, his long ponytail whipping around behind him. Closing his eyes, he put his hands over his face and tried to remember what he had been thinking.

"Sir?"

Ocelot looked up. A woman stood there in front of him. She wore jeans, a blue shirt, and a no-nonsense canvas apron. She carried a plate with a large, steaming sandwich and a pile of potato chips. His waitress. He nodded as she set down the plate in front of him. "Uh...thanks."

*Is she looking at me? Why is she looking at me like that?*

The waitress, oblivious to his thoughts, smiled and turned away, moving back inside. Ocelot watched her go. As she disappeared into the crowd his gaze fell on two humans seated at a table a few meters away. They were both men, both dressed in the suits of middle managers. One of the men, dark-haired and middle-aged, happened to be looking at Ocelot just as he was looking at the two of

them. The man nodded politely and returned his attention to the conversation he had been having with his friend.

Ocelot stiffened. From somewhere deep in his mind the thought came, almost as if it was coming from someone else: *They're in on it too. They've found me already. They know where I am.*

*All right. Stay calm. They can't do anything to you in here.* He looked down at the sandwich, then back at the two men. They were ignoring him now, thoroughly absorbed in their own business. *That's just a front. They've seen me – they're probably reporting in. Have to get out of here, but have to do it subtly. If I run they'll follow me. Have to make them think I don't know.*

Again he looked down at the sandwich. It had just arrived – if he left now without touching it that would be very suspicious. They'd certainly notice and have him before he made it out the door. He'd have to force himself to eat at least some of it before he left. Picking it up, he took a bite; his mouth was dry and the thing tasted like wet rubber between two slices of cardboard. He fought to slow his breathing, to get his heartbeat back down to normal levels. Focusing on the old-fashioned black and white framed fishing photos hanging on the wall next to his table, he took another bite and then another, washing them down with beer that now tasted more like weak acid than refreshing beverage. From the corner of his eye he sneaked another glance at the men: their food had arrived and they were both laughing. *They're getting ready. They're happy they've found me. They'll probably get some kind of prize for bringing me in.*

Suddenly he had an idea. It was a long shot – if they caught on, he might be trapped – but if it worked, he might be able to get out without being seen. Checking to be sure the two men weren't looking, he pulled out enough money (he always carried paper money in addition to his credsticks – easier and less traceable) to

cover the cost of the meal and tip, and slid it under the plate with just enough sticking out so the busperson would see it. Then, deliberately leaving the rest of the sandwich untouched, he stood, glanced around for a moment as if looking for something in particular, then nodded in satisfaction and headed for the doorway marked "Restrooms." He already knew where it was; the look around was for the benefit of his observers, who still didn't seem to be paying any attention to him.

Once he was out of sight, he hurried down the hallway, passing the two marked restroom doors, and slipped in through the door to the kitchen. He had noticed earlier that there was a way outside from the kitchen, and the door had been propped open to let in some fresh air. At the time he'd parked there had been two busboys out back having a smoke, but they were gone now. Not quite believing his good fortune, he moved silently through the short distance to the exit door and made his escape, grinning. *By the time they realize I'm not coming back, I'll be long gone! Maybe I'll finally give them the slip.*

As he roared off down the Embarcadero, another less happy thought supplanted that one: *Shit...if they're after me I can't go to Sensei. Don't want to drag her into this.*

This was bad. The buzzing was starting in his head again. He couldn't even call her—he knew that if he did, she would want to help. An ex-shadowrunner herself, the Japanese ork now ran a successful dojo and still maintained contacts with her former team, but Ocelot knew that whatever this was, it was not only not her problem, but might prove actively dangerous to her and her friends. He couldn't do that to his old teacher. He was on his own here, and he knew it.

He stopped at a red light, lanesplitting up to the front as he assessed his options. He couldn't go back to Seattle—too many people knew how to find him there. He

couldn't stay here, not like this. They knew he was here and without Sensei, he had nowhere to stay and no real reason to be here. But if not, then —

The guy in the next car was watching him. He hadn't even looked in that direction, but he knew it.

His eyes darted sideways.

He was right.

It was a late-model Ford Americar. The man was its only occupant. The window was rolled down and the guy was smoking. His eyes glowed red. He smiled.

*Shit!*

The light changed and Ocelot was off like a shot, flying across the intersection and turning on a side street before any of the cars could even get started.

*I can't stay here. Gotta go. Gotta get out —*

But where? Where could he go?

He forced himself to slow down, to merge with traffic, not to draw attention to himself. That would be the worst thing he could do right now. Just blend in and think...think...

His mind raced over the possible alternatives. NAN? No, he couldn't go there—he didn't have the proper paperwork, faked or otherwise, and the Native American border guards' sense of humor rivaled that of the Tir's for nonexistence. Aztlán? *Don't be an idiot. Talk about out of the frying pan and into the fire!* The Big Sur coast? Maybe, but the combination of unfamiliarity and lack of large cities made him reluctant. He was a city kid, and if he wanted to get lost somewhere, that somewhere had better have more concrete than trees if he was going to survive.

Los Angeles.

The second it popped into his head he knew that was the answer. L.A. was big, it was urban, it was varied — and it had an enormous population of SINless individuals like himself.

And best of all, nobody down there knew him.

He couldn't put anyone at risk, and they couldn't endanger him by talking to the wrong people.

He pulled back out onto Embarcadero and headed for the freeway, trying to ignore the couple on the corner who were both watching him.

*I'll be long gone before they get their report in.*

The trip down to Los Angeles took him about six hours, including two very short breaks for rest and water. Now that he had made up his mind, he wanted to get there as fast as possible. He took Highway 101; he would have preferred 5 because it was in the middle of nowhere and it would have been less likely that someone would hassle him, but that meant cutting back across from San Francisco and he didn't want to waste the time.

Like the Tir, getting out of San Fran was easier than getting in. The trip was uneventful except for a few times when he was convinced he was being followed and had to speed up to triple digits to get away from his would-be pursuers. They never followed him that fast—he figured they had instructions to keep him in sight but to be subtle about it. There was nothing at all subtle about a minivan doing 110 down 101.

It was late afternoon when he cruised at last into the Los Angeles sprawl and he was dog-tired. The lack of rest last night was beginning to catch up with him, especially after having been hunched in essentially the same position for several hours in a row. The Aurora was a good bike—fast, flickable and mostly reliable—but it was by no means a bike for long-distance touring. *Shoulda brought the Triumph*, he thought, picturing the dark green sport-tourer Winterhawk had given him a couple of years ago. But it was too late for that kind of decision now, and besides, he didn't want the mage to be able to track him.

The thought that 'Hawk might be able to track him *anyway* using magic gave him a brief moment of panic, but he put it aside. There was nothing he could do about it, and if 'Hawk came after him he'd deal with him. That was all there was to it. Same for any of the rest of the guys. It was probably they who had ratted on him in the first place—the reason why he had to run like this.

The reason why he had to hide.

He spent the next hour cruising around the freeways, trying to decide where to go. He had only been to Los Angeles a couple of times, and only briefly. Still, a city was a city, at least to someone who had spent as long in the shadows as Ocelot had. Instinctively he avoided anyplace that looked too clean, too pretty, too well-ordered (*corpers, cops, rich fat-cats*); he also avoided places that looked too rundown and blasted out (even with his unfamiliarity with L.A. he had heard some of the nastier rumors about places like El Infierno and Coast Town). Instead, after struggling with the freeway system for another hour, he opted to pull off at Harbor. The edges of the place, at least from his vantage point on the 405, didn't look too bad. After he settled in, he would go looking for the shadow community. There always was one, and if you knew the right things to say and had the right balance on your credstick, they could help you with just about everything.

*Just have to make sure they're not working for them. That's gonna be hard.*

The buzzing in the back of his head had been increasing its intensity over the last few hours; he'd been able to ignore it—mostly, at least—while he was riding. When he became convinced that one of the cars was following him or watching him, it was a fairly easy proposition to speed up and get out of their way. The

Aurora was narrow and Ocelot was a good enough rider (not to mention a crazy enough rider) that lanesplitting between traffic going freeway speed on a five-lane highway was not something he feared. At least not enough not to do it to get away from his pursuers. So far none of *them* had chased him on their own motorcycles, but he knew he had to get off the road and hole up somewhere before they figured it out. Their reach was long and their agents many. That had already been proven to him numerous times over the course of the trip.

He took the next exit and rode at random for the next half-hour, relying on his instincts to keep him away from trouble spots. He wasn't quite sure where he was except that it was somewhere in the Harbor district; the buildings around here were mostly industrial and depressing, the people wary and watchful. Ocelot recognized the familiar gang markings spray-painted on the sides of some of the buildings, fences, and other landmarks; he didn't know the actual gangs, of course, but their marks were unmistakable to someone who had spent the largest part of his youth in the culture. *Maybe I can make a deal with the local gang to keep an eye out for them.*

He shook his head as the buzzing increased. *Maybe the gang's in with them. Can't trust anyone. I'm on my own.*

It was starting to get dark. It took him awhile to find a place to stay; accommodations didn't seem to be plentiful around here. He almost missed the tiny motel (it looked like one of those chain places that had lost its franchise and gone independent) because its main sign had been shot to pieces and taped up with duct tape. The "VACANCY" sign hung askew from two thin chains, one slightly longer than the other. Ocelot pulled in and, keeping his bike in sight, made arrangements for a room on the first floor. As he had hoped and expected, it was a cash-only, no-questions-asked kind of place. He filled out

the required form with a fake name and address, and the clerk didn't even look twice as he passed the key through the small hole in the bulletproof glass surrounding his work area.

Ocelot didn't bother to fire the bike up again on the way to the room; instead he wheeled it silently through the parking lot, noting the chunked and potholed asphalt and the generally ratty appearance of the few cars in residence. Across the lot, two teenagers in leather jackets, both orks, lounged by the obviously nonfunctional ice machine, checking out both Ocelot and his bike. They didn't approach, though. *Damn! Not again! Not this soon! How do they know?*

He jammed the key into the room's maglock and shoved the door open, pushing the bike inside. The room was small and dingy, with a single ugly lamp on the nightstand for illumination, a bed with a stained spread, and one rickety chair. On the small dresser was something Ocelot hadn't seen in years: a crummy old flatscreen television. He wondered idly if it worked as he put the bike on its stand and then did his usual security check of the room.

He couldn't stay long, he knew that. They were on to him again. He didn't know how they could be, since he hadn't even known himself where he was going to be until a few minutes before he arrived. How could they know? Were they following him magically? He couldn't do anything about that except to keep running. But what if there was another way? What if—

His gaze fell on the Aurora.

Of course.

They must have bugged it somehow. They must have planted some kind of tracking device so they could follow him.



He grinned self-consciously, feeling like an idiot. Why hadn't he figured that out a long time ago? He was slipping. But now he knew, so he could do something about it. He could find it and get rid of it, and then *they* wouldn't be able to find him anymore. He'd have to move again, of course, but Los Angeles was huge. There were plenty of places to lose himself.

The buzzing in his head seemed pleased.

Forgetting about everything else, Ocelot sat down on the floor and began doing a visual inspection of the Aurora, starting with the front fender, working his way up the forks to the instrument cluster, around the tank, over the seat, under the back fender.

Nothing.

He increased the level of his scrutiny, peering at the engine (careful not to touch it—it was still quite hot from the trip, clicking sporadically as it cooled), getting down on his back to look underneath, checking the wheels, inside the exhaust pipe—

Still nothing.

He sighed, sitting back and running a hand through his hair. This was going to be tougher than he thought. It made sense, though—*they* wouldn't have put it somewhere obvious. They knew how suspicious he was; once he started looking, he would find it in no time if they'd put it somewhere easy. No, they must have hidden it well, sometime when he wasn't looking. Had they sneaked into his garage?

It didn't matter now. Whatever they had done, they had done it and now it was up to him to *undo* it. Grimly he removed the Aurora's seat and dug out the small toolkit nestled there. He was glad he had replaced some of the stock tools with better and more useful ones—he was going to need them.

He thought about turning the television on to see what kind of flatscreen drivel was still broadcast over the ancient medium, but then decided not to. He needed to be able to hear if anyone was sneaking up on him outside the room. He wouldn't give them the chance to surprise him.

*They* had indeed been thorough. An hour and a half later he stared at the bike: pieces of it lay all over the floor, but he was still no closer to finding the elusive bug. He had taken off the tank and the fenders, removed the seat, removed the back wheel and inspected the brake assembly, checked the battery, examined the shock absorber, pulled the cylinder heads and checked under the valve covers—nothing. “Where the hell is it?” he muttered under his breath, eyeing the rest of the engine. Did he dare try to tear that down? It would take most of the night to do it and get it back together again, and even if he had the time he was certain he didn't have all the right tools in his little travel toolkit.

The bags. He'd go through the bags first. He hadn't even checked them yet. If he didn't find anything there, he'd do the engine tomorrow, when he had a chance to pick up the right tools. Maybe he'd even find a place that'd let him rent some space to work on the bike. Yeah, that was it.

He snatched up the tankbag and the tailbag from where he'd tossed them on the bed, unzipped them one at a time, and upended them on the floor. Methodically but with a certain mania, he rifled through the contents, checking each article of clothing for unexpected items in the pockets or small devices sewn into the linings. When he failed to find anything in the clothes, he stripped down his guns and checked them as well. This operation didn't take as long as the bike had, because it was one he performed often. But despite his care, he found nothing in the guns, the clothes, or the bags.

Tossing the stuff back on the bed, he sighed again and dropped down next to it, eyeing the Aurora's engine. No doubt about it—he was going to have to tear it down and check it before he could go on. He would —

He stopped, stiffened like a cat.

What was that?

Utterly silent, he listened.

Voices. Outside the window.

There were at least two of them, talking in hushed tones. It sounded like one male and one female. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but there was an urgency to their voices that chilled him.

*They're arguing over what to do with me. They found me and they're arguing over what to do with me.*

Feeling the bright edges of panic beginning to claw at him, Ocelot darted his gaze around the room. His clothes were tossed in a pile on the bed, his weapons next to them. The bags were on the floor. It would only take a couple of minutes to gather all of it up, but —

The Aurora. He stared at it in panic. It was in pieces. Even with the engine still mostly intact it would take him more than an hour to get everything back together again. Probably closer to two. He didn't have that kind of time. He didn't have two *minutes*, let alone two hours, if they were already on to him.

Breathing hard, he began pawing at the pile of clothes, shoving them haphazardly into the tailbag. That bag had a strap he could sling over his shoulder. The weapons went in next, followed by another pile of clothes. He could feel his heart pounding. The voices had stopped now, but he knew they were still out there somewhere. They knew they had him — they could afford to wait.

When he had everything he could fit into the tailbag, he shrugged into his leather jacket, slipped the bag's strap over his shoulder, and moved with silent care over to the

room's single window. Moving the curtain aside slightly he peeked out, using his cybereyes' low-light and thermographic vision to verify that the mysterious visitors were not currently in sight. But they'd be back. *Time to go. Don't wait – can't afford to wait. Must go –*

He took one last reluctant glance over his shoulder at the Aurora. He'd had the bike for years. It was like an old friend. It hurt him to leave it here in pieces for *them* to find.

Savagely he forced himself to swing his head back around. *It's just a thing. They've got it bugged. You can't take it. Go. Go. Now!*

He shoved the door open and hurried out, looking back and forth as if expecting pursuers to be accosting him from all sides.

There were none.

*Good. They didn't expect you to go now. Run. Run while you can.*

He ran.

Time after that became a blur. As the buzzing in his head grew progressively more insistent and harder for him to ignore, he gradually lost track of everything – where he was, where he was going, what he wanted. He ran until he couldn't run anymore, and when he was tired, he found places to crawl into and sleep for awhile. He knew he couldn't stay anywhere very long – *they* were on his tail, and the only way he could avoid them was to stay away from them. That became the focus of his existence. His shadow- and gang-trained instincts led him to hiding places, showed him how to steal food when he needed it, taught him that most people would leave you alone if you scared them. He was at the same time frightened and frightening. He didn't know when he lost his bag, but he had vague memories of having to leave it

when he became convinced that *they* had once more managed to sneak into his hiding place one night and plant another of their invisible devices. He held on to the weapons for awhile longer—a few days, perhaps—but the Franchi-SPAS and the Manhunter disappeared first, followed shortly afterward by the hand weapons.

He didn't know where he was anymore. He alternated between running and wandering aimlessly, hiding and snatching food where he could. He woke one morning huddled behind a dumpster in a pile of cardboard boxes and found blood on his cyberspur; he didn't know where it had come from. As hard as he tried to remember, the memory was not there. Should he be afraid or elated? Had he killed one of *them*? Would they leave him alone now? That thought had been quickly put to rest by the man who had been watching him as he emerged from his cocoon after spending about half an hour cleaning the blood from his spur. His breath quickening, he ran again. He had not stopped *them*. He would never stop *them*. There were too many of them.

He took to prowling the streets by night because he was afraid to sleep then. Better to be the predator than the prey, at least some of the time. He was always cold now, as he had lost his jacket: someone had grabbed his arm awhile ago and he had twisted around, screaming and writhing out of the jacket until the attacker had nothing but that.

*They* had tried the direct approach only a couple of times, attacking him as he shuffled his way down the street looking for his next meal and looking out for *them*. He didn't know how he had missed them until they were in his face: a human and an ork dressed in gang colors, yelling something about tolls and protection. He hadn't heard them. He didn't hear much anymore, not much that could make it above the buzzing. He screamed something

unintelligible at them and the next thing he knew his spur was extended, its tip poking out through the back of the human ganger. The kid hadn't even had time to scream as his eyes bulged out and blood ran from his mouth and down his shirt. The other one had run. Clever ruse *they* had, disguising themselves as gangers, but he knew better. After that he ran again until his lungs nearly burst before crawling into another hiding place.

He was so hungry. The food he'd managed to steal had barely been enough to sustain him, and water – water was hard to come by in Los Angeles. It was even hard to steal, because the people in this end of the plex only had a few hours a day of running water and they guarded it more jealously than any of their meager possessions, including their food.

He got tired more quickly now – not only did he have to avoid *them* but also the sporadic police patrols that came through the areas. There weren't many of them, but the ones that did come were not kind. He had watched from his hiding place as the men in the big armored vehicles had swept through, hurting people, carrying them off. Were the cops in with *them*? It made sense. They were probably paid off. Avoid them.

*Just keep going. Keep running. Find food, find places to hide. They can't keep this up forever. Sooner or later they have to move on to someone else. You just have to hold out –*

They got him shortly after that, in Coast Town near the walls of El Infierno. He didn't know anything now except run, hide, steal – the crowd had drawn him out because he was starving and thought that a crowd so large might have food. He moved among them, counting on the anonymity of the crowd to conceal him, hoping that *their* agents were not among this rag-tag group of people who had gathered here for some unknown reason.

He sniffed almost like an animal, searching for food and water, muttering to himself about *them* and their agents. He sensed that these were people like him—people who were *their* prey—and for a moment he felt comforted. He would be safe among these people.

He was in the middle of it when the violence started. He couldn't make out the point of the screams, except that the group seemed to be protesting something, but it didn't matter. Everything had gone wrong. *Must get out!*

In front of him, an ork man hit a human in the face with a length of pipe; the human screamed and went down, blood spraying from his nose and mouth. Three more humans surged forward and brought the ork down, beating him into submission with chains, pipes, and fists. The ork's scream joined the human's, and both of them joined a growing cacophony erupting all around Ocelot. He jammed his hands over his ears and bulled his way in the other direction, trying to get out of the crowd, to run, to hide.

A small troll stepped out in front of him, his expression menacing, one of his huge hands wrapped around an enormous club made from what looked like a piece of telephone pole. He yelled something and swung the club at Ocelot.

Even now, instinct was hard to deny—especially instinct that had been trained as long as Ocelot's had. He could run, he could hide, but he was not going to simply roll over and die. Something deep within him could not—*would not*—allow that to happen. He ducked under the swing, his cyberspur sliding from its sheath like a silent metal snake. “No!!!” he screamed, sidestepping the troll and slipping the spur in through the soft place under his ribs. Cruelly he wrenched it sideways and was rewarded by a fountain of blood and the troll's shriek of agony. The club dropped to the ground, followed only a couple of

seconds later by the troll himself. Ocelot didn't wait to see it. He turned to run again.

This time he didn't get far. So caught up in the crowd itself, he had not noticed the arrival of the Citymaster, accompanied by the blare of sirens and the sound of chattering gunfire. As he finally made his way out of the crowd and into the open, he was struck by something that stung hard, then buzzed in his head even more loudly than the subliminal sound that had been his constant companion for as long as he could remember. His body stiffened, he dropped to the ground, and everything went mercifully black. His last thought as he went down was that it had all been for nothing. *They* had won.

*They* had won...

When consciousness returned he was lying on something that wasn't quite soft, but not quite hard either. His head felt like it was full of cotton, which was muting the buzzing somewhat. He blinked a couple of times and then opened his eyes slowly.

He was in a cell; that much was apparent right away. The not-hard, not-soft thing he was lying on was a cot with a thin, stained, blue-and-white-striped mattress. The floor was concrete with a drain; the only other furnishings were a stainless-steel sink and commode. Everything was bolted down to the floor or the walls. There was a harsh chemical tang to the air.

He realized that some of the smell was very close by. Looking down (without lifting his head much—he still didn't feel like a lot of exertion) he saw that he was dressed in blue work pants, light blue work shirt, and black socks. The smell seemed to center around the clothes and his body.

Testing himself to see how much effort he was capable of, he tried to sit up. The foggy feeling was lifting slightly



now. Except for a few muscle aches, he didn't feel any different than he had before. He wondered how long he had been here, and what they had done to him.

With his back pressed against the cold wall and his feet hanging over the edge of the bed, he realized two things simultaneously. The first was that his head felt strangely light. A hand to it provided the reason: they had chopped off his long hair, rather crudely from the feel of it, fairly close to his head. The second realization was worse: there was some kind of metal device attached to his arm, down near his wrist.

"Wouldn't try anything if I were you," a voice spoke from the other side of the bars. "You try to pop that spur and it'll blow your arm off. If you're lucky that's all that'll happen."

Ocelot looked up through narrowed eyes. A man stood out there in the hallway — human, uniformed. *Cop*.

"You understand?" the man asked. His tone was brisk, businesslike.

"Yeah." His own voice sounded like a croak in his ears.

"Good. You know where you are?"

He looked around. "Yeah. Jail. Now what're you gonna do with me?" He knew it wasn't wise to anger *them*, but he didn't care anymore.

"Don't get smart with me, kid." The man's tone grew a little colder. "You ought to be grateful. You're one of the lucky ones — you're still alive. Can't say that for too many of your buddies out there."

"Ain't my buddies," he said sullenly.

The man shrugged. "Whatever. I don't give a damn. Either way, you got popped with a Narcoject round when you tried to run, so now you're here. I'm here right now 'cause you're gettin' transferred. I was hoping to do it

while you were still out, but—" He spread his hands in a gesture of apathy.

"Transferred?"

"Yeah. You don't think street trash like you gets to stay in our first-class accommodations forever, do you? This is just the holding cell. You're bein' transferred to The Pit."

"The Pit?" He'd never heard of it, but it didn't sound good. Just the kind of place *they* would put their enemies before they...did whatever it is they had planned for them. He looked at the man again; on second look his uniform was wrong for a cop. Guard, maybe?

"You're gonna love it. Trust me." Sarcasm dripped from the guard's words. "Now, we can do this the easy way, the hard way, or the *really* hard way. The easy way is that you get up like a good boy and come with me without tryin' any funny business. The hard way is that I can Narcoject you again. You might like that now, but you ain't gonna like it when we get to the Pit. There ain't any private cells there, if you get my drift, and you don't wanta be out of it when you arrive, that's the truth. The *really* hard way is that you try something funny on the way outta here and you get blown away so fast you won't know what's hit you. That last way's the easiest for me, so I wouldn't advise you try it." He leaned in a little closer. "You scan, chummer?"

Ocelot glared at him and didn't answer.

The guard smiled anyway. "Good. I'm glad you decided to see it my way." He motioned behind him and two more guards—a beefy human and a beefier ork, both carrying assault rifles—stepped out of the shadows behind him. "Last warning," the first guard said as he did something that opened the cell door with a *snick*. It slid open and the two other guards trained their guns on

Ocelot. "Come on out, and put your hands out in front of you so I can cuff 'em."

Ocelot did as he was told. The buzzing in his head had lifted somewhat now, and he could clearly see that there was no point in making a stand here. They'd kill him before he could get them all, and the satisfaction of taking one or two of *them* down wasn't worth his life. He could wait.

The guard nodded approvingly as he snapped the cuffs over Ocelot's wrists. "Good boy." He looked him up and down. "I don't know what the hell the story is with you—you're in too good a shape for me to believe you were on the streets for long, especially with the cyber you got in you. You musta pissed off the wrong people *bad*, huh?"

Ocelot didn't answer. He followed along silently next to the guard. The ork and the human followed a few paces behind them, guns still ready. Nobody was taking any chances.

The processing out didn't take long, which was probably part of the plan: don't keep the dangerous ones standing around any longer than you have to. In less than fifteen minutes Ocelot had been loaded into the back of a heavily armored transport vehicle, with one of his ankles put in a shackle bolted to the side of the truck's steel interior. There were two other prisoners in the truck along with three guards; one of the prisoners was a big troll who looked like he might cry at any moment, and the other was a hulking human giving the hairy eyeball to anyone who looked at him. The door slammed shut, there was the sound of several locks being engaged, and then the truck rumbled off.

The trip over was silent except for a few muffled moans from the troll. Ocelot glanced at him; he didn't look any older than his friend (*ex-friend*, he reminded

himself) Joe when he'd first met him—*just a teenager. Wonder if they got him too.* He also noticed that the human prisoner was watching him—specifically the odd mechanism attached to his wrist.

The truck continued on for about twenty minutes and then ground to a stop. Ocelot had been listening, and had heard the sound of several heavy gates slamming shut behind them. Wherever they were, the security had to be phenomenal.

One of the guards touched an earpiece he was wearing, then nodded and rose. "Okay. Everyone remain seated until we come to a stop. We'll take you out one at a time. You first," he said, pointing at Ocelot, who was closest to the door. Then he pointed at the troll. "You next, and then you," he finished, nodding toward the human. "You do not move until you are told to do so. If you disobey you will be shot. Understood?"

Nobody answered, but the guard got the idea they understood anyway. The door to the back opened, revealing a squad of men wearing helmets and security armor and holding more assault rifles. They arrayed themselves around the opening and waited without comment.

Ocelot's guard nodded to him. "Okay, up." When Ocelot complied he touched something on his belt and the shackle popped open. "Out. Slowly."

Ocelot glared at him but again complied. He moved carefully to compensate for the fact that his hands were cuffed and couldn't be used for balance. Once he was down, two of the armored guards grabbed him by the shoulders and hustled him away. He didn't get to see what happened to the troll and the other human.

As they crossed an open area toward a featureless building, Ocelot got an idea of what kind of place he had gotten himself stuck in. High plascrete walls, probably a

good six meters up, rose all around; up on top, shadowy forms with rifles at ready patrolled between guard posts. He could see the razor wire up there, and the poles that undoubtedly had monowire strung between them to further discourage escape attempts. There were several more featureless buildings like the one to which they were now headed; arranged in a rough circular pattern, each of the buildings was about five stories tall. The open area extended for about a hundred meters between the buildings and the walls, and more armored personnel patrolled here. Some of them had leashed creatures that looked like large dogs. *Hellhounds*, Ocelot's voice of experience told him.

Not a nice place at all.

The Pit's administrative machinery operated with frightening efficiency. Ocelot was taken inside, searched using mundane and magical means, and given another set of clothes to replace the ones he was wearing. These were similar but there was a large number stenciled in black across the back and a smaller one across the front. A chip was implanted under his skin at the base of his skull—a further means of identification, he was told. *A way for them to track me*, he knew. All of this was performed under the watchful eyes of several armed guards. Nobody ever asked him his name. He got the impression that nobody cared.

As he listened to the snatches of conversation he was able to pick up, Ocelot began to figure out what was going on and why the excessive level of security was being brought to bear. This particular building was known informally as “the hardcase wing.” It got the worst and the most dangerous offenders of a very bad and dangerous lot. Anyone with offensive cyberware was sent here, along with trolls, big orks and humans, and anyone who had committed a particularly violent crime. Every

face behind the desks and behind the guns here was cold, closed, distant. Nobody wanted to be here, and that fact did not by any means apply only to those on the wrong side of the bars.

After he was processed, Ocelot was led down a hallway and through several locked doors by two guards, one of whom seemed to enjoy prodding him in the back with the barrel of his gun. "Welcome to hell, drekface," the other one muttered as they passed through one more door and it clanged shut behind them.

It was an apt description. The hall was wide and lined on both sides with small cells. All around there was yelling, screaming, and the sound of various things being banged against metal bars. The yells all blended together but Ocelot could occasionally pick out a few words: an obscene suggestion here, a bit of profanity there. As he moved down the hallway flanked by the two guards the yelling got worse. It appeared that the cells had been designed for two occupants but most of them had three and a few, four. Along with the bunk beds bolted to the walls there were mattresses tossed on the floor to accommodate the extra 'guests'. The stench was appalling. Ocelot could hear the far-off sounds of more yelling and screaming from yet more levels above and below.

The guards stopped in front of one of the cells and opened it. "Inside."

Ocelot looked into the cell. It was empty.

One guard grinned. "Don't worry, you won't be lonely. Company's comin' soon. Now get in and turn around facin' this way."

Ocelot took one last look at the guards' assault rifles as if trying to gauge whether he could take them down before they got him. *No. Not yet. You'll get your chance.*

*Don't let them win. If they kill you, they win.* With a glare he stepped into the cell and turned as ordered.

While one guard covered him, the other unlocked the cuffs. Then both backed off and slammed the door closed. "Have fun," the first one called back over his shoulder as the two departed, ignoring the catcalls and obscenities being yelled at them from both sides of the hall.

Ocelot forced himself to tune out the noise and looked around the cell. It looked very similar to the one he had been in before except that this one was in worse shape. The mattresses on the bunks (and the one on the floor) were thinner and heavily stained; the walls had been chipped and carved by so many hands that it was impossible to read any of the inscriptions anymore, and the sink was backed up, its drain full of a clump of matted hair. He tried turning on the water and nothing happened—of course not. The prison, given its proximity to El Infierno, was probably last on the water rotation and only got running water for a couple of hours a day. This time obviously wasn't part of those couple of hours.

Ocelot sighed and vaulted up onto the top bunk, which sagged a bit under his weight, and waited.

He didn't have to wait long. About half an hour later, just as the din was beginning to die down, the door at the end of the hall opened again and he could hear the footfalls of more people coming down his way. Heavy footfalls.

He remained where he was and was surprised to see the young troll who had been one of his fellow riders in the back of the transport vehicle being given the same rundown as he had gotten only a short time ago. The troll stood silently, head bowed, throughout the lecture. There were three guards this time, including one very large ork. The two humans covered Ocelot while the ork shoved the

troll inside and undid his cuffs. They slammed the door a little too quickly and exited.

The troll remained where he was, his massive hands gripping the bars. Ocelot watched him warily.

After a few minutes the troll turned and looked up at Ocelot. His eyes were wide, frightened, almost childlike. "Hoi," he said. His voice was deep (it was hard to find a troll—even a female—whose voice *wasn't* at least somewhat deep) but it too had a childlike quality to it.

Ocelot nodded.

"My name's Tiny." His lips quirked around his big tusks in a nervous smile. "Well...my real name's Norbie—Norbert Evans. But everybody calls me Tiny." He paused. "What's your name?"

Ocelot closed his eyes for a moment. It was hard for him to trust anyone—who knew who could be *their* agents?—but this troll had been captured by *them* too. He made a quick decision. "Ocelot."

Tiny tilted his head. "Ossa-lot? What's that mean?" He moved slowly over and sat down cross-legged on the mattress on the floor, looking up at Ocelot like he was waiting for a story.

"It's...a kind of cat."

Tiny nodded solemnly. "Oh. I had a cat once. His name was Boots. But he ran away and got hit by a car."

Ocelot didn't answer.

Tiny didn't seem to mind. "Why'd they put you in here?" he asked.

"They were after me for a long time. They caught me."

"Oh." The troll mulled that over for several moments, then looked up at him again. "They took me away 'cause somebody was tryin' to hurt my friend's mama and I hurt 'em."



"That sucks," Ocelot said. Made sense, though. Orks and trolls always got the short end of the stick, justice-wise. "What'd you do, hit him?"

"I pulled his head off." Tiny's voice didn't change tone. "My friend and his mama're human like you, and this guy was human too, 'cept smaller than you. It was easy."

Ocelot looked Tiny over. He wasn't quite as big as Joe nor as wide, but he was still a troll and that meant *big*. He had mostly Caucasian features but the creamy light brown of his skin and his black hair spoke of some Latino blood as well. He wore the same outfit Ocelot wore, although with his size the numbers on the front of his shirt were almost as big as the ones on Ocelot's back. His face was wide and open—not exactly friendly, but definitely not the hooded, secretive look of the typical street rat. "You...pulled his head off."

Again Tiny nodded with the pursed-lipped seriousness of a child reciting his lessons. "Yeah. It was real gross. But he was gonna hurt Sammy's mama. He was gonna...do *bad things* to her." He lowered his voice when he said that, like he wasn't sure if he should be talking about those kind of *bad things*. Then he bowed his head. "But then the cops came. They yelled at me. I tried to run away, but they hit me with something and that's all I remember until I woke up in jail."

Ocelot took a deep breath. It was a very lucky thing for Tiny that the cops hadn't just killed him right then and there. "Tough break," he said noncommittally, although inwardly something was stirring: he liked this young troll. The more they spoke, the more he became convinced that he was not one of *them*.

Tiny slowly got up. "How long you think they'll keep us here?" he asked. "D'you think my mama will come for me, and take me home from here? I only did it 'cause he

was gonna hurt her. Don't they understand that?" He moved over to the sink and tried to turn it on, nodding philosophically when nothing happened. "No water. Maybe later, huh?"

"Yeah. Maybe later." Ocelot leaned back and stretched out on his uncomfortable bunk, looking up at the concrete of the ceiling a meter or so above his head.

An hour or so passed—it was hard to tell just how long it was because the cells had no windows—but it seemed like about that long when the door opened again for the third time. It was just like the others—the screams, yells, obscenities, followed by the arrival of the guards with another prisoner. *Four* guards this time. Ocelot sighed when he saw who the prisoner was. *Should have known*. It was the hulking, ill-tempered human who'd been the third occupant of the transport. The guards went through their routine again with three remaining in the hall and the fourth installing the human in the cell. Ocelot and Tiny watched from their respective vantage points as the man grabbed the bars and tried to wrench them free. When that failed, he joined in the clamor of profanity that echoed around the halls. That lasted for several minutes and then at last he wheeled around to face his cellmates. "What the fuck are *you* lookin' at?" he yelled. His hair was cut short, his muscles bulging under his prison uniform. Tattoos peeked out from beneath his shirt-cuffs.

Ocelot glared right back. So the guards had decided to put one of *them* right there in the cell with him. He was tired of running. If they were stuck here, then so be it. "You don't have to yell, asshole. We're right here."

The man stalked over and glared at Ocelot. "Smartass, huh? Why don't ya come down here and say that, cyber-boy?" He grinned nastily. "Oh, yeah. I forgot. The Man took yer toys away. I know your type. Can't fight worth shit without yer 'ware."

He didn't get much further before Ocelot's foot lashed out and connected with his jaw. He reeled back as an audible *thud* echoed through the cell, and staggered into Tiny's arms. Big troll hands clamped around his biceps. Tiny looked down at him with wide, serious eyes. "Don't do that," he said. "Ossa-lot is my friend. Don't you hurt him."

The man glared up at Tiny—it seemed like he only had two expressions, the glare and the sneer—and started to say something, but thought better of it. Instead he grumbled something under his breath and tried to shake loose of Tiny's hold. Tiny let him go. He staggered over to the lower bunk and rubbed his jaw.

Ocelot pulled his legs back up onto his bunk and looked at Tiny. For the first time in at least three weeks, he smiled.

Tiny smiled back and lowered himself back down to his mattress. And thus the way of things within the cell was established, at least for the next couple of hours.

Prison routine was as mechanical and indifferently efficient as the processing procedure had been—or it would have been if the guards had been robots instead of humans and metahumans with emotions, prejudices, and, preconceptions. It became clear to Ocelot early on that the guards came in two varieties: the ones who didn't want to be here and had been assigned to the Pit because of some transgression or failure in their jobs, and the ones who liked being here just fine because it allowed them to give free rein to their baser and more sadistic impulses with relative impunity. The guards weren't supposed to kill anyone without clear provocation, but beyond that anything went.

The prisoners' days were divided into distinct periods: from 22:00 until 06:00 the lights were turned out

and they were expected to sleep and be relatively quiet. In the morning around 10:00 there was a rotating hour-long exercise period in the yard: each cell block got two such periods a week, Ocelot found out—the next one for his block was scheduled for three days from now. Anyone not on exercise remained in their cell for the morning. There was no breakfast. Lunch was served at or around noon, and was singularly unappetizing. Each prisoner got a tray containing some kind of soy glop and a largish paper cup of water. Ocelot learned quickly from the prisoners across the hallway (they were the only ones he could see besides his own cellmates) to hang on to the paper cup and use it when the water in the sink was turned on. This happened at random intervals and it was a high point of the day for the thirsty prisoners.

Showers were once a week—this part of L.A. didn't get enough water to justify wasting it on scum like the Pit inmates. Other than that and the exercise period, the only other time the prisoners were let out of their cells was for nightly dinner, served at 18:00. Dinner wasn't any more appetizing than lunch, but at least it was outside the cell.

The parts of this that he didn't learn on his own that first day, Ocelot found out secondhand by listening to their newest roommate, whose name apparently was Max, talking to another prisoner across the hall who shared his proclivity for mayhem and his dislike of metahumans. Max was in for multiple murder and was quite proud of that fact. He spent the better part of the day yelling conversation at his new friend, ignoring Ocelot and Tiny.

For the most part the next couple of days passed in the same way. Ocelot mostly kept to himself except when Tiny wanted to talk; both of them avoided Max. Max, for his part, seemed like he *wanted* to start something, but even for someone as belligerent as he was, the prospect of

tangling with a troll and a guy who was faster than he was *and* a better fighter wasn't a pleasant one. He settled for rolling up his sleeves to show off his large collection of obscene and grisly tattoos as a silent attempt at intimidation. It didn't work.

It was hot, it was dry, it was boring. Ocelot lay on his bunk and listened to the near-constant murmur of voices, a murmur which was occasionally broken up by a sudden yell as someone got angry, then died down again. He wondered if this was what *they* wanted: to simply warehouse everyone here until they died of boredom or dehydration or disease. He'd only been here a little over two days and he'd already seen the guards, dressed in different armor that was completely enclosed, dragging the body of one of the prisoners unceremoniously down the hall. Again Max' conversation with his across-the-hall buddy yielded an explanation: the guy had been sick for quite awhile and had finally died last night for lack of medical care. Max' friend figured his body would probably be sent off to the morgue to be cremated that same day. Tiny spent the rest of the morning moping around the cell after this.

There had been thus far no opportunity to even think about trying to get out. The only time they were let out of their cells was during the dinner break, which was always supervised by far too many guards carrying big guns and wearing security armor. Ocelot heard some of the other prisoners talking at the table about less obvious security measures in force as well: at the first sign of any trouble the control room could pump the mess hall full of knockout gas and clean things up at their leisure; also, for anyone who thought it would be a wiz idea to try to waylay a guard and relieve him of his gun, it would be smart to remember that all the guards carried signature guns coded for them and them alone. They wouldn't even

work if somebody else picked them up. The old hands told these stories in the tones of men who had long ago resigned themselves to their fate.

Ocelot dejectedly picked at his food as he listened to the stories. *They* had done it this time. There was no way he was going to get out of here.

"Hey," Tiny said from next to him. He had already finished his meal; trolls didn't get much more than humans, so he was always hungry. "You okay, Ossa-lot?"

"No. I'm fucked, and so are you, and so is everyone else in this shithole."

Tiny regarded him silently for a moment, then nodded. "Oh." He paused, then sighed. "I'm sorry."

Ocelot shook his head. "Don't be. Ain't your fault. *They* won, that's all. They got us and there ain't a damn thing we can do about it."

Again Tiny nodded, picking up on Ocelot's mood. "We're not gonna get outta here, are we? I'm not ever gonna see my mama again."

Ocelot looked up at him. "It sure doesn't look that way, Tiny." He shoved his plate, which was still half full, over toward the troll. "Here. I ain't hungry anymore."

Tiny looked at the plate, then at Ocelot, then back at the plate. He was having a hard time hiding the hope in his eyes. "You sure?"

"Take it. Better than lettin' them throw it out."

He didn't need a second invitation. "Thanks," he said, picking up the plastic spoon which was the only utensil the prisoners were allowed and digging in. "You know, I'm glad I got a friend in here."

Ocelot sighed. He wasn't glad for much of anything right at that moment, but he didn't see any point in ruining the troll's meal by telling him that.

He got his first inkling that something was up at the exercise period the next morning. The prisoners were lined up and escorted out into the yard by a group of armed and armored guards; Ocelot went along without protest because it would be the first time he'd gotten to see the sun and move around since he'd arrived at the Pit.

The prison yard was about thirty meters on a side, bordered on two sides by the high plascrete outside walls and on the other side by two of the buildings with a high, razor- and monowired fence between them to prevent anyone from making a break for it. In the center of the yard was a concrete slab with ragged rubber mats and battered weight equipment; the area around the slab was hard-packed dirt with a few heavy stone benches scattered around. There was nothing hospitable about it, including the sky which was so choked with smog that the sun was barely visible, but at least it was outside.

The guards stationed themselves around the perimeter of the yard, guns out and held casually at the ready. "Awright," one of the guards yelled, "You got an hour. When I blow the whistle you get back into formation and get ready to go back in. Anybody who disobeys gets plugged. Got it?"

Nobody bothered to answer. Instead, most of the prisoners began to spread out. A group of orks immediately took over the weights, while a few small groups moved off near the walls to get a chance to talk to people they didn't get the opportunity to see during the day. Max and his friend took off toward one of the benches and met up with another couple of humans.

"You wanna do that?" Tiny asked Ocelot, pointing toward the weights.

Ocelot shook his head. "Nah. I gotta move around some. You go ahead if you want."

Tiny looked at him as if trying to decide if Ocelot was trying to get rid of him, then nodded. "I don't wanna either, but I saw another troll at dinner last night. Maybe he wants to talk."

"Good idea." Ocelot clapped him on the arm and moved off.

He didn't feel like running—not with as little water as he'd had and as little energy as he could summon up—but just being out walking in the air felt good. He'd taken freedom for granted before. Even on the streets with *them* following him he'd been free to make his own decisions. Being confined in a tiny cell was approaching unbearable.

He was wondering if he could manage to kill himself without Tiny finding out and stopping his attempt when his gaze fell on two men over near one of the walls. They were close together and talking in hushed voices; Ocelot couldn't hear what they were saying from here, but there was a certain urgency about their words. He kept walking, making the pretense of ignoring them as he moved on by, but watching them out of the corner of his eye. There was something familiar about them. Something in the way they carried themselves, the way they moved—

Then it came to him.

He stopped and leaned back against the wall as if resting, but he was doing anything but. He hadn't recognized the men, but he *had* recognized their bearing, because he'd seen it many times in his past, back before *they* had taken their interest in him.

The men were shadowrunners.

Ocelot lowered his head, pretending to breathe hard at his exertion, and strained his ears to hear what they were saying. They were both human, about his age—one black and one white. Ocelot caught the telltale hint of wires like his own in the fluid way the black man moved.



“—dinner—gets in—signal—” The white man’s words were carried off by the wind and the sounds of the other prisoners. Ocelot barely caught those small snatches.

The black man didn’t say anything; he just nodded. Then he noticed Ocelot. Touching the white man’s arm, he nodded in the other direction and the two of them moved off quickly.

Ocelot watched them go, his mind spinning. Was something going to happen? If so, what? What signal? He resumed his brisk walk around the yard, glaring at anyone who approached him with any challenge in his eyes. He wasn’t in any mood for that right now. He had to think.

At the edge of the concrete slab, two prisoners had gotten into an altercation over who would be next on the bench press machine. They began shoving each other, yelling obscenities. Immediately the other prisoners backed off. Tiny had found another friend, an ork, who took the troll’s arm and moved him back with the rest. The next actions were swift and brutal. Two of the guards swooped in and pulled pistols off their belts, each one firing at one of the combatants. The two men dropped like stones. After another moment more guards showed up and dragged them off.

Ocelot drifted over toward Tiny and his friend. “Shit...” he said under his breath.

The ork glared at Ocelot but Tiny shook his head. “Zak, this is Ocelot. He’s my friend.”

Zak’s demeanor changed immediately. “Yeah,” he said. “You don’t get in fights around here or they nail your ass to the wall. Those guys were fuckin’ idiots.”

“Did they kill ‘em?” Ocelot asked, not really caring.

“Nah, but they might as well’ve. That stuff was some kinda DMSO cocktail with neuro-stunners in it. Frags up

your brain, y'know? Sometimes you come back, sometimes you don't. But they don't give a damn. Gotta control the animals." His tone was bitter.

Ocelot didn't get a chance to answer because at that moment a whistle sounded stridently across the yard. "Okay assholes, that's time! Back in line!" the guard yelled. "Step it up!"

They were rounded up and taken back to their cells. No one protested—after the incident in the yard, nobody was feeling like messing with the guards. When the doors slammed shut, Ocelot jumped back up on his bunk and lay down. He was still thinking about what the two shadowrunners had been talking about. He knew they were on his block or they wouldn't have been out there, but he'd never seen them before. He decided he would look for them at dinner. Maybe nothing would happen, but if something did, he wanted to be aware of it.

For awhile he thought nothing would. The prisoners were lined up and marched into the mess hall at the usual time, seated at their usual places at the bolted-down metal tables on bolted-down metal benches. Ocelot had gotten his tray and sat down to eat (dinner tonight was soy glop that tasted vaguely like chicken if you used your imagination, a cup of water, and a blob of greenish stuff that the long-term prisoners called 'Soy-lent Green,' which they thought was funny for some reason), looking around for the two men he'd seen during the exercise period. He found them without too much trouble—they were at the next table, across from each other, both on the end of their respective benches. As Ocelot feigned being very interested in his soy chickenish glop, he noticed that the two of them both seemed to be doing the same thing he was: being very watchful while pretending not to be.

He smiled slightly to himself. Maybe he was right. Maybe something *was* going to happen.

But half an hour passed and nothing did. The meal period was only an hour, and they'd taken a few minutes of that just getting their trays and getting settled at the tables. There was no clock in the room, but Ocelot's innate time sense told him that they probably only had fifteen or twenty minutes left. He took a sip of water and glanced over at Tiny, who was talking to Zak. Fifteen minutes wasn't enough time to—

The lights went out.

Chaos descended almost immediately. There were no windows in the mess hall, so the place was cast into total darkness. For a few seconds everyone remained still, holding their breath, waiting. When it became clear that no emergency lights were going to come on, the pandemonium began.

The guards were yelling, but nobody was listening to them. All around Ocelot bodies were moving, scrambling over tables, shoving each other aside, whooping and screaming. A couple of small shafts of light split the darkness as two of the guards managed to locate their flashlights, but in a room this size it barely made a difference. Shots rang out for a moment, and then the guards were overwhelmed by charging bodies and went down. The feeble glows vanished.

Before the light disappeared Ocelot caught a glimpse of the two shadowrunners from the next table: they were already moving, heading for the door with a sense of purpose none of the other prisoners were showing. He dropped low and hurried in that direction as Tiny's voice called out in fear behind him. "Ossa-lot? Where are you? What's happening?"

"Come on," he hissed. "Follow me if you want to get out!" He kept moving without stopping to see if Tiny

followed. He wouldn't mind the troll's help and wouldn't mind getting him out of here too, but he wasn't going to sacrifice what he saw as his one chance.

Another shaft of light cut through the room for a moment, long enough for Ocelot to see that the runners had almost made it to the door. There were no guards there, and the door, surprisingly enough, was swinging open. Ocelot put on another burst of speed to get there before they slipped through. A big body jumped in front of him, and he sensed rather than saw the threat. Throwing himself sideways, he lashed out with his foot and was rewarded by a loud *oof!* followed by a string of profanity. The figure dropped and he went on. Behind him he could hear more gunfire, but it was tapering off now. The guards' screams were barely audible over the sound of the riot: "Where's the fuckin' *gas?*"

"Turn it on! Turn it—AAUUUGGGHHHH!"

"They got Central! Ah, fuck, they—"

Ocelot didn't hear any more. He slid through the door and felt someone else—someone big—slip through behind him. "Tiny?" His voice was quiet and tense.

"Yeah. I'm here. Where we goin'?"

He had to risk stopping for a moment. "Tiny, I gotta get outta here. This is my only chance. If you're comin' with me you're gonna *listen*. Got it? If you ask questions I gotta go without you. Scan?"

Tiny nodded. "Yeah, I got it. I wanna get out too. I'll follow."

"Then come on." Without waiting for an answer Ocelot hurried down the corridor. The emergency lights were on here, but only about half-strength, giving the hall an eerie and faint reddish glow that made the place look even more hellish than usual. The runners were rounding a corner. Ocelot followed them. From far off in the distance he could hear the sound of alarms going off.

Closer, running footsteps echoed in the concrete halls. Doors slammed open and closed. *What the hell was going on?* He kept running. He knew if he lost the others he was hosed.

*I might be hosed anyway. But at least this way I go down fighting. Maybe I can take some of them down with me.*

He skidded around a corner and nearly collided with the two runners, who had stopped there. Tiny pulled up short behind him.

Ocelot realized why they had stopped: two guards lay dead at their feet and they were shrugging into the guards' armor at a high rate of speed. The black man glared at the two newcomers, helmet in hand. "Why the hell are you following us? Hit the road, chummers."

"We're coming with you," Ocelot snapped.

"Like hell you are," the white guy muttered. "This whole job is going to shit and you guys wanna tag along?"

The black guy was looking back behind him as if expecting more guards. "Come on, Kraft. We have to go or we'll never make it. Louie's only gonna be able to stay in for another few minutes. If we're not out by then —"

A meaty hand locked around his arm. "Ossa-lot says we're comin' with you," Tiny said placidly. "So we're comin'. Or you're not goin' nowhere."

Ocelot looked at him in surprise, very glad now that he'd trusted his instincts and let him come along. "You heard the kid," he said. "We won't slow you down. They're everywhere. We want out as much as you do. We ain't gonna let 'em have us again."

The black guy looked at Tiny's hand around his arm and then at Kraft. "I've seen the way this guy moves. He's got wires. And a troll —"

Kraft nodded. "Yeah. It ain't going like we planned it. Maybe some extra muscle might help."

"Okay, you're in," the black guy said. "I'm Michael, this is Kraft. Our chummers outside set this up so they could get us out of here, but we're a little more on our own than we expected. We have about twenty minutes to get out before our decker expects to get kicked out of the system. So we have to move."

Ocelot nodded. "You got it. I'm Ocelot. This is Tiny. Let's go."

Kraft and Michael finished putting on the guards' armor. "C'mon. Stay behind us. We can't use their guns, but we might be able to fool 'em long enough to nail another guard and get his stuff." Michael looked up at Tiny. "Sorry, no troll guards."

"That's okay," Tiny said. "I'm real tough."

Together they made their way slowly down the hallway, listening to the far-off yells and gunfire and alarms. The area where they were was deserted. "Where we headed?" Ocelot whispered.

"There's a delivery dock not too far from here. With the doors all opened, shouldn't be hard to get to it. From there we gotta get over the wall somehow. Our decker might be able to help with that, but we can't count on it."

It didn't seem like a terribly well thought-out plan to Ocelot, but it was all they had. If it meant getting away from *them* it was worth a shot.

As they neared an intersection, Kraft held up his hand. In a moment, the sound of pounding feet could be heard heading toward them, accompanied by yells of excitement. Kraft pointed toward the intersection and held up four fingers. A few seconds later four prisoners came around the corner. They were spattered with blood and one of them wore a guard's bloody helmet. They were screaming and yelling in insane glee.

It took the four would-be escapees only a few seconds to deal with them. Kraft turned out to be a physad—one

chop to the throat took down his opponent. Michael was a more conventional wired fighter, much like Ocelot. The two of them weren't far behind, and Tiny simply brought a fist down on the fourth man's head. They didn't stay to survey their handiwork, though. Kraft pointed forward and they kept going. "It's not far from here," Michael whispered. "Only —"

There was a very loud, metallic *thud* ahead of them.

"Oh, shit..." Kraft whispered sharply. "Michael —"

Michael muttered something under his breath and pounded his fist into the wall.

"What?" Ocelot demanded, fighting to keep his voice low. "We're close. What —"

"That was the big door between us and the dock," Kraft said. To verify his words, he peered around the next corner, then pointed. "See?"

Ocelot looked, and so did Tiny. A huge, thick metal door had come down and settled into place in what looked like a deep indentation in the floor. "What's it mean?"

Michael hit the wall again. "It means they're on to us," he said. "They must have got Louie. They're locking the place down."

Ocelot stared at them. *No...it couldn't be...they were so close...* He ran over to the door and pounded on it, then tried to lift it with insane strength. The door didn't budge.

"Ossa-lot..." Tiny's soft voice spoke behind him.

"What?" He glared at the troll.

Tiny shook his head. "Nothin', I guess."

Behind them, Michael and Kraft slumped against the wall.

Their one chance, and they had blown it. Now they were all stuck in here with the rest of the residents of Hell.

## 9.

Joe was only a day from having parted with the rest of his team when the dreams started coming.

He had gone to bed very late that night after having stayed up long past when he would have preferred to crash in order to regale his fellow gang members with the story of the Kenny Zane concert. He hadn't told them about it before because it was part of a run and therefore confidential information, but now that the run was over he didn't see any harm in giving them a few details about the concert itself and what Zane was like. He'd enjoyed being center stage, having most of the younger guys and even a few of the older ones clustered around him, hanging on his every word. Joe was already something of a celebrity in the gang due to his affiliations with the shadow community—nobody was supposed to know *officially* that he was a shadowrunner, but unofficially it was common knowledge among the gang, who lived in such close quarters that it was difficult for them to keep any secrets from each other. Even so, the fact that one of his jobs had given him an all-access pass to one of the most sought-after shows to come to Seattle in years—he still had it, having asked if he could keep it after its electronics had been disabled—had catapulted him upon his return from minor celebrity to man of the hour.

As much as he enjoyed the attention, though, Joe was tired. It had been a long grueling run and the Zane show had been only the culmination of the whole thing. Naturally he hadn't said anything to the others about Twyla Ellindel's involvement, as he had given his word along with the rest of the team that he would not, but Timothy Carson's betrayal of both the elven woman and Zane weighed heavily on his mind. He had been as pleased as the others when Carson had gotten his just



deserts. Now all he wanted to do was get away from here for awhile and get some long-deserved rest.

"That's it, I'm fragged," he said to the disappointed gangers, rising from his chair. He picked up the plate next to it, which had been filled almost six inches high with a late dinner of ribs, corn, and spiced potatoes, and made his way across the room, forcing the gangers to scoot out of the way or be stepped on. "I gotta get some sleep, guys." On the way by he glared down at one of the younger trolls, who was holding a riotously-colored synth-guitar. "And keep that thing down tonight, okay? If it wakes me up you're gonna be missing a few strings. Scan?"

"Yeah, Joe. Sure. Null persp," the kid said quickly, pulling the instrument protectively into his lap. He had been quietly noodling Zane chord progressions as Joe had been talking.

The kid didn't see Joe's grin because he'd already passed by, but someone else did. The big, bald troll who had been leaning in the doorway waited until Joe was out of the room, then followed him toward the stairs that led to the sleeping areas. "Still scarin' the kids, huh?" he teased.

"Hey, if you got it..." Joe stopped at the foot of the stairs, turning back. He smiled. "It's good to be back, Jake."

Jake nodded. Several years older than Joe, he was the leader of the gang that inhabited this tumbledown former apartment building. "Had a lot of jobs lately. Was wonderin' when you were gonna take a break."

Joe shrugged. "It just didn't work out that way, but it is now. We're all gonna take a month or two off. It'll be nice."

"Yeah, I'll bet. You stickin' around?"

"Dunno. Maybe for awhile. I'll probably go away in a week or two."

The other troll nodded. "Well, whatever." He grinned. "I'll shut these kids up so you can get some shuteye tonight, but after that all bets are off."

"Fair enough." Joe chuckled, clapping Jake on the shoulder with a force that would have broken human bones. "See ya tomorrow."

Jake moved off back toward the main living area while Joe continued upstairs. His room was on the top floor of the three-story building, at the end of the hall. A long time ago it had been a four-story building, but when the gang had taken over it had done some renovations that had resulted in the top-floor rooms being larger and higher-ceilinged than the second- or first-floor rooms. Only those gangers at the top of the hierarchy got to have their quarters up here, in rooms where they could stand up without hunching.

Opening the door to his room (which was not locked—no one would dare enter without his permission) Joe entered, closed the door behind him, and flopped facedown on his big bed with a loud sigh. After a moment he flipped over on his back and stared up at the rough ceiling.

Life had certainly started getting weird lately, but it finally looked as if maybe things were starting to settle down. He wasn't entirely sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, it was nice to have some time where he didn't have to worry about things, but on the other hand, he didn't always mind the weird stuff. It was that weird stuff, after all, that had gained him his closer relationship with Bear. If he hadn't met the Totem itself at a bizarre party on the metaplanes a couple of years ago during the whole Harlequin thing, he would doubtless still be casting about looking for the meaning he had always known

existed in his life but could not identify. In Joe's mind, saying that the tradeoff had been worth it would have been a serious understatement.

His gaze traveled around the room, looking at the Native American prints he had hung on the walls, the woven rug on the floor next to the bed, the bag on the chair that contained his pipe and his stash of peyote, and finally at the spear that occupied a place of honor on a stand in the opposite corner. As always when he looked at it, he felt a sense of satisfaction, as if the two of them belonged together. The spear was very old, but its wooden shaft, carved flint head and feathered ornaments had survived the passage of almost two hundred years with surprising durability. Joe thought that this was because, despite the fact that the spear was not magical, its history gave it a power that other similar items might not possess.

The spear had at one time belonged to the legendary Sioux chief Sitting Bull, who had always been one of Joe's particular heroes. It had been given to him a couple of years ago by an unlikely source—Winterhawk—in gratitude for Joe's contributions toward saving his life when he had been gravely injured by a vampire sniper. Of all the gifts the mage had carefully chosen for his friends ('Wraith had received a nearly-impossible-to-obtain Barrett sniper rifle, which 'Hawk had refused to explain his ability to procure but which bore the mark of the British military, while Ocelot had been given a two-part gift consisting of a Triumph sport-touring motorcycle and an antique blues guitar), the spear was undoubtedly the one that was dearest to its new owner. Ever since he had received it, Joe used it as an integral part of his ritual attempts to contact Bear. He wasn't often successful—he had studied such rituals extensively but owing to his lack of magical abilities, it was amazing that he succeeded at

all—but the few times he did manage to make contact he always felt that the power and emotion surrounding the spear’s aura had aided him in his effort.

Joe smiled, closing his eyes and kicking his boots off; they clunked loudly onto the floor but either there was no one in the room below yet or else Grundy and Kurt, the two young gangers who occupied that room, didn’t have the nerve to complain about Joe’s noise. Either way, the boots were forgotten as soon as they hit the floor. Joe wiggled his toes and stretched out, propping up his head with his crossed arms. A moment later he flicked on the chip player next to the bed, called up one of his Native American music chips, and set it on low volume. The soft chanting, underscored with rhythmic drumbeats, filled the room and put him at ease. As he drifted off to sleep, he was smiling. Life was good.

He was standing in a forest. The trees grew thick and tall here, their overhanging boughs interlocking high above his head and filtering the sunlight down to a sickly trickle; a luxuriant carpet of soft needles covered the ground beneath his feet. In the distance, he could hear the sound of a running stream. He held the Sitting Bull spear gripped tightly in his left hand.

The place was familiar to him, but yet it was not. An odd sense of heaviness pervaded his senses—he could not tell if it originated inside him or from the forest itself, but it was as if the trees were leaning in, stifling him, trying to block out the air and the sunlight. There was a slight chill in the air, and the faintest of breezes.

He looked around. There was no visible path; the land sloped upward in a barely perceptible incline, and around him he saw nothing but the seemingly unending trees spread out before him in all directions.

He was not afraid, although the sense of foreboding was not lessening—it had settled in and seemed bent on being his traveling companion through this strange forest. The trees looked dark and somehow menacing, their roots stretched out as if reaching for him, their branches, heavy with still more of the sharp green needles, extending down toward him. He shook his head and chuckled once, aloud. That was just silly. Even in the world of the Awakened, trees didn't attack people. Maybe the occasional odd specimen, but certainly not *en masse*. His mind was playing tricks on him, that was all.

No, he wasn't afraid. It didn't occur to him to question why he was here, but regardless of that, he was well equipped to survive in this environment. An experienced woodsman, he knew how to find clean water, catch fish, hunt with minimal tools, start a fire. And if he needed to get back to civilization, he could just follow the stream down until he found the road. He knew there was a road nearby. It went with the feeling that this place was familiar.

He didn't want to find civilization yet, though. Despite the odd aura, he liked being in the forest. He liked nature of almost any type, preferring its peace and intimacy with the bustling concrete streets of Seattle. Nothing there was ever quiet. You didn't have the time or the chance to think or listen or feel there—you were too busy chasing survival and gathering *things* and fragmenting yourself away from your inner core. It wasn't that he didn't like the city: cities had their purposes and that was where he made his living, but places like this were where he came when he wanted to truly live.

He started up the hill. Something told him that there was something up there that he would want to see—shelter, perhaps. He gripped his spear a little more tightly and moved with deliberate slowness, his big boots

making surprisingly little noise on the carpet of needles. *That's it, he thought. I'll get up there, rest for a little while, and then —*

There was a sound off to his right.

He stopped, immediately going stock-still, his sensitive ears searching to identify the sound and exactly where it had originated.

For several seconds he heard only an almost painful silence, and then the sound came again.

*Crunch. Crunch.*

Silence.

Joe twisted himself ever so slightly to his right without moving his feet. There was no doubt in his mind now, the sound had come from there, and not far away from the sound of it. Still moving slowly, he raised the spear and moved it across his body, gripping the wooden shaft up near the head with his right hand and down near the base with his left. It felt refreshingly substantial in his grasp. It did not occur to him to question why the spear, which had been made for a human-sized individual and thus had always felt small in his hands, was now perfectly sized for his trollish proportions and occupied his hands like it had been custom-designed for him. It was another in a long series of things that just weren't important. What *was* important was whatever was making the sound.

He waited, his breath coming very slowly, very quietly.

Silence again, followed by *crunch-crunch...crunch-crunch*.

It was getting closer.

His hands shook a little. He crouched slightly, dropping down, preparing himself.

Closer.

The crunching grew louder...louder...

The trees were too thick to see it clearly. It was a dark shape, massive, built low to the ground.

*Crunch. Crunch.*

It stepped out of the trees, and Joe relaxed and smiled.

A bear, huge and brown and bigger than all but the largest of its species, continued to move slowly, trundling toward Joe. The bear's eyes, glittering with intelligence, locked on Joe's and did not pull away.

Joe, feeling a bit silly for having worried at all, made a gesture of welcome, softly calling out the greeting to a respected teacher in the language of his native Nootka tribe. "I'm pleased to see you," he added. It was an understatement, but he knew that Bear would understand. It wasn't the words but the emotions behind them that mattered.

The bear — or Bear, as Joe knew he was — did not speak or acknowledge Joe's presence except to continue to regard him with wise brown eyes. He moved closer, his huge clawed paws making even less sound on the needle-strewn ground than Joe's boots had. When he stopped only a meter or so in front of Joe, his shaggy shoulders reached the troll's chest. Even with such massive size, he seemed to dwarf Joe with his sheer presence.

Joe smiled and inclined his head respectfully, lowering the spear until the end of its shaft rested on the ground. "Is there something you wish me to see, or to do?" he asked.

Bear paused, continuing to study Joe, his silent scrutiny both unnerving and comforting. Several moments passed. Joe remained still, confused. It had never been like this before. Whenever he had encountered Bear in a dream or during a vision, Bear had always intended to show him something, to reveal some truth to him. Such revelations were always vague and ambiguous and sometimes Joe could not make sense of them, but

even the vaguest of them was clearer than this quiet examination. He drew breath, preparing to ask a question.

At that moment, Bear's soft brown eyes hardened, taking on a malevolent gleam that had not been there previously. Before Joe could react, Bear had raised up on his powerful hindquarters, opened his mouth, and let out a vast roar that shook the forest. As Joe staggered back, deafened by the force of the roar, Bear surged forward and swung around, his massive left paw slicing through the air toward the troll. The paw struck the Sitting Bull spear at mid-haft, splintering it like it was made of balsa wood. Joe, thrown off balance by the sudden loss of his support, lost his footing and fell back.

Bear leaped forward, roaring again, his huge, pointed white teeth growing larger as he drew closer. The sound was thunderous, resounding both inside Joe's head and around him, feeling like the echo of it was being picked up and amplified by every tree that surrounded them — trees that were getting closer —

Joe's eyes flew open.

His heart was pounding, his breath quick and sharp in the dimness. He was gripping the edges of the bed as if he was afraid he would fall off.

Slowly he sat up, his gaze going immediately to the corner of the room where he kept the Sitting Bull spear. It was still there, just as he had left it. He let out his breath in relief, lowering his head down into his open hands and shoving his long hair back off his forehead.

It was almost three a.m., he saw when he looked at the clock on the nightstand — that meant he had been asleep for only an hour or so. That had been quite a dream for only being asleep for an hour!

Propping his pillows up against the wall and leaning back into them, Joe contemplated the dream, trying to



remember its details. Those details didn't seem to want to come back to him—the only thing he remembered clearly was the look of rage on Bear's face, and the feeling of dread and shame and confusion he had experienced when Bear had attacked him. *Why would I dream about Bear attacking me? I haven't done anything that would displease him...*

He thought about it a little more and still couldn't come up with anything he might have done that would have violated his dedication to the cause of his chosen totem—in fact, the last run they had just completed seemed like just the sort of thing Bear might have approved of: helping the oppressed, righting a wrong, choosing the path of right over the path of expediency. So why was he having bad dreams?

After a while he sighed and shrugged. *Sometimes these things just happen*, he told himself. *You've had bad dreams before. You probably ate too much too close to going to bed.* He could still taste the spicy ribs he'd had only a couple of hours ago. Maybe that was all it was.

*Not worth getting upset about yet.* In the background, the Native American chants continued to provide a soft backdrop to his thoughts. He reached over and shut off the chip player. *Maybe that's all it was. Ribs and chanting. I'll try to get some sleep now, and tomorrow I'll see about trying to contact Bear. If he's angry with me, maybe I can find out why, and if I can't reach him—it probably just means I was having a bad dream.*

Content with that decision, Joe got up and took off everything but his T-shirt and shorts. He lowered his pillows back to a flat position, climbed back into bed, and tried to relax. He wondered if he'd get any sleep.

He woke the next morning feeling refreshed around 10:00—he had slept clear through since dropping off shortly after he had lain back down several hours before.

His mind and body both felt good, as if both had truly rested.

His mind immediately returned to the previous night's dream. It seemed remote now, far away like something that hadn't been quite real. Still, though, he knew that it *had* been real and he had to know what, if anything, was going on.

First things first, though.

Most of the guys weren't up yet so he had no trouble getting into one of the two functional bathrooms on this floor for a quick shower. Then he went downstairs, nodded to the two troll kids who were sitting, rather zombie-like, at the kitchen table, and fixed himself a quick breakfast of soy eggs and real bacon. He was eating it when Jake came downstairs.

"Morning," the bald troll said. The two kids had left by then, so Joe was the only other occupant of the room.

"Hey," Joe said. He motioned toward the platter of food. "Want some?"

"Nah. I ate already. Was wonderin' when you were gonna get up."

Joe, who routinely slept even later than this when he didn't have to be up for some reason, ignored him. "What's goin' on?"

Jake shrugged. "Thought I'd go down to the club for awhile. Wanna come?" He took occasional bouncer work at one of the nearby strip clubs where his girlfriend was one of the performers—the club was under the gang's protection and every few weeks a group of them had to appear there to remind the place's owners of this fact.

Joe shook his head. "I've got some stuff to do today."

"More work? Thought you were on vacation."

"No, not more work. Just—need to see about some things, okay?" Joe sometimes wished he could share his feelings about Bear with Jake, who was one of his closest

friends outside the team, but the gangleader just didn't seem to be interested. Joe had mentioned it to him once and Jake had been surprised and pleased, asking Joe if he had discovered himself to be a shaman. They currently didn't have anyone with magical power in the gang, a deficiency that Jake was not pleased with even though he tended to distrust magicians because he didn't understand them. When Joe had told him that no, he was not a shaman but had simply decided to follow the way of Bear, Jake had looked at him oddly, shrugged, and lost interest. It wasn't that he ridiculed Joe's dedication in any way—he simply rarely referred to it at all. Joe knew it was because Jake couldn't get his mind around why anyone would want to follow the strictures of a Totem without getting any of the bennies for it.

Jake spread his arms. "Hey, no problem. I'll get Grundy—he's been dyin' to see the show anyway." He hadn't sat down yet and still did not; leaning over the table he grabbed a slice of bacon and stuck it in his mouth, muttering a goodbye to Joe as he left the room.

Joe finished his breakfast and headed back upstairs, carefully closing the door behind him. He didn't like to be interrupted when he performed his ritual to contact Bear. Part of this was because the distraction disturbed his carefully-constructed mental state and part of it was because he didn't want to have his ritual, which he had cobbled together out of the traditions of the Nootka, Sioux, and a few other Native American tribes, observed. He felt it to be a profoundly personal and solitary thing, not to be shared with any but perhaps a shaman or another mundane follower of Bear. Since he didn't know any of the latter and there weren't any of the former handy, he had to settle for doing it alone. Settling himself cross-legged down on his heavy print rug on the floor, he placed the Sitting Bull spear across his lap and spent

several moments stretching, relaxing his body until he felt completely comfortable in his chosen position. He switched on his chant chip, picked up his pipe, filled it with his peyote mixture and lit it. After waiting a few moments for it to get a good head of smoke going, he began taking slow, rhythmic puffs, holding the smoke in his lungs for several seconds each time before letting his breath out. Before long a haze of smoke began to hang in the air around his head. He cleared his mind and after a time began to chant along with the chip, taking puffs in between. His body became even more relaxed, his mind opening up to the possibilities of what might lay out there, unseen by the mundane eye. He tried to picture Bear in his head, to feel his benevolence, his power, his immensity. There was nothing else that was important—only Bear and his love, only his own desire to be enlightened by the Totem's wisdom.

He did not know how long he remained like that—he always lost track of time during the ritual because time was not a relevant concept in this context—but eventually the gray haze around him began to clear slightly. He tensed just a little, his body tingling with excitement: this was what usually happened on the very rare occasions when Bear answered his call. He forced himself to relax again, taking deep breaths and long slow puffs on the pipe, increasing the cadence of his chanting. He was so close, he wasn't going to lose it now.

The scene very slowly resolved itself into a misty forest. Fog hung on the ground and floated lazily through the air; the tree-trunks were black and desolate-looking in the whiteness, the needles a green so dark they almost seemed black themselves. Joe watched the scene, puzzled. Usually when Bear appeared to him it was in a bright, sun-dappled forest, green and alive with energy. Now, this time, everything seemed almost dead. It didn't *feel*

dead – it seemed to be the same forest, only in the dead of winter rather than the sunny light of spring.

As he continued to watch, a figure stepped out of the trees. It was almost like his dream had been: a massive creature, brown and shaggy, wise-eyed and watchful, but this time it stopped at the edge of the tree-line.

Joe felt himself being beckoned. Although he knew in some corner of his mind that he was not moving in the real world, he felt his body moving over the forest floor toward Bear. Bear watched him, an odd look in his eyes. Was it worry? Protectiveness? Joe couldn't quite tell.

He drew closer. "Teacher?" His voice was soft, respectful.

Bear still did not move. He continued to watch Joe as he got closer, showing no sign of any of the animosity he had exhibited in Joe's dream.

Joe stopped in front of him, bowing his head, waiting. It was not wise or productive to attempt to rush Bear. The Totem was slow and ponderous, but his wisdom, should he decide to impart it, was well worth waiting for. There was a slight chill in the air; Joe tried to ignore it.

After several moments, Bear raised his head and looked into Joe's eyes. There was no communication, at least not in words. Bear rarely communicated in words, preferring instead to show, to give impressions, to allow the student to draw what he could from the interaction. Today was no different.

Joe looked into the wise brown eyes and suddenly the chill in the air seemed to grow stronger. He shivered a bit. Around him the fog seemed to be moving in closer, oppressive in its thickness. Still, though, there was no feeling of malevolence to it. It was not a pleasant day, but it was a natural day. Nothing like what he had seen in his dream.

Bear's eyes were another matter. As Joe continued to look into their deep pools, he began to get a sense of foreboding. Again, it was not like the dream: he felt no threat from Bear himself. Instead, he felt as if something was seeking him, something that had nothing good on its mind. Something dark. What—?

Bear nodded in an almost humanlike fashion, then slowly faded away, becoming one with the swirling fog.

Joe was alone.

He stood there for a moment, pondering what had just occurred, and then he began to feel the effects of the peyote fading. He was returning to himself.

He was sitting in the middle of his room where he had been when he started. A glance at the clock told him he had been gone for more than four hours, when you added up all the time he had spent chanting and smoking in addition to the communication with Bear. His head felt pleasantly buzzy, his legs a little stiff from having been in the same position for so long. Slowly, picking up the spear and setting it down next to him, he stretched his legs out and waited while the pins and needles of returning feeling attacked him, then got up and returned his gear to its places.

He sat down on the edge of his bed, contemplating what had just happened. That had been without a doubt the most cryptic of his few actual contacts with Bear. What had the Totem been trying to tell him? Was the desolate landscape a clue? Was there some threat to the forest where he had grown up, or the place where he went to retreat from civilization these days? That didn't seem likely. It would have to have been a fairly big threat to draw Bear's attention, and even then he had his shamans to inform of such things. Why tell a mundane troll who didn't even know what he, Bear, was talking about?

*That's Bear, he thought. Doesn't do any good to try to explain why he does what he does. He has his reasons.*

That still didn't get him any closer to understanding, though. He sighed, looking at the spear which was now back in its corner. Maybe he'd try again tomorrow. Or maybe he'd just let it go. The dream, after all, might easily have been nothing at all. In that case, maybe Bear was just telling him, in his own indirect way, to stop worrying so much.

He doubted it, but there wasn't much else he could do.

Over the next few days he tried to settle back into life with the gang, taking his place on neighborhood patrols and even accompanying Jake down to his girlfriend's club a couple of times. He figured he'd stay around for a week or two to reconnect with his fellow gangers and then head out to his cabin in the mountains above Seattle for another two or three weeks of rest and solitude. It seemed like a good plan to him when he made it.

He didn't account for the dreams, though.

He had two more that week. He didn't remember either of them with any kind of detail—not even as much as the first one he'd had. They made him uneasy, though, because they both involved Bear in some way. Worse, they both involved Bear in a way that suggested to Joe that the Totem was somehow angry with him, or wanted him to do something or else incur his wrath. The only problem was, Joe couldn't seem to remember what it was Bear wanted him to do. Both nights he had awakened from the dream in cold sweat but when he had tried to recall the particulars they had flitted away from him, leaving him with a vague feeling of unease and dread but no specific reason to have it. If he had been thinking clearly about it, he might have gotten the impression that

something or someone was blocking the worst influences of the dreams on his mind, but his mind wasn't working with that level of efficiency at this time. The dreams disturbed him but not overmuch—he had had bad dreams before and these, though stranger than the ones he was used to, were no worse than many of his others.

He could tell that some of the other gangers, particularly Jake, were concerned about him. The gangleader brought up the subject one day while they were on their way to get some lunch at Joe's favorite neighborhood deli. "Joe, are you all right?" he asked out of the blue.

Joe tilted his head. "Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"I dunno." Jake shrugged. "You've just been actin'—well—weird lately. Doin' the native thing more than usual."

That much was true. As the dreams had continued that week Joe had spent more time in his room, listening to his tribal chant chips, smoking, meditating. He hadn't been specifically trying to contact Bear, but even these actions had given him some comfort. Joe sighed. "No...nothing's wrong, Jake. I just—want to rest for awhile, you know? I think I'm gonna take off in a day or two."

Jake nodded slowly. "I figured you might. Listen, chummer—you know if there's anything you need help with, the guys and me are—"

"Yeah, I know," Joe said. "I know that. But I think I just need to get off by myself for awhile and think about some things."

Jake had left it at that, and they had continued on. That had been yesterday. He had another dream that night, worse than any of the others. Once again Bear had attacked him—but this time he had remained asleep long enough to see the whole thing through. He could feel



Bear's hot breath on him, feel his flesh being ripped from him by the massive claws, taste the blood in his mouth – and from somewhere off in the distance, he could hear laughter. The laughter still rang in his ears, sounding strangely familiar as he jerked awake.

He sat up in bed, shaking a bit in the darkness. This was getting weirder by the day, and it didn't seem to be calming down. He was going to have to take a different approach.

He considered his options. He needed to talk to someone who knew something about magic. He didn't know if his dreams had any magical significance, but with four of them in less than two weeks, it was worth investigating. His first thought, because they had left each other's presence only a week or so ago, was Winterhawk. Maybe if he gave 'Hawk a call he might be able to examine Joe's aura and figure out what was troubling him. Almost as soon as that thought touched his mind, though, he discarded it. No, in the first place, Winterhawk was gone, undoubtedly back in England by now, and wouldn't take kindly to Joe's contacting him. It didn't matter anyway, because Joe didn't know *how* to contact him. The mage had never given Joe any other indication of where he lived beyond "England."

His next thought he discarded even faster, even though its subject was without any doubt the most powerful magician Joe had personal contact with. Gabriel would have been a very good choice – when you were having problems that might be magical in nature, who better to have on your side than a friendly Great Dragon? – but Joe had even less idea where Gabriel was than Winterhawk. He had taken off months ago with Kestrel and neither of them had been seen since.

The answer was obvious, really. He'd known it all along. Sure he would be unable to sleep any further that

night, he got up and began tossing clothes into his duffel bag. He would leave tomorrow.

He would have to go and talk to Ben.

As he continued to pack, his mind focused on the task at hand, he didn't consciously realize that the eerie laughter was continuing somewhere deep in his psyche.

Jake didn't ask any questions when Joe appeared downstairs the next morning carrying his bag and his Sitting Bull spear. The gangleader watched wordlessly as he gathered a few things from the kitchen and slid them into his bag. It was only after Joe had zipped the bag up and faced him across the table that he spoke. "Heading out?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah. I don't know when I'll be back. Got some things to do."

Jake saw him to the door. He, like the rest of the gang, didn't know where Joe went when he left—everybody got the impression that, even in their highly communal lifestyle, this was one thing that Joe took very seriously and considered to be completely private. Whether he was heading out for some shadowrun-related activity or simply going off somewhere to be alone for awhile, Jake didn't know and didn't ask. "Take care, buddy," the gangleader said, clapping him on the back.

"Yeah. Keep those kids outta my room, okay, Jake?"

Jake grinned. "You got it." His tusky face sobered. "I hope you work this out, whatever it is. I haven't seen you this serious in a long time."

Joe nodded soberly. "Yeah, Jake. Me too. But I gotta do this, you know?" He hefted his bag in one hand and the spear in the other and, with one last wave, headed out.

Less than an hour later he was on the road and heading out of Seattle, the rumble of his big Harley Scorpion and the wind streaming his long hair out behind him beginning to do their work to relax him. He always felt more at ease when he got out of the Sprawl, as the people and the cars and the pounding pulse of the city gave way to trees and streams and a more reflective, contemplative outlook. More than any of his teammates, Joe loved and felt he belonged among nature: Ocelot, as a street-bred city kid, always seemed vaguely uncomfortable with it; 'Wraith was another city type and, while he didn't seem exactly uncomfortable, he did seem out of place there; Winterhawk looked at it as something to be used or tamed rather than something that merely *was*. Joe looked forward to his chances to get out of the city for awhile and regroup.

He had taken the Scorpion on purpose, rather than the team's big Gaz-Willys Nomad. For one thing, the Nomad was currently locked in Ocelot's garage, but even if it wasn't Joe wouldn't have taken it. He didn't expect trouble of the type that the Nomad would have been able to help with, and besides, he was traveling light. Currently the duffel bag was secured with bungee cords to the Scorpion's rear seat, and the spear was in a specially designed holder he'd added to the bike a long time ago. It had actually been designed to hold a rifle, but after a few quick modifications to it the carefully wrapped spear had fit nicely inside, safe and out of sight. He had enough food to keep him going until he could begin hunting, spare clothes and blankets, a couple of weapons, his ritual gear, and his spear. He didn't need anything else.

The trip up took about two and a half hours; it would have been faster but Joe wasn't hurrying. His mind was gripped almost unconsciously by two conflicting

directives: on the one hand there was a sense of urgency, as if the answers he was seeking were at his destination and he had to hurry to get there, but on the other hand he felt the vague dread that what was waiting for him was not something he wanted to know anything more about. So he compromised, keeping the bike at a brisk but reasonable pace and concentrating on enjoying the ride and the scenery as he got closer.

The turnoff, as the road wound up into the mountains, was not easy to spot but Joe knew its location by heart. He slowed the bike in anticipation and when he saw the arrangement of trees and rocks that indicated the turnoff he carefully steered it off the main road.

The side road leading upward was not paved, so he kept the bike at a slow speed and guided it around the rocks and ruts with practiced ease. The Scorpion was heavy enough that the substandard road didn't bother it much, and if he started to lose his balance he could just put his feet down to steady it. All he really had to worry about was not running over any sharp-pointed rocks that might puncture one of his tires. He was attentive but relaxed as he continued upward for a couple of miles until at last the road gradually petered out, claimed at last by the forest undergrowth. Joe knew that there used to be a fire lookout station up here somewhere many years ago, but it had fallen into disuse before he had been born and thus the road was no longer maintained. The only reason this one had lasted as long as it had was because Joe and a few other people who had property up here all made efforts to keep it up just enough for it to be barely passable. With one exception, he had never seen any of the others and they had never seen him: anyone who wanted to come this far up into the mountains likely had little interest in socialization. That was fine with Joe.

He pulled the bike off near the end of the road and wheeled it into a clump of bushes behind a tall rock. This was where he always hid his bike when he came up here, and so far no one had disturbed it. Off to the left of the dirt road was a tiny path leading further upward—it was carefully hidden and much harder to see than the entrance to the dirt road that led up here, but Joe knew exactly where it was and barely even had to look for it. Slinging his duffel bag over one shoulder and grabbing the spear, he slid the bike's key into his pocket and took off in that direction, shoving clumps of bushes aside and starting on his way.

The hike up was quite pleasant; it was a reasonably nice day with only a few clouds in the sky, and all around him he could hear the sound of nature: birds, little furtive movements in the bushes and the underbrush, the far-off sound of running water. There were no vehicle sounds, no sounds of civilization at all. He liked that. He whistled a tune as he continued upward, his long-legged strides eating up the ground quickly.

It was only twenty minutes or so before he came upon a clearing. Joe pushed through the trees and stood looking at it for a moment: in its center was a small cabin built of rough wood. He smiled. The place looked undisturbed: the windows were all intact, the door closed, and the roof solid and strong. He hadn't been up here for awhile; he was always a bit worried that he would get here and find that someone had broken in, but he never did. He crossed the clearing and unlocked the door.

The inside too looked as he had left it, cozy and rustic with rough-hewn wooden chairs, a stone fireplace, and an oversized cot in the corner covered with folded army blankets. He'd have to do a bit of cleanup if he was going to stay here for awhile: dusting, cleaning windows, that

sort of thing—but he knew from experience that the work was part of what he enjoyed about the place.

The cabin was his, as much as any piece of real property could belong to someone without a SIN. He had bought the land several years ago through a convoluted deal orchestrated by Harry in which Joe had given Harry the money (more than the land had cost, of course—Harry rarely did anything for free) and then the fixer had made all the arrangements that had allowed Joe to semi-legally own the small, four-acre plot up here in the mountains. He paid an annual upkeep fee to Harry which covered taxes and the payoffs for the deckers that kept the records updated, and in exchange he had a peaceful, beautiful retreat where no one could bother him. He thought it was a fair trade all around.

Shortly after he and Harry had solidified the deal, Joe had begun building the cabin. He was proud of the fact that, with the exception of one other helper, he had built the place with his own two hands. It was rough and unpolished, but it had its own simple beauty and to Joe it was every bit as beautiful as any fine home owned by a corporate fatcat. After all, he had *made* it, which made it uniquely his.

Now, though, he wasn't planning to stay here. He had to find Ben, and, depending on where his friend was right now and what he was doing, that could take some time. *Just a few more minutes and I'll go*, he told himself. He hadn't been sleeping too well the past few days—it wasn't that the odd dreams had prevented him from sleeping, but they had certainly been weighing more heavily on his mind with each successive one. A little rest here where he felt peaceful would do him good. He would allow himself a few minutes to slump down into one of the chairs and then he'd get up and go out in search of Ben.

Joe awoke with a start to the sound of someone knocking on his door. At least that was what he *thought* he had heard. Jerking his head upright, he glanced at his chrono and winced. He'd been asleep for over an hour – the crick in his neck was proof of this fact.

The knock came again. "Joe? You in there?"

It was Ben's voice. Joe jumped up out of the chair, grinning a little to himself. Leave it to Ben to figure out that he was here and save him the trouble of looking for him. He did that sometimes; Joe wondered if Bear himself told Ben he was there or if he just checked the place out regularly to make sure nobody was breaking in. He'd never asked. "C'mon in," he called. "It's open."

Immediately the door swung open to admit a tall, broad human. "Joe," he greeted, smiling. "It's good to see you." Although not nearly as tall as Joe, Ben projected an image of size, of a substantiality that seemed somehow bigger than his physical form. He was dressed in rough but serviceable woodsman's clothes – jeans, plaid wool shirt, leather work boots – and his brown hair and bushy brown beard were both unruly and wild-looking. His brown eyes twinkled as he took in the sight of his friend. "Long time no see. What'cha been up to?"

"Oh, you know – the usual," Joe said as Ben settled himself into another of the big chairs near the fireplace. He hadn't ever told Ben about his shadowrunning activities in anything but the vaguest of terms, and Ben hadn't asked. It was almost as if the Bear shaman existed in a completely different circle of Joe's life, one that he did not want to intersect with his other one in the city. He hadn't told the team about Ben, either. "How have you been?"

"Oh, can't complain." Ben crossed his ankle over his knee and leaned back as if he intended to stay awhile.

"The weather's been rotten lately, but I've gotten a lot of work done inside the lodge so it's not so bad really."

Joe nodded. Ben was the only other person up here whom he ever saw, and had been the one who had helped him build his house. The shaman lived up here full-time, coming into town in his ancient, battered pickup truck only when he needed supplies that he couldn't get in the mountains. Even then he usually went across the border into the NAN lands and did his dealing there, bartering skins, handcrafted wooden items, and other such things with some trusted friends for what he needed instead of using money. He had a profound dislike of cities and felt uncomfortable in anything but the smallest woodland town. That was why Joe hadn't called him to tell him he was coming up—modern conveniences like cell phones and data terminals were not the sorts of things Ben liked to have in his life. It wasn't that he didn't know how to use them, just that he preferred not to.

"So," Ben was saying, "what brings you up here? Just need some time away?"

Joe's grin faded and he looked troubled. "No...I was hoping I could talk to you about something."

Ben leaned forward, his eyes growing serious. "What's on your mind?"

The troll took a deep breath, wondering now if he wasn't just blowing the whole thing out of proportion. "I've been having weird dreams," he said at last.

Ben's expression didn't change. "What kind of weird dreams?"

Joe looked around the cabin. "Hey, I just realized—did I take you away from something? We could talk about this later if you—"

"No, it's fine." Ben waved him off. "I wasn't doing anything important, but even if I was, it can wait. Tell me about these dreams."



So Joe did, beginning with his first night back from the run (he didn't mention the run specifically, just that he had "some business" and it had ended well) and continuing through his strange contact with Bear and the other dreams. When he finished, he looked up. "That's it."

Ben was looking at him even more seriously than before. "You're right," he said. "That *is* weird." He stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment. "You sure you didn't do anything that might make you feel guilty? You know, that might make you think Bear might not be pleased? 'Cause I'll tell you this—the last time Bear was pissed at *me*, I got a hell of a lot more than bad dreams."

Joe was curious about the incident Ben had mentioned but he didn't think this was the right time to ask. "I can't think of anything. I mean, my business was about helping somebody out who'd been screwed over pretty bad. When it was over, she was okay and the person who did it to her was in big trouble. I can't see how Bear would be upset about that."

"No..." Ben shook his head slowly. His voice took on the same quality Winterhawk's did when he was thinking something out as he went. "You say that in each dream, Bear attacked you in some way, but in the vision, you thought he was trying to warn you about something..." He paused, stroking his beard again, and then made a decision. "Listen," he said, "why don't you come up to the lodge? We'll see if we can ask Bear himself to tell us anything else about the situation. Okay?"

That was what Joe had been hoping to hear. Ben would doubtless be able to get a much better impression of the Totem's opinion than Joe himself could ever achieve. "Thanks, Ben. I'd appreciate it."

"No problem." Ben smiled and stood up with a grace that belied his large form. "C'mon. Afterward I've got

some venison that I think you'll like, and I just picked up a case of beer last week on my trip in."

Ben's combination home/medicine lodge was about half an hour's hike away, at the end of another road even more well hidden than the one that led near Joe's place. Joe was relieved when they came into view of the rough-hewn wooden structure built into the side of the hillside; he had spent many happy days here and it almost felt like a second home to him.

Ben opened the door and motioned Joe inside, then followed him and closed the door. Joe looked around, taking in the familiar sights in the dim, filtered light: the room that was larger than it seemed from the outside because it had been dug a fair way back into the hill itself, the skins and ritual objects hanging on the walls, the small living area near the back. The lodge smelled of leather and smoked meat and wood; there was a large ritual circle laid out permanently in the big cleared area in the middle of the floor, at the center of which was a fireplace with a hidden vent that carried the smoke up and out of the lodge. "Have a seat," Ben told Joe, indicating the living area. "You know I'll have to get some things ready before we can start. Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge."

Joe did just that, grabbing a beer and dragging a chair over near the circle. He dropped his bag, a smaller version he'd carried inside his big duffel and which was now filled with his ritual supplies, next to the chair and propped the spear up against the wall.

It didn't take Ben long to prepare—he summoned up a couple of hearth spirits to help him and only about twenty minutes later he straightened up and motioned Joe forward as the spirits bowed and faded away. "Okay," he said. "This shouldn't be too tough, since all we're trying to do is get some answers." He grinned. "I expect Bear

will just tell you to lay off the chili burritos and stop worrying so much about things.”

“I hope so,” Joe said fervently, picking up his spear and bag and stepping into the circle.

The fire had been lit now, its smoke swirling upward and disappearing up through the vent. It crackled merrily in the middle of the pit, flames licking in anticipation. Ben had placed two heavy folded blankets next to each other near the fire; he lowered himself down cross-legged onto one and Joe did likewise on the other, laying the spear as he always did across his legs.

Ben had a small drum in his lap. As Joe settled in he began to beat a slow rhythm on it, his eyes closed, his face peaceful. Part of the preparation had been to close the blinds on the lodge’s few windows, leaving the flickering fire as the only source of illumination. Joe watched it cast eerie shadows on the walls and felt himself infused with a sense of calm. He took out his pipe, prepared it, and began his relaxation exercises.

He had rarely contacted Bear with Ben before, but on the few occasions that he had it had been much easier but much less personal on his part. When with Bear he felt similar to a decker who joins in a decking session via a hitcher jack: he could see everything that happened but couldn’t affect any of it. The analogy was not quite true because occasionally Joe *could* have some input into the contact, but Ben’s power was so strong that it usually eclipsed whatever small measure of mundane energy Joe brought to the party. When this happened Joe usually felt a longing, a desire to touch Bear the way Ben did with such ease—this time, though, he would be happy if Ben could simply set his mind at rest that there was nothing to worry about and he had just been overreacting to the whole situation.

They slipped into the trance together to the sound of the soft cadence of the drum, Ben subtly guiding Joe until they had both reached the state of mind that would allow them to be receptive to the Totem's teaching. It felt different for Joe than usual—more aware, more in control of himself than when he did it on his own. *Probably because it takes less peyote this way*, he had thought wryly on previous occasions. Whatever it was, he concentrated on opening his mind as the lodge faded away and the fog began to lift.

This time the scene was very different from before. They were still in the forest—or rather, Joe was, because Ben was nowhere in sight even though Joe could still feel his strong presence next to him—but this time instead of an endless progression of trees he was in a clearing. The clearing was almost completely round, surrounded by thickly-growing trees that left only a meter or so at most between them.

He stood in the middle of the clearing, turning around as if trying to see everything at once. Quickly he began to get the same sense of foreboding as before, but it was much stronger this time. There was something out there in the forest, seeking him. Even though he couldn't see it, he *knew* it with complete certainty.

Then the eyes appeared. The spaces between the trees were shrouded in darkness, and as Joe spun around, he could see tiny glowing eyes appear and then disappear at various points around the clearing. He could hear soft sibilant whispers as if whatever things were out there were speaking to each other, trying to figure out the best way of attacking him. He broke out in a cold sweat, his body trembling. He was far more afraid of these things than he should be, given that he didn't even know what they were. He didn't need to know what they were. All he

knew is that if he allowed them into the clearing he was lost.

There were so many of them, though. He continued to turn around and around, gripping his spear (it was once again troll-sized in the vision), and each time he turned more of the bright little eyes regarded him from the darkness, more of the whispers reached his ears. He could still feel Ben's presence, but it was far away as if this did not concern him.

Then, suddenly, there was another presence in the clearing. One moment Joe was alone and the next moment he felt something large and powerful standing at his side. He spared a glance and saw that it was Bear, huge and brown and shaggy. Bear looked at him and then returned his attention back to the dark spaces between the trees. He opened his mouth and let out a roar and some of the little eyes receded.

Joe's eyes widened. So they *could* be frightened and driven off! Taking his cue from Bear's example, he began to poke at the dark spaces with his spear. Wherever he did so, the lights went out and the whispers quieted. Joe was elated. This was all he had needed –

The eyes reappeared.

They were clumping together now, several eyes in one space, and then they spread out again. There seemed to be more of them this time. Bear swiped at some with his massive paw and Joe continued to poke them with the spear, but it was clear that it was a lost cause. For every one they stopped, more appeared. Joe's sense of dread began to grow again, rising higher and higher until it became full-blown terror. He poked madly at the things, shrieking at them to stop, to go away, to leave him alone.

Bear turned to him. For a moment there was an expression of wise sadness in his eyes. The look had

significance: the Totem was trying to tell him something. But he couldn't understand. The terror was too strong —

The vision faded.

Joe's consciousness was slammed back into his body with wrenching force. His hands were knotted tightly on the spear's shaft, shaking; his body was bathed in cold sweat. For a moment he just sat there, trembling, assuring himself that he was back in Ben's lodge, that he was safe, that the things were not here.

Ben didn't look like he was doing much better. He too was shaking, his shirt, hair, and beard darkened by sweat. The fire had gone out, leaving the place barely lit by the small amount of outside sunlight that could slip in between the blinds. Ben was breathing hard, his shoulders slumped, his hands limp over the drum. "Well," he said raggedly, "I guess I was wrong. It's not the chili burritos."

For a long moment he did not speak further; Joe was fine with that because it gave him a chance to get himself back together and try to calm down. Finally, he ventured, "Do you — know what it is?"

Ben rose slowly on shaky legs and moved out of the circle. He crossed the room, carefully putting the drum back on its stand, and grabbed two beers from the fridge. He tossed one to Joe and popped the other one. After a long swallow, he let his breath out and ran the back of his wrist over his mouth. "Not exactly," he said. "I don't know what those things are. I've never seen anything quite like them before." He dropped into a chair and motioned for Joe to join him. "I'll tell you this, though: whatever they were, Bear was definitely trying to warn you about them."

Joe got up and carried his beer over to a chair opposite Ben. He was beginning to get a very bad feeling deep in the pit of his stomach. "So then — why did he attack me in my dream?"

"I don't think that was Bear," Ben said, taking another swig. "I can't say for sure 'cause I didn't see your dream, but I *know* the Bear we saw in this vision was the real deal. I could feel him, his presence there. And it sure looked to me like he was trying to protect you from those things." He regarded Joe silently for a moment. "You have any idea what they might be?"

Joe's stomach twinged again. Could it be — ? No...not after everything that had happened before. He had thought all that was over. "Maybe," he said slowly after a pause. "I'm — I'm not sure."

Ben's gaze remained on him for a long moment before he nodded. "Okay. Suppose you tell me what you think they are?"

Again Joe paused. If it *was* what he feared, he was in a difficult situation. The existence of those particular enemies was not something that was widely known, and there were some very powerful folks out there who had made it their purpose to keep it that way. He didn't think it would be wise to reveal what he knew, even to his most trusted friend outside the team. He sighed. "I — don't know," he said. "I thought I did, but —" Changing the subject, he said, "Is there any way we can figure out what they want? Why they're doing this?" *And what we can do to stop them?* He thought that perhaps if Ben somehow figured it out for himself they could talk further. And then again — maybe it wasn't what he feared at all.

Ben was still regarding him with an odd expression, but he did not pry further. "I don't know," he said. "Whatever it is, Bear's obviously worried about it. You're not a shaman, but Bear has high regard for you and looks out for you, as you well know. What this vision says to me is that Bear is trying to help you hold these things off, but they're just going to keep at it until they get through.

He can't get involved directly, he can only help you to see the way to proceed."

"But I don't *know* the way to proceed," Joe said. The terror was beginning to recede, but he still felt more than a bit uneasy about the situation.

"I don't either," Ben said. He sighed and got up. "Tell you what. Why don't you stay here for the night, and let me try another ritual by myself a little later after we've had a chance to rest. I'll see if I can find out more about what's going on and maybe get some idea what you can do about it."

Joe nodded gratefully as again a sense of relief washed over him. "Thanks, Ben. I'm gonna owe you one for this."

Ben smiled, though he still looked tired. "Just bring up another case of beer next time you come. I'm figuring you're gonna drink me out of most of this one before we're done."

Joe had a hard time settling down to rest, but he forced himself to do so nonetheless. He and Ben had had a simple but delicious meal of venison, boiled potatoes, and more beer, spending the time talking about mundane things like how Ben's vegetable garden was doing and how nice Joe's ride up had been. An hour or so after dinner was over the shaman had moved off to prepare for the new ritual, admonishing Joe to try to get some rest. He told the troll that this one would probably last most of the night.

Joe didn't remember drifting off; the last he recalled was the smell of smoke, the flicker of firelight, and Ben's soft chanting, but the next thing he knew something had awakened him.

It was still dark outside. The fire had died down to a few glowing embers and there was a slight chill to the air



in the lodge. Joe looked over and saw Ben sitting slumped in front of the fire, his shoulders rising and falling slowly.

"Ben?" he called softly.

Ben raised his head and turned. He looked very tired, but he smiled a little when he saw Joe. "Thought I told you to get some rest."

"I did. I just woke up. Did you – are you done?"

"Yep."

"Did you find out anything?"

Ben rose slowly from his seated position and came over to take a seat next to where Joe had spread out his blankets on the floor. He lowered himself down and leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. "I still don't know what it is," he said, "except that it's powerful and very evil...some kind of primal force. I don't know how you got mixed up with it and I'm not sure I want to know. But I think I know what you're gonna need to do."

Joe tensed a little. "What?"

Ben let out his breath slowly, a soft hiss in the darkness. "You need to get away," he said. "Far away from civilization and people. Bear can protect you from this, but not if your spirit is fragmented by conflict. He showed me a vision of a cub being sought by some kind of dark force, and then showed me the cub going off far away, living as close to the ways of Bear as possible. If he can keep you close to him, he can prevent the force from reaching you. Does that make any sense?"

Joe pondered, then nodded. "I think so. So I'm supposed to go away from here, even? Away from the cabin? Away from you?"

"Yeah." Ben sighed. "I wouldn't have thought so, but Bear was pretty adamant about it. He's trying to protect you but he needs to be able to focus on it, and he can only do that if you're focused on him. It's harder because

you're not a shaman. I might not have to go away if it were me, but with you —" he spread his hands.

"So..." Joe sat up slowly. "How long will I have to be gone? Did Bear say?"

Ben shook his head. "I don't know. I'll keep consulting him, studying the problem, trying to figure out how to deal with it. But until then..."

"Be careful, Ben," Joe's voice was soft. "I don't know what this is, but I don't want you to get hurt over it, whatever it is."

"I'm always careful," Ben said; for the first time since the ritual there was a bit of a chuckle in his voice. "You'd better take your own advice, though."

There was a long silence. "Where will I go?"

"I've been thinking about that. I think I know a place where you'll be happy until we can get this figured out. You want to do it?"

Joe nodded. "If that's what Bear says I should do, then yeah...I want to." *Anything to make it go away.*

"Okay, then. Get your stuff together and tomorrow morning I'll take you there." Ben patted Joe's arm encouragingly. "We'll get it figured out, Joe. Don't worry. There's got to be some explanation for it."

"Yeah." *That's what I'm afraid of.*

The next morning Joe got his things together and headed back down to his cabin for the rest of them. *Get closer to Bear*, he thought, looking around the cabin at what he had brought. *Can't do that with all this stuff.* He emptied his duffel bag out on the bed and examined the items he had brought, finally choosing a few army blankets, some dried food, and his Sitting Bull spear. He put the blankets and the food in his smaller bag and slung it over his shoulder. Everything else, including his other

weapons, he packed back in the big duffel bag. He'd take that up and leave it with Ben for safekeeping.

When he arrived back at the lodge Ben was waiting for him. He handed Joe a large filled canteen. "It'll be a long hike," he said. Joe simply nodded and followed.

It was a long hike indeed. It took them nearly half a day of hard hiking; there were no trails here and most of it was uphill. When Ben finally stopped they were standing nearly at the top of the mountain on which the lodge and Joe's cabin were located. Joe looked around, awed. "This is beautiful," he said. "I've never been up this far before."

"Not many people have," Ben said. "I doubt you'll find another person for five miles in any direction—probably farther in most directions." He pointed off to the east. "There's a creek over there—good fishing, and the water's great. Lots of deer and smaller critters for hunting, and somewhere around here is a cave you can use for shelter—it was empty last time I was up here a month or so ago." He looked around. "You should be okay here...I'll try to figure out something else as soon as I can and come back up to get you, but with your woodsman skills you shouldn't have any problem."

Joe nodded slowly. He hadn't been completely sure about this, but the higher up they'd gotten the more sense he'd had that it was the right thing to do. He could almost feel the tension lifting from his shoulders. He turned to Ben and his eyes were earnest. "Thanks, Ben. I don't know what I'd have done if you hadn't—"

"Don't worry about it," Ben said. "Just take care of yourself and be careful."

Joe watched as Ben bade him goodbye and turned to start back down the hill. He wondered how long it would be before he saw the shaman again, and a twinge of fear rippled through him as he thought about Ben dealing with what he, Joe, was afraid the problem was. He began

to regret not telling Ben more about his fears, but the shaman was already gone.

He turned to look back at the pristine beauty of the mountain and the trees and the sky. Despite his fears about Ben, he still felt peaceful. An odd serenity was already beginning to cover him like a soft blanket.

“Better go find that cave so I can do some hunting before the day’s over,” he murmured to himself, and headed off. By the time he had located the cave and a good spot in the creek to fish, he had almost forgotten about everything but the immediate world around him.

## 10.

From the moment Jonathan Andrews awoke, he knew that something was very wrong.

He wasn't sure exactly *how* he knew at first, but the motel room was a good start. It was small, nondescript, of the type found in just about every low-rent chain from San Francisco to New York. Double bed covered with a faded floral print spread, tiny table with two chairs, single window with closed curtains, inoffensive seascape print framed in light wood. A doorway on the other side of the room undoubtedly led to the bathroom, as it did in every other motel room of this type.

Jonathan sat up in bed and looked around, taking in the scenery. Yep, it was a fairly standard-issue motel room, all right.

The only problem was: when Jonathan had gone to bed last night, he hadn't been *in* a motel room.

"What's going on...?" he whispered to himself. No one answered, but then, he hadn't really expected anyone to answer.

Moving slowly as if in a daze, Jonathan swung his legs around and put his feet on the floor, sitting up on the edge of the bed. As he did so, he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror across the room: pale, thin, the expression confused and wary. His short white hair was awry from sleep; mechanically he raised his hands and ran his long fingers through it. He touched the tips of his pointed ears. He still hadn't gotten completely used to those—to any of his "changes"—even though they had been a part of him for several years now. At least he didn't have it as bad as some of the new creatures that had started appearing: as odd as he sometimes felt with his elven features, he wouldn't have traded them for those of an ork or a troll. It was bad enough being unusual, but

to be unusual and looked upon with suspicion and hatred by a significant portion of one's fellow beings was a bit more than Jonathan was prepared to deal with.

He rose to a standing position and looked around the room. His reflection regarded him from the mirror – tall, lean, dressed in a loose-fitting T-shirt and a pair of shorts. It wasn't his usual sleeping attire, but that was the least of his concerns at the moment.

A dim illumination, emanating from a small night-light near the side of the bed, suffused the area. His bare feet rested on shabby carpet that looked like it might have been tan at some point in its past, but which was now a grimy combination of brown and gray, stained and tracked with the treads of many dirty shoes. There was no sign of the motel's name anywhere in the room, not even a room-service menu or city guide next to the – what? The thing on the nightstand looked vaguely like a telephone, but it was like no phone he'd ever seen before. Tentatively he picked up the receiver and was surprised when a little video screen lit up to reveal a very authentic-looking computer generated image of a woman. She chirped, "City and listing, please."

He quickly hung up the receiver; the image faded.

Breath coming faster, he turned around in place, taking in the rest of the room without really seeing it, examining his situation. Whatever was going on was very, very wrong. Nothing was as he remembered it. It was almost like a –

"Of course. It's all a dream. That's it..." he whispered aloud. His body slumped with relief as the answer came to him. Of course it was all a dream. He allowed himself to drop back down on the bed, resting his elbows on his knees. *All a dream. Pretty soon I'll wake up, and I might not even remember it. I'll be back in my own room again, ready to get up and go to work.* He smiled. Sometimes he did have

very lucid dreams like this. He couldn't recall every having had one quite *this* lucid before, but that didn't mean anything. Dreams were funny things that operated by their own rules.

Jonathan got back into bed and pulled the covers up, wrinkling his nose slightly at the musty smell of the sheets. *They should air this dream out a little*, he thought, then chuckled at his own joke. He closed his eyes and tried to relax, to will sleep to descend once more upon him. *But aren't I already asleep? If you fall asleep in a dream, what happens? Do you have dreams within dreams?*

The answer eluded him as consciousness once again departed.

Awareness returned again. For a moment he thought nothing had happened, but then he became conscious through his closed eyelids of the fact that it was lighter in the room than it had been before. Had he gone back to sleep after all? *Great. I hope I didn't oversleep. Not that anybody minds if I come in a little late, but it's a bad precedent to set –*

He opened his eyes.

A little shiver ran down his spine.

He was still in the motel room.

"Okay," he said under his breath. "Something very weird is going on here." He looked around the room; it hadn't changed except that it was, as he had suspected, a little brighter. A weak shaft of sunlight shone in through the window, in a spot where the curtains didn't quite meet.

He wondered what time it was. Spying a watch on the nightstand next to the telephone-thing, he picked it up. It wasn't his: he'd never seen it before in his life. But at least it seemed to be working. 07:36, the digital readout

informed him. He put the unfamiliar watch back on the nightstand and pondered his next option.

“Okay,” he said again. “Let’s see. What did I do last night?” He considered that for a few moments, but his memories were all of a fairly mundane variety: he had stayed up late working on some reports for work, and then gone to bed around midnight in his suite at home. He remembered climbing into bed, thinking about the reports and the presentation he was due to deliver later in the week.

He sat up and picked up the odd watch again, examining it for a date. WED, it proclaimed. 17. At least *that* fit. Last night had been Tuesday, he was sure of it, and so today was Wednesday. It was a start.

He still wasn’t convinced that this wasn’t a dream, but that certainty was developing quite a few cracks after his second awakening. It certainly *looked* real. Something skittered across the floor; he quickly lifted his feet off the floor. *This isn’t a dream. I do not dream about cockroaches.*

He took a deep breath. “I think I need to get out of here,” he announced. Checking to make sure the cockroach had disappeared from sight, he got up and began searching the room for his clothes. He would take a shower, get dressed, and then go see the manager of this place and see if he could get some light shed on the situation.

On the other side of the bed was a leather duffel bag with bungee cords crossed through its handles. Next to it was a briefcase, and hung over the back of a chair nearby was a dark overcoat. Under the chair as if neatly placed there was a pair of black boots. Jonathan looked at the items, head tilted in confusion: these items were not his. Like the watch, he had never seen them before.



Crouching down next to them, he looked first at the leather bag. What were the cords for, he wondered. He moved them aside and unzipped the bag.

On top were clothes—once again not his. They consisted of two pairs of jeans, clean and well-worn, socks and undershorts, and several T-shirts in gray, black, dark blue, and white. He pulled them out carefully, looking for a wallet, a personal planner, anything that might give him an idea whom the clothes and other things belonged to. There was no such identification. The only other things he found in the bag, buried down at the bottom under the clothes, were two solid plastic cylindrical tubes, a little longer than a pen or pencil but about twice as big around. Each of these items had a tiny electronic readout near one end; each readout looked like it was capable of displaying five digits but was currently dark and unhelpful. Jonathan carefully replaced all the items in the bag and zipped it back up.

The briefcase was no help at all; he couldn't even get it open. He picked it up and looked it over, but it soon became clear that there was some kind of lock on it that required an action. What action was required, he didn't know. There was no place for a key, and no place to enter a combination. He regarded it for a moment longer and then put it down next to the leather bag.

Ignoring the boots, he rose and looked at the coat. It was dark gray, almost black, long in duster style and unadorned. He grasped it by the collar and picked it up, surprised to discover how heavy it was. He dropped it on the bed and probed at it for a moment, which revealed the reason for the weight: the coat was padded with very well concealed armor, probably some kind of plastic or resin from the feel of it. "Bulletproof?" he asked himself under his breath.

His hand fell on a bulge within the coat—one that didn't feel like another armor panel. He opened it up, slipped his hand into the hidden inner pocket and gasped at what he pulled out.

It was a gun. A rather large gun, as pistols went. It remained there in his shaking hand, black and fearsome looking. He almost dropped it, but tightened his grip at the last moment. Jonathan didn't have much experience with guns—what if this one was loaded and it went off when it hit the bed? Carefully, his hand still trembling, he placed the gun on the bed next to the coat. He drew himself back up to his full height and stood there staring at everything he had found, his mind spinning frantic circles as he tried to make sense of the situation.

All at once a fearful thought stabbed its way to the surface of his mental soup: *What if you're not supposed to be here? What if whoever this room belongs to is coming back? What if he finds you here going through his stuff?*

Jonathan gasped aloud, his gaze quickly darting around to verify that he was still alone. He even crossed the room to peer into the bathroom and the shower stall. Obviously, whoever rightfully belonged in this room was a dangerous customer—that was clear by the gun and the armored coat. God only knew what was in the briefcase, or what those strange cylinders were.

*Does he know I'm here? Did somebody knock me out and bring me here, and I woke up before I was supposed to?*

He hurried back out into the main part of the room. Suddenly urgency seemed important where it had not before. Never mind the shower—he had to get out of here, and besides, he didn't want to be vulnerable if the room's resident returned. Reluctantly he re-opened the leather bag and pulled out one of the pairs of jeans, a white T-shirt, and a pair of socks. He didn't like stealing the man's clothes (he didn't like the thought of *wearing* the man's

clothes) but he didn't have another option. He couldn't go out like this and there were no other clothes in the room.

Oddly, the clothes fit him perfectly. "Maybe he's another elf," he muttered under his breath. That was strange all by itself. He hadn't encountered too many other elves of his age; most of them were much younger. Then again, the man could just be a tall, thin human. There were certainly enough of *them* around.

Hesitating for a moment, he reached under the chair and drew out the boots. After hovering for a moment in indecision, he shoved his feet into them. They too fit like they were his own. He didn't give that any particular thought, though; his breath was coming fast, his eyes shifting back and forth, watching the door and the window, his sharp ears listening for any sounds outside that might precede the untimely return of the unknown man.

He wondered if he should take any of the other items and decided against it. Perhaps the man wouldn't pursue him for a pair of jeans or boots, but the gun, the briefcase—*No, I'd better just leave them where they are.* He turned toward the door, then stopped and turned back. His eyes fell on the coat, still lying where he'd draped it across the bed. Should he? If anyone dangerous—*anyone dangerous and armed*, he reminded himself—was going to be after him, it might not hurt to have a little extra insurance. He picked up the coat and slipped it on. It dropped over his shoulders and settled comfortably around his body. The armor, which had seemed so heavy when he was holding the coat, distributed its weight in such a way that he barely noticed it with it on. Finally, he snatched up the odd watch from the nightstand and shoved it into his pocket.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he passed it on the way to the door...and stopped to stare.

For a moment the image wavered in the mirror, revealing a frightening individual looking back at him: pale, expressionless, with frigid white eyes regarding him implacably from a dark-side parody of his own face. Then it was gone and it was just Jonathan again: also pale, but with normal eyes and a fearful, hesitant expression. He shook his head quickly to clear it and looked at the mirror again. The image was normal now.

He left the room, closing the door behind him. It locked with a decisive *click*.

There was no going back now.

He didn't get to talk to the manager of the motel (which, he noticed by the rundown sign out front, was called the Thrifty Inn) because there wasn't anyone to be found at the office when he went there to check. The door was locked up tight, the windows covered over with formidable-looking bars. It was just as well, he thought, and did not pursue it further. It was probably better if no one saw him leave. That way they couldn't tell the other man what had happened to him. He hurried off, doing up the coat as he moved.

He didn't stop until he had gone several blocks and was well out of sight of the Thrifty Inn, moving swiftly and with purpose. At that point he halted and leaned against a building to rest.

He hadn't taken much interest in his surroundings up until this point, concentrating on the way ahead, but now he looked around. The area looked tantalizingly familiar, and yet it didn't. He was in a neighborhood of mixed residential and commercial buildings, mid-height structures with businesses on their ground floors and apartments on the upper floors. Currently he was standing in front of a deli; next door was a barbershop. The deli was closed, but the barbershop's sign was

illuminated. Both businesses were fronted by gray concrete which was covered by a colorful accumulation of spray-painted graffiti. Jonathan recognized the marks of gangs, but had no idea of the particulars. In the parts of town he normally frequented, such activity was quickly curtailed and its results washed or sandblasted or painted away. Here, though, it appeared that the only way to get rid of one of the marks was to replace it with another.

He shivered a bit and drew the coat tighter around his body; the morning air carried a chill along with the faint stench of garbage, the sharp tang of damp pavement, and the reek of smog. He wondered if he was still in New York City or if his unseen counterpart had brought him here—wherever *here* was if it wasn't NYC—while he had been sleeping, drugged, or otherwise unconscious.

In any case, he decided, the first order of business was to get out of here, and that meant calling someone to come and get him. He looked down at his wrist before realizing that he wasn't wearing a watch. Pulling the strange watch he'd taken from the room out of his pocket, he glanced at it—8:07—and shoved it back in. After eight, which meant that someone would be at the office. He could call Anita, the morning receptionist, and ask her to have a cab sent for him. Soon enough all of this would be over and he would be back home, back in the world he understood.

That decided, he moved toward the barbershop and opened the door. There was a little electronic *beep* as he crossed the threshold. As he expected, there were no customers in evidence this early. The barber, who was sitting in one of his chairs with his back to the door, swung around at the sound.

Jonathan hesitated a moment, startled. The man was an ork. He was dressed neatly but casually in a white shirt and dark pants, and smiled a fangy smile as Jonathan entered. "Hey there, chummer," he said. His voice was

rough from too many cigarettes but held a friendly tone. "Out to get a haircut early today, are ya?"

"Uh...no..." He recovered quickly and shook his head. "No. I—I was wondering if I could use your phone."

The ork tilted his head and regarded Jonathan with some suspicion. "There's a pay phone in the back." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder toward the rear of the shop. "Somethin' wrong with the public telecom outside?"

Jonathan turned, his gaze following the ork's indication. All he saw outside was a small kiosk near the curb, but it didn't look familiar to him at all. "I...don't know. I didn't think of that."

"It's okay." The ork waved him off dismissively. "Wanted to come in, get out of the cold—no problem. Phone's in the back."

"Thank you." Jonathan nodded to him and hurried toward the back of the barbershop. There was a door marked with male and female pictographs—unisex restroom, of course—and next to it was an object hanging on the wall.

Jonathan studied it for a moment. As a general class of thing, it resembled the phone-thing he had found on the nightstand back at the Thrifty Inn, except this one was larger and more elaborate. It had a little two-inch-diagonal screen with some kind of camera pickup above it; next to the screen was a numbered keypad, and near that was a speaker. Panels protruded from the wall about two feet on either side of the unit, allowing the body of the caller to obscure the viewscreen from any unwanted observers.

The one thing it did not have was a coin slot. Instead there was a round slot below the speaker, and next to that it read, "Local calls, ¥0.5." Jonathan stared at the slot. What was going on here? Was this some weird new

experimental type of phone? What was he supposed to do to get it to work? He fumbled in the pockets of his jeans and the longcoat, but came up with nothing useful. Finally, in desperation, he pressed 0.

Almost immediately the face of a human female appeared on the screen. "Operator." She sounded bored.

Jonathan wasn't sure what to say. "I'm...trying to make a call," he said.

"How can I help you?" The voice didn't change inflection; Jonathan realized with surprise that it was not a human at all, but a computer-generated image. A very good one, though—it was difficult to tell from the real thing without a close look.

"I'm not sure how to use this public phone. It's not like one I've ever seen before." He figured he might as well go for the bold approach. Maybe this faux operator would think he was a tourist or something.

There was a slight pause as if the operator program was accessing some seldom-used routine. "Insert your credstick in the slot and then key in the LTG number of your party," it recited at last. "If you need directory assistance, press 9."

Jonathan looked at the screen and then down at the hole. *Credstick*...So that's what those things in the man's bag were—some kind of money. He was beginning to regret not taking them with him. "I...don't have a credstick. Is there any other way to do it?"

"I'm sorry, sir." The voice sounded slightly contrite: apparently whoever had written this program had tried to inject a bit of human courtesy into it. "Public telecoms require a credstick for use."

"Uh...all right. Thank you." Without waiting for a response, Jonathan hung up. His shoulders slumped slightly. *Now* what? He was stuck somewhere he didn't know, with no money (and apparently in a place where

nobody used money anyway) and even the phones make sense. He turned back around to the ork, who was now putting his work area in order in preparation for the day's customers. "Excuse me—"

"Yeah?" The ork's tone was a bit impatient, but not unfriendly. "Somethin' else I can do for you, chummer?" Jonathan noticed that he looked a bit nervous, too.

"I...Would you mind telling me where this is?"

The ork tilted his head. "Whaddya mean, where this is? This is McCarthy's Barber Shop. Didn't ya see the sign?"

Jonathan shook his head. "No. I mean—where. The address. The name of the street." *The city*, he thought, but he didn't ask. That would sound far too strange. How far had the mysterious dangerous man taken him, anyway?

"Oh. I'm on Greene Street." His expression got a little less friendly. "Listen, buddy, it's been great talkin' to ya and all, but if you're not plannin' on gettin' your hair cut, would you mind movin' on? I've got to get ready for the day here."

Jonathan nodded slowly. "Of course. I'm sorry. Thank you for your time." He nodded a farewell to the ork and quickly headed out of the barbershop and out onto Greene Street.

*Don't panic*, he told himself as he moved off down the street. *There has to be a logical explanation for all of this. You just haven't found it yet.* Greene Street, the ork had said. That sure *sounded* like a New York City address, but he couldn't be certain. He *had* to call the office. They'd be able to help him. They would send someone for him and before long he'd be chuckling about this over a nice cup of coffee. Or maybe something a little stronger than coffee.

*But first I have to figure out a way to call.* He continued on his way, passing more small businesses—a junk shop, a small grocery store, a couple of bars, a pawn shop, a



Chinese restaurant. Some were open, some closed. There were more people out now, most of them moving down the street with a sense of purpose. Men, women, a few children, and surprisingly, representatives of all five metatypes. The people were mostly human, but Jonathan saw enough orks, dwarves, elves, and even a few trolls that he noticed it as being out of the ordinary. He was used to seeing other metatypes, but rarely in such concentrations. At the office and the area around his home, an occasional elf (too occasional, he thought) or dwarf was common, while orks and trolls were rare and almost always there temporarily—to repair or deliver something, for instance. Still, though, this revelation barely made a dent on Jonathan’s psyche, given all the other weird things that were currently plaguing it right now. That one could line up and take a number. At the rate he was going, he might get to it sometime next week.

He stopped after another few blocks (the street names were definitely looking like New York City, but no part of it he was familiar with) and leaned against the side of a building. He had passed a few more of the public telecoms the ork at the barbershop had pointed out, but after examining the first one, he determined that they, like the pay phone inside, required the insertion of one of those cylindrical plastic things. He sighed, watching the people go by without really noticing them. He *had* to get some money somewhere. Not only to make the call, but also possibly to pay a taxi to take him home if he couldn’t get hold of anyone. He was nervous about staying around this area any longer than he had to—he had no idea whether the man from the hotel room was looking for him, or what he would do with him if he found him.

Halfheartedly he searched his pockets again, hoping he had overlooked something. The longcoat had several pockets: two at the hip, inside breast pockets on both

sides, and the strange pocket that had obviously been added to hold the gun Jonathan had left back at the room. Unfortunately, they were all empty.

Jonathan sighed. Reflexively, he patted his jeans pockets before he remembered that they too were empty—but they weren't empty. He reached into the right-side front and pulled out the chronograph he had put there earlier. He'd forgotten about it.

Curiously, he examined it. The digital display now read 09:26. He turned it over in his hands as his mind began to work. *I saw a pawn shop back there a couple of blocks. I could sell this...I wonder how much I could get for it?* Anything would be a help. He didn't need much, after all—just enough to get him back home, or back to the office.

He was about to put it back in his pocket and retrace his steps to the pawn shop when his gaze fell on another section of the thing's large face. He hadn't noticed it before because he had been too busy checking the time, but there was a tiny flipped-down panel above the digital display. Glancing around to make sure no one was paying too much attention to him, he flipped it up.

His eyes widened. Beneath the panel was a tiny screen, like the world's smallest laptop computer screen. Below that was a little numbered keypad, arranged in the same manner as a—

"A phone?" he muttered under his breath.

It sure looked like a phone. He smiled. *Maybe we're getting somewhere after all!*

Still smiling, he carefully tapped the tiny *O* key. His smile broadened when a miniaturized version of the computer generated operator appeared on the screen. "Operator," said the tiny speaker.

"Yes!" Jonathan whispered. Then, louder: "Can you connect me with 212-555-2873, please?"

The operator looked puzzled, at least as much as a computer construct could look puzzled. "I'm sorry, sir. That is not a valid LTG number."

"A valid what?" Jonathan tilted his head in confusion. "It's a valid phone number. For R. and J. Andrews, Inc. In New York City."

"I'm sorry, sir. Please enter a valid LTG number to be connected."

Jonathan took a deep breath. Okay, this was weird, but it was easy enough to solve. "Can I get directory assistance here?"

"I'll transfer you, sir." Without waiting for an answer, the operator disappeared and the screen went blue with a "Please Stand By" logo.

After a second or two, another computerized operator, this one male, appeared. "City and listing, please."

"Manhattan. R. and J. Andrews, Inc."

There was a pause. "I'm sorry, sir. I don't have a listing for R. and J. Andrews, Inc. in Manhattan."

Jonathan froze. "What do you mean, you don't have a listing? It's on First Avenue in Manhattan. Can you look again, please? That's A-N-D-R-E-W-S."

"Yes, sir. A-N-D-R-E-W-S. I'm sorry, but I show no such listing on First Avenue." The operator's voice was infinitely patient but implacable. "Sir?" it asked after several moments passed with no input. "Are you still there?"

Jonathan was leaning harder against the building now; his legs didn't feel like they could quite support him. "Yes...I'm still here. All right. Uh...do you have a listing for an Andrews residence at 1761 W. 3rd Street?"

There was another pause. "No, sir. I'm sorry. There is no Andrews listed at that address."

A cold feeling settled in the pit of Jonathan's stomach. What the hell was going on here? "What about...Jonathan Andrews?" He spelled it out. "At 1761 W. 3rd St. Suite 2000."

"I'm sorry, sir. No listing."

"There *has* to be a listing! That's *me*!" he said, his voice pitching a little too loud. He quickly lowered it when he noticed that passersby were giving him odd looks and diverting their paths so as not to get too close to him. "Listen," he said more quietly, "I *know* there has to be a listing for Jonathan Andrews. *I'm* Jonathan Andrews."

A moment passed. "We have several listings for John or Jonathan Andrews, sir." He proceeded to rattle off several street names in various parts of New York City. None of them were at all familiar. "Do any of those help, sir?"

"No..." He sighed, realizing he wasn't going to get any help here. "No. Thank you. I'll...figure it out." He closed the screen and stared at the watch-phone.

*Now* what was he supposed to do?

He looked at the phone again. He needed money. He could use the public telecoms to make calls if he had to, but he needed cash (or whatever passed for it) to do anything else. And since he had only one thing of value, he was going to have to sell it.

The interior of the pawn shop was dark and musty, with a vaguely unsavory air about it. Jonathan's gaze darted around as he opened the door and slipped through. Something buzzed, indicating his entrance. He was nervous but he wasn't sure why. *It's just a pawn shop*, he told himself sternly. Sure, maybe he'd never been inside one before, but that didn't make it dangerous. He moved through the store, noting the musical instruments, odd electronic equipment, and sporting goods lining the

shelves along the walls. The display cases that held jewelry and other small, valuable items were in the back, where the proprietor could keep an eye on them.

There were two other people in the store: one customer and the store's proprietor. The customer, an ork in a military fatigue jacket, battered jeans, and combat boots, was perusing a collection of antique jewelry with an air of someone who was waiting for something to happen. Jonathan noticed the ork kept looking sideways at him and realized he was waiting for *him*. *Probably waiting for me to leave so he can buy something illegal.*

He ignored the ork for now and concentrated on the owner. A grizzled-looking dwarf in a backward-turned baseball cap and a black T-shirt that read "Kill 'Em All and Let God Sort 'Em Out," he sat perched on a high stool behind the counter and regarded Jonathan with suspicion. "Help ya?" His accent was pure Noo Yawk, harsh and nasal.

"Uh...yes." He approached the counter, carefully pulling the watch-phone from his pocket. He noticed that both the ork and the dwarf stiffened slightly, then relaxed as the item was revealed. "I'd—like to pawn this." He held out the watch for inspection.

The dwarf's small, stubby fingers plucked it from Jonathan's hand without making skin-to-skin contact. He swung a gooseneck lamp around and switched it on, holding the watch under its light. "Hmm..." he said, and nodded to himself. Flipping the display up, he tried out the functions, nodded again, and then closed it up. "Nice piece," he said. "Been over the road a bit, though—that'll take off its value." His gaze travelled from the watch to Jonathan's face and then back again; Jonathan got the feeling he was being appraised as much as the watch was. "I'll give ya a hundred for it," the dwarf said at last.

Jonathan paused. He had no idea how much it was worth, of course, and a hundred would probably keep him in phone calls and taxis for long enough to get back to somewhere he was familiar with. But still — there was something in the way the dwarf was looking at him. It was subtle, but it was there. Something in his eyes suggested that he was waiting to see what Jonathan's response would be.

Jonathan shook his head. "It's worth a lot more than that," he said, hoping his bluff was sound. "Come on — is that the best you can do?"

Something in the dwarf's expression changed infinitesimally. "Okay," he said grudgingly. "One-fifty. But that's my best offer."

"Three."

The dwarf snorted. By now, the ork was interested too. He had drifted over closer, still feigning concentration on the jewelry case. "Three?" the dwarf demanded, his voice full of contempt. "Yer crazy, chummer. One seventy-five. Take it or leave it."

Again Jonathan paused. He needed the money more than he needed the watch, that was certain. He nodded. "Okay. One seventy-five."

The dwarf nodded in reply, his fingers closing around the watch. "Deal. Gimme yer stick."

"What?"

"Yer *credstick*," the dwarf said in the tone he would use to address a retarded poodle. "So I can make the transfer of funds."

Jonathan froze. Was he going to need one of those just to get money? "I — don't have one."

The ork couldn't take being out of the conversation anymore. He laughed rather unkindly. "He wants certified cred, Benny. Get a hint."

Benny shot him a dirty look but didn't reply. "Okay, okay," he muttered. "Everybody fraggin' wants..." He disappeared under the counter without finishing the sentence and came up with another of the cylindrical objects Jonathan had encountered back in the hotel room. After twiddling with it for a moment, he stuck it into a hole in his register, punched in some numbers, and then pulled it back out and offered it to Jonathan. "There ya go, chummer. The cred and the claim check are on the stick."

Jonathan nodded. He took the stick and looked at it: small, faintly glowing numbers in the digital display read 175. "Thank you," he said.

"Pleasure doin' business with ya," Benny replied, already turning to the ork. Jonathan took the hint and got out of there fast.

Back out on the street again, he once more considered his options. He still didn't know what was going on, but at least he had some money now. It was a start.

If he was going to get anywhere familiar, he was going to need a cab. He looked up, not surprised to see none in evidence. What *did* surprise him, though, was something he hadn't noticed before because he'd been too busy paying attention to remedying his money situation: the cars were different. He swept his gaze up and down the street, noting the rounder, sleeker lines of the few vehicles parked there—even those that seemed old and beat-up. "Weird..." he muttered under his breath—but like all the other things going on in the periphery of his attention, he didn't spare the time to worry about it. *Get back to the office or home first, then worry about the weirdness.* That became his mantra.

He started moving again. If there were no cabs here, there were bound to be some soon. Manhattan *ran* on cabs. Nobody in their right mind drove around these parts.

He had only walked for about ten minutes when he saw a taxi heading in his direction. The cab was another of the rounded-bodied cars, with a battered red-and-white exterior and blacked-out windows. As Jonathan flagged it and it pulled to a stop next to him, he could see the words *Happy Cab Co.* on the door, with a jaunty smiley-face above them. The line of bullet holes stitched across the face marred its cheerful effect somewhat.

"Where to, mac?" the cabbie asked. He was a dark-skinned ork in a greasy baseball cap. His accent was thick and unidentifiable.

Jonathan gave him the address, then climbed in and gingerly settled into the seat. The cab's interior smelled of old fish, sweat, and smoke. The ork grunted something Jonathan couldn't quite catch, then pressed the button to start the meter running and pulled back out into traffic.

Jonathan watched out the window as the scenery rolled by. He hadn't remembered everything looking quite this dingy and broken-down before, but he reminded himself that this was not a part of town he normally frequented. *I'll need to call the police when I get back to the office too*, he mused. *If this guy is out looking for me, I'm going to want them to at least be aware of it. Maybe increase the security around the office and the apartment for awhile.*

The cab ride took about twenty minutes. By the time the driver pulled up in front of the address Jonathan had given him, the meter read 12.50. "Here y'are," the ork said indifferently.

Jonathan looked out the window and froze. "Wait," he protested. "There must be some mistake."

The cab was double-parked at the curb, not in front of the high-rise office building that Jonathan had been expecting—instead, an ugly, squattish structure that looked like a parking garage loomed in its place.



"Ya did say 2630 First Avenue, right?" The cabdriver turned slightly in his seat to regard Jonathan, suspicion showing in his hooded eyes. He gestured toward the garage. "This is the place. That'll be 12.50."

"But..." Jonathan paused for a moment, looking back and forth between the garage and the cabdriver. "This is supposed to be the McClintock Building. That's where my business is: R. and J. Andrews."

The ork shrugged. "Sorry, mac. You gimme an address, I take ya there. That's it. Now c'mon. I gotta get back on the road. Ya wanna stay here, or go somewhere else?"

Jonathan considered for a moment, then made a quick decision. "Yes. I want to go somewhere else." He recited the address of the building where he and his father shared a spacious apartment on the top floor. "Take me there, please."

"You're the boss, mac." The cabdriver started the meter going again and pulled back out into traffic. Jonathan could tell by his bearing that he didn't think much of this odd passenger, but he didn't care about that. It wasn't a cabbie's job to care about his passengers' lives—just to deliver them where they wanted to go.

Again the drive took around twenty minutes: the distance wasn't quite as far, but the traffic was heavier. Once more as they approached the area, Jonathan felt the all-too-familiar feeling of dread settling like a cold lump in his stomach. His heart was beating a little too fast, his hands knotted into fists. Outside the window, the neighborhood was deteriorating: the tall buildings and relatively clean streets of the business district were giving way to more graffiti, more trash lining the curbs, fewer cars. Something was definitely wrong, and it was getting more wrong by the minute.

The cab stopped again, and again Jonathan looked out the window with a sense of fear and disbelief. "Oh, my God..." he whispered. "No..."

This time, he recognized the building. It wasn't hard to do— it was the building he had entered and exited at least twice a day for the last several years. The architecture was familiar, a solid example of the late 20th-century modern style, soaring and airy.

Or at least it *had* been soaring and airy. Jonathan stared, wide-eyed, at the blasted hulk that had been his home. The building existed to only about half of its former twenty stories; it looked like someone had hastily blocked off the top floors to prevent anyone from entering an area that was undoubtedly hazardous. The bottom floors, formerly dominated by the large picture windows of restaurants and shops, were now boarded up, with no glass in sight. The concrete surface was covered to a distance of about ten feet up with more of the ubiquitous gang graffiti.

Even so, though, the place did not look unoccupied. As he continued to watch, the doors opened several times to allow people to exit: people dressed in all sorts of street styles from cheap but clean suits to studded leather and body piercings. People were entering, too, with the air of individuals who were quite familiar with the building. Residents? "What—what happened to it?" he whispered.

The cabdriver, whom he had almost forgotten about, shrugged. "Don't know what you mean."

"What happened to the *top*?" he demanded in frustration.

"Dunno. Don't come around here very often. You gonna get out, or you wanna keep going?" He sounded like he would be quite content to drive this weirdo around all day if it meant the fare kept mounting. Currently it stood at 26.25.

Jonathan took a deep breath. He had two choices: he could either keep riding around in the cab, running up his fare until he ran out of the money he had gotten for the watch-phone, or he could get out here and see what he could find out. *Where else could I go?* he asked himself, realizing that if his office and his home didn't exist anymore, he had no way to know if the rest of his world did either. He could spend the day going from futile destination to futile destination, at least until his money ran out. If he had gotten no further by then—

"I'll get out here," he said.

The cabdriver nodded. "You got it, mac. That'll be 26.50."

Jonathan pulled out the credstick and examined the slot. Hoping he was doing the right thing, he shoved the stick into the slot, leaving the display end visible. As he watched, his balance went from 175.00 to 148.50. The fare display flashed *Tip?* and Jonathan punched in 4.00—a bit over the customary 15 percent—without even thinking about it. These kinds of calculations came easily to him. The credstick adjusted itself accordingly and then flashed OK. Jonathan pulled it out and opened the door.

"Thanks, mac. 'Luck." The cabdriver didn't wait around long; as soon as Jonathan got out and closed the door, he pulled away and was gone.

Jonathan put the credstick back in his front pocket and looked around the area where he had chosen to stop. It wasn't just his residential building—the whole area looked like its fortunes had fallen significantly since Jonathan had last been here. It was far too drastic a change to have occurred in the space of an evening, or even a few days. Even without looking hard, he could notice the signs of the kind of decay that took years to occur: eroded concrete, dingy streets, windows boarded up with rusted nails. The people who passed him by

looked like they spent much of their lives worrying about the basic necessities of life, their expressions wary, guarded, and forlorn. They did not meet Jonathan's eyes as they passed; the few who did quickly looked away as if they expected something unpleasant to befall them if they paid too much attention to strangers in their neighborhood.

As he looked around trying to decide on his next move, a rumble in his stomach alerted him to the fact that he was hungry. He didn't know what time it was anymore because he'd sold his watch, but it felt like it was getting toward lunchtime. Even if it wasn't, he didn't know when he'd last eaten and he could certainly do with a bite.

He approached one of the people coming out of his building: a slightly harried looking human male in a clean but threadbare suit. "Excuse me..."

The man's head jerked up, his eyes full of fear. His entire body was stiff, poised to flee. "Yeah?"

"Is there somewhere around here I can get some lunch?"

The man seemed as if he was preparing to answer another question, then looked startled as the expected question didn't materialize. "Lunch? Uh...yeah. If you go a couple blocks down that way—" he pointed off to the left "—there's a diner." With one last quick look at Jonathan, the man hurried off without waiting for thanks.

Jonathan took a deep breath, watching the man go. *Just get something to eat, he told himself. You're hungry. You'll think straighter when you've had some lunch. Worry about it then.* It was good advice. He decided to take it.

The diner was named Marge's Eat 'n' Run Diner, and it was right where the man had said it would be—about two blocks from where the cab had let Jonathan off. It was situated on the lower floor of an ugly five-story building

that appeared to house apartments on its upper floors. Jonathan entered slowly, remaining alert to his surroundings. A hastily-scrawled sign taped to the door read: "*Special Today – Sloppy Soy Burger, Frys, Soda, ¥5.50.*" Beneath it, a caricature of a plump, jolly waitress made an "OK" sign with her thumb and forefinger and winked, as if trying to let the would-be customer in on some sort of secret.

Inside, the lunch rush hadn't quite hit yet, which allowed Jonathan to find a small unoccupied table near the back. He observed the clientele while waiting for one of the place's two waitresses to find time for him: the diner was about half full, with the customers consisting of about half humans with the remaining half made up mostly of orks and dwarfs. He noticed one troll perched precariously on a chair that looked far too small for him, perusing a menu held gingerly in a massive hand; he also noticed two elven teenagers—one male, one female—seated at one of the booths near the front.

After a couple of minutes, the older of the two waitresses approached Jonathan's table. She was dressed in a no-nonsense uniform and unattractive but comfortable looking shoes. Her nametag read *BRITTANY loves Marge's Homestyle Cookin'*. "What can I getcha?" she asked. Her voice was harsh, probably from too much yelling across crowded spaces, but friendly enough.

Jonathan had spent so much time watching the customers that he hadn't looked at the menu. "Uh...I'll just have the special," he said hastily. Food was food, and he doubted that any of it around here was going to be all that spectacular.

"One special, comin' up." The waitress was already moving off as she spoke, heading for another customer. Jonathan settled back in his seat and allowed himself to rest for a few moments, trying to calm his racing thoughts

and bring some order to his mind. Whatever was going on wasn't going to get solved if he allowed himself to lose focus. Problems were things to be solved, and he was good at solving them. This was just another problem.

The dwarf woman at the next table got up to leave, and Jonathan's gaze fell on the item she left behind on the table. It looked like a newspaper, only smaller and printed on flimsier paper. He looked up to make sure that the dwarf wasn't coming back, then got up to snag the paper before the busboy whisked it away with the dirty dishes. He spread it out on the table in front of him and began to look it over. An audible gasp escaped his lips when he saw the masthead – or, more specifically, the date.

September 17, 2059.

Jonathan froze, a cold tingle running down his spine and settling once again in his stomach. He picked up the paper, pulling it closer, but that didn't change the numbers on the page. "Twenty...fifty...nine..." he whispered aloud. He wasn't even conscious of the fact that his hand had closed around the paper, wrinkling part of its fragile substance into a wad.

His head jerked up quickly, his sharp eyes checking out the other customers in an almost accusatory fashion, as if he expected them all to be laughing at him for falling for the joke.

No one was laughing. In fact, no one was paying any attention to him. They went about their business without even a glance in his direction.

He looked back down at the paper. It hadn't changed. 2059. His mind fought to make sense out of this new bit of information. It wasn't 2059. It was 2032. He was Jonathan Andrews, only son and business partner of Richard Andrews, working his way up the corporate ladder at their family business, R. and J. Andrews, Inc. This was

Manhattan, his home was here, and something was *wrong*—

“Here’s y’special.” A voice intruded into his increasingly racing thoughts. He looked up to see Brittany standing there holding a heavy plate and a plastic tumbler of soda with a paper-wrapped straw stuck to the side. He sat back, giving her the room to set the plate down in front of him. The meal looked singularly unappetizing, but at least it was hot. “Excuse me...” he ventured.

“Yeah?” Brittany hovered, poised in mid-turn to take flight again back toward the kitchen.

“Would you mind telling me...what the date is?”

She cocked her head at him as if to say *oh, great—another weirdo*, but she shrugged. “Sure. It’s September 17.”

“September 17, 2059.”

Now she was looking at him even *more* strangely. “Yeah. 2059.” She forced a toothy smile. “Enjoy y’meal. Just wave if y’need anyt’ing.”

“Thank you.”

Jonathan finished his meal in a mechanical haze. He didn’t remember eating the greasy soyburger and equally greasy fries, nor did he remember finishing off the soda that went with it, but when he looked again they were gone and he wasn’t hungry anymore. When he was done he got up, paid his tab, and left the diner, moving like a man who had just been smacked in the head and hadn’t quite recovered from it yet. He had folded up the front page of the newspaper and shoved it in his pocket before he left.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a similar blur of occasional flashes of lucidity followed by long stretches of allowing his autopilot mechanism to guide him up and down the streets, watching the people, the cars, the buildings without really seeing any of them. Once, in an

odd moment of clarity, it seemed to him that the city made sense—the colors were brighter, the odd fashions and vehicle designs were normal, and his own presence belonged there—but then the fog descended again and he continued to wander. No one bothered him; it seemed that everyone else was interested in minding his or her own business as well. In his clear moments he was grateful for that.

He didn't realize it was getting dark until he noticed that the streetlights—at least the ones that hadn't been shot out or broken by street kids throwing rocks—were beginning to come on. It was twilight now, still bright enough that the lights weren't necessary for visibility, but still the idea of darkness brought Jonathan's mind back to some semblance of rationality.

*I can't stay out here tonight. I have to find somewhere to stay, or someone I know. It's not safe to be on the streets after dark.* For the first time that day he wished he had brought the gun from the hotel room—at least then he would have some protection if anyone tried to bother him. That thought brought back the vision of the room and the man who had occupied it, but of course he *had* no vision of that man. He wondered if he had managed to get away, to elude the man long enough that it wouldn't be worth his while to hunt for him. He hoped so. He had been trying to pay attention around him, making sure that no one was surreptitiously following, but the foggy episodes had made that difficult to maintain.

There weren't as many public telecoms around here, especially not out on the street. He had only seen two in the last couple of hours, and one of those looked like somebody had emptied the clip of a very nasty firearm into it. The 'Out of Order' sign hanging over its screen had been a rather superfluous touch given the circumstances. As the light grew dimmer, Jonathan



decided he would have to try to find a place to stay, and that meant entering one of the bars he'd been passing to try to find a telecom inside. Most of the other stores had closed already, their windows and doors enshrouded securely by heavy metal gratings.

There was no shortage of bars around, though, which he supposed was fortunate. He chose one that looked rather more respectable than its companions (which wasn't saying much) and headed inside.

His senses were assaulted almost all at once: his eyes by the inky, smoke-filled dimness, his ears by the driving beat of the music being pumped through the numerous speakers stationed around the place, his nose by the tang of smoke and the reek of unwashed bodies overlaid by the ever-present stench of cheap liquor. The place wasn't large but it was full, with all the tables and the space at the bar itself occupied by what looked like mostly young humans and orks. There was a space in the far back corner that looked like it might have been a dance floor, but it was hard to tell for sure through the crush of bodies that might have been dancing or might have just been having a particularly intimate conversation. Jonathan hesitated a moment, wondering if perhaps he should choose another bar. *Stop it*, he chided himself. *It's just a bar. Just find out where you can stay, call a cab, and get out of here.*

Thus self-castigated, he quickly wended his way back through the bar before he lost his nerve. He had made it about halfway to the rear when a thought occurred to him: why was he bothering with the telecom when he had a live bartender here to ask? Bartenders were renowned for their knowledge of their local areas – perhaps this one would give up some useful information for the price of a beer. Pleased with himself for managing to think clearly even in the midst of this very strange situation, Jonathan altered course and pushed himself up to the bar.

It took a few moments for the barkeep, a tall human wearing a white bib apron over a black button-down shirt, to approach him. "What can I getcha, chummer?"

"I'll have a beer," Jonathan said, pitching his voice a bit louder to get over the noise of the crowd and the music.

"What kind?"

"Anchor Steam." Jonathan's eyes widened. The words had just popped out without any conscious thought process behind them. *Where did that come from?* he wondered, but he let it stand.

"Comin' up." The bartender moved off and came back less than a minute later with Jonathan's order. "That'll be four bucks."

Jonathan had already scouted out the credstick reader, so he had no trouble completing the transaction. Before the bartender could leave again to attend another customer, he said loudly, "Do you know anywhere decent around here to stay?"

"Like a hotel, you mean?"

Jonathan nodded.

The bartender thought about it a minute. "Depends on what you call 'decent' and 'around here.' There ain't no Hiltons around this area, if that's what you mean."

"No...just someplace clean...not too expensive."

Again the bartender paused. "Yeah," he said at last. "There's the Gonzalez on Bond. Little place, family run. That's about five blocks from here. Mrs. Gonzalez'll treat ya right if she's got any room left. Just don't try nothin' funny, 'cause her boy's a troll and he don't like trouble." He quickly rattled off specific directions for how to get there.

Jonathan struggled to hear him so as not to miss anything important. "Thanks," he said, taking a sip of the beer. It was good, and tasted *right* somehow. For a brief

moment the same feeling he'd experienced earlier in the day—the feeling that everything was as it should be—drifted over him, but then it was gone again.

"Null sheen, chummer." With a last nod, the man turned away, off to the call of another customer.

Jonathan finished his beer while he considered his options. He could try walking to the Gonzalez, or he could get a cab. *It's only five blocks*, he thought. *That's not so far...and I don't know how much I'll have to pay for the room. I'd better not waste the money on the cab. If I leave now it's not even full dark yet.* He didn't like the conclusions he was reaching, but he knew they were good ones. The last thing he wanted to do was get there and discover that he was just a small amount short of what he'd need to pay for the room.

He set the empty beer glass decisively down on the bar, got up, and headed for the door.

He didn't notice the heads of three figures near the front of the bar swivel around to follow his motion as he left, and he didn't notice them get up and, after a few seconds, follow him.

It was darker than he'd expected it to be when he got outside. The air was too smog-choked to see the moon, but the streetlights were actually earning their keep now, picking out little circles of moist illumination down the sides of the dingy street.

Jonathan blew his breath out slowly, watching the resulting cloud of vapor rise and dissipate. Raising the collar of his coat, he started walking. *Only five blocks*, he repeated to himself. *That's not very far. Just walk fast and you'll be there in no time.* The heels of his boots made dull quick thudding noises as he hurried away, trying to look purposeful but not to draw too much attention to himself.

A light mist hung in the air, sending an uncomfortable chill into his bones despite the protection of the coat.

He noticed right away that there weren't many people out on the street. He could pick out the far-off sounds of dueling musical choices from the various bars up and down the street, but other than that the traffic seemed mostly confined to people in cars and a few straggling souls moving from bar to bar. Even the few streetwalkers he noticed stayed close to the bars and did not venture far away in search of customers. Two of them propositioned him, but he ignored them and went on.

He'd made it about three blocks toward his goal when he became aware that he was being followed. He wasn't sure quite *how* he knew—he hadn't heard anything consciously—but a tingle in the back of his neck settled an odd certainty in his mind that his progress was being tracked. His muscles stiffened a bit, the crawling fear-feeling creeping back into his gut. Again he wished he'd brought the gun along, but wasn't sure he'd be able to use it—to kill someone—if he had. *Two more blocks*, he whispered. *Just keep moving and you'll get there. Just —*

A figure stepped out in front of him. "Hoi." He was tall, broad, but not ork-broad—a human. Jonathan stopped, his quick gaze taking in the greasy long hair covered by a filthy do-rag, the synth-leather jacket festooned with metal studs and obscene artwork, the wide, grinning face with small glittering eyes. He couldn't have been older than seventeen or eighteen. "You got the time, chummer?" His expression was placidly malicious, like he was waiting for something good to happen but he had the patience not to rush it.

Jonathan glanced off to both sides, then back at the youth. "I'm sorry, but I don't. If you'll excuse me—" He took a step forward, hoping even as he knew it was futile that the young thug would let him by.

The thug blocked him. His grin grew marginally wider. "Well, that's too bad, ain't it?" One hand, which had been in the pocket of his jacket, came out to reveal a knife. "I ain't never seen you 'round here before. You look like a little lost fairy tourist. 'Zat what you are, daisy-eater?"

Jonathan tensed. Even after all the years he had been an elf, he had never quite grown used to the racial slurs. He could feel his heartrate pick up speed, a light sweat breaking out on his forehead as anger warred with terror inside him. How was he going to get out of this?

"Maybe he got lost from his little treehugger tour group," came a voice from off to his left. Another figure detached itself from the shadows and approached. This one was a little smaller than the first, also human. His grin revealed ugly, stained teeth.

"Ain't that unfortunate." This time the voice came from his right. The third thug was female, human, dressed like the other two except for an almost comically elaborate hairstyle. "Maybe he don't know what we do to little lost fairies."

"Maybe not," the first one said speculatively. He addressed Jonathan. "You know what we do to lost fairies?"

Jonathan didn't answer. He took a step back, only to find that the other two thugs had moved behind him, enclosing him within a triangle. The parked cars on one side and the building walls on the other formed an effective barrier to quick escape.

The thug in front of him laughed; it was an unpleasant sound, as ugly as he was. He held up the knife. "We don't like fairies, see? Fraggin' daisy-eaters don't belong around here. Fraggin' halfers, fraggin' trogs...none of 'em belong here. But we hate fairies worst of all, ya scan? So see...when we find a fairy, we figure

he's got two choices: he can pay the fairy tax, or he can let us make those pointy ears look like reg'lar human ears."

"Yeah!" said the skinny human male, drawing his own knife. "Fairy tax!"

Still Jonathan didn't speak. His mind was racing, trying to find a way out, a way to escape. *Maybe if I move fast, I can get between those cars –*

"So what's it gonna be, pixie?" the first thug asked. "You can pay the fairy tax, which tonight is – lessee – fifty bucks, tonight – or you can lose the pixie-points. Whaddya say?"

"Ooh, can I do it?" the woman cried, grinning. Now she had a knife too, a pearl-handled thing that was bigger than the ones her companions held. "Lemme do it, Spud. I'll make 'em all purdy!"

"Sure, baby. Give it that woman's touch, you know? But hey – maybe he wants to pay the –"

Jonathan broke right and ran, his reflexes fueled by desperation, heading for the tiny space between two parked cars.

He almost made it too. He would have made it if something odd had not happened – suddenly, as his adrenaline kicked in, his body felt lighter, faster, primed for movement. The thugs were a blur, moving in molasses for a moment, impossibly slow, ponderous –

– and then he was falling. His mind, unable to cope with this new and unexpected burst of speed, failed to keep up with his reflexes and he was pitched headlong into the back end of one of the cars.

He hit hard, pain exploding through his body, and then he was rolling. The thugs were yelling, moving at normal speed again, heading for him. Their knives were raised, their eyes blazing with rage at almost losing their prey. They closed in –

– the pain flowered in his head –

And then, blackness.

He ached.

That was the first thing he noticed when awareness returned: that his entire body ached like it had been pummeled by trolls wearing boxing gloves.

Tentatively, he tried to move, to test his limbs, ready to stop immediately if he felt anything rip or tear or bleed.

But nothing did.

He heard a vague voice swirling in his mind: "I t'ink he's awake, Mrs. M."

He opened his eyes. His vision fuzzed for a second (it was an odd sort of fuzzing, more like pixellation than mental fog, but he scarcely paid it any mind) and then resolved itself.

The scene he had expected to see — darkness, a damp street, or possibly a hospital — did not materialize. Instead he was lying on a narrow, metal-frame bed next to a wall covered by cracking plaster. Hanging on the wall was a brightly-colored calendar depicting two ork children playing with a puppy; the calendar didn't quite cover the long crack in the wall.

He turned his head. A young ork male was seated next to the bed, watching him. When their gazes met, the ork smiled. "Easy," he said. "You're okay. Just a little banged up, that's all."

"Where — ?" Jonathan's voice came out sounding a bit cracked and shaky. *What happened?* he wanted to ask. *Why didn't they kill me? Why didn't they catch me?* But none of that came out.

The ork put a gentle hand on his shoulder. "It's okay," he said gently. "Everything's fine. You're at the Bleecker Street Shelter. My name's Rick. You're safe here."

"What — about — ?"

"Well! Look who's awake!" a cheerful, Irish-accented female voice boomed over Jonathan's question. As the owner of the voice got closer, Jonathan got a good look at her: tall for a dwarf but characteristically squat, middle-aged, her long hair pulled back, her dress worn but clean, her eyes sparkling. She approached the bed and regarded Jonathan with an appraising eye. "How you feelin', friend?"

Jonathan took a deep breath and sat up a little. He didn't hurt as much as he'd expected to—his aches were more of a general variety. "What happened?" he asked again. His voice sounded stronger this time.

The dwarf woman pulled up a chair next to the bed. "Rick, would you mind takin' care of finishin' up the dishes while I fill our friend in?"

"Sure, Mrs. M." The ork grinned at them both, nodded to Jonathan, and hurried off.

As soon as he was gone, the dwarf turned back to Jonathan. "What happened. That's a bit of a story, but I can see you're gonna be restless until you find out. So I'll start at the beginning. My name's Molly Muldoon. What's yours, by the way?"

"Jonathan. Jonathan Andrews."

Molly Muldoon nodded. "Pleased ta meet you, Jonathan Andrews. You're at the Bleecker Street Shelter, which I run. The reason you're here is that Rick there—" she nodded toward the direction the ork had disappeared—"and a couple of his friends happened to be out last night and noticed you gettin' hassled by some o' the local riff-raff. From what I hear, it sounded like they were plannin' to cut you up good. 'Twas a good thing Rick and them found you 'fore they did. Afterward you were out like a light, so they brought ya here."



Jonathan nodded slowly. He looked down at himself, noticing that he was dressed in just his T-shirt and shorts. He looked around for his clothes, but didn't see them.

Molly Muldoon looked apologetic. "Sorry, lad, but I'm afraid your coat's gone. Those thugs had already got it before Rick and the boys got there." She smiled. "Don't worry, though—yer jeans 'n' boots are fine. We hung 'em up, and the boots are under the bed."

His eyes widened. "My credstick—"

Again she shook her head. "Was it in yer coat?"

He nodded.

"Then I'm afraid it's gone too. I'm sorry...I hope ye didn't lose much. Unfortunately money's one thing that's pretty tight around here."

Jonathan was silent for a moment. No credstick, and no way to get more money. What was he going to do?

"You're not from around here, are you?" Molly asked gently.

He thought about that for a moment before answering. Did he want to tell this woman his whole, strange story? "No," he finally said. It was easier that way.

She nodded. "Could tell. Shouldn't've been out so late. The riff-raff, they like to hassle good folks. 'Specially good metahuman folks. We usually stay inside after dark, 'cept for Alfonso and Luke—nobody'd think of pickin' on them."

Jonathan sat up a little more, trying to head the dwarf off in mid-ramble. "You said this was a shelter—"

"Yup." She gestured around her. The rest of the room was largish and contained five more beds just like the one Jonathan currently occupied. "Folks come and go, but we usually have about thirty or so every night, including the littl'uns. We look after 'em, give 'em a hot meal and a safe place to stay till they can get on their feet again. When

they can, they get jobs and help with the upkeep of the place." Her voice was full of pride; obviously this place was a very important part of her life.

"And rescue elves in trouble," Jonathan added wryly.

"Yeah, we do a bit o' that too." Her eyes twinkled. "We don't get many elves, though. Mostly orks 'n' dwarves, a few trolls like Luke and Alfonso."

"No humans?"

She shook her head. "We wouldn't turn 'em away, of course—we never turn anybody in need away here, 'slong as they've got a good heart and are willing to pitch in—but there's usually other, better places the humans can go." There was no bitterness in her voice at that; it was as if she was simply stating a well-known fact. She looked Jonathan over. "How do you feel? We couldn't find any real injuries—looks like all they had a chance to do was knock you around a bit before we found you."

Jonathan tested out his limbs, noting that he did have a few bruises but nothing more serious. His head throbbed a bit, as did his shoulder, but the coat seemed to have taken up most of the impact of his beating. "I think I'll be all right," he said at last. He met her gaze. "Thank you. I don't know what I'd have done if —"

"That's all right, lad," she said, smiling. "It's what we do around here. We can't make much of a difference, but we do what we can."

"I'd like to repay you somehow...but —"

She held up her hands. "Don't worry about it. You rest. If you're feelin' up to it, dinner's in about half an hour. Dining room's down the hall, you can't miss it. After you're feelin' better, we'll talk."

Jonathan nodded. "Thank you," he said again. "For everything."

Molly chuckled. "You just wait," she said. "If you're really serious about wantin' to pay us back, there's plenty

of things around here you can help with." She stood and patted his shoulder. "Hope to see you at dinner, but if you don't feel up to it, somebody'll bring you a plate."

Jonathan did feel well enough to show up at dinner — or more precisely, he forced himself to feel well enough because he decided it was not courteous of him to remain in bed with only a few bruises when everyone else was eating. He pulled on his jeans, wincing a bit at the pain in his stiff muscles, and padded down the hall in his stocking feet.

The dining room was bigger than the bedroom he'd been in by a significant margin. It too had cracked-plaster walls and was lit by several hanging bulbs that had been covered by homemade shades to make them less harsh. Three long tables were arranged parallel to each other in the middle of the room, their centers decorated by old but still colorful bouquets of fake flowers. The smell of food, strong and pleasant, wafted through the room. A battered chip player at one end of one of the tables filled the room with cheerful music.

There were already a number of people waiting, lining up on the far side of the room near the door to what could only be the kitchen. Jonathan noticed two dwarves, an ork woman with three children, another ork woman with four children, and a Latino troll lined up, each one holding a white, institutional-looking bowl.

Rick, the ork who had first talked to Jonathan, waved when he saw him. "Hoi!" he called. "Glad to see you made it. Grab a bowl and get right in line."

Jonathan did as he was told, picking up one of the cracked bowls and taking his place behind the Latino troll, listening to the happy chatter going on around him. The troll was having a conversation about some local news item with one of the ork women, while the restless

children tried to remain calm long enough to get their food. They all smiled at Jonathan, welcoming him to their group without fanfare.

He noticed when he got to the front of the line that Rick was manning two large pots, scooping out thick stew into each bowl. When it was Jonathan's turn, Rick chose the left pot. Jonathan noticed at that point that the stew from the right pot had meat; from the left, only vegetables. The ork grinned at Jonathan. "Enjoy."

Dinner was a bit of a blur. The stew was simple but surprisingly good and filling. Nobody seemed to mind that Jonathan kept to himself, being polite and gracious to the others seated at his table but not joining in their conversation. He suspected they were probably giving him his space because of what had happened to him, which was fine with him.

People drifted in and out over the next hour or so, and when the dinner hour was finally winding to a close, Molly Muldoon sat down across the table from Jonathan. He noticed that she too was eating the vegetable stew. She smiled and sighed. "It never ends," she said, but it didn't sound like she minded much. "Will you keep me company while I eat?"

"Of course." Jonathan pushed his bowl aside.

"Thanks. Usually everybody's mostly gone before I get around to eating." She scooped up a healthy spoonful and paused to chew before continuing. "So, Jonathan Andrews – what's your story?"

He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

She smiled. "Everybody has a story. A reason why they end up here. Some people can't get a job, some people can't afford to work 'cause they don't have anybody to look after their kids, some people wander into the wrong part of the town and get beat up –"

"That's me," Jonathan said, surprised that he could smile about it.

Molly chuckled. "Yeah, but what about before that? You got somewhere to go? You look like you do—too healthy for somebody who's lived around here for long."

"I—" Jonathan sighed, looking down. "I used to. I don't know anymore."

She nodded sympathetically. "We get a bit of that, too. Lots of folks fall on hard times. We don't ask questions here. All we ask is that folks do their share and don't do anything to cause trouble. For that you get two square meals a day, a place to sleep, and maybe some friends." She looked at him. "I know it's a little soon to ask, but are you thinkin' 'bout stayin' awhile, or you gonna be on your way?"

For a long moment Jonathan didn't answer. He had almost said, *I'll be on my way*, but where? He had no money, no way of getting more, no home—the world was falling apart around him. Right now, the haven of Molly Muldoon's Bleeker Street Shelter seemed like a good place to get himself together for awhile before he went once more in search of his life. "Could I—stay?" he asked tentatively. "For awhile, I mean? A few days?"

She smiled. "Lad, you can stay for as long as you like, as long as you do something to help us out and don't mind sleepin' on the floor if we get too many kids or women or old folks some nights."

Her words gave him relief, more than he would have expected. "Thank you," he said. "What sort of things do you need help with?"

Molly shrugged. "Everything. Cooking, cleaning, fixing the place up, taking care of the little ones and the sick ones, or—"

"—You said money was a problem," Jonathan interrupted. He suddenly had an idea.

"Money's *always* a problem."

"What kind of...management do you have around here?"

Molly looked confused. "I'm not sure what you mean. I'm in charge of the—"

Jonathan nodded. "Yes, I know. But I mean—do you have anyone here who knows how to manage money?"

She thought about that a moment, then sighed. "I look after the books, but I've never really been too good at that sort of thing. Usually we don't have much money to keep track of."

"Perhaps that's where I can help you." Jonathan leaned forward. "It's something I've done for a long time, and I'm good at it. Let me help you with that."

Molly looked dubious. "Well...I'm not sure..."

"I'll *help*," Jonathan said, realizing that this woman had no reason to trust him. "I'll show you how to do it, so then you can do it yourself after I'm gone. I'm sure I can teach you a few things that will help you get more for your money."

Again Molly was silent for several moments, mulling that over. Then she looked up and nodded once. "We'll give it a try, then!" she said decisively. "You rest, and we'll start in the morning. If you can make sense out of our accounting, you'll be a godsend!"

And Jonathan did exactly that. He showed up bright and early the next morning, and before the end of the day, Molly had turned over most of the business side of the shelter's management to him. She seemed grateful to do it, too, because it allowed her to spend more time doing what she loved: taking care of the shelter's denizens. The only part she retained control over was the actual accounts: Jonathan would need her authorization before he was permitted to spend any money.

That injunction lasted only until the end of the week. By that point Jonathan had gotten to know all of the shelter's regular residents: Carla and Lavonne, the two ork mothers and their children; Alfonso and Luke, the two trolls who were the place's primary security force; Mr. Huggins, an elderly dwarf who was always kind and pleasant despite a heavy alcohol habit; Wilhelmina, a mildly retarded teenage ork girl who nonetheless wanted more out of life than to become a streetwalker or a chiphead; Freddie, a young dwarf with a bad leg and a talent for art; and Rick, the ork who was Mrs. Muldoon's right hand, chief handyman, carpenter, and general get-it-done guy. Other people drifted through just as Mrs. M. had said, but they rarely stayed long, on their way to somewhere else.

By the end of the week Jonathan was showing no signs of being one of these transient residents: he had settled into the shelter routine like he had been born to it, already finding ways to save money, to raise more money, to give the place a little breathing room against the ever-present wolf hovering at their door. He had redone Mrs. Muldoon's haphazard account books and brought them into order the first day, and after that he had applied himself diligently to improving the situation wherever he could. One afternoon the dwarf woman took him aside. "Jonathan," she said, "You've been here a week now. I wanted to ask you — are you planning on sticking around? I know you don't have a job, but — well — I'd like to offer you one. As our full-time business manager. We can't pay much —" she grinned " — as I'm sure you know better than I do. About all I can offer you is a little room of your own and a little money each week...but —" She looked at him. "I know it's only been a week and it's probably wrong to trust somebody I've only known a week, but I've always prided myself on being a good judge of character. I

believe you're an honest and trustworthy young man, so I want to prove that to you – and besides, I don't want to lose somebody who's as good with money as you are!"

Jonathan smiled. "I'd like that, Mrs. Muldoon. I'd be happy to accept the job." And as he said it, he knew it was right. Even in this short time, he felt like he belonged here. He knew he was going to have to leave at some point, to find out about his past, but for now this seemed like the right thing to do.

And so Jonathan Andrews became the official business manager of the Bleecker Street Shelter. It was a long way from junior partner in R. and J. Andrews, Incorporated, but in many ways the position was more interesting. Because he had already been doing the job in everything but name, he fell into it like he was meant to be there. Mrs. Muldoon altered the shelter's accounts to include him so he could handle transactions on his own, and before long he was performing more of his financial wizardry on the place's meager coffers. Not only did he find ways to stretch the money they had to get more value, but he also began reaching out, seeking out sources of funding. He tirelessly made calls, sought out charities and businesses known to be friendly to metahumans, and made presentations in favor of providing support, both in the form of monetary contributions and of donations of goods, to the shelter. They were still going to have money troubles – he had a talent for this but he was not a miracle worker, and he still got a lot of doors closed in his face – but it was clear to everyone who lived at Bleecker Street that their lives had improved in tangible ways since the coming of this pleasant but quiet elf.

More time passed, and as Jonathan spent more and more time devoted to his new position, an odd thing happened: his memories of his past life began to fade. He



didn't realize it at first, because it happened slowly and gradually over the course of a couple of weeks, but one night as he prepared for bed in his tiny room, he tried to recall his old life at the corporation. He found that it was a difficult thing to do. He had trouble visualizing his father's face, the apartment where they had lived, his friends from those days. The realization frightened him briefly, but then slowly he calmed.

Perhaps this was what he had been meant to do all along. He was happy here, he was doing what he loved and was good at, and people appreciated his efforts. Was there really much more he could ask for?

He smiled, settling down in his bed, pulling the covers up. Tomorrow was another day, another chance to pit his intellect and his talents against the world to help out the people who had taken him in. It was going to be a good day.

## 11.

Kestrel had lost track of the time they had spent at Gabriel's lair. It didn't really seem to matter, though—it was as if time passed differently here than it did anywhere else. As in the few other times when she had come here with him, she felt odd in a place that had seemed to be more comfortable with the passage of eons than of days.

They had flown out of Zurich on a nonstop to Seattle, and then from there transferred to a private jet Gabriel had arranged to take them as far as Winnipeg without asking questions. From there they had driven most of the rest of the trip until the way had become impassable by car. They had no trouble with the border guards; Gabriel had everything in order and the guards barely glanced at the car before waving it through the checkpoint. *Nice trick, Kestrel had thought with some amusement. Could have used it a few years ago.*

She hadn't said much throughout the trip; she had gotten the strong feeling that Gabriel had something on his mind and wasn't in the mood for conversation. He had been his usual quiet, polite self, but there was something in his eyes that told Kestrel he was far away. She was concerned about how worried he looked when he thought she wasn't paying attention, but didn't ask. She also noticed that he didn't sleep during the entire trip back. Kestrel herself caught a few catnaps, but when she awoke she would find Gabriel there next to her, wide awake, staring off into space.

She hadn't been back to his lair in several months, and never for more than a day or two with one exception. She smiled a little to herself, remembering that first couple of weeks after she had met him when they had been getting to know each other while he recuperated from his

wounds and regained his energy. Those had been good times.

The lair was located at the top of a mountain in the middle of a large expanse of forested land in the Algonkian-Manitou Council lands. Kestrel didn't know for certain, but she was fairly sure that Gabriel owned several thousand acres around the lair, and that he had taken care of that little detail shortly after he had awakened. While he was quite the social butterfly by dragon standards, he liked his privacy and did not enjoy having anyone stumble into his most private sanctuary.

Not that they *could* have, of course. Kestrel had seen some of the magic that protected the lair from prying eyes—extremely powerful but very subtle magic, none of it lethal, with the aim of concealing the entrances in a cloak of illusion so potent that it would have taken another dragon to see through it. Kestrel was quite sure that she was the only human living who had the means to pass through those barriers: shortly after their meeting, Gabriel had re-attuned the wards so she was able to enter unimpeded. Of course it had still taken her awhile to get used to striding boldly through what looked like a solid wall (she had missed the entrance once and smacked into the mountainside, much to Gabriel's amusement) but these days she did it without batting an eye.

Kestrel loved the lair, which was a good thing because she had ended up spending a lot of time alone this trip while Gabriel was off doing research, prowling the astral plane, and performing various other magical experiments that she couldn't help him with. Despite her crack about toting eye of newt, she knew there wasn't much she could do, so she spent her time exploring. When they had first arrived this time he had taken awhile to show her around, and she was pleased to discover that he had made a few additions since she'd last been here, including a massive

media room that contained a trid screen that would have been at home in a small theater, a library of trids, chips, and old-style DVDs (including the entire run of the Godzilla series, which made her laugh), an impressive collection of music and sim chips, and a Matrix hookup. When she had asked him how he had managed to get all this in here without being noticed, he'd merely said, "It's amazing what you can do with a few elementals and a dragon's illusion abilities..." and let it go at that.

When she finally had her fill of entertainment and exploring and paid attention to how much time had gone by, she was surprised to discover they had already been there for a week and a half. During that time she had seen Gabriel only once or twice a day: he had taken meals with her when he remembered that he was hungry (which wasn't often) and always made it a point to spend at least an hour with her each day. He wouldn't talk about what he was doing, though, meeting Kestrel's questions with polite deflections until she stopped asking. She figured he knew what he was doing.

That morning after a week and a half had passed, though, she decided that she needed to know more—like how long he was planning to remain here. She was quite convinced that something was far more wrong than he was admitting, and that the incident at the chalet had disturbed him profoundly, but, like the subject of his mysterious research, he had refused to discuss the matter. Kestrel hated to push him on it, but she had to know something. If this affected her, she had a right to know, and if it didn't—if it didn't, she was supposed to be his friend. That meant she felt she should at least *try* to help.

She was just slipping on her boots and getting ready to leave the cozy stone chamber she was using for a bedroom when he appeared in her doorway. She had not heard him coming; she started when she looked up and

saw him there. "Don't—" she started to say, and stopped in mid-sentence. Her eyes widened.

Gabriel stood framed in the doorway, watching her. He did not look well, but it was hard to put a finger on why. His hair was a little mussed, his clothes a little more disarrayed than they should have been, his eyes a little brighter. None of these things taken individually would have been cause for alarm, but together — "Gabriel?" she ventured softly. "Are you okay?"

He smiled; it didn't quite reach his eyes. "I'm fine, Juliana. I—just came to see you. We need to talk."

*Uh-oh. That doesn't sound good.* Kestrel patted the chair next to the bed. "C'mon in. What about?" She kept her voice carefully neutral, hoping that if she remained calm he would finally tell her what was going on.

He crossed the room and sat down, bent over a bit with his elbows resting on his knees, his face a mask of quiet that belied the look of deep concern in his violet eyes. "Juliana," he said softly without looking at her, "I think you should leave here."

That was not what she had been expecting. Her eyes came up sharply. "What?"

Gabriel sighed, meeting her gaze with his own. "I think you should go. It would be better that way—we've been here for a week and a half and I have not been much company to you at all. I think it would be better if you returned to Seattle. I'll catch up with you when I'm finished here."

She stared at him. "Gabriel, what's this about? You want me to leave?"

He bowed his head again. "I think it would be for the best," he repeated.

Kestrel sat back, studying him for a moment before she spoke. His posture was slumped, his bearing radiating exhaustion. "Gabriel—I—shouldn't you get

some sleep? You look tired. How long has it been since you've eaten?"

"It doesn't matter." His voice was soft, quiet, with the faint edges of defeat around it. His eyes came up again to meet hers; there was a look of pleading in them. "I'll get you down the mountain and drop you off at the airport. You should be in Seattle by this evening, and then —"

"Gabriel, stop it!" She was surprised at the vehemence in her voice. "I'm not going anywhere until you tell me what's going on. You look terrible. What's wrong with you? Why won't you talk to me?"

His expression was haunted. "Juliana —" Getting up from the chair, he began to pace around the room. Restless energy that was nearly palpable surrounded him.

Kestrel watched for several moments. When he didn't say anything else, she too got up. Moving over to him, she stood in front of him, gently gripping his shoulders and looking into his eyes. "Tell me why you want me to go. What are you worried about?"

For a moment it seemed as if he would break free of her hold and continue on, but he did not. Instead he remained where he was, trembling slightly. "You," he said in a near-whisper.

For the second time in the conversation, Kestrel had not gotten an answer anything like she had expected. "Me?" She cocked her head slightly to one side. "Why are you worried about me? I'm fine, Gabriel. I don't mind waiting around while you —"

Gabriel shook his head. It was a rather harsh movement, very unlike him. "No," he said, impatience creeping into his tone. "Juliana, please. I can't explain everything right now. Please don't ask me to. Later on when I understand it all, then I will tell you. But for now — you have to trust me. It isn't safe for you here."

She thought about that for a few moments, then looked at him. "Is it safe for *you* here?" she asked quietly.

Gabriel did not answer, except to shake free of her grip and resume his pacing.

"Gabriel?"

He was visibly trembling now. He stopped, facing away from her, and then turned back. There was now something decidedly odd in his eyes, which Kestrel saw for a brief second before he closed them.

"Gabriel?" She took a step forward, but it was a hesitant step. She had never seen him acting like this before. "You didn't answer my question. If you're not safe here either, then I'm not going to leave you here by yourself with whatever it is. I can help, if you let me. Just tell me—"

"I must go," he hissed suddenly through his teeth. Wheeling around, he stalked out of the room, leaving Kestrel to stare after him, eyes wide, utterly flummoxed by his uncharacteristic behavior.

Two hours later, Kestrel was no closer to an answer. All she had managed to do in an hour of wandering was come up with a whole lot more questions, and none of *them* had answers either.

The only thing she did know was that she'd have to find Gabriel eventually—if he was even still there.

She moved slowly down the stone hallway, eventually ending up outside on one of the ledges high above the valley below. That was where she had been for about the last hour, thinking over her friend's odd behavior. In all the time she had known him, he had never so much as spoken sharply to her, but yet today—

Her mind drifted back over the time since they had arrived, trying to put a pattern to any of this. He had wanted to return here because of the incident that had

happened in the chalet. He had said that he was more confident about being able to handle another such incident if he were on familiar territory instead of somewhere far from home. Ever since he had arrived back at the lair, he had been increasingly preoccupied; there was a growing tenseness about him that Kestrel hadn't noticed right away, but in retrospect it stood out in sharp relief. He was definitely upset about something. Had the mysterious astral force attacked him—or attempted to—again? If so, why hadn't he told her about it?

*He doesn't want to worry me.* Kestrel sighed. It was a subject the two of them had discussed many times: his tendency to keep anything that was bothering him to himself, especially if it was something potentially dangerous. Sometimes she tried to convince him that he was being too overprotective, that she had dealt with plenty of dangerous things before she met him and would continue to do so...and sometimes she kept her mouth shut, realizing that anything a dragon considered dangerous was probably not something she wanted to tangle with. Still, it bothered her sometimes: the loss of her team two years ago had left her in limbo as a shadowrunner, and her friendship with Gabriel sometimes left her feeling that she was letting her skills slip because she didn't need them to survive when he was around. What good were lightning-fast reflexes, hand-razors and years of combat experience when you hung around with a guy who could eat any of her enemies' lunches magically *and* physically without breaking a sweat?

She sighed again, rising to a graceful standing position against the rock wall. Her knees popped slightly as she stood, eliciting a tight little smile: she wasn't getting any younger. At thirty-three she had already made it longer than many in her profession; still, she



knew that despite the small sign of her eventual mortality, she still was in damn good shape. Maybe not as good as she could be, but that was easy enough to remedy. *Think I'll work on that after this thing's over*, she told herself. *Maybe see if Ocelot and his team'll take me on for awhile. I'm getting out of practice.*

She nodded to herself, glad to have decided something. For now, though, she had a decision of a different type. Except that it wasn't really a decision, because she already knew the answer. Stretching like a cat, she headed back inside to find Gabriel. If he insisted that she leave, she would go—but not without an explanation first.

He wasn't in any of the usual places she expected to find him. The media room was empty, the trid screen dark and quiet. His chambers in the human-sized portion of the lair were likewise unoccupied and looked like no one had been there anytime recently. He wasn't in the dining area, nor was he in the lair's vast magical library.

*Okay*, Kestrel thought as she stood in the middle of the library. *He's not here. Could he have left without me?* She didn't think he would have done that, at least not permanently. He knew she didn't have an easy way to get back to civilization; even if he had left her the car, she still would have had to get down the side of a fairly sheer cliff face without any climbing gear. She didn't think he'd let her risk herself like that.

She realized that left only one answer, and not one she was looking forward to. If he hadn't left, and he wasn't in the human-hospitable part of the lair, then the only place left to look was —

She sighed. This was going to be a long walk. *Gabriel, when this is over, you and I are going to have a talk.*

After three hours, Kestrel was beginning to wonder if this had been a good idea.

She stopped for a moment, leaning against the cool stone wall, and took stock of her situation. She stood far off to one side of a vast cavern, its ceiling rising some thirty meters up into dim blackness. She had been walking and jogging through this particular cavern for the last forty minutes, and before that it had been a seemingly endless hallway leading out of yet another cavern. All around her everything was enormous, as befitting a lair that had at one time been home to not just one, but an entire family of Great Dragons. Kestrel felt small and insignificant as she gazed at the caverns' colossal beauty, marveling at the different colors of stone, at the way that dim and comforting light was somehow filtered in even though there was no evidence of the method, at the thought of what this place must have been like when it was occupied by all of its former inhabitants. She had been in this particular part of the lair only once before, and that had been with Gabriel in his true form. Riding on his back, she had passed through it much faster. She hadn't had time to look around with such wonder.

Now, though, as the hours crept by and she began to be concerned about finding her way out, the sense of wonder was giving way to a little bit of trepidation. Where was he? What if she had been wrong and he *wasn't* here after all? It had taken her three hours (so far) to get in here, so no doubt it would take at least that long to get back out again. Probably longer, because she wasn't moving as fast now as she had been. *Gabriel, where are you? Why did you run away from me?*

She decided to stick it out for another half hour, and if she didn't find him by then she'd head back. She regretted not having brought any food or water with her; the underground lake that was one of Gabriel's favorite

dragon-sized haunts was far back near where she had started, and despite the sound of running water she had heard through most of her trip, she hadn't discovered the source of any of it. The search became more methodical as she went on: hike through long passageways, peer into chambers, discover no sign of Gabriel there, move on. She stopped in frustration when the half-hour reached its end and she still had found no indication that he was here. "Gabriel!" she yelled. "Come on! Where *are* you?"

*"Juliana?"*

She spun around so fast she nearly fell. The voice sounded surprised, but there was something else to it as well—stress and exhaustion. "Gabriel? Are you here?" Her voice bounced around the cavern, sending weird echoes back to her ears.

*"You should not have come, Juliana. You must have walked for hours to get here."*

Kestrel sighed. *Note to self: Next time, bring bicycle. And provisions.* "Where are you? I'm not leaving until we talk!" *Yeah, that's it. Give the dragon an ultimatum.*

There was a brief impression of a tired sigh in her mind, and then the voice was back. *"Go west from where you are standing and take the left fork. I am not far away."*

West? She was heading east now, which meant that she had somehow missed him. There had been too many forks she had been forced to choose between. Trying not to think about how easy it would have been to get completely lost in here, she turned and retraced her steps, veering left when the passageway divided.

This passage was short compared to the others. She could see a dim light shining from the room at the end of it, even from where she was. Moving forward slowly, she rounded the last corner and stopped at the entrance to the chamber.

He was there, lying in the middle of a massive room that glowed with the radiance of the items lining the ledges high above. His head was lowered on his forelegs, his tail wrapped around him, his wings drooping slightly. His luminescent violet gaze settled on her as she approached, but he did not speak.

Kestrel took a step forward. "Gabriel —?"

"*Juliana.*" There was infinite weariness and something else she could not identify in his tone.

She moved into the room with careful steps. The air in the room seemed to crackle with tension. "Why did you run away from me?" she asked softly. "Can't we talk about this? If something's wrong, can't you tell me? This has something to do with what happened in Switzerland, doesn't it?"

The dragon raised his head slightly. For a long moment he didn't speak, and then he resumed his old position. "Yes." Kestrel started to speak again, but he cut her off. "*Juliana, you must go. It isn't safe for you to be here.*"

Another step forward. She was still a good twenty meters away from him, realizing once again just how *big* he was. His presence dominated the room even when he did not move; she knew somehow that it was his tension that was affecting her. She also knew that if she, one hundred percent mundane that she was, could feel it, that it must be truly strong indeed. "Gabriel...why did you run away from me like that? You've never done that before. I'll go if you want me to, but you have to tell me what's wrong. I'm worried about you too. What is it that I'm not safe from?"

Gabriel shifted position slightly; the overhead glow from the objects danced across the small golden scales on his flank, accenting the gold with the blues and greens, reds and purples of the finest jewelry. He closed his eyes

and shuddered; when he opened them again, the strain showed clearly in their depths.

Kestrel watched him for a moment, then looked up at the glowing objects. She could not see them clearly, but she could see that there were many of them, ringing the room. For the first time, too, she noticed the floor beneath her feet: it was stone like all the others, but this one was carved with odd figures and sigils, intricate and beautiful. "What is this room?" she asked. "It's—some kind of magic place, isn't it?"

Gabriel nodded. *"It is...one of the places where rituals are performed. The magical protections are even stronger here and in the other places like it than they are on the rest of the lair."*

She continued to approach him. As she drew closer, she could feel his sheer presence as a near-palpable aura. She had never felt this uncomfortable around him before, not since that first time she had encountered him wounded in a cavern on his brother Stefan's island complex. He was like a coiled spring held back by a force that might or might not be sufficient for the task. "You—came here for a reason, didn't you?" she ventured. "You didn't run away because I made you angry."

*"You did not make me angry, Juliana."* His voice was very soft, trying to sound reassuring despite the tension. *"I don't think it would be possible for you to do so."*

"Even if I tell you I'm not leaving until I get an explanation?" She had reached him by now; she extended her hand and put her palm down on one of his forelegs—and was surprised to feel it trembling slightly, like there was a low electrical current running through him.

He sighed; she could feel his warm breath touching her like a desert wind, ruffling her hair. *"You do not understand"* he said. *"I told you—I will explain later, when I understand it fully."*

Now it was Kestrel's turn to sigh. "Gabriel...I love you. You know I do. But you can be exasperating sometimes. After everything we've been through together, you've got to know by now that you can't shield me from everything that's dangerous. Okay, so you don't understand it all. You must understand more of it than I do, or you wouldn't be worrying about me being in danger. Just tell me *that*, if nothing else—why am I in danger, and from what?" She looked into the one eye she could see from where she was, challenging him.

The electrical-current tension stepped up a notch, and the eye closed. The thought, when it came, was soft, weary, and more than a little rough, as if he were parting with it with great reluctance. "*Me.*"

She stopped, stunned, eyes widening. She stared at him. "You? I'm in danger from *you*?" The concept was unthinkable. Gabriel would never hurt her—would he? She looked again at the massive being next to whom she stood, becoming once more conscious of his size. His head was near her; each of his sharp, wicked-looking fangs was half the size of her body. His claws, resting now on the stone floor, were each bigger than she was. Not since that night in the cavern was she so aware of the vulnerability of her human body next to this creature who was bigger than a house. She tensed a bit, involuntarily. "Gabriel...tell me what's going on. Please."

He raised his head and drew back in a sudden, explosive motion, barely giving her time to pull her hand back and get out of his way. Backing off, he raised up slightly on his powerful rear legs, extending his wings to nearly their full span. He shook his head violently, looking very much like he was trying to clear some unpleasant thought from his mind, and then opened his eyes again. They glowed brightly, their purple depths scanning the room until his gaze leveled on her again. "*I*

*do not know how much longer I can do this, Juliana. Go. Get away. Get out of here now!"*

Kestrel stood rooted where she was, the combination of the sight of him towering over her and the incongruity of his words causing her to hesitate. She took a breath. *He's my friend. He loves me. He would never hurt me. I need to help him –*

*– but is this Gabriel I'm talking to? And what if it isn't?*

She took a step back. "Where am I going to go?" she called, trying to reason with him, to perhaps jolt him out of this strange state by appealing to his protective instincts. "You know I can't get down that mountain without gear if you don't help me. You want me to just go back to Seattle and leave you here?"

Something in his gaze...changed. He was visibly shaking now, rising up to his full height, spreading out his full wing extension, dominating the room even more thoroughly than he had done before. The soft glow in his eyes was replaced by something much more disquieting. A low rumbling growl began forming in his throat. As Kestrel watched in horror, he flung himself forward slightly and to his left, his blazing eyes locked on the room's only exit.

It was then that she realized that she was standing between him and it. "Gabriel!" she called, a little desperation creeping into her voice. "Wait! Don't –"

*"Juliana – go – now!"* The voice in her mind didn't even sound like him anymore, the strain was so great. He sounded like he was trying to hold something off, to maintain control as long as he could. *"RUN!"*

The last command boomed in her head with the force of a sudden blast of feedback from some troll death-metal band's amplifier. She clamped her hands to her temples, disoriented, swaying on her feet. She could hear – and feel – the rumbling thunder of his approach, but her mind

wasn't clear enough to process the input. *Something's – wrong... must – run –*

She spun, but it was too late. He was on her. She looked up into his eyes, the eyes that had regarded her with kindness and love so many times, and saw only madness there now. *"I'm sorry..."* she thought miserably, thinking not of herself but of whatever had taken her gentle friend from her and replaced him with this insane creature. *"I'm sorry, Gabriel. I'm –"*

She heard a scream from far above her, a heart-rending sound that cut her to the bone, and then something slammed into her. She hit the wall, pain exploding in her back, her head, her arms – and then she knew nothing more.



## 12.

It was two-thirty a.m. in Seattle. Outside the window of the large office high above the city, the rain was coming down hard; the sound of it pattering against the panes was the only thing that relieved the silence of the night.

There was only one occupant of the office; he currently sat behind his desk, his hand hovering over the phone. He left his hand there for a moment and then sighed and let it drop.

*No...they need this time. I'll catch 'em later on. Next time.*

He leaned back in his chair and looked around the office, noting with satisfaction the deep, real-wood paneling, the understated, old-fashioned light fixtures, the paintings that hung on the walls (bought at auction through proxies, they were small in number and very high in value), the solid respectability of the antique rosewood desk beneath his hands, the luxuriant plush of the thick carpeting under his feet. It was the sort of office that might be occupied by a very wealthy Eastern banker.

Harry thought that ironic, all things considered.

He glanced at the phone again, rethinking his position for a moment but arriving almost immediately back at the same conclusion as before. The call he had received half an hour earlier, routed as it always was through so many blind pathways that it would never be possible to trace it to this place, had been a request for a talented, highly professional team to perform a bit of subtle and potentially dangerous business (but then, this sort of business was always potentially dangerous—it was the degree of subtlety requested that varied). Harry's mind had settled instantly on the right team for the job, but a split-second later he had remembered that that particular team, after completing their last run with an almost textbook level of efficiency that rarely occurred in this line

of work, had decided to finally take some time off to rest, tend to personal business they had let slide during their last three jobs, and generally make themselves unavailable for current engagements until further notice.

Harry had sighed, telling the caller that he would get back to them with an answer the following day, and left it at that for the moment. The team he'd had in mind was not the best of those he kept under his exclusive retainer, but they were very close—regardless, he tended to give them first shot at the “interesting” jobs even above the one other team who had been in the business a bit longer because they had proven themselves over the years to be adept at handling the jobs where things were prone toward going south in a hurry—or, in the case of most of these sorts of jobs, off in some direction that didn't even appear on a standard compass.

Still, though, he owed them their time off without trying to call them up and convince them to take this job—if he could even get hold of them. At least three out of the four usually left town during breaks between runs, and the fourth wasn't shy about telling people to bug off and leave him alone. Harry had a pretty good idea where one of the others went—it was not the sort of knowledge he was supposed to have, but little bits of information had a habit of drifting toward Harry like iron filings to a strong magnet. Even so, though, *having* the knowledge and *using* it were two different things. One of the pillarstones on which his reputation rested solidly was the fact that his integrity was unassailable. Sure, he'd exploit loopholes and look for angles just like everybody else in this business (and he was damn good at it) but as for outright betrayal of trust—secrets were safe with Harry as long as the subject of the secret didn't do anything to actively get on the fixer's bad side.

Harry sighed again and scrawled a note on a pocket secretary next to the phone. Tomorrow morning he would give one of his promising second-tier teams a call and tell them about the job. It wasn't the best choice he could make, but it was the only one available to him when playing the game on his terms. These guys needed a shot anyway, and when they got a little more experience, Harry thought, they'd probably be even more subtle than his first choice. As for dealing with weird stuff—well, this didn't feel like weird stuff. He'd take the chance. That decision made, he leaned back in his chair, finally allowing himself to relax for awhile. Moments of quiet didn't often happen this time of the night, which was the middle of his workday. He had learned to savor them. As often happened during such moments, he allowed his mind to drift to see where his thoughts would take him, and also as often happened, they took a meandering course that eventually led to his past.

The baby boy who was born to Abraham and Anna Steinberg in October 1998 in a tony suburb just outside New York City didn't know at the time, naturally, that the course of his life had already been mapped out for him. For young Nehemiah Harold Steinberg, being the first son of one of the senior partners of one of the oldest and most prestigious investment banking firms in Manhattan—a firm that at the time had been helmed by his grandfather—meant that his position in the family hierarchy was secure and, as far as his father was concerned, not open to debate. Even after his sister came along two years later and his younger brother five years after that, it was Nehemiah who clearly had the largest number of expectations and aspirations stacked upon his young shoulders.

The first part of his life had gone quite nicely according to plan: he had been sent along with his siblings to the best private schools money could buy, and from the time he was old enough to carry on a coherent conversation his father— who had taken over the firm when Nehemiah was four years old, after his grandfather had suffered a mild heart-related “incident” and decided to retire— would introduce him to various suit-clad men and women whom he often brought home to dinner to discuss business. Young Nehemiah at these early ages found the business discussions boring, but even as young as he was he had been fascinated by the interactions between his father and the strangers. As time went on the strangers became not so strange anymore as he saw them more than once—he learned their names quickly and always greeted them when his father brought them home. Almost all of them were impressed by the boy’s quick wits and well-schooled manners. As Nehemiah grew older his father clearly began to put more and more effort into grooming him for a position at the firm after he graduated college, and Nehemiah took to it mostly without complaint. He clearly had a talent for it.

Life went on as charted for the first twelve years of Nehemiah’s life, but at that point things began to happen that rocked not only his family, but every family on Earth: the dawn of the Awakening, followed by the VITAS plague and goblinization. Suddenly, the neat tidy pre-planned lives of a significant portion of the world’s population were turned end over end, and the ramifications would be felt for years to come.

Either by luck or by divine providence (many of Nehemiah’s family, as devout Jews, chose to align themselves with the latter theory; Nehemiah himself tended toward the former), none of the tragic events of the early twenty-teens through the early twenty-twenties

touched deeply on the Steinberg family. None of Nehemiah's immediate family was afflicted by VITAS and none of them goblinized, although there were rumors that a couple of distant cousins had turned troll and been sent off to school far away to avoid disgracing the family. Of course, none of his immediate family showed any signs of magical talent either, but that did not bother any of them. Old-fashioned and pragmatic, most of the Steinberg clan looked at magic in those early days with distrust, not as a valuable tool to be used but as an unknown force to be avoided if possible.

As well as could be expected during the upheavals afflicting the world, Nehemiah Steinberg held steady to the course his father had set and he had embraced—after finishing high school and attending the same small, exclusive college his father and five generations of ancestors had attended, he enrolled in the Wharton School of Business and emerged two years later at the top of his class, MBA in hand.

Naturally he had a position waiting for him at the firm. At the age of twenty-four, Nehemiah joined the firm as a junior partner; he spent the next few years distinguishing himself and moving slowly up through the ranks. Everyone who worked with him saw his aptitude for the business; many observed that he was showing all the signs of eclipsing even his own father's brilliance at both dealing with people and spotting and pouncing on shrewd investments. Nehemiah, for his part, fit in quite nicely on the surface. Beneath the surface, though, he began to see the signs that changes were coming, changes that the firm, in order to remain competitive, would need to embrace. Every day, new technologies were being created, new discoveries were being made. Nehemiah watched as entire new branches of science grew by leaps and bounds—especially the budding field of cybernetics,

which was showing great promise in melding cold steel with human flesh to create all sorts of promising new avenues for medical science, the military, and the new megacorporations that were growing ever more powerful each day. He felt that his firm should be investing in these new technologies, as they would be where the money was in the years to come.

His father did not agree. Abraham Steinberg was nothing if not traditional – traditional to the point of being stodgy, some would say – and he had a strong tendency to mistrust anything that was new or untested. He told his son in no uncertain terms that their firm would not be entering into such investments, at least without more time to study them and their effects. The firm would continue on the conservative course it had always followed, leaving these risky new ventures to the upstarts. Perhaps after a few years, after the newcomers had been given time to shake themselves out in the market, then their firm would consider taking a look at them. Not before.

Nehemiah simply nodded, left his father's office – and set about making a few investments of his own. It was not his way to actively disobey his father, but from the time he had been a very young man, he had realized that doing things Abraham's way was not going to work for him. So, using his own money (of which he had a fair amount at this point) and a series of trusted contacts he had made over his last few years at the firm, he began making careful investments into these nascent industries.

As he had expected, most of the companies he chose proved to be wildly successful, providing him with a healthy return on his investments; he continued to turn around these profits, investing more and more heavily into various cutting-edge technologies while still maintaining the outward appearance of his staid father's equally staid son and heir apparent. He handled his

extracurricular activities in secret, not because he was ashamed of them but because, despite the fact that he did not see eye to eye with his father, he still respected him and did not wish to embarrass him. Life went on smoothly as Nehemiah performed his normal job duties while simultaneously gathering significant wealth in the form of both cash and of holdings in various companies and gathering equally significant contacts in the cybertechnology, computer, and weapons industries.

Then came 2029 and the Crash, and the world was once again thrown into upheaval.

Like most other businesses of the time, the investment firm did not fare well in the Crash. Overnight they lost a significant percentage of their holdings and the financial world was in such chaos that it did not look as if anything would be remedied in the foreseeable future. With so many businesses dependent on data stored in the vast array of interconnected computers around the world, the loss of that data via the virus that had caused the crash meant that it would take years to sort out all the implications. The odds were good that things would never recover to the point where they had been prior to the disaster.

Abraham Steinberg likewise did not fare well in the Crash. Only a few months afterward his health, already more precarious than even he knew, took a downturn in the form of an “incident” similar to the one that had stricken his own father years ago. It was only a mild heart attack, the doctors said, but Steinberg would be in the hospital for several weeks and would be forced to slow his pace after that if he didn’t want to have a similar and probably much more dangerous recurrence of the same trouble a year or two down the road. Further, the heart attack had been accompanied by an even milder stroke that had not impaired Steinberg’s functioning in any

significant way, but had clearly taken the edge off his razor-keen intellect.

Steinberg, always a realist, saw the way things were and decided to accelerate a plan he had been forming for awhile previously—he would step down as head of the firm and convince the board to install Nehemiah, by now almost thirty-two, in his place. It was to be a rubber-stamp operation whereby Nehemiah would take the helm of the company and, guided by both Abraham from home and a team of his trusted advisors, continue the plan Abraham had already been following for several years. The Board had no objection, as they knew that Nehemiah had been slated to take over in a few short years anyway; besides, although he was younger than Abraham's tradition-bound contemporaries would have liked, they had nothing but praise for his business acumen and his projected ability to continue to lead the company effectively through the chaotic months following the Crash.

It was all set. The only thing they didn't reckon with was Nehemiah himself.

He didn't want the job.

For him, the Crash had merely been an accelerated form of a path he had seen growing for several years previously. He hadn't predicted that it would all happen so quickly, of course—no one could have done that—but the Crash's subsequent insanity did in less than a year what Nehemiah was certain was inevitable in the next few: it swept away most of the last vestiges of the old ways, clearing the way for the new. He had expected that he would remain at the firm for a few more years as one of his father's associates took over and he maintained his position and continued his under-the-table dealings. He had lost a great deal of his fortune in the Crash, but not as much as most had because he had made it a point to put



most of his money into things that could not be taken away by the destruction of bits and bytes: hard materials, gold, and influence among a growing number of the heads of companies in the newly emerging industries.

What he hadn't expected was that his father would try to make him head of the company. He realized right away, when Abraham hinted to him that it was coming, that he simply could not continue in that capacity. Pulled in one direction by his father's dimmed but still considerable will and paternal power and in another direction by the advisors who expected him to merely carry out their directives, Nehemiah knew that he would be essentially a figurehead with no real power — blamed if anything went wrong but not allowed to pursue what he thought to be the only wise course if they were to survive into this new world.

It was a painful decision for him, but not a difficult one. Gathering a few things he would need into a bag, he got into his car one evening and left town. When the board meeting that would install him as the acting president of the investment firm convened, it did so without its star attraction.

Nehemiah didn't tell anyone where he had gone at first. It hadn't been far: he settled in Boston, using some of his remaining money to rent a nice apartment and office space and then immediately started up his business again. This time he didn't have to be under the table. He called up his contacts from his previous deals and began calling in favors. Before long, he had a little venture capital business going — because he had not been hit as hard as some by the Crash, he had cash available to lend some of the companies who had not been so lucky so they could get back on their feet quickly. In this climate, those who could move quickly were the ones that survived, so Nehemiah knew how valuable a quick infusion of cash,

even a relatively small one, could be. It wasn't easy at first—none of his clients saw just how much fancy dealing he had to do so none of them could figure out just how little money, relatively speaking, he actually had—but eventually as his clients' fortunes began to rise, so did his.

He did not entirely break off contact with his family during this time. In fact, only a month or so after he had failed to show up at the board meeting, Nehemiah received a phone call from his father who had managed to track him down. The conversation had been neither hostile nor amicable—it had been almost a business transaction in itself. Nehemiah had told his father the truth about why he hadn't wanted the job, and Abraham, while certainly not pleased that his eldest son had defied his wishes, had to admit to a grudging understanding of where Nehemiah was coming from. They ended the call with Abraham's agreement not to attempt to contact Nehemiah again and to tell the rest of his family that he was well but had decided to take an extended sabbatical, and with Nehemiah's promise that he would do nothing to embarrass the firm in his new dealings.

Life and business continued. Nehemiah had long believed that, in his line of work, contacts, influence, and information were far more valuable than monetary assets—he was now getting the chance to prove it. He branched out, moving from strictly venture capitalism into taking a more active role in facilitating business deals between some highly disparate elements. As the emerging megacorporations, particularly the cybernetics industry and the infant Matrix (the latter of which had grown out of the Echo Mirage project designed to deal with the virus that had caused the Crash), began to grow ever larger and more powerful, it was quickly realized by all concerned that not all of their dealings could be aboveboard. The extraterritoriality conferred by the Shiawase Decision late

in the last century meant that the megacorps had the power of small states in and of themselves, but that meant that, in dealing with each other, a certain amount of covert “lubrication” was often required to make things go smoothly. Nehemiah, to whom a not-insignificant number of important people by now owed favors, was ready to step in and take on a new role. In addition to his information-gathering and venture-financing activities, he began calling in some of these favors and became not only a broker of information and capital, but also of skilled personnel. His fortunes—in the form of money, influence, and information—continued to grow.

It was about this time when he began to realize that he would have to make some changes. He had not had contact with his family for several years at this point, beyond an occasional cryptic message to let them know he was still alive. However, when one of his ventures went bad and he got wind that one of the individuals involved was poking around looking for information about his family, Nehemiah decided it was time to take his show on the road to somewhere less dangerous.

He chose Seattle, which, as a small outpost of the newly-formed United Canadian and American States in the midst of the vast Native American holdings, had been emerging as a hotbed of shadowy activity, as his new home. Fortunately, none of his contacts knew his full name, but he decided to take no chances anyway. Selling off his holdings back East to trusted sources, he set up residence in Seattle and, giving up his rather memorable first name in exchange for his more common middle one, began calling himself simply “Harry.” In the years that followed, he devoted his considerable energy to setting up an impressive web of contacts, freelance operatives, and corporate employers, playing each of them off the others in a way that resulted in no one’s knowing too

much about exactly what he knew and what he didn't. He acquired the reputation of being very smart, very good at what he did, and not the type to cross for fear of swift and deadly retribution—but with that went the reputation for being someone who could be trusted. Word on the street was that Harry would not double-cross you—not for money, not for information, not because someone was leaning on him. The only way to get on Harry's bad side was to attempt to double-cross *him*. Some tried; they didn't last long. Eventually most people got the idea that it wasn't a smart thing to do if continued living was on your list of things to do—he had by this point wormed his way into the good graces of so many different major players (who either owed him favors, owed him money, or simply respected his way of doing business) that no one wanted to take the chance on cacking him and risking the wrath of his many powerful friends. Besides, he was far more valuable alive than dead, as one never knew when one might require his services. By the time the 2050s rolled around, Harry was known as one of the premier fixers in Seattle, and what he couldn't get or do for you—for the right price, of course—probably couldn't be done or gotten.

Harry met the two men who would become the longest-running members of one of his favorite teams within a few days of each other in the early 2050s. To this day he was still amused by the flash of brilliance that urged him to try them out together as a team—it was one of the smartest things he'd done in years, but at the time it had seemed to be madness more than anything else. They couldn't have been less alike: the young street kid from Seattle, an ex-gangleader with a brash, in-your-face manner and no social graces, and the educated, upper-class English mage, slightly older, sarcastic, irreverent,

and almost utterly without street smarts. At first it had been dislike at first sight—the two had eyed each other warily like a pair of cats in disputed territory when they had been introduced by Harry, but the fixer assured them that he thought their strengths would balance each other's weaknesses and that if they wanted to make it in the shadowrunning world they were going to have to get used to working with people they didn't like. They had grudgingly agreed to try out the arrangement, although Harry could tell by their voices that neither of them thought it would work out. He had set them up with a simple job, given them the contact information for the Johnson, and sent them on their way.

When they came back two days later after having successfully completed the job (it had been nothing particularly complex or dangerous—Harry always liked to see how new team members worked together before he sent them out on anything difficult), Harry saw the change right away. Somewhere in the course of that two days, just as he had expected, his two new recruits had come to some sort of understanding. They still sniped at each other—that was something they still did even after all these years together—but it was a subtly different sort of sniping. Harry could see the beginnings of an attitude he had seen in other successful working partnerships: the “we can pick on each other, but anybody *else* tries picking on one of us and you've got us both to deal with” mentality. He wasn't quite sure how their almost diametrically disparate personalities had managed to work out an understanding, but there it was. He was pleased—not surprised, but pleased. After a few more jobs to work the bugs out and show them where they needed to pay attention most, Winterhawk and Ocelot had the makings of a damn good shadowrunning partnership.

After they had run as a two-man team for about a year, Harry had noticed that the one thing their partnership, which hinged on Ocelot's speed and hand-to-hand abilities and Winterhawk's magical punch and social skills, lacked was some good solid muscle and somebody who could handle the heavy artillery. After looking carefully for personalities he thought would mesh effectively, he hooked them up with a couple of other runners with about the same level of experience: the hyperkinetic human samurai Moto and the laid-back troll rigger Vrool. The team was a good one—'Hawk and Ocelot provided some much-needed subtlety to their new partners, while Moto and Vrool provided the big firepower and the ability to take a significant amount more punishment without falling down. That time, though, Harry made a small mistake in his matchups: Moto and the rest of the team, while professional in their relationships with each other, never really meshed in the way the others did. While Vrool settled right in, Moto's hyperactivity and penchant for big explosions made him a difficult fit with 'Hawk and Ocelot, both of whom prided themselves on their ability to get in and out of situations with a minimum of upheaval. Eventually, the other three and Moto parted ways; the last anyone had heard of the samurai, he had gone to his beloved Japan and taken up residence there.

'Hawk, Ocelot, and Vrool, having grown used to having someone around who could handle firearms better than any of them could, asked Harry if he could find them such a person to round out their team. Luck had been with them as the fixer had been hearing good things about an elf who had drifted into town from back East somewhere and was looking for work—an elf who was known both for his speed and for his mastery of most types of firearms. Harry had been a bit concerned about

the elf's borderline-certifiable personality, but the checking he had done had revealed that ShadoWraith, as he called himself, appeared to be a consummate professional, an assassin who had exhibited a high degree of integrity with regard to the jobs he chose and the care with which he carried them out. It just so happened that, personality-wise, he was silent almost to the point of being pathological about it. He had contacted his team and the elf, set them up together in a meet, and let them decide whether they wanted to pursue things any further.

They had all decided to give it a try, and there had been no particular problems to trouble them. Winterhawk had reported back to Harry that the elf didn't say much but he was good at his job, and besides, he had a rather wicked sense of humor that the mage appreciated. 'Wraith, for his part, didn't seem to mind being part of a team. And so it continued.

The death of Vrool when his van exploded following a particularly nasty run had been a shock to them all, although not so much of a shock as it could have been under the circumstances. All three of his partners (and Harry, for that matter) suspected that Vrool had decided to fake his death in order to get away from some enemies he suspected were on his tail; when another troll who looked very much like him showed up a couple of months later, calling himself Malcolm and claiming to be Vrool's younger brother, nobody asked too many questions. That association lasted a few months, but it was never quite the same as it had been with Vrool. Malcolm eventually drifted away and returned to his home city, leaving Winterhawk, Ocelot, and ShadoWraith once again in need of a new fourth. Back they had gone to Harry.

Again the fixer had a suggestion for them. Like 'Wraith, he wasn't completely sure about the ability of his choice – an Amerind troll named Joe who was not yet out

of his teens—but once again he decided to let the participants be the judge.

The relationship had been rocky at first. In particular, Winterhawk and Joe seemed not to hit it off, although the friction was actually rather one-sided: the mage made no secret of his distrust of the troll, who he thought did not have the proper respect for keeping his mouth shut and who possessed a crude sense of humor that grated on 'Hawk's nerves; Joe, on the other hand, was almost as easygoing as Vrool and didn't appear overly bothered by Winterhawk's issues. Ocelot leaned more toward Winterhawk's side of things, while 'Wraith and Joe fairly quickly formed an unlikely partnership based on Joe's ability to shield 'Wraith from the kind of punishment that was lethal to the glass-jawed elf and 'Wraith's ability to pick off foes before they were able to concentrate their firepower on the slower-moving troll. As time went on and Joe proved himself to be an earnest, trustworthy, and valued member of the team, even Winterhawk's none-too-subtle dislike of the troll began to temper. At this point, the two of them seemed to get along fine. 'Hawk was still disgusted by Joe's occasional crudeness but respected the troll's loyalty and his devotion to his Native American heritage and the teachings of Bear, while Joe still enjoyed twiggling the mage when he got a bit too snobbish and pompous but likewise respected his magical abilities. Harry, watching from the sidelines, had to chuckle at the fact that once again his matchups had been good ones—it had just taken a bit longer to see it that time.

The team in its current incarnation had been together for over five years now, which was very rare in the shadow community: usually as teams moved up through the ranks they either lost significant chunks of their membership due to run-related casualties, got fed up with each other and parted ways, or made a big killing and



retired, dropping out of the shadow world and going legit if they could. This team showed signs of none of the above.

Harry was noticing other signs over the last couple of years, though. He kept his mouth shut about it because it wasn't any of his concern, but still he noticed. There had been changes in this team—changes that couldn't be accounted for by the simple passing of time and the accumulation of maturity. He saw that all the time: it was a fact of life in this business that you either got smarter and learned from your mistakes or you got killed and made way for the new kids to give it a try, and every successful runner team had to make the transition from brash kids ready to take on the world to seasoned professionals who had seen most of it and heard about the rest. The team had done that too, of course, but there was something more to it that Harry couldn't put his finger on.

It had started about a year before Dunkelzahn had been elected President of the UCAS and subsequently been assassinated on the eve of his inauguration. The team had been taking a break between runs, but had abruptly called Harry one day and asked him to find them a job. He had thought this odd—they usually didn't cut their vacations short—but he had complied. They had done the job with their usual level of professionalism, but over the next few months after that Harry had noticed fundamental changes in their personalities. It had been most obvious in Joe: this had been the time during which the troll had embraced Bear and began studying the shamanic ways, even though there wasn't an ounce of magical blood in him. He had also asked Harry to help him purchase some land up in the mountains and paid the fixer a yearly fee to keep prying eyes from examining

the details too closely. Harry thought this was odd too, but still he didn't ask. It was none of his business.

The others had changed too, but more subtly. Ocelot became less outwardly hotheaded and more grim. 'Wraith became a bit more verbose (a state which, in most other people, would still be considered near-silence) and began taking an interest in things outside his small circle of former pursuits. Of the four Winterhawk changed the least, but even he toned down some of the nasty edges of his personality. Harry wondered what had caused this change; the team never spoke of it.

Things continued on and got yet odder. The team managed to wangle an invitation somehow to Dunkelzahn's inaugural ball—they had done some shadow work around the time of the wyrm's presidential campaign and were apparently being rewarded for it with a cushy security gig that wasn't procured through Harry—and were thus present when Dunkelzahn was assassinated. They had been extremely morose for quite awhile after that and had taken a few months off to recharge their psychic batteries before heading back into regular working schedules again. Once more, Harry hadn't asked.

Everything had been getting mostly back to normal for a year or so after that when the next bit of weirdness occurred in the form of a young man named Gabriel who had appeared in town a little over a year ago and set up shop as a fixer with his friend and partner, the former samurai Kestrel. Because Kestrel had been an old girlfriend of Ocelot's, the team were quickly drawn into Gabriel's circle, and Harry feared for awhile (though he wouldn't have told them at the time) that they would be lured away by the young fixer. This did not happen, but that didn't make Harry any happier about the fact that he could not dig up one bit of information about the

Gabriel's past. It seemed like he had sprung full-blown into Seattle from nowhere. People who were able to do that were the kinds of people Harry didn't trust.

When it became clear after some time had passed that Gabriel had no intention of trying to muscle in on Harry's territory or his teams, Harry decided to just let things go and see where they went. He didn't stop trying to dig into Gabriel's past, but he didn't make it a priority anymore. If the kid didn't mess with him, he wouldn't mess with the kid. They'd just ignore each other and that would be it.

The only problem was, Gabriel was difficult to ignore due to the fact that, despite not making any attempt to lure runners away from Harry's influence, the young fixer seemed to have become close friends with Winterhawk, Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith. Harry was sure there was something about Gabriel that they knew and he didn't, but still he chose not to ask questions. It wasn't that he wasn't curious—he would have given a lot of money to find out the kid's angle—but that just wasn't his way of doing things. Something was bound to slip sooner or later. Harry could wait.

And then, four months ago, Gabriel had disappeared. Left town. He didn't tell anyone where he was going or whether he would be back, but just left. A month ago, Kestrel had left too. There was no word on whether she had left with Gabriel, although that much Harry *had* asked the team. Ocelot had told him, rather moodily, that yes, the two of them were together and they were "off seeing the world somewhere, I dunno." After that, the team had gone back to work and seemed to be back to their normal selves. Harry just shook his head and let the whole thing drop. Everything was back to the way he wanted it, so he wasn't going to complain about it.

In the darkened office, Harry leaned back in his chair and contemplated the phone again. He'd been sitting like that for a long time, lost in thought; the rain had stopped and the faintest traces of sunlight were beginning to poke their way through the clouds into the darkened sky. Far below him the early-birds of the city were waking up.

"Gotta give those kids a call," he muttered to himself under his breath. One last time he thought about trying to contact his first choice, but he shook his head. They definitely deserved their rest. Besides, he didn't know where to find most of them anyway. "They'll call if they want a job." He was still muttering as he stood up, pulled on the suit-jacket he'd slung over the back of his chair several hours before, lit a cigar, and headed for the door.

As he closed it behind him, he wondered what the four of them were doing. He hoped they were enjoying their vacations. At least the weirdness finally seemed to be over.

*Thanks to Dan for the basics of Harry's history*

## 13.

As Kestrel slowly returned to consciousness, she did not open her eyes immediately. Her mind still fuzzed, her thoughts indistinct, she listened.

Far away, the soft *whoosh* of flowing water. Closer, the gentle crackle of a fire. Ghostlike images flickered against her closed eyelids. A light, pleasant odor of woodsmoke hung in the air.

She was lying on something soft, covered with something soft and heavy. As the memory of what had happened crept tentatively back into her awareness, she moved her arms and legs slightly.

There was no pain.

*That's weird...I remember pain...*

Somewhere nearby, a soft sigh.

Exhausting the sources of information she could obtain from her other senses, she opened her eyes with hesitant care. She did not know what she was going to see—or what she hoped to see.

The first thing she noticed was the fire. It was on the other side of the room (*a small room*, some corner of her subconscious noted, *not a huge chamber*), licking cheerfully at the top of a rough stone fireplace. The rest of the room, beyond the fire's glow, was wreathed in shadow.

She did not need to see the figure sitting in the chair next to the bed in full light to know his identity. Everything about him was familiar to her: his posture, his profile, the way one errant lock of hair fell over his forehead.

He did not appear to notice her. He looked utterly miserable.

She turned her head slightly, just a tiny movement that enabled her to study him. His eyes were downcast, his fingers steepled, his bearing tortured. He was dressed

in simple black; the unadorned lines of his clothing melded with the shadows that swallowed his body, leaving only his hands and his pale face floating like disconsolate ghosts in midair.

She sat up a little, pushing herself back toward the head of the heavy, wood-framed bed in which she lay. When she spoke, her voice shook with uncertainty, a soft voice like a child whose world had been turned upside-down: “Gabriel?”

The figure in the chair bowed his head, resting his forehead on the tips of his still-steepled fingers. “Juliana,” he whispered. The roughness in his tone was the sound of a man who had never wept fighting desperately not to break.

Kestrel stared at him in fear—not of him now, but for him. She reached out a gentle hand and touched his arm.

He did not pull away, but neither did he respond except to close his eyes.

“Gabriel...? Are you—okay now?” She continued to speak softly, as if afraid that speaking too loudly would cause his fragile control to shatter.

Carefully, methodically, he unclasped his hands. Raising his head slightly, he opened his eyes and stared into the fire, the flames’ hungry yellow tongues reflected in their darkened purple depths. “Are you...well?” Still his voice did not rise above a hoarse whisper; still he did not look at her.

She took a slow deep breath and sat up a little more, moving each limb in turn. She was a little surprised to discover that nothing hurt—even the stiffness she had been starting to experience from her long hike was gone like it had never been. “I’m fine,” she said at last. Her hands found the soft, heavy fabric of the comforter that covered her, closing around it as a tenuous anchor in the midst of this sudden minefield. “I’m—more worried

about you. Are you—?” She let it trail off, not sure how to end it: *well? sane? safe to be around?* She hated the suggestions her mind was offering—he wasn’t *like* that. He couldn’t be. But—

He must have picked up something, because he lowered his head into his open hands, his fingers spasmodically plowing his short inky hair into spikes. “*I am sorry, Juliana...so sorry...*” It took her a moment to realize that he was speaking now not to her ears, but to her mind, and that there was something profoundly, deeply wrong in that mental voice.

Kestrel sat up the rest of the way, only a slight light-headedness marking the vestiges of whatever had occurred while she slept. She looked down at herself, realizing that she was dressed in loose-fitting shirt and pants, similar to a doctor’s scrub suit, rather than the T-shirt, jeans, and jacket she had worn before. “What...happened?” she asked softly, as images of sharp fangs and the sound of a dragon’s scream filled her mind and she shivered, drawing the cover up closer. How much of that had really happened, and how much of it was only in her dreams?

His reply answered that question with stark simplicity: “*I hurt you.*”

Kestrel didn’t think she had ever heard anyone inject so much emotion into three simple words. The despair, the utter hopelessness were enough to bring hot tears to her eyes. They glittered there, unshed, as she watched him. “Gabriel, I—”

He had not yet raised his head. “*Are you hurt? I—thought I healed all your injuries, but —*”

The deadness in his tone cut her deeply. “No...” she said slowly. “I—I’m fine. Really. Not...hurt at all.” She chose her words with care as her mind continued to try to

make sense out of what had happened. "What—what about you?"

A quick shudder passed through his body, as if he had suddenly stiffened. "*When you are feeling well enough to travel, I will see to it that you get back to Seattle safely.*" His voice was flat, lifeless.

Kestrel's eyes widened. "Gabriel, no! Why?" She swung her legs around until she was sitting on the edge of the bed, facing him. Everything was going wrong, spiraling out of control, and she had no idea how to fix it. "Please tell me what's going on. Don't just shut me out like this."

This time, he did face her. He turned slightly in his chair and raised his head from his hands. His eyes were haunted, his expression that of someone who knew he had committed an unpardonable sin and was just waiting for the inevitable sentence to be handed down. "What is going on?" he asked. "Juliana—what is going on is that I have hurt you. I have done something I swore to myself I would never do. That is unforgivable." He lowered his head. "It is fortunate that I was able to heal you—that you have suffered no ill effects—but that does not excuse what I have done."

She took a breath and let it out slowly. "So...now you want to take me back to Seattle."

He nodded without looking up.

"Why? Because...you're afraid you might hurt me again?"

Again the nod was his only reply. This time it was more of a sharp jerk of his head—more an admission than an agreement.

Another deep breath. "Gabriel...will you look at me?"

After a long pause he raised his head again.

"Will you tell me what happened? I know you didn't mean to hurt me. There was something—wrong with you



before. That was why you had to get away from me, wasn't it?"

He nodded reluctantly.

"So...what did I do then? I followed you. You told me to go away, and I didn't listen. That's not your fault, Gabriel. It's mine." She leaned forward a little closer to him, her eyes begging him to hear her, begging him to put aside his despair. "You seem...better now," she ventured after a moment's pause.

"Better?" The word was harsh, bitter, self-loathing. "I *injured* you, Juliana. I could have *killed* you. It is a miracle that I didn't. And you think that is *better*?"

"That isn't what I mean," she said, keeping her voice low. "You know that. What I mean is—whatever...had control of you before...doesn't seem to be here now." It was almost a question, colored by faint tinges of hope. Was it gone? Would it stay gone? Was this only a brief reprieve?

He didn't answer. Instead, he stood, the movement another sharp jerk, and crossed the room to the fireplace where he stood, hunched slightly, his hands gripping the stone. "Juliana, you don't understand."

"Then *tell* me," she urged. She turned again and watched him there, his slim, black-clad figure backlit eerily by the crackling flames. With his back to her he looked even more like a shadow that had broken free of its host. "Gabriel—I'm your friend. I thought you trusted me."

His grip tightened on the stone until his hands shook. "I...*do* trust you. Don't you see? You can't trust *me*. I can't trust *myself*."

"I think that's up to me to decide," she said softly. "If I'm willing to forgive you—because I know that wasn't you back there—then why aren't you?"

"You didn't see what I did to you." He sounded like he was speaking through clenched teeth.

"What difference does it make now? Whatever it was, you must have fixed it, because I feel fine." She paused. "You didn't mean to do it, did you?"

"Of course not!" His answer came quickly, shocked.

"Then...how can you beat yourself up over this? I don't understand."

"It doesn't matter if I meant to," he said wearily after a moment. "The fact remains—I did it."

"And you won't let me forgive you for it."

He shook his head. "I won't let me forgive *myself* for it."

Kestrel sighed. She patted the soft bed next to where she sat. "Will you come over here and sit down? You're making me nervous over there. I keep thinking you're going to—jump into the fire or something."

It was meant as a joke, but she didn't think Gabriel took it that way. He stared into the flames for a moment as if contemplating just that, then sighed and turned, moving with the slowness of a condemned man back toward where she sat.

"Okay," she said after he had sat down heavily next to her, back in his elbows-on-knees, head-bowed position. "Why don't we start from the important question: is it gone?"

He didn't ask her what she meant; he didn't have to. Slowly, without looking up, he nodded.

"You're sure."

Again he nodded.

"How—do you know?" She hated to ask him, but she hated even more not knowing.

Gabriel sighed. "After I—hurt you—" he whispered, "I was filled with—rage. The kind of rage I have never experienced before, not even when Stefan told me he had

led Telanwyr to his death by impersonating me. Rage at this—*thing*—that would dare to take over my mind and cause me to hurt my dearest friend.” His gaze roamed around the room, taking in the fire, the walls, the chair—anything but the woman sitting next to him. “The rage...gave me the strength to...drive it from my mind. I realized that it had been there—some part of it had—ever since the incident at the chalet. It had been—hiding—lying dormant, waiting for a chance to insinuate itself into my mind again.” He lowered his head. “That is why coming here did not stop it—because no magical protection, no matter how powerful, can stop something that is already inside.”

She touched his shoulder gently. “Oh, Gabriel...You mean...you’ve been fighting this...whatever it is...ever since then?” *No wonder he’s been acting strange all this time.*

He drew away a bit, not allowing himself the comfort of contact. “I didn’t realize it until it was gone...If I had...perhaps then I would not have—”

“None of that,” she broke in. “It wasn’t your fault. I can’t blame you for what you did when you were fighting something like that. I’m just glad it’s gone.” She looked at him, again reluctant to ask but again needing to know. “What—happened in there? I remember you coming toward me—it was more like you were trying to get out than to attack me. I just didn’t get out of the way fast enough.”

He shook his head. “You could not have done it. When I realized—that I was about to attack you—that that was what this...*thing*...wanted me to do—I fought it. I tried to block its influence long enough for you to escape...to get as far away from you as I could, so perhaps you would have a chance to run...” He ran a tired hand back through his hair, making the spikes even more pronounced than they had been before. “When I turned...I

moved too quickly. I struck you...with the end of my tail..." He looked like he was about to cry, although there were no tears. "I slammed you into the wall, Juliana. I hurt you badly. I thought—I thought I had lost you. How can you ever forgive me for that?"

Moving slowly, she scooted over until she was very close to him. She put her arm around his shoulders, pulling him close, tears glimmering in her eyes as she felt him trembling. "Gabriel...let me tell you a story, okay? I've...never told you this before. It's not something I like to think about. But back when I was with the team, we were on a run one time where we ended up in a firefight out on a city street. I hadn't been doing this very long—I was still the new kid, anxious to prove herself to the others—and I got a little overzealous. Instead of hitting the guy I was trying to shoot, I hit a child. A little girl about eight." She took a deep, shuddering breath. "That about did it for me. She wasn't doing anything—she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, and I was gung-ho to prove myself to my team." She paused a moment, looking at Gabriel for his reaction; he appeared to have none. "I wasn't much good for the rest of that firefight," she continued softly. "I was torn up with guilt about what I'd done. They managed to get her to the hospital—I donated my whole cut of the payment for that run, anonymously, to make sure she got the care she needed. She recovered okay—it's amazing what they can do with magic when the money's there to pay for it—but I was a mess. It took a lot of long talks with the guys on the team before I finally accepted it and learned from it—learned to be more careful next time, to pay attention better—but more than that, I learned to forgive myself. I don't know if that girl ever forgave me, because I didn't see her after she went in the hospital. You've got one up on me there, Gabriel—I *am* forgiving you. I love you. You're my best

friend. It's hurting me more to see you like this than anything physical you might have done. Can't you forgive yourself?"

For a long moment he did not respond, remaining in the same position, staring down at the stone floor. Then his gaze came up to meet hers, his eyes pleading with her to understand. "I keep picturing you there..." he whispered. "Bleeding...not moving...and knowing that I had caused it. I, who had sworn to protect you with my life, had almost taken yours instead..." He shook his head.

"That wasn't *you*," she reminded him firmly, and with that statement she realized something that had not previously made it to the forefront of her mind. When she spoke again, her tone was nervous. "Gabriel..."

That tone accomplished what her words had not: his gaze sharpened and a small bit of the despair dropped away. "What is it, Juliana?"

She swallowed. "Do you—do you know what it *was*? You...keep calling it a *thing*...Do you know more about it than that?"

His nod was slow and tormented, as if he had wished she had not asked that particular question, because he knew he could not keep the truth from her.

"What...was it?"

When he met her gaze again, his eyes were clear. There was fear there, and sadness, but his expression was that of a man who knew what he was facing and would face it even if it meant death. "It was the Enemy, Juliana. They have found me again."

Kestrel gasped. Somewhere in the back of her mind she thought that might be what he would say, but it had not reached the point where she had given it conscious thought. "Then...it isn't over?" Her voice shook a little as she whispered the words, afraid to raise her voice any louder and risk something else hearing.

Gabriel suddenly looked very tired. "I don't know. It doesn't have the feel of what we faced before—but it is the Enemy. I thought I felt it after what happened in Switzerland, but I wasn't sure."

"And now you are." She suppressed a shiver, remembering the hell (almost literally) they went through facing that the last time.

He nodded. "That is why I want you to go back to Seattle. I don't know what is causing this—but whatever it is, I don't want you to be near it. If it manages to affect me again, I don't want to hurt you. Next time I might not be fortunate enough to repel its influence with enough time to heal you."

"The Enemy..." she whispered to herself, trying to fight off the fear of something that had given her nightmares—still gave her nightmares occasionally—since they had returned from the metaplanes. If these things were back already—if all their efforts, Stefan's sacrifice, had not been enough—fear was not a strong enough word to describe what she was experiencing, for what anyone else who truly understood what such a realization meant would experience. But even as she fought the fear, she realized that something frightened her even more: the thought of being alone with this. At some deep, instinctual level, she knew that 'alone' was absolutely the wrong thing to be in the face of what was to come—even if she didn't know what that was yet. She shook her head firmly. "No. I'm not going anywhere, Gabriel. I'm staying right here with you. If it is...what we fought before...it probably *wants* us to be apart. That's how we won last time—by being together, remember? If we go off in different directions, we'll never fight it. It'll pick us off one by one."

"Juliana—" Gabriel's gaze entreated her, the last-ditch effort of a fighter who knew he had already lost the battle.

She pulled him into a hug, her arms tightening around him, giving and getting comfort at the same time. "No, Gethelwain. I'm not going. I told you before—I love you. I don't care what this is, or how dangerous it is—I've faced death before, plenty of times. If I walk away from this now, I'll never be able to look at myself in the mirror again." Her eyes glittered as she raised her head and faced him. "Don't even think of trying to drive me away for my own good. If you don't want me around—if you can honestly tell me you want to get rid of me—tell me and I'll be out of here in a minute. But you can't protect me from everything, just like I can't protect you—or anybody else I love—from everything. That's just the way life works. You don't have to like it, but that's the way it is." She continued to watch him, her eyes challenging, knowing she was doing the right thing.

When he looked back at her, she realized he knew it too. For a moment he held her gaze, and then his lowered. "You are truly a wonder, Juliana," he whispered.

She shook her head, her arms still around him. "No, I'm not. I'm just somebody who doesn't want to watch her friends suffer. Just like somebody else I know."

He sighed. "Even in the face of this—even with the thought that this might never be over—you still remain here. Even after what I have done to you. You *are* a wonder."

She looked at him. "Let me ask you something—if the situation was the other way—If something had taken over my mind and I'd accidentally hurt *you*—would you forgive me for it, or would you blame me?"

"Of course I would forgive you," he said, as if the answer was obvious. "But—"

"But nothing. Is it different because you're a dragon? You cared enough about me to kick that thing out of your mind so you could make it right. That tells me a lot about

what you think of me.” She moved her head down, forcing him to make eye contact. “Do you *want* me to go, Gabriel? Do you want me to go away because you don’t want me around anymore? Answer me honestly—I know you won’t do anything else, because you’re the most honorable person I know. Do you want me to go?”

He closed his eyes; she could feel his slight tremble grow a little stronger. Several seconds passed. “No,” he finally said softly. “I don’t.”

Even though she already knew what his answer would be, she still smiled. “Good,” she murmured, pulling him close, “because I didn’t want to go.” She took a deep breath, allowing herself to relax a bit now that the immediate crisis seemed to be averted—which in turn brought the enormity of the full situation crashing back down on her all at once with frightening immediacy. She shuddered a bit, realizing that this was far from over—that she had just signed herself up for another hitch at the nightmare factory. She didn’t regret it, not for a moment, but—involuntarily, her grip on Gabriel tightened.

“Juliana?” His voice was soft, concerned.

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak quite yet.

He pulled back a little, looking at her, his eyes full of worry. “Juliana, what is it?”

She looked up at him. Doing that, as she tried to get her fear under control, she wondered how she could ever have doubted him: his eyes were so gentle, his voice so comforting, his attention fully on her—and then all at once other feelings, ones she understood much more and with which she felt much more comfortable—began overcoming the fear and the uncertainty. He was so beautiful—“Gabriel...” she murmured tentatively, like a child.

He continued to watch her, waiting, patient.



"Please—I—" She shook her head, remembering the last time she had spoken to him in this way—but that time somehow seemed different, far away, almost from another lifetime. "Just—this once..." She lowered her gaze, burying her face in his shoulder, feeling him trembling beneath the soft thin fabric of his shirt. "I want you..."

He did not pull away from her. "Juliana—" His voice had an odd rough quality to it. She could feel the heat of his body, the intensity of his heartbeat matching that of hers.

"Just this once," she whispered. "I love you so much...I want you...please...Don't...turn me away..." Her hands moved over his back in the hug, rubbing, loosening his tensed muscles, slipping up under his shirt to continue the massage on the warm skin beneath. "You said once...that you would...if I wanted it..."

She could feel him nod. "I...did..." he whispered. "Are you...sure, Juliana?"

Her only answer was to pull him down next to her. This time, he didn't resist.

The fire was burning down to a low soothing glow in the stone fireplace when Kestrel awoke. For a moment she was disoriented, the room unfamiliar, and then she heard soft breathing next to her. She smiled.

She was lying with her head on his shoulder, her arm draped over his bare chest, which rose and fell in the gentle rhythm of his sleep. She raised up very slightly, not wanting to wake him, looking down at his face. How serene he looked, calm and carefree like a young boy who still had faith in the inherent goodness of the world. She wished she could fix things so he always looked like that. It seemed wrong somehow that someone like him should ever have to suffer. That thought brought on a silent

chuckle—*listen to me. I'm thirty-three, he's over seven thousand, and I'm trying to protect him from the evil of the world. Yeah, sure...how's that for idealism?*

Something in her thoughts must have broken through his thin veil of sleep, because at that moment he opened his eyes. When he saw her looking up at him he smiled; it was the radiant smile that she saw so rarely these days and loved so much.

"Hi, sleepy," she said, gently pushing his hair off his forehead. For a moment, a sense of *deja vu* gripped her as she remembered the morning at the chalet when they had awakened together under similar circumstances. *Similar, but not quite the same...*

He sat up a little bit, still smiling. "How long have you been awake?"

"Not long. Just a few minutes. I was watching you."

He tilted his head. "Why?"

"Because you're beautiful, that's why," she said teasingly. She ran a hand over his chest. "If you didn't want women looking at you, you shouldn't have made yourself look like that."

He ducked his gaze a little, surprising Kestrel. *A shy dragon? There's another one for the books.* "How—are you?"

Suddenly she was shy too as once again reality intruded. She paused. "I'm fine," she said, her voice soft. "How about...you?"

He looked down at himself and then at her. His smile was a little different now—contented. "I am very well."

She let out a mental sigh of relief, realizing that she had been metaphorically holding her breath ever since he had awakened. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really." He looked around the room, noting how far the fire had burned down, the slight chill in the air, and the little piles of clothing on the floor. With a gesture he levitated two more logs on the fire; after a

moment it blazed up again, licking hungrily at the new fuel.

"Nice trick." Kestrel grinned, but it was short-lived. Turning back to Gabriel, her expression sobered, although there was still the pleasure of memory in her eyes. "So...now what?"

"I thought that was your department," he said.

She was startled until she saw the twinkle in his eyes. "You know what I mean."

He nodded. "I know what you mean. I—just don't have an answer for you yet. Do you?"

She took a deep breath, realizing that she didn't. This was the part you never thought about. After a long pause, she ventured, "I should—call the guys—Ocelot—see if they're okay..." She was aware that she sounded a little awkward, but that was all right. She *felt* a little awkward.

He sat up the rest of the way, looking into the fire for several moments before turning back to her. "Perhaps you should," he said at last. His tone had a distant quality to it, as if he was working something out in his mind before voicing it.

She tilted her head at him. "What?"

"I don't know. Nothing, I hope. But—perhaps it would be wise if you did call them. I will feel better knowing they are well."

*Uh oh...* She took a deep breath. "Gabriel...is there some reason to believe they *aren't* well?"

He did not answer, except to get out of bed and begin gathering up the piles of clothes the old-fashioned way.

"Gabriel..."

He looked back up at her. "I don't know, Juliana. Anything is possible. I pray that I am wrong."

She nodded slowly, her lighthearted mood ebbing away to be replaced once more by the feeling of dark foreboding. "I'll call Ocelot," she said quietly.

When she found him again he was standing on the outcropping outside the lair, staring out over the valley. He looked like he had been there for quite some time. He didn't turn when she came out, but she could sense the question in his mind.

"I couldn't reach him," she said. It was unnecessary, but she said it anyway. "I tried the others—I couldn't get through to any of them."

Gabriel nodded once without moving.

She joined him at the edge. "Maybe they're just not answering their phones—they do that sometimes...when they're on a run..." Even as she said it she knew she didn't believe it. Several minutes passed in silence as together they regarded the beautiful, tranquil landscape spread out before them as far as the eye could see, belying the unease that hung in the air between them. "You think it's got them, don't you?" she finally asked. "Can you just—find them astrally? Send an elemental?"

He shook his head. "It would be dangerous—I have driven it off once already, but the more contact I have with the astral plane, the more likely it is that it will take hold of me again."

She nodded slowly. "What about...your friend Neferet? She helped you before—"

Again he shook his head. "No. I don't want to involve her in this—at least not yet. She is a good friend and more powerful than I, but to ask this of her would require certain—obligations—that I am not yet prepared to grant." Now he turned to her, looking into her eyes. "I have to find them, Juliana. And I have to do it the slow way. Once I know whether they—need help—then I can determine what to do next."

"We," she corrected gently. "We have to find them. We're a team, remember?"

He nodded with a slight, faraway smile. “We are,” he agreed. Still, though, as he turned to head back inside, Kestrel couldn’t help noticing the tense set to his shoulders. Sighing, she followed, knowing somehow that something had already been set in motion that none of them could stop until it had run its course—for good or for ill.

## 14.

The name of Augie's Delicatessen was a bit of a misnomer, because it wasn't exactly a delicatessen and the owner's name wasn't Augie. Both had been true two generations ago when the current owner's grandfather still ran the place as a little corner eatery in one of the out-of-the-way corners of Downtown, but over the years it had evolved into something that wasn't quite a deli and yet wasn't quite an upscale lunch spot, but rather something halfway between the two. The current owner, Max Goldberg, had been largely responsible for the change, which had catapulted the place from an obscure watering hole for the local wageslaves to its current position as one of the places to be for those who liked good food and a sort of 'downscale upscale' atmosphere. Class without the stuffiness, that was what it was, and that was the way its regular patrons liked it.

Augie's was one of Harry's favorite places to eat lunch, although he didn't often go there anymore. Too many security risks, going out in public like that—he always felt safer in the sorts of places that made you check everything from your coat to your artillery at the door, which Augie's did not. Still, though, Max was an old friend for whom Harry had done a few favors many years ago, and as a result he had a standing invitation to drop by whenever he was in the neighborhood and in the mood for good food at a substantial discount.

It was a drizzly Monday afternoon. Harry had been here for about an hour (the service at Augie's was slow but worth the wait), sitting with his back to the wall at one of the tables near the rear of the restaurant where he could keep an eye on things and be alone with his thoughts, slightly out of the way of the rushed waitstaff and the impatient customers. He never looked at the man

and the woman sitting at the table a few meters away, nor at the nervous-looking young guy reading a magazine at another table on the other side of him; he didn't have to. They were there, and they knew their jobs well. That was all he needed to know. They were watching so he didn't have to. He did anyway, though. There wasn't much that Harry missed. He picked idly at the coleslaw that accompanied his egg-salad sandwich and glanced over the day's datafax, making mental notes of some of the stories that he wanted to check into with more detail later.

He wasn't sure how long there was someone standing next to his table before he noticed him. He glanced up, a quick movement of his eyes alerting the two bodyguards at the table to his right. Then his gaze came up to see who had approached him.

Surprise quickly crossed his features at the sight of Gabriel. It had been at least three months since that particular professional counterpart had shown up in Seattle. The handsome young man was dressed in a business suit, with an overcoat draped casually over his arm. In contrast to his usual look of perpetual amusement, today he looked somehow...subdued. "Good afternoon, Harry." His voice was soft, polite. It was something that Harry always found odd about Gabriel—his total lack of cockiness, especially given his young age and the high-powered circles in which he traveled.

Harry nodded a greeting. "Yeah. Nice t' see you back in town. This ain't your normal beat. Slumming?"

Gabriel shook his head. "May I sit down?"

"Sure." Harry nodded toward the chair across from him. "Want a beer or a sandwich or something?"

Again the young man shook his head, taking the offered chair and putting his coat over the back of one of the other two at the table. "Thank you, but no. I've come because I need your help."

This time Harry didn't register any surprise, although he was feeling plenty. This was an unexpected development. He sized Gabriel up slowly, munching a bite of his egg salad sandwich to cover it. "And..." he said at last, "you came here to find me? Kinda odd, wouldn't you say?" *Especially since I didn't even know I was coming here until an hour ago.*

"I didn't have time to make an appointment." Gabriel still seemed strangely quiet, the usual spark of mischief in his eyes conspicuously absent. He looked like a man who had a very important problem on his mind. He sat there across from Harry, watching the older man with a gaze that held respect, but not an excess of it. It was the respect of one professional colleague for another.

Harry stared off into space for a moment, appearing to be adding something up in his head. "You didn't have time...and you found me here. Right. Must be something important. Sure you don't wanna discuss it over a knish?"

Gabriel shook his head, not falling for Harry's attempt at distraction. "No, thank you. And it *is* important. I need to locate your team."

Harry sat up straighter, slowly returning the sandwich to his plate. For a moment he didn't speak, his shrewd brown eyes studying the younger man. "Right to the point," he said at last. "This must be something serious. And you just expect to come in and get me to tell you this?" He glanced sideways at the two bodyguards again under cover of taking a sip of beer—just checking to make sure they were still paying attention. They were. In fact, they seemed quite interested in what was going on, in a surreptitious sort of way.

"I need to speak to them as soon as possible," Gabriel said, nodding. "They could be in danger."

Harry raised his hands. "Hey, slow down. If we're talkin' business—well, this is a little open for that.



Especially if you want details. Maybe we should go back there." Here he nodded over toward the kitchen; there were two other doors there, both unmarked. "Maybe we can make a deal."

A brief look of—disappointment?—flickered across Gabriel's face, but it was quickly gone. "Perhaps we can," he said softly.

Harry hadn't missed the look, but he didn't know what to make of it so he just filed it away for now. He gave the young man a stern look of his own. "It would be nice if you told me what's going on, y'know. This is a little...abnormal." *Yeah, that's the understatement of the year.*

Gabriel nodded soberly. "I know it is, and I'm sorry. If I could have done this another way, I would have." He paused a moment and took a deep breath. "I can't tell you everything—all I can say is that it is likely that they are in danger. If I can find them, I think I can help them."

Harry was still looking stern, partially because he still couldn't figure out what this kid was after. Why the sudden interest in his team, especially now? What was this danger he was talking about? The little hairs on the back of Harry's neck stood up a little. "They're big boys," was all he said, "and they take care of themselves. Besides," he added after a moment, "another 'personnel manager' getting a little too interested in them isn't good for business, if you know what I mean." He cocked his head a bit at Gabriel, still not seeing his angle. "You aren't recruiting, or so I hear."

Once again the brief look of disappointment passed over Gabriel's eyes. "No, Harry. I am not, and never have been, attempting to 'recruit' your team. They are my friends. I want to help them, but I can't do that unless I know where they are."

"So why don't you just call them?"

"I have tried," the young man said, in a tone that suggested that he knew that Harry knew that. "I haven't been successful so far. That is why I am here. I thought you might have other ways to contact them."

Harry leaned across the table a bit, meeting Gabriel's gaze. "Okay, let's stop the dance. There's something you ain't tellin' me—two things, actually. One is what's at the bottom of this request. The other is what your angle is. I don't get into things uninformed. It's bad business."

Gabriel sighed, bowing his head slightly. "This isn't about business."

"You know what I mean." Harry made a dismissive gesture. "Get involved in something with someone who doesn't have his motives out on the table, and you ain't really sure what you're gettin' into. And you're saying this is dangerous." He continued to study Gabriel as he spoke. Red flags were going up in every direction, and this whole situation was making him nervous. First this kid fixer, the guy who nobody knew his background, managed to find him when nobody should be able to find him that easily. That was flag one. Flag two was that the kid was talking about his team, and about danger. Flag three was the fact that Gabriel didn't seem to be worried about having just waltzed in here, neat-as-you-please, asking for the kind of information that no fixer in his right mind would give out, while still holding back enough cards on his side of the table to make a whole new deck. This just didn't add up, and Harry hated things that didn't add up.

Gabriel nodded. He paused for a moment, taking a deep breath, as if considering something. Then he returned his attention to Harry. "All right. Certainly you understand that I am reluctant to, as you say, put my motives on the table—but time grows short. I might be able to find them on my own, but it will take longer than I

like. I am not sure I have that time." Appearing to take notice of his surroundings for the first time since he had sat down, he looked around the room. "We can't talk here, though."

Harry hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Back room. Nobody'll overhear." *Nobody except my people. But if he doesn't expect that, he ain't half as good as I thought he was.*

Gabriel shook his head, a hint of a gentle smile quirking the corners of his lips. "No, Harry, I don't think that will be possible. I suspect that the two individuals at the table over there, and the other gentleman—" He nodded toward the nervous-looking magazine reader at the other table "—might have some interest in our conversation."

It was Harry's day for not showing surprise, even though he was getting quite a few of them. It was just possible that Gabriel might have noticed his glances over to the two bodyguards, but Harry had never even looked in the direction of Rick, his surveillance expert. Had the kid noticed the tiny directional mike hidden under the magazine? He let out his breath slowly. "It's strictly confidential," he assured him. "You oughtta know that by now."

Again Gabriel shook his head, and the smile disappeared. "To me, *strictly confidential* means that only you hear what I have to say."

Harry had had about enough of this enigmatic kid. "All right," he said, "screw formality. I don't know how you found me here, but I don't like it. You want my help—you better tell me what's going on, and why, from your end. This sounds like some major secret to you, yes?"

Gabriel paused. When he spoke again, his words came with measured care. "It isn't a secret. I think a better

way to put it is...that it's something I don't think you want to be involved with."

Harry shook his head. "Too late for that, I think. You want the information I got—that's the price. I don't get into something I don't have a handle on. That's a good way to get bit."

Gabriel didn't answer. He sat there considering, silently watching Harry.

"Okay," Harry finally said, tired of being studied by that unnervingly calm purple gaze, "it's like this. Tellin' me what's up with the situation is just the prereq for me telling you anything. What I want—I want your angle. What's in this for you. I'm a little tired of playing word games—and never quite knowing where you're comin' from." It was a long shot, sure, but if it paid off, then Harry would have something he had been trying to get for a very long time: the story on what was up with the kid. Was the location of his guys worth that to him? He didn't think so, after all the trouble Gabriel had gone through to keep his secret under wraps.

Gabriel leaned forward, his expression intense. "And if I tell you this," he said softly, "you will tell me where they are? Do I understand you correctly?"

"That's the deal. You get whatever I know about the subject at hand."

The intensity stepped up a notch, giving Harry the uneasy feeling that he was being scanned. "Do you know where they are?" Gabriel's tone was still quiet, but very focused.

"More than you do." If the kid was going to try intimidation, Harry was going to let him know it wouldn't work. Still, though, it didn't *feel* like intimidation. It just felt like Gabriel wanted to make sure Harry knew something worth knowing before he continued. Nothing less than Harry himself would have

done. "And a *useful* amount more than you do," he added after a pause.

Gabriel studied him for a moment longer and then nodded slightly to himself. He stood, draping his coat back over his arm. "Let's go for a drive, then."

Harry remained seated as he mulled that over. On the one hand, he might finally get the information he had been after for a long time. On the other hand, going off with someone, alone, on his own turf, was not the smartest move anyone could make. That was how people turned up dead—or didn't turn up at all. "Just like that? I prefer not to just head off into who knows where," he said, looking up at Gabriel.

"We aren't going far." Gabriel didn't look concerned. "And I prefer not to be overheard. I'll bring you back here when we're done."

Harry thought about it a little more, even though he already knew the answer. This piece of intel was too good to pass up, and he knew the chances of having Gabriel in the position of wanting something from *him* ever again were hovering between slim and none. It was now or never, which meant it was now. He'd just have to trust that the kid's street rep as a straight-shooter was accurate. "Yeah," he said. "Twenty minutes. Just you an' me." He glanced over at the two bodyguards, making a subtle head gesture. *Listen to me. Don't follow. I'm leaving with him.* The female guard's acknowledgment was every bit as subtle; neither she nor her male counterpart looked pleased about the situation, but they weren't being paid to question the boss' orders.

Gabriel nodded. Harry wasn't sure quite why, but he got the impression from that nod that it *would* be just the two of them—that it was a good thing he wasn't intending to try anything funny. This whole situation

wasn't sitting well with him, and the sooner it was over, the better.

Harry rose, tossing enough scrip on the table to cover the bill and a nice tip, then waited for Gabriel to lead the way. This was his show, at least for the next twenty minutes.

Outside, Gabriel did not bother to slip on his coat for the short walk across the parking lot to the black Dynamit waiting there. Harry didn't ask how he'd gotten a spot that close to the door in the middle of the lunch rush. "I expected a driver," he said, indicating the small sports car.

Gabriel smiled; this time, it showed genuine, almost boyish amusement. "Where's the fun in that?" He touched a button on the key and the doors unlocked with a soft *whoosh*. Motioning Harry toward the passenger side, he climbed in behind the wheel and waited.

Harry took one last glance back toward the restaurant before getting in. The bodyguards, as he had instructed, were nowhere to be seen. He wasn't sure if that was comforting. *Okay, this is it. Now we play it by ear.*

The young man started the car, its engine coming to life with a low thrumming roar like some kind of predatory animal held prisoner under the hood. He pulled out of the parking lot and merged into traffic, driving fast but with confident skill. For several minutes he said nothing, guiding the Dynamit through the snarled traffic of Downtown for a couple of blocks and then heading off onto a less-populated side street where he increased speed. "All right," he said softly, "What do you want to know?"

Harry settled back into the soft leather seat, alternating his gaze between watching the drizzle out the front window and watching the car's driver out of the corner of his eye. "We ain't got much time, so let's get to

it." He turned sideways a little so he could watch Gabriel a bit more closely. "Here it is: What are you up to? Why are you fixing, for whom, or for what? Everyone has a reason: money, excitement, power—you don't fit. Now, you're gettin' a bit close to home for me, and I don't wanna go any farther until I get some indication of why. That's it." His piece said, Harry resumed his old position and continued to look out the window.

Gabriel smiled slightly. "Slow down, Harry. One at a time."

"It's all one," Harry pointed out. "You can't tell one without giving up the others, so let's go straight to the big stuff."

Gabriel shrugged. "All right," he said as if he had just decided something. "Why am I fixing? Because I find it intriguing. Because I met someone—I'm sure you're aware of Kestrel—who was involved in this sort of thing, and I found it interesting. So far it has been. For whom? No one. I'm on my own, except, of course, for Kestrel."

Harry snorted. "Intrigue? You're doin' this for *intrigue*? That doesn't add up. If that's all it was, your past wouldn't be buried like that, and almost a year of *her* past wiped off." He turned toward Gabriel again. "There's more reason to it than that, 'cause nobody goes to that kind of trouble just because they like it." That much he was sure of. Harry might not have known much about Gabriel, but every bit of information he'd gotten on the kid indicated that he was neither stupid nor naive. It would take one or the other to do this sort of thing for the fun of it. Either that or a death wish, and Harry was pretty sure Gabriel didn't have one of those, either. That left the big question mark.

Gabriel smiled. "True. The problem here, I think, is that you're not asking the right questions. You seem very interested in the fact that I'm—as you call it—a 'personnel

manager.' But that is only a small part of what I do. And I haven't even done *that* for the last three months."

Harry sighed. So even now the kid was going to play games. "I thought we were gonna get down to business here," he said shortly. "I know you've been gone for weeks, and trippin' all over the world. But surprise surprise, you end up back in Seattle. And you're asking after runners. That tells me you're in this biz. The rest may be window dressing, but it ain't the main drive."

Gabriel's expression sobered. "Don't be so sure of that. I am asking after them as *friends*, not as runners. I am very concerned about their well-being. This has nothing to do with your—or my—business."

"You neatly ducked the part about your past, and why it's gone," Harry pointed out. "And why you'd remove—or at least put a big hole in—someone else's. This is s'posed to be your time to tell me stuff, and then you get what you're looking for, remember?"

Gabriel nodded. "I know that. I'm just trying to help you realize that sometimes a puzzle is easier to solve if you ask the right question in the first place." He paused a moment, looking out the window. The traffic was increasing again, forcing him to slow down. "You say my past is gone. It isn't. I appeared to you a bit over a year ago, and you hadn't heard anything about me before then." He smiled. "Your information gathering sources aren't failing you, Harry—*no one* had heard anything about me much before then, because I was somewhere no one could find."

"Great. Now I get Zen answers." Harry blew air out through his teeth in frustration. "You didn't just crawl out from under a rock a year ago! You were *somewhere*. You were *someone*. And I'm betting heavily it ain't who you are now."



Gabriel smiled, his eyes twinkling, chuckling at some private joke. "You wouldn't win that bet...and actually, it was more like a year and a half."

"Enough with the cute," Harry growled. He'd had about enough of this kid and his evasive answers. He was beginning to wonder if the whole thing hadn't been some elaborate setup. "Are you answering, or not?"

"I *am* answering." Gabriel turned slightly to look at him, then returned his attention to the road. "You said I didn't just crawl out from under a rock a year ago. I said it was more like a year and a half."

Harry sighed; it was a sound of long-suffering. "— You expect me to believe you crawled out from under a rock a year and a half ago." He paused. "Looks like you got your suit cleaned since then."

Gabriel shrugged. "It's a different suit. In fact, I wasn't wearing one at the time. And if you want absolute truth, I didn't crawl out from *under* a rock—I broke free of several of them."

Harry had truly had enough now. He turned on Gabriel, anger and frustration showing in his eyes. "Okay. Here's a direct question: *Who* were you then, and why were you stuck to rocks?"

There was a long pause during which Gabriel didn't answer. He showed no sign of having been affected by Harry's tirade. When at last he did speak, his voice was very quiet and calm. "My real name is something I will not tell you, so do not ask. I was in rock because that was where I had been sleeping for the last six thousand years." He did not look at Harry.

The rain was picking up a bit now; for several moments, the soft *snick-snick* of the windshield wipers and the softer rumble of the engine were the only sounds to be heard. Harry sat back, letting his stunned mind digest the information he had just been given.

Click.

*No no no no... 6,000 years... sleeping...*

*Oh, shit.*

"If this is a joke," he said, unable to keep his voice from rising just a tiny bit, "it's a *long* way to go for not much payoff...and if not..." He let his breath out slowly, not wanting to finish that sentence.

"It isn't a joke, Harry." Gabriel's tone was soft. "And I hope you realize the urgency of the information I seek from you, if I am willing to reveal this to you in order to get it."

Harry wasn't really listening. Instead, he was muttering to himself. "No history...not 'cause you wiped it, but you weren't around...awake...until then. And you decided to play human...because...it was fun? And being a fixer intrigues you?" *Yeah...dragons like to play games with humans – dammit, that fits – and it explains why nobody can dig up nothin' on him...* "Yeah. Okay." Another pause. "So, assuming this is true – why the hell do you need my help? Can't your uncle or someone just wave a claw and find out?"

Gabriel's expression sobered, unmistakable sadness wreathing his features for a moment before he turned back to Harry. "No." He sighed. "I need your help because the nature of the threat makes it very dangerous for me to seek them using magic. I can probably find them without magic, but it will take much longer than simply asking someone who knows."

"Uh...yeah." Harry paused to digest that. "This threat is something that keeps you from using magic. Okay. And you think this is after them...Why hasn't it found and eaten them by now, then? It's not adding up again."

Gabriel closed his eyes briefly. "I can't give you the details. I don't think you want to know them. It isn't the

sort of threat that ‘finds and eats’ people. It is much more... insidious than that.”

“Yeah. Right. Insidious.” This was getting weirder by the minute. Harry looked at his watch. It had been about ten minutes since they had left the restaurant – yeah, ten times as weird was about right. And probably another ten times weirder before they got back. *If* they got back. “And I’m being told this by a dragon driving a Saab. Maybe I don’t want all the details. You got any other reason I should believe this?”

Gabriel was looking rather stressed, something Harry had never seen before this day. “Harry, I don’t know how to prove it to you, short of showing you my true form – and I don’t think that will be practical right now. Please – I have done as you requested. Tell me where I can find them, before it is too late for me to help them.”

Harry sighed. He didn’t like to trust such things on nothing but words, but there was something in the young man’s tone—he would have put a lot of money on the belief that he wasn’t lying. “Right,” he said. “My end of the deal.” He sat back, adjusting his seat belt as he organized his thoughts. “I don’t know where they all are. They like to split up and disappear sometimes, and I don’t check too closely. Joe I lost sight of; I think he’s relatively nearby, but nothing more. ‘Wraith’s on the east coast—last I heard it was New York, but he dropped down a month or so ago and I didn’t push it. Ocelot went down to CalFree like he does sometimes. And ‘Hawk—did he ever let on who he really is?”

Gabriel shook his head.

Harry took a deep breath. He didn’t like passing on data like that, not without the okay from the person involved. But on the other hand, if this really *was* a dragon, he could get the info anyway...and if he *wasn’t*, he still had to have the kind of backing that he might as well

be, given that Harry had not been able to poke a hole in his background for more than a year's worth of trying. "Okay. He's a British national. Name's Dr. Alastair Stone. He's back home in England, where he's got a family home. He likes to stay there. He's prob'ly the easiest to find in a hurry—he's in the phone book."

Gabriel nodded, making a quick right turn. "Thank you, Harry."

Harry noticed that they had been heading in a large loop and were now going in the general direction of Augie's. "Yeah. I'd like to be kept up on what's happening—but not too involved. I'm not liking the sound of this."

"Neither am I," Gabriel said very softly. He nodded. "If you could continue to search for the other three, I would appreciate it...I will go to England first and then, depending on what I find, proceed from there."

"Sure. I turn up anything, I'll call."

"Thank you." They were nearing the restaurant now. Gabriel turned to Harry. His eyes were very serious. "I am sure it isn't necessary for me to say this, but I would appreciate it if you would keep what I have told you between the two of us."

*Sure. I'm gonna go blab to everybody I know that the kid's a dragon. And I might make it to next week.* "Yeah. Like someone'd believe me if I told 'em," he said, masking that thought with flippancy. "Don't worry. That was the deal too."

Gabriel nodded. "I'm not worried. Your team values your integrity highly. I can see that you are an honorable man."

Harry snorted. "Save the eulogies for later. My lunch is gettin' cold, and you have something to do."

Gabriel sighed, shaking his head with amusement. He pulled the car smoothly into the parking lot and up to the front doors of Augie's. "I will be in touch."

"I'll be waiting." Harry opened the door, stepped out, and closed it behind him. Without turning, he walked back into the restaurant. Suddenly he wanted nothing more than to get back to familiar surroundings, where he could sort out what had just happened and what he had just found out. *Be careful what you ask for...*

As the door closed behind him and the Dynamit headed back off into the rainy afternoon, Harry was already going over the ways he might get in contact with the team. He still wasn't quite sure about Gabriel, but he was sure that if the guys were in trouble, he wanted to know about it.

*(Thanks for Dan for his help with Harry in this chapter)*

## 15.

The sky was dark and overcast. Iron-gray clouds choked the late afternoon sky, washing the color from the world below. A light drizzle fell. On days like this it seemed as if the sun was only a distant memory that would never reveal itself again. It was a day for dark moods and unwelcome reflections.

It was a day that suited the states of mind of the occupants of Stone Manor very well.

Aubrey pattered around the main hall, dusting, sweeping, occasionally pausing to look for a moment at this or that bit of bric-a-brac before continuing on. His movements were aimless and without thought: sometimes he would dust an item and then pass by everything else on the same shelf; other times he would spend ten minutes meticulously removing every speck of dirt from a small statuette or dagger. From off in the kitchen he could just smell the pleasant aroma of the soup that was cooking—more often lately he had to remind himself to cook, and to eat.

Maya followed behind him, moving on silent paws, her big green eyes missing nothing, revealing nothing. She spent a lot of time around the house now, although on some days she would disappear for hours before returning through one of her mysterious means of entry and re-attaching herself to Aubrey. When she wasn't with him, she was in the study off the main hall. Aubrey left the door open for her. She seemed to take comfort from curling up in the ratty leather chair in the corner.

It had already been almost two weeks since the night Aubrey had gotten the call. Even before he'd picked it up he had known something was wrong.

"Aubrey..." The voice had been familiar enough even without the image to go with it: Rodney Leifeld. "I'm

sorry to disturb you this late, but I thought you'd want to know. Something – has happened."

Aubrey had gasped, immediately assuming the worst: "Dr. Stone! Is he—?" (Had it been the worst, really? In retrospect, he wondered.)

Leifeld had shaken his head. "We're still trying to figure out what happened, Aubrey. He's alive—there's nothing wrong with him...physically. Can you come?"

And of course he could come. When he arrived, they had explained to him what had happened: Stone had had some sort of episode in the seminar. Three students had tried to help him, and he had lashed out at them with the full power of his magic. Two of the students were in intensive care; the other, an ork, had fared slightly better due to his strong constitution, but he too was in the hospital. Another student had managed to subdue Stone with a sleep spell before he could do any other damage.

Aubrey gasped. That wasn't like Dr. Stone at all. "Do they—do they know what's—?"

Leifeld shook his head. "They're still running tests."

"May I see him?"

They had let him in for a few moments, but it had done no good. Stone lay in the hospital bed, his eyes closed, his face pale. He did not respond to Aubrey's voice. When at last the caretaker left and went out in the hall where Leifeld waited, he looked like a man who had lost his purpose. "Don't they have any idea?"

Leifeld sighed. "Not yet. But—you did know that Alastair was suffering from—some strange episodes lately, didn't you?"

Aubrey stared. "Episodes? I knew he wasn't sleeping well—he'd gone to see Dr. Lennox—"

"Yes, I know. I convinced him to do that. But...I think there was a great deal he was hiding from us. I don't know why—perhaps he was afraid, or perhaps, knowing

Alastair, he thought he could deal with it on his own, but—" He shook his head. "Either way, I think this had been weighing heavily on him for quite some time now."

Aubrey nodded, remembering all the signs he had seen, all the times he had convinced himself that Stone was fine, that he just needed good food and rest. "If only I had —"

Leifeld squeezed his shoulder. "If only nothing, Aubrey. You know Alastair better than I do. You know how good he is at keeping things to himself."

Reluctantly Aubrey nodded. "So—what are you saying you think is wrong? To attack students—"

For a long moment Leifeld didn't say anything. Clearly he was hesitant to mention it. "Aubrey...some of the students said that he appeared to be having delusions. He was yelling at something that no one could see. One of them said he cried out something like 'you are dead!' That was right before he lost control completely."

Aubrey's eyes widened at the implications. "Dr. Leifeld...are you saying that you think Dr. Stone has gone mad?"

Leifeld didn't meet the caretaker's gaze. "I don't know, Aubrey," he said at last. "We won't know for sure until the results from the tests come back—perhaps not even then. But..." Again he paused. "It is not...unheard of for mages—especially ones who dabble in the sorts of things Alastair Stone did—to...misplace their grip on reality."

Aubrey gasped. Such a gentle little euphemism. He knew Leifeld was trying to be kind, but it didn't matter. He suspected that Stone's old friend had already drawn his conclusions.

Their worst fears had been realized when Stone had come out from under the effects of the sedative. The



doctors had been hoping that the episode had been an isolated incident, that he would awaken and once more be lucid so they could attempt to determine what had caused him to lose control. However, the moment his consciousness had returned, he had stared up at the medical personnel with wide, terrified eyes, thrashing around in his bed until they had been forced to restrain him. Shortly thereafter Dr. Lennox, in consultation with a psychiatric specialist who worked exclusively with mages, recommended that he be moved to a private psychiatric hospital where they had experience dealing with this sort of patient. They had shown Aubrey the papers before the decision was made, and he had bowed his head. "This is a hospital for the dangerously insane, isn't it?" he'd asked bleakly.

Lennox reluctantly nodded. "I'm sorry, Aubrey. I wish there was another way, but he's a danger to himself and others here. At Sheffield, they can do what they can for him and keep him from hurting anyone while he gets better."

"Do you think he's going to?" Aubrey had asked, bitterness and hope warring in his tone.

"He'll have the best care available. You know that." Lennox had given him an encouraging, kindly smile. "You know I'll make sure they take good care of him and do everything they can."

Aubrey had nodded. Lennox was not only Stone's physician but his friend. He knew there was no other choice.

He had gone in one more time to see Stone before they took him away, but once more he had been sedated. This time his wrists and ankles had been restrained with soft cuffs, and an IV dripped into his arm. Aubrey patted his shoulder. "Come back to us, sir," he whispered. "Maya

misses you already...and I do too." Then he turned and slowly left.

That had been two weeks ago. Aubrey had gone to Sheffield Psychiatric Hospital twice in those two weeks, the first time to make sure it was a proper place for his employer, and the second time to see if he had made any progress. His first concern had been put to rest: the place was small, nestled in the midst of peaceful forested land; the staff was competent and compassionate; everything seemed in order. But there was no progress. The doctor who had been assigned to Stone's case had confided in Aubrey that when he was awake, Stone merely sat on the floor in the corner of his room, staring into space for hours on end. He would get up when prompted for meals, showers, and other requirements, but he moved like a zombie and showed no initiative. At random and unpredictable intervals he would have a repeat of the strange episodes. Medications helped, but nothing alleviated the problem completely. The doctor did not have an estimate of when Stone might be well enough to come home. He had shown Aubrey some papers they had found in Stone's briefcase—papers filled from top to bottom with illegible scribbles—and asked him if he could make anything of them. Aubrey couldn't. Apparently Leifeld couldn't either. They appeared to be nothing more than what they seemed: scribbles.

Aubrey had gone about his business, taking what little solace he could take in the performance of his duties, in keeping Stone Manor and its grounds as well maintained as he could manage for when Dr. Stone returned home. He also picked up the habit of talking to Maya. Even though she could not reply, when he looked into the blackberry cat's expressive green eyes Aubrey had almost convinced himself that she understood what he was

saying. He kept her up to date on Stone's condition (he called every day to find out if there had been any change) and on the doings around the house, and always made sure that both she and Mullins were well fed and had everything they needed. What he never did was think about the future. To Aubrey, the future was simply, "When Dr. Stone is well and comes home." Everything else beyond that was a non-issue, as was the possibility that Dr. Stone would *not* be well and come home. He could not allow that thought to enter his mind, or all would be lost.

It was later that evening when there came a knock on the door.

Aubrey was in the kitchen preparing a light dinner when he heard it; he stiffened a bit. Stone Manor rarely got unexpected visitors, and even more rarely now that its master was—indisposed. The deliveries came around the back, and always early in the morning.

Aubrey carefully shut off the fire on the stove and removed the oven mitt he had on one hand, setting it next to the spoonrest.

The knock came again.

"Yes, yes, I'm coming," he called as he hurried across the hall. "Just a moment!" Reaching the heavy wooden door, he unbolted it and swung it open wide enough that he could see out but the visitor could not see in.

Two people stood there patiently under the porchlight: a man and a woman. The woman was tall, slim and wiry, dressed in jeans, boots, and long brown leather coat. She looked to be in her early to middle thirties, her white-blonde hair cut in a short no-nonsense style, her features attractive in a purposeful sort of way, like a predatory cat's.

The man—there was something odd about him, but Aubrey couldn't put his finger on what. He was quite young, certainly no more than twenty or so; unlike the woman, he was dressed more formally in a fine suit and a dark gray wool overcoat. Mist droplets glittered in his ink-black hair and on the shoulders of his coat. When he looked at Aubrey, the caretaker realized what the odd thing was: the young man didn't look quite real. He was too handsome, his eyes an impossible shade of bright violet, his complexion too flawless. That kind of beauty was very rare and almost never natural.

"May I...help you?" he asked hesitantly. He did not open the door any farther.

The handsome young man nodded. His expression was solemn, but nonetheless managed to convey a certain serenity. "Yes, I hope so. I am Gabriel, and my friend is Juliana." He indicated the woman next to him; she inclined her head in greeting. "We would like to speak with Dr. Alastair Stone, if we may." His voice was soft but carried well.

Aubrey regarded them for a moment, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mr...Gabriel...but Dr. Stone is not here at this time." He was quite sure he had never seen these two before; if he had, he would have remembered them. Whatever they could want with Dr. Stone, Aubrey was in no state of mind to deal with right now. "If you'll excuse me—"

He moved as if to close the door, but before he could do so, a black blur shot past him and out onto the entryway. Aubrey's eyes widened as he saw that it was Maya, and that she was twining herself affectionately around Gabriel's ankles. Aubrey couldn't remember the last time Maya had even allowed herself to be seen when there were visitors. It had taken five visits before she had deigned to reveal herself to Dr. Leifeld.

Gabriel smiled, looking down. "A blackberry cat. I haven't seen one of your kind in a very long time. And a fine beauty, too." He ducked down and gently stroked her fur. Next to him, Juliana was also smiling. Maya, for her part, purred contentedly as if she and Gabriel had known each other for years.

"I'm—surprised, sir," Aubrey admitted as he watched. "Maya is—rather shy. She is never...so affectionate with anyone other than Dr. Stone himself."

"Gabriel has that effect on people," Juliana said, chuckling as if it were an old joke.

Gabriel was still stroking Maya. "I'm honored to meet you, Maya," he said, in much the same way, Aubrey noticed, as Dr. Stone spoke to her—like she understood.

"*Mrrrow*," she replied, rubbing her head against his hand. Then she looked up at Aubrey imploringly.

"Can you tell us when he might be home?" Gabriel asked quietly, rising back to a standing position. "It's very important that we speak with him."

Aubrey took a deep breath. "May I ask—" he said carefully, "—how you know Dr. Stone?"

When Gabriel didn't speak right away, Juliana put in, "We're friends of his from Seattle."

Aubrey stiffened. "Indeed?" he asked, continuing to keep his voice neutral. All he needed right now was for Dr. Stone's "other life" to come looking for him when he was incapacitated. But still—the visitors didn't look dangerous, and Maya *did* like them. She would have picked up any ill intentions well before Aubrey himself did.

Gabriel nodded. "Please, sir. Can you tell us when we might see him? I'm afraid what we have to discuss with him cannot wait."

For a long moment, Aubrey looked at them. He looked down at Maya, and then back up at Gabriel. He

made a decision and opened the door with a sigh. "Please come in. I am Aubrey, the caretaker of Stone Manor. Obviously you haven't heard about Dr. Stone."

Gabriel and Juliana exchanged worried glances. "Heard?" Gabriel asked as the two of them moved inside, followed immediately by Maya. "What haven't we heard?"

Aubrey bustled around doing his duty as caretaker and host, taking their coats and settling them into the comfortable sitting area near the roaring fire. Maya immediately installed herself on Gabriel's lap and remained there, purring. Finally, after prolonging the inevitable for as long as he could, Aubrey sighed. "Dr. Stone...was taken ill a couple of weeks ago. He's in hospital."

Two shocked expressions met his announcement. "Ill?" Gabriel asked quickly. "Ill—in what way?" Again, he and Juliana exchanged glances.

Aubrey took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Mentally...ill," he said slowly. The words sounded like they were being pulled from him. It was the first time he had admitted it aloud.

Gabriel's reaction was not what Aubrey had expected. He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "No..." he whispered. "I had hoped we could prevent—"

Juliana put a hand on his arm. "It's all right," she said softly. "We'll do what we can."

Aubrey looked at them rather suspiciously. "Are you saying that you knew something about what caused Dr. Stone's—affliction?" he demanded.

"Only superficially," Gabriel said, bringing his gaze back up to meet Aubrey's. "I had hoped that we would arrive with enough time that we could attempt to prevent it—or that it had not affected Dr. Stone at all." He leaned forward a bit, careful not to dislodge Maya from her

perch. "Sir...can you tell us what happened? How this occurred?"

"Please—not 'sir.'" Aubrey said automatically. "Just Aubrey. And what good will it do for me to tell you? Is there anything you can do about it?" His tone suggested that he was doubtful. What could a young man barely old enough to be one of Dr. Stone's students and a woman who moved like one of his fearsome friends from his other life do, when the doctors could do nothing? He shook his head. "You're welcome to stay for dinner, of course, and the night if you like—if you *are* friends of Dr. Stone's, I wouldn't send you back out on a night like this—but I truly doubt that there is any way you can be of help at this point."

Gabriel sighed. "Aubrey..." he said gently, "If you have no other hope, could it do any harm to at least tell us what happened?"

Again, Aubrey looked at Maya, who was now totally relaxed in the young man's lap. When she caught Aubrey looking at her, she fixed her green eyes on him with an expression that was almost human. He offered a silent prayer that he was doing the right thing, and then nodded. "All right. I'll tell you. Let me go and put some more food on to cook, and we'll talk in the dining room. Please make yourselves comfortable until then."

Dinner was half an hour later. Fortunately there had just been a delivery earlier that day, so Aubrey had enough supplies to put together a decent meal for the newcomers. He tried not to think much about them while he cooked, because he knew that, when Dr. Stone's Seattle friends were involved, it didn't pay to try to draw conclusions with no evidence. Instead he busied himself putting the dining room in order and fixing dinner. When he caught glimpses of them as he went between the

kitchen and the dining room, he saw that they were still seated by the fireplace, deep in conversation. He couldn't hear what they were saying, though, and was too polite to attempt to eavesdrop.

When the three of them (four if you counted Maya, who had pried herself away from her new friend to investigate the plate of fresh fish Aubrey had prepared for her) were seated at the long dining table, Aubrey began the story, starting with Dr. Stone's arrival a few weeks ago and his sleeping difficulties, followed by all the other little oddities about his behavior, and culminating with the story he had been told about Stone's last night at the seminar. Both Gabriel and Juliana listened intently; Gabriel, especially, had an intensity to him that frightened Aubrey slightly even though there was nothing even remotely fearsome about it.

"So—you say that he was afraid of something he said was dead?" Gabriel asked when Aubrey had finished.

He nodded. "That was what Dr. Leifeld said—that he yelled something about 'you are dead!' before he...lost his mind."

A shadow crossed the young man's face. "You mentioned some papers in his briefcase—may I see them?"

Aubrey tilted his head. "They're nothing but scribbles—Dr. Leifeld said—"

"Please, Aubrey." Gabriel's voice was soft but urgent. "At this point, everything might help."

Aubrey paused a moment and then nodded and hurried out. He retrieved the briefcase from where he had placed it in Stone's study and brought it back. Silently he passed it across the table to Gabriel.

While he carefully withdrew the papers and began examining them, Juliana attempted to make conversation.



She looked around the dining room. "This is a beautiful house."

"Thank you," Aubrey said, glad for an opportunity to tear his gaze away from those papers with those disturbing scrawls. "It has been in Dr. Stone's family for several hundred years."

She nodded. "I've been to England before, but always London. I've never made it outside. It's lovely here—peaceful."

He smiled faintly at her. "I agree. The weather's been a bit frightful lately, but that's common for this time of year. You should see it in the summer. It—"

"Pardon me," Gabriel interrupted, looking up from the papers with a very serious expression. "Aubrey, where did you say Dr. Stone was?"

"I...didn't, sir," he said quietly. "He is in a small, private hospital north of here. He—"

"Would it be possible for us to see him tonight?" Gabriel's tone was soft and respectful, but insistent.

Aubrey shook his head. "No. Not this late. They only allow visitors during the day." His gaze sharpened. "Why? Is something wrong?"

Gabriel carefully put the sheaf of papers back in the briefcase. "It's imperative that we get to him as soon as we can, but we can't arouse suspicion. When is the earliest we can be there in the morning?"

"Just a moment, sir," Aubrey said, his tone resolute. "You must understand—Dr. Stone is my employer, and my friend. I look after his affairs, especially now that he can't do so on his own. I have never met either of you before, and never heard Dr. Stone mention a Gabriel or a Juliana among his friends in Seattle. And now you come here telling me he's in trouble, but won't give me any details. Certainly you understand my reluctance to simply go along with your wishes, with nothing more than that

to go on. What *kind* of danger is he in? How do you know this? Why is it necessary to get to him first thing tomorrow?"

Gabriel looked at Juliana, then back at Aubrey. He sighed. "All right," he said softly. "I will tell you what I can tonight. You have a right to know, and I can sense that you have only Dr. Stone's best interests at heart."

"Of course I do!" Aubrey interrupted, almost indignant.

Gabriel nodded. "Come, then. It will take some time to tell you the story."

For the first time in his memory, Aubrey left the dishes on the table. He followed Gabriel and Juliana out to the main hall, where they resumed their seats next to the fire. Aubrey hesitated, unsure of the motives of this young man with the eyes of someone much older and wiser, who spoke gently of things that Aubrey knew nothing about. He looked at Maya again, curled up once more on Gabriel's lap, sighed, and nodded to Gabriel.

"Juliana and I have known Dr. Stone for a bit over a year," the young man began, leaning slightly forward in his chair. He was clearly not relaxed, but his voice was calm. "Juliana is...a good friend of another of Dr. Stone's acquaintances, a man who calls himself Ocelot." Here Gabriel paused, waiting to see if there was any recognition.

Aubrey nodded. He had met Ocelot, or Terry as he knew him, on several occasions when he had visited Stone at the Manor. He looked at Juliana and realized that he was who she had been subtly reminding him of all evening. "We have met," was all he said.

Gabriel appeared pleased at that, as if perhaps his story would not be so hard to tell after all. "Together over the course of the next few months, Dr. Stone, Ocelot, two of their other associates, and Juliana and I became

involved in various...activities, involving, among other things, my brother." Again he appeared to be waiting for any sign of recognition. This time he got none. He continued: "Aubrey, have you heard of the metaplanes?"

Aubrey nodded slowly. "I have heard of them, although I am not entirely certain what they are. Dr. Stone has spoken of them occasionally. They are—somewhat like the astral plane, but more difficult to reach, yes? Requiring a much more powerful mage?"

"Simply put, yes." Gabriel paused a moment. "Our activities involved traveling to the metaplanes, and while we were there, various events occurred that resulted in our acquiring some powerful enemies. They also resulted in the death of my brother."

Aubrey didn't miss the look Juliana gave Gabriel when he said that. "I'm very sorry to hear that," he murmured.

"Thank you." Gabriel continued to speak softly, staring into the roaring fire. "This happened around six months ago. I had thought it was over, but apparently this is not the case. Our enemies seem to have located us again, and I believe that they are responsible for Dr. Stone's insanity."

Aubrey stared at him. "You're saying—that these enemies from the metaplanes have driven Dr. Stone mad?" He took a deep breath. "How—could that happen? I thought that...things from other planes couldn't affect us here unless they were summoned." He was a little surprised he had remembered that; apparently Stone's lectures had rubbed off on him more than he'd expected.

"Usually they can't," Gabriel agreed. "But these entities are...particularly attuned to us, due to some of the things that happened while we were in their realm. I did not think they were capable of reaching this far, but I now have reason to believe that they can."

"Because of Dr. Stone."

"Because of Dr. Stone and...other things."

Aubrey paused. "You speak like a mage, young man, but yet, if you'll forgive me, you don't look as if you're old enough to be dabbling in the kind of magic you speak of."

Gabriel smiled. "I'm older than I look."

Aubrey chose to let that go. "Are you saying that you might be able to help Dr. Stone? You certainly can't cure him, can you? I assure you, the doctors at Sh—at the hospital where he is staying are the best money can buy, and all of them are powerful mages in their own right. How is it that you two think you can make a difference?"

"Because we know what's wrong with him," Juliana said, speaking for the first time in awhile. Aubrey almost looked startled to be reminded that she was still there.

"You *can* help him?" Aubrey hardly dared allow himself to hope. It was ridiculous to think that two unknown individuals could do anything, but —

"I think we can," Gabriel said softly. "But we must get to him soon. It has already been too long. I think I can counteract their efforts, but the longer we wait, the more dangerous it will be, and the lower our chances for success."

There was a long silence punctuated only by the crackling of the fire as Aubrey considered the young man's words. Maya had opened one eye and was regarding him with it; she almost looked as if she was holding her breath in anticipation of his answer. Finally he sighed wearily. "I don't see that I have any other choice," he said. "The doctors aren't helping him." He met Gabriel's comforting, intense gaze with a certain intensity of his own. "Tell me why I should trust you. Tell me what you're going to do to help Dr. Stone, and I'll drive you there myself first thing in the morning."

An even longer silence hung in the air. Gabriel looked away, staring once more into the fire. He appeared to be trying to decide something. He turned back to Juliana, and it seemed as if an unspoken communication passed between the two of them. Juliana nodded once, gently; after a moment Gabriel sighed and he too nodded. "You care a great deal for Dr. Stone," he said softly. "I can see that."

Aubrey looked confused, but nodded. "Of course I do. What's that got to do with—?"

Gabriel raised his hand. "You asked me to tell you why you should trust me. I will do that—by trusting you with something I rarely reveal to anyone. Perhaps then you will see the gravity of the situation—and the urgency." He paused a moment, then met Aubrey's eyes. "The reason I appear to have such knowledge of magic despite my youth is because I am not human."

Aubrey's eyes narrowed. "Not—human? Then...what are you? You don't look like an elf—"

"I'm a dragon, Aubrey."

Whatever Aubrey had been expecting to hear, that was *not* it. He dropped back into his chair and stared, shaking his head. His expression grew sharper as he forced himself to his feet again. "Sir, perhaps you and your friend should go. I don't know who has put you up to this cruel joke, but I don't—"

"Do I look like I am joking?" Gabriel asked.

And he did not. Aubrey had to concede that. Looking into the young man's eyes, he had never seen anyone look more serious. He stopped again.

"I can prove it to you if you like," Gabriel was saying, looking around the main hall as if gauging its size. "Although it might be a bit of a tight fit in here."

"He's not kidding." Juliana's soft voice once again startled Aubrey. "I know it's hard to believe, but it's true."

Aubrey was clearly on unfamiliar ground. He looked at her. "Are—you—too?" he asked slowly.

She shook her head and grinned. "Nope. I'm as human as you are. I just hang out with 'em." She moved closer to Gabriel.

Aubrey backed away slightly, his gaze now fixed on the young man. A little fear showed in his eyes. "I don't know if I believe you," he said at last, his voice shaking some, "but if you are...a dragon...what interest do you have in Dr. Stone? I thought dragons—well—had their own things to do, and didn't care about us humans." He decided at the last moment not to add, *except as light snacks*.

"He is my friend." Gabriel's voice was very soft, very gentle. "I owe him and his companions a great deal—almost certainly my life. It is indirectly my fault that he is in the condition he is. If I did not do everything I could to help him—" he sighed "—then where would my honor be?"

Aubrey was looking into the fire again. "A dragon," he whispered. It certainly didn't surprise him that Dr. Stone had acquired yet another unusual friend, but a *dragon*? "It is a bit hard to believe," he said apologetically.

Gabriel nodded. "I know. May I?" He indicated the huge open area of the hall.

"Is it...safe?" Aubrey's eyes widened.

Juliana put a hand on his shoulder and smiled. "He would die before he would hurt anyone he cared about," she said. A brief sad look crossed her face and then Gabriel's, but Aubrey didn't see either one.

Aubrey considered. After a few moments he nodded once, backing up until his back was against the stones of the fireplace.

Gabriel moved into the middle of the room and faced them. For a moment, he smiled, and then space seemed to

ripple around him. He was changing—his form was growing larger, taller, his dark suit morphing into golden scales, his handsome face transforming into something longer, still beautiful but in a far different way, bristling with fangs. When the change was complete, the creature he had become took up most of the room in the hall, its tail wrapped carefully around its hindquarters. Luminous violet eyes regarded Aubrey with gentle amusement. *“There. How is that?”*

Juliana caught Aubrey as he fainted.

When Aubrey returned to his senses he was lying on the couch in the sitting area, covered with a blanket. Gabriel and Juliana were sitting opposite him. The young man was back to his human form, and Maya was once more in his lap, watching Aubrey worriedly.

“Are you all right, Aubrey?” Gabriel asked, his soft voice concerned. “Shall I bring you something—?”

Aubrey put a hand to his head and attempted to sit up. Immediately Juliana was there next to him, helping him to a seated position. “Careful,” she said with a little smile. “No more fainting, okay?”

That brought everything crashing back. He stared at Gabriel. “You—you were—” He pointed at the hall.

Gabriel nodded. “I’m sorry—I didn’t think you would faint.” He too seemed amused by the whole thing, but it was a kindly sort of amusement.

“It’s okay,” Kestrel assured him with a wink. “He’s pretty scary the first time you see him—but you get used to him eventually.” Playfully she reached out and ruffled Gabriel’s hair.

Aubrey took a deep breath. Life was getting complicated, and it was doing it at far too rapid a pace for his liking. But still—Dr. Stone needed help, and if anyone could help him—

He looked up at Gabriel. "You wouldn't hurt him?" he asked quietly.

"I give you my word that I would die myself before I did anything to harm him." Gabriel's voice was soft, but the inflection in it was in the tone of a vow.

Aubrey smiled weakly and nodded. "All right. I'll take you there in the morning." He lowered his gaze, meeting the eyes of Maya. "You approve, don't you, my dear?"

"*Mrrow*," Maya stated, leaping across from Gabriel's lap to a spot next to Aubrey.

And that, more than anything else, cemented the whole thing.



## 16.

They left a little after dawn the next morning. Gabriel drove, as neither Aubrey's old truck nor Stone's little convertible would accommodate the three of them comfortably. Aubrey watched with wary interest as the young man guided the expensive sports sedan with a sure hand and a high rate of speed through the early-morning M25 traffic. "I guess I never thought of dragons as...needing to drive," he commented about halfway through the trip. He was still getting used to the whole idea, but at least he was trying.

"Did you think we flew everywhere?" Gabriel chuckled. "That would be a bit conspicuous, don't you think?"

"Besides, that way they don't get to tear around the countryside like speed demons," Juliana added from the back seat.

They arrived at the Sheffield Psychiatric Hospital almost exactly at nine o'clock, which was when they opened for visitors. "Are you sure about this?" Aubrey asked Gabriel. They had discussed the plan on the way up, but the caretaker still had his reservations.

The young man nodded. "Don't worry, Aubrey. Just do it the way we discussed and everything will be fine. The most important thing is that we don't arouse suspicion."

Aubrey nodded and followed the two of them out. He was dressed as he normally was when he visited Dr. Stone; Gabriel and Kestrel both wore business clothes, which had struck Aubrey as odd since neither of them had had luggage. He didn't ask, though. Somehow in light of everything that had happened, it seemed a minor consideration.

The nurse at the front desk looked at the three of them a bit oddly when Aubrey introduced the two newcomers as “Dr. Gabriel and his assistant Ms. Harvath, from America,” but it wasn’t her place to question these things. She buzzed them in and they were then led by another nurse down the hallway and up to the third floor. “How is he today?” Aubrey asked the nurse, a burly, kind-faced young man named Mike. Aubrey had met him on his previous visit.

Mike sighed. “Same. He had another episode yesterday, but Dr. Overton got him calmed down. He made it through the night without another one.”

Aubrey nodded silently. When Mike unlocked the door, he stepped inside and then moved aside so Gabriel and Juliana could come in behind him.

Juliana suppressed a gasp when she got a look in the room. The man who sat in the far corner, his legs drawn up to his chin and his arms wrapped around them, barely looked like the same man as the flippant, self-assured Alastair Stone (or Winterhawk) that the two of them knew. He was dressed in soft cotton pants, pullover shirt (no buttons, belts, strings, or other potentially dangerous items) and soft-bottomed slippers. He was pale but clean-shaven; it looked like someone had attempted to put his hair into some semblance of order, but that order had long since departed. He rocked slightly, muttering to himself, and did not seem to notice his visitors. His eyes were closed.

“Oh my God...” Juliana whispered under her breath.

Aubrey nodded. “He’s been like that for two weeks now.”

Gabriel stood for a moment, head bowed, one fist clenched until his knuckles whitened, and then he took a deep breath and relaxed. He moved into the room slowly,

making no sudden moves. "Dr. Stone," he called gently. "Can you hear me?"

There was no response, except possibly a slight increase in the tempo of Stone's rocking.

From the doorway, Aubrey watched warily. Mike took up a position in the opposite corner of the room, there if he was needed but unobtrusive otherwise.

"Dr. Stone?" Gabriel moved up next to Stone and crouched down, resting his elbows on his knees. "Please open your eyes. It's Gabriel. I've come to help you."

Suddenly Stone's eyes flew open. Without warning he screamed in terror, shoving Gabriel so hard he fell backward, and then leaped up and flailed at something that none of the others could see.

Gabriel recovered his balance quickly as Mike hurried forward, pressing a button on his belt. "You'd better go," he said urgently. "The doctor'll be here in a minute to get him calmed down, but it's not safe to be here right now."

Aubrey and Juliana retreated to the doorway, but Gabriel did not. As Mike fought to physically restrain Stone without hurting him, Gabriel reached out and gently touched his forehead. Stone stopped in mid-scream and stared at Gabriel, then his expression grew placid again and he sank back down to his sitting position.

Mike glared at Gabriel. "What did you do to him?" he demanded. Without waiting for an answer, the nurse squatted down to examine the patient. When he looked up again, his eyes were wide. "He's all right," he said, unable to hide the incredulity in his voice. "Well, as all right as he's been. But you—that's the fastest I've ever seen anyone stop one of those episodes."

Aubrey stepped forward, relieved, and played his role. "That's why I've brought Dr. Gabriel here from America," he said firmly. "He's got some magical

techniques he thinks might work to help Dr. Stone, but he wanted to examine him first."

At that point another figure swept through the door: a short, slightly plump dwarf woman in a white lab coat. "What's going on here?" she demanded, looking at Stone before taking in his visitors. "Mike, you called —"

Mike nodded. "He was having an attack, Dr. Overton. But this man here—" he indicated Gabriel "—he did something to stop it."

Overton's gaze immediately swiveled around to Gabriel. She looked him up and down and then looked at Stone. "You did this?" Her manner was abrupt but her regard for her patient was evident.

Gabriel nodded.

"How?"

"It would be difficult to explain," Gabriel said softly. "It is a magical technique that I have developed, one that reaches into the deepest parts of the mind. It's still in its experimental stages, but when Aubrey called me, I thought it might prove helpful in a case such as Dr. Stone's."

Overton studied him with suspicion, but the results did seem to bear out his words. She looked at Aubrey. "These are the Americans Jeannette mentioned?"

Aubrey nodded. "Dr. Gabriel would like the chance to examine Dr. Stone, if you don't object."

Overton sighed. "How can I object? So far nothing we have tried has been effective. Two weeks isn't a long time, but we should have seen *some* results by now if our methods were working." She looked very tired. "Perhaps another doctor, with a different approach —"

"Thank you, Doctor." Aubrey knew why he liked Overton—because she was one of the rare highly skilled physicians he had ever met who placed the interests of her patients completely above her own ego. If what she

was doing wasn't working and someone else could help, she would step aside.

She sighed again. "Don't thank me—I was about to call in some other specialists myself." She looked at Gabriel. "What do you need?"

"I can do the examination in here," he said quietly. "I just need some time alone with him. You can watch from outside if you like, but don't let him know you are there."

Again Overton looked suspicious, but his last comment calmed her fears. "All right. We'll wait outside, then."

Aubrey looked back and forth between Overton and Gabriel—between the skilled doctor who was all but admitting failure and the unknown quantity who could well possess enough power to help where no one else could...if he could be trusted. With a last look back over his shoulder and a silent prayer that he was doing the right thing, he followed the others out of the room.

When they were alone, Gabriel studied Stone for a moment, then gently took his arm and helped him up, leading him over to a soft chair. Stone went along docilely, allowing Gabriel to sit him down and make him comfortable. "I'm sorry, Dr. Stone," he said to himself, his eyes very sad. "I'm sorry you had to go through this. Believe me, had I known sooner I would have been here." But it was too late for that now. He sat down on the edge of the bed next to Stone's chair and reached out a hand to touch the mage's forehead. He shifted to mental communication. "*Dr. Stone? Can you hear me? It is Gabriel.*"

There was no reply except for a slight agitation in Stone's mind.

Gabriel abandoned communication for the moment and instead concentrated on discovering what had

invaded Stone's mind so he could block it. At least he had some idea of what he was looking for.

It turned out that if he had not, he never would have found it. As he probed, careful to go lightly, to calm Stone's growing agitation at each step, he began to see familiar patterns deep in the mage's mind. He shifted his perceptions once more, allowing himself to see through Stone's eyes, to perceive what he perceived. The results caused him to stiffen in revulsion and shock.

No wonder Stone had gone mad! Using the mage's vision, Gabriel looked around the room. Every inch of it seemed to be alive with something hideous. The bed oozed with bloody white maggots; rivers of blood ran down from the walls; the chair he sat in was a creature of some sort, soft and yielding, pulsating with power; the trideo unit, safely behind an unbreakable plastic screen and powered off, showed visions of unspeakable tortures; the door was veined and throbbing as if something large was attempting to get in. As Gabriel took in these sights and realized that they had become Stone's world, suddenly the wall erupted across from them with a spray of gore and a sinewy, blood-streaked tentacle popped out, lashing at Stone with a lamprey-like mouth. Stone's agitation immediately spiked higher—he struggled, thrashing left and right, a scream rising in his throat—

*"Be calm, my friend,"* Gabriel spoke softly, insistently in his mind, weaving powerful magic to block the horrible visions. *"Be calm. You will be well soon."*

He repeated it like a mantra, his voice soothing and gentle, until once again Stone calmed down. He took a deep breath. Already he knew that he was not strong enough to completely drive the foreign influences from Stone's mind here. There would need to be a ritual, which meant they would have to get Stone out of here, and soon. The longer those influences had to take root in his mind,

the smaller his chances were of being able to counteract them and expel them.

Concentrating on strengthening the magic he was using to temporarily block the assault on Stone, Gabriel reached out to him again. *"Dr. Stone, please listen to me...All will be well, but you must let me reach you..."*

From outside, four faces watched through the small cutout in the door. Juliana's face showed calm confidence; Aubrey's, fear; Dr. Overton's, sharp curiosity; Mike's, worry. They all watched as Gabriel sat down next to Stone and, aside from touching his forehead, appeared to do nothing else. They watched as Stone built up to another episode, and they watched as he calmed down again before the episode took hold. Still, Gabriel did nothing—he did not move or speak. The only thing they noticed was the look of shock that crossed his features at one point before the episode arose.

*"He's doing something,"* Dr. Overton murmured. *"I can sense the magic. But it's like no other magic I've ever seen before."*

Aubrey hoped so. He repeated his prayer and continued to watch, holding his breath.

*"Dr. Stone?"*

*"..."*

*"Dr. Stone, can you hear me? I know you're in there. I know you're hiding. But I am not your enemy. You recognize my voice, don't you? It is Gabriel. I am here to help you."*

*"..."*

*"Please, Doctor...Alastair. Listen to me. The things that were disturbing you have been blocked for now. They won't bother you again as long as I am here. But you must help me. I can't reach you if you don't help me."*

*"...help me..."*

It was a small voice, soft and fearful, like that of a child who had been punished too many times and was afraid to trust.

*"Alastair? Is that you? Do you know who I am?"*

*"...g...gabriel..."*

*"Yes, Alastair. It is Gabriel. I'm here to help you. Kestrel is here too, and Aubrey. We all want to help you. Can you come out now?"*

*"...no!..."*

*"The bad things are gone now. I've stopped them. But you'll have to help me stop them permanently. Can you do that for me?"*

*"...how...?"*

*"You need to come back to us. We have to take you away from here, back to your home. But you have to show them that you're ready to go."*

*"...home?"*

*"Home, Alastair. Back with Aubrey and Maya, who miss you. They want you to be well. I do too. Can you help us make you well?"*

*"...they're...everywhere...Won't go away..."*

*"I promise, Alastair – I'll keep them away. You don't have to hide anymore. You did a good job of hiding – of protecting yourself so they didn't take over. But now you have to come out, or we can't help you. Will you do that?"*

*"...Promise...? No more...things?"*

*"No more things. I give you my word. I will do everything I can to help you, but I can't do it alone. Will you help me?"*

There was a very long pause. When the mental voice spoke again, it was stronger. *"I will help you."*

Outside, Aubrey's eyes widened as Gabriel stood and put his hand on Stone's shoulder. After a moment, Stone also stood. Together they came to the door.



Tentatively, Dr. Overton opened it, with Mike right next to her in case there was trouble. She looked questioningly at Gabriel.

It was, however, Stone who spoke. His voice was soft, infinitely weary, but unquestionably sane. "I think...I am...ready to leave here, Doctor."

After that, it took about an hour to do all the paperwork, but there was no significant objection to Stone's leaving. Aubrey took care of most of the details, saving all the things Stone had to sign for last. He still wasn't sure this was the right thing to do, but so far it looked better than anything else. He was beginning to suspect that this mysterious young man (this mysterious *dragon*, he reminded himself) was his employer's only real hope of making it out of this with his sanity intact.

Gabriel and Juliana sat quietly, one on either side of Stone. The mage had not said anything beyond short, simple answers to questions since he and Gabriel had emerged from the room. His gaze roamed edgily around Dr. Overton's waiting area, obviously not recognizing anything about his surroundings. "He seems... better..." Aubrey had said carefully to Gabriel at one point during the paperwork, "but – are you sure he's...well?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. He's not well yet. But we must get him out of here before I can begin the next stage. I don't think even a dedicated staff of physicians like this would look kindly on the sort of ritual I'll need to set up."

Aubrey had taken a deep, slightly shuddering breath, and let it go at that.

When they left Sheffield Psychiatric Hospital, everything had been taken care of so there would be no suspicion. Stone would return home for a few days, and then be flown to another private hospital located outside Boston, where Dr. Gabriel and his assistant would

continue pursuing his experimental course of treatment. During the hour when the papers were being signed, Juliana had disappeared for awhile to make some arrangements with some decker friends; any inquiries directed at the hospital in question (which did not exist) would be politely dealt with and promptly lost in red tape.

Juliana drove now as they headed back toward Stone Manor; Stone sat in the middle of the wide back seat, with Aubrey on one side and Gabriel on the other. Gabriel seemed somewhat tired and preoccupied as if he was concentrating hard on something, so Aubrey did not bother him. Stone, for his part, was silent but calm. He did not seem inclined to talk, but at least he appeared to have the delusional episodes under control.

When they drew up in front of the wrought-iron gates that led to the Manor, Stone snapped out of his lethargy for a moment, smiling at the sight. He looked right and left, noticing his companions. "Aubrey..."

Aubrey smiled. "Hello, sir. It's good to see you're feeling better."

Stone nodded vaguely, though it was not clear whether he had heard the caretaker's words. He turned the other way and seemed surprised. "Gabriel? What...are you doing here?" Once more he didn't wait for an answer; his gaze wandered off again.

When they were inside (with Stone being supported by Aubrey and Juliana as they ascended the steps to the front door), Aubrey wanted to immediately hustle his employer off to a warm bed with some soup and hot tea, but Gabriel vetoed the idea. The concentration was taking a lot out of him, it appeared; he looked more tired than before. "No. We must begin the ritual. I cannot hold the spell I have on Dr. Stone forever, and without further preparations, he can't leave my presence or it will fail and

we will be right back where we started—or worse.” He sighed. “I won’t be able to do the full ritual now—it’s too dangerous, and too likely that someone will notice.”

Juliana looked at him questioningly. “You aren’t going to—make him better now?”

“Better, yes. Functional...but there will be more that needs to be done, once we return home.”

“Home?” Aubrey looked indignant. “Wait a minute—he *is* home. You’re not going to take him away, are you? He should stay here, where he can be taken care of—”

“That will be Dr. Stone’s decision,” Gabriel said softly. “Not mine.”

Aubrey sighed. “He’s in no shape to make such a decision—”

“He will be.” Gabriel gave him an encouraging look. “Aubrey, please. I know this isn’t easy for you. It isn’t easy for any of us. I wish we didn’t have to do this. But the situation has been taken out of our hands.” He looked over at the area of the main hall, where he had changed to his true form the previous night, as Maya padded from wherever she had been hiding and alternated her gaze between him and Stone. “May I use this?”

For a moment Aubrey was confused, then he nodded reluctantly. “Of course. If there’s anything you need—”

“No...just time. This will take awhile. If you’re hungry, this might be a good time to eat something.”

The caretaker nodded even more reluctantly. “All right. I think we could all do with a bit to eat. I’ll see to it.” With a quick worried glance at Stone, he left for the kitchen.

“Okay, so what aren’t you saying here?” Kestrel asked Gabriel after Aubrey had left. “Why can’t you do the whole ritual now?”

Gabriel answered as he paced around the hall, measuring and noting the positions of its various sides. "Somehow the Enemy has reached his mind, as it did mine. The manifestation is different, obviously, but the signs are there. Every time I use magic, I increase the chance that they will notice us and take further action before we are prepared."

"So you're telling me you can't use magic?" That would be very bad.

"No. Just that I cannot use *powerful* magic, except under carefully controlled circumstances, without taking a risk. It is the same reason I can't summon elementals to search for people—any astral contact is dangerous."

"So what are you going to do now?"

Gabriel paused, pulled a piece of chalk from his pocket (Kestrel didn't even ask him where he'd gotten it) and marked some figures on the gray stone floor tiles, then moved on. "This ritual is to strengthen the spell I cast earlier, to block out the Enemy's influence on Dr. Stone's mind. Later on, when we're back at my lair, I can shield us well enough that I can finish driving them out of his mind completely."

Kestrel looked at Stone sitting in his chair, staring at the embers of last night's fire. "Is he going to be like that? Like a zombie, until you get him home?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. This ritual should impede enough of the influence that he should be back to fairly close to normal. I can also block the worst of what he experienced, so he won't remember everything. He should be all right."

"What...*did* he experience?" Kestrel's voice was soft; she was thinking about Gabriel's own episodes, especially the last one at the lair.

"Hallucinations." Gabriel marked another spot on the floor and continued. "Bad ones. Constant. It's a wonder they didn't drive him mad before this."

Kestrel took a deep breath. "I don't mind admitting I'm a little scared here, Gabriel."

"So am I, Juliana," came his soft answer. "We will do what we can do. I hope it will be enough."

By the time Aubrey returned carrying a tray heaped with sandwich fixings and pitchers of water and juice, Gabriel had chalked up almost the entire floor of the main hall. Aubrey stopped, careful not to step on anything, and studied the intricate drawings. He looked over at Stone, who still sat where he had been before. He too was looking at the circle. Maya was padding precisely around the perimeter of it, never touching, but never far away.

Gabriel and Juliana were on the other side of the room, conferring. They both looked up as Aubrey came in. "Are you—done?" the caretaker asked.

"Yes." Gabriel indicated the circle. "I'm ready to begin now."

"Will you have something to eat first?"

He shook his head. "No, thank you. I'll eat afterward. You and Juliana are free to do whatever you like, as long as you don't touch the circle. I'll need Dr. Stone's participation."

"How long...do you expect it will take?"

Gabriel looked at the circle for a moment and sighed. "There's no way to be certain, but I would estimate two or three hours. This is only a fraction of the full ritual."

Aubrey took a deep breath. It was clear on his face that he didn't like this, not one bit. The main hall of Stone Manor was not the place for dragon rituals and extraplanar madness. It was also clear that he knew he didn't have any other option. He moved over to the other

side of the room next to Juliana, set the tray down, and watched.

The actual ritual was not very exciting. There were no glowing sigils or multicolored shafts of light or luminescent magical haze—there was just Stone, floating suspended over the center of the circle, and Gabriel, standing next to him, deep in concentration. The two of them remained in those positions for the entire course of the procedure; the only sign that anything was happening was the look of increasing fatigue on Gabriel's face as time went on. Aubrey was surprised to see the sweat standing out on the young man's brow—he had always thought of dragons as somehow possessed of enough power to effortlessly do anything they put their minds to. The fact that they apparently had limitations too (albeit on a far higher level than mere humans) both comforted and frightened Aubrey. But he continued to stare, alternating his gaze between Gabriel and Stone, as the ritual progressed.

And then, with no fanfare, it was over. Gabriel backed off a bit, let his breath out slowly, and lowered Stone to the floor. "Dr. Stone?" he called softly. "Are you back with us?"

On the floor, Stone's eyes opened. He blinked a couple of times, as if coming out of a long sleep, and looked around. "G...Gabriel?" he asked uncertainly. "What—are you doing here? And why am I on the floor?"

Aubrey, weak with relief, slumped into the nearest chair. Juliana hurried over to the edge of the circle.

Gabriel reached down to give Stone a hand up. His breath was still coming fast, his face pale and glistening from his effort, but he looked pleased. "That is a long story, Dr. Stone. How do you feel?"

Stone slowly rose, holding tight to Gabriel's arm, and took stock of his status. "Ghastly," he finally admitted. "But somehow I think I shouldn't worry too much about that, should I?"

Gabriel didn't answer, but Maya did: ignoring the circle, she hurried over and twined herself around Stone's ankles, purring happily. Stone didn't think he had ever seen her looking more delighted.

It wasn't until later that night when Stone, Gabriel, and Kestrel were safely on the private jet Gabriel had chartered to get them back to Seattle that Stone finally got the whole story of what had happened. They had bade goodbye to Aubrey and Maya earlier in the day; the caretaker had been reluctant to let Stone out of his sight now that he seemed to finally be well again, but Stone had been adamant once Gabriel had explained enough to convince him that the process wasn't yet finished and couldn't be until they got back home. They had said their goodbyes while Gabriel made arrangements for transportation. On the way out the door, Aubrey had pulled Gabriel aside for a moment.

"I don't know how I can ever thank you for what you've done," he said, his eyes glittering with unshed tears. "If you hadn't come, he —"

Gabriel shook his head. "There is no need, Aubrey. Part of this was my fault. I had to do this. I told you, Dr. Stone is a good friend."

Aubrey nodded. "I know, sir. But still —" He looked down at Maya, once again attached to Gabriel's ankles as if she sensed he wouldn't be there much longer. "Take care. All of you."

"We will." Gabriel crouched to give Maya a last scratch behind the ears. For a moment they appeared to be communicating, and then he rose, smiling. "I'll do my

best," he said to her aloud. And then he was gone with the rest.

"So," Stone said when they were on the plane, leaned back in sumptuous leather seats and watching the darkness speed by outside the tiny windows, "Now what? This isn't over, is it? I've a feeling it won't even be over after you've finished your spell on me."

He had listened quietly as Gabriel had explained to him what had happened, his eyes widening with incredulity as the story got more fantastic. He remembered everything up to the last day, the one when he had lost it at the seminar. Beyond that was fuzzy due to Gabriel's spell, so he had to rely on the two of them to fill in the blanks. After that, he had been very subdued, thinking over what he had been told. This was the first time he had spoken in several minutes.

Gabriel sighed. "I don't think so," he admitted. "If this has affected you, then it has probably affected the others as well. We will have to find them and do what we can for them."

"The others?" Stone gripped the arms of his seat and leaned forward. "You think they're going through the same sort of thing?"

The young man took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know. I suspect they're probably suffering from *some* sort of manifestation of this. Whether it is the same as yours—" He shook his head. "I don't know."

Things were coming back to Stone now. "Gabriel...the one thing you haven't told me yet—I don't know whether you're avoiding it or you don't know, but—what caused this? How did you know to come for me?" There was an odd tone in his voice, as if he already knew the answer and wasn't sure he wanted it confirmed for him.

Gabriel bowed his head.



"It's the Horrors again, isn't it?" Stone leaned forward a bit more, lowering his voice to a murmur.

The young man didn't answer; he didn't have to.

Stone let his breath out slowly. "All right..." he said with measured care, "Why don't you tell me the rest of the story? I think I'll be needing to know it since it looks like I'm right in the middle of this with you."

Gabriel was looking very desolate. Kestrel put a gentle hand on his shoulder; he covered it with his own. With eerie calm, he told Stone the part he had not yet told him—what had happened in Switzerland followed by the events that had occurred at his lair up to the point when he healed Kestrel of the injuries he had caused.

Stone stared at him. "So then—after you realized that the Horrors—or at least some subset of them—were looking for you again, you thought p'raps you might not be the only one they were after?"

Gabriel nodded. "Kestrel tried to reach you and the others, and had no success. We decided we should return and find out what was happening. I had hoped it would be nothing—that all would be well." He sighed.

Stone considered that for a few moments, leaning back in his seat. "So what now? Do you know where the others are? Do you know if they're all right?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. That is why we're going back. The ritual I have performed on you should keep the Enemy's influence at bay long enough for us to locate the others, and then we will return to my lair for the final ritual. I would prefer to do that one only once, as it is very long and draining. I have already taken too many chances that the Enemy will notice us, and I will have to take more before we are done."

"You used magic to find me, didn't you?" Stone leaned forward. "You're saying that every time you do, the Horrors might notice?"

Gabriel nodded to the last part of his question. "I didn't use magic to find you, and I don't plan to for the others."

"Then—how did you find me? I didn't think Kestrel had my number in England. Ocelot does, but I didn't think you found him yet."

Gabriel didn't look like he was happy about what he was going to say. "I found you through Harry. He told me how to reach you."

"Harry?" Stone's eyes narrowed. "How did you manage that? I'd have thought Harry would keep that sort of information a bit more to himself. Not that I mind your knowing, Gabriel, since I know there's nowhere I could go to hide from you anyway, but I'd like to think that he isn't passing on my personal data to anyone with a few nuyen."

Gabriel shook his head, looking even less happy about the whole thing. "That wasn't what happened. He was very reluctant to reveal anything about you or any of the others. To get the information I had to give him something he wanted very badly."

"What?" Stone leaned forward a little more.

"I had to tell him who I am."

Stone stared at him, stunned. "You mean, you told him you were—"

Gabriel nodded.

The mage blew air through his teeth. "I see."

The young man lowered his head. "Somehow, in light of all that has happened in the last few months, my—masquerade doesn't seem as important as it did before. If it takes revealing what I am to make this right, then it is the least I can do."

"Gabriel...this isn't your fault," Stone said quietly. "You didn't ask for this any more than the rest of us did. I think the best thing for us now is to find the others

quickly and then go from there. Did you get anything else from Harry?"

When Gabriel didn't answer, Kestrel shook her head. "He didn't know where the rest were when we left, except that Ocelot might be in CalFree, Joe is probably somewhere near Seattle, and 'Wraith went to New York."

Stone nodded. "That sounds about right. Ocelot goes to San Francisco, although I'm not sure exactly where. I might be able to help find Joe. 'Wraith, I've no idea about."

"Harry said he would continue checking while Kestrel and I were gone," Gabriel said, raising his head. "I promised to keep him apprised of what we've found out."

Once again Stone leaned forward. "You didn't tell him about—?"

"About the Enemy?" Gabriel shook his head. "No. I told him I thought you might be in serious trouble. Once I revealed my true nature to him, he didn't ask any more questions about what sort of danger that might be."

Stone chuckled mirthlessly. "Yes, I can see that. Harry might be more curious than I am, but he's not a fool." He paused a moment. "I suppose it wouldn't be wise for me to do anything magical either, would it?"

"No." Gabriel looked out the window for a moment and then back at Stone. "Simple combat spells and such should be all right if necessary, but anything involving placing your mind in direct contact with the astral plane—projection, ritual sorcery, even perception—is dangerous." His expression grew very serious. "I don't want to frighten you, Dr. Stone, but your mind's hold on sanity is very tenuous right now, irrespective of the likelihood that the Enemy might notice what you are attempting. If I were you, I would be very careful."

Stone's expression mirrored Gabriel's. "Don't worry, my friend," he said softly. "I've grown rather fond of my

sanity, such as it is, over the years. I will indeed be careful." After a pause, he added, "If we're going back to Seattle, probably best if you don't call me Dr. Stone anymore."

Gabriel nodded. "Right." He looked at the clock in the plane's cabin. "You should probably get some rest—it will be several hours before we land. We'll talk to Harry and depending on what he finds out, we'll make our decision. I hope that perhaps the others aren't affected—you, as a mage, would be by far the most susceptible of the four of you to the Enemy's influence."

"You're a real comfort, Gabriel," Stone said half-teasingly, half-sourly. "Let's just hope you're right. It will make things a lot easier."

## 17.

When they arrived back in Seattle, it was raining. They landed in the late morning, at a private airfield a short distance out of town where Kestrel had made arrangements. Gabriel settled up with the pilot while Kestrel and Winterhawk waited inside, and then they were on their way in another rented car. "Do you want to go home first?" Gabriel asked Winterhawk as they left the airfield and merged into the tail end of the morning rush hour.

"I suppose I should," the mage said a bit reluctantly. He'd had a chance to sleep (albeit fitfully) on the plane, but he was feeling rather like a terrorist with the night's growth of stubble and a rumpled suit. "Do we have time?"

"We can call Harry from there," Kestrel assured him.

Gabriel nodded. "I hope he's come up with something. I don't want to use magic to look for them, but if he can't find them, we might have no other choice."

"Don't underestimate Harry," 'Hawk said. "He might not use magic, but I'd wager a large amount of money on his ability to locate any given person faster than almost anyone else I know."

"That is what I'm counting on," Gabriel said.

Winterhawk's Downtown apartment was just as he had left it, except for a thin layer of dust on the furniture; while he went off to shower, shave, and change into a fresh suit, Gabriel took care of calling Harry. By the time 'Hawk reappeared looking refreshed and somewhat happier with life, they had a meeting set up for later that afternoon at one of Harry's favorite places to hold court – the Black Dog Lounge. "Did he have anything useful for us?" the mage asked as he buttoned up his jacket and

straightened his tie. He was still looking more than a little pale, and it was obvious to everyone in the room that he was using his usual briskness to cover up the fact that he was still very disturbed by what had happened to him.

"He wouldn't tell me until we met in person," Gabriel told him. "But he was willing to meet in an hour, so I suspect he does."

'Hawk was looking out the window. "It doesn't take an hour to get to the Black Dog," he said. "D'you mind if we just pop by 'Wraith's place? I very much doubt that he's around, but —"

"That's a good idea," Kestrel agreed, looking at Gabriel.

The young man nodded. "Why not?"

They got together in the rented car again (none of their own cars were big enough to accommodate more than two people, and the team's usual truck wasn't available) and drove by ShadoWraith's place, which was only five minutes away from Winterhawk's. They didn't know what they expected to find, but whatever it was, they didn't find it. A quick clairvoyance spell by Gabriel confirmed that the place was uninhabited, locked up tight as if its occupant expected to be gone for a long time. "That fits," Winterhawk mused as they drove away. "If he was planning to head back East, he'd have all his traps set. At least he'll be pleased to know no one's tried to break in."

"How do you know that?" Kestrel asked.

"No dead bodies on the floor."

She regarded him for a moment and decided not to ask.

The Black Dog Lounge was fairly unpopulated this early in the day; most of its usual clientele didn't show up until after dark, and even the afternoon bar crowd didn't

often turn up until after the day-shifters got off work. This left the place currently occupied by a couple of orks drinking beer in the back corner, a frowzy-looking human couple having a boozy tête-a-tête at one of the booths, and a dwarf reading a datafax at the far end of the bar. The bartender, also a dwarf, was sitting atop a high stool, picking peanut shells out of his beard and keeping one eye on the trid unit suspended from the ceiling. The strains of a familiar soap-opera theme song emanated from the trid's buzzy speaker, fighting a losing battle with the synth-pop being piped in from above.

The bartender looked up as the three newcomers came in. Recognizing Winterhawk, he hooked a thumb toward the back room without a word. 'Hawk nodded and the three of them continued through, ignoring the muttered lewd comment the female half of the frowzy human couple made at Gabriel as they passed.

It was obvious from the moment they entered the back room that Harry was concerned about something. He was even more no-bullshit than usual. "'Hawk. Good to see ya," he said, nodding. He looked at Gabriel. "Guess you found him. Should I ask any more?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Better if you didn't."

"What did you find out?" Gabriel asked. He did not sit down, but rather moved restlessly around the table where Harry sat. 'Hawk and Kestrel likewise did not sit.

Harry took a deep breath. "I haven't found anything on Joe or 'Wraith yet. I think 'Wraith's gonna be the hard one—it'll take me longer to call in favors to get the info." He paused. "But I did find Ocelot. I wanted to talk to you about this, but one way or another one of us is gonna have to move fast."

Gabriel stopped his restless motion and leaned over the table. "Where is he?"

"L.A. He's in jail."

"What?" Winterhawk and Kestrel demanded almost simultaneously, taking up positions on either side of Gabriel. "What the bloody hell is he doing in Los Angeles?" 'Hawk demanded. "I thought he was in San Francisco."

"That's why it took me this long to find out anything," Harry said. "I was checkin' in San Fran. But when nothing turned up there, I ranged out some. Apparently he *was* in San Francisco briefly two or three weeks ago, but somethin' spooked him and he took off outta there. I've traced his movement down CalFree—looks like when he left he made a beeline toward L.A. Didn't stop long anywhere on the way."

"What's in Los Angeles?" Kestrel asked, perplexed. She looked at Winterhawk. "He doesn't even know anybody down there, does he?"

'Hawk shook his head, as confused as she was.

Gabriel, on the other hand, looked at them oddly, then at Harry. "He doesn't know anyone down there...perhaps that is the reason he went there."

Harry shrugged. "I dunno. All I know is the reports I got say he was actin' weird. He didn't contact anybody in San Francisco, and the guys who saw him said it seemed to them like he was scared of his own shadow—'cept if anybody messed with him they got hit hard. That's how he got picked up in L.A.—Report says assault and resisting arrest. He was in the middle of some kinda riot near the El Infierno wall. He sliced up some troll and then tried to run."

Kestrel sighed, shaking her head.

"Did you get anything else?" Gabriel asked quietly. So far he seemed to be the only one of his little group who was taking this news with any amount of calm.

"Yeah." The fixer looked up at him. "From the sound of things—realize I'm getting this secondhand, 'cause the



actual police records'll take longer—he was living on the street. The one eyewitness my guys were able to get anything from said he was like one of those guys who wander the streets talking to themselves." His gaze hardened. "This is bad stuff, kid. If somebody's causin' this, I want to know about it. When somebody starts screwin' with my team, it gets to be my business fast."

Gabriel sighed. "You're right—it *is* bad. But we can't tell you any more than that right now."

"You don't want to hear it," Winterhawk added soberly, without a trace of humor.

Kestrel nodded in silent agreement.

Harry looked back and forth between the three of them, his eyes finally settling on Gabriel. "Yeah. Maybe you're right. But one way or another we're gonna have to deal with this. Are you gonna do it or am I?"

"Which jail is he in?" Kestrel asked suddenly. "And how long has he been there?"

"It ain't good." Harry glanced down at his pocket secretary then back up to Kestrel. "He's in the big Lone Star lockup just outside El Infierno—the one they call The Pit. Been there about four days now. I only found out about it last night—was gonna give you a call today, but you called me first."

"Damn." Kestrel dropped into a chair with a loud frustrated sigh. She had heard many stories about The Pit in her days as a runner, and none of them had been good. Los Angeles—especially *that* part of Los Angeles—was not a good place to get caught when you were doing something illegal. The only thing worse would have been for him to be inside El Infierno itself—but she didn't think they even *had* prisons in there. If the natives didn't kill you, the cops would. Less paperwork that way. Still, though, this was far from a desirable situation, and she knew it. "I assume he's still alive or you wouldn't be

telling us this—but the Star doesn't look too kindly on people with cyberware."

Harry nodded. "He's okay so far—as okay as you can be in a drekhole like that, I mean. They've got him in the hardcase wing, where they toss anybody who looks like they might be a troublemaker, including folks with cyber. The Star ain't quite as quick to yank out people's mods right away after they got sued by that kid's family last year, fortunately. But it ain't gonna last forever. And if he's as loony as it sounds like he is, it's only a matter of time before he attacks somebody and the guards kill him. It ain't a nice place." He looked at Gabriel. "You want to handle this, or—?"

Gabriel studied him for a moment before answering. "We'd better go down there and get him out," he finally said. "But if you can arrange it so they don't do anything permanent to him until we can get there—"

"I'm already on that part," Harry told him. "Gettin' him outta there isn't gonna be easy. I can do it, but I think you might be able to do it faster. Me, I'll just make sure there's somebody down there for you to get out. That's my end." He sighed. "Give me a call when you get there—I'll try to get things arranged so you can just waltz right in there and take him out. You might have to grease a few palms—"

"That won't be a problem," Gabriel said with a tiny hint of a wry smile.

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I imagine not." He paused a moment, then continued. "I don't know if I can set that up this fast, but I'll give it my best shot. When you call I'll give you the details." Rubbing the back of his neck wearily, he settled back in his chair and pulled out his phone. "You get going—the sooner you get down there, the sooner the kid'll be out of there."

"And you'll keep looking for the others?" Winterhawk asked as the three of them prepared to leave.

"Yeah, yeah. I've got all kinds of feelers out right now—something's bound to come back soon. Hell, who knows—maybe one of the guys'll hear I'm lookin' for him and give me a call, wantin' to know what all the fuss is about."

"And I'm the king of England," 'Hawk said sourly. Harry didn't answer.

Less than an hour later, they were on another small private jet bound for Los Angeles, California Free State. Gabriel, Kestrel and Winterhawk sat oblivious to the plush finery surrounding them, all of them on edge as they thought about what they might be likely to find when they arrived. "What's it like?" Winterhawk asked suddenly about halfway through the trip.

Kestrel looked at him, confused. "What's what like?" She looked at Gabriel, but his eyes were closed; he seemed to be either sleeping or, more likely, meditating.

"Jail. Prison. Wherever it is they've got him."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Not nice," she said at last. "I've never actually been inside, but I've had friends who have. Once they managed to get out, they never wanted to go back." She looked at him. "It's a good thing Ocelot's tough—I don't think too many people will want to mess with him. That ought to keep him safe for awhile." She didn't add *I hope*, but Winterhawk heard it nonetheless.

"They do have guards, though, yes?" the mage asked. "Aren't they supposed to keep order among the prisoners? Make sure they don't kill each other or something?" His experience with prisons was very limited, and what little he had had been drawn from those

in his own native country where things – even prisons – were generally somewhat more civilized.

“Yeah, they have guards,” Kestrel told him rather bitterly. “And that’s what they’re *supposed* to do. As usual, though, reality’s a little different.”

‘Hawk leaned forward. “Go on...”

She spread her arms. “All I have is what my friends have told me. Most of the guards are on the take, and quite a few of them are working for one or the other of the factions of prisoners – especially if there’s a high gang and organized crime population. They get away with things because they can – who’ll stop them? Nobody cares as long as the prisoners behave themselves and don’t cause too much trouble. I’ve heard stories of guards beating up prisoners...standing by while the prisoners beat up each other...staged fights for their amusement...” She shook her head. “Maybe it’s different where Ocelot is, but I doubt it. Truth be told, it’s probably worse. Are you familiar with El Infierno?”

Winterhawk shook his head. “Other than the fact that it’s a bad part of Los Angeles, no, not really.”

“Well, saying it’s a bad part of L.A. is like saying Gabriel’s a big lizard. Kind of the understatement of the year.” She glanced at Gabriel, then back at ‘Hawk. “They walled it off because they couldn’t deal with it anymore. The folks in there are on their own, and it’s just anarchy. This prison isn’t in there, but it’s right on the edge. That means it gets a lot of the cases who get arrested trying to get out of El Infierno. It also means that the cops and the guards who get assigned there are the ones that got last pick for assignments. They have riots there two or three times a year, and they usually end in a few guards and a whole bunch of prisoners getting blown away and the administration shaking their finger at the whole thing and sweeping it under the rug until it happens again.” Kestrel

let her breath out again. Telling the story had seemed almost cathartic to her. She sighed. "That's why we have to get him out of there before somebody kills him. He's tough, but there's always somebody tougher. Especially when they don't separate the metatypes. And with him messed up in the head—"

Gabriel opened his eyes. The expression in them was sad; he'd obviously been listening to the conversation. He shook his head without saying anything.

Winterhawk looked at him. "What is it?"

The young man shook his head again. "Forgive me, but once again I am dismayed by the capacity of some of your people for barbarism."

Kestrel nodded wordlessly. Right now she didn't feel in much of a mood to apologize for humankind, meta or otherwise. She wasn't feeling too charitable toward them herself.

The plane landed at another small private airfield without any trouble and they picked up the rental car that Kestrel had arranged. By now it was late afternoon. As Kestrel drove, Gabriel called Harry to see if he had managed to get anything set up.

"I think I've got it taken care of," the fixer told him. "But you aren't gonna be able to do it until morning. Not if you want to be anything like subtle about it, anyway. They don't release prisoners this late in the day. I've already got the paperwork started—my deckers are plantin' a few appropriate records and doctorin' a few more—so you should be able to just go in there tomorrow and tell 'em you're there to pick him up. But that won't be until nine tomorrow morning. If I were you I'd sit tight until then. It'll draw less attention."

Winterhawk leaned over the seat to address Harry. "So we've got to leave him in there another night, then?" He didn't sound too happy about the prospect.

"'Fraid so." Harry didn't sound happy about it either. "If you try to go in today, somebody might get suspicious. With this kind of short notice, the stuff my deckers did might not stand up to that level of scrutiny. I'd play it safe if I were you."

Gabriel sighed. "Of course. I don't think any of us like it, but best if we do as you suggest. Thank you, Harry."

"Yeah, yeah. Call if you run into any snags. Good luck." Harry disconnected, leaving the three of them to contemplate the unpleasant fact that they would have to cool their heels for almost fifteen hours before they could be reunited with Ocelot.

That left them with an evening to kill, and none of them was in any mood to seek out recreational activities. Gabriel was becoming more introspective, Winterhawk more morose, and Kestrel more stressed as time went on. Finally, after a halfhearted attempt to come up with anything better, they decided to simply check into a hotel and wait out the night.

As Gabriel and Winterhawk sat in the crowded hotel bar waiting for Kestrel, who had decided to go work off some of her excess energy in the complimentary health club, 'Hawk sighed. "We're going to need to do this again for Joe and 'Wraith, aren't we?"

Gabriel didn't look at him; he was watching a group of the bar's other patrons move by. The three Japanese *sararimen* looked happy and more than a bit tipsy. "I think so," he said reluctantly at last.

'Hawk regarded the tall glass of Guinness in front of him, which he had not yet touched. After a pause he asked, "Is there anything...you're not telling us?" His tone

suggested that he couldn't make up his mind whether he wanted an answer.

Gabriel turned his chair around to face the mage. He didn't reply. He appeared to be deep in thought.

"Gabriel?"

"I don't know," the young man said. "I don't understand it myself. I've never seen anything like this before. We—we all saw it die. We all saw Stefan kill it. So...if it is the Enemy—and I am quite sure it is—then it must be something different. Something—else." He sighed and looked down. "I cannot help but believe that this is my fault somehow. I just hope we are not too late to save the others."

Winterhawk shook his head. "It might be because of you," he admitted. "And it might not be. Remember, we dealt with some of these things before we ever met you. P'raps it's some bit of leftover business from *our* past, and you've just gotten yourself caught in the middle of it."

"It is possible." Gabriel didn't look convinced.

The mage took a sip of his Guinness. For a long moment he was silent, staring down into the deep brown of the liquid as he swirled it around. "Odd..." he commented, almost to himself.

"What?"

His eyes came up. "I was just remembering something a friend told me back home. She's an expert at divination. When I was first starting to...experience this, I went to see her, to see if she might be able to shed some light on what was happening to me." He paused a moment, gathering his thoughts, aware of Gabriel's intense gaze fixed on him. "She...told me that she sensed conflict in it. As if it were trying to...harm me and warn me at the same time." He shrugged, meeting Gabriel's eyes. "I didn't know what it meant then, and I still don't. P'raps it means nothing."

Gabriel sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know. When I...touched your mind, back at the hospital, I didn't sense any conflict. Only fear. Something—malevolent. Perhaps the warning was some part of your own mind when it was still in control, trying to keep you safe from it. I did sense that your consciousness was attempting to withdraw, to hide from the influence. That was probably why I was able to bring you back. If your mental discipline had not been strong enough to—" Again he shook his head.

"Let's hear it for mental discipline," the mage said a trifle sarcastically. He looked up, realizing the implications of that. "Does that mean—that the others will be more difficult for you to save?"

"I don't think so." Gabriel smiled almost mechanically at two pretty young women who were giving him the eye, then looked back at the mage. "You were probably the most difficult, because of your magical abilities. You are by nature more susceptible to astral influence than someone who isn't magically active. That is one of the reasons why mages are abnormally represented among individuals with severe mental illnesses."

'Hawk nodded. He knew all about that. "The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents," he said in the tone of a quotation.

Gabriel tilted his head in question.

'Hawk chuckled mirthlessly. "Lovecraft. One of those authors magical types tend to develop an interest in—and probably shouldn't." He shrugged. "Seemed apropos." Again there was a pause, and again he looked up as another revelation struck him. "Gabriel..." he asked slowly, "Are you sure you can handle this? I know you're far more attuned to the astral plane than I am—if it can even influence someone as strong as you are—"



The young man took a deep breath. "I don't have a choice, do I?" he asked softly.

Another long pause. "No...I guess you don't at that." The thought did nothing for Winterhawk's already somber mood.

Fortunately, Kestrel picked that moment to enter the bar. She'd obviously already been up to her room—she was dressed in street clothes and her hair was still damp from the shower. The two men stood as she approached. "Was the workout any help?" Gabriel asked.

"Not really. But at least I got rid of some energy." She looked down at their nearly-untouched drinks. "C'mon. Unless you two want to take the rest of the night to get drunk, let's go get some dinner and call it a night. The sooner we do, the sooner tomorrow gets here and we can get this over with."

Her two companions were in full agreement.

No one slept much that night, and no one was surprised. Gabriel's soft knocks on Winterhawk's and Kestrel's doors at 7:00 the next morning found both of them dressed and ready to go. 'Hawk and Kestrel exchanged slightly sheepish glances at the realization that they had both probably been ready for quite some time, and awake for quite awhile before that.

After a quick breakfast at the hotel coffee shop (none of them was particularly hungry, but Kestrel pointed out that it would probably be several hours at least before they ate again), they set out for the prison. The morning traffic was every bit as hellish as that in Seattle; Gabriel was driving now, and Kestrel was grateful for his inhuman patience. Had she been driving, she would have been chewing the steering wheel by the time they found the proper exit and ventured onto city streets.

It was obvious that something was wrong before they got within six blocks of the prison. As they approached, all three of them became aware that there seemed to be a lot more police vehicles around than would have been normal even for a prison, and traffic had slowed to a grinding crawl. Drawing closer they saw the reason for the crawl: the street was cordoned off and uniformed officers were waving cars back, forcing them to perform awkward U-turns. "Uh-oh..." Kestrel said under her breath. "This doesn't look good at all."

Winterhawk leaned forward and switched on the car's radio. After fiddling with the unfamiliar stations for several seconds he stopped, finger poised to hit the seek button again, as the words "...are advising anyone without business in that area to avoid it until further notice. Lone Star has scheduled a press conference for later this morning, so stay with us. Now back to Bambi McKay with our weather report—" came through the speakers.

"Hawk switched off the radio. "Bugger. Do you think this has anything to do with our friend?"

"I don't know." Gabriel's expression was grim as he continued to guide the car up to the site of the roadblock. Most of the vehicles in front of them were turning around early, but a few pressed on. Beyond them, an Ares Citymaster rolled by, lights flashing.

As they finally reached the roadblock, one of the two cops made a 'turn around' motion at the car. Gabriel pretended not to recognize it and moved forward a bit more until they were near the second cop. He rolled down the window.

"Turn back!" the cop ordered. "You can't go this way, sir."

"We're here to pick up one of the prisoners," Gabriel said, still feigning innocence. "He's being released today."

The cop looked at him like he was crazy and waved back over his shoulder in the direction of the excitement. "Nobody's pickin' *nobody* up today, chummer. Haven't you been listenin' to the news? There was a riot last night. The place is in full lockdown!"

## 18.

"Now what?" Winterhawk asked.

Gabriel didn't answer; he was busy guiding the car back the way they had come. When they got far enough away that the traffic began to thin out again he pulled off and parked.

"We have to get him out of there before somebody kills him," Kestrel said.

"How are we going to do that? Prison breaks aren't exactly my speciality," Hawk said. As he was prone to do, he was hiding stress under a layer of flippancy. It wasn't fooling anyone.

Gabriel leaned over and turned the radio back on, scanning through the channels until he found one devoted to news. The three of them listened grimly to the report: there had been an attempted breakout at the Pit last night. No prisoners had escaped, but as was procedure, the facility was in lockdown. Nobody was getting in or out. The break had affected only one of the prison's five buildings; however the affected area housed some of the most dangerous of the Pit's inmates. They were still attempting to determine how many guards were in there. So far there had been no demands. There was also no word on who had been involved in the attempted breakout. There were confirmed fatalities on both sides, but no one knew how many.

"I wonder if Ocelot was in on the break." Kestrel sighed, slumping back in her seat.

"I wouldn't put it past him, knowing how much he hates being confined," Winterhawk said.

Kestrel nodded and turned to Gabriel. "Do you think there's any way we can get in there?"

Gabriel didn't answer right away. "It won't be easy," he said at last. "I don't think we will be able to do it without magic."

"Is that—safe?" Winterhawk asked.

"I think so, although it won't be safe to do any sort of astral reconnaissance."

"They'll have wards and spirits on patrol anyway," Kestrel pointed out. "You can't expect a place like that not to have major magical defenses."

Gabriel nodded. "It would be easier if we knew the layout of the place."

'Hawk smiled mirthlessly and pulled out his portable phone. He was already punching in a number.

"Who—?" Kestrel asked, but 'Hawk waved her away as the party on the other end answered.

"Harry. Can you get a secure line and call me back at this number?" He nodded. "Right." He clicked off; after a few moments the phone buzzed again. He tapped the speaker button so everyone in the car could hear the conversation.

"This has something to do with the break last night at the Pit, doesn't it?" Harry asked without preamble.

"How did you know about that?" 'Hawk was astonished. "We just found out ourselves."

"After you left, I flagged my sources to pull up anything about L.A. and specifically about that area. Didn't get in till just now, or I'd've called you sooner."

'Hawk nodded. "We need a map of the Pit, Harry. Can you come up with such a thing on short notice?"

On the tiny viewscreen, Harry's eyes narrowed. "You're not tellin' me you're thinking of going *in* there, are you? That's just plain suicidal."

"You forget who we've got on our side," Kestrel said, leaning over the seat.

"No I don't. It's *still* suicidal. Tryin' to break outta there is insane. Tryin' to break *in*, and then get back out again, while the place is under a lockdown is —"

"Can you get us the map?" 'Hawk interrupted.

Harry sighed. "Yeah, yeah. It'll take me a little time — half an hour or so at least. I can get you the layout, and the basic security setup, but I can't promise anything beyond that. A situation like this changes all the rules. That's why it's so dangerous." He looked away for a moment, examining something offscreen. "Send me a number where I can shoot this to you, and I'll do the best I can. But I'm tellin' you — you might be better off waitin' until the lockdown's lifted and takin' your chances then."

"We can't," Kestrel said. "You know Ocelot as well as we do. If something's up, chances are he's in the middle of it. Which means he's either going to get out or get killed. I think we all know which one of those is the most likely."

The fixer didn't answer; he didn't have to. "Okay. I'll do the best I can. Sit tight until I get back to you."

Winterhawk gave Harry the number of a secure mail drop Kestrel passed along to him. Before he could disconnect, Kestrel motioned for the phone. He gave it to her.

"Do you know anybody down here that we can pick up some stuff from?" she asked Harry.

"Like what stuff?"

"Armor, guns, ammo — something nonlethal. Narcoject, maybe, or a Squirt? Gabriel and Winterhawk might be able to sling the spells, but I'd feel a lot more comfortable with a little artillery backing me up."

Harry nodded. "Yeah. Hang on a second." Again he consulted something offscreen and then a number appeared on the phone's display. "Call this and tell 'em I sent you. They'll set you up."

"Thanks." Kestrel handed it back to 'Hawk, who broke the connection and stashed the phone back in his jacket.

Sighing, the mage leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. "Might as well make that call now. There isn't anything else we can do until Harry gets back to us."

The phone number Harry gave them turned out to be a Chinese restaurant a couple of miles away. The man who answered told Kestrel it was a little early to be picking up take-out orders, but when she mentioned Harry he told her to come on down and he would set her up with the special. Twenty minutes later the three of them were in one of the back rooms of a restaurant called Fung Long's, being outfitted with everything they might need by an amiable young man who had introduced himself simply as Cheung while an older man with a strong familial resemblance to Cheung watched silently from the shadows.

Kestrel looked much more comfortable now, dressed in an armored longcoat with an Ares Squirt, a Narcoject pistol, sufficient ammunition for both, and an unremarkable but serviceable katana stowed in various places around her person. Winterhawk had taken another of the armored coats and, after some prodding from Kestrel, a Narcoject pistol to be used as a last resort if he took too much drain from casting spells. Gabriel had at first declined to take anything, but Kestrel convinced him to at least wear the armored coat. Winterhawk watched some subtle and silent communication pass between them and wondered what she'd said, but whatever it was it seemed to be enough to convince the young man she was right. Finally, she picked out three tiny radio transceivers with throat mikes and a hand-held scanner that would

allow them to monitor police communications. "I don't know if these'll work in there," she said, indicating the transceivers, "but they'll be worth having if we get separated."

"How much do we owe you for all of this?" Gabriel asked Cheung after they had finished with their outfitting and had stowed everything away for transport.

Cheung shook his head. "Harry took care of it already. He said to give you whatever you needed. That it's—how did he put it?—'his contribution to this mess'."

"What a surprise," 'Hawk said, and he truly *did* appear to be surprised. "Getting Harry to part with a nuyen? This is indeed a rare and momentous occasion."

They were on their way back in the direction of the Pit when Harry called back. "I got what you wanted," he told them. "Plans of the place—not the official ones, either, so they show some things that aren't on the ones on file with the city. Got some security info too, but like I said, that's not gonna to be much help in this situation."

Gabriel was already pulling over next to a public dataterminal. Kestrel got out of the car and plugged her pocket secretary into it, running a little routine that bypassed the public terminal's normal identification procedures and allowed her to connect to her anonymous mail drop. Winterhawk kept talking to Harry while Kestrel finished the download; two minutes later she was back in the car. "Thank you, Harry," 'Hawk said. "We owe you for this."

"We'll settle up later," Harry said gruffly. "When all four of you guys are back here in one piece. I don't hafta tell ya to be careful in there, but—be careful in there."

"I'll second that," the mage agreed.

Kestrel studied the plans as they drove the rest of the way over. Gabriel parked the car as close as he could get



to the Pit without arousing suspicion and turned off the engine. "We'll need to get closer," Kestrel said, handing the pocket secretary over to Winterhawk for a look. "I think I've got a pretty good idea of the layout now, but that isn't going to help us if we can't get in."

"Do you think anyone's going to go in?" Winterhawk asked. "Doesn't 'lockdown' mean they don't let anyone in or out?"

"Usually." Kestrel was busy fastening up the front of her armored jacket. "But this place isn't your typical prison. If somebody's overridden the security—and it sure looks like they have, or this wouldn't have happened in the first place—then they might just decide to do something drastic. From the sound of things there aren't any VIP hostages in there—you know, like the head of the place or some Lone Star higher-up—so they might make the decision to sacrifice the guards that are still alive and go in with lethal force to take the place back."

Gabriel sighed but didn't comment.

"It might be our only chance to get in," Kestrel pointed out gently. "But we'll have to get a lot closer than this if we're going to do it."

"I can get us closer," Gabriel said, his voice soft, his eyes showing sadness.

Kestrel nodded. She didn't look much happier about it than he did. "Okay. Then we'd better get started."

The three of them got out of the car after first making sure that all of their various weapons were out of sight. "We're lucky in one thing," Kestrel said as they headed in the direction of the prison. "I noticed in that file Harry gave us that they don't hold any magically active prisoners in the Pit—it's too dangerous, so they ship them elsewhere. That means they won't be looking for magic on the inside. They *do* have some paranormals—hellhounds—guarding the outer yard, though."

“That should not be a problem,” Gabriel said. He made a brief gesture toward the two of them. “There. We should not be noticed by anyone now. Keep that in mind, though, because the spell does not discriminate. Don’t, for instance, walk out in front of any vehicles expecting that they will stop.”

Winterhawk nodded. He was familiar with the spell. He felt much more comfortable now under cover of such a spell cast with a dragon’s power.

As they approached, they could see at least a dozen Lone Star vehicles ranging from patrol cars up to armored personnel vehicles arrayed around the prison’s main entrance. The air crackled with the sounds of radio chatter and shouts back and forth between the various individuals and small groups gathered outside. More guards in full security armor and carrying machine guns patrolled the top of the high gray wall.

Kestrel, Gabriel, and Winterhawk stayed about half a block away, watching from around the corner of a large abandoned building. No one paid any attention to them, which wasn’t surprising given the magic that cloaked them; Kestrel suspected, though, that as long as they stayed on the right side of the roadblocks and didn’t do anything to attract notice, they would have been simply part of the scenery like the rest of the area’s denizens who were observing from the shadows. Kestrel pulled out the police scanner and fiddled with it, listening intently to the communications coming through the tiny earbud receiver. Gabriel and Winterhawk continued to watch grimly, neither wanting to use any more magic until it was necessary for fear of being noticed – either by Lone Star or by...something else.

The minutes dragged on for what seemed like forever while Kestrel listened. It became clear that Lone Star was

preparing to do *something*, but it was difficult to tell what that plan was from this far away.

Kestrel fiddled with the scanner again and listened for about five more minutes. Her eyes widened. "That's it," she said, pulling the earbud out and returning her attention to her companions. "That's how we can get in. But it won't be easy."

"What?" Winterhawk glanced back toward the cops and then again at Kestrel.

Kestrel held up the scanner. "Good thing we had this—and good thing it's a little better than the ones you can pick up down at the local electronics shop. I was able to listen in on one of their coded channels for a couple of minutes before they changed the code again. It sounds like they're planning to send in a small squad of heavily armed special-forces types—they'll be here any minute now. They're trained to deal with this kind of thing. The plan is to put them in one of the Citymasters and run them up to one of the back doors, then unlock just that one door. They figure the one thing they've got in their favor is that the inmates can't use the guards' guns—yet. But there are some guys in there who might be capable of overriding the signature feature on the guns, given enough time to do it. They want to do something before that happens."

"I don't understand," Winterhawk said. "If they've got the place locked up and the inmates don't have guns, why can't they—I don't know—flood the place with stun gas or something?"

Kestrel shook her head. "It's a different system, and somebody inside has overridden their ability to get to it from the outside. From what little reports they've been able to get from the guards, the gas didn't work right. It's standard procedure to do that at the first sign of a riot."

"Deckers inside?" the mage asked. "Almost sounds like something *we'd* do, doesn't it?"

She grinned mirthlessly. "Yeah, come to think of it, it does."

Gabriel had been watching the Lone Star activities as the other two were talking. He looked back at Kestrel. "All right—we know their plans now. What do you suggest we do?"

Kestrel eyed him up and down. "Do you think you could get us into that Citymaster?"

He looked at it and then back at her. He was about to say something and then he smiled. "*In* would be difficult," he admitted. "Would you settle for *on*?"

"What do you mean, *on*?" Winterhawk tilted his head questioningly.

Kestrel was smiling now too. "Okay, I get it now. You can conceal us and we can ride in on top of the thing?"

Gabriel nodded. "Then once they open the doors, we can slip in unnoticed behind them."

"Can you hide us from their scanners too? I'm sure everybody and their dog will be watching that thing when it goes in."

Again the young man nodded. "We'll have to be a bit careful until we get inside, but after we've gained entry we can simply wait for them to move on and then search at our leisure."

"Sounds easy enough," Winterhawk said a trifle dubiously. "I keep forgetting we've got a dragon on our side, so I guess it *should* be easy. But I don't mind saying I'll be much more pleased when this whole thing is over." He turned to Kestrel. "When you looked at the layout of the place, did you get any idea where he might be?"

She shook her head. "It sounds like the riot started during the dinner hour. That's the only time when most of

the inmates are out of their cells. He could be anywhere by now. Anywhere but out," she added ruefully.

Gabriel pointed toward the gate. "It appears that our strike team has arrived."

The other two looked over. A black van was pulling up near the largest knot of Lone Star cars. Before it even came to a full stop the back doors opened, disgorging seven figures. Each was dressed in matte-black armor complete with helmets—lighter than full security armor, allowing for more maneuverability, but still heavy enough to stop a bullet. All seven carried rifles over their shoulders, stun batons and pistols at their belts, and small riot shields. One of the seven had a case of some sort slung over his other shoulder. Kestrel nodded. "Combat decker," she told the others. "Looks like they're going to try to get in there and get control back. That means we're going to have to hurry, 'cause we don't want to get caught inside when they get the gas going again. If I were them at that point I'd just gas the whole place and then sort it out before anything else happened."

"Lovely," Hawk muttered.

Inside the walls of the Pit it was anything but lovely. Ocelot crouched in the shadows, resting for a few moments before moving on. Tiny was with him, as was Michael. Ocelot wore the armor that had been worn the previous night by Kraft, who didn't need it anymore.

It had been only a couple of hours since the lockdown when it had happened—the four of them were making their way carefully down red-tinged metal corridors, trying to reach the Pit's control center. Michael and Kraft had determined that the Star might *not* in fact have gotten Louie, since the gas hadn't come on and the interior doors hadn't closed. They had surmised that someone had taken control of the outer perimeter, including the walls and the

doors leading to the outside world, but that it was quite possible that their decker was still active inside. That decided, the two subjects of the escape attempt had figured their best course of action was to try to reach the place where Louie was and see what they could do about communicating with their other teammates on the outside. Aside from that they admitted to being fresh out of options.

Ocelot and Tiny didn't have any options either, so they had set off with Michael and Kraft. At least those two appeared to have some idea where they were going; right now that was probably the most valuable thing in here, except perhaps for a way out.

They had been ambushed coming around a corner into an area that they had thought to be deserted. No sooner had they stepped into the room than a gang of three trolls and an ork came up from behind some overturned furniture (it had been ripped out of the floor, probably by the trolls) and set upon them, wielding makeshift clubs.

The attacking gang had been defeated, but not without heavy loss. All three of the escapees heard the sickening *crunch* as one of the trolls got hold of Kraft's neck and twisted it sideways, then flung the man aside like an unwanted toy. Kraft hadn't even had time to scream.

That had spurred the remaining three runners to enraged action: Tiny, roaring, took out the troll who had killed Kraft and another one besides, and between them Ocelot and Michael killed the other ork and the troll rather messily, clubbing them to death with their comrades' own weapons. When it was over, silence hung in the air for a long moment as no one moved. Then Michael dropped down to his knees next to Kraft's body, his unyielding features overlaid with grief. Ocelot came

up next to him, the faint stirrings of something in the back of his mind warring with the buzzings and the paranoia. "How long you two been teammates?" he asked gruffly, in the tone some men use to hide emotion.

Michael bowed his head. "Five years." His gaze came up, his eyes blazing with rage and despair. "Damn this place. We are *going* to get out of here. I am *not* going to die in this hellhole!" Reaching down, he pulled Kraft's helmet off and passed his hand over his friend's face, closing his eyes. "Come on. Let's get his armor off—you can use it, and it'll mean we won't have to risk taking down another guard just for that."

Ocelot nodded. He helped Michael carefully remove the armor and then donned it while Tiny stood guard. They gathered up all the guns and the clubs the trolls had been using, handing the latter to Tiny who held one in each hand, his face grim. Both he and Michael took one last look back at Kraft before they moved on.

After that it had been an uneasy but uneventful night—at least as uneventful as it was possible to be under the circumstances. They came upon fewer and fewer guards as the night went on, and managed to avoid the ones they did encounter. Michael had determined with Kraft earlier when they had obtained the first sets of armor that the guards did not carry anything that might be useful to their quest, such as keys or ID cards that allowed them access to the various area of the prison; apparently it was all done with codes and retina scans, neither of which were operational at the moment. Thus, it didn't make sense to mess with the guards, since they still had functioning firearms. It became obvious early on that the guards were as busy trying to avoid the inmates as the opposite; they moved in little groups of two or three, covering each other, the fear invisible on their faces beneath the helmets but quite apparent in their bearing as

they moved. Despite their firearms, they were hunted animals. Their ammo could only last so long, and they knew it.

In addition to the guards the three of them also passed many more dead inmates lying in bloody heaps along the corridors. Some of them were in groups, some alone; some had been killed by guards' bullets and others by blunt trauma—probably by their own fellow prisoners. Even Ocelot, in his short time here before everything had gone south, had seen the evidence of simmering rivalries between the prisoners: human against meta, ork against troll, gang against gang. Now, with all the doors thrown open and no guards to keep a lid on things, they were free to give vent to these rivalries. Ocelot was disgusted. Surviving was one thing—the most important thing, in fact. Living like animals, turning on each other when it would make more sense to band together until they were out of here—it was mindless, foolish, suicidal.

They had lost track of what time it was. They weren't near any windows, so the illumination inside continued to be nothing more than the faint red of the half-power security lights. It had been an endless progression of sneaking around, hiding until other groups went by, fighting occasionally when they had to. It seemed to Ocelot as if he had never been doing anything else. At least the action and the tension kept the buzzing down. He had noticed (when he'd finally gotten around to thinking about it) that the buzzing had not been as bad since he had been brought here. He still worried about *them* and realized that if he did get out of here he would have to run, to be on his own again, but in here the fuzz that had wrapped around his brain on the outside did not seem as thick.



He looked at Michael and Tiny and quickly moved to catch up. He knew it was going to take teamwork to get out of here. That was more important even than *them*.

Outside the plan was proceeding well, albeit nerve-wrackingly. Gabriel, Kestrel, and Winterhawk, still cloaked by Gabriel's spell, crept forward as the Citymaster was opened and the seven armored figures began taking their places inside. When the three saw the interior of the vehicle they were glad they had not tried to get inside—quarters were close with all the equipment they had in there already, and someone was bound to have noticed them. As it was, levitating upward and flattening themselves against the roof was quite perilous enough.

Fortunately for them, now that Lone Star had decided what to do, they did it quickly without a great deal of fuss and bother. No sooner had the three stowaways taken up positions on top of the Citymaster, it began to move. Two other Citymasters with mounted machine guns moved in behind them, their weapons trained on the gate that they would be opening. The rest of the Lone Star personnel, weapons also drawn, spread out to cover any holes that might be left by the larger vehicles. The heavy gate rolled open slowly; as soon as the Citymaster was through, it slammed closed again. Winterhawk and Kestrel exchanged glances. They were on their own now.

The Citymaster moved quickly across the wide expanse of yard, obviously not wanting to be caught out in the open for long. The three stowaways stayed low, resisting the urge to raise up high enough that they could get a better view of what was going on ahead. They knew where they were going, and it wasn't worth it to take even a slight risk of detection.

It was only a few moments before the vehicle stopped again, swung around, and backed up to what looked like a heavily fortified door. The back end opened and three of the seven Lone Star operatives got out, including the one Kestrel had identified as the combat decker. While the other two covered him, the decker jacked into a small panel next to the door and in less than a minute had success. "Okay," he called. "Get ready—I'll open on three."

The remaining operatives jumped out of the back of the Citymaster and spread themselves out, training their guns on the door. One of them, apparently the leader, nodded toward the decker.

"Okay. One—two—three!" The light on the panel changed from red to green and the door slid open, revealing a red-tinged hallway beyond and nothing else. There was no sign of life inside.

"Go, go!" called the leader, and the men hurried inside. The decker remained outside until everyone else was in.

Kestrel looked at Gabriel and hooked her thumb toward the door. He nodded and the three of them floated upward and inside the doorway just as the decker slipped through and it closed behind him.

The three stowaways flattened themselves against the walls and listened as the leader gave a final briefing to his men: they were headed for the central control room of this particular building. If there was a decker inside, he would have to be there. They would retake the building and then, if they could get control of the ventilation system, they would fill the entire building (with the exception of the control center) with stun gas. That would allow the Star to send in personnel to get things under control again.

Kestrel nodded knowingly as the seven Star men moved off in military formation and disappeared down the hall. The three waited five more minutes to make sure the others were gone, and then Kestrel sighed. "Okay. Now comes the hard part."

"I'm going to drop the spell now, if no one has any objections," Gabriel said. "As I said before, any magic involving prolonged contact with the astral plane, even something like this, increases our risk."

"Combat spells should still be all right," Winterhawk said. "Yes?"

Gabriel nodded. "Try to use as little magic as you can, though—it would be better if we weren't identified." He looked them up and down. They had all changed clothes before leaving, and were now dressed in nondescript pants and shirts under their armored jackets. Winterhawk and Kestrel had soft caps on to cover their distinctively-colored hair. He looked at Kestrel. "Lead on."

For the next several minutes they moved noiselessly down the corridors, stopping at each decision point for Kestrel to re-check the map of the place and determine their next course of action. None of them had any idea where Ocelot might be, but they had made a few guesses about where he would *not* be: anywhere particularly open or the cell blocks, the former because even when he was sane he preferred places where he could hide, and the latter because Kestrel surmised (and Winterhawk agreed) that he would not risk being near a place where he could be recaptured should something happen and the guards take over the building once again. That left the administrative areas, the bathrooms, the armory, the infirmary, the control room, and the ventilation systems. Right now they were heading for the administrative area, due to the fact that it was one of the few areas in the

building that had direct access to the outside world. If they knew that, perhaps Ocelot knew it too.

As they moved they could hear the far-off sounds of shouts, running feet, and the occasional gunshot. They encountered several dead bodies of both inmates and guards, each time taking a few seconds to verify that none of the bodies was Ocelot. All three of them were tense, knowing that the longer they remained in here, the greater the chance of discovery or of the Lone Star team's managing to locate the renegade decker and get the place back online. The tension was increased by the awareness that the control center was very close to the admin section, meaning that both they and the Star team were heading in roughly the same direction. This in turn meant that if they didn't find Ocelot before he arrived there (assuming that was where he was going at all) there would in all likelihood be a confrontation.

A crash sounded up ahead, followed by a loud yell of triumph. Kestrel froze and held up a hand; behind her, the others stopped as well. Seconds later three figures rounded the corner and stopped as they spotted the newcomers. All three were orks, huge and ugly and dressed in prison blues with the sleeves torn off. The one in the lead grinned as his eyes fell on Kestrel. "Hey, guys!" he yelled, leering. "Looka he —"

He didn't get to finish the sentence because there was a tiny *thwip* from Kestrel's Narcoject pistol, followed by a thud as the ork hit the ground. The other two did not get a chance to do more than stare wide-eyed before being dropped by a second shot from Kestrel and another from 'Hawk. Kestrel paused to replace the two spent Narcoject rounds and then slowly moved around the corner.

A guard lay there in a crumpled heap, his neck broken, blood pooling beneath his head. Gabriel looked

back with disgust toward the corner where they had left the orks, but followed and said nothing.

Winterhawk looked around nervously as they continued through the corridors. "Shouldn't we be—seeing more people?" he asked softly. Looking at another dead prisoner against one of the walls, he added, "Live ones, I mean?"

"A lot of them are probably hiding," Kestrel said under her breath. "Even in places like this, most people would rather hide than fight and risk getting killed. If this has been going on since last night I'd guess that the gangs and whoever else had some kind of rivalry going used this opportunity to take it out on each other, but I'm figuring a lot of the inmates are lying low. They shouldn't be a problem for us."

"From the look of things, neither should most of the aggressors." 'Hawk eyed an ork who had been stabbed in the heart with what looked like a knife fashioned from a piece of sheet metal and moved gingerly by. This particular ork had one leg of his pants rolled up to the knee, revealing intricate tattoos on his calf. 'Hawk, clueless as he was about gang culture, had spent enough time with Ocelot to recognize that both the tattooing and the ripped sleeves of the previous orks marked gang membership.

Kestrel sighed. "We're getting close," she whispered. "Keep low—we're probably going to run into more activity, especially if the people who planned this shindig are still in the building." She held up her pocket secretary and pointed out the heavy steel door, now open, and the location of the administrative offices around the corner. As they passed the door, Winterhawk noted that it was several inches thick and solid steel. It would certainly have been sufficient to keep out anything short of an army, had it functioned correctly. He passed under it

quickly, half afraid it would slam down on him as he went.

At the end of the corridor was a normal door, or at least normal for the sort of place this was: it was heavy steel with a small Armorlite window inset and slid back into the wall. Stenciled on the door in no-nonsense black lettering was "Administration—Authorized Personnel Only." There was a retina scanner next to it, but it was not necessary: the door had been slid half-open, slight scorch marks on the wall into which it had been shoved back indicating that whatever electrical system controlled it has been violently tampered with. Further, the door was propped open by the armored body of a very dead guard.

"Looks like a good spot for an ambush," Winterhawk muttered under his breath, eyeing the space the guard was occupying. It was barely wide enough for them to slip through one at a time.

Kestrel nodded. "I was thinking the same thing." She flattened herself against the wall and looked at Gabriel. "Is it safe to just do a quick check? I don't want to go through there without knowing what's on the other side."

Gabriel nodded, looking rather grim. He closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating, then opened them again. Holding his hand out for Kestrel's pocket secretary, he pointed at a spot the door. The hallway extended out for about three meters and ended in a T intersection. The location he indicated was around the corner. "There are two individuals there," he said softly. "One on each side. Both human, both armed with guns they appear to be using as clubs."

Kestrel smiled rather nastily. "Two humans with clubs we can handle." She readied her Narcoject pistol and moved over toward the opening.

"Shit!" Michael snapped in a whisper, drawing back from the corner he had been about to round.

"What?" Ocelot moved up, careful not to allow any part of his body to be seen by whatever had angered the shadowrunner.

"Star." Michael hurried back the way they had come, motioning for Ocelot and Tiny to follow him. When they had put enough distance behind themselves and the Lone Star team, he stopped. "We're not getting into the control room. They're already there. They've got a decker tryin' to get in." He blew air through his teeth and seemed to slump against the wall.

Ocelot sighed in frustration. "They makin' any progress?"

"Doesn't look like it yet, but it's only a matter of time. Louie's good, but he won't be able to hang on forever." He looked at Ocelot and then at Tiny. "Looks like we're on our own."

"What does that mean?" Tiny asked. "Can't we get out?" He looked worried. He had put his trust in these three—two now—men who appeared to know what they were doing. They were going to help him get out of here, get back to his mother and his friends. And now it looked like they were as stuck as he was.

Michael's gaze darted back and forth down the hall. "There's another way out, but it'll be risky. As long as Louie's got the control room we should be able to get out through the admin wing. We'll have to get through one door that'll be locked, then we're out. But the problem is there isn't any support once we get out. If they've got the walls—" He spread his hands, not needing to voice the rest of it.

"I want the hell *outta* here," Ocelot said. "I'm willing to take my chances outside."

Tiny nodded. "Me too."

Michael thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Okay," he said. "Let's go. Follow me—it's not far from here."

New plan in place, the three fugitives hurried back the way they had come.

Kestrel put her finger to her lips and crept forward. Winterhawk and Gabriel were right behind her, making no sound. Pistol drawn, she paused a moment and then quickly slipped sideways through the opening. "Come on," she whispered, moving back against the wall and waiting as her two friends came through. So far there had been no movement at the intersection. *They probably think we don't know they're there*, Kestrel thought. *They're waiting until we come to them*. She smiled at the thought. The would-be ambushers were going to get more than they'd bargained for.

Side by side with Gabriel in the middle and Winterhawk and Kestrel on either end with their Narcojects ready, the three of them made their move.

The two humans waiting for their prey to approach were far more surprised than their intended victims when said victims passed the corner. They barely had time to raise their weapons before twin *thwips* sounded and tiny darts stuck to each of their bodies at chest level. First one and then the second human slumped, their guns crashing down next to them. "Which way?" Winterhawk asked as he slipped two more rounds—one for the last time and one for this time—into his gun.

Kestrel hooked a thumb over her shoulder. "That way. It's about ten meters down this hallway and hang a left, and that should be the main admin area. From the look of things we should be able to search it fairly quick."

'Hawk nodded and he and Gabriel followed her in that direction. The mage was hoping hard that they



would find Ocelot here and alive—all this sneaking through reddish corridors was reminding him uncomfortably of a run the team had performed many years ago in an Aztechnology research lab gone awry. *At least there aren't any mutated trolls*, he told himself sourly. It wasn't a very reassuring thought.

Ocelot was looking everywhere at once as he, Michael, and Tiny reached the corridor that led to the admin wing. Michael stopped as he noticed the guard propping open the door. "Somebody's been here already," he said grimly. "Be ready for a fight."

Tiny hefted his twin clubs and Ocelot tightened his grip on the gun he carried. A fight would be preferable to sneaking and hiding like an animal. The buzzing in his head was increasing again; he didn't know why, but he tried to ignore it as much as he could. *They* were everywhere, he knew—*they* might even be among his companions, but he couldn't believe that right now. Once they were out, if one or the other of them tried anything, he'd take care of them. Right now, though, he sensed that they wanted out as much as he did. Even the enemy could be your friend under the right circumstances. He shook his head as if to clear it as that thought seemed familiar. He had dealt with just such a situation in his past, but he could not remember any of the details. A time when an enemy had become a friend—

"Come *on*," Michael hissed, motioning toward the half-open door.

Ocelot hurried to catch up.

Tiny looked at the door. "I'll open it the rest of the way," he said, moving to do just that. "I'm not gonna get through there the way it is now."

"Careful," Michael said. "We don't know what's on the other side."

Tiny had escape firmly in his sights now and was not worried about threats. Grasping the door in his huge hands, he shoved it sideways until the protesting motor trying to push it open gave up and broke, allowing him to finish what someone else had started. The guard's body slumped slightly to the side and did not move.

"I'm not sure exactly where the door out is," Michael said. "We're gonna have to hurry, though. I don't think it'll take that Star decker long to get to Louie. I don't like it, but we'll need to split up."

"Split up?" Tiny didn't look happy about the prospect.

"Come on," Ocelot said, realizing Michael was right. "We have to find it fast."

"Just yell if you run into trouble," Michael said. "I'll do the same. Meet back here in five minutes—I hope by then one of us will have found it. Hurry." To punctuate his words he turned and moved swiftly down, taking the right fork at the end of the long corridor.

Ocelot wasted no time in following, choosing the left fork. Tiny was more hesitant, but he didn't want to be left alone. He hurried after Ocelot.

Ocelot's fork branched again, left and right. He pointed left. "Tiny—check that, okay?" Without waiting for an answer he chose the right fork and continued on. Even though he had no idea where he was going, he hoped he would be the one to find the door. Then, at least, he would have time to assess his options before continuing.

Kestrel, Gabriel, and Winterhawk were having no luck finding the object of their search. Except for the two ambushers they had dispatched and a few more dead bodies, the place seemed deserted. They had separated slightly, still keeping each other in sight, to check the

administration area for familiar bodies before deciding where to go next.

Gabriel sighed. "We can't do this forever," he said. "Perhaps I should risk a detection spell—"

"Let's finish here," Kestrel said, "and then maybe you're right. I just don't see—"

"Ocelot!" Hawk broke in.

Kestrel looked up from the body she had just rolled over. "I don't see him either. We—"

But Winterhawk wasn't listening. He was staring at something at the other end of the corridor.

Ocelot froze, his blood chilling as if someone had just quick-frozen it from the inside out. Someone had called to him. Someone whose voice he knew. Someone who should not be here.

Someone who was one of *them*.

He looked down the corridor, eyes wide and unblinking, and saw what he had feared: a tall, thin man in a longcoat, his hat not quite hiding the shock of white in his dark hair. "No..." he whispered. *Not now. I'm just about to get out of here. They can't have me now.*

He backed away warily.

Winterhawk could not believe his good fortune. "Ocelot!" he called again. His expression turned to one of puzzlement as his friend began moving away from him. "Ocelot? What's the matter? Come on—we've come to get you out of this hellhole."

Kestrel too was confused as Ocelot continued to back up, his gaze darting left and right as if looking for an escape route. "Ocelot. It's us. It's me, Kestrel. We've come to get you out of here."

"No!" Ocelot called, tensing. "You won't get me now. I won't let you! I'm gonna get outta here, and you're *not* gonna catch me!"

"Ocelot."

Ocelot whirled as another voice spoke, this one off to his left side. The voice was soft, gentle, persuasive. His eyes widened and a shiver ran down his spine as he saw the speaker: a young man, dark-haired, dressed as the others were but with eyes that were oddly intense, compelling. *No...* All at once he remembered.

This young man was *their* leader, or at least one of them. He was the one who had orchestrated this whole thing—the phone calls, the surveillance, the odd feelings of being followed—they were all his fault.

He quickly scanned the room. There was no escape. The other two, the man who had first spoken and the woman who called herself Kestrel, were in front of him, a few meters away. The young man was to his left. Behind him was a wall. To escape he would have to fight. He would have to—

The young man took a step closer. "Ocelot. Please listen to me. I know you aren't well. I can help you, but you have to let us get you out of here first."

*Stall. Stall until someone gets here. If they get distracted, maybe I can—* "No. I'm not going anywhere with you. You're not gonna—"

There was a movement behind the young man. Ocelot noted it but did not let any reaction reach his face.

"No one is going to hurt you, Ocelot," the young man continued in his soft persuasive tones. "Winterhawk was ill too, and as you can see I've helped him. Everything will be all right. You just have to—"

Gabriel noted the movement behind him, but not quite soon enough to avoid the blow completely. With inhumanly quick reflexes he flung himself sideways as

Tiny's club came down, aimed for the top of his head. Because of this, instead of crushing his skull the club glanced off the side of his head and hit the top of his shoulder. For all intents and purposes the effect was the same, though: Gabriel slumped against the wall and did not move.

After that, it seemed that for the next few seconds everything happened at once. Kestrel and Winterhawk acted almost as one, firing their Narcojects at the troll who had appeared behind Gabriel. The troll swayed and dropped, crashing to the floor next to his victim, as Ocelot leaped forward. Before Kestrel and Winterhawk could react again, Ocelot had grabbed Gabriel and was holding him up in front of him, arm wrapped around the young man's upper chest.

"Don't move!" he yelled. "You try to shoot me and I'll kill him."

"Ocelot, no!" Kestrel immediately lowered the barrel of her gun. "Don't do this. You don't know what you're doing. Put him down and let's talk. Nobody's going to shoot you."

Ocelot's only answer was to adjust his grip on Gabriel. "I'm gettin' out of here, and he's goin' with me," he said. The buzzing in his head was getting unbearable. "*They're* everywhere. Maybe they'll let me alone if they know I have their leader."

Winterhawk stepped forward, his expression tight and calm. As he moved, he slid his own Narcoject pistol into the pocket of his coat and spread his hands. "No weapons, my friend," he said quietly. "We're not your enemy. I don't know quite how they've gotten to your mind, but believe me I understand. If it's anything like how they got into mine, I don't envy you in the slightest right now." He took another step toward Ocelot, careful not to get too close and frighten him. From where he was

he could see the strange light of insanity in his friend's eyes. "Listen to me, Ocelot. We are your friends. I'm Winterhawk. This is Kestrel. And the chap you're holding there is Gabriel. Don't you remember us at all?"

"I remember you," Ocelot growled. "You're all in league with *them*." He shook Gabriel slightly. "'Specially him. He's the boss."

'Hawk shook his head. "No, Terry. He's not the boss. He's trying to help you, like he helped me. If he hadn't come for me I'd still be stark raving mad. It isn't us, Terry. It's the Enemy. The Horrors. Don't you remember the Horrors?"

Ocelot's muscles tightened involuntarily. The buzzing inside his brain was getting so loud now that he could barely think past it. Impressions came to him—not thoughts, exactly, for there were no words, but certainties. Or were they certainties? *Don't listen to him. He is trying to mislead you. He is the enemy. All of them are. You are on your own. You must escape...* "No..."

"Terry," Winterhawk continued. "The Horrors are doing this to you. I don't know how—none of us do yet. We're trying to figure it out. Gabriel can help you. He can block off whatever is disturbing your mind. But we have to get out of here."

Kestrel nodded. "There's a Lone Star team trying to get into the control center. When they do, this whole place is going to be flooded with gas. They'll catch us all. They'll put you back in your cell. You don't want that, do you?"

Ocelot's gaze moved restlessly back and forth between the two of them. Something inside his mind was trying to fight the buzzing. There was something he needed to hear, and it wasn't letting him hear it. Something—

"Terry. It's the *Horrors*," Winterhawk said urgently. "Fight it. I know you can do it. I know how strong your mind is. I helped train it, remember? You *can* fight this, but you have to want to."

Kestrel was about to say something else when the sound of a strangled cry cut off by gunfire split the air, not far away. "Damn!" she bit out under her breath. "They're coming. We have to do something."

Ocelot hesitated, shifting his grip on Gabriel again. So far the young man had not moved; his head was bowed, his chin resting on Ocelot's forearm. Ocelot glanced toward the passageway that Michael had taken. Where was Michael? Had they gotten him?

To his left, Tiny was stirring slightly, groaning. "He's—not dead," he said slowly.

"Narcoject," 'Hawk told him. "We're trying not to kill anyone." He leaned forward, his eyes blazing. "Terry! *Listen* to me. It's the *Horrors* that've got you! Do you understand me? *The Horrors are trying to take over your mind!*"

Ocelot's breath was coming more quickly. A light sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead. *The Horrors...* The words, like no others could, were beginning to crack their way through the buzzing. He was shaking. *The Horrors...no... not...they can't...It can't be...*

*No! He's one of them. He's trying to deceive you –*

*The Horrors...the Enemy...*

*No – it – can't be – it can't – it –*

The buzzing faded, all at once. It was not quite gone, but at least for the moment it no longer had a stranglehold on his thought processes. He looked around in confusion. *How did I get here? What did I – ?* Hesitantly: "'Hawk?"

Winterhawk slumped slightly in relief. "Ocelot. Are you back with us? Are you all right?"

Ocelot looked down and realized with shock that he was holding Gabriel, and that the young man was unconscious. "What—?"

"Come on," Kestrel urged, dividing her attention between the hallway where the gunfire sounds had come from and the scene in the room. "We can talk later. We have to get out or there won't *be* a later!"

Her urgency got through to Ocelot. "Yeah," he said. "What's your plan?"

At that moment Kestrel realized that a large component of their plan was currently slumped in Ocelot's grip. She looked at Winterhawk. "Can you wake him up?"

The mage shook his head. "No."

"Damn." She glared at Tiny, who was getting up slowly. "He a friend of yours?" she asked Ocelot.

He nodded slowly. "Yeah. He thought he was protecting me."

"Well, he might have just screwed up our plan to get out of here," she said, her voice snapping a bit with frustration.

"Oh, shit..." Ocelot looked down at Gabriel and realized what she meant. "He—"

"He got us in. He was gonna get us out."

"Shit!" Ocelot said again. Moving over to the wall, he lowered Gabriel down and propped him up against it. He inspected the wound where Tiny's club had hit; it had already stopped bleeding and didn't look serious, but that didn't help much. "He's lucky he got outta the way," he said grimly. "Tiny could've killed him if he'd gotten a clean shot."

"I'm sorry," came a voice from behind them, the contrite tones of a little boy delivered in the deep bass of a troll. "I thought he was gonna hurt you."



Ocelot sighed, looking up at Tiny. The troll was seated now, looking a little loopy but shrugging off the effects of the Narcoject with surprising speed. "It's okay, Tiny. You didn't know. We—"

"Okay, everybody hold it right there!"

Everyone currently awake whirled at the sound.

Three armored guards and two Lone Star operatives stood there, guns trained on the group. One of the Star men moved forward, waving his assault rifle. "Everybody up. Slow. No sudden moves, and keep your hands in view. If you reach for a weapon you're dead." His voice was crisp, efficient, the kind of voice that expected to be obeyed.

Winterhawk and Kestrel looked at each other and nodded, slowly standing up. They looked at Ocelot, hoping he was back to himself enough not to try anything rash.

It appeared that he was. He too rose and kept his hands away from his body. "It's okay, Tiny," he said again. After a moment the troll did the same.

The Star guy who had spoken before looked them over as the other one and the three guards covered them all. His gaze fell on Kestrel and 'Hawk. "Well, look here. Looks like we've found the rest of the runner team who was trying to break Kraft and Michael outta here. Too bad there's nothing left to break out."

"What's that mean?" Ocelot demanded.

It was impossible to see the Star guy's face because of his helmet shield, but the smirk came through nonetheless. "Kraft's been dead awhile—we found him on our way in—and I'm afraid Michael's just gone to join him in Hell." He gestured with his chin toward the hallway where they had heard the cry and the gunfire.

Ocelot said nothing, but merely glared at their captors.

"What are you going to do with us?" Kestrel asked. She sounded amazingly confident for someone staring down the barrels of five assault rifles.

"Just shut up and you'll find out," the cop said. To the other cop, he ordered, "Cuff 'em. Jarvis should be into the control room in the next few minutes and we'll transport after we've taken the place back."

The second Star cop nodded and moved forward. Before he could get far, though, he, the first cop, and the three guards clutched their heads simultaneously and dropped into armored heaps on the concrete floor.

For a moment the runners just stared at each other. Then they turned around to look behind them.

Gabriel was struggling to his feet. He still looked disoriented, but there was determination in his eyes. "Come," he said between breaths. "We must—go now. They won't—be out for long."

Kestrel got an arm under him and helped him the rest of the way up. "Where's the exit?"

"I don't know," Ocelot said quickly. "I thought *you* knew."

"We were going out the way we came in, but we can't do that now. We need to find a way out."

"I found it," Tiny said suddenly. "I found the door. That's why I was coming back—to tell you." His expression clouded. "Michael's dead?"

Ocelot nodded. "Sounds that way." There was no time for sympathy now, even though he too was having a twinge of regret about losing their companion. "Where's the door, Tiny?"

"C'mon." The troll hurried off back the way he'd come. The rest of the team were quick to follow him.

As they expected, the door was locked—as it led to the outside world, it was one of those under control of the forces on the outside. It was heavy steel and looked quite

substantial. Ocelot smacked it with his fist. "We're never gonna get through this — even if we do, it'll be too late."

Tiny, before anyone could stop him, moved back and took a run at the door. All he succeeded in doing was hurting his shoulder. He rubbed it ruefully, the hope beginning to leave his eyes. "We're stuck here," he mumbled. "I'm never gonna see my mama again..."

"Not...stuck." Once again everyone had almost forgotten about Gabriel, still held up by Kestrel.

Tiny eyed him dubiously, then looked at Ocelot. "Is he gonna get the door open? He's just a little guy."

"Do you think you can do it?" Kestrel asked worriedly. "What about —?"

"We'll have to take the chance," he said quietly. He looked at Kestrel, Hawk, and Ocelot in turn. "Be ready...we must do this quickly. They will be waiting outside."

They nodded solemnly. Tiny watched with confusion but decided to continue trusting his companions — so far they hadn't steered him wrong.

Gabriel moved away from Kestrel, swaying slightly on his feet, and approached the door. He put both hands on it, leaning forward so his forehead touched its steel surface. For a few seconds nothing happened. Then the door began to buzz and smoke began seeping out from the cracks. "There," he said, letting his breath out. "Come on."

The others had been covering the corridor. So far the rest of the Lone Star contingent hadn't made an appearance, but nobody believed it would be long before they did. "Stay close," Gabriel said. "I'll need to shield us all again."

Ocelot took Tiny's arm and pulled him into the small group as Gabriel cast his spell once more. When he was finished, he nodded to Kestrel and she slid the door open.

Behind them as they moved through and slid it closed again, they could hear two sounds: the first was of booted feet ringing on the concrete floor, and the second was the hiss of gas being released from hidden vents in the ceilings.

None of them wanted to wait and see what would happen next.

## 19.

"Okay," Ocelot said from across the table. "I'm back now. You guys mind giving me the whole story?"

He, Kestrel, and Winterhawk were sitting in the living room of the large suite they had rented just outside Los Angeles. It had been about six hours since they had carefully sneaked their way around the Lone Star patrols and gotten out of the area of the Pit.

It hadn't been as hard to do as they had feared: the combination of Gabriel's powerful Disregard spell and the excitement of everyone around there about the fact that the Lone Star strike team had re-taken the control center and were in the process of flooding the building with stun gas had made it so no one had really been looking for them. The group had simply strolled outside and levitated over the wall. After that, a quick spell to change all their clothes into something more normal-looking and they had made it back to the car with a lack of drama that would have been almost disappointing had they not all been so tense.

The question about what to do with Tiny had been quickly settled when the troll had asked them to drop him off at a bus station a few miles away. "I know you guys got places to go," he had said. "I just wanna get back home to Mom and my friends." He'd looked at Ocelot and smiled. "Thanks, Ossa-lot. You got me outta there. You're a good friend."

Ocelot, who was dealing with his own problems at that point, had to smile. "No problem, Tiny. Just don't let 'em get you again, okay?"

Tiny had nodded soberly. "Sorry I slugged ya," he said to Gabriel, who was resting in the back seat next to Ocelot. "I hope you feel better..."

Gabriel nodded without opening his eyes. "Thank you, Tiny. I will be fine. Be careful."

With a pocketful of cash given to him by Kestrel, the young troll got out at the bus station and waved goodbye to his new friends. He looked back a little wistfully, then turned and marched inside with squared shoulders.

The next stop, after a brief telephone call, had been back at Fung Long's, the Chinese restaurant where they had met Cheung. Since the only one of Ocelot's friends who had the knowledge of how to remove the explosive bond from his cyberspur or deactivate the tiny locator chip at the base of his neck was Kestrel and she didn't have the right tools at hand, they decided the best plan was to let an expert do it. When they arrived at the restaurant, Cheung had introduced them to a tiny woman he identified only as Yin; she had pulled out an impressive-looking electronics kit and, with deft and gentle hands, made short work of both annoyances. "You will need to have the chip removed at your convenience," she told Ocelot, "but it is no longer active." The team had said their thank-yous and left shortly thereafter, knowing that they still had much more to do before the day was over.

After that, the plan had been to go back to the hotel, but that plan had been changed when Ocelot had begun acting strangely again. Winterhawk noticed it first when he turned around to say something to Gabriel and caught the odd look in Ocelot's eyes. "Terry? Are you all right?"

Ocelot blinked a couple of times and shook his head rapidly from side to side. "It's — starting again," he said as if speaking through a haze.

"What is?" Gabriel opened his eyes and was regarding Ocelot with intensity.

"It's this...weird feeling." Ocelot took a deep breath. "Like...buzzing. I think it might have been how it all

started. There was this buzzing and then I started – having strange thoughts.”

Gabriel’s expression hardened. He looked at Kestrel and Winterhawk. “We need somewhere large, and quickly. I don’t think we have much time to start the ritual before this takes over again.”

While Kestrel had driven, ‘Hawk got on the phone to Harry and in a few minutes had secured the address of a warehouse not far from their present location. “Not the best place,” Harry had apologized, “but with this kinda notice, it’s the best I can do.”

Once at the warehouse, Gabriel had wasted no time in starting to prepare the ritual he had used on Winterhawk. “Are you sure you’re up to this?” the mage had asked him, noting that he still looked pale and tired from the hit he’d taken and all the magic he’d used getting them out.

He had nodded. “I’ll be fine,” he’d assured ‘Hawk. “I can rest when it’s over.”

Neither ‘Hawk nor Kestrel had looked convinced, but they hadn’t argued. They knew how important this was.

The actual ritual hadn’t taken as long as the one for Winterhawk, due to the fact that Ocelot was not magically active and the Horrors hadn’t had to get their tendrils as far into his mind as they had with Winterhawk. Only an hour or so after he had begun it, Gabriel lowered Ocelot down to the floor. His head was bowed with fatigue. “There,” he said, sounding satisfied. “That should take care of him for now.”

Winterhawk helped Ocelot up while Kestrel led Gabriel over to a place where he could sit down. “How are you feeling?” the mage asked.

Ocelot accepted the hand up, then rubbed his head. “Fuckin’ weird,” he admitted. “Tired...but...like something heavy’s been lifted off the top of my brain.”

"Well, that's good, I think," Hawk had told him. He hoped he was right. They hadn't stayed long after that.

Now, in the hotel, they sat across the table and regarded each other with varying degrees of weariness and resignation. When they had arrived, Ocelot had gone off to take a long shower. By the time he'd emerged half an hour later, Gabriel had headed to his room to rest. "He was wiped out," Kestrel told him. "He said to give him a couple of hours and then we can go back to Seattle."

Ocelot nodded. He too was tired but feeling far too wound up to sleep right now. The first thing he had looked for was the room's bar; upon locating it and discovering it was well stocked, he'd poured himself a stiff one and held up the bottle to Kestrel and Winterhawk. When they declined, he brought both the glass and the bottle back over and dropped into a chair. That was when he finally asked about the whole story, which no one had told him yet.

"The whole story," Winterhawk repeated with a sigh. "I'm not sure any of us—even Gabriel—knows that yet. But we can tell you what we know."

He and Kestrel took turns giving Ocelot the rundown of what had happened over the past few weeks. He listened with growing amazement and mounting fear. "You mean," he said at last, "that the Horrors are after us again and they're tryin' to take over all our minds?" His voice dropped down to a near-whisper as if he was afraid the Horrors in question might hear him.

Winterhawk nodded, looking grim. "I don't remember much about what happened to me—I think that's a blessing, all things considered—but what little I do remember was not at all pleasant. The feeling of losing control and not being able to stop it—" He shuddered slightly.



"Yeah," Ocelot agreed in much the same tone. He shook his head, blowing air through his teeth. "I *do* remember what happened, and I wish I didn't. But the weird thing was—it all seemed so *normal*. Looking back it was crazy of me to get freaked out by the sound of a phone ringing or to think everybody was out to get me, but at the time—" He trailed off, taking a long drink from his glass. Then he looked up again, first at Kestrel and then at Winterhawk. "So—has anybody figured out what they want yet? *Why* they're doin' this? I sure as hell don't want some Horror fucking around with my brain anymore."

Winterhawk shook his head. "We don't know. I don't think Gabriel does either—at least if he is, he's not telling."

"I don't think he knows," Kestrel put in. "If he did, I think he would have told me after he—" She didn't finish the sentence, but the two men knew what she meant. She had told them about Gabriel's episode, although not about what had happened in its aftermath. She doubted that she would ever tell anyone else about that.

Winterhawk nodded. "It certainly appears that he's casting about in the dark almost as much as we are—a thought that doesn't give me a great deal of comfort."

Ocelot took another drink. "You don't think that...*thing*... that Stefan ended up fighting managed to survive, do you? If it did, I wouldn't be surprised if it was pretty pissed at us for fucking up its plans."

"I don't see how," Hawk said speculatively. "We all saw it fall with Stefan. We all heard it scream. If anything can survive in the bottom of that chasm—" He shook his head.

Kestrel sighed. "Well, whatever it is, it's real and it's after us. Talk about thoughts that aren't very comforting."

"And you're sayin' it even managed to get hold of Gabriel?" Ocelot's ice-blue cat-eyes glanced first toward the room where the young man was asleep, then locked on her face. "What makes us think it won't do it again? If he's all that's standing between us and the Horrors —"

Kestrel shook her head, looking down at the pocket secretary with which she was idly fiddling. "I think hurting me snapped him out of it pretty good," she said at last. "I trust him. I think now that he knows what we're up against, they won't get him again as easily. Besides," she added, her gaze rising to meet Ocelot's, "who else *can* we trust?"

She had a point, and both Ocelot and Winterhawk knew it. "Listen," Hawk said, trying to change the subject, "it's been a long night. I suspect we're all tired. As long as we're not going back for awhile, this might be a good time to get a bit of sleep."

Ocelot nodded reluctantly. "We gotta get back to Seattle." He was uncomfortably aware that, although he and Winterhawk were now at least momentarily free of the Horrors' influences, their remaining two teammates might not be so lucky. After the experience he had suffered, he didn't wish for them to be subject to such influences any longer than necessary.

"And we will," Winterhawk assured him. "We will. But we aren't going anywhere without our young friend, so we might as well take advantage of the downtime."

Ocelot sighed and rose, draining the rest of his glass with one smooth motion. He wiped his mouth on the back of his wrist and ran his hand with disgust back through his involuntarily-shortened hair. It was going to take at least a year for it to grow back to a decent length. He silently cursed the prison personnel, realizing even as he did it that they were not the enemy. No, he had far worse enemies than an overzealous guard with a pair of scissors.

At least his spur was working properly and that *thing* they'd put in his neck had been neutralized. He'd been a bit concerned about that, even though he had found out from the other prisoners that the thing was nothing more than a short-range locator that allowed them to keep track of the inmates within the prison. Even so, he still didn't like it. He looked at his friends and sighed again. "I'm gonna get some sleep," he said, and stalked out of the room without a word.

Winterhawk and Kestrel exchanged glances, then moved off in opposite directions to do the same.

They didn't get back to Seattle again until close to midnight, which meant it was a perfect time to call Harry—midnight was right in the middle of his workday.

None of the four of them had gotten as much sleep as they would have liked, but the couple of hours they managed to fit in had at least taken the edge off their fatigue. Of the four Ocelot was still looking the worst—his weeks on the street and few days in the Pit hadn't let him get a decent night's sleep in a long time. Gabriel hadn't quite sprung back to his usual boundless energy but at least he didn't look like he was about to faint anymore. Kestrel and 'Hawk, for their part, were feeling fairly well, though the mage had still been plagued by vague discomfiting nightmares that weren't bad enough to wake him up but *were* bad enough to disturb his sleep.

Harry met them in the back room of a little coffee shop called Spano's, which his visitors suspected was owned by yet another of his endless series of friends. As they appeared in the doorway he shooed out three prissy-looking men wearing corp-boring suits and carrying briefcases and motioned for the newcomers to sit down. "Accountants," he snorted. "Can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em." When he saw Ocelot, he smiled, appearing for

a moment to be genuinely pleased to see him. Then his expression rearranged itself once more into its usual mien of gruff cynicism. "Hey, kid," he said. "Nice haircut."

"Bite me, Harry," Ocelot replied, but there was a certain relief to his tone.

The fixer motioned for them to sit down; they arranged themselves around the table. "Have you found out anything else?" Winterhawk asked. He was usually the one to exchange pleasantries prior to getting down to business, but tonight he wasn't in the mood. None of them were. "About the others, I mean."

Harry sighed and shook his head. "Still workin' on it. All I know for sure at this point is that 'Wraith took off for New York City—I'm not even sure he got there. I've got some guys checking into it, but if he's tryin' to hide—" He spread his hands. "You know as well as I do that if he goes underground he's probably the best of the four of you at keepin' from gettin' found."

"But—you *can* find him, right?" Kestrel asked, fixing her green eyes on Harry's brown ones.

Harry nodded. "Yeah. I can find anybody, given enough time. Haven't missed yet. I'm just tellin' you that it might take some time." He didn't think it wise to mention that not all of the people he had found had been alive when they had been found. It probably wouldn't have been a welcome bit of information at this point in time.

"Would putting more people on the search help?" Gabriel asked softly. "As I'm sure you know, money is not an issue. I will pay whatever it takes."

For once Harry's eyes did not light up at the concept of money being no object. He sighed and shook his head. "I've already got a lot of folks on this, and I've let it be known that whoever finds him is in line for a hefty reward. If I get too many people on it they're just gonna

be tripping over each other, not to mention maybe alerting the wrong people that we're after him."

Gabriel nodded, dropping his gaze for a moment, then met Harry's eyes. "I'll make a few calls and put some of my own people on it as well—although I don't know how much help it will be. I have even less influence in that part of the country than you do, and with magic unavailable as a means of searching—"

"We'll find him," Harry said reassuringly. "If he's out there, we'll find him. I've even got some guys tryin' to trace the route he took, in case he never made it to New York."

"Yeah," Ocelot nodded. "If what happened to him was anything like what happened to me, he could be anywhere. Especially seein' as how 'Wraith is about the only guy I know who's more paranoid than I am." He looked at Harry. "If it *is* the same thing that happened to me, I'd bet 'Wraith would go somewhere far away from anywhere we'd expect him to go." He shuddered a bit, remembering how he had felt when he was on the run. "All I wanted to do was get *away*—I was sure you guys were all workin' for *them* and if I got in touch with any of you, you'd—" He shrugged. "I dunno what I was afraid of. That you'd kill me? That you'd turn me over to *them*, whoever *they* are? I didn't know. That was the worst part: not knowing who was on your side and who was out to get you."

Winterhawk listened soberly to Ocelot's words. "Somewhere far away," he said, shaking his head. "That could make things problematic, especially without magic." He tilted his head, looking at Gabriel. "But wait a minute—he doesn't know we can't use magic to find him. That means, as far as he's concerned, he knows that wherever he goes, we can locate him. He certainly knows that *you* can locate him," he added.

"So?" Harry asked.

"So," 'Hawk clarified, sounding as if he was working this through as he went along, "P'raps he *didn't* go somewhere like that. If he was afraid of being found and knew we could do it, wouldn't he concentrate on trying to go somewhere he knew? Somewhere he felt comfortable, rather than a new place where he didn't know anyone or anything about the town?"

Harry nodded slowly. "You got a point there." He looked at Ocelot. "You and 'Wraith are both urban kinds of guys. You went to L.A. I can't see 'Wraith going off to hide in the wilds somewhere. If he goes somewhere he feels safe, it's gonna be in a city. Probably a big one."

"So we're back to New York City again," Kestrel said.

"Maybe." Harry shuffled the papers on the table in front of him and slid them into a briefcase he picked up off the floor. "I think right now the best thing to do is just keep on doin' what we're doin'. I'm confident that if we do that, we'll find him faster than if we shift gears now in the middle of things."

Gabriel nodded. "Probably true."

"What about Joe?" Ocelot asked. "Any luck with him?"

"Nothing more than I already told you last time." Harry clasped up the briefcase and put it back down on the floor. "Only reports I got show him headin' out of town up in the mountains somewhere. I figured maybe I'd wait till you got back to pursue that one any further—I figured you might know where he hangs out."

Ocelot nodded. "We might. If it's where I think it is, we were there a long time ago." He looked at Winterhawk. "Remember, back during the '57 presidential campaign, when you had that weird malaria thing?"

The mage nodded. "Oh, I quite remember that," he said wryly. "It's one of those things I'd like to forget, but somehow it never seems to work out that way."

"Where's this?" Kestrel asked.

Harry wasn't listening. "Right," he said, his eyes widening. "I'd almost forgotten about that. He's got some land up there. He bought it a few years ago. I helped him get all the paperwork straight—or snarled, actually, since he can't legally own land without a SIN." He looked around the room. "Let me go through my records back at the office and I'll give you a call when I find something."

Ocelot nodded. "Meanwhile, maybe we ought to go by his place and talk to his gang. Maybe they know something."

"Good point," Winterhawk said approvingly. "I'd forgotten that Joe is the only one of our number who actually has roommates." It was a legitimate thing for him to forget: he tried to avoid visiting Joe at home whenever possible. While he'd grown rather fond of the big troll over the years, that fondness did not extend to his fellow gang members. "P'raps he might have let something slip to one of his friends there—or even come right out and told them something."

"Let's go," Ocelot said, standing up. He was feeling all right as long as he wasn't alone and was actually *doing* something. When things started to slow down, that was when he had time to think. Right now, thinking too hard was not something he was in any hurry to do. "I'll feel a lot better when we get everybody back together."

Harry picked up his briefcase and stood. As he pushed in his chair, he looked at Ocelot, then at the rest. "It's a good thing they got you outta that place," he said rather soberly. "I been followin' the news. Final death count when they took the place over was fifteen guards, seven non-guard personnel, and forty-seven inmates. Oh,

and the decker who'd taken over the control center. They blew the hell outta him. That didn't get on the news, naturally."

Ocelot nodded. He could believe those numbers. "They say anything about anybody gettin' out?"

Harry shook his head. "Of course not. Official line is that nobody got out and the breakout attempt was headed off by Lone Star in their usual efficiency."

"Well, I can't say I'm unhappy about our lack of fame," Winterhawk said, adjusting his jacket. "The less said about that whole situation, the more pleased I'll be."

"Amen," Kestrel agreed. Gabriel said nothing; he hung back and waited as the others prepared to leave, then followed them out. He looked like a man who was deep in thought about things that were not altogether pleasant.



## 20.

Joe's residence, a place where none of his team members had spent very much time, was located on the edge of the Redmond Barrens. He shared this residence, which had once been a large, multi-unit brownstone apartment building and which now hovered only a few steps above being condemned, with his gang. The gang, named Darwin's Bastards after a semi-obscure all-troll band from the earlier part of the century, consisted of an indeterminate and often-changing number of orks and trolls who joined together in a combination of mutual protection society and organization dedicated to the pursuit of minor-league mayhem. Nobody knew who owned the building—it was a good bet that the Bastards didn't—but nobody bothered them. For one thing, they were good for the neighborhood, keeping an eye on things and swiftly showing troublesome newcomers the way out of the area. For another, even the hardiest of Barrens denizens blanched a little at the thought of telling a large number of massive and potentially violent individuals that they should find other digs. For the most part, the arrangement worked out to the mutual benefit of the Bastards and their neighbors.

Even from down the street where they had parked, the four visitors could hear the loud sounds of a driving beat, yelling, and something which was probably supposed to be music but which in actuality sounded more like barely controlled demolitions.

It was a little before one o'clock in the morning; the team had seen no particular reason to wait for morning as they expected that at least a few of Darwin's Bastards would be awake at this hour. From the sound of things, all of them were.

Ocelot and Winterhawk took the front of the group as they approached the door, while Gabriel and Kestrel hung back a bit and waited to see what kind of reception they would get.

There weren't any gang members hanging around the outside of the place at the moment, so they reached the front unchallenged. However, as they mounted the steps to the door (which had been enlarged to accommodate the greater height and breadth of the residents), a voice called from off to one side: "We don't want any!"

Ocelot took charge of the situation as he and Kestrel turned to look at the speaker while 'Hawk and Gabriel kept their eyes on the door. He didn't recognize the young troll who leaned out the window, but that was okay. "Hey. Open up. We're here about Joe."

The troll leaned out a little farther. He had slicked-back hair, a pierced tusk, and several earrings running up the sides of each of his ears. He was dressed in a studded leather jacket and a ratty T-shirt. "What about Joe? He ain't here."

"That's what we're here to talk about," Ocelot said patiently. "Is Jake there? Tell him Ocelot and Winterhawk are here to see him."

More orks and trolls were poking their heads out of various windows, watching the newcomers suspiciously. So far, no one else said anything, at least not that the group at the door could hear.

The troll they'd been talking to paused a minute, then said, "Hang on. Wait there. I'll see if he's here."

The four exchanged glances and remained on the porch. There was a several-minute wait after which the door was opened by yet another troll. This one was older than the first, big and muscular and bald, his jacket festooned with various studs, patches, and painted slogans. He looked the four over and nodded as he

recognized Ocelot. "Haven't seen you around here in awhile." He looked suspicious. "Somethin' happen to Joe?" He stood aside and motioned them in.

The place looked about like one would expect an ill-maintained apartment building occupied by a large number of male teenagers to look: chaotic. As the four were led back through the place to what looked like a combination living room and game room, they got glimpses in through some of the open doorways. Every surface was covered with pizza boxes, empty beer cans, clothes, girlie magazines featuring just about every available metatype in every available combination, and sports equipment. The aroma of something strong and spicy wafted out from what was presumably the kitchen. The music was very loud, coming from two different locations, each tune competing with the other for aural supremacy. The effect, on the whole, was rather overwhelming, although their current host didn't give it a second look. When they arrived in the back room he hooked a thumb over his shoulder toward two trolls who were having an arm-wrestling contest on the coffee table as the trid unit blared a pirated porno flick in the background. They grumbled but made their exit, eyeing the newcomers as they went. Kestrel ignored the comments they made to each other as they passed.

Jake used one beefy arm to sweep clothing and magazines from the two large couches, motioning for the guests to sit down. Digging the remote from beneath a pillow he switched off the trideo unit and dropped down into a chair. "Okay," he said. "So what's with Joe?"

Winterhawk sat down rather gingerly on the arm of one of the couches and waited for Ocelot to speak. This was definitely Ocelot's show. He glanced around the room. Back when he had left England and begun his shadowrunning career he had thought that he didn't care

for trolls—over the years and especially following his association with Joe and other professional and shadowrunning trolls, he realized that it was not trolls *per se* that he did not like. He liked them just fine. It was many *young* trolls he had difficulty dealing with, especially the males of the street-tough variety. The combination of the intellect of a hormone-crazed thirteen-year-old boy in the body of a fully mature male often disturbed him. When the male in question approached ten feet tall and possessed a musculature that would put a steroid-pumped professional football player to shame, it disturbed him even more. Jake, to the contrary, was older than Joe and looked like just the kind of guy who might be able to hold on to some authority over this unruly bunch. ‘Hawk respected that.

Kestrel and Gabriel, meanwhile, had taken seats on a second couch. Both of them looked fully at ease in the situation, and both had, like ‘Hawk, apparently come to the conclusion that Ocelot was the best choice to be their spokesman.

“We can’t find him,” Ocelot said. He hadn’t sat down; he roamed around somewhat restlessly within Jake’s line of sight. “We thought maybe you might know where he is.”

Jake’s warty features twisted into an expression of concern. “I thought he was with you guys. You’re sayin’ he isn’t?”

“We haven’t seen him for a month,” Winterhawk put in. “He doesn’t answer his phone or respond to any messages.”

Ocelot nodded. “You hear from him any time in the last month?”

Jake shook his head. “I tried to reach him too, a couple of times. No answer. I figured he was off with you guys doin’ something.” He leaned back and stared off into the

air, thinking. "I guess it was right about a month ago when I saw him last. Come to think of it, he's been actin' a little weird, but you know Joe—sometimes when he goes off on that Native American stuff of his, it seems a little weird to the rest of us."

Ocelot nodded, then his gaze sharpened. "What do you mean, 'goes off on that Native American stuff?'"

Jake shrugged. "Just seemed like he was actin' a little strange there before he left. He kept to himself, locked up in his room. He does that sometimes, but this time it seemed to last longer than usual."

"Did he say anything when he left?" Winterhawk asked, leaning forward. "Anything that might have led you to believe that he would be gone for awhile?"

"No, not really." Jake shifted his attention to the mage. "He said he might not be back for awhile, but he's done that before. I guess I just assumed that he was with you guys. I thought you'd just gotten done with somethin,' but I figured it wasn't any of my business if you wanted to go right back out again." He eyed the four of them suspiciously. "So you guys got any idea what might be up with him?" His gaze lingered on Gabriel and Kestrel. "I don't think I ever heard Joe talk about you two."

"They're friends," Ocelot assured him. "Gabriel and Kestrel. They're helpin' us track down where Joe's got to."

Jake nodded. "If there's anything you want us to do, let me know."

"Do you think we could see his room?" Gabriel asked suddenly.

"Why?" Jake's suspicions were on the rise again.

Ocelot picked up on Gabriel's plan. "Maybe he left us some clue in there—you know, something only we might recognize. Has anybody been in there since he left?"

"Nah." Jake shook his head. "Joe's made it pretty clear he doesn't like guys goin' in his room. Took awhile to convince 'em, but it's stuck now." He smiled, revealing polished tusks. After a moment's consideration he said, "Yeah, okay. But I'll come with ya." He rose from the chair with surprising flexibility for someone his size and motioned them to follow. "C'mon. It's upstairs."

The four of them trooped up two flights of stairs behind the troll and then down a long hallway. Joe's room was at the end of the hall; the door was closed. However, when Jake tried it, the knob turned. Pushing the door open, he moved into the room and waved the others around him.

Unlike the chaos of the downstairs area, Joe's room was mostly neat and organized. From the look of things some fairly extensive work had been done to make the place troll-sized: the ceiling was higher and it looked like a wall had been knocked out to make two rooms into one. The place was furnished simply: a desk with a heavy wooden chair, a comfortable-looking overstuffed chair, a big bed (both the bedspread and the chair were in a Native American print pattern) and a dresser. In one corner was a massive metal weapon locker, which was closed and locked tight. Another door led to a closet.

"Try not to touch much," Jake warned.

The four visitors moved around the room, carefully taking Jake's advice and not moving any of the items in the room. Aside from the furniture, the only other visible items were articles of clothing and several other Native American objects: prints, a rug, and some small tribal items.

"Wonder how many guns he took with him," Ocelot mused, looking at the safe.

Gabriel sat down on the edge of the bed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Kestrel was watching him intently. "Anything?"

He shook his head. "Not really. After a month it's not surprising, though. All I get from the room is a feeling of peace—he obviously feels comfortable here. It wouldn't be safe to try anything more...complex, I'm afraid."

Winterhawk sighed, examining one of the prints on the wall. It was done in a highly stylized manner and showed a bear standing in a forest next to a river. "I wonder if he took his spear with him," he said. "I don't see it in the room."

Ocelot looked around, knowing exactly which spear he meant: the spear of Sitting Bull that 'Hawk had given Joe years ago. "I don't see it either, but that probably means it's in the safe."

Jake was listening to the conversation and shook his head. "No, you're right. It's gone." He pointed over to the corner of the room, where a wooden stand sat, previously overlooked, in the corner. "That's where he keeps it. I've seen it lots of times. He said it wasn't proper to keep it with the guns."

"He's got to be where we thought he was," 'Hawk said to Ocelot. "Why else would he take it?"

Ocelot shrugged. "It's as good a place as any to start." He motioned to Gabriel and Kestrel. "C'mon. Let's go see if Harry has anything yet. He should by now." Turning to Jake, he said, "Thanks. I think you gave us what we needed."

"No problem," Jake said, standing aside to let them out of the room. "I just hope you find Joe and he's okay. I know he goes off like this sometimes, but it's not like him to just disappear."

Harry came through as they expected him to, because this time the information he was seeking was under his control. Fifteen minutes after calling him they had the location of the parcel of land Harry had helped Joe buy a couple of years ago. Ocelot nodded when he saw it. "Yeah, that's where we went last time," he told the others. "That's where he goes to be alone. Odds are he's there if he's anywhere."

Nobody wanted to split up and despite the hour their mental states meant that none of them were tired, so they decided to drive up to the place immediately. It would take a couple of hours to get there, which meant they would arrive around dawn. It took about half an hour for Kestrel to procure them a four-wheel drive vehicle and then they were on their way.

Gabriel drove, allowing the rest of them to grab catnaps on the way up. After about two hours' drive, they reached a spot where they had to leave the paved road and follow a rutted dirt road, barely more than a track, up the forested mountainside. Fortunately it was not raining at the time, although the road was muddy and the going slow. Ocelot sat in the passenger seat and alternated between looking at the map on his pocket secretary and the vehicle's GPS. "It's not far from here that we'll have to park and walk," he told his companions. "It's a mile or so off the road."

"Lovely," Winterhawk muttered. Last time he had been up here he had been feeling terrible and not really paying much attention to his surroundings. Then he looked resigned. "Well, guess it can't be helped."

Nobody answered him.

They drove in silence for a few more minutes and then Ocelot pointed. "Here. There should be a trail, but it'll be hard to spot. It—"



"There it is," Gabriel and Kestrel said almost simultaneously, both pointing at a spot a few meters ahead of where Ocelot had indicated. Gabriel pulled the vehicle to the side of the track, and shut off the engine.

"Let's just hope we find him up here," 'Hawk said.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. If he's not here, I got no idea where he might have run to."

The hike up to Joe's land took another half an hour; by now, the sun was on its way up. It was a beautiful morning, a rare sunny day beginning to dry out the damp carpet of needles that silenced the progress of the four visitors. Kestrel took at the lead at this point, synching up Ocelot's map and her own hand-held GPS; the trip was a pleasant one undermined only by the hikers' tension about what they would find when they arrived at Joe's little cabin.

As they approached the clearing where the cabin stood, they all heard the gentle nearby burble of a small creek. The cabin itself was visible in the distance: a tiny (at least by troll standards), rough-hewn wooden building that seemed at home with the trees and vegetation around it. Kestrel stopped. "Should we call him?" she asked softly.

Ocelot shrugged. "Might as well. But let's be careful. If those things have got to him, he might be dangerous."

Winterhawk nodded soberly. "And we don't know for sure if he took any of his armament with him."

Ocelot stepped forward, to the edge of the clearing. From behind a tree, he called, "Joe! C'mon out. It's me — Ocelot!"

There was no answer.

Ocelot paused a moment, then called again: "Hey, Joe! It's Ocelot. I'm here with 'Hawk and Gabriel and Kestrel. We gotta talk to you!"

Still no answer.

Winterhawk and Kestrel exchanged puzzled glances. "I was sure he was here," the mage said.

"Well, let's have a look," Ocelot put in. Without waiting for an answer he moved cautiously out into the clearing, keeping low and away from the cabin's small windows. After a moment the others followed.

The cabin's door was locked, and a look in through the window confirmed why: there was no one here. The tiny place only had one room, and that room was clearly uninhabited at the moment. The place looked simple, spartan and neat, as if no one had been there for awhile. There was, as far as the observers could tell, no sign of anything Joe had brought with him, including the spear. "Damn," Ocelot said, smacking his open palm against the wooden outer wall. "*Now* what?"

"Now," said a soft voice from the other side of the clearing, "We need to talk."

## 21.

The four newcomers turned as one toward the other side of the clearing where the voice had spoken.

A man stood there, watching them with a mild expression that suggested that he was not troubled by their intrusion. Tall, broad, bushy-bearded, he wore a plaid flannel shirt, faded jeans and aged but comfortable looking hiking boots. A leather bag was slung over his shoulder. "I was expecting you," he said, "but it took you long enough to get here."

Ocelot stepped forward. "You were expecting us?" he demanded. "We didn't even know we were comin' until this morning."

"We're looking for Joe," Gabriel added, moving up next to him. "Have you seen him? We understood that this is his cabin."

"Yep," the man agreed. "It's his all right. But he's not here."

"I think we've determined that on our own," Winterhawk said, a trifle sourly. "Do you know where he is?"

The man was not ruffled by 'Hawk's tone. "Yeah," he said. "Or at least I can find him without too much trouble. But first, like I said, we have to talk." He approached the foursome, his gait easy and unhurried, and extended his hand. "I'm Ben. A friend of Joe's. I live up here, not too far away."

Gabriel shook his hand. Ben was a few inches taller than he was and considerably wider. The two of them regarded each other for a moment, then Ben grinned. "You must be the dragon," he said.

If Gabriel was surprised by Ben's words, he did not show it. "Indeed?"

The big man nodded. "C'mon. Let's go inside. I'm sure Joe won't mind if we use his place, all things considered." Without waiting for an answer he headed for the door.

Behind him, Winterhawk and Ocelot exchanged glances. Who was this guy? How did he know about Gabriel? They knew that Joe, more than any of the rest of them, occasionally had trouble keeping things to himself, but they didn't think he would have told anyone Gabriel's secret without the young man's consent.

Kestrel too was looking troubled as she watched Ben take a key from his pocket and open the door. The only person other than Ben who did *not* look troubled was Gabriel himself, who followed the man inside without a second look.

Inside, the cabin smelled of wood and smoke and the lingering odor of something else—probably peyote, knowing Joe. The furniture, what little of it there was, was rough and heavy but serviceable and mostly comfortable, even for humans. Ben settled himself into an oversized chair near the fireplace and silently studied the four visitors.

"What did you mean, you were expecting us?" Winterhawk asked. He was perched on the arm of another large chair. Kestrel was on the other arm; Ocelot and Gabriel had chosen to remain standing.

"I dreamed about you," Ben said mildly. "In fact, I've been having a lot of dreams about you. I knew you'd come eventually."

"What kind of dreams?" Ocelot was suspicious. Joe had never mentioned this bearded human who seemed entirely too knowledgeable about their activities. Still, he did not feel uncomfortable around Ben. The man possessed a calming aura not unlike Gabriel's.

He shrugged. "It was pretty much the same dream every time. A cub in trouble—dark things seeking him, trying to claim him. The cub seeks the bear's counsel but is then forced to flee before the dark things catch up with him. The bear tries to find the cub, but alone he cannot reach him. Then four friends, led by a dragon, come seeking to help him, but first they must find him. A dragon, a wolf, a falcon, and a cat." As he named each animal, he looked at each of the newcomers in turn: Gabriel, Ocelot, Kestrel, Winterhawk. "The bear leads the four friends to the cub, for only the dragon can help him." He smiled. "You're not supposed to take it literally, you understand. But the signs are there, and there *are* four of you."

Gabriel watched him intently. "You follow Bear, do you not?" he asked, his voice soft.

Ben nodded. "Yes. And I believe that Bear has sent me these dreams. I'm the bear who's supposed to lead you to the cub."

"Then let's go," Ocelot said, not wanting to wait any longer than necessary. He wanted to find Joe, get him straightened out, and get back to Seattle as quickly as possible.

Ben held up his hands. "Hold on," he said. His tone was placid, but held an undercurrent of strength beneath it. "I'll take you to Joe—I would never doubt a vision Bear has sent to me, especially not with this kind of power behind it—but first I want to know what's going on. What kind of danger Joe is in."

"Did Joe seek your counsel?" Gabriel asked, seemingly ignoring the man's words.

Ben was not offended. He nodded. "A little over a month ago, he came up here. He was scared. He said he'd been having weird dreams, dark dreams, like something

was trying to get into his head and he was afraid he wouldn't be able to stop it."

"He's right about that," Winterhawk muttered under his breath. Louder, he said, "And what did you do about it?"

"I sought Bear's advice—or rather, we did together."

'Hawk nodded. He knew how occasionally Joe, despite being a mundane, was able to contact Bear. When he did it alone it usually resulted in clues too cryptic to make sense of, but if Ben was as powerful a Bear shaman as 'Hawk thought he might be, perhaps the results might have been more productive in his company. He, like the others, was silent, waiting for Ben to tell the story in his own way and time.

"What I saw frightened me," Ben continued. "It didn't all make sense to me—it still doesn't—but the vision Bear gave us showed something very evil, very primal, seeking Joe. He's an unusual individual, as you well know: not magically gifted, but still somehow under the protection of Bear. I think it was this protection that helped Joe stay free of this—thing's influence, but I could see its power. I could see that it wasn't going to give up. It would just keep poking around at him until it found a way in. Neither one of us knew what would come next if that happened."

Gabriel leaned forward a bit. "Did Joe know what the influence was?"

"I don't know. He was scared. That was why he came to me."

"What did you tell him to do?" Winterhawk asked.

Ben took a deep breath and let it out slowly, stroking his bushy, light-brown beard. "I told him to stay here for the night, that I would consult Bear again—on a deeper level than he could come along on this time—and then come back and tell him what advice I had, if any." He

paused a moment, his calm gaze taking in each of them. "I was up most of that night. I could tell we were up against something that was far more powerful than either of us — or even the two of us together — were able to handle. The second vision that Bear gave me was that the cub must seek solitude, far away from civilization. That he must try to remain as close to Bear as he could, for only then could he have any chance of being protected from any of this."

Gabriel nodded. "And he has done this?"

"Yeah." Ben's big hands squeezed the wooden armrests, his forearms knotting with muscle. "He's been gone, like I said, almost a month now. I sent him further up the mountain, told him Bear's message to him. There's some territory up there that's almost never touched by anything but the creatures who live there. Forest, a nice creek where he can fish, game to hunt, caves to live in—I haven't gone up there to check on him, because before I got a chance to, the dreams started coming. I was wondering if you guys were ever gonna get here, and starting to wonder if maybe I shouldn't try going up there myself anyway." He looked at them again, settling finally on Gabriel. "You know what this is, don't you?"

The young man nodded, his expression very serious. "We do."

"And you think you can do something to help Joe get out from under this?"

"He can do it," Winterhawk said softly. "He's already done it for Ocelot, and he's done it for me."

"But we have to get to him," Ocelot said, moving restlessly.

Ben nodded, rising. "All right. I won't ask you any more about what this thing is that troubles you all, because Bear will tell me what I need to know, if he wants me to know. I trust the visions he sends me, and this one said you were the only ones who *could* help."

The trip up to the place where Joe had secluded himself was harder than the trip up to the cabin: the slope was steeper, the paths rockier early on and nonexistent as they got higher up, the air thinner. There was a cold crispness to the air that both invigorated the travelers and bit hard into their lungs with each breath they took.

Ben moved with an efficient, trundling gait that never slowed or sped up, but simply continued moving. From the others' viewpoint the movements looked ponderous, but they ate up the terrain with a surprising degree of effectiveness. It was fortunate that the four who followed him were in good physical condition or they would not have been able to keep up. As it was, Winterhawk was beginning to lag. Ocelot, glad for a chance to slow up a bit (he wasn't yet back in top shape after his ordeal in the Pit, and further was not used to exertion at these altitudes), dropped back and encouraged the mage to keep going. Gabriel and Kestrel moved on with what seemed to be limitless wells of energy.

About the time when they were wondering if they would be hiking for the rest of their lives, Ben stopped. "Here we are," he said. "He'll be around here somewhere."

"How can you be sure he's still here?" Kestrel asked, looking around. The land was beautiful: the sky an intense shade of clear blue, the needles on the trees sparkling with the remnants of the last rain and the morning dew, a wide stream running down the mountainside off to their left. *I could like spending some time up here*, she thought in satisfaction, before her mind returned her to the job at hand.

"He's here," Ben said. His voice was full of certainty. "If something happened to him or he left, Bear would have told me."



"Any idea where?" Winterhawk asked between breaths. He was leaned over slightly, recovering after the long hike.

"Not exactly." The shaman looked around. "But I have a pretty good idea. I know where *I'd* go if I came up here to stay for awhile." He regarded his four visitors. "Let's rest here for a few minutes and then we'll go on." Opening his leather bag, he pulled out a smaller bag full of dried meat and offered it to them. Ocelot and Kestrel took him up on the offer; all four of them took the opportunity to drink from the clear stream after Ben told them it was safe for them to do so. Munching on the meat, he himself took a deep drink and then settled back against the rock to wait.

They had so far seen no signs of human or metahuman habitation up here—either there was none or those who lived here made very little mark on the land. That did not mean, however, that there was no sign of life. All around them they could hear the sounds of birds calling to each other, squirrels chittering and leaping in the trees, the rustles of small animals moving through the carpet of needles. At one point, Ben grinned and pointed; several meters away a mother bear and her cub made their unhurried way through the forest. Neither seemed to notice the newcomers, who watched the two with interest until they disappeared. "Good sign," Ben told them. "Bear is pleased. We're in the right place." He pushed himself off the rock. "C'mon."

They moved on again, this time following the path of the stream. They had only hiked for about ten minutes before Ben held up his hand. Everyone stopped behind him. Silently, he moved off into the trees, motioning for them to follow. When they were safely hidden, he pointed up ahead. "There he is. I thought he'd probably be out hunting this time of day."

The four moved forward a bit, looking in the direction Ben was pointing. They exchanged concerned glances.

Joe was there all right. He stood, feet planted apart, in the middle of the stream, staring intently into the water. Dressed in ragged jeans, a leather vest with no shirt underneath, and soft leather boots, the troll held a large spear in one hand. The muscles in his bare arms bulged with tension. As his friends watched, he suddenly, convulsively hurled the spear downward into the creek; when he brought it up again, a silvery fish was skewered on its end. The fish flopped briefly and then was still. Joe pulled it off the spear and added it to a big bag at his side, much like the one Ben himself wore.

Ben turned back to them, then nodded toward Joe in a sort of, *okay, you take it from here* gesture.

Everyone else immediately looked at Gabriel. The young man nodded. Kestrel squeezed his arm gently and then he moved silently out from behind the trees and approached Joe.

For a few moments Joe did not seem to notice him. The troll was once again staring with great concentration down at the water as it swirled around his feet. Gabriel stood on the bank a few meters away, watching. He waited until Joe's muscles relaxed, indicating that he was not actively searching for a fish, and then said in a soft voice, "Joe..."

Joe stiffened for a moment, then turned. When he saw who was standing there, he smiled. "Hi, Gabriel. What are you doing up here?"

"Looking for you." He indicated the stream. "How is the fishing?"

"Not too bad. I've caught four so far today. I figured I'd get one more and then go back."

Gabriel nodded. If he noticed the odd tone in Joe's voice, the slight dreamlike quality, he did not comment on it. "Where is 'back'?"

Joe hooked a thumb over his shoulder. "Home. Where I've been staying."

Again Gabriel nodded. He didn't move any closer to Joe. "I've brought some of your friends with me—Ocelot, Winterhawk, Kestrel, and Ben."

Joe grinned. "Sounds like party time." Then his expression sobered. Abandoning his search for a last fish, he moved out of the water and up onto the bank. "How come?"

"Would you—take us back with you to where you've been staying?" Gabriel asked, not acknowledging Joe's question for the moment.

Joe nodded. "Sure. But I warn you—there's not much to eat. If I knew you were coming I'd have gotten more food."

"That's all right. We ate before we came up here. We'd just like to visit with you for awhile. We've been wondering where you were."

"I've been here," Joe said, rather cheerfully. "I like it here. It's quiet. Nobody bothers me."

Gabriel smiled. "We haven't come to bother you—just to visit."

"Oh, you guys aren't a bother." Joe waved him off. "It's kinda nice to have visitors every once in awhile." He looked around. "Where's everybody else?"

Gabriel turned and motioned for the others to come out from their hiding place, which they did.

Joe grinned. "Hey, guys," he said. "It's good to see you."

"How's it going, Joe?" Ocelot asked carefully, giving him a surreptitious once-over. Aside from looking more than a bit scruffy (which most people presumably would

after living off the land for a month), Joe appeared healthy enough.

"Good. It's been good. But like I told Gabriel, it's nice to see somebody up here. I was getting a little lonely."

"Why don't we go back to your place, Joe?" Ben said, moving closer. "You can tell us what's been going on with you."

"Sure. Good idea. Come on." Joe turned and headed off, back toward the forest.

Winterhawk and Ocelot looked at each other, frowning. Hawk shrugged. "We all deal with it in our own way, I guess. At least he appears harmless."

Joe's temporary residence wasn't far away. It was a rather large cave set into the side of the mountain, its entrance concealed by trees and undergrowth. Joe turned back to make sure they were following, then ducked down and disappeared inside. Ben went in next and then the others, one at a time.

The inside of the cave was as expected very dimly lit, its only illumination being the sunlight filtering in from outside. The newcomers waited for their eyes to adjust to the difference, then looked around. The cave was decent-sized, large enough for Joe to move around in but not quite large enough for him to stand up straight. The others had no problem with this. The stone floor was swept clean of debris; there was a nest of army blankets and pillows near the back next to a small pile of clothes. Joe's Sitting Bull spear, which had not been the one he was using for fishing, leaned up against the wall to the left of the clothes. Other than that there was nothing else in the cave.

"Sit down," Joe said, rummaging in the pile of blankets and handing some around to use as cushions. "I'll be back in a few minutes—I'm gonna cook up this fish for lunch."

He had barely made it out of the cave when Ocelot turned to Gabriel. "What's wrong with him?" he demanded in a low voice.

Kestrel nodded. "Why is he acting like nothing's wrong?"

There was a long pause; Gabriel studied the cave exit for several moments before speaking. "I don't presume to understand the workings of the Totems," he said at last. "Perhaps this is Bear's way of somehow protecting him from the influence. If it works, I am not going to argue with its methods."

Ben nodded. "He's acting strange, all right, but he seems okay. I take it this wasn't what you were expecting?"

"He's a lot more together than we were expecting," Ocelot said.

"How so?"

Winterhawk glanced toward the exit, then returned his attention to Ben. His bright blue eyes were sober. "Before Gabriel found me and helped me, it had driven me insane," he said quietly.

Ocelot nodded. "Me too. I ended up living on the streets in L.A. until they grabbed me and threw me in jail." He shuddered a bit—the memories were still too fresh to dwell on it too much.

"So..." Ben said in his slow, deliberate way, "this dark thing—whatever it is—is after all of you, it looks like. Not just Joe."

"Yes," Gabriel said.

Ben looked first at Ocelot, then at Winterhawk before facing Gabriel again. "And you stopped this."

"No. I didn't stop it. I merely slowed it down. More preparation will be required to stop it—if I even have the power to do so." Gabriel sighed. "Before we can even try, though, the four must be reunited."

Ben considered that for several moments, then sighed. "I don't envy you—any of you," he said. "But if there's anything I can do to help, let me know."

"Thank you," Gabriel said. "We must perform a simple ritual to do the same thing to Joe as was done to the others—block the influence temporarily so he can function. If you can provide a location for a circle—"

"My medicine lodge is at your disposal," Ben said immediately. "If you are the ones from the vision Bear sent me—and I believe you are—I know that I can trust you, that you have only good intentions."

"Let's just hope good intentions are enough," Ocelot muttered.

They fell silent, each alone with his or her own thoughts, until Joe returned carrying a rough wooden platter containing four large fish that he had apparently cooked over a fire outside. The pleasant aroma of the fish almost immediately pervaded inside of the cave. Joe dropped down on one of the blankets and set the platter down. "Eat up," he said. "Sorry there's not much, but I can go get more if anyone's really hungry."

"Go ahead and eat," Ocelot said. "We had lunch before we got here." The others nodded in agreement.

Joe looked troubled. He looked down at the fish and back at his friends. "You sure?"

"We're sure, Joe," Gabriel said gently. "Eat."

Joe didn't need a second invitation. He tucked into the fish like he didn't have a care in the world. It didn't take long before there was nothing left on the platter but bones. "How long are you guys staying?" he asked when he finished. He remembered something and looked at Hawk and Ocelot. "We got another job already?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "No. Not yet."

"We'd like you to come back with us, Joe," Gabriel said. "There are some things we need to talk about."

Joe cocked his head. "Talk about? Like what? Is something wrong?"

"Some things have...happened," Gabriel said carefully. "Do you remember why you came up here in the first place?"

Everyone in the room watched Joe as he considered the question. After a long pause, he said, "I'm—not really sure. I remember coming to see Ben, and I think he told me to come here. But that was a long time ago. It feels like I've been here forever."

Gabriel nodded. "That's right. You did come to see Ben, and he did send you up here. Do you remember anything else?"

"Do you remember the dreams, Joe?" Ben's voice was as gentle as Gabriel's. "The ones you told me about?"

Joe was beginning to look nervous now. His gaze darted back and forth between Gabriel and Ben. "I—"

"It's all right," Gabriel said. "I know you'd rather not remember—perhaps it might be better if you didn't, but I don't think we'll have a choice about that. All you need to know is that we can help you. But you'll need to let us do it. We can't do it without your cooperation."

Joe drew a deep breath and held it for several moments. His body trembled slightly. "Ben—?"

"It's all right, Joe." Ben got up and moved over next to him, putting a hand on his arm. "Bear has spoken to me, told me that these folks would be coming to help you."

He nodded, but didn't look convinced. "Can't I just—stay here? I—there aren't any bad dreams here."

"There won't be any more bad dreams, Joe," Gabriel told him. He indicated Winterhawk and Ocelot. "They were having bad dreams too, and they aren't anymore. I can do the same for you."

Winterhawk didn't have the heart to tell Joe that he actually *was* still having bad dreams—just not bad dreams

of the insanity-inducing variety. He didn't think that particular bit of information would be helpful right now.

Joe looked at Ben again, who nodded encouragement. At last Joe nodded as well. "I'd rather stay here," he said, his tone full of reluctance. "But I can't, can I?"

Gabriel shook his head. "It wouldn't be wise. I'm not sure how long you'll be able to hold out up here. The thing that seeks you—that seeks all of us—isn't going to go away."

Joe shuddered, then sighed in resignation. "Okay," he said. "If Bear says you can help me—" He looked around the cave in the manner of someone preparing to leave a long-occupied and well-loved home. Then he stood, picked up the platter containing the fish remains and took it outside. The others remained where they were until he finished disposing of the remains and putting out the fire and then returned and began gathering up the blankets. He did all this in silence. By unspoken agreement, no one offered to help him. "Okay," the troll said at last, slinging the bundle over his massive shoulder and hefting his Sitting Bull spear. "I'm ready. Let's go."

Ben's medicine lodge was bigger than Gabriel had expected it to be, which was a good thing. Built by hand—no doubt by Ben himself—of solid timbers, the lodge was set into a hillside and looked very much like it was part of the terrain. It was not that it was hidden, but more that it blended in, becoming an integral component of the land on which it resided. It didn't look large from the outside, but when Ben opened the door and ushered the others in, they could see that the biggest part of it extended back into the hillside, dug in several meters. There were few windows, only a couple in the front that were currently covered by rough shades. The place gave the impression



of both intimacy and openness at the same time. "Will this do?" the shaman asked Gabriel.

He nodded. "I will need your help, though. I can feel Bear's power here—I do not think he would be pleased if I performed the ritual in this place without your assistance."

Ben nodded, and the two of them went off to the other side of the lodge to prepare.

Because there was a permanent ritual circle set up in the lodge, Gabriel would not need to build one from scratch, but only modify the one already here. That would make the process go much faster. The others, especially Winterhawk, watched with interest as Gabriel and Ben began their preparations, talking quietly as they worked. Joe seemed a bit confused, wandering around the lodge, never taking his hand off the spear he held, occasionally touching one of the items that hung on the walls and then moving on. After what seemed like a very long wait but was only about an hour, Gabriel announced, "We are ready."

Ben beckoned Joe over to where he and Gabriel stood, and motioned for the others to move away from the circle. He had already dragged several chairs over to the area he indicated, making sort of a gallery to witness the ritual. When everyone was in their specified place, the two of them began.

Winterhawk leaned forward, his concentration fully on what was going on before him. He wished he could observe the ritual on the astral plane, but he knew that was unwise at this time, even in the medicine lodge of what was clearly a powerful shaman. *I'll wager he's not as powerful as a dragon... and the dragon isn't willing to risk it. I think for once in my life I'll not let my curiosity get the better of me.*

It was unfortunate, though, because it was one of the oddest rituals Winterhawk had ever had the privilege to witness. Not quite hermetic, not quite shamanic, and not quite the exotic and mysterious form of magic Gabriel normally practiced, it seemed to be an amalgamation of all three. As in the previous rituals of this type that Gabriel had performed, Joe floated serenely in the center of the circle and Gabriel stood next to him speaking in an unintelligible language. However, this time the invocation was more of a chant, louder, with a cadence to it that hadn't been there before. Ben had strapped on a large drum and was half-pacing, half-dancing around the perimeter of the circle, beating the drum rhythmically like a strong heartbeat underscoring Gabriel's chant, adding a chant of his own as a counterpoint. Winterhawk didn't recognize the language Ben spoke either, except that he was sure it was not the same one Gabriel used. If someone had described the ceremony to him he would have thought that the result would have been a discordant cacophony, but the disparate elements all blended together, complementing each other and forming a coherent and oddly beautiful whole. He felt a sense of calm well-being as he watched it; glancing at his friends he could see that they too were having the same experience. For the first time in awhile he felt *right*. He knew that there were few things on earth more powerful than the Great Dragons, but the shamanic Totems were one of those few things. If Bear had blessed their efforts, then perhaps they had even a better chance than 'Hawk had thought they did.

They took their leave of Ben shortly thereafter, taking with them the shaman's good wishes and offers of assistance at any time in their endeavor. "May Bear keep you under his protection always," he told them as they

prepared to go. He gave Joe, who had awakened feeling refreshed but uneasy after the ritual, a hard hug and said, "Take care of yourself, Joe, and come back when this is over. There's a lot you have yet to learn."

As they were getting ready to leave, Ben took Gabriel aside for a moment. "You know," he said, "When you came up here, the four of you, and I said you must be the dragon, I didn't mean that literally. Or at least I thought I didn't." He tilted his head at the young man, asking without asking.

Gabriel shrugged. "I am sure Bear has told you what you must know," he said softly.

Ben nodded. "Yeah. I don't understand all this, but maybe it's better if I don't. You'll watch out for them?" He looked fondly at Joe. "I've gotten attached to that cub. I don't know what Bear has planned for him yet, but I think whatever it is, it's gonna be important."

"I have the same feeling about all of them." Gabriel watched as the three teammates and Kestrel discussed their plans, trying not to notice the one hole that still remained in their number. "You can be sure that I have made their well-being one of my highest concerns."

"I believe it," Ben said, nodding. He looked at the four and then at Gabriel. "And I have a feeling that goes the other way around, too."

"They are good friends," the young man agreed. "A very rare thing in this world, but thankfully not as rare as I had once feared."

"No...not so rare at all, really, when you look for it." Ben patted his back. "You take care. All of you."

Gabriel nodded, bid him farewell, and moved off to join his friends.

Ben watched them as they left, remaining there in front of his lodge until they had disappeared, and then long after that. He had a lot of thinking to do.

Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel caught Joe up with current developments as Gabriel drove back down the mountain. "I was afraid it might be the Horrors," Joe admitted. He had taken up the entire back portion of their vehicle; it didn't look terribly comfortable but he didn't seem to mind. "I didn't want to admit it to myself, but that's what worried me when I started having the dreams. That's why I went to see Ben."

"Why didn't you call us?" Winterhawk asked. "After meeting Ben I can see that he's got a lot of power, but —"

Joe nodded. "I know. I thought about it, but something told me not to. Maybe it was the Horrors. I can't remember anymore. All I know is that every time I thought about calling, something...talked me out of it." He shrugged. "Besides that, I knew Gabriel wasn't around, and he was the only one besides Ben that I thought really had a chance to deal with it."

He had told them about his dreams and how he had become convinced that stealing away to seek Ben's advice had been his only chance. He didn't remember much about his month high up in the mountains except that both Ben's counsel and his own heart had told him that his safest choice was to get as close to Bear as possible, to block out as many outside influences as he could. "That's why all I took with me was the spear," he told them. He was still holding it even inside the vehicle. "It felt right. The rest of my stuff—my weapons—didn't. Everything else except the blankets and some clothes, I made up there."

"Well, it certainly seems that you've weathered this storm better than either Ocelot or myself, so there must be something to it," Winterhawk told him. His expression sobering, he added, "Somehow I don't think we're going to have the same luck with 'Wraith.'"

## 22.

It was already dark by the time they got back. When they started getting close to Seattle, Ocelot pulled out his portable phone and called Harry.

This time, though, the fixer hadn't managed to pull any rabbits out of any hats while they'd been gone. "No luck yet," he said. He sounded frustrated. This was supposed to be what he was good at, but yet he was still without results. "About the closest I've managed to get is that I'm about 90% sure he's in Manhattan—or at least he was a couple of weeks ago. I managed to find some guys who'd seen him, or somebody who looks a hell of a lot like him, but they didn't know where he went. He sighed. "Sorry, kid. I'll keep lookin', but so far no dice."

Ocelot thanked Harry and hung up. He looked at the others; the frustration in his eyes mirrored Harry's. "So what the hell do we do now? Sit around and wait for Harry to turn something?" His tone of voice suggested that was the last thing he wanted to do—and could probably not be persuaded to do it even if the team thought it was a good idea.

"I don't think we can afford to do that," Winterhawk said slowly. "From all our experiences, this doesn't seem to get any better as time goes on. Who knows what might happen if we wait too long?"

"We can't wait too long," Gabriel's soft voice spoke from the driver's seat, startling everyone. He hadn't said a word the entire trip back.

The others turned to look at him, really noticing for the first time in awhile how tired he looked. "What do you mean, we can't?" Joe asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "The ritual I cast over the three of you, the one blocking the Enemy's influence, requires me to devote a certain amount of my

concentration to maintaining and monitoring its effectiveness. A small amount, to be sure, but as more of you are protected by it, that small amount becomes more significant. I cannot maintain that focus indefinitely. If we don't find him soon, we have two options." He paused a moment, then continued. "I can perform the more permanent ritual on the three of you without 'Wraith, or we can attempt to use some sort of magical means to locate him."

Winterhawk was looking at him, a very sober expression on his face. "And the implications?" He sounded like he already knew the answer, but wanted to hear it anyway.

Gabriel sighed, brushing his hair back off his forehead. "The implications of either are potentially not pleasant. If 'Wraith has been affected by the Enemy's influence, which he almost certainly has, then there will be a point after which there won't be anything I can do about it." He regarded Winterhawk for a moment before turning back to the road. "We had almost reached that point with you, since as a mage you were more susceptible to the influences. If we reach it with 'Wraith —"

"You won't be able to bring him back," Joe finished.

Gabriel nodded reluctantly.

"And what about the other?" Kestrel asked.

"If I attempt to use magical means to search for him, it leaves me open to allowing the Enemy to —" He let that trail off.

"—to get hold of you again." Ocelot shook his head. "That's not an option. If they get you again, we're all fucked. There's no way we can fight you."

"And no way to ensure that what happened after I—hurt Kestrel will happen again and allow me to block it." Gabriel's voice was very soft, very weary.

"What about me?" Winterhawk asked suddenly.

Gabriel shot him a questioning look.

"Could I do it? With you to watch over me, to block anything that tried to attack me, would it be possible?"

For several moments Gabriel didn't answer. He concentrated on the road ahead, staring far off into the distance. "It would be dangerous," he said at last.

"I know that," Hawk said. His tone was sober. "That's not what I asked."

"Hawk, don't be an idiot." Ocelot leaned over the seats to get a better angle on the conversation. "We're not gonna be any better off if you let the Horrors make you crazy again."

Gabriel spoke as if Ocelot had not. "If it were quick, I think I could shield you well enough to prevent them from detecting the attempt." He sighed. "But I don't know, and it's not a risk I want to take."

"It's a risk we *have* to take," Winterhawk pointed out. "If we're to get him back, we'll need to do something soon. You said that yourself. I'm willing to take the chance—to trust your judgment that you can keep the Horrors from attacking me again." He turned slightly in his chair, facing Gabriel. "Besides, I think it can be done with a watcher spirit. That's safer than my actually searching for him astrally, isn't it?"

Gabriel nodded. "It is—but there is still the risk of the path back to you from the spirit. The longer it takes the spirit to find him—"

"—the more danger I'll be in." Winterhawk nodded impatiently. "I know that. But what other choice do we have? We don't know any other mages or shamans who know him well enough to describe him sufficiently to allow a watcher to find him. I don't even think Trixy knows him that well—even if I wanted to bring her into this, which I don't."

Again Gabriel was silent. The other occupants of the vehicle also remained quiet. They all knew how potentially disastrous this course of action could be, but they also knew that if they were to have any hope of getting 'Wraith back, they would have to do something. Finally Gabriel sighed. "Let me think about it until we get back," he said softly. "I want to make sure I consider all the implications before I agree to it."

Nobody argued with that.

When they reached Seattle, their first stop was Joe's place. Jake and the other gang members were glad to see him, though he had to put up with some good-natured ribbing about the state of his clothes. The others waited in the common room for him while he showered, changed clothes, and packed up what he would need. When he returned downstairs, he had his duffel bag and his axe with him; he reclaimed his spear from Winterhawk, with whom he'd left it for safekeeping. Gabriel had spent the half an hour or so they had been waiting staring out one of the windows, deep in thought. His friends had left him alone.

"So," Winterhawk said when they got back to the truck, "have you decided?"

Gabriel nodded. He studied the mage for a moment, his eyes serious. "If you are willing to take the chance, then I will do everything I can to protect you."

Kestrel, from the other side, looked at him in sympathy. She, more than any of the others, knew how hard it had been for him to say that. She knew he wanted to do it himself, but the danger was too great—Winterhawk didn't have the power to protect him, but Gabriel had the power to protect Winterhawk. Even so, she knew he wasn't certain this was true; she could see it in his eyes. His agreement might end up sentencing a friend to irrevocable madness. She climbed into the



shotgun seat next to Gabriel and touched his arm gently. He covered her hand with his own for a second or two, and then the others were inside and they were driving back toward the heart of Seattle.

The summoning would take place at Gabriel's Downtown apartment, as the magical protections were strongest there. The actual deed didn't take long at all – Winterhawk had summoned hundreds of watcher spirits in his magical career. Gabriel watched him intently (as did the others) as he visualized the necessary formula that brought the shimmering little spirit into being and gave it a mental impression of 'Wraith. "Find him, then come back and show me where he is," the mage told it. He supplemented the impression with one of the New York City area, telling the spirit to start there and work its way outward if necessary.

When he finished, he slumped back on the couch. The effort had not tired him: summoning a watcher was one of the simplest of magical techniques. However, the knowledge still remained that they weren't out of danger until the little spirit returned. "Well, that's done," he said, forcing himself to sound brisk even though he knew his friends could see the tension in his face. "Now we wait."

"How long?" Ocelot asked.

'Hawk shrugged. "I put a bit of power into it, so we've got four or five hours. I figured if it finds him quickly that's best, but I wanted to give it some time in case things took longer."

"So—" Joe said slowly, "We've got four or five hours to wait while we worry about something following the link from the spirit back to you?"

Winterhawk nodded. "Looks that way, doesn't it?" He took a deep breath and got up, his body like a tensed spring.

"You should try to get some sleep," Gabriel told the others. "If the spirit finds 'Wraith we'll have to leave again quickly."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" Kestrel asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "All there is to do now is wait."

She nodded and headed for one of the other couches. Like any longtime shadowrunner she knew the value of grabbing catnaps when she could.

Ocelot was tired too but he knew there was no chance he would sleep now, so he paced. So did Winterhawk, for whom sleep was the last thing on his mind. Joe, who was the only one of the group who was well rested, sat down on another couch and kept alternating worried glances between Winterhawk and Gabriel.

Gabriel, for his part, merely remained seated in his soft leather chair. His eyes were closed, but nobody believed he was asleep.

An hour passed with no word from the spirit. Kestrel woke up from her nap feeling refreshed; after a whispered conversation with Ocelot she retrieved a big towel from the bathroom and a pair of scissors from Joe and, sitting Ocelot down on the towel, spent the next half hour making his newly shortened hair look like a haircut instead of the aftermath of several crazed weasels attacking his head. When she finished she was pleased with the results: she wasn't exactly skilled in this area, but anything would have been an improvement.

Winterhawk had grown tired of pacing and settled back down in his original position on the couch, but he still didn't look relaxed. Gabriel hadn't moved. Joe had gone over to one of the room's enormous floor-to-ceiling windows and was taking in the skyline.

Suddenly both Gabriel and Winterhawk stiffened at the same time. Winterhawk gave a slight gasp, his eyes widening as he sat bolt upright on the couch.

Ocelot was instantly alert. "Oh, shit—" he whispered, he and Kestrel moving as one from where they had been talking on the other side of the room. Joe joined them quickly, his eyes full of concern.

Neither of the two subjects of their attention seemed to notice them. Gabriel had leaped up from his chair and moved over next to Winterhawk, clamping his hand over the mage's forehead. His jaw was tight with tension, his eyes closed. Both he and 'Hawk were trembling.

The little drama didn't last long: only about five minutes had passed before Winterhawk let his breath out and fell back against the cushions and Gabriel dropped to his knees in front of the couch, his head bowed. When he looked up at the observers, they got a brief impression of his eyes changing from the slitted pupils of the dragon to their normal human appearance. Both he and Winterhawk were pale.

"What—happened?" Joe ventured, hauling Gabriel gently up and helping him sit down next to Winterhawk.

"Something attacked, didn't it?" Ocelot asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Gabriel nodded wearily, brushing a damp lock of hair off his forehead. "The spirit returned...but it had something else with it when it came."

Winterhawk brought both hands up and scrubbed at his face. His breath was still coming fast; as he got it under control he looked up at his friends. "I felt it again," he said, his voice faint and fearful. "The madness. I felt it trying to reach me again." He lowered his head, shuddering. "I can't—I—"

Gabriel put a gentle hand on his shoulder, trying to comfort him even though the fear had not completely left his own eyes.

"Did you find 'Wraith?" Ocelot demanded. As he said it he realized it might sound harsh, but he knew that if they hadn't found the elf, all of this had been for nothing.

With effort, Winterhawk raised his head again and made a small gesture. Instantly the little shimmering form reappeared in front of him. Closing his eyes, he was silent for several moments and then the form disappeared. It was hard to tell, but it appeared that even the spirit was a little shaky. "He's in New York, all right," he said. He looked at Gabriel. "Did you get that?"

The young man nodded. "I think we can find him, but we must go now."

"Wait a minute," Ocelot protested. "What just happened there?"

Gabriel was already getting up. "Something—undoubtedly the Enemy—attached itself to the spirit and, just as we feared, followed the link back to Winterhawk. I was able to stop it and free the spirit, but the Enemy is getting bolder. Once we have 'Wraith back, I think we must go on the offensive."

"Go after the *Horrors*?" Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "Are you crazy? They almost trashed us, drove us all nuts, and you want to go *after* them?"

"Do you want them to keep coming after *us*?" Joe asked quietly. "I sure don't."

"Yes, well," Winterhawk said, slowly getting to his feet, "why don't we take this one step at a time, shall we? Let's get 'Wraith back first, and then we can decide where to go from there."

Kestrel nodded. She looked at Gabriel, who didn't answer. She wondered if it was because he had nothing to

say or because he was afraid to share what he already knew to be true.

## 23.

Manhattan was not lovely this time of year. Not even at mid-day.

It was a little after noon when the oversized cab/shuttle bearing Winterhawk, Ocelot, Joe, Kestrel, and Gabriel rolled into Manhattan and headed toward 'Wraith's last known location. The air was heavy and damp, the sky choked by grayish-yellowish clouds. A faint faraway stench of decay hung in the air.

The five passengers were mostly silent, each content for the moment with the company of his or her own thoughts. They had arrived an hour ago in a small plane Harry had procured for them—they wouldn't have been able to get out as fast as they had if the fixer hadn't been able to arrange both the plane and the private airfield where they had landed. It had meant that the trip had taken longer than if they had taken a commercial plane, but it had also given them all time to grab a badly-needed rest during the trip. At the end of the four-hour flight they all felt refreshed enough to face the day, albeit still more than a bit apprehensive.

Harry had also arranged transportation for them in the form of a taxicab that looked more like a cross between a sport-ute and a minivan. The driver, a genial ork named Tony, was a rigger who did freelance work for Harry sometimes, and the armored cab was disguised to look like one of the ubiquitous fleet that cruised around shuttling Manhattanites from Point A to Point B and back again.

Tony had seemed a bit surprised when he saw his odd collection of passengers, but he didn't say anything about it. Instead, he had just enquired, "Where to, chummers?" Oddly, he didn't seem nearly as surprised to find out that they weren't quite sure exactly *where* they wanted to go.

"We'll know it when we see it," Winterhawk had told him, and Tony had merely nodded.

"You got it. Just sing out if you see anything you like." He climbed in after the passengers had settled themselves and began driving. All he had to go on was the brief description 'Hawk and Gabriel had given him of a rather rundown-looking building surrounded by what looked like a marginal neighborhood.

"You think we're gonna find it?" Ocelot asked, his tone dubious as he looked out the window at block after block of rundown-looking buildings in marginal neighborhoods. "It could be anywhere."

"Well—we do know the *general* area," 'Hawk reminded him. "And we know it's a place with a fair number of people—a place that feels relatively pleasant." He'd managed to get that much before things had gone south with the watcher spirit. They had gotten a map and used some of the astral landmarks the mage had remembered to narrow the area down to about a fifteen-square-block area in one of the declining parts of the city.

"If he's even still there by now," Joe pointed out. "He could have moved."

"Yeah," Kestrel agreed, "but if this is all we have to go on, we have to investigate. If we get to what we think is the right area, we can ask around and see if anybody's seen him."

Ocelot nodded. "It ain't great, but if it's all we've got to go on I guess we're stuck."

The mode of operation was the same each time: Tony would prowl up and down each of the streets in the fifteen-block area designated on the map, then find a place to park (legally or otherwise) and let his passengers out to begin their investigation. They would fan out, question a few of the locals, and examine the homes and

businesses in the vicinity for anything that looked like the place 'Hawk and Gabriel had described.

They had completed eight blocks in one direction by the time the sky began to grow dim, and so far had come up with no likely places and no locals who had seen anyone who looked like 'Wraith. The elf's description was rendered more problematic by the fact that, as an albino, he usually preferred to wear some sort of makeup to hide his condition, but that makeup varied according to what 'Wraith wanted to look like. Sometimes he disguised himself as an Aztlaner, occasionally as an African, and sometimes as a Caucasian. They did the best they could, but they were all becoming discouraged as they reconvened back at the car. "Anything?" Ocelot asked.

Joe shook his head. "I didn't see anything."

The others nodded in agreement. "Do we want to keep going tonight?" Winterhawk asked. "Or should we try to find a place to stay and pick up again in the morning?"

"I think we should keep going," Kestrel said. "The longer we wait, the more likely it'll be that he'll move and we won't be able to find him at all."

Joe nodded. "Yeah, I agree." He looked at Gabriel questioningly.

The young man also nodded. "Yes. We should keep going before the impressions fade." He had a rather tense, driven look in his eyes.

"Okay, then." Ocelot motioned toward the cab. "Let's go."

The ninth block began an area that was a bit different from the previous eight. Of most of the blocks they had already searched, the buildings were primarily residential—apartment buildings, decaying townhouses, rooming houses—with only a few business interspersed between them. The ninth block looked like the beginning



of a more commercial area, dominated by small shops and bars with fewer residences. By this time of the night, most of the businesses were closed. "This shouldn't take long," Ocelot observed. "Nobody much to talk to."

Nonetheless, the runners repeated their process: Gabriel and Kestrel went off in one direction, Ocelot and Winterhawk in another, and Joe by himself in a third. They had their small radio transceivers with them so they could keep in contact in case something should happen, but up until now all they had done was inform each other that they hadn't found anything.

After half an hour, Winterhawk and Ocelot had had no luck at all. They had seen a few people, but no one who recognized their description of 'Wraith, and most of them were reluctant to talk to strangers, especially after dark. They were about to pack it in and head back when the radio crackled in their ears.

"Hey, guys—" came Joe's voice through the tiny earpiece. He sounded excited. "I think I've got something."

Everyone else quickly reconvened at Joe's location to find the troll in conversation with another troll, this one shorter and older than he was. Joe grinned as his companions approached. "This is Rufus. He says he might have seen our friend."

Rufus nodded. He was dressed in a Jets sweatshirt and had an easygoing, roll-with-the-punches kind of expression. "Yeah. Maybe so."

"Can you describe him?" Winterhawk asked quickly. "I mean—what was he wearing? What color was his hair?"

Rufus thought that over. "Well...the guy I seen was kinda weird-lookin'. Real pale skin, light color hair. You know—*really* light. I didn't see him up close or nothin',

though. He was wearin' reg'lar clothes—jeans, shirt, you know."

Ocelot nodded. He too was getting excited—it certainly sounded like there was a good possibility that Rufus had seen 'Wraith, which meant it was their first solid lead all night. "Where'd you see him? How long ago?"

"It's been a week or so. I guess I just 'member him 'cause I saw him talkin' to Alfonso. Me and Alfonso, we sometimes hang around together. One time we—"

"And where did you see him?" Gabriel asked, gently cutting him off before he could get up a full head of steam. "Was it near here?"

"Yeah." Rufus didn't seem to mind being denied the opportunity to tell his tale. "Somewhere by here. Don't 'member exactly, though." He brightened. "Ya know—you should ask Alfonso. He'd know, if he was talkin' to him."

"Where's Alfonso?" Joe asked. "You know where he lives, Rufus?"

The troll nodded. "Sure. He lives over on Bleecker. At the shelter. He kinda helps look after 'em—you know, keeps 'em safe—and they give him a place to stay."

Kestrel checked her map. "Bleecker Street. That's the next one over." She smiled at Rufus. "Thanks. You've helped us out a lot."

Joe nodded. "Yeah, you bet you have."

"Let's get going," Ocelot broke in. "It's not gettin' any earlier, and if we don't get there sooner they're all gonna be in bed."

"Uh—" Rufus spoke up, tentatively trying to get their attention, sensing correctly that he was no longer their focus now that he had delivered his information.

Joe turned back to him. "Yeah, Rufus?"

"You guys—uh—that is—you wouldn't have a little money for a meal or nothin', wouldya?" He sounded almost fearful to be asking.

Joe gave the others a 'let me handle this' look and dug in his pocket. "Sure, Rufus. You helped us—only fair we help you." He handed the troll a small sheaf of the low-denomination bills he carried. "This do?"

Rufus' eyes lit up. "Thanks..." His gaze took them all in as he stowed the cash. "I sure hope you find your friend."

"We do too, Rufus," Gabriel said quietly.

Jonathan, because his room was on the first floor of the shelter along with Mrs. Muldoon's and the one shared by Alfonso and Luke, was one of the first to hear the knock on the front door, followed by the sound of the bell ringing.

He didn't know what time it was exactly, but his innate time sense told him that it was late—eleven o'clock at least. He had been preparing for bed (the shelter was generally awake and functioning early and most of the residents were asleep by ten or eleven at the latest) when the sound came. It was odd but not unheard of for new people to arrive at this hour, especially when they were in trouble.

He wondered if he should go out, but decided against it—Mrs. Muldoon, accompanied by Rick or one of the trolls, usually handled late-night arrivals. In the past month or so he had been here, there had been three such instances—one where an ork mother had been abused by her boyfriend and needed a place to stay with her two children; one where a runaway street kid had needed a safe haven for the night (he had disappeared early the next day and not heard from again); and one where a young ganger had been beaten and sought refuge. In the

latter case Mrs. M. had patched him up and sent him on his way, thus improving (at least marginally) the shelter's reputation in the eyes of the local gang. In all three cases, Mrs. Muldoon, Rick, and Alfonso and Luke had handled things. If they needed Jonathan, he knew they would call him. The only time they had was in the case of the ork mother: Mrs. M. had wanted to know if their accounts contained enough spare cash that they could give her a little before she went on her way. That had been the next day, though.

The question of whether he should venture out settled in his mind, Jonathan continued his preparations for the night's sleep. Tomorrow he would have to work on the presentation he was pulling together to convince an influential store owner to make a sizeable donation to the shelter, so he would need his rest.

The runners and Gabriel had little trouble finding the Bleecker Street Shelter using Rufus' directions. In fact, it was listed in the local directory when Kestrel looked it up. Tony stopped the cab a few buildings down to let them out and then cruised off to find a longer-term parking spot. He would stay in radio communication and be there in a hurry if needed.

They decided that it would probably be best if they didn't all approach the place—together they made a rather formidable-looking assemblage. After a hurried conference it was decided that Gabriel and Joe would go—the latter because they were seeking information from a troll, so another troll might make him less nervous about being roused in the middle of the night, and the former because his manner and appearance tended to put people at ease. The others would position themselves around the area, keeping a lookout for any trouble. Not that they expected any, but they had all been in this

business long enough to know that trouble didn't pay much attention to expectations.

The shelter was a largish, rather ramshackle two-story building that looked as if in one point in its history it might have been an apartment building. Despite its rundown appearance, it showed evidence of care: its windows were all intact, the door was solid and secured by a new-looking lock, and the well-kept sign next to it announced, *Bleecker Street Shelter – All are Welcome*. There were a few lights on, mostly on the second floor, but most of the windows were dark. "Must be asleep," Joe whispered.

Gabriel nodded. "It's unfortunate that we must wake them, but we are growing short of time." He had been quiet during most of the search; even now he seemed preoccupied.

Joe approached the door and rapped gently but firmly. When that did not bring a response, he pressed the button off to one side. A far-off tone sounded.

After a few minutes' wait, they heard a voice through the closed door. "Can we help you?" it called. It was deep and male.

"Forgive us for disturbing you," Gabriel called back, "but we are seeking a friend. We were told that one of your residents might have some knowledge of him."

There was a long pause. "Can't you come back tomorrow? We're kinda closed up for the –"

"Please," Joe called. "Just let us talk to Alfonso for a minute. That's all we want."

Another long pause. Then there was the sound of an old-style bolt being thrown and the door opened a few inches, revealing a troll face. "I'm Alfonso. Do I know you guys?" Suspicion and confusion battled for control of his features.

"No." Gabriel stepped forward. "My name is Gabriel, and this is Joe. We're looking for a companion of ours. We met Rufus, who says he is your friend. He says that he remembers seeing you talking with our friend about a week ago."

"You guys know Rufus?" Alfonso tilted his head, then looked back and forth between Gabriel and Joe. "Who's this friend?"

"He's an elf," Joe told him. He described 'Wraith's height and general build, but left out specifics about his appearance since none of them were sure exactly what he looked like these days. "He got lost, and we think there might be something wrong with him. That's why we've gotta find him."

Alfonso's expression grew suspicious. "How do I know you guys are this elf's friends?" he asked. "I've never seen you around here, and I know pretty much everybody in this neighborhood."

"We're not from around here," Gabriel told him. "Please—may we come in? We'll be very brief."

Alfonso was silent for a moment. Gabriel and Joe could hear the muted tones of a conversation, and then the door opened. Alfonso stood framed in the doorway, a medium-height Latino troll in jeans and a white tank top; next to him stood a tallish, middle-aged dwarf woman who, despite the size difference, still managed to convey that she held the authority of the pair. "Come in," the dwarf said. "I'm Molly Muldoon. I run the Bleecker Street Shelter. And you've already met Alfonso." She and the troll stood aside and motioned the two newcomers in. There was a little sitting area with a scruffy couch, a couple of chairs, and an old table nearby; Molly directed them to it with the air of an old-fashioned lady of the manor welcoming honored guests. When they were seated (all but Alfonso, who leaned against a wall and

kept a watchful eye on them), Molly settled her attention on them. “Now – about this friend.”

Inside his room, Jonathan could hear the voices. He couldn’t hear what they were saying from his bed, but his sharp ears picked out the sounds of a conversation. He recognized two of the voices without difficulty: Mrs. Muldoon and Alfonso. The other two he did not recognize, but he could tell they were both male. One was deep, the other very soft, so soft he could barely hear it at all.

It was odd that it would be two adult men. Men almost never came to the shelter, especially not in pairs, unless they were very young, elderly, or, as in his own case, injured. Perhaps one was injured and the other had brought him here to a place of safety until they could get to a hospital.

As he lay there and continued to half-listen while trying to will himself to sleep, Jonathan gradually became aware that a strange feeling was suffusing him. He didn’t notice it at first; it crept in like a slow-rising river raising its level in a series of tiny increments, lurking in the back of his consciousness as outside the conversation continued.

The feeling was dread. *They’ve got something to do with me.*

He didn’t know how he knew, but when the thought finally bubbled to the top of his awareness several minutes later, it had incubated sufficiently that he was ready to accept it. *They’re here about me.*

Moving very, very quietly, he got out of bed and crept barefoot across the tiny room. Pressing his ear against the part of the door where there was a quarter-centimeter crack because it didn’t quite line up with the frame, he

strained to pick out words from these suddenly disturbing newcomers.

Mrs. Muldoon was troubled. "You mean...there's something wrong with his mind?" She perched on the edge of the couch, regarding the handsome young human and the Amerind troll skeptically. "But—he seems fine to me. A bit confused, sure, but he's settled in quite nicely —"

Gabriel nodded soberly. "We're quite sure of it," he told her. He and Joe had been unable to believe their good luck when Mrs. Muldoon had informed them that, not only had both she and Alfonso probably met the elf they were seeking, but he was in all likelihood living here under this very roof. She had hesitated when they had asked to see him, though, holding out for a little more information before she revealed him to strangers. "We don't know exactly what is wrong with him," Gabriel continued, "but judging from past experience, odds are good that he is delusional in some way."

"Delusional?" Her brow furrowed. "Jonathan might be a little odd, but I wouldn't say —"

"Jonathan?" Joe spoke up. "Is that what he's calling himself?"

Mrs. Muldoon looked suspicious. "Don't you know his name? If he's your friend —"

"That's not the name we know him by," Gabriel said. "Although I believe it is one he has used before." He glanced at Joe, who nodded, remembering. When they had gone to the metaplanes, 'Wraith's true name had been revealed as Jonathan Andrews.

"How did he come to be here?" Joe asked. "And how long?"

"He's been here about a month," Alfonso said. "Some street scum had worked him over a little, but Rick—he's



another guy who lives here – and some friends managed to find him before he got messed up too bad. He's been here ever since."

Mrs. Muldoon nodded. "He's done wonders for the place, too."

"In what way?" Gabriel asked.

The dwarf lady smiled. "He's managed to wring quite a bit of value out of our tiny little bank account – and actually get people to add to it. I've never seen someone who's so good with money."

Gabriel and Joe exchanged glances. This was a facet of 'Wraith neither of them was familiar with.

That wasn't the only thing that was troubling them, either. 'Wraith had been brought into a shelter, injured by 'street scum'? ShadoWraith, the ultra-paranoid master marksman whose reflexes were faster than the vast majority of beings on earth had managed to get taken down by 'street scum'? Something was definitely wrong here. "Mrs. Muldoon," Gabriel said slowly. "Would you mind telling us a bit more about Jonathan? About the way he's been acting?"

Mrs. Muldoon shrugged. "He's quiet, keeps to himself, but he's always pleasant to be around. He does what's needed, although lately he's been concentrating a lot more on the business end because that's what he's good at." She looked at them. "He does seem...troubled, though. Occasionally, when he doesn't think anyone is looking, I'll notice him looking a bit...bewildered. Like he's not quite sure where he is."

Gabriel nodded. "That isn't surprising. He's been through a great deal. That's why we want to find him – so we can help."

"Can we see him?" Joe asked. "I know it's late, but –"

Mrs. Muldoon pondered. She looked the two of them over again, then nodded. "All right. But if he doesn't want to see you —"

"We'll deal with that if it happens," Gabriel said, his tone soothing.

"All right, then. I'll —"

The crackle of a radio transmission sounded softly in Joe's and Gabriel's receivers. "Guys —" It was Ocelot's voice. "We got something out here. Looks like 'Wraith, and he's takin' off down the street like somethin's chasin' him."

Jonathan ran.

He didn't want to—he was loath to leave the only situation he'd found in a long while where he was beginning to feel comfortable—but he knew it was the only way.

It was the man from the hotel room. It had to be.

After moving over to the door so he could hear more clearly what was going on, he had spent the next few moments listening. His eyes had widened, tension filling his body as the conversation had continued. The strangers *were* here to see him. They said there was something wrong with him. They said they were his friends.

Jonathan knew better. He didn't recognize either of the voices—not the deep one or the soft, persuasive one. Whoever these people were, they were not his friends.

All at once he knew he had to see them. After that, he could make up his mind what he had to do.

With infinitesimal slowness, he turned the knob on the door and swung it open. Fortunately it did not squeak: Rick was good about keeping the place up as well as he could on their budget, and hinge oil was cheap. Jonathan slipped out and tiptoed down the hall, moving on silent bare feet. He knew there was a place where he

could look around the corner and see into the sitting area with minimal chance of being spotted. Most of the lower floor was dark, while the sitting area would be well lit for the visitors. It was a chance he had to take.

It felt like nearly forever before he reached the end of the hallway. He stopped, pressing his back against the wall, and held his breath. The newcomers, Mrs. Muldoon, and Alfonso were still talking. It sounded like they were convincing Mrs. M. that they should see him. He knew he had to hurry—he was concerned not only for his own safety, but for that of the shelter residents if there should be a confrontation.

Carefully he turned around so he was facing the wall, then slid sideways a bit so he could glance around the corner with one eye.

Mrs. Muldoon was in her usual spot on the edge of the couch, intent on the visitors. Alfonso stood nearby, his attention also fully engaged. Jonathan took a few seconds to examine the two newcomers: the deep-voiced one was an enormous Amerindian troll, dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and huge combat boots. The soft-spoken one was a young human barely into manhood, dark-haired and handsome, wearing a fine suit.

Jonathan paused. He had never seen either of these two, he was certain of that. Neither of them could have been the man in the hotel room: the troll was out of the question, and the young human was not nearly tall enough or elf-thin enough to share clothing sizes with him so perfectly. So who were they, then, if not—?

*They work for the man in the hotel room.*

*Of course!* Jonathan's whole body tensed as the thought came to him. Of course. Whoever was in the room wouldn't come looking for Jonathan himself. He'd have hired men to do that sort of thing. They would grab him as soon as they were alone with him, and take him

back to—what? He didn't know, but whatever it was it couldn't be good.

He knew what he had to do now. Retracing his steps back to his bedroom (a little faster this time—there was a sense of urgency that had not been as strong before) he slipped back inside and hurriedly pulled on his clothes, including the heavy synth-down jacket Mrs. Muldoon had given him. He shoved his feet into his boots and climbed up on the bed to open the window.

He felt bad about doing this—Mrs. Muldoon and the rest of the shelter folk had been good to him, helped him when he needed help, and they deserved at least a note—but he didn't have time to spare. *I'll call them from somewhere once I've gotten away*, he told himself. *They'll understand.* He wished now that he had shared the story of the hotel room with the dwarf, because then perhaps she might have turned the strangers away saying he was not there, but it was too late for that now. They were here, and he had to go.

He shoved open the window and slid out into the night air, closing the window behind him. He couldn't lock it, but he knew they would discover it soon enough after they found he was gone. They would lock it then.

He ran.

Gabriel and Joe made no indication that they had heard Ocelot's voice over the radio. They couldn't answer him without giving away the fact that they had friends outside, something they didn't want to do at this point. It would just make Mrs. Muldoon suspicious.

The dwarf was already rising. "I'll go see if he wants to see you," she said. "You wait here with Alfonso, all right?"

Gabriel nodded. "Thank you."

He and Joe looked at each other, then settled back to wait for what they knew would come. The voices continued on the radio, mostly Ocelot with a little of Winterhawk and Kestrel, and the two inside contented themselves with listening.

"That's him, all right!"

"He's afraid of *something* – watch out for whatever's chasin' him –"

"There *isn't* anything chasing him. He's just running."

"He came out of the back –"

"Why's he goin' so *slow*? If he wanted to get away –"

Gabriel and Joe could hear the sound of heavy breathing as the three outside converged on 'Wraith's position.

"Hey, 'Wraith! Stop! It's us!"

"Shit! He's runnin' –"

"Get around in front! Don't hurt him –"

There was silence for a moment, then Ocelot's voice came back online. "Guys—I know you can't say anything, but we got him. Had to Narcoject him, though—he was pretty stressed out when he saw us. Can you wrap it up in there?"

He didn't get an answer and clearly didn't expect one. "Okay, hurry up if you can. We'll be in the car."

Again Gabriel and Joe exchanged glances, nodding slightly.

At this point, Mrs. Muldoon came back. She looked concerned. "He's not in there!"

Alfonso frowned. "What do you mean, he's not in there? Is he in the can or somethin'?"

She shook her head. "I checked there and in the kitchen. And Alfonso—the window in his room was unlocked. It looked like he might have sneaked out that way." Remembering at that moment that they had

visitors, she regarded them with suspicion. "You two don't know anything about this, do you?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Muldoon," Gabriel said, rising. "We have no idea why he might have run away." That much was absolutely true.

Joe stood as well, and sighed. "I hope he's okay. I was afraid something like this might happen."

Gabriel nodded. "We'll have to keep looking." He turned to Mrs. Muldoon. "If he should return, please tell him we mean him no harm. We'll check back in a few days." He paused, pulling out a credstick from one of his pockets. "In the meantime, we apologize for any inconvenience. I'd like to make a donation to your shelter, if I may."

The suspicion hadn't entirely left the dwarf's eyes, but nonetheless she took the credstick. She wasn't quite able to suppress a slight gasp when she saw the amount it carried. "But—"

"It's for a good cause," Gabriel said, already heading for the door.

"He'll write it off on his taxes," Joe added, following on his heels. Before Mrs. Muldoon or Alfonso could say another word, they were gone.

Back at the car, Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Kestrel were in the back when Gabriel and Joe arrived. They were regarding the unconscious form of ShadoWraith, who lay stretched out across one of the back seats. Ocelot looked up as the two got in. "I don't know what the hell is going on," he said. "He was runnin' like somethin' straight from hell was chasing him, but he was just going...normal speed."

Kestrel nodded. "When he saw us, he looked panicked. Even then, though, he didn't try to fight back or

run any faster. He just turned and went a different direction."

'Wraith was dressed in faded jeans, a plaid button-down shirt, and what the team recognized as his own custom-made boots. A heavy synth-down jacket was in one corner of the seat where he lay. Joe looked him over. "So now what?"

"He won't be awake for quite awhile," Ocelot said.

Winterhawk was already pulling out his phone. "Will you be needing another large location to do the ritual?" he asked Gabriel.

The young man shook his head. "No. It's getting more difficult for me to maintain the spells on all of you. There's no point in performing the stopgap ritual and then immediately performing the major one. We need to get back to Seattle."

"So we're not going to—your home?" Kestrel looked surprised.

Again Gabriel shook his head. "I don't think we have the time. It will be a bit more difficult to do it at my apartment in Seattle, but I have everything I need there."

"Let's head 'em out, then," Ocelot said, then communicated same to Tony. "Tell you one thing—I ain't sorry to be leavin' *this* place."

'Wraith woke up when the plane was about halfway back. They had made him as comfortable as possible in a little makeshift bed near the back of the cabin, and kept a watch of at least one of them on him at all times to make sure he didn't try anything or hurt himself if he woke up.

They needn't have worried. When he opened his eyes and saw Joe sitting in the seat nearest him, his eyes widened in an expression that was half fear, half resignation. "All right," he said wearily. "You've got me. Will you at least explain what this is about?"

The others, who were alert to sounds coming from that part of the plane, moved back to take other seats near 'Wraith. "Don't you recognize us, 'Wraith?" Winterhawk asked, leaning forward a bit.

"What do you mean, 'what this is about'?" Ocelot added. "What do *you* think it's about?"

'Wraith sat up slowly, propping himself against the wall. His gaze scanned the four of them. "No...it isn't any of you. So you must be taking me to him, right?"

"Taking you to whom?" Gabriel asked softly. "Jonathan, I assure you we mean you no harm. We want to help you."

The elf settled his attention on the young man. He didn't look like he believed the part about their being there to help him. He sighed. "You're taking me to the man from the hotel room. I don't know why. I'm sorry I took some of his things, but I needed them to get out—"

"Jonathan," Gabriel continued as if 'Wraith hadn't spoken, "does the name 'ShadoWraith' mean anything to you?"

'Wraith pondered that for a moment, then shook his head. "No. Is that the man in the hotel room?"

"What hotel room?" Ocelot couldn't stay silent any longer.

'Wraith looked startled. "The one...the one where I woke up. I didn't know how I got there, or who else was there. I thought I'd gotten away, but I guess I didn't make it after all."

"You said you took some things from the man in the hotel room," Gabriel said, still speaking in low, soothing tones. "What did you take?"

There was a long pause, as if the elf was deciding what, if anything, he should reveal. Finally he bowed his head. "I took a coat—a long one. Armored. I took a pair of



jeans and a T-shirt and some boots. And his watch-phone. But I left the gun and the briefcase," he added hastily.

The four others exchanged glances as things began to come clearer. "Jonathan," Gabriel continued, "do you remember anything before you woke up in the hotel room?"

He shook his head. "No. I woke up and everything was—wrong." He closed his eyes, trying to dredge up thoughts that had become indistinct during his time at the shelter. "Everything was wrong. My apartment was...gone. My father—his business—everything was gone. Everything was—*different*."

Winterhawk tensed as the implications of that sunk in. "Jonathan," he said, "how old are you?"

The question gave the elf a little trouble. He frowned a bit, then nodded. "Thirty-one."

The runners and Gabriel looked at each other. As an elf, 'Wraith didn't age like a human, so it was difficult to tell his actual age from just looking at him. His teammates, however, knew that he was older than all of them, which meant that his answer could not be correct.

Gabriel nodded. "All right," he said gently. "You rest, Jonathan. If you'd like anything to eat or drink, just let one of us know. We'll be home soon."

"Where's—home?" 'Wraith asked. He still sounded fearful. These strangers might be relatively non-threatening at the moment, but the fact remained that one of them had shot him with some kind of tranquilizer dart and they had kidnapped him to this airplane against his will.

"We're going to Seattle," Kestrel told him. "That's our home, and yours too."

"Try to relax," Winterhawk added. "It will all be clearer to you soon."

‘Wraith gave him a look that suggested that he did not believe this to be true, but because he was out of options, he would wait.

## 24.

"How much longer do you think it's gonna be?" Ocelot asked. He was pacing again; it was not by any means the first time.

It had been nearly eight hours since they had arrived back in Seattle. After landing they had taken a waiting limo back to Gabriel's apartment, with one quick stop at the market to allow Joe to load up on food. Gabriel had told them that the preparation for the final ritual would be a long and painstaking one and that they would need to wait elsewhere in the apartment to avoid distracting him as he constructed the circle. As the apartment was large enough to accommodate a dragon, the others didn't argue too much (even Winterhawk, who was sufficiently stressed out by the whole situation that even his catlike curiosity about the circle-casting had been put on hold for the duration). The only request Joe had made was that they could pick up some food and drink before they began. Gabriel, realizing that the contents of his refrigerator—or lack thereof—wouldn't keep his guests happy for very long, agreed that this was a reasonable cause for a stop. Joe had outdone himself, returning to the car twenty minutes later with his massive arms full of bags of groceries.

That had been about seven hours ago, and the natives were beginning to get restless. Upon arriving back at the apartment, Gabriel had shown them to a wing they hadn't seen before, consisting of a large and well-equipped media room, a library full of both real and chip-based books, and several smaller rooms containing beds, couches, and comfortable chairs where they could rest. The wing had access to the kitchen and two full bathrooms (one with a jacuzzi big enough for Joe to sit in and the rest of the team to swim in) but Gabriel closed off

the door leading to the front part of the apartment. "Please don't disturb me until I come back to get you," he had told them. "I've never done a circle like this before, and I'll need all of my concentration to make certain nothing goes wrong."

That didn't fill his companions with confidence, but they could see how tired he was looking, so they didn't press the matter. All of them were tired from their exertions, but the added strain of maintaining the spell over three of them was showing more and more on the young dragon. They all knew this had to be done, and it had to be done soon.

'Wraith, for his part, had been mostly silent, observing the odd behavior of his captors with curiosity and a little trepidation. As time had gone on, though, some of his fear had begun to melt away. None of them had been anything but kind to him—they had made sure he had what he needed, that he was comfortable, and they didn't watch over him too closely as if they expected him to escape. He still didn't know what was going on, but he decided to bide his time and see what happened before making a final determination.

The rest of the team entertained themselves in various ways: Joe and Kestrel fired up the trideo screen, which was the size of one that might be found in a small commercial theater, and, after a brief discussion, settled down to view one of the latest action trids. Winterhawk adjourned to the library, where he examined the books and then spent the next couple of hours studying a few that had particularly caught his interest. Ocelot paced, exploring the confines of their large waiting area like a cat looking for a crack in the cage.

Each of them throughout the course of the day took a turn at the jacuzzi or the elaborate shower in the other bathroom, feeling refreshed to be clean once again, and all

of them made serious inroads into the huge stock of groceries Joe had gathered. They took naps. Winterhawk joined Kestrel at the trid while Joe spent awhile in the library. Kestrel and Ocelot did some sparring. 'Wraith found a chair in a quiet corner of the room and waited.

Eventually they all began to get fidgety. There was only so long you could spend entertaining yourself when you knew there was something big and bad-ass happening in the other room—especially if you weren't allowed to go look at it. Ocelot had managed to hold his question for most of the day, but at last he couldn't take it anymore. "How much longer?" he repeated. "'Hawk, any idea?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Afraid not. Even if I were to profess any knowledge of *normal* dragon rituals, which this is assuredly *not*, I wouldn't begin to hazard a guess." He kept his voice down so as not to disturb 'Wraith, who seemed to be dozing in a chair on the other side of the room. The other four of them had gathered in one of the sitting areas to discuss their situation.

Joe sighed. "I guess I'll go make another kitchen run—anybody else want something to eat?"

Everyone else shook their heads; eating was increasingly becoming the last thing on their minds as the clock continued to tick away the hours.

"Okay, then," the troll said, rising. "I guess I'll just go—" He stopped, staring past him. "Or maybe I won't."

The others turned to see what he was looking at.

Gabriel stood in the doorway of the room they were in, his hands gripping either side of the door frame. If he had looked tired before, he looked nearly exhausted now. Nonetheless, he gave them a faint smile. "I apologize for keeping you back here so long," he said. "The circle is prepared. I am ready to begin whenever you are."

Even Winterhawk, who had seen many ritual circles in his day, stopped cold when he saw the one Gabriel had prepared this time. The others moved out around him, each one in turn halting to stare as they got a look at it.

Gabriel had done something to the windows such that, despite the fact that it was still only early afternoon, the huge room was nearly dark. The only illumination was supplied by the circle itself, which glowed with its own inner light.

There were no candles or crystals this time; the glow came from the hundreds of intricately-wrought sigils, symbols, and tracings that took up a significant portion of the middle of the floor. The primary color of the glow was blue, but the runners could see traces of purples, reds, golds, and greens throughout its structure. The overall effect was very beautiful, quite eerie, and fairly crackling with mystical power.

"Wow," Joe said.

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Winterhawk agreed. He looked at Gabriel, who stood near the circle, watching them. No wonder he was tired, if he had created all of that in less than eight hours.

"What—what is going on?" came a voice from behind them.

All of them turned to look. 'Wraith stood there, regarding the circle and Gabriel with a wide-eyed look of fear. "What are you going to do?"

"It has to be done, Jonathan," Winterhawk told him, moving closer to him. He spoke gently but firmly. "We're all going to have to do it. We've all had a similar problem to yours—something's been mucking about with our brains. The only reason Gabriel here hasn't fixed you temporarily like he did the rest of us is because it was easier for him to just do the whole thing once and for all. Do you understand?"

‘Wraith shook his head. “I don’t think I understand anything anymore,” he said, rather miserably. “I just wish someone would tell me what I’m doing here.”

Joe approached. “We’re your friends. You don’t recognize us right now, but you will when this is over. Winterhawk’s right—your head got scrambled some, just like the rest of us, and now Gabriel’s gonna fix it.”

Jonathan paused, looking back and forth between the two of them, and then over at the circle again. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?” He sounded as if he was resigned to his fate.

Winterhawk shook his head ruefully. “I’m afraid not, old boy. But we’ll be right there with you, don’t you worry. And when it’s over, you’ll be glad you did it.”

“We must begin.” Gabriel’s soft voice broke in before they could continue their discussion.

The runners moved over to stand near him, Joe remaining subtly behind ‘Wraith so he didn’t attempt to run away.

Up close, the circle was even more beautiful. From this distance the observers could make out the fact that there appeared to be words interwoven with the symbols, but none of them recognized the language. The glow lit the room with a comforting bluish illumination. “Where do you want us?” Winterhawk asked. “Around the outside, like last time?”

Gabriel shook his head. “No. For this ritual, we must all be in contact. It will be more similar in form to what you experienced with Stefan on the metaplanes.”

That sent a shiver through four of the five runners as that particular memory crept back into their minds. “We’re not gonna all get each other’s thoughts again, are we?” Ocelot asked. His voice shook a bit. That was not an experience he wanted to repeat.

"No." Kestrel had told Gabriel about the experience after he had returned from his three-month absence, so he knew about it even though he hadn't been through it personally. "No...there might be some overlap, but not nearly the intensity. It should feel more like a...cleansing." He spoke slowly, carefully.

Kestrel moved over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Are you okay?" she asked softly.

He gave her a faraway smile. "I will be. When this is over, I will be." Indicating the circle, he said, "Come."

When he had finished placing the five runners in their positions, they were seated around a smaller circle in the inner part of the larger one. There was an open space at the circle's head; he would occupy it when he was ready to begin. Currently, Winterhawk sat to the right of the open spot, with Ocelot next to him, then 'Wraith, then Joe, and finally Kestrel finishing the circle on his left. 'Wraith was quiet, taking in everything without comment or protest. It was difficult for the others to watch him, because his bearing suggested that he firmly believed that he would not leave the ritual alive. There was no time for reassurances, though—they all knew such reassurances wouldn't be needed after the ceremony had completed its purpose.

Gabriel lowered himself gracefully down into the open position, his gaze traveling around the circle to meet each of the runners' in turn. He was all business now, no smiling, but there was an air of serenity about him that helped to put the rest of the participants at ease, at least as much as it was possible to do so. "Join hands," he said, his voice soft and even.

The runners did as instructed, except that Joe and Ocelot having to clasp 'Wraith's hands because he did not make any move to volunteer. As Kestrel and Winterhawk completed the circuit with Gabriel, they all felt a low



thrumming energy coursing through the circle. Around them, the glows of the sigils increased their intensity a bit.

"Close your eyes...try to relax..." Gabriel murmured. "I will be reaching out to each of you...touching your minds...but there will be no intrusion. I seek only to drive from you what is not meant to be there. Try not to resist..." He continued, his voice forming what was almost a soft chant. The words weren't important anymore after a time; there was only the voice: low, whispered, hypnotic.

Next to him, Winterhawk felt his consciousness begin to slip into a trancelike state. It was not unlike the feeling he experienced when he sent his spirit to the astral plane, but there was a subtle difference to it. Instead of the sense of separation, he experienced instead a sense of peace, of oneness, both with himself and with his friends. Some corner of his mind recalled the time Ocelot had spoken of: the time when all of their lives had depended on their ability to merge minds with Stefan, to act as one being to stop something that as separate entities they had no power to stop—but it didn't feel like that either. He could sense the others there with him: Ocelot's stubborn strength, Kestrel's determination, Joe's heart, Jonathan's confusion that was just beginning to give way to 'Wraith's understanding, Gabriel's rock-solid resolve—he let his mind drift over these, adding to them his own certainty that this was the right thing to do. As the ritual progressed in a sort of timeless fashion, he continued to shift between moments of clarity and moments of this strange cosmic awareness of everything around him and of nothing.

And then Gabriel was in his mind. It was a sudden thing but not unpleasant, not intrusive. There were still no words, only a sense of calm and purpose. He watched as from a distance as the dark fog to which he had become accustomed began to slowly fade, to ebb away like the

morning mist after the sun has fully risen. He sensed that he could aid this process and so he did, clearing away the fog more quickly, removing the last vestiges of cobwebs from his mind. He realized suddenly that what Gabriel had done before, back in England, had been nothing more than a metaphorical sweeping under the rug of the dark things that had been attempting to overwhelm him; it had been a necessary thing and it had worked, but he saw how it would not have been possible to hold those things back indefinitely. Now, though, the windows were open, the light let in, and the dark things under the rug whisked away to dissipate into nothingness. The last thing he felt before the presence gently disengaged and moved on to Ocelot was the careful closing up and shoring up of his mind, the sealing of the cracks so as to not allow the dark things to seep back in again. The light was still there, shining strong and pure through the windows, but the openings through which his mind had been invaded previously had been safely fortified. As the presence left him and moved on, he felt as if a heavy weight that he did not even know he had been carrying had been lifted from him. The tenseness in his body relaxed as a gentle, comforting darkness settled over him. He smiled.

When Winterhawk opened his eyes and returned to awareness of the world around him, it was dark. He looked around, regaining his bearings, and noticed that his friends were still seated around the remains of the inner part of the circle, just as he was. The beautiful glow was gone now; in fact, there was no real indication that the circle was still there now beyond the fact that the six of them were still in the same positions.

All around him, his friends were awakening. He watched them, wondering if they felt as he did: refreshed,

cleansed, and tired with the good honest fatigue that accompanies any worthwhile effort.

The only one of their number who did not appear to be awakening was Gabriel. He sat in his place like the others, his posture slumped slightly, watching them with glittering eyes. His expression was that of a man who had exhausted himself performing a duty that he knew he must perform, but who was well satisfied with the results. His hair was plastered to his forehead; his arms hung limply at his sides.

"It—worked, didn't it?" Winterhawk asked, even though he already knew the answer.

Gabriel nodded slowly. "Yes. I—think so." His gaze settled on 'Hawk for a moment, then moved to take in the others. "Are you all—well?"

Ocelot was stretching out his muscles, testing himself to see how he was feeling. "Yeah, I think so," he said at last. He turned to his other side. "'Wraith?" His voice was tentative; like the others he was holding his breath in anticipation of the result of that query.

The elf looked down at himself, then up at Ocelot. His eyes showed question, but there was something subtly different about the look. "Explain," he said.

Joe grinned. "Good to have you back, 'Wraith." He looked at Gabriel. "Is it okay to get up now? Is it done?"

The young man nodded wearily. "It is over. I have removed the Enemy's influence from our minds, and taken steps to see that they are not able to attack us again. You are free to do as you wish."

Kestrel, who had not experienced the influences as the others had, was feeling marginally more awake than they were. She put a hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "Are *you* okay?" she asked.

Again he nodded. He gave her a similar smile to the one he had given her before the ritual began. "I told you I would be fine when this was over. It is over now."

"Explain," 'Wraith said again. He was looking around, taking in the fact that he was in Gabriel's apartment, his confusion evident in his clipped speech.

"Is anybody else hungry?" Joe asked. "Maybe we could order some pizzas or something and tell 'Wraith what's going on."

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," Ocelot agreed.

And so that was what they did. Kestrel called out for delivery and arranged to be downstairs to meet the man when he arrived; less than an hour later they were seated around a big table in another part of the apartment with several large boxes spread out in front of them.

Strangely, 'Wraith did not have a strong reaction to what he was told—at least not one that any of the runners could see. If Gabriel saw anything, he said nothing of it. The elf listened as Winterhawk told the main part of the story, embellished by details from Joe, Ocelot, and Kestrel. 'Hawk told not only of what happened to 'Wraith, but what happened to all the rest of the team as well, with each participant filling in details for his or her own story. 'Wraith nodded occasionally, his hands steepled, his eyes closed, but said little. When they finished, he opened his eyes and once again nodded. "Don't remember much," he said in his typical terse fashion, the more sociable tones of Jonathan Andrews having disappeared as if they had never been. "Better that way, I think."

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes, I'll agree with that. I don't like losing nearly a month of my life, but all things considered I think I'd rather just put the whole thing behind me and move on."

Kestrel looked over at Gabriel, who hadn't eaten much and appeared to be deep in thought. "Gabriel?"

For a moment he didn't answer, then looked up as if startled. "Yes?"

"Are you okay? You were zoning out a little there."

The young man nodded. "I'm fine. Just a bit tired."

"A bit." She shook her head at him in mock disapproval, then sighed. "If you're half as tired as I am, it's a wonder you're still upright."

"That's a point." Ocelot bit into a slice of pizza and swallowed before speaking, washing it down with a healthy swig of beer. "What do you guys want to do now?"

Even though he wasn't being completely clear, everybody knew what he meant. They had been avoiding the question, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the course of the meal: now that they were safe from the Horrors' influence on their minds, what now? Did they just say goodnight and leave, heading back to their own places and continuing their lives as if nothing had occurred? Did they stay together for awhile to make sure nothing else happened? Did they call Harry and tell him they were ready for a job?

Joe paused in mid-bite. "I don't know about the rest of you guys, but I don't know if I just want to take off and go home quite yet."

'Wraith nodded. "Agreed." He too had been very quiet while the others had been talking; everyone present could tell that he was still coming to terms with what had happened to him and, like the rest of them, would likely be doing so for the foreseeable future. They left him alone, as that was probably the kindest thing they could do for him.

"You are welcome to stay here as long as you wish," Gabriel said softly. "I can see that you are all tired;

perhaps it would be best if you remained here tonight and decided what you want to do in the morning.”

Various brief looks of relief passed over the faces of the four teammates: none of them would have brought it up, but all of them were, on some subconscious level, hoping he would issue just such an invitation. For now, at least, this place felt safer than the unknown represented by the rest of the city. Winterhawk looked around at his friends’ faces and then back at Gabriel. “I think we’d like that. Thank you.”

Ocelot nodded. “Yeah. We can decide what to do tomorrow. Me, I think I’d like to get a good night’s sleep and then see about picking up a job.”

“We have to call Harry and tell him we found ‘Wraith,” Joe reminded them.

“In the morning.” Winterhawk finished his last slice of pizza and tossed the crust back on his plate. “He’ll understand—even if we don’t tell him everything, he’ll understand.”

“I don’t think he *wants* to know everything,” Ocelot agreed.

The four of them finished up and rose from the table. As the night wore on, the heavy feeling of fatigue was descending on them with increasing rapidity. Gabriel pointed out to them where there were bedrooms they could use (the apartment seemed to have everything, but nobody questioned why a guy who lived alone had so many extra bedrooms—it just didn’t seem important at the time) and they made their goodnights and headed off to attempt to sleep. They weren’t sure if they would succeed, but at least the rest would do them good. Tomorrow was another day, and a new beginning.

Kestrel followed Gabriel back out toward the front part of the apartment. "So," she said softly, "Is it really over?"

Gabriel gave her a weary smile and nodded. "I think so. The ritual was a strong one, and I was careful to block off any avenues of influence. I can't be certain, of course — no one can be certain of this sort of thing, not even one far more powerful than I — but I am reasonably sure that it is over."

She smiled, gripping his arm briefly before letting go again. "And they'll be okay?"

Again he nodded. "I believe so. They have strong minds, and they have encountered similar things before. I am confident in their ability to deal with this."

"What about yours?" There was no smile now — she was looking at him very seriously.

He shrugged. "It is over. I will have to live with the fact that I hurt you until the day I die, but —"

"No, Gabriel." Kestrel shook her head. "Forget about that. I told you, I forgive you. I just mean — is this whole thing going to mess with your head? You got the worst of it, and you had to deal with it in all of us."

Gabriel paused a moment before answering. "I am glad that I was able to stop it," he said at last. "That will have to do for now."

Kestrel nodded, deciding not to push it at this point. "You'd better go rest," she told him, giving him a gentle shove in the direction of the other side of the apartment. "You've taken care of us — now take care of yourself."

He smiled. "Yes, mother." He leaned forward and gently kissed her forehead; it was the gesture of a friend rather than that of a lover. "I will see you in the morning, then. Sleep well, Juliana."

She stood there for a moment, watching him as he crossed the room and disappeared into the darkness.

“Night,” she whispered, then headed to her own bedroom. She hoped that the night would pass peacefully for all of them—they certainly deserved it after all they’d been through.



## 25.

Winterhawk had been in the bedroom for several minutes before he realized he was just standing there at the window, staring out over the city and thinking about absolutely nothing.

He shook his head, trying to clear it. *Tired, that's all. That's normal after all this.* Sighing, he crossed the room, sat down on the bed, and bent to take off his shoes.

It would be good to finally have a night's sleep that wasn't haunted by either madness or worry about his friends. Despite the fact that he had been the first one Gabriel had tracked down and warded against the Horrors' attempts at control, 'Hawk's mind had been anything but easy over the last few days. There had been too many unknowns, too many episodes of concern about what sort of personal hells the other team members had been experiencing. As each one in turn had been located and Gabriel had worked his magic over him, a bit of the disquietude troubling the mage had dropped away—but there had still been the subtle but constant presence of fear that the spells would slip, that the madness would return, that they would all be lost. It didn't make for easy nights' sleep by any means.

That was gone now. 'Hawk closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to find any trace of it left in his mind. He found nothing. All that was there now was the fuzz of fatigue and a vague pleasant feeling—sort of the mental equivalent of how it felt after taking a shower when you hadn't even realized how dirty and sweaty you'd been before. *Stop dwelling on it, damn you,* he told himself sternly. *It's over. You're going to have to deal with it—we all are—but not tonight.*

He nodded to his little inner voice. "Good idea," he agreed aloud. He tossed his shoes aside and began the

rest of his preparations for bed. In a way he would have preferred to have been home in his own bed where he felt more comfortable, but there would be plenty of time for that later. There was something to be said for spending your first night back from hell in a dragon's apartment.

He smiled a bit to himself as he climbed into bed and settled down. The bed was quite comfortable; he lay on his back and looked out the big window on the other side of the room, watching the moon and the lights of some of Dometown's other tall buildings. He didn't even remember falling asleep.

*Help me...*

Winterhawk tossed uncomfortably in bed, rolling over, the restless movement of his legs turning the covers into a disorganized wad.

*Help me...please...someone...I cannot endure this for much longer...*

He moved again, gathering his pillows up and clutching them tightly, unaware of the light perspiration breaking out on his body. He muttered something unintelligible, then dropped down to a deeper level of sleep.

*He was standing in a room where everything was dark, but yet somehow he could still see without difficulty. The walls and floor were made of the same black stone, fitted together to form an eerie, windowless chamber.*

*He stood in the middle of the chamber, unsure how he had gotten here. It was as if he had simply appeared here, spirited away from his bed. The room felt oppressive, not hot or cold but simply heavy—the weight of the very air around him seemed to be pushing down on him from all sides.*

*"Who's there?" he demanded, his voice sounding oddly small and dead. There was no echo in the room, no sense of his*

voice reverberating off the walls; the sound was absorbed almost the instant it escaped his lips.

*"Help me..."*

He whipped around, looking for the source. The room had no doors, no windows, no way in or out. The voice came from far away; it was full of weariness and despair, the voice of someone who had been making similar pleas for a very long time and no longer expected them to be answered. "Who's there?" he cried again. "Where are you?"

*"Please...help me....You must help me...I beg you..."*

He closed his eyes and tried to center in on the direction from which the voice was calling. There was something familiar about the voice, but he could not as yet put his finger on it. It was too far away, too weak. "Keep talking! I'm trying to figure out where you are!"

*"You can...hear me?"* Now the voice sounded surprised, tinged with a tiny hope that had not been there before.

He turned, facing what he thought was the proper direction. "I can hear you, but I can't see you. Who are you? Where are you? How do I get out of this room?"

For a long moment there was no reply, and then the pleas began anew: *"Help me...please...Don't leave...If you are here, do not leave me to them...I beg you..."*

He let his breath out slowly. "I'm coming!" he called. "Hold on – whoever you are, hold on. I'm coming!" He moved to the wall in the direction that seemed to lead to the voice. As he approached, he saw what he had not seen before: there was a thin thread of a crack in the wall, in the size and shape of a door. It was difficult to see, but it was there. Tentatively, he pressed on one side.

Nothing happened. The door – or whatever it was – remained stubbornly unmoving.

*"Help me...Hurry..."*

Picking up the unseen captive's sense of urgency, he quickly moved to the other side of the door and pressed again. This time, the thing swung inward on silent hinges, opening a

doorway slightly taller than he was and about twice as wide. Beyond was a hallway wreathed in darkness. "Can you hear me any better now?" he called down the hallway. "Is this where you are?"

"Hurry..." The voice sounded a bit more distinct now, but still far away.

He stepped into the hall. It smelled wet and musty, with a faint mossy odor. Far in the distance he picked up the sound of trickling water; there was a dank chill in the air that had not existed in the previous chamber. Taking a deep breath, he set off in the direction of the voice.

It seemed that he had been walking forever. The hallway stretched out to a length that seemed infinite; all around him the voice continued to call for help, joined by the echoes and whispers of—what? He did not know. He shivered, wrapping his arms around himself against the chill, which was growing worse with each step he took. From above him, things occasionally dripped onto his hair, his shoulders, his arms—he fought the urge to stop, to turn back and abandon this strange quest. He ignored the drips and the whispers and the cold and kept going.

Eventually—he lost track of how long it had been, if indeed time had any relevance at all where he was—something began to resolve itself ahead of him. He stopped for a moment, squinting as he tried to pick it out, and realized at last that he was finally drawing near the end of the hall. What he was seeing, far ahead and still tiny, was another doorway.

"Help me...please...Do not let them do this to me...Help..."

The voice was definitely louder now. "I'm coming!" he called. "Hold on! I'm getting closer!"

It seemed to take him almost as long to reach the end as it had taken to cover the previous part of the hallway, but at long last he stood in front of a heavy wooden door. It was set into the stone of the passageway, bound with black metal straps. It was the kind of door one would use to hold in something powerful. Strangely, it had a handle but no apparent lock. "Are you in

there?" he called through the door, then pressed his ear against it to hear the reply.

"Yes...I can hear you. You are close. Please help me..." The voice was fearful, growing desperate. "Please!"

He paused. His sense of urgency was increasing now: he was sure the voice sounded familiar, but still he could not quite place it. But what was on the other side of the door? Was it a trap? Was there any way for him to know that?

"Please..."

He made a decision. Grabbing the heavy iron handle, he swung the door open and entered the room –  
– and gasped.

"My God..." he whispered, as the awareness that had been trying to come to him since his arrival in the original chamber hit him with the force of slamming into a wall. "No..."

The man on the other side of the room was upright, but that was only because he was attached to some sort of barbaric apparatus. His arms and legs were bound to a frame by what looked like living ropes; they cut into him so tightly that blood oozed from around their edges. Not all of it was new blood, either.

Worse, some of the ropes, which looked more like tentacles on closer inspection, seemed to be growing through the man's body at various points around the frame, poking up through his flesh and waving around like vile worms as if seeking something new on which to feed.

"No..." he repeated, his voice unable to rise to anything above a whisper.

The man on the frame raised his head. It was an exhausted gesture, the gesture of someone who had given up hope but who was willing to give it one more try – always one more try – because there was nothing else he could do. "Help me..." he pleaded.

He took in the man's dark hair, his hawklike features, his eyes, which had once been piercing but were now hollow and

*lightless. For a moment he could not speak. Then, at last, one word escaped his lips: "Stefan..."*

*Then suddenly darkness descended on the room and the man screamed.*

Winterhawk's eyes flew open.

The room was dark, peaceful, quiet. Normal.

His heart was pounding in his chest; the sheets were soaked with perspiration. His hands were clenched around the covers. His gaze darted around the room, but there was no threat, no one else in the room.

He was alone.

Slowly he sat up, having to send a conscious thought to his hands to disengage them from the covers. He noticed in passing that the fact that he had been gripping them had probably been the only thing that had prevented him from digging his nails into the palms of his hands.

He willed his breathing to slow. "Just a nightmare..." he whispered. "That's all it is..."

He froze for a moment, remembering the dream, remembering the fact that his previous madness had started with dreams—but he could not remember those dreams. This one was all too clear in his mind. The images were still there, not fading away as dreams were often wont to do.

Closing his eyes, he searched his mind and his feelings for any sign of the madness. He didn't know if he would know what to look for even if it were there, but what he found encouraged him. The satisfied, cleansed feeling he had experienced at the end of Gabriel's ritual was still there. Fundamentally he still felt *right* in a nebulous sort of way.

But the dream—

*Why would I dream about Stefan? Why now? He's been dead for months. And why would I dream that he needed my help?*

He sighed and shook his head. Trying to make sense of dreams was better left to professionals—or at least amateurs who weren't as mentally fried as he was at the moment. He made a perfunctory attempt to straighten out the covers and put the pillows back in order in anticipation of crawling back into bed before realizing that the chances that he would get back to sleep any time soon were somewhere between slim and none. *Bugger these dreams anyway. First night where I might actually get a decent night's sleep and this had to happen. No sense arguing with it, though. P'raps a cup of tea might do me good. I wonder if Joe got any tea in all those bags of his.*

That decided, he pulled on the slacks and shirt he had worn the night before, as none of them had brought any extra clothes, and padded barefoot toward the kitchen with his shirttail untucked. *Aubrey would be appalled if he saw me now*, he thought wryly; the thought calmed him a bit, reminding him that there was a real life out there and soon he would be returning to it.

Deep in thought, he had reached the end of the hall before he realized there was a light on in the kitchen. He stopped a moment, then nodded. *Probably Joe grabbing a midnight snack.*

But it wasn't Joe. As Winterhawk rounded the corner and paused in the kitchen doorway, he saw Ocelot seated at the table, a bottle of scotch open in front of him. "Evenin', 'Hawk," he said. "Want a drink, or you want to hear some weird shit?"

## 26.

*Hope.*

*For the first time since the time so long ago that he had first reached out, he felt hope.*

*He scarcely dared to believe it, but there it was.*

*Someone can hear me!*

*My message has reached someone at last!*

*He could feel it now, feel it strong and pulsing, unhindered by the others' damping, unencumbered by their malevolent influence. They were not gone – oh, no, they were there and they waited...always they waited – but somehow their minds, their whispers no longer picked up his efforts, twisted them, added their own foul spin to his message. His voice, crystal clear, strong, full of hope and power, reached out across the vast gulf and had at last touched something on the other side.*

*At first he was confused: what minds were these that he had reached? Where was Gethelwain? His brother was there – he could feel him, stronger than the others – but there were other presences, strong too but different, alien –*

*Their thoughts reached out to him, full of shock and horror and compassion – and then he knew.*

*Of course.*

*It was the bond. Not simply the one he shared by blood with his brother, but that which he shared by choice with his brother's friends. He had nearly forgotten about the bond in his torment, but now it rose once again to the forefront of his mind as he realized simultaneously that this provided him with a greater chance to reach someone, to communicate his message and to seek help – but it also put these friends in great danger. The things wanted Gethelwain, that much he knew – but he had no doubt that they would be pleased to add a few extra victims to share his torment.*

*The pain was too strong, the torment too great, to allow him to dwell on such questions for too long. He could not bear it for much longer – he did not know how much longer he could cope*



*with this before whatever was left of his essence fell apart and there was nothing left but unceasing mindless agony.*

*He hoped that they would forgive him – Gethelwain and his friends – but he was no longer in a position to consider these things too carefully. He had to take the risk, as he knew it was the only chance he would ever have.*

## 27.

Winterhawk paused in the doorway, looking from Ocelot to the bottle in front of him. "Should I ask?"

Ocelot indicated the seat across the table from him. "Pull up a chair. Couldn't sleep either, huh?" He was dressed in tanktop and shorts, his newly short hair uncombed.

'Hawk shook his head. He didn't sit down right away; instead, he began opening cupboards and examining their contents.

"What are you looking for?"

"Tea. It's a bit early in the morning for your style of refreshment." The clock on the kitchen wall read 02:17.

"Second one from the fridge, bottom shelf."

The mage opened the indicated cupboard and was pleased to find not only tea, but a nice selection of it. Either Joe had been thinking of him on his shopping trip or else tea was one of the few things Gabriel actually kept in stock. He found one he liked and put some water on to boil, then dropped into the seat facing Ocelot. "So," he said, "What brings you out in the middle of the night when you should be sleeping off the effects of several weeks in hell?"

Ocelot shrugged, pouring himself another shot of Scotch before replying. From the level in the bottle, it appeared as if he had been here awhile before Winterhawk had arrived—or else he was tossing them down fast. "Had a bad dream. Tried to get back to sleep after, but it just wasn't happenin'. I figured I'd come out here and try to medicate myself a little, then go back to bed."

Winterhawk's gaze sharpened a bit. "A bad dream? I had one too."

"Doesn't surprise me. It's not like we haven't all been through enough shit to provide subject matter for a couple of years' worth of the damn things."

'Hawk was about to reply when a shadow appeared in the doorway. Both he and Ocelot looked up to see ShadoWraith standing there watching them. "Don't tell us," 'Hawk said wryly. "Bad dream?"

'Wraith looked briefly startled, then nodded. "Yes."

Ocelot pointed at another chair at the table. "Right now the bar's serving Scotch and tea. If you want anything else, you gotta get it yourself."

'Wraith looked at Winterhawk. "Tea?"

The mage nodded, already getting out another cup.

'Wraith sat down; he didn't seem inclined to speak right away, but no one minded. They sat in silence for a few moments as the water boiled and Winterhawk prepared two cups of tea and brought them over to the table. He was just placing one in front of the elf when they all heard someone else coming down the hall. From the sound of the heavy footfalls, it was Joe.

When the troll's huge bulk appeared in the doorway, the others were all looking in his direction. He looked surprised to see them all there. "Hi, guys," he said quickly. "I didn't expect you all to be up. I was just looking for a snack." He crossed the kitchen and began digging in the cabinets, gathering the makings of a rather sizable early-morning meal.

"No nightmare?" 'Wraith asked.

Joe froze in the act of pulling out several slices of bread.

"So then you had one too?" Winterhawk asked the troll's back.

Joe put the bread back and slowly closed it up. "Yeah. I had one. You guys did too?"

"We all did," Ocelot said. "That's why we're having this little party instead of sleeping like sane people are supposed to do at 2:30 in the morning."

"We all did what?"

Once again they looked up. Not surprisingly, Kestrel was watching them. Like the others, she looked like she had just gotten up and hadn't spent much time in preparation before heading for the kitchen.

"Had nightmares," Winterhawk told her.

Her eyes widened. "You too?"

"Okay," Ocelot said. "This is getting ridiculous. Should we all sit here and wait a few minutes to see if Gabriel shows up and says *he* had a nightmare too, or just have our midnight—uh—two-thirty a.m. snacks and go back to bed?"

"I don't think I want to go back to bed quite yet," Kestrel said. There weren't any more chairs at the kitchen table, so she leaped gracefully up and perched on one of the dark marble countertops, drawing her legs up and wrapping her arms around them. "I don't think I could take another one like that."

Joe nodded. "Yeah, mine was a little freaky too." He paused. "Okay, a *lot* freaky. Can't figure out why I'd suddenly start dreaming about Stefan after all this time."

Four pairs of eyes fixed on him simultaneously. "You—dreamed about Stefan?" Winterhawk asked. His words were soft, slow and measured, like he was trying to keep his voice under control.

The troll nodded again, bringing his tray of food back to the table. "Yeah. It was the weirdest thing—it didn't even really seem like a dream. I mean, you know how dreams tend to fade away after you wake up? This one didn't fade. It's still not."

'Hawk carefully set his teacup down, his gaze still riveted on Joe. "Joe—in your dream—what was Stefan

doing?" He could feel the attention of the room's other three occupants—the anticipation as they all waited for an answer.

Joe seemed to have forgotten his food. "He was in trouble. Big trouble. He was begging me for help. I asked him what happened, but he just kept begging me to help him."

"Oh, shit..." Ocelot's voice was quiet, but it didn't need to be loud to reach the others.

"Same dream?" Wraith asked.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. Oh, shit..." He looked at Kestrel. "You too?"

She also nodded. "Same one. Stefan—he was stuck to some kind of weird...thing. Like a framework. It looked like somebody was torturing him. He kept pleading with me to help him, but before I could do anything, he screamed and then I woke up."

Winterhawk held out his teacup toward Ocelot. "I think I'll take you up on that offer after all," he said faintly. His eyes were wide in his pale face. Ocelot obliged, pouring a healthy shot into the mage's tea.

"Okay," Kestrel said from the counter. "Let's try to make sense out of this. Are we trying to say that all five of us had the *exact same dream*?"

For the next several minutes, the five of them compared notes on their dreams. Several things came out of this discussion: first, they had indeed all had the same dream, down to the description of the rooms, the mossy odor of the hallway, the wicked framework that had imprisoned Stefan, and the scream that woke each of them up. Second, they all remembered it with remarkable clarity. As one would describe something, the other four were quick to add more detail until they had an uncomfortably clear picture of what had occurred. Third, all of them were growing more and more uneasy as the

discussion progressed. By the time they had finished fleshing out the substance of the odd dream, Ocelot's bottle of Scotch was gone, and not entirely by his own doing.

One thing that struck them as particularly strange as they wound down their discussion and sat looking at each other, trying to decide where to go next, was the conspicuous absence of one of their number. 'Wraith noticed it first; he kept casting glances toward the kitchen door as they talked. "Where's Gabriel?" he asked at last.

The others realized that, despite their predictions to the contrary, the young man had not made an appearance to announce his participation in their shared nightmare. Kestrel shrugged. "He was exhausted. Maybe he was just sleeping too deeply for it to affect him."

"Or p'raps it just *didn't*," Winterhawk added. "P'raps dragons don't have nightmares."

"This one does," Kestrel said soberly.

"Should we tell him about ours?" Joe was eating again; apparently even something of this level of weirdness couldn't deter his appetite for long.

"Definitely," Ocelot said. "Maybe he can figure out why we're suddenly all dreaming about his dead brother."

"In the morning," Kestrel's voice was firm. "We're not going to wake him up now. You didn't see him after you guys all went to bed. He was barely on his feet."

The others grudgingly nodded. They all wanted to talk to someone who might be able to make sense out of the situation, to tell them that it was nothing and they were all simply overreacting after too many unpleasant experiences in too short a time, but they knew she was right. Even as close as they had grown to Gabriel over the past few months, none of them was in any hurry to wake a sleeping dragon to tell him they'd had bad dreams.

The only one who didn't nod was 'Wraith. As the others were listening to Kestrel, the elf seemed to have locked his attention on something else. He stared across the kitchen at nothing, his body tense.

"Something wrong, 'Wraith?" Joe said through a bite of his multi-layered sandwich.

'Wraith's gaze switched back on and settled first on Joe, then on the others in turn. "Dead brother?" he asked.

Everyone gave him various versions of a confused look. "Yeah," Ocelot said. "You know—Stefan? Big, green, scaly?"

But 'Wraith shook his head. "Operative word: not brother. Dead."

Winterhawk caught on first. He tensed, halting in the act of lifting his teacup. "Oh, bugger..." he whispered.

"What?" Ocelot demanded.

"What if he's not dead?" Kestrel spoke up as she too caught on to the elf's implication.

"But we all saw him die," Joe protested. "Right?"

The others nodded, all of their minds carrying them back to the scene on the blasted plain near the Chasm of the Horrors, where all of their fates had rested on their former enemy's—Gabriel's brother and former mortal enemy's—ability to defeat the Horror who had already killed one dragon and had been on its way to killing two more. They all remembered the agonizing scream of the Horror as Stefan, near death, had sacrificed himself by throwing both himself and the Horror over the edge of the precipice, casting both of them into the Chasm. It was a scene that would remain, vivid and unfading, in their minds—probably for the rest of their lives.

"Saw him go over the edge," 'Wraith pointed out. "Didn't see him die."

"But nothing can survive at the bottom of the Chasm," Winterhawk said. "Harlequin told us that more than once."

"Does he know for sure?" Ocelot asked. He didn't like asking these kinds of questions, but he knew if he didn't ask, somebody else would get around to it in short order.

'Hawk sighed. "I don't think *anyone* knows for sure. How can they? It's not exactly like we can nip off to the metaplanes and conduct interviews with the Horrors, now can we?" His voice was a bit strained as his mind continued to consider possibilities.

"Wait a minute." Kestrel jumped down from the countertop and began pacing around the kitchen. "We might not know for sure that Stefan's dead, but Gabriel does. He *felt* him die. He told me that. And after that, he went off to mourn with the other dragons. There were a lot of dragons there. Don't you think if he wasn't dead, *somebody* would have figured it out?"

Winterhawk sighed. "I don't know." He looked around at the others. "P'raps we're all rushing to a conclusion here. Let's examine what we've got, leaving out any supposition, shall we?" He leaned back in his chair and ticked the items off on his fingers. "First, we've all been influenced profoundly by the Horrors, and very recently. Second, that influence has only even more recently been removed. Third, we've all had nearly identical nightmares involving Stefan's being in great distress and needing our help. Have I missed anything?"

"Gabriel didn't have the nightmare," Joe said.

"We don't *know* he didn't," Ocelot said. "Maybe he did and just didn't come out here."

'Hawk nodded. "Right. Now let's look at our suppositions."

"Stefan's still alive," Ocelot said.



"He's in trouble somewhere and has figured out some way to reach us," Joe said.

"Horrors are deceiving us," 'Wraith said.

Everybody turned to look at him. "Oh, shit..." Ocelot said. "'Wraith, you coulda gone all night and not said that."

"But it's definitely a possibility," Winterhawk said, nodding. "P'raps this is just some vestigial bit of the Horrors' influence burning itself out."

"But what if he *is* still alive?" Kestrel said. She was still pacing around the big kitchen. "Is it possible?"

"Anything's possible," Winterhawk said. "Especially where magic and the metaplanes and the Horrors are involved."

"Then if he's alive, where is he? How did he survive? How would he reach us?"

"Horrors did," 'Wraith pointed out.

"We don't know how they did *that* yet either," Ocelot reminded them.

"Guys, I think we need to talk to Gabriel," Joe said. "This isn't helping."

Winterhawk nodded reluctantly. "We could sit here all night trying to figure out how this could have occurred, but I don't think we're going to get very far. Our time might be better served by trying to get some sleep and resuming this discussion in the morning."

The runners looked at each other. They could all see in each other's eyes that nobody was in any hurry to go back to bed and risk experiencing the nightmare again, but on the other hand they all knew Joe and Winterhawk were right. They weren't going to get any answers tonight—not unless they woke Gabriel up. And even then, they weren't certain that he would have any further insight.

"One more question before we go," Joe said, standing and beginning to clean up after his meal. "Does anybody feel—weird?"

"Weird?" Winterhawk tilted his head in question.

"Yeah. You know—I think it was different for all of us, but before, when I started losing it, I felt—something. I don't feel it now. Do you?"

The others, all except Kestrel who hadn't experienced the madness, considered that question for a few moments before answering. They all shook their heads. "No," Ocelot said. "No weird buzzing...no feeling like somebody's out to get us. Well, no more than usual," he added.

The others readily agreed that, whatever had caused the nightmare, it didn't feel like the Horrors trying to get their hooks into them again. At least not the same way. It was a small measure of comfort, although it didn't help much.

Ocelot stood and tossed the empty Scotch bottle in the trash. "Well, I sure hope I've medicated myself enough that I'll get at least a couple hours' sleep. Otherwise I'm gonna be starin' at the ceiling until the sun comes up."

The others also rose and together they filtered out of the kitchen and back toward their respective bedrooms. They exchanged a round of uneasy goodnights and after a few moments the place was once again quiet.

Kestrel watched the closed doors and then turned to head for the other side of the apartment where her room was. Briefly she thought about waking Gabriel, wondering if he had experienced the same thing they had and was simply keeping it to himself to spare the others any potential disturbance. Then she shook her head. *Let him sleep, if he can. We'll talk to him in the morning.* She wished she could go to him, to climb into his bed, to both give and receive comfort. She knew it wouldn't happen,

though. That night at his lair seemed like it had been a million years ago, a night from another time; in some odd way that she could not quite explain it had felt like the end of something and the beginning of something else.

She sighed as she passed by the door to the suite that was his living area when he was in human form, moving on to open the door of her own room. She got in bed, wishing that she had partaken of some of Ocelot's Scotch, but deciding it was probably better that she hadn't. Settling back, her thoughts a turmoil of confusion, she was asleep—deeply and dreamlessly—in less than five minutes.

## 28.

At approximately the same time that the five runners were gathering in the kitchen to discuss their shared nightmare, the remaining occupant of the apartment was standing in his chamber fighting the urge to scream out his frustration, terror, and despair until the entire city echoed with the sound.

Gabriel stood at the window, his body rigid and trembling, staring out at the dimmed lights of Downtown without seeing them. He could see the shimmering beads of perspiration standing out on his chest, and feel them on his forehead. His hands, pressed against the glass both to still them and to steady his body, nonetheless shook uncontrollably.

He was afraid, more afraid than he had ever been in his life – and it didn't matter. He knew what must be done now, and his own fear was no excuse for him to fail.

*No excuse...*

He had been awakened some time ago—he didn't know how long it had been, but it wasn't important—by the screams of his brother reverberating in his mind. Even after he had awakened the screams seemed to continue for several seconds before finally dying into nothingness, leaving him alone and fearful in his bed.

*"Stefan..."* he had whispered aloud, trying to reach out to his brother but touching nothing.

The dream had been terrifyingly vivid. Stefan had been *there*, in his mind, pleading for his help. *"Brother... Gethelwain... please... do not leave me like this... you must help me... I am begging you... please do not leave me here... help me or destroy me... I do not care which... but I cannot endure this for much longer..."*

In the dream Gabriel had closed his eyes, clenching and unclenching his fists, trying desperately to get to his brother but unable to reach him. For him there had been no escape from the chamber, no way to continue the search as, unbeknownst to him, the others had done in their own dreams.

Instead, there had been a presence.

At first he had been too preoccupied with the screams, with trying to find a way out, to notice it. But when he turned, it was there. He had frozen, staring.

The presence was familiar. Not this particular instance of it—that one had truly died and would not return—but the type, the essence, was one with which he was well familiar. It stood silently, watching his efforts. It smiled. The effect of that smile was not unlike the rainbow hue that resulted when the sun struck a pool of oily muck. *He has found you*, it said. Its voice was oily too, and it spoke without moving the disgusting thing that served it as a mouth. *Good. We are pleased that our message was received.*

Gabriel glared at the thing. “Where is he?” he had demanded. “What sort of trick is this?”

The thing laughed. *Trick, dragon? There is no trick. You see what is. You hear what is. What you choose to do about it is the question.*

Rage blazing in his eyes, he had tried to attack it. He had gathered his energy and focused it into a magical assault of such power and intensity that almost no living thing could have stood against it.

The presence merely laughed as the energy crackled around it and dissipated harmlessly away. *You cannot reach us that way, dragon. You should know that by now. Especially since we have already reached you...* It laughed again as if it had just told a particularly amusing joke.

Gabriel shook his head. “No longer. I have blocked your influence. I do not know why you seek us again, but

you will reach neither me nor my companions any longer."

The presence sneered. *There are many ways to reach those we seek*, it said. *You can thank your brother for what has come before – we had not expected it to be so, but it was most amusing...he has given us a chance we never expected to have again...*

Gabriel moved closer, fighting the uneasy disgust he felt for the thing. His eyes shone with his rage. "Enough!" he ordered. "You have made your attempt and we have prevented it! Go back to your holes and your dark places and leave us! Your tricks are not working!"

*You have not yet seen our tricks*, the thing said mildly, without moving. It seemed unaffected by Gabriel's verbal onslaught. *But that is not the issue here. What of your brother?*

"My brother is dead. He died destroying one of your number, and destroying your plans."

*Is he?* The presence chuckled again.

The screams started again.

Gabriel stiffened, his gaze moving around, trying to find the source as the sounds of Stefan's agony cut through him. "It is a trick!" he cried again. "You seek to make me believe he is here, but I know better. I felt him die. He is gone. He is beyond your reach!"

*His body is beyond our reach...but how can anyone truly know what occurs when the body is destroyed?* The voice was almost gentle now, insinuating.

Gabriel could not suppress a gasp as that sunk in. *No*, he told himself. *It is not possible. They cannot –*

*But do you want to take the chance, dragon?* the voice cut into his thoughts. *Of course it is possible that we are deceiving you. But what if we are not?*

And then all at once, as the screams continued to echo around him, he knew.

One moment the certainty eluded him—the next moment it was there.

No...

The presence laughed. *Ah, you are beginning to see the light, young one!* It fairly wriggled with anticipation. *But you have not yet stepped from the darkness. You have not yet seen the entire picture...*

“What do you want?” Gabriel demanded.

*What do we have, you mean...* There was a pause, and then the thing leaped forward, fingerlike appendages splayed, extending itself toward him. He tried to ward it off, but it slipped around him, past his defenses—

He heard himself scream as it touched his mind, as it plunged its filthy essence into his being.

And, far away, he heard Stefan’s screams join with his own.

He awoke with such a violent response that he had leaped from the bed and stood, breathing hard, heart pounding, in the middle of the room before he came fully awake.

*What do we have, you mean...*

That was what it had said before it had attacked him.

And then, afterward, he had known.

He knew exactly what they had—and what they wanted.

He dropped to the floor, head bowed, and buried his face in his hands.

He didn’t rise again for several minutes. When at last he did, he crossed the room and took his position at the window. Reaching out, he could feel the others—they were awake. As he continued to observe, they congregated in the kitchen. Their auras showed the dull red of agitation, the bright red of fear—

They had had the dream too. All of them had. Even Juliana.

What did they know?

He hated to observe them without their knowledge, but he had to understand. Were they even now discussing what he himself had seen? Did they know what he knew? He closed his eyes and watched for a moment, listening silently as each one described what he or she had seen.

His shoulders slumped as they finished. Now at least he had his answer. They had part of the picture, but not all of it. Not the most important part. He watched as they debated whether or not to wake him, to tell him what they had experienced, to ask his counsel. He was touched by their faith in him, and racked with a brief sense of disgust: *I am not worthy of their faith.*

But they did not come to him. Juliana — *bless her; I am likewise not worthy of her love* — had convinced them to wait until the morning. *Thank you, Juliana — I can do what I must and none of you will suffer because of it...* He leaned forward until his forehead touched the cool glass of the full-length window and tried to gather his thoughts. The small scar on his bare side throbbed slightly, as if mocking him.

He knew what he had to do. There was no other option open to him. None of them would ever be safe again, he knew that now. Not unless he acted. It was what they wanted all along. And Stefan —

*I am sorry, brother. It is not your fault. You did the only thing available to you, and I will do what I can to help you. You had no way to know what would happen.*

He took a deep breath. There was no more excuse to wait. The longer he waited, the worse things could become — and the harder it would be for him to gather the courage to do this.

The others must not be involved.



Moving with the absolute silence he rarely employed while in his human form, he left his bedchamber and entered one of the rooms he used as an office. He glanced briefly at the dataterminal, then shook his head. Instead, he opened a desk drawer and withdrew a sheet of fine paper and an old-fashioned fountain pen. He sat down at the desk and regarded the blank sheet for several seconds before he began to write.

*They deserve this. They deserve to know the truth.*

When he finished, he carefully waited for the ink to dry, then heated some wax from a candle to make an old-style seal. He folded the paper, sealed it, and took it with him back to the bedroom.

He paused a moment, considering, and after a time silently left the folded message on the pillow of his bed. Then he left the room, heading out to the front part of the apartment. Looking around, he drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, allowing his gaze to travel over the vast main room. He liked this place—he had liked it ever since he had moved in more than a year ago.

He hoped he would see it again.

He moved slowly but without hesitation, closing and locking the front door behind him. A hidden stairway took him to the roof.

It was cold up here, but very beautiful. It was a rare clear night—the wind whipped his hair and knifed at his unprotected skin; the lights of the stars and the buildings and the few passing planes winked on and off against the black of the moonless sky.

Gabriel moved to the edge of the building. He climbed the small lip and stood for a moment without fear like a high-diver on one of the corners. “Goodbye, Juliana,” he whispered, and jumped.

If anyone saw the plummeting body of the young man suddenly shift and grow into the graceful winged

form of the dragon and take off into the darkness, they only saw it for a second or two before invisibility cloaked him and made him one with the night.

## 29.

Even without nightmares to plague their rest, none of the runners managed to stay asleep past about seven o'clock that morning.

Winterhawk was one of the first to awaken; the morning light streaming in through his window brought him up from what had been a slightly troubled but mostly peaceful slumber. He sat up, running a hand back through his disarrayed hair, and considered his situation. He still felt tired, but it was the sort of tired he could deal with.

He encountered Ocelot on his way to the bathroom to have a shower. "Morning..." he muttered.

"Yeah. Not so loud, okay?" Ocelot's voice was gravelly. "You think dragons keep aspirin around?"

'Wraith and Joe were not long in joining them, and the four of them managed to work around each other to get themselves at least somewhat presentable in about an hour. Fortunately, Gabriel kept his guest bathrooms well stocked; they had to wear the same clothes they had worn the previous day, but at least they were clean.

When they arrived in the front room, Kestrel was already there, sprawled across one of the couches with one foot over the top. She was reading a magazine, but she tossed it aside and looked up as the others came in. "Morning," she said. She appeared more chipper than they did; apparently she kept spare clothes here because she was wearing a different pair of jeans and T-shirt than yesterday. "You guys sleep well?"

"Well enough," Winterhawk told her.

"No more nightmares, at least," Joe added.

Ocelot looked around. "Speaking of nightmares—which reminds me of dragons—has our host shown up yet?"

Kestrel swung around and faced them over the back of the couch. She shook her head. "Haven't seen him all morning. Like I said, though—he was really tired last night. Let's give him a little time. It is early."

So they settled down to wait. After an hour and no sign of Gabriel, even Kestrel was starting to show signs of restlessness. "It's not like him to go off by himself this long—especially not after what happened last night."

Ocelot glanced toward the other side of the room, then back at her. "Could you maybe...go check on him? If he's asleep you can leave him alone, but I think we all want to have a talk with him."

Winterhawk nodded. "Indeed. Tell him afterward we'll all be happy to buzz off and let him sleep for the rest of the day if that's what he wants."

Kestrel sighed. "Yeah...I think maybe you're right. I keep thinking about what happened at the chalet—I'd hate to think he had another incident like that and nobody knows..." She gracefully got up and headed off. "I'll at least go knock on his door. Just hang out here and I'll be back in a minute."

It wasn't much more than a minute before she returned. All four of the runners could see from the look in her eyes that something was wrong. They were on their feet immediately as she approached. Ocelot took a step toward her. "Kestrel—?"

"He's not in there," she said softly.

"What do you mean, he's not in there?" Joe demanded.

"He's not here. I knocked on his door, and when there was no answer, I opened it. It wasn't locked. His bed looked like it had been slept in, but he was nowhere to be found." She paused. "I think something's wrong."

"Hold on," Winterhawk said, making a *slow down* gesture. "This is a big place. He could be somewhere else, couldn't he?"

"Why would he get up and not tell us?" Joe asked. "He knew we'd want to see him before we left —"

Kestrel held up her hands. She looked frazzled; it was only then that the other runners could see that she held something: a piece of folded paper. "What's that?" Joe asked.

"I found it on his bed." She bowed her head, holding the paper out to them. The outside read simply, *Friends*. "He knew we'd find it there when we went looking for him..." she murmured.

Winterhawk gently took the note from her nerveless hand. After glancing quickly at his teammates, he broke the seal. For a moment he just stared at whatever was printed inside, and then he began to read in a soft tone that shook slightly as he went on.

*My dear friends,*

*I apologize for leaving you in this way. I wish it could have been otherwise, but I hope you will forgive me when you understand why I have done this.*

*I know about your dreams last night. I know because I had one as well, and what I have learned from it has at last revealed to me the reason why we have been plagued by the Enemy's attacks. I will tell you now what I have learned, with the hope that you will understand what I ask and why I was forced to act. I owe you the truth after all we have been through together.*

*Stefan — or at least some part of his essence, the thing that made him Stefan — still exists. I will not use the word 'lives', for that in no way describes the experiences he has endured since the day when he cast himself and his foe into the Chasm. His body is dead, but this part of him remains. I do not know how the Enemy has managed this, but I am certain now that they have done so.*

"My God..." Kestrel whispered.

"So that really *was* Stefan calling to us..." Joe added.

Winterhawk did not reply; instead he continued reading:

*Somehow, Stefan had managed to find a way to reach out across the Netherworlds in an attempt to contact me, to seek my aid. He was not aware of the fact that the Enemy learned of his plans and used them to serve their own ends – by adding their 'signal' to his. It was the only way they could hope to reach this world. Further, Stefan did not realize that because of the link he had shared with you at the end of our time on the Netherworlds, he had a closer bond to all of you than he had expected. The madness we experienced was the result of the Enemy's attempt to use Stefan's signal to reach our minds.*

Winterhawk looked up; four pairs of eyes were riveted on him, shifting back and forth between his face and the letter. He drew a deep breath and continued:

*Apparently the ritual to block the Enemy's influence was effective, but because it was not designed to block Stefan's message as well, he was at last able to get through to us. That was the cause of the dreams you had last night. Without the Enemy to intercept his attempt to reach us, Stefan succeeded in doing what he had intended to do all along – to contact me and inform me of his plight. I believe the fact that he reached all of us was an unintended consequence brought on by the remains of the mental link.*

"So...he's gone off to the metaplanes to rescue Stefan?" Ocelot demanded. "Or his ghost, or whatever? The Horrors have got him?"

"Let him finish," 'Wraith said.

Winterhawk had been scanning ahead a bit during the interruption; his eyes grew wide. "Wait...we're not done yet. Listen."

*As you might have already surmised, I cannot leave Stefan to the Enemy. I must do what I can to help him, and therefore I have departed to my lair where I will travel to the Netherworlds to seek him and attempt to free his spirit from their*

*imprisonment. Please do not try to follow me; I am grateful for your loyalty and friendship, but there is no need for any of you to risk yourselves in this attempt.*

*Before you protest, there is one other thing I must tell you. I do this reluctantly, as I am still coming to terms with it myself.*

*I did not escape unscathed from the Enemy during our last battle. As it has been revealed to me in my dream, I know now that I have been marked, much as Stefan was marked. It is very weak, its power over me nonexistent now – but I know that I must either defeat the one who holds it or live forever in fear that its power will some day begin to grow stronger. It was not only Stefan who came to me in my dream, but the Enemy; I know that if I do not defeat it, it will strike out not only at me but at those I hold dear until at last I am forced to seek it out on its own terms. I cannot allow this.*

*Please, I ask again: do not seek me and do not attempt to follow. If I am successful, I will return to you and we will be rid of this foul cloud over our lives once and for all. If I am not – then it is my hope that at least the Enemy will no longer have interest in all of you and so you will be safe and free.*

*The Enemy should not trouble you again, but if you desire it you are welcome to remain in my home for as long as you like. The wards are strong and should protect you against all but the most potent of attacks.*

*You are all very dear to me. I hope that we will meet again. Until then, be well.*

*-G.-*

Winterhawk's arm dropped to his side, still holding the note. "That's it," he said. His voice was numb.

"Oh, shit..." Ocelot whispered. His gaze traveled around the small circle of his friends. "I think I need to get very, very drunk right now..."

Kestrel was staring at the note. She reached out for it, and when Winterhawk didn't move, she took it from his hand. Bowing her head, she began to read it over again.

"Now what do we do?" Joe asked as if Ocelot had not spoken. Like the others his voice was low, almost hushed.

"We have to go after him, of course." Kestrel looked up from the note.

"He said he didn't want us to follow him," Joe reminded her, but everyone present could hear the tone of a token protest without any conviction behind it.

"Yeah, yeah..." Ocelot sighed, beginning to pace again. "Sure he did. And we all know how well we listened to him last time." He stopped briefly. "Let's look at this for a minute, guys. Stefan's not dead. Is Gabriel *sure* of that? Could the Horrors be fooling him? They're kinda good at that, you know."

Winterhawk began subtly herding the group over toward a sitting area. "It certainly felt like Stefan in my dream. And stranger things have happened. We didn't actually *see* him die, after all."

"Doesn't matter," Wraith spoke up.

Everyone turned to look at him; he hadn't said anything in awhile. Joe tilted his head. "Huh?"

The elf shrugged. "Doesn't matter. He's gone regardless. Must go after him."

"True," Winterhawk admitted. "If Gabriel's gone off to do battle with the Horrors again, it doesn't matter if Stefan's alive or if they've somehow managed to fool him—and all of us—into believing that Stefan's alive. Either way Gabriel's still out there."

Kestrel bowed her head. "Why did he have to do this?" she asked softly. "Go off on his own, I mean. We could have helped him—"

Ocelot shook his head. "You know him better than we do. You know the answer to that."

She nodded. "Yeah...I do. But I don't have to like it." She looked around the room, then back down at the note she still held.



Ocelot stood up. "Anybody else need a drink?"

When no one answered, he hurried out to the kitchen and came back with another bottle of Scotch and five glasses. He poured one, then looked questioningly at his friends. They all shook their heads; he shrugged and settled back in his chair with his glass.

"Okay," Joe said. "So we're gonna go after him, right?"

Everyone nodded. "Yes," Wraith said.

"Yeah," Ocelot said with another sigh. "And not just 'cause we owe it to him, either. Let's face it—he's got no real way to know if the Horrors are gonna leave us alone now that he's gone. He's just hoping."

"What about this mark he's talking about?" Joe asked, looking mostly at Winterhawk.

The mage shrugged. "I don't know. It sounds nasty...and it sounds like he didn't even know about it until he had the dream."

"Could it control him?" Ocelot leaned forward. The last thing he wanted to do was be forced to fight a Horror-possessed Gabriel.

"He says not yet," Kestrel said, holding up the note. "He says it doesn't have any influence yet but it could some day. That's why he has to go find who did it and destroy them."

"What I'm wondering about is who could have done it?" Winterhawk mused. He froze. When he spoke again, his words were slow and measured: "If Stefan isn't dead—"

"—maybe the other one isn't either..." Ocelot stared at him, then tossed back his drink and poured another. "Is it okay if I just go jump off a bridge now and get it over with?"

"Now wait a minute," Joe said. "Wouldn't he have said something if he knew that one was still alive? Could it be some *other* Horror?"

Winterhawk sighed. "I don't think we have any way to know. If we're going to do this, we're going to do it fairly blind. But whatever we do, it had best be soon. I suspect we don't have a great deal of time to dither about it."

Joe nodded. "Yeah."

Kestrel stood. "Okay, then. What are we waiting for? Let's go."

"Wait." Again, 'Wraith's quiet voice spoke up.

"What?" Everyone turned to look at him.

"How?"

"Huh?"

"Go after him. How?"

As the reality of that sunk in, Kestrel dropped back down to her seat.

Winterhawk sighed. "Good point. We hadn't even thought of that. How are we going to get there?"

"There's no way you can take us, is there?" Ocelot asked, even though he already knew the answer.

The mage shook his head. "No. I can get myself over—maybe—although I'm not anything like certain I could find the proper spot. And forgive me, but I don't fancy going alone."

"What about Harlequin?" Joe said. "He helped us last time."

"And we're gonna contact him how?" Ocelot shook his head. "We don't exactly have his number on our speed-dialer. At least *I* don't, and if you guys do it's time to have a talk."

For several moments they were all silent. "We could try to see if Harry could come up with something," Joe suggested. "He might know someone who can —"

"No." 'Wraith shook his head. "No outsiders. Too dangerous."

'Hawk nodded. "Besides, the odds that Harry would know someone who could send four mundanes and a mage to the farthest reaches of the metaplanes—"

Ocelot got up and once again began pacing. All this inactivity was beginning to get to him, especially now that it looked like they had arrived at a decision and discovered that they had no way to implement it. "Damn it," he growled, "There's *got* to be a way." As uncomfortable as he was feeling about doing this, now that they had decided to do it, he wanted to get *on* with it. He was feeling even more uncomfortable about remaining here and, as 'Hawk had put it, 'dithering'. "Anybody got the direct line into Saeder-Krupp?"

Joe sighed. "It's too bad we don't know any other dragons."

Winterhawk nodded. "Well, we don't, so we might as well—"

"Wait a minute!" Kestrel's eyes were bright with excitement as she broke in. "We do!"

The mage tilted his head and frowned. "We do?"

She forced herself to calm. "No...I mean...*I* do. Sort of. Gabriel does, anyway." Frustration crossed her features as she realized she wasn't making sense.

Ocelot put a hand on her shoulder. "Slow down. What are you talking about?"

She took a deep breath. "What I'm talking about is that I know how to get hold of a dragon who might be willing to help us."

The runners stared at her. "How?" 'Wraith asked.

"Who?" Joe asked at the same time.

"She's a friend of Gabriel's. He went to stay with her for awhile after Stefan—after Stefan's memorial. When he had his incident at the chalet in Switzerland, he had me

call her. She sent a spirit to help him. Remember—I think I mentioned her before when I told you what happened.”

“Where is she?” Winterhawk leaned forward, eyes fixed on her. “Do you still know how to contact her?”

Kestrel pulled out her portable phone. “She’s in Cal Free somewhere,” she said as she twiddled with the buttons on the tiny instrument. “I just hope I didn’t clear out her number—no! Here it is!” She held up the phone triumphantly, but then her expression clouded as she looked back at her friends. “There’s just one thing—”

“What?” Ocelot had settled back down on the couch next to her again.

“Well...she doesn’t like humans.”

Everyone paused for a moment, then Ocelot shrugged. “That’s okay. We’ll just send ‘Wraith and Joe to talk to her.”

Kestrel shook her head. “No. I mean—she doesn’t like humans *or* metahumans. She’s kind of—dragon-centric. She only talked to me because Gabriel was in trouble...and he was right there.”

“He’s in trouble again,” Joe pointed out. “Just tell her that.”

She nodded with a sigh. “Yeah. I just hope she doesn’t hang up on me before I can get through to her.” She looked at them, then around the room. “Is this ever gonna be over?” she asked softly.

“I damn sure hope so,” Ocelot said. “C’mon—let’s see what we can find out and get this show on the road before I lose what’s left of my nerve.”

## 30.

"Seems like I've spent half my life on planes lately," Ocelot commented sourly. He wasn't speaking to anyone in particular, so he wasn't surprised when nobody answered. He settled back in his seat, grabbed another magazine, and did his best to alleviate his growing restlessness.

It was a little after 3:00 that afternoon. They were on yet another private plane, this one bound once again for Los Angeles. All five of them had spent most of the flight in silence, thinking about what had occurred and what was scheduled to occur this evening.

Kestrel had, with more than a bit of nervousness, made the call that morning. She closed her eyes now, letting her mind drift back over the conversation.

She had punched the button to make the call with a shaking finger, afraid that the number she had was no longer valid, that they had changed it, that something would go wrong. As before, the deep tones of the spirit Uneki had answered the call. "Yes?" Also as before, there was no video.

"Uneki?"

"To whom am I speaking?" There was no sign of emotion in the tone—not even a slight curiosity.

She took a deep breath. "Uneki...This is Kestrel. Remember me—Gabriel's friend? You helped him awhile ago, in Switzerland."

"I remember," the voice intoned. "Is there something further you require?"

Another deep breath. "I'd—like to speak with Neferet again, if I may. Gabriel—he's in trouble again. We need to speak with her about it. Is she there?" She could feel her heart pounding in her chest, and couldn't quite figure out

why. This dragon was a friend of Gabriel's—someone who apparently harbored an almost maternal affection for him. Why should Kestrel be afraid to talk to her?

"Please wait. I will consult the Lady." There was a slight *click* followed by the silence of a line on hold.

Kestrel was conscious of the other runners' eyes on her as she waited. The pause seemed interminable, but it was only a few seconds before the line was picked up again. This time, the voice was the woman with whom she had spoken previously. "This is Neferet. You have told Uneke that Gabriel is in trouble again. Has he experienced another similar episode?"

"No." Kestrel spoke quickly, a bit taken aback by Neferet's tone. It was calm and not in any way hostile—but it likewise held no warmth or encouragement. "No," she said again. "He's—gone." She paused, unsure of where to go next.

"Explain, child. Where is he?"

"I don't know." She sighed, deciding that if they were going to get anywhere, she would have to just blurt it out and hope for the best. "He's gone to the metaplanes to look for his brother. Stefan's not dead—or at least Gabriel doesn't think he is. We think he's walking into a trap."

There was a long pause on the other end. "I see," the voice said at last. "And why do you believe he is in danger?"

Kestrel looked at the others. She wished one of them was doing this instead—they had more experience with the terms and concepts of the metaplanes than she did. But it couldn't be helped. "When he was visiting you, did he tell you about what happened before? With Stefan, I mean? With all of us?"

"He has told me of his brother's death and his sacrifice," she said.

"And about the Hor—uh, the Enemy?"

"Yes." For the first time there was some indication of emotion in the voice, but it was difficult to identify its nature over the phone.

Kestrel nodded. "Well, that's why. We know they're involved again." She paused. "Please—would it be possible for us to meet you somewhere? I don't feel comfortable telling this story over the phone."

This time the pause seemed to go on forever. Kestrel glanced at the others as the phone remained quiet; she made a shrugging gesture to them and hoped she had not somehow angered Neferet. Finally, the voice spoke again. "It is not normally my way to invite humans into my home, but as I have told you before, I have grown deeply fond of the young one and do not wish to see him in distress. You must come to me, though—I rarely travel."

Kestrel nodded even though she knew Neferet couldn't see the gesture. "Yes, of course. We'll go where we must. Just tell us what we have to do."

And Neferet had done just that—or rather Uneke had. He had instructed them to land at a private airport in Palmdale, which was a small town near Los Angeles. Upon landing, they would be met by a car that would take them to their destination. Kestrel had merely agreed without question; she had no desire to offend the dragon or her spirit servant by questioning their terms.

She had arranged for a plane to fly them there; they weren't expected until later on that day so after the arrangements had been made the five of them took the opportunity to return to their homes, change clothes, and pack for the trip. When they reconvened at Winterhawk's place around one o'clock, they all looked rather grim and determined. It was clear that all of them had been doing some thinking. "I called Harry," Ocelot said.

"Yes?" Winterhawk finished zipping up his garment bag and tossed it across the couch on top of a small leather satchel. "And?"

"I told him we got 'Wraith back and he's okay. He was glad to hear it."

"Did you tell him—anything else?" the mage asked carefully.

Ocelot shook his head. "No. Just that I thought we were all straightened out. I said we needed some time off before we were ready to get back into things."

Joe nodded. "Good idea."

"Do you think he suspects anything is wrong?" 'Hawk asked. "Did he ask about Gabriel?"

"Nope." Ocelot picked up his duffel bag. "He seemed like he wanted to just—put the whole thing behind him."

"It'll be nice when *we* can," the mage muttered.

The flight was uneventful, even boring. Nobody minded; a little boredom wasn't a bad thing after everything they had been through. Still, there was an undercurrent of tension that ran through each of them, not only because of what they were seeking to do, but also at the prospect of spending an indefinite amount of time in the home of a dragon who did not care for their kind. Each of them dealt with the tension in his or her own way: Winterhawk and 'Wraith settled back in their seats and meditated; Ocelot read his magazine and tried to interest himself in the tiny trideo unit in the back of the cabin; Joe had a big lunch, tilted his seat back, and went to sleep; and Kestrel leaned against the window, staring out at the blue sky and clouds speeding by and trying not to think about Gabriel and whatever he was facing. By the time the pilot—a old rigger friend of Kestrel's—announced that they were beginning their descent, all five runners were eager to get on with the next step.



There was a limousine waiting for them, a shining cream-hued Mitsubishi Nightsky with blacked-out windows. It looked a bit odd sitting there out in the far reaches of the airfield, but as the little plane taxied to a stop one of the limo's doors opened and a figure climbed out.

Kestrel recognized the tall black man immediately as Uneki. Instead of the robes he had worn before, he was dressed in a simple, elegant business suit. He inclined his head in greeting as the five runners disembarked, then motioned them silently toward the Nightsky. "The Lady awaits," he told Kestrel. He did not seem interested in the four men with her at the moment. Popping the trunk, he waited for them to stow their bags and then opened the rear door.

Kestrel nodded and climbed inside; after a moment her companions followed, 'Wraith last. As soon as they were settled Uneki closed the door. A few seconds later they were moving.

The limousine's interior was a study in understated elegance. Although lacking standard-issue limo accessories like a bar and a trideo unit, it made up for this deficiency by providing butter-soft leather seats in rich tan, luxuriant carpeting the same color as the car, and polished-rosewood paneling. The only thing that was slightly disturbing was the fact that the windows, which had appeared opaque from the outside, were equally opaque from the inside.

*"Please forgive the inconvenience of the windows,"* Uneki's voice came from the unseen driver's compartment of the limo without benefit of any visible intercom. *"The Lady does not wish to reveal the exact location of her home."*

"Understandable," Winterhawk muttered. He didn't seem bothered by it, although Ocelot and 'Wraith were

looking a bit uncomfortable. Kestrel squeezed Ocelot's arm and nodded.

*"We will arrive in approximately one hour. Please make yourselves comfortable,"* the spirit told them, and then was silent, presumably concentrating on driving.

The runners attempted to do that. The inability to see out the windows continued to make them uneasy, but they dealt with as best they could and did not try to thwart it in any way. If the dragon you were asking to help you didn't want you to know where she lived, that was her business.

Wherever it was they were going, it was clear when they arrived that the occupant of the place valued her privacy.

In almost exactly an hour after Uneke had made his announcement, the car came to a smooth stop. The runners remained where they were until the door was opened, revealing the spirit. "Welcome," he said. "Please follow me."

Everyone got out and paused to look around a moment before claiming their bags from the trunk. The limo was parked in a large circular driveway. On the far side was a wall of light-colored stone; they had probably just come through the high wrought-iron gate set into it. In the center of the circular driveway was a large fountain—bright sprays of water shot upward and then fell back down into a pool inlaid with a mosaic of tiny colorful tiles.

"Long way out," 'Wraith said quietly to 'Hawk, cocking his head toward the gate as the two of them retrieved their luggage.

The mage glanced in that direction and immediately saw what the elf was talking about: Aside from the road

on which they had clearly arrived, there was nothing but desert as far as the eye could see.

Uneke waited until everyone had his or her bags (and notably did not offer to carry them), then inclined his head. "Come," he said, turning to head for another smaller gate on the other side of the drive.

Beyond the second gate—which Uneke opened without difficulty but on which both 'Wraith and Kestrel noticed evidence of an extremely sophisticated security system—the spirit led them down a stone path through a luxuriant garden that was somehow set up to allow the indigenous plants of this area to co-exist with lush, greener vegetation that would have been more at home in a jungle than in a desert garden. As they passed by they noted paths crisscrossing the garden, leading to little pools, small sitting areas with stone benches, and tiny structures. The far-off call of birds gently broke the desert silence, although no birds were currently visible.

Eventually the garden opened up to reveal a large, rambling house made of the same sort of pale stone that had formed the wall outside. Although only a single story, the walls were not designed to the typical human- and elf-centric architectural standards of the day. Instead, they rose at least five meters up, set at frequent intervals with high, soaring windows that looked like they had been cast in liquid gold. The overall impression of the house spoke of a bit of Spanish influence, a bit of Mediterranean, and more than a bit of Egyptian. It was like nothing any of the runners had ever seen before. Above, the cloudless sky was a brilliant shade of azure blue as the sun began its descent toward twilight.

The pathway led up to two massive, ornate wooden doors carved in intricate patterns. Uneke mounted the tile steps to the entryway, put his hand briefly on the door, and then swung it open. "Welcome," he said again. "The

Lady has instructed me to show you to your rooms. She will see you in an hour, at the evening meal."

Nobody argued. They followed the spirit through the house, silently marveling at the beauty of it. Everything inside fostered the same open, effortless impression as did the outside, from the magnificent statuary, paintings, and sculpture to the Egyptian-style wall hangings to the simple beauty of the tiled floors. Kestrel allowed her gaze to linger on the walls and the art objects as they passed by, wondering what Gabriel had thought when he first arrived here. This place did not remind her of Gabriel's own—for one thing, she had not yet seen a room big enough for a dragon to be comfortable in it—but she could see the same sort of love for uncluttered spaces and simple elegance. Despite her trepidation, she was looking forward to meeting this dragon.

The rooms to which Uneke showed them were at one end of the house: three on one side of the hallway and two on the other. "The Lady hopes you will be comfortable here," he told them. "We do not normally receive guests, but I hope that we have provided that which you might need. If there is anything else you require, please do not hesitate to call. I will return in an hour to show you to the dining room." He inclined his head, turned, and moved silently off.

The runners just looked at each other for a moment. "O-kay..." Ocelot said, letting his breath out slowly. "I guess we unpack and cool our heels for an hour."

"Looks that way," Joe said. No one else had any better ideas, so they each picked a room and retired to it, agreeing to meet up again in half an hour in Kestrel's room.

The rooms were all large, furnished in the same style of spartan elegance as the other parts of the house that they had seen. Each contained its own bath and a large

window affording a spectacular view of the desert. Ocelot didn't have much to unpack (he hadn't brought any weapons with him; he hadn't liked the idea of traveling without them, but all things considered he had decided on wisdom over paranoia) and so was settled in—including changing into his suit—in less than ten minutes. Crossing the hall, he knocked softly on Kestrel's door.

"Come in," she called softly.

She was sitting on the edge of her bed, staring out the window. "You okay?" he asked, moving over to sit down next to her.

She sighed and turned to look at him. "Yeah—I'm okay." Her tone was odd—quiet and very tired. She too had changed and was now dressed in a pants-and-jacket outfit of thin, soft green leather.

"You want to talk?" He glanced at the closed door, then at his chrono. They had about fifteen minutes before the others would arrive.

For a long moment she was silent. "I don't really know if there's anything to talk *about*," she said at last. She drew her legs up gracefully under her, leaning forward to prop her elbows on her legs. "We'll do what we have to do, and we'll either succeed or we won't, right?"

"Looks that way," he agreed in the same tone. He took a deep breath and looked out at the desert. Nightfall was approaching in earnest now; the sunset was shaping up to be spectacular. "There's something else on your mind, isn't there?"

She looked up a little sharply at him. She started to say something, then let it go and shrugged instead. "How can I answer that? I think we've all got a lot of things on our minds. We just haven't had a chance to deal with it all yet."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah...you're right about that. But look at it this way: at least until we settle down, maybe it'll keep the bad stuff away. It's harder to get wound up about something when you know there's stuff you have to do."

"Yeah." She was restless; pulling herself back further onto the bed, she sighed again. "What if she won't help us?" she asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

"You heard me." She fixed her green gaze on him. "What if we tell her what's going on and she says *No way, José, you're on your own?*"

"Why would she do that?" In truth, Ocelot had been wondering about the same thing earlier, but he didn't think this was a good time to tell her that. "I thought you said she was a friend of Gabriel's. Why wouldn't she want to help him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. She's a dragon. Dragons don't make sense to us puny humans sometimes. I just keep remembering something Gabriel said when we were at his lair and we couldn't get hold of you or any of the rest of the guys. I asked him why he didn't ask his friend for help, and he told me he didn't want to do that yet because it would mean he'd be liable for obligations he didn't want to grant. And she's his *friend*. He told me they'd gotten rather close over the time he stayed here — that she kind of treated him like a surrogate mother would, since his mother is gone. So what's she going to do if we show up here and ask her to help us find him? Will she just agree to it like that, or will she want us to do something for her first? Or worse yet, is this going to make it so Gabriel owes her something he never even agreed to?"

Ocelot didn't have an answer, and he didn't like the sound of that *obligations* part. Still, he was determined to

remain neutral. "We'll just have to see what she says," he told her. "That's really all we can do." He put a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Is that it?"

She chuckled. "Isn't that *enough*?" Before he could answer, she shook her head. "That'll do for now. I'm sure things are lining up to be noticed, but right now I'm going to focus on what's here now. If she won't help us, we'll have to find someone else who will."

"Let's worry about that if it happens." Ocelot squeezed her shoulder and then pulled his hand back as there was a knock at the door. "Looks like we'll know soon enough."

The others arrived, all dressed more formally than before. Nobody seemed particularly inclined to talk about anything important, so they killed time for the remaining half-hour until Uneke was due to return by discussing neutral topics like the rooms' decor and the beauty of the desert at night. When the soft knock came, no one was surprised that it was on Kestrel's door.

"Here we go," Ocelot muttered.

Uneke waited patiently outside the door. He was once again clad in elegant robes, this time of rich dark brown silk embroidered with patterns in golden threads. He inclined his head in his odd not-quite-a-bow as Kestrel opened the door. "The Lady requests your presence in the dining room."

## 31.

*Spinning, falling –  
Dizzy sense of disorientation –  
Falling –  
Wrenching sensation, pulling –  
Laughter –  
Darkness.*

The darkness lifted.

Gabriel did not so much awaken as regain his senses, as if they had suddenly been switched on. He looked around, briefly disoriented—he had distinctly remembered falling, the feeling that he had been grabbed by something and wrenched off his course, but yet he was standing upright now and apparently had been before his awareness had returned.

He was standing in an alley. On either side of him, tall buildings of dark brick rose up several stories into the sky. The road beneath his feet was made of brick too; there was a wooden door off to his right next to several overflowing garbage cans. The stench of rotting vegetables and fish filled the alley, along with the more subtle odor of wet street. It wasn't raining now but it looked like it had been recently: the sky was dark and choked with forbidding reddish-tinged gray clouds and a faint mist hung persistently in the air.

Looking down at himself, he noticed that he was dressed in an old-fashioned-looking black business suit, simple white shirt, thin dark tie, and heavy black wool overcoat. His shoes were wingtips, shiny and a little smudged from wear. On his head was a black fedora-style hat with a wide dark gray band. *Odd*, he thought. His side, where the scar was, throbbed slightly. It was a bit distracting at the moment but nothing more.



Gabriel frowned, his sharp eyes picking out details of his immediate area before he ventured out. This was not what he had expected. Swiftly his mind went over the ritual again—the long hours of preparation, the implementation, the strange feeling when he had felt as if someone else had tried to wrest control of it from somewhere outside—and compared it to his outfit, trying to make sense of his current location. He could not.

This was a place of the Enemy, though. He could tell that right away. He wasn't sure how, exactly, but he knew. Perhaps it was the heaviness to the air, the sense of foreboding that seemed to enshroud the place. It was at the same time subtle and nearly impossible to ignore. The tiny hairs on the back of his neck were tingling with a feeling of vague dread.

Outside the alley he could hear the sounds of vehicles moving by; from the sound of it there was a busy street not far away. He wasn't going to get anywhere by remaining here, that was certain. Slowly he moved forward, his senses at full awareness. If anything was lurking nearby waiting to ambush him, he wasn't going to give it the pleasure.

It was twilight. Emerging from the alleyway, he found himself, as he had expected, on a city street lined with tall dark buildings. He paused a moment, watching the cars that zipped back and forth down the rain-soaked road racing the faint yellow cones thrown out by their headlights.

*Something doesn't fit here.* Still keeping a close watch on what was going on around him, Gabriel started off down the street. There were few pedestrians; those he did see looked wary and moved quickly. The buildings towered menacingly over him, their façades pitch-black and forbidding in an elegant gothic sort of way like no buildings he had ever seen in the Fourth World or the

Sixth. Although they were not leaning forward as if in anticipation, they managed to convey the impression that they were. The cars were all dark too, grays and blacks and deep blues, sleek, low-slung: the kind of cars one might see if a horror-movie director had collaborated with a classic-car expert. Overhead, streetlights hung suspended like overripe fruit from dark wrought-iron posts, casting their feeble greenish light into the dim gray almost-darkness.

*What is this place? I don't –*

His thought was interrupted by the loud squeal of thin tires on wet pavement followed by a high-pitched scream. Gabriel stiffened and then ran, instinctively heading for the source of the sound.

He had made it about three-quarters of the way down the block when one of the dark cars came careening around the corner in the wrong lane, hovering briefly on two wheels before settling back down on all four. All around him, the street's few pedestrians were scattering, diving for cover. Gabriel barely had time to notice this before the muzzle-flashes and staccato *budda-budda-budda* of machine-gun fire pierced the twilight. Two figures were hanging out the car's near windows, two more out the far ones; the driver propelled the car in a crazy pattern back and forth across the street, forcing the remaining few other cars to skid their way out of its deadly path.

The near gun chattered again, tearing great chunks out of the building only a few feet above Gabriel's head. He threw himself forward, rolling to a crouched position behind a parked truck; on the other side of the street a woman screamed, spun, and dropped as she was hit. The car continued on its way, its occupants apparently oblivious or uncaring about who or what in particular they hit. The sounds of the machine guns could be heard

long after the rumble of the car's engine had melded with the rest of the traffic noise.

Gabriel rose from his crouch. Darkness was dropping over the city quickly now; the scattered pedestrians were slowly picking themselves up, straightening their clothes, moving on with wary glances around them. No one seemed to be paying any attention to the downed woman across the street—it was as if she was no longer there, despite the fact that Gabriel could see her dark form lying unmoving where it had fallen.

A hand fell on his shoulder from behind. "Gabriel!"

Gabriel whirled, already preparing a spell. He stopped when he saw the man there, backing off, hands raised palm out. "Easy," the man said. "It's just me. You're late. Where you been? We've been waitin' for you."

Gabriel took a deep breath. "The woman—"

"You can't do nothin' for her no more, kid." The man's voice was gentle; he was dressed in a dark pinstriped suit and vaguely resembled Harry. "I saw it from the doorway. She's gone."

"No—" Gabriel shook his head, starting to draw away. "I might be able to save her—"

The man grabbed his arm. "How? Come on, Gabriel. I know you don't like it, but there's nothing we can—"

"Magic. It might not be too late." He once again attempted to pull away from the man's grip.

The man stared at him. "Magic? What are you talking about?"

Gabriel broke free and moved around the truck. "I can heal her if she's still alive." His voice took on a tone of urgency now; he knew that even with the power of his spell, if he waited until her spirit was gone there would be nothing he could do.

The man swiftly caught up with him. "You hit your head, Gabriel? Since when can you do magic?"

Gabriel didn't pause to answer. Instead, he sprinted across the street. He could hear heavy breathing and pounding footsteps behind him as the man followed. Dropping down next to the woman's body, he winced slightly when he saw her wounds. She had been hit once in the chest, once in the upper leg. Her gray dress and coat were soaked with blood from neck to thigh. He reached out with his senses, trying to find a spark of life he could grab—

—and nothing happened.

*What — ?*

The man had reached the other side of the street now. Puffing, he put his hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "They'll be back soon, kid. We have to get inside."

Gabriel ignored him. He closed his eyes and forced himself to concentrate, placing his palm on the woman's forehead. His scar throbbed painfully as if mocking his efforts.

The man's hand closed over his shoulder once again. "Gabriel—"

"I—" He looked up at the man, confused. "I can't—" He lowered his gaze back to the woman's body; she had not moved and was clearly dead now. Slowly he rose as if in a daze.

The man put a fatherly arm around him. "I'm sorry, kid. I don't know what happened to you while you were gone, but I don't get this stuff about you and magic. You've never been able to before." Subtly he began to steer Gabriel back across the street; the traffic was sparse now and even the sound of gunfire had faded away.

Gabriel allowed himself to be steered. He felt numb—no magic? This was not something he had expected. *I should have...* he thought a little bitterly. *It's happened before.*

*But how am I to face the Enemy without it? Have I made a mistake by coming here? I don't want to fail you, Stefan...*

"Kid?"

The man was speaking to him. He tore his thoughts from their current unpleasant paths and forced himself to look at him. "What?"

"You okay? They didn't—hurt you, did they?"

He shook his head. "No. I—I'm fine. Where are we going?"

The man made a quick head movement to indicate a building on the other side of the street; they were approaching it now. "There's a meeting tonight. We didn't know if you'd make it, but I'm glad to see you here. It's been too long."

Gabriel nodded, deciding to play along for the moment and see if he could make any more sense out of the situation.

The building was a nondescript, three-story structure of dark brick that blended in well with its neighbors on either side. A simple brass plate next to the door read *Connor*. The man looked back over his shoulder to verify that no one was paying attention to them, then knocked softly in a brief pattern, opened the door and motioned Gabriel inside.

Gabriel did not get much chance to look around—long hallway, threadbare rug, vague musty smell, stairway leading upward—before the man closed and locked the door and then urged him down the hallway toward another door.

The door opened into a room lined with bookshelves. It was a dimly lit, comfortable looking room with a soft chair, a reading lamp, and all four walls covered from floor to ceiling with books. Heavy dark drapes were pulled closed over the single window. The man went immediately to one of the bookshelves, pulled out a thick

book, and pressed down on the spot where it had been located. A section of the shelf swung outward, revealing a narrow shaft. A metal ladder was bolted to the wall. The man indicated for Gabriel to go first—it was the casual movement of someone for whom this was a fairly common occurrence. Again Gabriel didn't ask questions, but simply swung himself into the shaft and climbed carefully down into the darkness. After a moment he could hear the sound of the panel being moved back into position, and then the man's footsteps on the ladder above him.

The shaft went down for about the depth of one story, ending in a small, chilly, concrete-walled chamber lit by a single lightbulb. A heavy closed door took up most of the space on the wall opposite the ladder. Gabriel stepped aside and pressed his back against the wall, watching the man as he descended. The man gave him a quick smile that was both encouraging and weary, leaping off the second step from the bottom and turning toward the door. The sound of his knuckles rapping the pattern against the metal of the door echoed hollowly around the chamber. The man gave Gabriel's shoulder a squeeze. "They'll be glad to see you."

The door opened a few inches, revealing the face of a man in his mid 40s. He looked relieved to see who was outside. "Wallace. Good. We heard the gunfire outside, and we were afraid you'd—" His gaze fell on Gabriel and he smiled. "And Gabriel. They *did* find you. I'm so glad. Come in." Swinging the door fully open, he stepped back to let the newcomers enter.

There were about ten people in the room about four meters square, seated on folding chairs and benches shoved up against the wall to best utilize the small space. The room itself was concrete-walled like the chamber outside, its floor covered by old rugs to take some of the

chill out of the air. Instead of a bare bulb hanging from the ceiling they had a small lamp covered by a simple shade on a table in one of the corners. All of the people were dressed similarly to Gabriel: dark suits, overcoats, white shirts; both genders and all the metatypes were represented, although humans dominated with five (seven now with the addition of Gabriel and Wallace).

"Have a seat," Wallace told him. "We'd better get started—we've got a new guy tonight and as usual we want to keep things as quick as possible."

Gabriel did as he was told, moving toward the middle of the room where one of the folding chairs was empty. Everyone was smiling at him; as he passed, a dwarf woman patted his arm. She looked happy to see him, but sad about something too. He sat down behind her and leaned back.

"Okay," Wallace said, taking his place at the front of the room. Apparently he was the leader of this group, whatever it was. "You all heard the gunfire upstairs. It looks like the gangs are beefing up their patrols around here, which means we're in more danger than ever. You all know to be careful, so I won't bother telling you that. We have to make this quick so we can get out of here, so let's get started." He looked around the room. "First thing, let me say 'welcome back' to Gabriel. It was a tough thing with Stefan, but I'm glad to see you came back. We can use more like you, and it would've been a shame to lose you over this."

Heads turned to look at Gabriel; all of the expressions held a little sadness, a little sympathy, a little relief. "Thank you," he said, leaving it at that. He had stiffened a bit at the mention of Stefan, but didn't let it show. *You'll get the information. Just sit back and listen until you know what's happening.*

Wallace nodded. Then his face clouded and he frowned. "Moving on—unfortunately, I've got some more bad news to report: Flannery, from East Side, was killed last night by the Salazaros, and Williams is on the injured list. They were checking out a lead on the Rileys' gun-smuggling operation and stumbled into a Salazaro trap." He bowed his head. "Flannery will be missed—we're gonna take up a collection for her family a little later. Williams isn't sure he wants to come back." Sighing, he returned his gaze to the silent group. "Can't say I blame him, really. But the fact remains we have to go on, and this leaves us dangerously short. With Gabriel back we're doing better than I hoped, but—" There was another pause as he visibly pulled himself together. "Okay. If we dwell on the negative we're not gonna be able to do our job, so let's try to dwell on the positive instead." He indicated a young man seated in the front row. "I want you to meet our newest agent, Joshua Pearson."

The young man turned to face the group, nodding a greeting. He was about the same age that Gabriel appeared to be, with short-cut dark hair and an earnest, rather angular face.

Gabriel returned the greeting along with the others. *Our newest agent. Agent for what?*

Wallace grasped Pearson's shoulder as he spoke. "I'm sure Pearson here will prove to be a valuable addition to our organization." He looked up. "Gabriel—as long as you're back—I was thinking he might make a good partner for you. What do you think?" His voice had an odd gentle edge to it, as if he was being particularly careful not to probe a wound any more deeply than necessary.

Gabriel looked at the young man and then back at Wallace. He nodded.



Wallace returned the nod. "Good." To Pearson, he added, "Gabriel's young, but he's a damn good agent. He was on leave for awhile after—" quick glance at Gabriel, then away as his voice softened "—after his brother Stefan, who was his partner and one of our top guys, disappeared a couple of months ago."

Gabriel's attention stepped up a bit. *Disappeared?*

Young Pearson echoed his thought: "Disappeared?"

Again Wallace glanced at Gabriel before he answered. "Yeah. He was following up a lead that the Salazaros were upping their drug operations and got in some trouble. Unfortunately nobody knows for sure what happened to him." He hesitated a moment, as if there was more to say but he didn't know whether to say it.

"Tell him the rest, Wallace," a gruff ork man said. His tone was steadfast but not unkind. "Kid's got a right to know."

Wallace nodded wearily. "Yeah." This time the quick look at Gabriel was apologetic. "Rumor has it that the Salazaros captured him—that he's still alive and—remember, this is nothing but rumor, we have no proof—he might have gone over to their side."

Pearson's eyes widened while behind him Gabriel stiffened. "But—doesn't that put us all in danger?"

"We're always in danger, Pearson. It's part of the job. But yeah, we've changed a few of our operations, safehouses, that kind of thing since it happened. So far there's been nothing to indicate that the gangs are doing anything they haven't been doing all along." When Pearson didn't reply, Wallace turned back to the group at large. "I think that's about it for this meeting. You all know what to do. Watch the usual place for the location and time of the next meeting. Until then, we'd better get out of here before anybody catches on." He looked around at them all, his expression one of a man who cared

deeply for every individual in the room. “You all be careful,” he added softly. “I want to see you back next time.”

The others got up and began filing toward the room’s exit. Several of them stopped to shake Gabriel’s hand, to welcome him back; they also paused to welcome Pearson into the fold. After most of them had gone, Wallace motioned to Gabriel. “Can you two stay a minute after? I want to talk to you a little more about your assignment.”

When everyone had departed except the three of them, Wallace sat down and indicated for them to do likewise. Reaching into his inner jacket pocket, he withdrew a sheaf of folded papers. “I’ll go over this again for Gabriel’s benefit, plus give you some more information that I didn’t have before.” He unfolded one of the papers and spread it out across his lap. It appeared to be a map with a route traced out on it, then looked at Gabriel. “What you’re doing here is you two are going to hijack a shipment of guns the Salazaros have got coming into town tomorrow night. We’ve managed to get hold of their route from one of our informants, and you two know as much as I do how much we need these guns—not to mention the fact that we’ll deprive the Salazaros of some of their expected firepower. It looks like they’re getting geared up for something, but so far we haven’t been able to find out what it is yet. Taking out this shipment might buy us a little more time to find out.” He paused, looking at both of them to see if there were any questions yet, then returned his attention to the map. He pointed out a location halfway down a street near the edge of the map. “This is probably the best place to do it—our agents have been in contact with some of the folks who live over there, and they’re willing to help us provide a diversion in exchange for a few of the guns. We’ve agreed to this,

although if you determine there's a better place, you should do what you think is best and safest."

"How many on the truck?" Pearson asked, leaning forward to get a better look.

"Four by our intelligence, but be ready for as many as six. We're fairly sure they don't know we've gotten hold of their route, so the truck might not be as heavily guarded, but like I said—be ready." Wallace looked up. "It's good that you've got some magic, Pearson—you guys will probably need it."

Gabriel's gaze sharpened. Pearson had magical abilities? He had assumed from Wallace's words before that magic simply didn't exist in this world, but that was obviously incorrect. Somehow it was just that *he* didn't have magic. He felt a bit odd at the thought.

"Something wrong, Gabriel?"

Wallace was looking at him now. *He's perceptive.* "No—I'm fine. Go on."

The older man's eyes held his for a moment longer, then he nodded. "Okay. When you get the truck, bring it to a warehouse on the corner of 10th and 43rd." He pointed out the streets in question on the map. "There'll be someone there to meet you. He'll ask you if that's the shipment of machine parts for the Abernathy account—that's the signal that he's the right guy. Turn the truck over to him. A car'll be waiting for you to drive back." He paused. "Any questions?"

"Should we expect magic from the opposition?" Gabriel asked after a moment.

Wallace gave him an odd look. "You sure are hung up on magic all of a sudden, kid. Don't know for sure, but be ready for it. Oh—I've got something for you. Both of you." He got up and went to the corner of the room, where a large leather briefcase rested on the floor. Opening it, he pulled out two folders and a pistol. He

handed one of the folders to Pearson, and the pistol, the other folder, and the folded sheaf of papers to Gabriel. "You two should read up on each other's dossiers, so nobody's surprised by anything. And Gabriel, I figured you'd want that back now that you're back in business again."

Gabriel nodded. "Thank you." He checked the gun, silently grateful that Kestrel had insisted that he learn how to handle one, and then stowed it in his coat pocket. The file folder said "PEARSON, J." on the tab. Glancing over at his own, he saw that its tab read "DRACO, G." *How original*. He had to smile just a tiny bit at it, which earned him another odd look from Wallace.

"You got a place to stay yet?" the older man asked Gabriel.

He shook his head. "No. Not yet."

Wallace nodded as if he expected that. Digging in his briefcase again, he handed Gabriel a key. "There's a rooming house just down the street. Number 472. We arranged for a room for you—figured you didn't want to waste time looking around. Pearson's there too—things are a bit tight lately so you two will have to share. He can show you where it is." He rose. "That's about it. About all I got left to say is good luck, and I'll see you guys in a week."

Gabriel and Pearson both got up too and silently followed Wallace out of the room and back up the ladder. The library was as silent and peaceful as it had been when they arrived. Wallace told them to wait a few moments after he left before leaving themselves, nodded farewell, and left.

Pearson and Gabriel regarded each other for a moment, and then Pearson broke the silence: "Want to head back to the rooming house, or go get something to eat?"

Gabriel shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me. Either is fine."

They ended up stopping at a dim little restaurant near the rooming house, where they spent more time talking in hushed voices than eating. Or, more precisely, Pearson talked and Gabriel listened, occasionally asking carefully worded questions designed to gather as much information about their situation as he could without arousing suspicion. He felt a bit of guilt at deceiving his new partner like that, but he knew that the more he found out about what was expected in this odd corner of the Netherworlds, the more likely he would be able to successfully accomplish what he had come here to do.

What he found out surprised and disturbed him. The city (which Pearson never referred to by name, Gabriel noticed) had long ago been taken over by a series of rival criminal organizations. The two most powerful among these organizations were the Salazaros and the Rileys, both of whom together controlled over half of the city's criminal activities. A government existed, but it was a puppet government run by a mayor who had long ago sold out to the crimebosses in exchange for kickbacks and job security. The police force was a joke.

Into this mix came the organization that Pearson and Gabriel worked for (Gabriel noticed that Pearson likewise did not name this). It had been started by the city's former district attorney, who had been disgusted by the rising tide of crime and the indifference of the mayor and his cabinet. The organization was underground, cell-based so no one could compromise more than a few of his or her fellow agents if captured by the enemy, and dedicated to returning the city to law and order in whatever small ways it could. The district attorney himself was long dead, his assassination rumored to have been ordered by the mayor himself and carried out by the Salazaros' top

hit man, but the organization lived on. They recruited carefully out of the general population, looking for people who had had enough of living like frightened children afraid to go out on the streets after dark for fear of being caught in one of the gangs' numerous sweeps for 'undesirables.'

This, Pearson told Gabriel, was how he had joined. He had been apprenticed to his father, who ran a local restaurant. One night not long ago he had been ill and so had remained in the upstairs apartment he shared with his parents and his younger sister. Awakened to the sound of gunfire downstairs he had crept cautiously to where he could see what was happening, only to see his parents mowed down by the Salazaros' machine gun fire, along with his sister and several of the restaurant's patrons. He found out later, after sneaking out and running for his life, that the Salazaros had been tipped that his father was running an underground newspaper dedicated to recruiting people to oppose them. It hadn't mattered that it wasn't the truth—both of his parents had been meek, unassuming people who had simply wanted to live their lives the best they could in the midst of hell—the Salazaros didn't care about things like truth.

Pearson had been contacted shortly after that by one of the restaurant's surviving patrons, a man he had known for years but never realized was a member of the underground—Wallace. By that time the young man was ready to do anything to avenge his family's death and, even more importantly, to make his contribution to seeing the crimebosses' stranglehold on the city brought to an end.

Pearson at that point had tried to steer the conversation back to Gabriel, asking tentatively about Stefan; Gabriel, once again by means of skillful

redirection, managed to deflect it back to Pearson and get his side of the story.

Stefan, apparently, had been one of the organization's top agents—fearless, smart, and dedicated. He had brought Gabriel in a couple of years ago as his partner and between the two of them they had been known as the ones to call when the job required finesse, iron nerves, and a high degree of grace under pressure. They seemed to thrive on it. This Pearson had heard from Wallace—he had never actually met Stefan, because he had disappeared two months ago after he and Gabriel had gone to investigate a funeral home that had been rumored to be fronting a huge drug smuggling scheme. Gabriel had barely made it out alive, but Stefan had been nowhere to be found. Pearson's voice shook a bit as he talked about this; obviously he had no desire to offend his new partner.

Gabriel was watching him intently, but not offended. "Do you think he's gone over to the other side, Pearson?"

Pearson paused, looking away on the pretense of taking a drink. "I don't know," he finally said. "Nobody's seen him since he disappeared...no...body was found..."

Gabriel took a deep breath. "I think they're holding him for some purpose. It sounds like they can be very patient. Either that, or—" He shook his head. "No. I don't think he's gone to the other side, and I don't think he's dead." *But how can I tell you what I know to be true – that the Enemy wants me to come to them?*

Pearson sighed, setting his glass back down. "I hope you're right," he said, and sounded like he meant it.

After dinner, Pearson took Gabriel to the rooming house where they would be staying. Number 472 was a quiet, unassuming two-story building tucked between several similarly sized structures. The proprietor was a large woman in her 60s with sharp, intelligent eyes. She nodded to the two young men as they entered, giving

them a veiled smile before returning to her needlework. The radio played soft big-band-style music on a table next to her.

Upstairs Pearson opened the door to a room at the end of the hall, bordered by the wall on one side and a linen closet on the other. "Mrs. Klein used to be with us," Pearson whispered. "She's retired. That's what Wallace told me. We should be safe here."

The room was mid-sized, simple, with two heavy wooden beds, some framed landscape prints on the walls, and a single window. There was a desk on the other side opposite the beds. One bed was neatly made, the other disarrayed as if it had been slept in. Pearson dug in his briefcase and passed his dossier across to Gabriel; he had been carrying it because Gabriel didn't have a briefcase with him. "Not much to read there," he said with a little wry smile. "This is my first job. I'm sure yours'll be a lot more interesting."

*I'm sure it will*, Gabriel thought, already working on a way to get hold of it when Pearson was finished with it so he could see what he was supposed to be.

It turned out not to be too hard. Gabriel sat down at the desk with Pearson's folder while Pearson stretched out on his bed. By the time Gabriel had finished reading through the information (noting particularly that his partner's magical talents consisted of a couple of offensive spells, the ability to conceal himself effectively in anything but full light and to heal minor wounds, and occasional flashes of premonition) Pearson had dropped off to sleep. It was a simple matter for Gabriel to borrow his own folder and return to the desk.

"Gabriel Draco" (he couldn't get over that name—apparently the Enemy wasn't very original in that regard) was 21 years old and had been with the organization for three years. He normally worked out of "Northside"



(wherever that was) and had just recently been reassigned to the city. He was known for his high intelligence and tactical planning abilities; although he possessed no innate magical talent his willpower measurements were practically off the scale, which made him difficult to affect with magic and highly resistant to coercion or torture. His gun skills were fair to middling (*they got that right*, he thought wryly, wishing he'd spent more time practicing with Kestrel), his hand-to-hand combat abilities high. There was a note in his file about Stefan's disappearance, although there was obviously a page missing that followed it. *They don't want to let Pearson know they're afraid I might do something rash to get Stefan back.* Under his personality profile, they listed him as smart, intense, trustworthy, occasionally willing to take dangerous chances to attain a goal, and prone to thinking outside the box, although the dossier didn't put it that way. Gabriel closed up the file and put it back next to Pearson, who was still sound asleep. Sighing, he sat down on his own bed and leaned back against the wall.

*Everything is set up. Now we wait. I'm coming, Stefan. Just hold on a bit longer –*

He didn't know whether to be comforted or disturbed that he could feel no hint of his brother's presence any longer.

It was dark – a cloud-choked, moonless night.

Gabriel and Pearson crouched on opposite sides of the street, the former behind a large trash receptacle in an alley, the latter far back in a doorway, using his magical concealment talent to blend his dark-clothed figure in with the shadows. They had been here for almost an hour, waiting.

The truck was late.

The day itself had been fairly quiet—they had spent most of it in their room studying the papers Wallace had given them, memorizing the route of the truck, and making plans for how they would accomplish the hijacking and what route they would take to the warehouse after they had taken possession. Both of them had agreed that the spot Wallace had indicated to them was probably the best place to do the job, especially if they could count on help from some of the locals to provide a diversion. Apparently there were quite a large number of city residents who weren't brave enough to join the underground organization and take a direct role in trying to shut down the gangs, but who were nonetheless willing to do what they could in their own small ways to aid those who were. Gabriel got the impression from listening to Pearson (fortunately the young rookie agent liked to talk and was anxious to prove himself to his new partner) that the agency was usually quite happy to make use of this offered assistance, although they were reluctant to trust the civilians with any important information for fear it might fall into the wrong hands. This philosophy had been supported by another of the documents Wallace had provided: the paper simply instructed the two of them that if they should decide to hijack the truck at the suggested place, they should contact a man named Hector at a bar nearby and tell him only what he needed to know for him and his associates to pull off the diversion. In exchange, they were to give Hector five of the guns from the truck's cargo.

After both of them had memorized the map, the relevant locations, and the rest of the information contained within the sheaf of papers, they had destroyed them along with the dossier folders. They were copies, of course—Wallace would never have let the originals out of his possession.

Following a late-afternoon meal downstairs prepared by Mrs. Klein, they had set out. Pearson had a car, one of the low-slung black things that were so ubiquitous around here; it seemed to Gabriel that everything in the city was dark. As they drove around the town (Pearson had suggested the early drive, noting that the gangs' patrols rarely started in earnest until twilight) he observed that everywhere they went the buildings, the cars, the streets were all black, gray, dark brown, dark blue—demoralizing colors when there were no others to relieve them. There were few plants and those that did exist were scraggly, unhealthy looking things; no parks or playgrounds—for that matter, no children. There were many more people on the streets during the day than there had been the evening Gabriel had arrived, but they all walked purposefully, heads slightly lowered, shoulders hunched, as if they were trying hard not to attract any attention. It was difficult in most cases to tell the men from the women, except that some of the figures in shapeless dark overcoats were larger and taller than others. Even in full daylight the city had an overcast, shadowy look to it. The sun, high overhead, shone reddish behind the thick clouds. Gabriel sighed. He knew in his mind that none of this was real, that likely the Horrors had simply constructed it from bits of his own thoughts and memories, but even that disturbed him. Where had he gotten thoughts and memories like this?

Pearson mistook his sigh for general gloom. "It gets to you after awhile, doesn't it?"

Gabriel nodded.

"Yeah...me too. It's hard not to think about my family. But then, remembering them is what keeps me going. It kept me going all through the training, and it'll keep me going now. Don't worry—I'm not gonna let you down."

Again Gabriel nodded. "I know that." He was restless, his usual patience being tried by all this waiting. Driving around town wasn't helping to get Stefan back. Neither was hijacking trucks. But he knew that trying to rush things would do no good at all. The Enemy might control this corner of the Netherworld, but it was still the Netherworld and operated according to its own rules.

He slumped back in his seat, allowing his mind to travel back to Kestrel and the others at his apartment. He wondered what they had done when they had discovered his note. Were they still there? Had they decided to leave and go about their business, get back to their lives that had been interrupted by this madness? He chilled a bit as he considered the possibility that they might disregard his advice and try to follow him here, but then relaxed. They had no way to do it. Winterhawk couldn't get them all to the Netherworld, and he doubted the mage would go alone into this kind of unknown. As far as he knew they had no way to contact Harlequin, and even if they did manage to do it, chances were good that the elf wouldn't send them over after him. He would realize that this was something Gabriel had to do and leave it at that. No, likely his friends were safe. The Enemy had all but told him in his dream that it was him they wanted, that they were only using the others as a means to get him where they wanted him. Now he was where they wanted him. He just hoped that he would be strong enough to come to them on his terms, not on theirs.

He was thinking about that again as he crouched in his hiding place behind the trash container. It was cold; the damp chill in the air sneaked in under his heavy overcoat and his muscles ached from being in the same position for too long. He wondered if this was how humans felt all the time—back home, even when he was in human form he didn't experience these sorts of feelings

unless he was injured: his magical nature allowed him to create a body that was physically flawless and not prone to normal human infirmities. Here, now, he felt vulnerable without his magic in a way he had not last time he and his friends had been to the Netherworlds. Perhaps it was because he had not been alone then. It was an odd and somewhat disquieting thought. Absently he rubbed his side where the scar was throbbing painfully again. He wished there was a way to communicate with Pearson, but in this world no one seemed to have heard of small portable radios, let alone cellular phones and other *accoutrements* of the 21st century. Sighing, he shifted position slightly, settled back, and continued to wait.

He glanced at the truck parked on the other side of the alley, its engine rumbling softly in the night air. He couldn't see the driver, but he and Pearson had met with him earlier that evening and he knew what to do. Hector Duran was a short, wide ork with intense dark eyes and a ready laugh—a man unwilling to give in and give up despite the fact that he had lost two brothers and his best friend to the gangs' sweeps over the past year. Duran had shown up at the appointed meeting place with three others, two men and a woman, and listened attentively as Gabriel and Pearson had explained the plan. He had volunteered his truck, a big black stakebed with no markings, its body long enough to block both sides of the street if parked sideways across it. Currently, one of his friends was in the cab with him and the other two were huddled under a canvas tarp in the truck's bed. Duran and one of the two associates in the bed carried pistols.

Gabriel pressed his back against the wall, pulled his hat down low over his eyes, and kept a close watch on the darkened street. His gloved hand tightened around the small rock he held; tossing the rock at the truck's side behind the driver's door would be the signal that their

quarry was approaching. *How much longer is it going to be? Did they decide to take a different route? Did they somehow find out –*

Far off in the distance, headlights approached.

Gabriel rose slightly from his crouch, gripped the rock, and leaned forward, trying to determine if the approaching vehicle was the one they sought. He knew that they had to make a fast decision but couldn't afford to be wrong: if they blocked the wrong vehicle before the real one arrived, they would not only lose their element of surprise but likely put innocent civilians in danger. They'd have to cut it close.

A stone skittered across the street and bounced off the side of the trash container. Gabriel tensed. It was Pearson's signal—the oncoming vehicle was the target. He rose the rest of the way, tossing his own rock against the side of Hector's truck, pulling his scarf up to obscure the lower part of his face, and drawing his gun. The stakebed rumbled to life, already beginning to back up. Gabriel moved in behind it; the pistol felt alien in his hand, but he gripped it tightly. With any luck, the mission wouldn't hinge on his marksmanship skills.

It was easy to see now that Pearson had been right: as the oncoming headlights drew closer, Gabriel could see that they hid a large panel-side truck—the sort that might have been used to make deliveries of bread or milk. He could see two people through the big front windows, already scrambling as the truck screeched to a halt several meters away from the obstruction. *All right, Pearson – your turn...*

Pearson knew his job and did it well. As the doors opened and the driver and passenger began to swing out of the truck with their guns already drawn, they suddenly clutched their heads and cried out in pain when the bright nimbus of a spell appeared around the truck's cab. The

driver, who had managed to make it all the way out, staggered backward, while the passenger fell back into his seat.

Gabriel ran forward. Neither of the two gangsters was unconscious; he would have to make his move before they recovered sufficiently to get a shot off. Hoping there were only two more in the back he lashed out with a brutal kick, taking the driver down and leaping into the driver's seat to try to get a clear shot at the passenger. *Good! No opening through to the back. They'll have to come around from the rear doors.*

Gunfire chattered outside as apparently they were doing just that. Hector Duran jumped out of the stakebed and his passenger slid over to take the driver's spot. Off to the side of the delivery truck Gabriel could hear the sharp *crack* of Pearson's pistol and the grunt of someone back there taking a round and going down.

His heart was beating fast as everything seemed to be happening at once. Next to him the ganger in the passenger seat tried to bring up his gun; without a thought Gabriel shot him in the chest. The ganger screamed, blood spraying the back of the cab. Gabriel shoved him out of the truck.

The stakebed was moving forward, getting out of their way. Hector was crouched in front of the truck, the muzzle of his pistol flashing as he squeezed off a shot at something unknown coming from behind. In the back of the stakebed one of their allies cried out and dropped back into the bed.

*How many of them are there?* Gabriel's thoughts raced, trying to tally up the count so far—he'd gotten two, Pearson at least one, Hector one, but still the sounds of gunfire continued.

Behind him, sound exploded as a fusillade of machine-gun rounds tore through the flimsy wall

separating the back part of the truck from the cab. Gabriel lunged to the side, wincing sharply as one of the rounds caught the upper part of his right arm before exiting through the windshield. His hand tightened spasmodically around his gun—the pain was incredible, but he couldn't drop it. Gritting his teeth, he twisted in his seat and prepared to fire back. There was a brief burst from somewhere behind the truck and then, for a moment, silence.

Pearson threw himself into the passenger seat. "Go, go!" he yelled. "They're down!"

Gabriel didn't have to be invited twice. Forcing his injured arm to function, he grabbed the oversized steering wheel and prepared to move forward. "Hector?"

"One down. They got their guns. Go!" Pearson's voice had the same staccato pattern as the gunfire, quick and short and sharp. He was sweating, his eyes wild with fear and adrenaline.

Gabriel threw the truck into gear and stomped down on the accelerator. The truck's tires squealed briefly and then caught traction on the rough street, shooting the big vehicle forward. In the side mirror Gabriel could see Hector and one of his associates running back toward their own truck, waving machine guns in each hand. Then they rounded a corner and were gone.

Pearson was breathing hard, still caught up in what had happened. "We did it!" he cried, his voice bright with exultation. "We got 'em!"

Gabriel didn't answer. It was only when Pearson looked over at him that he noticed the slightly darker spot growing on the arm of his partner's overcoat. "Gabriel?"

"I'm all right," he said through gritted teeth. "Navigate."

Pearson gave him another worried look, but nodded. Slowly he got his breathing under control and guided



Gabriel through the route they had agreed on. Other than quick hushed directions, the drive was silent. In less than ten minutes the hulking form of the warehouse on the corner of 10th and 46th Streets loomed ahead. "There it is. We're supposed to go around the back."

Gabriel nodded and steered the unwieldy truck down another alley toward the rear of the warehouse. It appeared to be deserted; there were no lights except for one of the sickish streetlights on the corner, and no cars were parked nearby. This didn't surprise them: Wallace had told them that there wouldn't be any indication of anyone there until they got inside. Gabriel doused the truck's headlights, relying on the minimal illumination from the streetlight to get them where they were going.

"Gabriel?" Pearson's voice split the darkness, very soft, hesitant.

"Yes?"

"Do you think it was too easy?"

*Probably. Definitely. I wouldn't be surprised if they were waiting for us inside.* "Why do you say that?"

Long pause. "It—it just seemed too easy, that's all." Another pause. "Do you want me to heal your arm before we go in?"

Gabriel weighed the options. He could feel the blood running down his arm; it wasn't a life-threatening wound, but it was his gun arm and it was beginning to shake with weakness from the pain and blood loss. "How long? And will it put you in any danger?"

"Just a couple of minutes. I think if you believe we can risk it, it'll be worth it. Just—just in case. No danger, just maybe a little drain. Like I said, I think it's worth it."

Gabriel felt odd not being able to heal his own wound, but he knew Pearson was right. "All right—but quickly, or not at all. We can't wait long."

Pearson nodded and began helping him out of the right side of his overcoat. The rookie whistled slightly when he saw the damage, then his expression grew serious as he concentrated on the task at hand.

Gabriel, meanwhile, remained vigilant, keeping an eye on what was going on around the truck. He transferred his pistol to his left hand, knowing that he would have even less chance than usual of hitting anything that wasn't right on top of him, but it was better than nothing. He could feel the warmth suffusing his arm, dulling the edges of the pain as Pearson's healing magics took effect. He was frustrated at feeling so powerless, on having to depend on this fragile body and this unreliable weapon to defend himself and his allies—but frustration was a useless and potentially dangerous emotion now. *I must deal with things as they are, not as I want them to be. But when we are finished here I must begin searching for Stefan. I know he is here somewhere, and this isn't helping me find him.*

"There." Pearson let his breath out, settling back in his seat. He looked tired but satisfied. "How's that?"

Gabriel raised his arm, moving it around to test the healing. The pain was still there, but it was a ghost of its former intensity. "Much better," he said, nodding. "Thank you."

"No problem." The younger man seemed pleased to have been able to do something to help his partner.

Gabriel started up the truck again. "Let's get inside before someone sees us." He slowly guided it the rest of the way around the back of the warehouse. The roll-up door Wallace had told them about was there, currently extended about halfway down. He flashed the truck's lights as they had been instructed and was rewarded by the sight of the door beginning to crawl slowly upward. When it was fully open he drove inside.

The inside was dim and shadowy; there were no lights on in here either. The headlights picked out a large open space surrounded by boxes and machinery. When they had pulled all the way in, they both heard the decisive *clang* of the door being rolled shut again behind them. A moment later a man holding a clipboard stepped out from behind one of the stacks of boxes. Gabriel's hand tightened on the pistol which was now in his jacket pocket; he could sense Pearson tensing next to him.

"That the shipment for Abernathy?" the man called. His voice was gruff, perfunctory. He was dressed in workman's coveralls; a cigar stuck out from the corner of his mouth.

Gabriel rolled down the window. "Yes."

The man nodded, hooking a thumb over his shoulder toward the back of the warehouse. "Good job. Bring it over there and park it between those two rows of boxes. Then you better get outta here. Car's waiting for ya."

Gabriel rolled the window back up and did as instructed, trying to watch everything at once. Glancing sideways, he noticed that Pearson had his gun in his lap down below the level of the window.

The spot the man had indicated was barely wide enough to pull the truck into and enable the two of them to get out. "I don't like this," Pearson said nervously.

Gabriel shook his head, his eyes grim. "I don't either. Let's leave it here. They can move it themselves."

Pearson seemed relieved. "You don't trust 'em either?"

"Just being careful." He pulled the truck up to the opening between the two rows of boxes and stopped it there, setting the brake.

Two other shadowy figures waited nearby. "Pull it in!" one of them called. "Park it there between the boxes."

Gabriel ignored him, opening the door to slide out. On the other side, Pearson was doing the same.

"Din'cha hear me, kid?" the other voice called.

"You can pull it in yourself," Gabriel replied. "Where's the car?"

The man grumbled, but didn't protest. "Over there by the back wall. You have any trouble? Anybody followin' you?"

"Not that we know of," Gabriel said. "Everything went well."

"Nobody's following," Pearson echoed. He had been watching as Gabriel drove.

The first man, the one who had met them originally, was coming toward them now as the two other men began opening up the back of the truck. He glanced at it, but simply shrugged. He tossed Gabriel a key on a ring, then stopped, pausing to get a good look at him. "You're Draco, aren't you?"

"Why?" Gabriel spoke warily.

"Cause if you are, I got some info to pass on to ya. So you want it or not?"

His hand tightened on the gun in his pocket. "What do you have?"

The man consulted his clipboard, although Gabriel suspected it was only a prop. "It's about your brother. I think we got a lead on where he might be."

Gabriel's gaze focused on him. "Where?"

The man nodded. "Coupla guys I know heard a coupla other guys talkin'. Sounds like they might be holdin' him in the back part of the Fortuna Club. At least they were holdin' *somebody* there an hour or so ago. Figured you might want to go check it out."

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Thank you. I'll do that." There was something odd, something he couldn't quite place in the man's expression, but it was the first semi-

solid lead he'd gotten since arriving here. He would check it out, but he would be careful.

"Yeah, good luck," the man said, nodding again. "Now get on outta here. It's dangerous to be here right now."

The two of them didn't have to be encouraged twice. Gabriel took the keyring and together he and Pearson headed for the car, another ubiquitous dark sedan. They walked quickly but casually, careful to continue their watch for unexpected motion. "I'll be glad to—" Pearson began, and then stopped both his forward movement and his sentence simultaneously.

Gabriel tensed. "What is —?"

Pearson's eyes widened as he stared at something that didn't seem to be there. "*Oh, shit, Gabriel, it's a —*" His voice pitched higher with fear and then abruptly halted as gunfire erupted from high above them and his face exploded in a spray of blood. Several more rounds *spanged* into the concrete floor and ricocheted away.

"Pearson!" Gabriel spared him only a glance—enough to tell with sickening certainty that the rookie was beyond the point where anyone could do anything for him—and then ran, launching himself off in the direction of the shadowy corners of the warehouse, away from the car. Already other figures were rising up from behind the car, behind boxes, behind machinery—his gaze darted around, looking for an escape route.

The truck's headlights went out, plunging the place into total darkness.

Gabriel stopped, struggling to slow his breathing, to get his bearings. Where was he? Where was the door? *I have to get out of here —*

*Wait. Stop. Don't panic.* He forced himself to remain still. Without magic, with only a human's strength and stamina, he was at a disadvantage—but he hadn't been

defeated yet. He was still standing. *Pearson* – He closed his eyes briefly, racked with a wave of guilt and grief over the rookie's death, but there wasn't anything he could do about that now. If he didn't get out of here, no one would know what had become of either of them.

Someone else—something else—was near. He could hear its soft breathing as it approached. He stood very still, holding his breath, waiting to see what it would do. Could it see him? *How can they get by like this? In darkness, they are helpless...*

*Don't panic. If you do, you're dead.*

The approaching thing stopped. It seemed to be sniffing for something. He could hear other sounds from around him: footsteps, the soft *swish-scrape* of clothing, breathing. There were several of them. He had seen at least four before the lights went down. *Were the workmen in on it? They must have been – they aren't running –*

Silence.

Gabriel began backing up, moving on tiptoe back toward the wall. It was so dark in here that his vision was not clearing; he could feel the blackness pressing in around him, almost hurting his eyes. *If I can get to the wall, I might be able to feel my way along it, to find the door – they can't have seen me...if they could, they would have shot me already –*

Step. Step. Slowly, carefully. Make no sound.

The other noises had ceased, the breathing quieted, the footsteps gone.

Step. Step. Stop. *I must be getting close now. The wall wasn't far away –*

He felt vulnerable, exposed. Some inner sense told him he was moving in the right direction—something about the way the air felt around him, almost a blind man's sense. But he hadn't been far from the wall when the lights have gone out. Could he have gotten turned around? He—

His heel touched the wall with a soft *click*. He halted his motion again, waited for anyone to notice him. *Where are they? They can't all be this quiet? Why aren't they breathing? Why aren't they doing something?*

He pressed his hands behind him against the wall, feeling the cold corrugated metal with sensitive fingertips. Slowly, still holding his breath, he began moving sideways, still on tiptoe. He would have liked to get rid of his shoes to allow him to move even more silently, but doing so would have doubtless revealed his position – and then there was the fact that he would need them later if he needed to run.

Step, pause. Step, pause.

Still no sound, no light from around him. The only thing he could hear if he strained his ears was the soft *ticking* of the delivery truck's engine cooling down. It wasn't loud enough for him to tell where it was, though.

Step, pause. Step, pause. He ran his fingertips along the metal, feeling its undulating contours, the occasional bolt, small patches of rough rust. *There has to be a door here somewhere.*

His hand fell on a seam.

His breath caught silently, his eyes widening as they fought to pick out the smallest bit of light. He stopped, moving his hand up and down along the seam until he reached a knob. *All right – do this quickly – hope it isn't locked –*

The lights came on, all at once.

Gabriel flinched against the sudden sensory overload, bringing his arm up to shield his eyes.

There was a figure next to him, floating a few centimeters above the floor. It was laughing silently.

"Bad luck, pretty boy," he purred, and brought something down on the side of his head.

As he fell and felt consciousness fleeing, Gabriel's last  
thought was *I'm sorry, Stefan. I've failed you –*  
And then nothing.



## 32.

The runners followed Unekei back down the hallway and through the front part of the house. Upon reaching the massive main room, the spirit turned and headed toward the back. They traversed another short hallway and came upon a set of wooden double doors decorated with intricately carved dragons of both the Western and Eastern variety. Unekei pushed the doors open and motioned them through.

As they moved into the room they all tried not to stare. The dining room was long and relatively narrow, with a high ceiling and walls covered in paintings and carvings of what looked like African and Egyptian craftsmanship. The table was of simple design and the finest wood, covered with a cloth of white linen; the chairs were tall and straight-backed, three on each side and one at each end. The place settings were of fine china, heavy crystal, and golden tableware. Lighting was provided by unobtrusive sconces along the wall and three large candles spaced along the center of the table.

All of this, however, was not what they were trying not to stare at. That honor was reserved for the figure at the head of the table.

She did not rise as they entered, and she did not smile, although her expression was in no way inhospitable. "Welcome to my home," she said. Her voice was low, soft, and rather deep, with a slight unidentifiable accent; it had an ageless, precise quality to it that dominated the room even though she did not raise it. "I am Neferet. Please – sit down."

The runners did as they were told, moving as silently as they could manage. Kestrel took the seat to Neferet's right and Winterhawk the one to her left. Ocelot sat next to Kestrel, 'Wraith next to 'Hawk, and Joe rounded out

the party by lowering himself carefully into the chair next to Ocelot. Surprisingly, it held without even a creak under his bulk.

Neferet watched them, silent and expressionless, as they settled in. With her skin the color of rich chocolate, her tall, slender form sheathed in a pale cream-colored gown adorned with a wide necklace of shimmering gold, and her head covered with a simple wrap that matched her gown, she resembled nothing more than one of the queens of ancient Egypt returned to life. The runners were compelled by her eyes, which were almost the same gold color as her necklace, dominating her strong, fine-boned face. There was no doubt in their minds that this woman *was* power and she knew it.

"Thank you for inviting us to your home," Kestrel said. Her tone was quiet and respectful; it did not waver.

Neferet inclined her head. "The young one has spoken of all of you with great fondness—he has told me of how you have aided him in the past." Her expressive lips curved in a slight smile as her gaze settled back on Kestrel. "Especially you, child. It takes a rare courage to put aside fear long enough to save the life of one of our kind."

"He's a dear friend," she said, ducking her eyes a bit under the woman's scrutiny.

"I can see that in your aura," Neferet told her. "You are fond of him as well—all of you are. It is admirable that you would risk coming here, knowing my disinclination to involve myself with those other than my own kind. I respect you for that." She glanced up. "We will dine, and then afterward you will tell me the specifics of what you seek."

As if on cue, Uneki entered. No one had seen him leave, but apparently he had because now he returned bearing a tray laden with food. As the runners and

Neferet watched, he began to spread delicacies one after the other in the middle of the table. There was a platter containing a lamb and rice dish with a delicate sauce, bowls of steaming vegetables, breads, and various condiments, all of which smelled exotic and wonderful. When he finished, he left and returned with a bottle of red wine. Beginning at Neferet, he moved around the table filling each crystal wineglass. Winterhawk's eyes widened slightly when he got a glimpse of the label on the bottle.

The food and the wine were as magnificent as they appeared. There was not much conversation as they ate; Winterhawk complimented Neferet on the excellence of the wine and Joe waxed enthusiastic over both the quality and the quantity of the food—it wasn't often that he was able to get such a wonderful meal in the kind of portions that would fully satisfy his appetite. Neferet ate lightly, seeming more interested in observing her guests than in dining.

Still, even as much as the runners were enjoying their sumptuous meal, there was an undercurrent of tension present in each of them. They all knew why they were here, and each bite took them closer to the inevitable.

When they at last finished dinner, Uneki glided silently in and whisked the table settings away, returning with small plates of cakes (the perfect size, as no one had room for anything much larger) and a bottle of some fiery reddish-brown liqueur surrounded by small crystal glasses. After everyone had been served—Winterhawk, 'Wraith, and Neferet opted for the liqueur while Kestrel and Ocelot chose the cakes and Joe chose both—Neferet leaned back in her chair and regarded the five of them over steepled fingers. Her expression was utterly neutral. "Now," she said softly, "Tell me of what has happened."

Everyone looked at Kestrel.

She took a deep breath. On the plane down here they had agreed that they would lay all their cards on the table, figuring that trying to withhold information from a dragon would be useless at best and unwise at worst. Speaking slowly, trying to keep her thoughts straight and all the events in order, she told Neferet what had happened. She began at the incident in the chalet and continued through Gabriel's madness and recovery, the search for the others, and her best description of what had befallen them. She glanced at each of them occasionally, silently asking for their input; they supplied some of the details she had missed but for the most part allowed her to tell the story. The only part she didn't tell, just as she had not told her friends, was the story of her night with Gabriel at his lair. She thought it neither relevant to the situation nor anyone's business but Gabriel's and hers. If Neferet noticed the omission she made no mention of it. By the time Kestrel got to the morning at Gabriel's apartment and the note he had left, her voice was shaking.

Neferet had shown no reaction to Kestrel's story until she got to the part about the note—and specifically the part where Gabriel revealed that he had been marked by the Enemy. Here, she stiffened a bit and her eyes widened very slightly. "Have you brought the note he left for you?" she asked.

Kestrel nodded and pulled it from her pocket, passing it across the table to her.

Neferet carefully unfolded it and for the next several moments was silent as she read over the words. When she looked up, her expression was serious. "This is a grave matter indeed," she said quietly.

No one spoke. Five pairs of eyes were fixed on her face; five minds silently repeating the same questions: *Will you help? Can you help?* But aloud they said nothing, waiting.

Neferet read the note again. Her gaze was focused, fixed on the words. Her lips were set in a tight line. After several moments she looked at them again—or rather, at Kestrel. “Truly grave,” she repeated. “I have never heard of a situation such as this—a case where the life force of one of our kind has been allowed to fall into the hands of the Enemy.” She bowed her head. “The young one possesses courage and wisdom far beyond that which one of his years should possess—but as with any youngster, he is vulnerable to making unwise decisions simply because he lacks the experience necessary to show him the way.”

“But—” Kestrel ventured tentatively, “You said yourself that this has never happened before. How could *anyone* have the experience to make the right decision?”

Neferet’s gaze sharpened, but it was not unkind. “That is true, child. And I am aware, from what he has told me, that he and his brother—and all of you—have succeeded in things that no elder among us would have believed possible. Still, the fact remains that it is done and we must all deal with the consequences.”

“If I may—” Winterhawk spoke up. When Neferet turned to face him, he continued, “What did Gabriel mean when he said he had been ‘marked’ by the Enemy? We know that a similar thing happened to Stefan, which was why the two of them agreed to cooperate in the first place. But from his note, it sounds like this isn’t quite the same thing.”

Neferet shook her head. “No. It is not, but that does not mean that it is not something that concerns me deeply. Because you know of the Enemy, I can tell you this: in the previous Age of Magic, when the Scourge of the Enemy was drawing to a close and the other races began emerging into the light, the remaining Enemy employed a similar mark to control those over whom they could gain

power. That mark was much more potent than the one of which the young one speaks—it allowed the Enemy to control the marked being's actions, to experience the world through his senses, to manipulate his emotions—thus, such a marking was considered a serious thing indeed. Most who were found to possess them were put to death, because the fear of the Enemy was so great that few were willing to take a chance on those who had been touched by them." She paused a moment, gathering her thoughts, and then went on: "In this Age, the Enemy's power is much weaker, their influence very limited. It is difficult for them to mark anyone without that person's consent, and even if they have that consent the power they can exert through it is severely reduced due to the lower level of mana at this stage of the Cycle."

"So," Kestrel said slowly, "You're saying that they had more power over Stefan because he gave his consent—even though they tricked him into it?"

Neferet nodded. "Yes." She sighed. "If Gabriel is correct that he has been marked himself then it must be a minor mark indeed. If not, I would certainly have noticed it when he was here. As I am sure he has told you, the Enemy is not something any of our kind take lightly."

Winterhawk took a sip of his liqueur. "What did he mean when he said he had to defeat the one who holds it? Is that how you get rid of one of these marks—by killing the thing that put it on you?"

"Yes." Neferet bowed her head for a moment, then looked back up. "But he risks great danger by attempting to do so. By seeking to free his brother, he must undoubtedly take his search directly to the Enemy."

Joe's eyes widened. "You don't mean he's going to the other side of the Chasm, do you?"

To the runners' surprise, Neferet shuddered delicately. "No," she said, shaking her head. "No—he can

be impetuous, but he is far too wise to do that. Even if he could reach it, which I do not believe is possible, doing so would mean certain death and probably a fate similar to his brother's."

"We all saw Stefan fall into the Chasm," Winterhawk told her. "Both Stefan and the Horror he was fighting. If Gabriel can't reach the other side...could he reach the bottom? Would he try?"

For a long moment Neferet was silent. "I hope not," she said at last. "But there is no way for me to know what he has done unless I were to see the ritual he has performed. Only then will I know where he has gone—or more correctly, since these things are never precise, where he has *attempted* to go."

The runners exchanged nervous glances. The thought of Gabriel going off to fight the Horrors on his own was bad enough, but adding to that the realization that he might be off wandering the metaplanes at their mercy only made it worse.

Kestrel took a deep breath. She looked reluctant to speak, but did so anyway. "So...I guess now that you have the whole story, or at least as much of it as we know, it's time to ask the important question: will you help us?"

The calm golden gaze settled on her. "What kind of help do you seek from me, child?"

That wasn't the answer she had been expecting. As she was startled into momentary silence, Winterhawk spoke up: "We want to go after him—to try to find him and do whatever we can to help. Unfortunately, I'm the only one among us who has any way to reach the metaplanes, and I can't take anyone with me."

Neferet turned slightly to face the mage. "Even despite his request of you not to follow him, still you seek to do so?"

"We have to," Kestrel said firmly. "He'd do the same for us—but that's not what matters. He's our friend. He's in trouble. We have to help."

Winterhawk nodded. "Quite so. Without his intervention, most of us would still be living in madness—or not living at all. He gave us back our lives. We can't simply allow him to walk into what might very well be a trap without doing *something* to help."

Neferet regarded each of them in turn. "Do all of you feel this way? Even if it should cost you your lives?"

Silently, Joe and 'Wraith nodded.

After a brief pause, Ocelot did too. "Yeah," he said. "And it's more than that. If we just let this go—don't go after him, I mean—we don't have any way to know if the Horrors are gonna leave us alone. Doing this might kill us, but I'd rather die cleanly than have to have this hovering over me for the rest of my life."

Neferet nodded. "He has chosen good friends indeed," she said, half to herself. She looked back up at the expectant faces around the table. "I will consider your request," she said. "I do not make such decisions lightly nor quickly; I must examine the situation with care." She rose from her chair. "I will give you my decision in the morning. In the meantime, I invite you to enjoy the hospitality of my home—if there is anything you wish, you have only to ask Uneke and he will provide it. Until tomorrow." She nodded a farewell to them, turned, and left the room, the skirt of her elegant gown swinging around behind her.

Nobody had much else to say until they were safely back to their rooms and Uneke had departed. Once again they gathered in Kestrel's room, taking up various positions either seated or pacing. "Do you think she'll do



it?" Joe asked. All of them were aware that it was a strong possibility that their conversations—and perhaps even their thoughts—were being monitored; they weren't happy about that realization but there was nothing they could do about it. Besides, this time they had nothing to hide. They had told Neferet the truth as they knew it; the ball was in her court now.

Kestrel sighed. "I hope so. She does seem to care a lot about Gabriel, although who knows if she'll be willing to get involved in something like this."

"Or what price she'll want in exchange," Winterhawk added soberly.

Kestrel looked up at him. "Whatever it is, I'll agree to it." Defiantly she cast her glance around the room as if daring any hidden ears to pick that up. "I don't think Gabriel would become such good friends with someone who would try to screw us over." Her eyes flashed. "If I have to make some kind of sacrifice for this, then so be it. God knows he's made enough of them for us."

"Calm down," Ocelot said gently, coming over to drop down into the chair next to the bed where she sat. "Let's just wait and see if she'll even do it. If she wants something in exchange, we'll just have to figure out what we're gonna do once we know what it is. Until then—anybody think they're gonna get any sleep tonight?"

"Sure, why not?" Joe clasped his hands behind him and stretched; his back made a mighty series of *cricks* like someone dropping a box of oversized ping-pong balls on a concrete floor. "I'll bet we won't have any nightmares tonight. After that great dinner, I'm planning on taking a nice hot bath and getting a good night's rest. Might be the last one we get for awhile."

"Eat, drink, and be merry—" 'Wraith started.

"Don't say it!" Ocelot ordered.

"Moo," said 'Wraith.

### 33.

Apparently Uneki or Neferet had figured out that none of the runners were going to be late sleepers, for the tall spirit had arrived at their rooms shortly after dawn the following morning.

They sat once again in the dining room, picking half-heartedly at the light breakfast Uneki had served them (all except Joe, of course, who never passed up the opportunity for a good meal). Neferet had not yet arrived; the spirit had informed them that she would be along shortly and that they should not wait breakfast for her.

She arrived as they were finishing up. Dressed now in a simple robelike gown of deep green with a matching head covering and none of the gold jewelry from the previous night, she looked every bit as exotic and elegant as before. "I have been out in the desert most of the night considering your request," she said; no one even seemed to notice the lack of greeting.

The runners leaned forward as one, breakfast forgotten. "And?" Kestrel asked softly. She didn't realize she was holding her breath in anticipation of the answer.

"And I have decided to aid you—or rather, to aid Gabriel—at least in some small way." Neferet's face was unreadable; her eyes were on Kestrel.

"What—does that mean?" Kestrel's voice was still soft and a little hesitant.

"It means that I will help you at least in your attempt to reach the Netherworlds and search for him." She settled regally into her chair at the head of the table. "In order to do that, however, I must know the specifics of the ritual he used to reach them himself."

Winterhawk took a deep breath. "I'm afraid we don't *know* the specifics of the ritual—and we have no way to find out. Gabriel didn't share that information with us."

Neferet nodded as if to say she already knew that. "According to the note he has left for you, he had conducted the ritual at his lair. We must therefore travel there."

Kestrel's eyes widened. "Go—to his lair?" She wasn't quite sure what to make of that. Gabriel had always treated his lair in the Algonkian-Manitou lands as a place of solitude, of privacy. As far as she knew, she was the only other being who had ever set foot inside it in this Age. She had no idea what the etiquette among dragons was regarding visiting each other's lairs when the owner was not in residence. But yet, Neferet was his friend, someone who wanted only to help him.

"It is the only way, child." Neferet's voice was gentle; obviously she understood the implications of what she was proposing. "I must see the remains of the ritual he performed, or I will have no way to determine where in the Netherworlds he has gone. Were you to go there without this knowledge, you could wander for the rest of your lives and never find him."

Kestrel considered for a long moment, wishing she had more concrete information to go on. Finally she looked up and nodded. "Okay," she said. "I can show you where it is." *Once we get Gabriel back if he wants to be angry about this, that'll just have to be how it is. At least he'll be here to get angry.* "When do you want to leave?"

"As soon as possible." Neferet rose again from her chair. "After I have seen the ritual, I can give you more information about what might be expected. Until then, I dare not make a guess."

Kestrel looked around at her companions; all of them nodded subtly. "Okay," she said again. What do I do?"

Neferet nodded at something unseen next to her; almost immediately Uneke appeared next to her. "Give Uneke the relevant information. He will see to securing

transportation. Gabriel has told me roughly where his lair is located; I assume we will need an aircraft."

"That and some kind of off-road vehicle," Kestrel told her. "The roads for the last few kilometers aren't passable by a normal car."

"Do not worry about that, child," Neferet said, a little distractedly. She turned to Uneke; after a moment he nodded and disappeared again. She then returned her attention to the runners. "If you will excuse me, I have preparations to make. We will leave as soon as the travel arrangements have been finalized." Without waiting for an answer, she turned and left the room.

Nobody said anything; Kestrel watched her go, hoping that she had made the right decision.

Several hours later they stood in a wooded clearing several kilometers off what passed for the main road nearest Gabriel's lair.

They had flown to Winnipeg on a small jet; it had been less than an hour after Uneke had gone off to make arrangements when he had returned with the information regarding a chartered flight. Once on the ground they had been met by a man who had obviously been waiting for them; he turned over the keys to a large sport-utility vehicle with nothing more than a "Have a good trip." Neferet, who had changed clothes once again, this time into a heavy robe belted with gold and covered by an equally heavy cloak, climbed into the front passenger seat and looked at Kestrel. Taking the cue, Kestrel had claimed the driver's spot and, once the others were settled, headed off as far as she could go before the roads became impassable. This clearing had been that spot. "Okay," she had told them, pulling off the road. "It's not really safe to

drive this much further, but it's still several miles up and not easy going. Are we hiking?"

"That is one possibility," Neferet said. She was looking up at the skies.

"What—would be the others?" Winterhawk asked a bit tentatively. Like the others, he had remained relatively quiet throughout the trip, just taking in the situation and trying to get himself mentally prepared for what he knew was to come when they reached the lair.

"We can fly."

"Fly?" Joe looked at her questioningly.

But Kestrel got it. She stared wide-eyed at Neferet. "All of us? At the same time?"

The woman nodded calmly. "If you are willing."

The other runners were not slow to catch on. "Wait a second..." Ocelot began. "You mean, like, you fly and we—"

"Ride on her back," Kestrel finished. "It is the easiest way to get up there. I've done it several times with Gabriel."

"It is your decision," Neferet said. "You have my word that it is quite safe. Just because I rarely choose to associate with your people does not mean that I wish any harm to come to you."

Kestrel didn't seem to think it was a big deal one way or the other. Winterhawk, Joe, and 'Wraith were looking various degrees of intrigued, while Ocelot still appeared dubious. Finally he sighed. "Okay. I'm not gonna be the one to hold up the party. Let's do it."

Neferet's gaze settled on him for a moment, then she nodded. Without further comment she moved out into the center of the clearing; the runners backed off into the trees, their eyes locked on her slim form.

She changed.

The transition was smooth and quick: one moment she was standing there as a human, and the next moment the clearing was filled with the large and graceful form of a Great Western Dragon.

Neferet must have been a slightly different subspecies of Western Dragon than Gabriel, or perhaps it was simply a difference due to gender: she was about the same size as he was, her hide the color of burnished bronze, her eyes a striking gold, but where Gabriel's form was massive, graceful but bulging with muscle, hers was longer, more slender and sinuous, almost as if there might have been some Eastern blood far back in her lineage. As she spread her wings, her scales shining under the sunlight, she put Kestrel in the mind of a dancer, elegant and beautiful. Kestrel took a step forward, trying not to stare.

Neferet lowered her head. Her eyes glowed slightly. *"Climb on my back and find a comfortable position. I will not allow you to fall."*

Kestrel was the first to take her up on the offer. She moved to the dragon's nearest foreleg and scrambled up, relying on the practice she had gained from flying with Gabriel. She settled into a spot at the base of Neferet's neck, between her wings, and then motioned the others to follow.

It took a few moments for everyone to get situated; none of them had ever ridden on a dragon's back before and so mounting was somewhat awkward. Neferet remained still, turning her head slightly to watch them with one eye as they arranged themselves. When they were set, she rose from her crouch. *"Hold on,"* she told them. Bunching her powerful leg muscles, she launched herself upward, spreading her wings to catch the air currents.

Kestrel was ready. The others were not. Winterhawk, Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith managed with varying amounts

of grace—or lack thereof—to keep their seats, but it was not a foregone conclusion for several seconds. Neferet didn't seem to notice. As she broke free of the trees, she began a slow circling pattern, gaining altitude with each pass.

Once the runners became somewhat accustomed to their positions and weren't hanging on for dear life, they gazed in awe down at the mountain and the valley below. Winterhawk gave Ocelot a rather fierce grin, which Ocelot didn't return. "I'm not enjoying this," he muttered between clenched teeth to the mage.

"I must admit I am," Winterhawk replied. "If it had been under better circumstances, I could get to quite like this."

Joe nodded in agreement. 'Wraith, for his part, was silent, taking in the view and keeping his opinions to himself.

The trip, fortunately or unfortunately depending upon who was offering an opinion, didn't last long. Neferet continued her circling and climbing for several more minutes, and then leveled out. Kestrel leaned forward and closed her eyes; Winterhawk, who was sitting directly behind her, suspected she was in communication with the dragon regarding the exact location of the lair. The location wasn't obvious to him—all he could see was trees and forbidding-looking rocky peaks jutting up into the clear blue sky.

Neferet scanned the area, her neck thrust out, her eyes constantly in motion. At last, Kestrel pointed at what looked like a large ledge against a featureless wall. Neferet banked gently and backwinged a graceful landing on the ledge, barely jostling her passengers.

There was not a lot of room on the ledge, so as soon as the riders had disembarked, Neferet shifted back to her

human form. She regarded the wall dispassionately. "This is the location?" she asked Kestrel.

Kestrel nodded. "Right here. This is the entrance we always use. See?" Moving over to the wall, she reached out her arm — which passed neatly through the rock as if it were not there. It was an eerie effect, making her look as if her arm had been bloodlessly severed at mid-forearm.

Neferet drew up alongside her and extended her own arm, her palm pointed toward the rock. Instead of passing through, her hand was stopped just as it would have been had this been normal rock.

Winterhawk's eyes widened. "You can't get through?" Ever-curious, he tried the same maneuver and got the same result as Neferet. The others did as well. It appeared that only Kestrel could gain entrance.

Neferet took a deep breath. She closed her eyes briefly; when she opened them again, her expression was sober. "The wards are stronger than I had feared," she said. "I did not think the young one capable of such magic."

"I don't think he did them all himself," Kestrel told her. "This wasn't just his lair — it was his family's. From what he told me, both of his parents were very powerful in their clan. I do know, though, that he tweaked them so I could get in. That's why I can get through now."

"So there's no way you can get in there?" Joe asked Neferet, looking back and forth between the rock wall and the woman.

She sighed. "Given enough time to study the wards, I could likely devise a spell that would allow me access — but that would take a very long time. We do not have such time."

"What do you propose, then?" Winterhawk asked.

Everyone watched Neferet, remaining silent as she did likewise. She moved off a few feet away from them,



staring out over the valley. Kestrel looked at the others and shrugged; her expression was serious. She looked very tense. Ocelot squeezed her shoulder gently, but he wasn't looking much less tense than she was.

After several minutes, Neferet turned and came back over to them. "I do not like it," she said, "but I believe there is only one way we can accomplish this with any amount of haste." When the others did not say anything but merely continued to regard her, waiting, she added: "Kestrel, you must go in, find the site of the ritual, and relay the information to me."

"What?" Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel demanded in unison; Ocelot's voice was a bit sharp, while Winterhawk's and Kestrel's were simply surprised. Joe and 'Wraith didn't say anything, but their expressions were equally startled.

Kestrel recovered quickly and took a deep breath. "Are you sure? I mean, of course I don't mind going in alone—this is Gabriel's home, after all—but I don't know anything about dragon rituals. How am I going to tell you what you need to know? I wouldn't even know what to look for." There was another thought nagging at her too: *What if I can't find the place where he did the ritual? That place is huge, and there are more places in there I haven't seen than those I have.* She didn't voice that one, though. There were too many others that were more pressing.

Joe was digging in his bag, which he had brought with him. "I brought the comm gear," he told her, holding out a tiny radio set with an earbud receiver and a throat-mike. "You could relay the information to her from inside."

Ocelot regarded it dubiously. "Will it transmit through all that rock?"

"It's pretty powerful," the troll said, still holding it out to Kestrel. "It's worth a try, anyway."

Kestrel took it and deftly donned it as Joe handed another set to Neferet. "What I'd really like to have is something with wheels. Wherever I end up going, it's going to be a long walk." She looked at Joe. "You don't have a pair of skates or a motor-scooter in there, do you?"

The troll shook his head, smiling a little. "Sorry. Not *that* well prepared. But I do have this." He dug in the bag again and came up with a small (for him, which meant it was big for Kestrel) pack of dried meats and fruits, and a canteen.

She looked at him gratefully, taking both and attaching them to her belt. "Thanks. I can fill up the canteen inside."

Neferet was examining the radio set in her hand like it was an unwelcome insect. She looked at Kestrel. "I do not want to place our trust solely in this device," she said, managing to make the word *device* sound somehow unsavory. "If you will permit it, I will place a spell on you that should aid us."

"What kind of spell?" Once again Kestrel, Ocelot, and Winterhawk spoke in unison.

Neferet ignored the two men and looked straight at Kestrel. "Nothing harmful, child. It is merely a spell that will allow you to recall details more carefully when you return."

Kestrel nodded slowly. "How does it work?"

"When you enter the lair and find the location of the ritual, you will examine every bit of it, taking care not to overlook anything. When you return to us, I will then be able to look into your mind and see what you have seen."

She looked a little uncomfortable, but nodded. "Kind of like a magical camera, so you can interpret what I see?"

Neferet nodded, although everyone present got the vague impression that she did not approve of having her magic compared with any sort of mundane technology.

Joe was once again searching his bag. "Speaking of cameras," he said, "You can take this if it'll do any good." This time he was holding out a tiny digital camera. "It's not as good as the one on my helmet, but it's good in low light."

"Glad *one* of us brought some stuff with us," Ocelot muttered. For his own part, he had not brought much to the dragon's home—only his ever-present monowhip and a couple of changes of clothes in his luggage. He—and he suspected his companions as well—had not expected that they would be going on an expedition to Gabriel's lair.

Kestrel nodded thanks to Joe and stowed the camera in one of her pockets. Then she turned back to Neferet. "Okay," she said. "Let's do it."

As the rest of the runners looked on—Winterhawk with the slightly glaze-eyed expression that was a dead giveaway that he was perceiving the process astrally—Neferet took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and reached out to Kestrel. Touching her forehead with two fingers, she began whispering. It was difficult to hear what she was saying, but even the few words 'Wraith's sensitive ears were able to pick up had no meaning to him.

It was over almost before it had started. Neferet finished the spell and backed up; Kestrel touched her forehead.

"Well?" Ocelot demanded.

She shrugged. "I don't feel any different."

"You will not," Neferet told her. "There will be no evidence of the spell until I retrieve the images when you return."

"You can't just—see through her eyes as she goes in?" Joe asked.

"Not if the wards are that strong," Winterhawk said before Neferet could. "Magic's magic. Spells on Kestrel become part of her—at least unless the wards are set to

keep out any particular type of spell, in which case she might be blocked—but anything trying to get in from the outside wouldn't have any more luck than the physical body."

Joe looked at Neferet for confirmation, and the woman nodded. "He is correct."

Kestrel, a little nervous at the prospect that Neferet's spell might cause her to be blocked from entrance to the lair, attempted to stick her arm through the wall again. It went through just as readily as before. She breathed a soft sigh of relief. "Okay," she said. "Looks like it's showtime." To Neferet she added: "Any particular instructions?"

Neferet nodded. "Yes. When you find the site of the ritual, do not touch anything. No matter what you see, it is imperative that you do not disturb the circle or his physical body—to do so could put him in great danger and prevent him from returning."

Kestrel swallowed and nodded. "Okay, check. Don't touch anything. Anything else?"

"Be certain to carefully observe everything around you at the site—even things that you do not consider to be important. If I am to determine the nature of the ritual, I must have as much information as possible about it. But again, it is more important that you do not touch anything than that you obtain clear memories of every aspect." Neferet's golden eyes met hers. "Do not fear, child," she said softly. "He is young and strong, and his will and determination are great."

She nodded. She wished that she could be as confident.

Ten minutes later she was on her way. There were no long goodbyes, but simply a final wave to the other

runners and a final glance exchanged with Neferet, and then she was gone, her body slipping through the illusionary entrance and disappearing. Ocelot watched her foot, the last part of her to go through, and fought back the irrational impression to grab it, to pull her back out of there because if she went in, he would never see her again.

"Now," said Neferet placidly, lowering herself down to a cross-legged seated position against the rock wall, "we wait."

Joe was already fiddling with his comm unit. "Can you hear me, Kestrel?" He spoke a little louder than the subvocalization that was all that was necessary so the others could hear him too. "Are you there?"

He waited a moment, then nodded. "Okay. Just check in every few minutes. If we don't hear every five minutes or so, we'll assume you lost the signal. I don't figure it'll last for long." He looked at the others. "She's on her way. No problems yet."

Ocelot nodded. He didn't know what kind of problems he expected her to have—after all, this *was* the lair of a Great Dragon, specifically one who felt he owed her his life and who considered her to be his best friend. Undoubtedly Gabriel had adjusted the lair's defenses to ignore her presence, so there was nothing to fear—

*What about the Horrors?* a little voice spoke up in the back of his mind. *What if they got Gabriel? What if she's in there with them now?* He shuddered, his muscles stiffening as he stared at the entrance that wasn't there.

Winterhawk tilted his head. The mage had been preparing to sit down much like Neferet had on the other side of the entrance; he paused at Ocelot's odd behavior. "Something wrong?"

Ocelot shook his head (a bit too quickly to pull off casualness) and sighed. "No. I just don't like this. I don't like her in there without some backup."

"Gabriel wouldn't hurt her," 'Wraith spoke for the first time in awhile.

Ocelot leaned against the wall and looked away. "I know that."

"There's more, isn't there?" Winterhawk asked gently.

There was a long pause. Ocelot sighed. *Sometimes I wish these guys weren't so damn perceptive. 'Hawk knows me too well.* "What if she's not alone in there?" His voice was quiet and a little ragged.

Winterhawk didn't see what he meant. "If Gabriel's in there — if he hasn't left yet — p'raps she can talk him out of this and we can —"

Ocelot shook his head more violently. "No, no. That's not what I mean." Despite the chill of the air up here, a light film of sweat was forming on his forehead. "Remember before, with Harlequin, when we tried to go to the Metaplanes? Remember what happened? Why he had to stay behind?"

It took 'Hawk, who wasn't thinking along those lines at the moment, only a couple of seconds to catch Ocelot's implication. His eyes widened. "You know," he murmured, "you could have gone all day without saying that." He watched 'Wraith, who had settled down to meditate, and Joe, who was standing at the edge of the ledge looking out over the valley. "All I can say is, I hope that's not the case."

Ocelot had half-heartedly been hoping that Winterhawk would say something like, *'Oh, no — don't worry. Couldn't happen.'* Even if he knew it was bullshit, it would have given him something to cling to. He glanced over at Neferet: the woman's eyes were closed and she

appeared to be either asleep or deep in thought. He didn't think bothering her right now would be a good plan.

'Hawk gently clapped him on the upper arm. "She'll be fine," he said. "Don't forget, Gabriel's got to have some heavy-duty defenses in there. They wouldn't hurt Kestrel, but you can be sure they wouldn't be too hospitable toward — *that* sort."

Ocelot gave the mage a wan grateful look and nodded. "Yeah. That's true."

*I hope.*

Kestrel was alone.

She ambled along, having long since settled into a half-walk, half-jog pace that she knew she could maintain comfortably over a long distance.

The radio transmissions had stopped after she'd gotten about half a mile in. She had left the comm unit set up and running just in case, but she knew the place was just too rock-encased to allow radio communication. She remembered Gabriel telling her once how much trouble he'd had to go through to get his media room set up; at the time she had thought it was hilarious that he had sent several spirits out to get crash courses in electronics so they could come back and wire up the place for him. Now, she wished they had gone a little further. She undoubtedly could have contacted her friends from the media room or other points relatively near the entrance, but the deeper in she got—the more she descended into the "dragon" part of the lair, the less such modern conveniences could be found. She missed Joe's voice in her ear.

The place was silent except for the far-off sound of rushing water from the underground river and her own soft footfalls, both of which echoed around the lofty walls

of the caverns. She had no trouble seeing: her cybereyes were equipped with low-light capability and even down here it was not fully dark. There was a faint, vaguely comforting glow all around with no obvious source. She wished she had asked Gabriel about it before, but it had never seemed important.

At first she hadn't been sure where she was going. She had checked the underground lake, the media room, Gabriel's human-sized chambers, and a few of the other spots with which she was familiar, but they had turned up nothing. It was as she stood staring out over the lake wondering where to go next that the thought had come to her.

Only it hadn't been a thought—it had been a certainty. Of course she knew where he was.

With the confidence of completely secure knowledge, she had set off. That had been about an hour ago.

As she jog-walked along with only her own thoughts for company, she found those thoughts returning to the last time she had been here. It had seemed so long ago—had it really only been a few days? So much had happened since then that she hardly believed it. She thought about her previous trip through these same caverns, in search of the same destination—for of course that was where she was heading. *"It is one of the places where rituals are performed,"* he had told her last time. And undoubtedly if he had sought refuge there during his brief period of madness, it had to be the one in which he felt most comfortable. She was sure that he would therefore return there to perform what had to be a very tricky and dangerous ritual such as this one.

She was making good progress; this time she hadn't had to make all the side trips she had made last time to look into the smaller caverns off to both sides of the main one. *Good thing I have a good sense of direction. If I got lost in*



*here, nobody would be able to come in here to find me. Not unless Gabriel comes back –*

*Not until Gabriel comes back*, she corrected hastily, and then put that line of reasoning aside.

She dropped into her pace and let her mind wander once again, remembering the scene when she had discovered him, his desperate attempt to drive her off before the madness took him completely, her confusion and pain as she had felt herself slammed into the wall, the absence of pain afterward, the look in his eyes when she had awakened. She smiled a little to herself as the memory of the time afterward returned and superseded the other recollections. It had been what she wanted – she knew that now, even though she had tried to put it away, to not think about it – and after it was over she had felt an odd sense of satisfaction, of pleasure, of – a kind of closure. It would probably never happen again, and she truly accepted that now. It didn't need to happen again. He was her dearest friend and would remain so – that was all that was necessary. She wondered if he felt the same way.

Her feet beat a slow steady rhythm on the stone floor as cavern after cavern was left behind her. More than two hours had passed now – she should be getting close, given that it had taken three and a half before, with all the side trips. She paused a moment to take a drink from her canteen and a few pieces of dried fruit from the pack Joe had given her. She had told the others that it would probably be at least five hours before she returned; she wished she could contact them with more information. *They must be bored stiff out there.*

She went on.

Ocelot looked at his chrono again and sighed. It had only been ten minutes since he had last looked. At this rate it was going to take nigh onto forever for Kestrel to return.

Winterhawk, who was dozing off and on against the side of the wall, glanced up at him. "Why don't you sit down for awhile?" he suggested. "All that pacing around is driving me—" He didn't finish the sentence. That was something he wasn't quite ready to joke about yet. "—It's annoying," he finished after a brief pause.

"I can't just sit down. You think it's bugging you to watch—it'd bug me even worse to just *sit* there."

'Wraith and Neferet both looked asleep, probably conserving their energy through their respective forms of meditation. Joe had unpacked his duffel bag, organized the items inside, and carefully repacked them. He'd offered them some more dried food and lukewarm bottles of water half an hour ago; they had taken him up on it just for something to do. Only Neferet had declined—or rather, she had not responded. No one was brave enough to try to wake her, figuring that if she wanted something to eat, she'd say so.

"You want to go explore the area around here?" Joe asked Ocelot. "We could climb down and look around the forest down there."

Ocelot nodded a little too fast. "Yeah." He was grateful to have something to do, even if it was something as pointless as exploring. "'Hawk?"

The mage shook his head. "I'll stay here. Leave me one of those radio sets so if you get in trouble we can come down there and rescue you."

Ocelot gave him a dirty look even though he knew he was joking.

Kestrel was getting close now. She wasn't quite sure how she knew it, but she knew it nonetheless.

Slowing her pace, she moved forward at a fast walk, looking for the side chamber that would lead her back several meters the way she had come and off at an angle to the chamber she was seeking.

She had long since removed her leather jacket and slung it over her shoulder; contrary to what one might expect of a cavern this deep in the mountains, it was actually quite warm here. It was one of the things she had learned about dragons: they tended to like their homes a little warmer and drier than humans found comfortable. She supposed that was why Neferet had chosen to live in the desert. *I wonder where her real lair is, she thought idly. Far away, or was it close and just well hidden? I suppose we'll never know.*

She almost missed the entrance she was looking for because her attention was focused straight ahead at the time. "Oh!" she said softly, startled, when she spotted it. She took a deep breath. *Okay. Here goes. I sure hope I'm not wrong about this, or it's gonna be a long walk back for nothing.*

She wasn't wrong.

She could see that immediately as she approached the entrance to the chamber itself. A faint blue glow was visible from the passageway, casting the walls in an eerie grayish light. As she watched, the light pulsed slightly, a living heartbeat to the chamber.

She crept forward, suddenly afraid; she had spent all this time hurrying to reach this place, and now that she was here she feared what she might see. She wondered if Neferet's spell was already diligently filing away her memories for later magical retrieval—the thought made her shudder a bit.

With a final deep breath she covered the rest of the distance to the chamber entrance, not giving herself time

to hesitate. What she saw once she got there made her stop in her tracks and gasp.

He was there—that much she had expected and so it did not surprise her. What she had *not* expected was the way in which the chamber had been transformed.

He was in human form, which only made the glowing circle over which his body floated look all the more massive. High above on the ledges, objects of every color of the rainbow glowed and pulsed, bathing the room in a more brilliant version of the same eldritch glow she had seen from the passageway. Below, the circle seemed almost alive, its sigils and symbols traced in flickering blue fire. Kestrel looked around, moving forward slightly but careful not to touch anything, and noted that shafts of brighter blue-white light arose from various points around the circle, converging at the place where Gabriel's body hung suspended in midair about two meters above the circle. The light seemed to cut through his body and continue on, the shafts extending outward and upward until they were lost in the shadows of the ceiling far above. Kestrel focused on his face: his eyes were closed, his expression one of repose. She could see the faint rise and fall of his chest, slower than normal but still there; his entire body was lit brightly except for the small scar on his side, which seemed to absorb the light around it. As Kestrel looked at it, the expression *glowing darkly* came unbidden into her mind; she didn't know where that had come from but now that it had been presented to her it seemed to describe what she was seeing all too effectively.

"Gabriel—" she whispered, even though she knew he couldn't hear her. There was, of course, no reaction; his body continued to float serenely as if in stasis. She knew with a sinking feeling that his mind, his essence were far away.

“Okay,” she said to herself, speaking in hushed tones as if afraid she might awaken him—or draw the attention of something else. “Time to get down to business.”

She drew the camera from her pocket and began pacing the circle.

Over five and a half hours had passed since Kestrel’s departure. Even the stoically patient ‘Wraith, who had spent most of the time in his own world, was beginning to get restless.

Joe and Ocelot had returned from their exploring trip down the side of the mountain; they had not discovered anything worthy of note, only dense forest as far as they could see in all directions. Ocelot, still unwilling to sit down and let more pent-up energy gather, had set about trying to scale the side of the mountain—he was now about ten meters up, using tiny cracks in the rock as hand- and footholds. Joe had found a deck of cards in his bag and he and Winterhawk had spent the last hour or so playing various games and teaching each other new ones. Neferet had not moved.

When Kestrel poked her head out through the illusionary wall, no one saw her right away. The first indicator that she was there was Neferet, whose eyes flew open and whose head turned quickly toward the opening. The second indicator, only a second or so later, was Kestrel herself, calling “Hey, guys. I’m back.”

Ocelot was so startled by her voice that he lost his fragile hold on the rock face and began to fall; only Winterhawk’s quick-thinking levitation spell saved him from a nasty landing. As it was, he didn’t even pay any attention to the mage in his haste to scramble up and reach Kestrel. “So? Was he in there?”

She did not comment on the lack of greeting—that wasn't important, after all. She looked first at him and then at Neferet, and nodded. "Yeah," she said softly. "He's in there."

"Has he—gone already?" Winterhawk asked.

Again she nodded. "Yeah." Her voice sounded strange, hollow in her ears.

"Come, child." Neferet's soft voice broke into the conversation before anyone else could ask a question. "Show me what you have seen." She put a gentle hand on Kestrel's shoulder—the first time the runners could remember her touching any of them—and led her off to one side of the ledge. Kestrel went numbly. Even with her boundless energy she looked tired from her long trek—her hair and the back of her shirt were damp with perspiration and her shoulders slumped some from their normal straight carriage. Ocelot watched her with concern but didn't approach her.

The runners watched from the other side of the ledge as Kestrel and Neferet conferred. Both of their expressions were grim; none of the runners could hear the conversation because it was taking place mentally. At one point Kestrel pulled out the camera from her pocket and handed it over to Neferet, who examined the images for several moments and then handed it back. She then reached gently out and put her hand on Kestrel's forehead. Kestrel stiffened for a moment, then relaxed, closing her eyes.

This went on for almost fifteen minutes. Neferet's arm did not waver as she continued the contact. Then, at last, she drew her hand back. Kestrel slumped for a moment, her head bowed, then slowly looked up again.

The remaining runners approached slowly. "So..." Winterhawk said carefully, "...what's—happened?"

"Do you know where he is?" Joe added.

Neferet rose from her seated position in a motion so fluid it seemed as though her body had flowed upward without the intermediate step of getting up. Her expression was unreadable as her gaze traveled around, meeting each pair of eyes in turn and lingering a moment as if testing them. "I do not know exactly where he is," she said softly. "I do not believe he himself knew exactly where he was going." She looked at them again. "However, I do know enough to make a decision. You are determined to do this?"

Kestrel nodded immediately. "Yes."

The others were a little slower, but eventually all of them nodded as well. Ocelot was last.

"You are determined to go," Neferet continued emotionlessly, "Even were I to tell you that he has little chance of survival regardless of your intervention?"

Kestrel gasped, stiffening. "What do you mean? He was —"

"He is alive now," Neferet affirmed, "Or at least he was when you left him, otherwise the ritual would have lost its potency. But the location to which he has gone is —" She paused, searching for the words. "I am not familiar with it," she said at last, "but from the form of the ritual, I can see that it is deeply connected with the Enemy. It appears possible that he has sent himself into their midst. If this is the case, then I fear there is little hope for his survival."

"You mean he sent himself—to where they are?" Ocelot demanded.

"Doubtless to a place where they have gained a foothold on this side of the Chasm." Neferet didn't look at him; she was still looking at Kestrel. "Doubtless too, a place that they control." She closed her eyes. "His courage is great, but this time it is likely that his youthful inexperience with such things has driven him to a

situation in which he has no hope of prevailing." Her face remained a mask; it was difficult to tell if she was trying to hide something or if she simply had no opinion on the matter.

The runners exchanged glances. "So—" Winterhawk ventured, "If we were to go after him—"

"—we'd drop ourselves right in the middle of their turf," Ocelot finished.

Neferet nodded, bowing her head. "Yes."

Kestrel let her breath out slowly and finally allowed herself to sink down against the wall.



## 34.

*His brother was here.*

*He could feel him.*

*The presence had been growing stronger for a long time. At first he did not believe it, did not allow himself to accept it, but he could not deny the fact that his mind resonated with the feeling of his brother's nearness.*

*He had come!*

*His mind spun with conflicting emotions: fear for his brother's safety, hope that perhaps this would finally be the end of his own suffering, a gratitude so strong that it filled his entire being. His brother – the brother for whom he had spent so long harboring only hatred and had only come to truly know shortly before they were torn away from each other – had come to help him. He had answered the call despite the danger to his own life, his own soul.*

*He did not touch his brother's presence right away – he had to be quiet and unobtrusive lest his captors become aware of him again and prevent his activities. They were preoccupied now, intent on some purpose of their own. It took him awhile to realize that the thing he sought was also the subject of their dark scrutiny.*

*He watched, and he waited. His heart – or whatever vestige of it remained in this sadly depleted form in which he now existed – ached at the sight of what his captors were doing, at the foul scenario they had orchestrated to try to convince his brother that he himself had turned traitor, gone over to the other side and joined the Enemy to save his own skin. Pleasure flowed through him when he saw that his brother did not accept their attempts and refused to believe he would ever do such a thing.*

*He was careful, though, to do his best to mask the pleasure. His captors did not like pleasure. They also did not like his brother's insistence on following his heart instead of the lies they were feeding him. They were not pleased.*

*He feared that their displeasure would lead to his suffering.*

*As it happened, though, things did not go as he had expected. He watched silently in growing horror as they made alterations to their plan, filling it with traps and wrong turns and pitfalls designed to snare his brother—if they could not make him believe their story in the course of unfolding the scenario, then they would resort to harsher measures.*

*He sensed their approval of such a plan. Although he did not know their exact intent, he could pick up enough from them to know that it would not be pleasant for his brother.*

*He closed his eyes, lowered his head, and forced himself to concentrate. If there was any way—small though it might be—that he could provide help to his brother, to aid him in his resolve and in fighting his captors' influence, then he had to do everything he could manage to provide it.*

*He hoped that the things were so intent on their task that they did not notice his meager efforts.*

## 35.

The steady drone of the small plane's engine provided a fitting counterpoint for the much more unsteady thoughts of the five runners as they sped back toward Los Angeles and Neferet's home.

Although none of them had discussed it, they had all taken seats about as far from each other as they could manage once they'd boarded the plane. Instinctively they all knew that it was the last chance they were going to get to think the situation over before they had to make a decision.

Kestrel sat slumped in a seat next to a window about halfway back. She leaned her head on her palm and looked out at the bright blue sky, at the wispy white clouds that flashed over the plane's wings and then were gone. Far below them, the land was a patchwork of browns and greens; they were not high enough that roads and other man-made structures could not be seen, but from here they didn't even look like tiny children's toys, but rather like interlopers in the pristine natural beauty laid out below.

She had already made her decision, of course. For her, there was no other. Regardless of what kind of hellish and insurmountable situation Gabriel had gone into in an attempt to save Stefan from the Enemy's hold, she had to try to help. Her friendship with Gabriel aside, she knew that without Stefan's sacrifice none of them would be here today to sit here and consider these options. They were, in effect, living on time that had been purchased for them by his death. It wasn't something she liked to think about, but it was true. Their battle with the minor Horrors would have come to naught if things hadn't gone as they had. And if it were true that he was *not* dead, that somehow

his fundamental essence had been diverted away from his body at the last moment to be forever tormented – there was no question in her mind. She could not live with herself knowing that she had allowed Gabriel to make the attempt alone.

That wasn't it, though—at least not all of it. She knew that too. Her mind flickered over the course of her life, pausing a moment here and there before continuing on, presenting to her a brief summary of who she was and what she had been: corp kid, college student, disillusioned young woman, competent professional, friend, teammate, lover, warrior. So easy to conjure up words to represent a life, but each of those words had too many scenes, too many memories attached to it. And then there were the things she had never been, would likely never be: wife, mother, sister, old woman. The last thought made her shiver a bit, but it was true: in her line of work, most people didn't make it to old age. It was just a fact of life. You accepted it and you moved on. Even now, when she had drifted away from the fast-paced and violent life of the shadowrunner and into the relatively more settled one of occasional fixer and world traveler, the danger was never far away.

*So what am I telling myself?* She sighed, slumping a bit more in the seat. Her body was tired from the trip through Gabriel's lair, but sleep wouldn't come even if she wanted it to. She was far too keyed up for that. *What do I want? What am I?*

Two rows behind Kestrel and on the opposite side of the plane, Winterhawk was staring out the other window. Unlike Kestrel, though, he was not paying any attention to the scenery. His eyes were open, his posture relatively alert, but his mind was far away.

Kestrel had described what she had seen of Gabriel's ritual to them on the way back to the airport. She could not and did not describe it in great detail, of course, but it would not have made any difference since Winterhawk was not familiar with even the rudiments of the sort of circle she had described. Neferet's words had chilled him: *doubtless a place that they control*. If they went ahead with this mission, the odds that they would succeed were so small as to be almost irrelevant to think about.

*And if we don't succeed, we die*, he thought with no particular feeling one way or the other. *I don't want to die, but there are worse things out there than death*. He shivered a little, mentally, as this thought returned his mind to—before. He forced himself away from the thought, or at least away from any specifics he could remember if he tried hard enough. That wasn't something he wanted to think about ever again. If he managed to fool his mind long enough, perhaps the images would fade, the nightmares would fade—

He was somewhat surprised at how well he had been holding up since Gabriel had rescued him from his own hell. It seemed almost like another world now, something that had happened to him long ago. He realized that it had to be that way: he feared very much that this particular wound was one that, if probed too vigorously, might spring back and re-infect him once more. He would have cheerfully put a bullet in his brain before he allowed that to happen again. Whatever, if anything, was lurking at the core of that situation was not something he wanted to relive.

*So what are you going to do then*, a contemptuous little voice in the back of his head asked. *Stay home? Stay safe? Let them go without you? Keep your precious head on straight while the one who saved it in the first place is in trouble?*

*Of course not*, he snapped back. These little inner dialogues with himself could get tiresome sometimes.

*Oh, really? Then why are you sitting here thinking about your own problems?*

*I'm going. I knew that all along, and so did you. What's death anyway? We all should have been dead a hundred times over.*

*Maybe it's not death*, the little voice insinuated. *You've thought about that, haven't you? That's why you're hesitating.*

'Hawk paused, stiffening a little in his seat. It was lurking there, of course, like a two-ton elephant trying to hide behind a lamp-pole—everyone knew it was there but they all pretended not to notice it. *You had to bring that up, didn't you?*

*Just trying to help.* The voice wasn't so smug now; it too was tinged with fear.

His hands tightened a bit on the arms of the seat. What if it *wasn't* just death? Gabriel had said that Stefan's essence was being held by the Horrors, and if the nightmares they had all experienced were any indicator of truth, they were doing more than holding him. They were tormenting him. If Gabriel died there would he experience the same fate?

If they died there, would *they*?

He didn't know, and he couldn't know. That was the worst part.

But even then, it didn't matter. Whatever might happen, he knew that his choice had already been made.

Joe's spot by necessity had been chosen for him, just as it had been on the previous flight. He sat leaned back in one of the two troll-sized seats at the back of the plane, his long legs stretched out before him. His legs were crossed at the ankle; he regarded his big boots as his mind went over the situation again and again.

He wished he could know Bear's thoughts on the matter—that he could go back to Ben's place so together the two of them could seek Bear's wisdom and his path for Joe to follow. He wasn't sure it would have done him any good, though, since he already knew the right answer. A talk with Bear would have given him confirmation, reinforcement of his decision, but that wasn't strictly necessary.

Bear's purview was about loyalty, about healing, about bringing order to chaos. Joe remembered the last time they had gone to the metaplanes with Gabriel, how that thing Winterhawk had called the Dweller had tried to test him by forcing him to choose between his loyalty to Bear and his loyalty to his friends. Of course no such choice could be made, because if his friends were true friends, there was no difference between the two. Joe had known that instinctively then just as he knew it now. Regardless of the apparent impossibility of the quest, it was a quest for the right reasons. Joe could no more refuse to undertake it than Gabriel could have refused to go after Stefan in the first place. If it ended in death, then so be it. At least they would have tried. Death held no fear for Joe—among his people, it was only a transition to another state. And to die in the pursuit of a noble goal was the most honorable way of all to go.

Joe's gaze traveled over his companions: 'Wraith, Winterhawk, Kestrel, Ocelot. He wondered if any of them would decide not to go. Kestrel wouldn't, of course: she would go even if none of the rest of them did, and go down fighting at Gabriel's side—if she could find him. Neferet had said she would help, so with the aid of a dragon Kestrel might make it. But the others? Joe thought he knew, but he wasn't fully certain. They had all been through a great deal. He could tell even without any sort of magical senses that none of them were over the

aftermath of the madness yet—they just hid it well because there was nothing else they could do. Joe himself was somewhat disturbed by what had happened to him, but because Bear’s protection had meant that the madness had never truly touched him, his situation was doubtless not the same as it had been for Winterhawk, ‘Wraith, and Ocelot. Would it be too much for any of them? Would they just say, “No, this is the end of the line?”

He would know—they all would know—all too soon.

Two rows up from Joe and on the other side of the plane, ShadoWraith had not moved perceptibly since the plane had taken off.

He sat straight and alert in his seat—no slumping for him—with his eyes fixed on some point in front of him. Although he could see Kestrel’s spiky blond hair barely poking up over the high back of a seat two rows in front of him, it was as if the two of them existed in different worlds for all he noticed her. ‘Wraith had a lot on his mind, and not all of it was by his own desire.

On one of the chair-arms, his hand shook slightly; he willed it to be still. *No*, he told himself sternly. *I will not give in to it. I cannot.*

The others weren’t letting it get to them, not visibly at least. Ocelot was as contentious as ever, Winterhawk his usual flippant self, and Joe—Joe was Joe. They were dealing, so he would deal. It was a conclusion that did not even require thought.

*But are they?*

He closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind, to attain the state of serenity that would allow him to stoically endure this flight and the trip back to Neferet’s home. This time, though, the serenity eluded him. The images flashed through his mind: the hotel room, the streets of



Manhattan, the shelter, the attack (*how could I have let them attack me? I am faster, I am stronger, I am more skilled –*)

He did not shift around uncomfortably in his seat, but that was only by an effort of will.

Other images, other thoughts: the people at the shelter, the kindness they showed him, the pleasure he felt when he discovered there was something he could do to truly repay them for their hospitality, the sense of belonging—he found himself, here in the middle of this grave situation that would probably result in his death and the deaths of all his friends, wondering how the shelter was doing. He had missed the presentation he was slated to have given the day Gabriel and Joe had found him.

*Why does that matter to me? I am not Jonathan Andrews. He is dead. I am ShadoVraith.*

He closed his eyes again and once more patiently attempted to reach the state of calm that would drive all of this away for a few hours.

Ocelot was having a hard time sitting still.

The only reason that he was managing this well was because of his position: by virtue of the fact that he had been the last one to board the plane except for Joe, the only open seat that wasn't too close to anyone else was directly across the aisle from Neferet. As much as Ocelot wanted to get up, to pace, to do *anything* to work off his restless energy, he did not think that doing so in front of a dragon who didn't particularly approve of them in the first place would be his best idea of the day.

So instead he sat, like Kestrel staring out the window at the blue sky and the clouds and the land far below. Ocelot didn't like planes much; he never had. For one thing, they were too confining. Having grown up on the streets with the city as his backyard, being stuck inside a

metal tube where he couldn't get out (at least cars had doors that, unless something was very wrong, opened to allow for a quick exit if need be) always made him a little twitchy. Add to that the fact that most airline personnel took a dim view of the kinds of things he routinely included in his carry-on bags and the end result was that given a choice, Ocelot would stay on the ground where he was in control of the situation.

That wasn't really what he was thinking about at the moment, though. The tension on this trip wasn't caused by the plane itself, the lack of weapons at his disposal, or even the sense of confinement.

He was tense because he knew what he had to do and he didn't like it.

Ocelot was not a particularly altruistic individual, but he was a realist. Whether or not they owed it to Gabriel to make the attempt to go after him on the metaplanes was not very relevant to him: in his mind, Gabriel had brought a lot of his problems on himself, and the team had more than done their bit to help him out. The first time they'd been dragged into the middle of something they had no wish to be part of. The second time the fate of a lot more than two dragons had been at stake. Sure, Gabriel had saved them from the madness, but indirectly he—or more specifically, Stefan—had been responsible for it in the first place.

But none of that was relevant either. What mattered was that Ocelot didn't believe Gabriel when he said that the Enemy wouldn't bother them anymore. The young dragon had no way to know that. Ocelot had dealt with the Horrors enough times to know that they rarely did what was expected and they *never* did what they promised. So unless someone defeated this particular threat, all of them would have to look over their shoulders for the rest of their lives—and possibly beyond that. This

in itself was enough to cement the decision for Ocelot, and that was why he was restless.

He turned slightly, silently, and looked back at Kestrel. She wasn't looking at him; her head was turned away. He sighed, his gaze lingering on her hair, on the slump of her shoulders, the weariness in her posture.

Horrors aside, he wasn't going to let her go on this trip alone.

Settling back, he jammed his hands into his pockets, bowed his head, and did his best to get some sleep before the plane landed. He didn't think he'd have the chance again in a long time.

The trip back to Neferet's home, like the trip to the airport, was not made in secret. Apparently Neferet had decided to trust them with the location of her home, but the ironic thing was that the runners no longer cared to notice it. Not that it would have mattered anyway: the house was hidden behind illusions every bit as powerful as the ones concealing Gabriel's lair, so even if they had been able to reach the location on their own, getting in would have been another story entirely.

They took the limo back, with Uneki once again driving, and convened around the table in the dining room. Neferet had said nothing on the trip back; she spoke for the first time after settling herself into her seat at the head of the table. She regarded them with an expression that was at the same time imperious and understanding. "Have you made your decisions?"

The runners nodded, some more slowly than others.

"And?"

"I'm going," Kestrel said firmly.

"As am I," Winterhawk said.

"Me too," Joe added, nodding.

There was a brief pause, and then 'Wraith simply nodded.

Another pause, this one a little longer than the last. All eyes were on Ocelot. He sighed. "Yeah, count me in," he said at last.

"How long will the ritual take?" Kestrel asked. She was mindful of how long Gabriel had already been gone, and another long ritual would only stretch out the time even more. "Will you be able to lead us to the place when we get there?"

Neferet turned her calm golden eyes on Kestrel. "I fear you have a misconception, child. I am not accompanying you."

## 36.

Gabriel awoke in darkness.

Awareness fought for supremacy over the countless dull pains that had settled into various parts of his body as his mind struggled to ascertain where he was, what he was doing, why he was here.

*I'm not dead –*

*– but what does dead mean here?*

He was upright, in a seated position. His arms had been twisted around behind him, his wrists bound tightly with what felt like rough rope. He tried to stretch out his legs and discovered that they too were bound, this time to the legs of the stout chair in which he sat. Painfully he lifted his head, which had been bowed forward; his neck muscles protested this treatment with great vehemence, aching sharply from the base of his skull to the area between his shoulderblades. The pain lessened slightly when he got his head upright but did not disappear.

The left side of his head hurt more than the rest of him. He wasn't sure because he couldn't touch it, but the skin there felt slightly stiff, as if blood had dried there. He remembered someone striking him –

– It came back to him in a rush and he closed his eyes. Pearson was dead. The meet at the warehouse had been a setup, and his partner was dead. He himself had been struck by one of them – one who had been following him as he stumbled through the darkness, probably grinning at him all the way, letting him believe that he might have a hope of escape. The image of the grinning face was burned into his mind.

*I have to get out of here.* He opened his eyes again, trying to ignore the pain long enough to get his bearings. Unlike the warehouse, this room was not fully dark: a thin sliver of dim light shined in from what was probably a

closed door on the other side of the room. As he remained still and waited for his eyes to adapt, he could pick out the locations of the walls directly in front of him and to both sides. There did not appear to be anything else in the room except his chair and the door—no furniture, no other people, no other doors—although he could not be sure because he couldn't twist his head around far enough to see the wall directly behind him. As nearly as he could determine, he was tied to a chair in the center of an empty room about four by four meters in dimension. He wondered how long he had been here, and how long he would remain before anyone came to check on him.

As his eyes became a bit more accustomed to the minimal light, he looked down at himself. They had removed his overcoat, jacket, and tie; he could feel but not see that his shoes were gone as well. He could also feel that they had shoved up his shirt cuffs so they could tie him directly around his wrists; the area chafed painfully where the ropes bit into his skin. Under his feet the floor felt like hard concrete; it sent a chill up through his thin socks, but the way in which he was tied did not permit him to lift his feet.

Gabriel took a deep breath and considered his options. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his shoulders he tried to move his hands, twisting his wrists back and forth to try to find a place where he could loosen the ropes enough to allow him to slip free. After several minutes of trying he had not found such a place, and had only succeeded in digging the ropes more deeply into his wrists. He could feel a warm dampness on the ropes and wasn't sure if it was sweat or blood; his wrists were so numb from the ropes that they barely even hurt anymore.

Abandoning that effort for the moment, he tried to do the same thing with his feet. This was more difficult and he realized much sooner that he wasn't going to be able to

get free in this way. Each of his legs was bound tightly at the ankle to one thick chair-leg; he couldn't even move them, let alone try to wriggle free of the bonds. Whoever had done this had done a very good job of it.

He glanced at the door again: there was no sign (other than the light) that anyone else was here. No footsteps, no voices, no traffic sounds. He wondered briefly if they had just left him here to die, but that didn't make sense. If they had wanted him dead, they had certainly had the chance to kill him while he was unconscious. *Perhaps they're holding me like Stefan, trying to use me to gain some advantage against the organization.* It made sense—and if that was what they were doing, he knew he *had* to get out of here. He didn't want to think about others being killed because of him. Pearson was bad enough.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to shift his weight back and forth, testing the chair to see how sturdy it was.

It didn't budge.

He increased his efforts, again forcing himself to ignore the pain that shot through him as he threw his body back and forth trying to dislodge the chair.

Nothing happened. Evidently the chair was attached to the floor in some way—from his vantage point he couldn't see how. It didn't really matter anyway: the chair wasn't moving, which meant trying to tip it over and break it was probably a futile effort.

He sighed, frustrated at his human body's inability to cope with this situation. Had he had access to his dragon abilities—even in human form—he could have made short work of chair, ropes, and probably captors. *Don't do that*, he told himself sharply. *You're here, this is the way it is, and you have to deal with it that way. Wishing for something you don't have isn't going to help you or Stefan or anyone else.*

Settling back to his former position, he let his breath out slowly and, using the new information he had

obtained from his experiments, attempted to re-assess the situation. If he couldn't get out of the chair on his own, then he would have to wait until someone showed up. He had no doubt that someone would—to gloat over his capture if nothing else. It was just a matter of time, and his transformation into a mundane human had done nothing to his patience. He could wait.

He didn't have to wait long. He had just allowed himself to relax as much as possible, to doze a bit to conserve energy, when the door swung open. A figure appeared in the doorway and suddenly the room was bathed in light.

Gabriel tried to flinch back, clamping his eyes shut against the brightness.

The shadowy figure laughed. "Good to see you awake. I was beginning to wonder." The voice was deep, cold, full of contempt.

Gabriel slowly opened his eyes. The light hurt, but that wasn't as important as seeing his captor. He raised his head.

He didn't recognize the man standing before him—tall, muscular, oily, dressed in an almost stereotypical gangster-style suit of gray pinstripes with black shirt and white tie—but he did recognize the eyes. They were dark and deep, pits leading down into something unwholesome. Right now they looked pleased, which made their appearance all the more disquieting. Gabriel said nothing; he merely glared up at the man, waiting. Above him, as he had expected, a bare light bulb hung at the end of a long cord suspended from the ceiling.

Two more figures slipped in through the open door, closing it behind them and taking up positions on either side of it. One was an ork, the other a large human; both of them were big and beefy and dressed similarly to the first man, although not as stylishly. Their hard flinty eyes



stared straight ahead, but Gabriel could see the smiles quirking the corners of their mouths: they were waiting for a show.

"Well," the first man said, chuckling. "Welcome to my humble abode, young Gabriel. We're so pleased you decided to join us. I do hope you're comfortable."

Again Gabriel remained silent; he didn't intend to give the man the satisfaction of a reply. Instead he fixed his gaze on the man's eyes and continued to wait.

"Ah...a quiet one." The man seemed amused by this. "That's all right—you'll have plenty to say soon enough, I'm sure." He reached down and took hold of Gabriel's chin, tilting his head upward. "You *do* know who I am, don't you?" When he didn't get an answer, he went on as if he had: "Well, let's just be polite, then—never let it be said that I'm not polite. My name is Vincent Salazaro—I'm with the Salazaros. You might have heard of us." When Gabriel still didn't answer, Salazaro squeezed his chin tightly between two fingers and then yanked his hand away.

"All right," he said, his voice more brusque this time. "You don't want to be polite, that's fine with me. It doesn't matter much anyway. The bottom line is, we've got you and you're gonna be giving us what we want. Understand?"

Gabriel continued to watch him silently.

Without warning Salazaro lashed out, backhanding Gabriel across the face. "You will answer when you are spoken to, boy! Do you understand?"

The two goons by the door smiled and leaned forward slightly.

Gabriel paused a moment, testing his jaw, and then nodded. "I understand." His voice was soft and even, without fear.

Salazaro nodded, satisfied. "That's better." He inspected his hand for a moment, wiped it on his pants-leg, and regarded Gabriel again. "You know," he said conversationally, "I didn't think we'd get you so easily. The setup worked like a charm, and you two took the bait like prize catches."

Gabriel remembered the scene at the hijacking: the gunfire, the blood, the cries of pain. "You had your own men killed to get us?"

"To get *you*, my boy," Salazaro said, smiling. "That kid, your new partner—he was nothing to us. You should have seen the look on your face when we blew his brains out, though—that was priceless. Such loyalty to someone you'd only known for a day or two. I can see why they value you around there. Too bad you couldn't save him, yes? But then, you do have a bad track record with partners, don't you? It's a wonder anyone wants to work with you anymore."

Gabriel clenched his back teeth together to keep from saying anything. The vision of Pearson's face exploding in a spray of blood haunted him. The rookie agent hadn't even had time to scream — *but he tried to warn me*.

Salazaro caught the flash in Gabriel's eyes. He smiled. "Feeling guilty, are you? Don't worry about it. These things happen. You have to look after yourself, you know. It's the way life works. Nobody's blamin' you for it." He paused a moment, then moved forward a bit, looming over Gabriel. "Okay, now it's time for business. You can make this easy, or you can make it hard. It's up to you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Gabriel's voice betrayed no emotion.

"I think you do." Salazaro glanced at the two goons, then back at Gabriel. "Let's start with the rest of your little band. Who's the leader of your group?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said again, with exactly the same inflection as before.

Salazaro backhanded him again, harder this time, snapping his head to the side. He tasted blood where the blow ground his teeth into the side of his cheek. "Don't play stupid, boy! I don't have the patience for it. Like I said, easy or hard. You tell us what we want to know, we can work a deal. You don't tell us—" He let that trail off ominously. "Now—I'll ask you again: who's your boss?"

Gabriel's mind returned to something from one of the old flatscreen spy movies he'd watched with Kestrel once. Name, rank, and serial number. That was all you were supposed to give out in situations like this. But he didn't have a rank or a serial number, and they already knew his name. "Sorry. I don't know."

This time the hand caught him by the hair, yanking his head up painfully. The black roiling eyes met his. "Listen, *boy*," Salazaro hissed. "We *will* get this information. That's a certainty. The only thing uncertain here is what condition you'll be in when we're finished with you. Don't be stupid. They're not worth it. Your life is worth more than your loyalty to some do-gooder organization. Who. Do. You. Work. For?"

Gabriel glared at him. "Give up, Salazaro. I'm not going to tell you anything."

Salazaro's featured darkened, but he got himself under control quickly and smiled his unctuous smile. "Oh, I think you will. As I said, it's just a matter of time. Gus, Carl—please assist me."

The two goons moved forward, their postures radiating anticipation.

Salazaro took a step backward, indicating Gabriel. "Nothing permanent—at least not at first. I'll ask the

questions. If he doesn't give the right answer, you know what to do."

The ork cracked his knuckles.

The human grinned.

They took up positions on either side of Gabriel's chair.

Salazaro smiled. "Who do you work for, Gabriel?"

"I don't know."

Carl's fist caught him across the jaw. He stiffened, fighting not to cry out in pain. The blow wasn't hard enough to break anything. He tasted more blood.

"Where was your last meeting place?"

"I—don't—know."

This time it was Gus' fist, slamming into his abdomen. He gasped, trying to double over, but his bonds prevented that. Struggling against a wave of nausea, he glared up at Salazaro, his breath coming short and sharp.

"What are the names of the others in your organization?"

"I don't know." This time, he thought with a sense of irony, he *didn't* know. That, of course, wouldn't make any difference to any of these people.

Carl this time, smacking him in the nose. He felt the blood running down his face, tasted it on his lips. Drops of it spattered the front of his white shirt. He swallowed hard, forcing himself to be calm. He remembered when they had been on the metaplanes last, when the Enemy had tortured him before he had volunteered to take Stefan's place at the sacrifice. He had endured that by thinking about his friends, about Kestrel, about what they were fighting for. He was alarmed to find that it was not as easy this time, and it had not been easy before. *Is it this human body? Is it because I am without magic?*

*—or is it because I am not as strong as I was then? That my dedication is not as strong?*

He bowed his head, gathering his strength and his courage. There was no other option. He would not give in. Doing so would not save Stefan. He would wait, biding his time. As long as he was alive, there was a chance.

The questioning continued. As Salazaro continued to grill him and the two thugs continued their brutal punishment for the wrong answers, his consciousness began to drift. He thought he heard himself scream at several points, but it could have been only in his mind. He wasn't sure anymore. The questions floated across his vision, the words spoken as if through water, their meanings only half-understood. He viewed the world through a thin red haze and wondered what death would feel like. The scar on his side ached. He did not answer the questions.

Finally, after what seemed like a very long time, Salazaro waved the two goons away and yanked Gabriel's head upward again. There was something shiny in his other hand. Gabriel forced himself to focus, though it was not easy through the haze and the confusion and the pain. The object was long, silver, shining. A knife.

Salazaro smiled when he saw recognition and fear in Gabriel's eyes. "Ah. I should have done this awhile ago. We might have gotten better results." He held the knife up so Gabriel could get a good look at it. Idly, he used it to pick something from beneath one of his fingernails, then leaned forward and deftly sliced off the top button on Gabriel's shirt. "Nice and sharp."

Then, suddenly, the knife was at Gabriel's throat. "Now..." Salazaro hissed, "Let's start again. Who do you work for?"

A little of the driftiness dropped away at the presence of this new and very immediate threat. Gabriel tried to draw back a bit, slowly, but was halted by Salazaro, whose other hand still clutched his hair and held his head

up. The knife moved in closer until it was touching his neck. It did not bite yet, but he could feel it there—he dared not even swallow, it was so close.

“One last chance, boy,” Salazaro told him. “Tell me. Who do you work for?”

*Would it be so hard to tell him? a little voice said in his head. None of this is real. This is the Netherworlds. You wouldn't be betraying anyone—all this has been created from your mind by the Enemy. Pearson, Wallace, Hector, all of them—created by the Enemy and the Netherworlds. Your friends aren't here. You can't help Stefan by refusing to answer. So easy, and then they might stop—they might leave you alone—*

“Forget it,” he whispered through gritted teeth.

The black oily eyes lit with rage, and a low growl escaped from the back of Salazaro's throat.

Gabriel closed his eyes and waited for the knife to slice him.

The moment dragged out.

Salazaro bit out an obscenity and yanked Gabriel's head sharply forward as he let go of his hair. The knife's bite did not come.

Gabriel opened his eyes. Salazaro was crossing the room away from him, his posture tight, tense, furious. He stopped at the doorway and wheeled back around, glaring at Gabriel. “We will see, boy,” he snarled. “I'll leave you here to think about things for awhile. You will change your mind. I guarantee it.”

And then he was gone, sweeping out the door with Gus and Carl in tow, the door slamming so hard behind him that the sound itself was painful and the room's walls seemed to rattle.

Gabriel watched the door for a moment, then allowed himself to relax the tension in his muscles. His mind was an odd mix of sluggishness and racing activity; he had the maddening feeling that there was *something* he should

have noticed in that encounter, but between the pain and the weariness that was already beginning to settle over him, he could not think of what it was.

*I'll just rest for awhile...must be prepared when they return...must be –*

His head slumped forward as consciousness departed.

When he awoke, he was being slapped.

He struggled to awareness, forcing his eyes open. Someone had hold of his hair again.

His first sight was the broad, piggyish face of Carl grinning at him. The thug delivered one more slap for good measure, then announced, "He's awake, Boss."

"Good, good." Salazaro moved into his field of view. "How are you feeling, Gabriel? Did you have a nice sleep?"

Gabriel didn't reply. He was having a hard time holding his head up after Carl let loose of his hair; the soreness in his neck muscles from before had compounded itself significantly following his last bout of unconsciousness. His shoulders felt like someone was driving metal spikes into them. He tried to shift position but again the bonds prevented it.

Salazaro cocked his head. "You don't look too well. How unfortunate that we have to resume our business now when you're not feeling fresh, but you know how these things go."

There was another chair in the room now. Salazaro placed it in front of Gabriel with the back facing him, then straddled it and leaned on his arms to watch his prisoner. "You'll be pleased to know, though, that while you were sleeping I've changed my mind about what I want. At least for now. I've decided that you don't need to tell us anything about your organization and who you work for. Sure, that information would be quite useful to us, but we

can wait for it. We'll get it eventually." He smiled; it was almost a pleasant smile except for his eyes. "No, I've decided that instead, you're going to join us. Switch sides. Work for us. Just like your brother did."

Gabriel's head snapped up despite the pain. His gaze was intense and fixed on Salazaro.

Salazaro chuckled. "I thought that might get a rise out of you. But it's true. I know that you, loyal little brother that you are, never gave up on finding out what had happened to him. Even when the rest of your pathetic organization was trying to get it through your head that he'd turned, gone over the wall, thrown his lot in with the other side—you still continued to believe he was either dead or being held prisoner against his will somewhere. Touching, but naive." He leaned in closer. "You see, boy, not everybody is as pure and good and...well...*stupid* as you are. Most people, when they see that they've only got one option to save their hides, they take that option. They don't sit here and let themselves get beaten up and eventually killed." He tilted Gabriel's chin up. "You don't want your precious agency to find your body in a trash bin somewhere, do you? What kind of an end is that for someone with your intelligence and...gifts?"

"You're lying..." Gabriel whispered. His throat felt raw, parched from thirst and screaming.

Salazaro grinned, sensing that he had struck a nerve. "You'd like to believe that, wouldn't you? You'd just love to believe that your big brother, the man you've looked up to all your life, was as much above temptation as you're trying to be. That he stood up to us, refusing to tell us anything, refusing to work for us to save his life—just like you're doing. You've been out there trying to save him, when in reality he never *wanted* to be saved. A man with his smarts is a valuable asset to our organization, if properly... rewarded for his loyalty. You could have the



same deal, Gabriel. All you have to do is say so, and you'll have money, power, women falling at your feet – you'll be part of the strong ones, instead of one of those pathetic do-gooders who think that their pitiful little agency is going to have any real effect on our activities." He leaned a little farther forward. "Come on, Gabriel – doesn't it chafe sometimes, someone like you forced to scurry around in the shadows like a puppy trying to attack a bull, instead of being out in the limelight where you belong? You could be quite a success, I just know it. All you have to do is say yes."

Gabriel watched him in a detached sort of way, hearing his words but not really internalizing them. Instead, he concentrated on the pain in every part of his body, focusing first on his feet and then working his way upward. He remembered what he had told himself before, when the Enemy had tortured him last time: that pain was the way to know you were still alive. He embraced the pain, using it as a defense against Salazaro's words.

Salazaro apparently sensed that his message wasn't getting through. He stood up, sighing. "All right, Gabriel. I can see you're going to be a hard nut to crack indeed. I knew it was going to take time, and that's fine. I can wait. But I think I've got something that will help you change your mind a little faster, so we can all give up this sad little charade and get on with business." He snapped his fingers behind him, toward the closed door.

The door opened. Carl stood behind it. He stepped aside as if to allow someone else to enter.

Gabriel gasped, his eyes widening in disbelief.

Stefan strode through the door and stood regarding his brother. He smiled. "Hello, Gabriel."

"I'll leave you two alone," Salazaro said, backing out through the door. He too was smiling as he closed it behind him.

Gabriel stared. "Stefan?" he whispered.

Stefan's smile grew a little wider. "Surprised to see me, brother?" He looked good—tall and powerful in a custom-tailored pinstriped suit and silk tie; a large diamond ring on his right hand caught the light from the bulb high above. He looked his brother up and down. "I wish I could say you're looking well, but unfortunately—you aren't."

Gabriel took a deep breath, considering his words carefully before he spoke. "Stefan...you..."

"I'm alive?" Stefan put a foot up on the chair that Salazaro had vacated, leaning forward so his elbows rested on his elevated knee. "Good of you to notice." There was something not right about his eyes—it was the look of the old Stefan, hooded and reptilian.

"How—?" Gabriel's mind was still reeling from this new development; he could not get his thoughts to line up properly. All he could do was stare up at Stefan in disbelief.

"How is it that I am alive, you mean?"

Gabriel nodded.

Stefan smiled. "Simple, brother. I am a realist. As I am sure you know, I've always found your gold-plated idealism to be a bit...tiresome. I went along with it when it suited my purposes, but when it no longer did—I chose the course that offered the most advantage."

Gabriel shook his head. "No..." he whispered. "Stefan... the Stefan I knew...would never join the Enemy."

"The Enemy?" Stefan chuckled; it was an unpleasant sound. "A very high-blown name for the organization, I would say. They are simply a means to an end, brother. When they captured me, they gave me the choice between death—a rather slow and painful death—and...changing my allegiances. I was reluctant at first—apparently more

of your idealism had rubbed off on me than I had thought—but I must say that it was one of the best decisions I have ever made. I have more of everything I have ever wanted here than I ever did in the agency.” He leaned forward again. “That is why I am here, brother. To offer you the same choice. You don’t realize how constrained you are, always following rules and upholding the law and rescuing innocent cats from trees. I’m offering you *freedom*, Gabriel. Freedom, money, power—they can be yours if you join us. We can be a team again.” He dropped his voice down to a conspiratorial near-whisper. “Between us, we can run this organization within a year. I am sure of it.”

Gabriel stared at him for a moment longer, then dropped his gaze. He could feel his body trembling, his strength deserting him. The myriad aches and pains from the beatings seemed to intensify as his mind tried to process what was happening. *No...Stefan wouldn't do this. He called for help...He begged me to help him, to release him –*

A sudden thought hit him, the force of it strong enough to cause him to stiffen visibly: *Could it all have been a trick? Could it be possible that he did choose to ally himself with the Enemy to save himself? Could he have set this up for no other reason than to lure me here?*

He shook his head violently back and forth, barely aware that he was doing it. *No! It can't be! I touched his mind – I saw his desperation, and his transformation. He –*

*– but he is not as strong as you are. He was already tainted by the Enemy. Perhaps they retained some form of hold over him, something he could not fight –*

“No!” he cried aloud, surprised at the intensity of his voice.

Stefan regarded him like a scientist watching a prize bug. He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his chest. “No?”

"This — isn't — real," Gabriel whispered between short sharp breaths. "None of this — is real."

"Ah, but it is, brother." Stefan smiled. "It doesn't get any more real than this." His expression changed, became darker, colder. "Now listen to me: you have two choices. You can join us and renounce your allegiance to the agency, or you can die." He stood up and began pacing around the room; Gabriel tensed when he got behind him, but he only continued on and reappeared on the other side. "I don't want to see you die, brother. It would be a shame and a waste. But it isn't my choice. I am trying to help you to understand the situation. Salazaro can be rather...crude sometimes. He asked me to talk with you because he thought I might be able to make an impression." He spread his arms wide. "See? I am well — better than I have ever been before, in fact. No more cowering in the shadows in fear because of inferior numbers. The Salazaros are the top organization in the city. What they want, they get. You can have this too, Gabriel. Join us." His eyes took on the look of an entreaty.

Gabriel looked into his eyes. They were his brother's eyes: dark and hard and glittering with intelligence and cunning — and yet, somehow, they were not. There was something...*odd* about them. *It is the Enemy...they have taken over his mind. It was all a trap —*

When he spoke, his voice was calm. "No, Stefan. I won't join you. I won't give up. If you intend to kill me, then you'll have to do it, because I don't accept your options."

A low growl rose in Stefan's throat. His hands lashed out and gripped both sides of Gabriel's shirt at the neck, trying to pull him up out of the chair. "*You...pitiful little whelp!*" he hissed through his teeth. "*How dare you? I give you the chance to save your worthless hide, and you mock me!*" He shook Gabriel back and forth in the chair, digging his

fingers into the younger man's shoulders as the thin fabric of his shirt tore.

Gabriel winced as blood welled up from the wounds, but he did not waver. If Stefan was going to kill him now for his efforts, then there was nothing he could do about it except to accept death with courage and honor.

But Stefan did not kill him. After a few seconds his rage seemed to dissipate and he let go, drawing back with a contemptuous sneer on his face. "You weren't worth the effort. I tried to help you, but you're too good for that. You always thought you were too good for me." He smiled thinly. "Well, you can see where that has gotten you. I am free and powerful, and you are a prisoner, at the mercy of the strong." He took a step back. "I'll try to see to it that they kill you quickly—but I would not count on it. Salazaro will not be pleased to find out that I wasn't able to make you see your error. Farewell, brother." Without another word he turned on his heel and stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

Gabriel bowed his head. "Stefan..." he whispered, watching the little runnels of blood flower out on the white fabric of his shredded shirt. Had he made a mistake? Had he been a fool?

He felt his eyes grow hot and was surprised when two meandering lines of moisture crawled slowly down his cheeks. He closed his eyes. *Dragons don't weep...but I am not a dragon now.* The thought no longer elicited any feeling.

He hoped that if they were going to kill him, they would do it quickly. If he had failed, a quick end would be the best for all concerned. *I am sorry, Juliana. I hope one day you will forgive me for not saying goodbye.*

## 37.

Five pairs of astonished eyes met Neferet's across the table. Winterhawk, as usual, found his voice first. "You're not—"

"—going with us?" Kestrel finished, her voice hushed as if she were afraid of voicing the thought. "But—" She let it trail off, bowing her head. "I'm sorry. You said you would help us, and you *have* helped us. You're right. We must have a misconception." She didn't try to disguise the weary disappointment in her voice; she knew that it wouldn't have made any difference to the dragon whether she tried or not.

"So, then," Winterhawk said carefully, "You can send us over without going yourself?"

Neferet nodded. She looked quite regal, sitting there at the head of the table. "I can, but that is not what I will do." She paused a moment, looking at each of them, and then indicated Uneke. "Uneke will use his power to transport you to the Netherworld, to the location I discovered from analyzing the remains of Gabriel's ritual. Once there, he will wait for you as you attempt to locate Gabriel. Then, if you need assistance in returning to this plane, you can find your way back to him and he will bring you home."

The five runners realized immediately what Neferet was not saying: *If you need assistance in returning to this plane* was clearly Neferet's diplomatic way of saying *If you can't find Gabriel, or if he's in no condition to bring you back himself*.

"So—Uneke's gonna do the ritual?" Ocelot asked. If the spirit had enough mojo to send four mundanes and a mage to the metaplanes, he decided, he'd better stop thinking of him as a mere servant.

"He's a free spirit," Winterhawk answered, cocking his head toward Neferet for confirmation. "Some of them have the ability to create astral gates."

Neferet nodded. "I cannot accompany you – you will likely not understand my reasons, but Gabriel would. But if there is any hope of returning him safely home, I will do what I can to see that it is done."

No one bothered to ask Neferet's reasons – they didn't think she would tell them anyway, and they were irrelevant since she had already given them her decision. "When do we leave?" Joe asked.

"How long does it take?" Kestrel added. "Is it long, like the ritual?"

"And can we take anything with us?" Ocelot asked.

"It would be best if you left as soon as you are ready," Neferet told them. "Time is of the essence. The process is akin to your form of astral projection," she continued, looking at Winterhawk, "so the time involved is minimal. Unfortunately you will not be permitted to take anything with you, aside from any magical weapons or items you might possess – but as I am sure you are aware from your previous excursions, your greatest weapons will be your strength of character, your willpower, your purity of heart, and your desire to succeed in your endeavor." She paused, her expression level and grave. "Because the area you seek is controlled by the Enemy it will be more dangerous for you than ever – but remember that even controlled by the Enemy it is still the Netherworlds – the metaplanes as you call them – and not the Enemy's own domain. Do not allow them to trick you into believing that they have more power over you than they do. It is then that you will be at their mercy."

The runners nodded soberly. "There's something I don't understand," Winterhawk said after a moment. "Is

it not normally the case that free spirits have the power of astral gateway only to their own home metaplanes?"

Neferet nodded, with a fond glance toward Uneke. "Yes, young one, that is true. But Uneke is—somewhat unlike a typical free spirit. He is very old and has been voluntarily in my service since a time that is no longer recorded in this age. Over that time I have taught him many things to which most spirits are not given access."

Uneke inclined his head, smiling just a bit. "The Lady has been generous to me indeed," he intoned. Rising fluidly from his chair at the other end of the table, he nodded to the runners. "Come. If you are ready, let us begin."

The runners got up and prepared to follow the spirit. Kestrel hung back for a moment, pausing before Neferet. "I want to thank you for everything," she said softly. "I know how you feel about us—about our kind, I mean—but you're still helping us. I want you to know how much I appreciate it."

Neferet's calm gaze met Kestrel's. "Thank you, child. I know you are aware that I am doing this because of my affection for Gabriel, but I would be blind not to see the depth of your feeling for him. I hope that it will be enough to allow you to do what you must."

"If there's a way to do it, we'll find it." She sounded more confident than she felt, but hoped she was right.

"I do not doubt that you will do your best," Neferet said. "Go, now—join your friends. Uneke will not require long in preparation."

Kestrel nodded. She paused a moment as if considering whether to say something else, then turned and departed the dining room.

Neferet watched her go. "I hope you are successful, child," she murmured softly to herself. "I think that the two of you will need each other in the time to come."



The room to which Uneke led them was large, windowless, and lit by candles set in sconces along the walls. The floor was covered by thick rugs; Uneke directed them to remove their shoes before entering.

Inside, the floor was partially covered by five futon-like pallets radiating out in a star-shaped pattern from the center of the room with enough space in the center for someone to stand comfortably. "Please," Uneke told them, his deep voice echoing around the chamber, "lie down and arrange yourselves into comfortable positions. You will be remaining in these positions for many hours, so be aware of this. When you are comfortable, lie quietly and attempt to relax until we are ready to begin."

The runners exchanged glances and then did as requested, each one settling down on one of the futons with their heads pointing toward the center of the circle. Winterhawk, used to this same sort of behavior in anticipation of long astral and metaplanar jaunts, immediately closed his eyes and began relaxation exercises; he had retrieved his black-bladed magesword from his room and now held it next to him on his pallet. Joe, opposite him, also began relaxation techniques, hampered only slightly by the unavailability of peyote, his usual aid to attaining a state of contemplation. 'Wraith seemed to be having more trouble than usual dropping into his meditative state, while Ocelot and Kestrel, both keyed up and not used to relaxing, had to content themselves with lying down next to each other and doing the best they could to work the tension from their muscles.

When Uneke spoke again, his voice came from the center of the star. "Relax..." he urged them. "There is

nothing to fear from me—I will see you safely to your destination and home again.”

*Yeah, but what about the stuff in between?* Ocelot wondered, though he didn’t speak this thought aloud.

The spirit began chanting something in a language none of them had ever heard before. His voice was deep and soothing, the words of the chant seeming to wind around them, to bear them upward until they could no longer feel their bodies on the pallets. Ocelot risked a glance and discovered that they were still in the same positions as before, but there was a disassociated feeling that almost made him think he was watching his body from somewhere above it. *Wonder if this is what ‘Hawk does when he goes astral...* he thought, closing his eyes to let the words take control of him once more.

The chant grew slightly louder, smoother, more hypnotic; the words began to run together into a seamless whole. Each of the travelers felt a brief tugging sensation as if they were being pulled in two different directions—it was at the same time disquieting and comforting, like birth and death simultaneously, but it only went on for a few seconds before all felt normal once again.

“It is done,” Uneki said softly.

The runners opened their eyes and immediately leaped to their feet, looking around in momentary disorientation. “What—?” Ocelot started, but he didn’t finish.

They were standing on a reddened, rocky plain. A slight hot breeze blew by them, whipping up little puffs of dust around the jutting rocks that reached up out of the ground like the teeth of some hungry beast lurking just below the surface. The sky was pinkish, cloudy, with a dull red sun far overhead. The place looked too familiar.

“This is—” Winterhawk began.

"Where we were before," Ocelot finished for him. "Where the fight was."

"Not quite," Wraith said, looking around.

Kestrel shook her head. Far off to their left they could see the dark maw of the Chasm; to the right was a range of sharp reddish peaks. "He's right. It feels kind of the same, but it's not the same place. Unless they're messing with our heads again."

"Hell, *that* never happens," Ocelot muttered.

Uneki stood watching them, his arms crossed over his chest, his silk robes fluttering in the light wind. His expression was impassive. "The place you seek is there," he said, nodding toward the peaks. "I do not know what you will find there, only that it presents great danger. Mark this place well, for I will remain until you return. I cannot aid you in any other way, but if you have need to return home, you have only to find your way back to me." He paused a moment, his deep, ageless brown eyes meeting each of their gazes in turn. He ended with Kestrel. "I, and the Lady, wish you good fortune and safe passage."

Kestrel nodded, holding the spirit's eyes a second or two longer than the others. "Thank you. I hope that we won't need you to bring us back, but — thank you."

Uneki gave her a slight smile, but said no more. He levitated himself a few centimeters off the ground and drew his legs up under his robe, floating there in a seated position. Closing his eyes, he seemed to no longer notice them.

The five runners moved off a short distance, casting glances back toward the floating form. "I don't like this," Ocelot said, looking around.

"Alternatives?" Wraith asked.

Ocelot blew air between clenched teeth. "You know as well as I do there aren't any."

"Let's get going, then," Winterhawk said. "If we've no choice in the matter, there's no point in waiting."

"Moo," Wraith said, and started walking. The others joined him immediately without further comment.

The landscape was forbidding, joyless, without even the scraggly form of a plant to mar its dusty, rock-strewn conformity. As they walked the wind nipped at their clothes, parched their throats, stung their noses and the tender flesh around their eyes. There was no sign of any living thing other than themselves; it was not long after they started that they lost sight of Uneke behind them. Oddly they could still see the Chasm, but their spirit companion's hovering form was no longer visible.

After walking for more than half an hour, they seemed to be no closer to the sharp peaks ahead. They had walked in silence, keeping their heads down and their mouths closed to keep out the worst of the swirling grit. Ocelot was the first to break the silence. "What if he's not here at all? What if we're in the wrong place? How long are we gonna go on before we start wondering about that?"

"We're not in the wrong place," Kestrel said quickly. "Neferet sounded like she knew where we were going—at least pretty close. We have to keep going." She ran a hand back through her hair, which was taking on a slight reddish tinge from all the dust that had lodged there.

"He's got a point," Joe put in. "I'm all for keeping going, but those mountains aren't getting any closer. She said the Horrors controlled this area—maybe they're playing some kind of game with us."

Kestrel stopped, her eyes flashing. "What do we do, then?" she demanded. "Uneke said it was this way. You want to go back? Start over? What if we don't find anything then, either?"

"Calm down," Ocelot said, moving closer to her. "That's not what I—"

Winterhawk had remained quiet through this conversation, not because he had nothing to offer, but because something had been nagging at the back of his mind since they had arrived. Something was wrong—or at least odd—and he couldn't put his finger on what it was. As Kestrel resumed her pace and the others started up again behind her, he trudged along deep in thought. Whatever it was he was trying to remember eluded him, dancing away whenever he got close to it. When it finally came to him ten minutes later, he was so startled that he blurted it aloud: "Where's the Dweller?"

"Huh?" Ocelot slowed his pace a bit, turning to look at the mage.

"The Dweller at the Threshold. Remember—the thing we saw last time, that appeared to us in different forms? It's the gateway to astral quests like this. You can't—at least not normally—begin one without passing it."

The others nodded as they too remembered their previous ordeals at the hand of that particular astral guardian. "Maybe spirits don't do it the same way?" Joe asked, sounding doubtful.

"I've never heard anything like that." 'Hawk shook his head. "I didn't think it was possible to bypass the Dweller."

"If we did," Kestrel said, "Let's just do it and be thankful about it. I'm in no hurry to go through that again."

"Problem?" 'Wraith asked, his pinprick eyes searching Winterhawk's.

"Don't know. Could be normal. *Normal* is not exactly a concept you can get your mind around out here. It's not as if I've done this hundreds of times or anything. But every time I have—"

"Wait a sec," Ocelot broke in. "I see something."

The others turned to look where he was pointing. Sure enough, it appeared that they had drawn closer to the mountains while they had been absorbed in their conversation. Something—they couldn't tell what it was from this distance, except that it stood out white against the red rocks—was up ahead.

"What is it?" Joe asked, straining his vision to see that far ahead. The still-swirling dust made it difficult to get a bead on it.

'Wraith concentrated, trying to employ the magnification built into his cybereyes. "Odd...Should be able to see. Can't."

"You can't see it at all?" Ocelot was squinting and having no luck, although the figure was still there. "Or just not clearly."

"Not clearly," the elf said.

"Looks like we're meant to see it up close and personal or not at all," Winterhawk said.

"At least it's not rocks or dust or—more rocks," Kestrel said. "Let's go." She started off again.

The others decided not to argue with her. They caught up and the five of them moved in a group toward the white figure.

Now they seemed to be getting closer to the mountains at about the speed they would have expected. The first thing they noticed as they neared them was that there was a break in the mountainside, almost like a cave—or perhaps a pass. The white figure, now resolved into humanoid form, was in front of the opening. As they got closer still, Kestrel gasped. "My God—that's Gabriel!" she whispered urgently under her breath. Unconsciously she picked up her pace.

She was right. After just a few more minutes' walk, they got close enough that they could see the figure

clearly, and if it was not Gabriel, it was the best facsimile of him that any of them had ever seen. He smiled at them as they approached. "I was wondering if you would show up," he said. "Good to see you all made it."

The runners stopped and stared at him. He leaned almost lazily against the rock on one side of what now was clearly the mouth of a pass leading through the mountain peaks. His arms were crossed over his chest with an air of casual indifference. Gone was the troubled young man they had seen the night before he had left them—in his place was the Gabriel most of them had first met at the party at Lunar Dreamscape: beautiful, vital, dressed in a flawless, perfectly-fit suit of pale gray, purple silk tie, and shoes that glowed with a mirror shine despite the dust. In fact, there was no sign of dust on him at all. His eyes sparkled with amusement and just the tiniest hint of something that was difficult to identify.

"Gabriel?" Kestrel asked, her tone uncertain. "What—?"

"What am I doing here?" He pushed himself off the rock and faced them—nobody consciously noticed that he remained in a position that allowed him to block the entrance to the pass. "You're here looking for me, aren't you? Even though I asked you not to?"

"You know we couldn't just leave you," Kestrel said. "You knew we'd come."

Gabriel nodded. "Sure I knew. That's why I'm waiting here for you." He smiled conspiratorially at her. "So—have you told Ocelot about...you know what yet?"

Kestrel stiffened. "Gabriel—"

"Told me about what?" Ocelot demanded, moving up next to her.

Behind them, Winterhawk sighed. He knew what this was and nothing he said would make any difference in the outcome, so he remained silent. Joe and 'Wraith,

sensing that this was not about them either, hung back with him and watched the scene unfold.

Gabriel's smile widened and he put up his hands as if to ward off a blow. "You *haven't* told him yet. I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

"Told me *what*?" Ocelot's voice got a bit more insistent. He looked back and forth between Kestrel and Gabriel.

"Okay, okay." Gabriel chuckled when Kestrel didn't answer. "It really surprises me that she didn't tell you about our night together. I thought she told you everything."

Ocelot stiffened, his eyes narrowing in shock. "You —"

Next to him, Kestrel glared at Gabriel and then sighed.

Winterhawk, Joe, and 'Wraith exchanged surprised glances but continued to remain silent.

"Slept together?" Gabriel did not seem to notice the expressions of those around him — or else he didn't care.

"Ocelot —" Kestrel began.

Ocelot ignored her. His gaze was still fixed on Gabriel. "Well? Did you?" Somewhere in his mind he knew that this wasn't really Gabriel — that it couldn't possibly be — but the perfection of the illusion coupled with the shock of the revelation that had just been dropped on him was playing havoc with his perceptions.

"Why don't you ask Juliana? After all, it was her idea."

Ocelot stood stunned for a moment, then wheeled on Kestrel, trying to keep himself under control. "Did you?"

With Ocelot's glare on her, Kestrel's emotion changed from confusion and betrayal to anger. Her eyes flashed as she returned the glare. "Yes! We did. And I don't see what business it is of yours, Ocelot."



Gabriel chuckled. "Of course it's his business. He's still got it bad for you, even if he won't admit it—even to himself. He's got some kind of gold-plated idea in the back of his mind that someday you two might settle down together, quit the rat race, get out of the danger business, maybe have a couple of kids—the whole bit. I don't think there was room in his plans for you to be indulging in a little inter-species hanky panky on the side."

"Gabriel, stop it!" Kestrel cried as she got a good look at the expression on Ocelot's face. "I don't know who you are or what you want, but cut it out!"

The young man's easy smile did not fade. He shrugged. "Why be afraid of the truth? Are you ashamed of what we did? You certainly seemed to enjoy it at the time."

"Shut up!" Ocelot yelled. Unconsciously he had dropped into a half-crouch, his muscles ready to spring explosively into action at any second.

Gabriel glanced at him, then back at Kestrel. "You *aren't* ashamed of what we did, are you? Having regrets?"

She stared at him for a moment, then looked down. "No," she said, her voice very soft.

He smiled. "That's good to hear. Neither am I." Ignoring them both for a moment, he glanced over at Winterhawk, Joe, and 'Wraith standing off to the side. "What about you three? Any regrets about coming after me?" His gaze settled on Winterhawk. "Still scared of facing the madness again?"

Winterhawk got a brief mental image of himself sitting in the corner of a room that was alive with loathsome things. He shuddered, but forced the image away with difficulty. He didn't answer.

Gabriel didn't seem to want to let it go, though. "Well? What do you say, Alastair? I did bring this whole thing on myself, right? You know that coming after me

could leave you open to it. You're the most vulnerable of all. Magic and madness aren't so far apart under normal circumstances, and your line's getting a little blurry. Sure you wouldn't rather just pack it in and go home to Aubrey and Maya and your students and your favorite pub? A lot easier that way, you know. What do you say? I can send you back if you like. Just say the word." He stood confidently, hands on his hips, with not even the smallest bit of dust daring to touch his suit.

Before Winterhawk could answer, Gabriel turned away from him and looked at 'Wraith. "And you, 'Wraith—or should I say Jonathan? How did you like being Jonathan for awhile? Seems to me like you enjoyed it just fine, once you got your feet under you. What do you think? Mild-mannered business manager or paranoid assassin? You could have it either way—I could fix it for you." He grinned. "I'm a dragon. I can do whatever I want. You want to be Jonathan Andrews? Go back to Molly Muldoon's shelter and make it the kind of place it deserves to be? They miss you, you know. They're doing all right—you really helped them out when they were there, and the donation I gave them when Joe and I came looking for you will keep them going for awhile, but with your management, just *think* of how many people they could help." He paced back and forth, gesturing like a pitchman. Despite the fact that he had been leaning against the red rocks, there was no dust on his back either. "Or," he said, dropping his voice down to a quiet, more intimate tone, "Maybe you'd just rather forget that part of your life. Brings up things you'd rather not think about, doesn't it?"

As he had not with Winterhawk, Gabriel likewise didn't give 'Wraith a chance to answer. His restless gaze settled on Joe. "And Joe, what can I say to you? You nearly avoided the whole thing, which was pretty smart if

you ask me. You're here because you think it's the right thing to do. I don't even sense any hesitation in you, like I do in these two." Here he gestured toward Winterhawk and 'Wraith. He smiled. "Not much I can say to sway you one way or the other, is there?" Turning abruptly, he stalked back over to Ocelot and stood in front of him. "So, we're back to the two of us again."

"Gabriel—" Kestrel began. Her expression was odd: sad and confused. "What are you—?"

He smiled at her. "Don't worry, Juliana. Everything will be fine. But I need to talk to Ocelot for a few minutes, all right?" He made a brief gesture and the air shimmered a bit between them.

Winterhawk, 'Wraith, and Joe exchanged glances, then moved up next to Kestrel. Nothing seemed to have changed except for the slight shimmer in the air. They didn't move closer.

Gabriel leaned back against the rock, his eyes sparkling with mischievous pleasure, his hands in his pockets, one leg bent so his foot could rest a little way up the side. His pose, with his hair and his tie ruffling slightly in the breeze, made him look like he was preparing for a photo shoot for GQ. "So here we are," he said. "Now you know the truth. What do you think?"

Ocelot, who had been standing silently, every muscle taut, as Gabriel had spoken to his friends, glared. "What do you mean, what do I think?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I just told you Juliana and I were...intimate. Doesn't that bother you?"

"What do you care?" Ocelot's eyes narrowed. He forced himself to remain still, watching the young man carefully.

"Why shouldn't I care? You're both my friends—or at least I thought you were. You I can never be too sure about. You've always been jealous of me, haven't you?"

His voice was soft, not accusing but more as if stating a fact they both knew to be true.

"Why the hell would I be jealous of you?" Ocelot's tone dropped a bit, with a bit of a growl lurking in the back of his throat. He no longer even noticed his friends, who had grown inexplicably a bit hazy behind him.

Gabriel's grin was mocking. "Lots of reasons. I'm better looking than you are, richer, smarter, more powerful—with my magic I can do practically anything I want to do—I've been around longer, so I've got the wisdom of age without any of the drawbacks. I'll never get old and lose my edge like you will. I'm a better fighter, and—" he paused a moment, meeting Ocelot's eyes challengingly "—Judging by the night Juliana and I spent together and her reaction to it, I'm better in bed than you are too."

Ocelot's growl grew until it was almost a scream—before he was even aware of what he was doing, he had launched himself forward and shoved Gabriel roughly back into the rock.

The young man's grin grew wider. "You're going to fight me, Ocelot? Even though you know you haven't a prayer of winning? Why? Because Kestrel prefers me to you? Because you know as well as I do that your little dream of settling down with her is just so much wishful thinking? A woman like Juliana needs *action*, Ocelot. Stimulation. Challenges. Can you give her those? Can you give them to her better than I can? What makes you think she'll ever go back to you now that she's been with me? You *lost*, my friend. Take it like a man for once."

"Shut up, you bastard!" Ocelot screamed in his face. He could feel the rage growing, watch the thin red haze overlay his vision and start to carry reason away with it. He seized Gabriel around the neck and shook him. "Shut up! That's not the way it is! I'll beat the—I'll—"

And then, suddenly, he stopped. Moving slowly and with great care, he dismantled his grip on Gabriel's neck and took a step backward. He was still breathing hard, his heart still pounding in his chest, but his expression was calm. "No," he said through his teeth. "This isn't right. You're not the enemy. I don't know why you're doing this—or if you're even who you're sayin' you are—but fighting you won't get us anywhere." He sighed. "You're right. It isn't my business who Kestrel decides to sleep with. It's hers. Just get the fuck outta here, okay? I don't want to look at you."

Gabriel's smile this time was different—the mocking was gone, leaving an expression of radiant happiness, pride, and satisfaction. "Well done, my friend," he said softly. "You may pass."

He faded from view, leaving the dark pathway through the mountains unblocked and unguarded.

At the same time, the wavering in the air faded, leaving a fully clear view to those on the other side. They had seen and heard everything that had occurred, but had been unable to interfere or even to make their voices heard through the curtain. As it faded, Kestrel's fists dropped from where she had been pounding on it, yelling at both Gabriel and Ocelot to stop. Her arms fell to her sides as she watched Ocelot's decision and Gabriel's disappearance.

"It *was* the Dweller," Hawk murmured. "I thought it might be. That bloody bastard gets trickier every time."

"So we passed?" Joe asked. "I thought it was supposed to test us all."

"Maybe it did," Wraith said.

"Or p'raps it just follows its own rules," Winterhawk added. "Either way, it looks like we're free to go, and we'd best get to it."

Kestrel wasn't listening. She was watching Ocelot, who was still facing the place where Gabriel had been standing. "Ocelot, I—"

"Let's get the hell on with it," he said gruffly, without turning. He didn't wait for an answer, but merely turned away from them and began trudging off into the canyon between the two towering red mountains.

After a moment, the others followed him. Nobody spoke. There didn't seem to be anything anyone wanted to say at the moment.

## 38.

Gabriel had lost track of time again; they hadn't been back since Stefan had left.

They had left the naked light bulb burning above his head; it hurt his eyes, so he didn't look up at it.

He drifted in and out of awareness, never quite losing consciousness but never quite regaining it; his head ached while at the same time feeling light and swimmy. The pain was a formless thing that engulfed his entire body, leaving him weakened and exhausted.

He had trouble concentrating, but he did his best to keep alert, to do what little he could to keep his body ready to act should the opportunity arise. He had little faith that such an opportunity *would* arise, but he nonetheless refused to give up. At least it was something to do.

Every few minutes he moved around as best he could, raising his aching arms to bring feeling back to his shoulders, flexing his fingers, rotating his wrists in the tight bonds. He couldn't do much about his legs; he could barely move them now, numbness having settled in long ago, but he did what he could, shifting his knees back and forth, raising his feet, gripping the concrete floor with his toes. He didn't know if it would help, but he knew it couldn't hurt.

He wondered if they had broken anything with their beatings. He didn't think so, although he wondered a bit about one of his ribs. It hurt to move his jaw, but not as much, he didn't think, as it would if it were broken. None of his teeth seemed to be loose, either. He couldn't get rid of the sour taste of blood in his mouth. His nose he couldn't be sure about: it had stopped bleeding before Stefan had arrived, but since he couldn't see it or touch it

he couldn't tell. All he knew was that it hurt. Everything hurt. He felt hot and achy and vaguely feverish.

The places where Stefan had dug his fingers in hurt the most right now, because they had been the last. He had, over the course of Salazaro's questioning, employed whatever mental discipline he currently possessed to add each new pain to the cloth of the whole, weaving it in, filing it away—he couldn't make it stop hurting, but he could control the intensity somewhat.

At least he could before. Stefan's claw-wounds stubbornly refused to join the tapestry, as did the pain from the scar on his side. *That* particular pain was and always had been different from all the others—while they, even the severe ones, seemed superficial, transient, the side wound felt as if it reached into the core of everything he was and clenched itself around his soul. If he had been given the choice at that moment, he would have gladly chosen to bear all the other injuries in exchange for ridding himself of that one. As it was, he didn't have a choice, which meant he was forced to deal with all of them.

Adding to all of this was the fact that he had been growing progressively more hungry, and especially more thirsty, as time went on. It was an odd, unfamiliar feeling, experiencing hunger from a human standpoint. He had never been hungry in human form before; like all dragons, he didn't have to eat often and took his real meals in his true form once a month or so. Each of those meals, usually comprised of several large herd animals (part of a group he kept on land he owned, tended by a spirit, for just that purpose) was enough to keep him going quite nicely until the next one was due. His human-form enjoyment of practically everything edible from pizza and hot dogs to the finest of multi-course meals and the most exotic of ethnic cuisines was more an amusement



than anything else—he liked the taste of the food, but the tiny portions would not have even begun to sustain his massive draconic form.

Now, though, the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach was getting more distracting, and the thirst was worse. He wondered if they intended to leave him here to starve—perhaps they thought that he might be a bit more tractable after a few hours (*days?*) to think it over. He didn't want to think too hard about that—or about the fact that he feared they might be right.

He had tried everything he could think of to loosen the bonds on his hands and feet, but nothing had worked. He suspected that they had wet the ropes before tying him up, so they would constrict as they dried and form an even tighter hold on him. He had extended his elbows outward, trying to stretch the rope enough that he could get one hand through it; he had wriggled first one leg, then the other against the chair-leg with a similar hope—but both had produced the same results: sore limbs and no perceivable stretching of the ropes. Finally he had slumped in despair, not giving up completely, but giving up for the moment. *I'll just rest for awhile*, he promised himself. *Then I'll try again.*

Without the attempts to escape his bonds to occupy his mind, he found it drifting back to his apartment where he had left his friends. A stab of guilt struck him, as it always did when he thought about them—*Should I have done it the way I did? Should I have told them in person, rather than leaving a note? Was I afraid of their response if I told them face to face? They could not have stopped me...*

*What was I afraid of?*

He closed his eyes and allowed his head to fall forward slightly. *Juliana, of course. She could have stopped you.*

He knew the little voice in the back of his mind was right. None of the others, Ocelot, Winterhawk, Joe,

‘Wraith—none of them could have said or done anything to stop him from continuing the course he had chosen. But Juliana—

Juliana could have had the chance.

In his mind he pictured her: her bright, glittering green eyes, her slender, wiry frame, her shock of short white-blond hair, her smile. He had given her his life that day more than two years ago, in a dark cave on an island where he had been prepared to die but still feared it—and he had never regretted that decision. Humans and metahumans fascinated him: their lives were so short, but so *bright*, shining with purpose and spirit and vitality—so different from his own people who, with their near-assurance of immortality, made decisions slowly and carefully, sometimes after years of consideration. Even most of the elves, long-lived as they were, existed only for a few moments in the spans of dragonkind’s perceptions. Gabriel, as a child in the Fourth Age who grew to the cusp of adulthood during the Sleep, still retained many of the impressions and beliefs of his childhood. He knew that eventually he would have to settle down and take his place among the doings of his own kind, but that was a long time off. Until then, he enjoyed spending time in the world of the young races—learning their ways, exploring their fascinating technologies (dragons, due to their prodigious magical abilities, had never needed to develop technology; Gabriel had often wondered if they had the proper mindset to have done so even without considering magic, but he supposed he would never know that), observing and being part of their complex webs of relationships. All of this he had been introduced to by Juliana, and he would be forever grateful to her for that. She had not only saved his life—at great potential risk to her own—but she had shown him what he had needed to know to live in this new world without revealing what he

was. She could have merely chosen to assist him in removing the imminent danger and then gone on about her business, but instead she had chosen to remain with him. In Gabriel's mind, that had raised her to a level rarely occupied by any being he had ever known, human, dragon, or otherwise.

He smiled a little without realizing it, thinking over the things the two of them had done together over the time of their acquaintance. He knew his mind was wandering, but just this once he let it wander. The thoughts were pleasant and right now he could use a few pleasant thoughts.

He remembered the baseball games, the odd little ethnic restaurants in bad parts of town, the far-too-fast drives in the countryside, their whim-driven jaunts around the world. He remembered the first time she had shown him trideo and how he had refused to remove himself from its presence for several days, fascinated by the images. He remembered teaching her about the history of his world while she taught him how to drive a car. He remembered her laughing good-naturedly at his taste for Godzilla movies, Urban Brawl, and chocolate ice cream, and his dislike of "cutesy" or uncomplimentary images of dragons in pre-Awakening pop culture. He remembered the way she looked at him the first time she saw his human form, and then later on when she didn't think he noticed —

He closed his eyes a little tighter at that thought, which had brought back other, more recent memories. He wished he could drive the images from his memory of the time after he had hurt her—seeing her there, broken, bleeding, and knowing that he had caused it. *The Enemy caused it*, he reminded himself, but that didn't make any difference to him. The only thing that did was that he had hurt her, very nearly killed her. If he could only forget —

But he did not want to forget, he realized. The anger, the memory of the rage he had felt at the Enemy—the rage that had driven all vestiges of the madness from his mind—that was part of what was keeping him going now. He was *not* going to let them win. He would die first.

But death had other consequences.

Quickly he forced himself to think of something else, and was surprised at what his mind settled on. More images: Kestrel again, but not bleeding, not injured—smiling. Wrapping her arms around him, pulling him close—

He wondered if she knew he had never done anything like that before, and decided she probably did. She had been patient, gentle, joyous—and he had responded. It had surprised him at the time, although he certainly would never have told her that. She had asked him once before and he had let her know his feelings on the matter: that he would do as she wished, but that the two of them were so different that it would have been awkward at best; she had respected his wishes and not pushed the matter. He could see, though, that it was not over, even if she had thought for awhile that it was. He had not read her thoughts and never would without her permission, but she could not hide her aura from him.

That night, after he had hurt her, after he had brought her back to health and watched over her, racked by guilt, as she slept, something had changed. Even now he wasn't sure what it had been, but that night he had looked at her—differently. There had been none of the reluctance borne of the fact that she was human and he was not, that among his people the telepathic component of the act was every bit as important as the physical, that he had gently turned aside her advances in the past. That night he would have given her anything she wanted, without

question. The night seemed long ago now, and was not likely to be repeated, regardless of what happened to him here—he had seen the subtle change in her aura the next morning, mirroring his own feelings that what they had shared had been something special and unique, but something that, having been completed, could now move on to the next level. He had never felt closer to Kestrel than that night, but more than anything it had heightened their bond of friendship and the feeling that no more such nights were needed.

He sighed, shifting painfully in his seat, and opened his eyes. *Juliana, I wish I could have –*

He stopped.

Froze.

Had there been something moving in one of the room's shadowy corners, or was it just a trick of the light and his exhaustion?

He leaned forward, concentrating.

It happened again: a slight, small motion and a very faint skittering noise.

As he watched, the movement repeated a third time, this time accompanied by a pair of small, shiny eyes that glittered in the overhead light.

Gabriel frowned. *A mouse? How did a mouse get in here?*

The shadowy form moved a little out of the protection of the corner. When it did, Gabriel could see clearly that it was not a mouse, but a rat: a little gray creature with bright black eyes and a long pinkish tail. It stood briefly on its hind legs and regarded him inquisitively.

Gabriel sighed. As if the situation here weren't bad enough, now he had rats to contend with. He hoped there wouldn't be more, and wondered once more how it had gotten into the room. *There must be an opening of some kind behind me, where I can't see. I wonder if there are more of them in here.*

He closed his eyes a moment to listen, but did not hear any more of the soft skittering noises of tiny feet on stone floor. When he opened them again, the rat was still there. It was back on all fours again but it was still watching him.

“What can I do for you?” he asked, surprised at how weak and rough his voice sounded in his ears.

The rat stiffened a bit, then chittered something and moved closer. It moved cautiously, never taking its eyes from Gabriel’s face.

“Go away,” he ordered softly. “You don’t – want to be here.” It hurt to speak, more now than before.

The rat ignored him and continued to move closer. When it reached a distance of about a meter away, it paused again, rose to its hind legs, and chittered once more.

Gabriel tilted his head in question. It was odd that it was coming this close to him; most of the rats he had encountered in the past tended to like dark small places where they could hide. This one seemed terribly exposed out in the middle of the floor under the glare of the lightbulb.

It paused there for a moment, then dropped down and continued its forward progress. It seemed to be heading directly for Gabriel.

“No...” he whispered. Was this Salazar’s, or Stefan’s, idea of a joke? Sending rats in to torment him, to bite him when he was unable to defend himself? He tapped his feet several times on the floor, trying to scare the rat away.

It didn’t budge. It simply sat there and watched until he was finished, then moved forward again. This time it circled around a bit, approaching him from his left side.

Gabriel turned his head so he could keep watching it. His heart was beating a little faster, his muscles tensing.

This rat was behaving in a very unratlike way. What did it intend to do?

It was next to the chair now. He had to lean over painfully to see it, and his eyes widened when he did—it had come right up to the chair-leg and was currently on its hind legs again, its forepaws resting on the ropes binding Gabriel's left ankle.

Gabriel tensed. Was this a prelude to its climbing up his leg? He threw himself violently forward and then back, his back smacking against the chair-back with a sound *thump*.

The pain was incredible, adding to his belief that Carl and Gus had managed to break at least one of his ribs during their ministrations. He clamped his eyes shut and gritted his teeth, afraid to cry out for fear of bringing one or more of his captors into the room. He breathed short sharp gasps and waited for the pain to dull down again, then opened his eyes.

The rat was still there. It was looking up at him, a surprisingly—compassionate?—expression in its black eyes. "Go away..." he whispered, not having the energy to do anything else.

It didn't go away. Instead, it leaned forward. After a moment, Gabriel could hear a tiny rasping sound.

He drew a deep breath and forced himself to look down at it, expecting to see it gnawing its way through the thin fabric of his pantleg in anticipation of reaching the flesh of his ankle.

But that wasn't what it was doing.

Slowly, methodically, the rat was gnawing through the rope.

When it noticed him watching it looked up at him for a moment, met his gaze, and then returned to its task.

He continued to watch, half in fascination and half in fear, as the creature went about its business. Its progress

was slow but steady; occasionally it would halt for a moment and look up at him, moving its mouth in the manner of a cat who has just eaten something that did not agree with it, but always it returned to gnawing after no more than a couple of minutes' rest.

Gabriel had long ago lost track of time and his innate time-sense didn't seem to be operating at the moment, but he surmised that it must have been about fifteen minutes before the rat had chewed its way through most of the rope binding his left ankle; it was still wrapped around him, but it felt looser. He longed to stretch his leg out, to restore full circulation to it, to *move*, but he did not; not yet. Instead he continued to watch the rat.

It had backed off a bit and was looking at the rope as if admiring its handiwork. It looked up at him again, chittered, and moved closer.

Halfway to the chair it stopped suddenly, raising back up on its hind legs and cocking its head toward the door as if listening to something. A few seconds later Gabriel heard the sounds of footsteps approaching. He stiffened, looking first at the door, then at the rat.

The rat was already moving. It scurried around behind him. For a moment he could neither see nor hear it, but then he felt the light touch of tiny paws on his bound hands as the creature climbed up the back of his chair and settled itself between his wrists. Its small furry body was warm and either hummed or shivered, he couldn't quite tell which, against his bare skin.

Gabriel lowered his head and closed his eyes. Perhaps the footsteps would pass by; perhaps if whoever it was came in, they would think he was asleep or unconscious and leave him alone. It was a long shot, but at least it was a chance. If he was awake when they came in, he didn't want to think about what they might do to him—especially if they discovered the gnawed rope. Part of him



marveled at the tiny creature's ingenuity at not gnawing all the way through—how could it have *known*? Still, it was often best not to question the motives of the Netherworlds too closely, especially when they seemed to be on your side.

The door opened. Gabriel was seized with an almost palpable temptation to open his eyes, to see who had entered the room, but he fought it and kept his head down.

The footsteps were heavy—that meant it wasn't Stefan, who walked with a light tread despite his tall, powerful form. It could be Salazaro, or it could be Carl or Gus sent in to check on him. It could, of course, be someone else entirely. He slowed his breathing and waited tensely, hoping the visitor wouldn't walk around behind him and spot the rat. He could feel it trembling a bit and wondered if it was nervous about being found too.

The newcomer came a bit closer; Gabriel could hear his slightly heavy breathing and feel his presence less than a meter away. He remained there for what seemed an eternity, then moved away again. Gabriel heard the sound of the door opening, and then his vision went completely dark. The door closed.

*He's turned out the light.*

He waited about thirty more seconds to make sure no one else was going to come in, noting that the rat seemed in no hurry to move either. After that he opened his eyes slowly. As he expected, there was little difference between the room with his eyes open and with them closed: the whole place was bathed in the same near-pitch-darkness as before, with light provided only by the same slender crack beneath the door. He let his breath out slowly and allowed himself to relax a bit.

The rat was on the move again, but not far. Gabriel could feel it shifting position, then felt its long tail brush

against his back as it began chewing away at the ropes holding his wrists together. The little feet tickled a bit, but it was a rather pleasant sensation in contrast to all the places that were in pain.

He tried to stay as still as possible so as not to disturb its progress. It took a little longer this time—probably around twenty minutes—before he could feel the loosening of the rope’s grip around his wrists. Again he had the overwhelming urge to move, but again he resisted it. The rat had done the same thing it had done with his ankle: gnawed away all but a thin strand of the rope in one spot and left it otherwise in place.

It moved again, and it was on his shoulder. He turned his head toward it even though he couldn’t see it, imagining what it would be like to meet the little glittery black eyes only centimeters from his face. The creature remained there for a few seconds, then scrambled down the front of his shirt into his lap. It paused there a last time, finally turning to make its way carefully down his right leg.

“Why are you doing this?” Gabriel whispered.

Of course there was no answer; he hadn’t expected one. A few seconds passed and the *rasp-rasp* of gnawing began once more.

Gabriel didn’t ask any more questions. He sat silently, trying not to be impatient as the last rope holding him captive was slowly and methodically chewed away. He had waited this long—he could wait just a little longer. Only a few more minutes—

The rat chittered and scurried back up into his lap.

“Are you—finished?” Gabriel whispered.

It chittered again.

He took a deep breath. “I—don’t know how to—thank you for this...I—don’t know why you did it...but...thank you...”

The rat climbed back up his shirt and perched on his shoulder.

Another deep breath. This had been the easy part, at least from his side of the equation. The rat had done all the work. Now it was his turn. He wondered if, after all this effort had been exerted on his behalf, he would be able to force his body to move enough to escape.

In the darkness, his expression hardened. He certainly owed it to the creature to try.

He remained silent for several seconds, listening for any sign of life outside the door—footsteps, voices, the sound of chairlegs scraping on the floor—but heard nothing. *They're being very quiet out there—if they're out there at all.*

He turned his head toward the unseen creature on his shoulder. “Ready?”

The small furry body brushed against his neck. It was still quivering—with anticipation?

He started with the ropes on his hands. Gritting his teeth against the pain he knew the action would cause, he attempted to pull his hands apart and break the thin strand of rope the rat had left remaining.

A low moan escaped his lips as the motion disturbed muscles that had not moved in many hours. Still, he kept going. The ropes didn't break, but they did pull away from each other enough that he could wriggle his hands out and let his arms drop free at his sides.

That time he nearly screamed. His shoulders felt lit with white fire, his hands starting out nearly so numb he couldn't feel them and then gathering the pins and needles of returning circulation. Moving hurt, *not* moving hurt—

He waited, eyes closed, trying to relax his knotted muscles, to remember all the mental discipline he was supposed to have. *Supposed to have*, he thought a little

bitterly. *That was when I was a dragon. How do humans deal with this?*

*Stop that, he told himself, his mental voice sharp. It is no excuse. Humans do this. You will do this. Your arms are free now. Get your legs free and get out of here before someone comes back.*

Taking a deep breath, he switched his concentration to his left leg. It had had the tight bonds around it loosened for the longest time, to the point where it was feeling about as normal as could be expected under the circumstances. At least the prickly feeling had long since departed. Focusing all his energy on that one ankle, he moved his lower leg out away from the chair. The rope resisted, but under increased pressure it finally gave way. Gabriel gasped sharply as his leg suddenly extended much more quickly and sharply than he had intended. *Two down, one to go.*

He paused again to listen and was rewarded once more by nothing more than the sound of his own harsh breathing. *One more.*

A last time he gathered his energy, this time centering it on his right leg. Taking a lesson from what had happened with his left, he decreased the intensity of the pressure, aiming this time for a more steady push. Surprisingly, the rope broke away almost immediately. Gabriel wondered if the rat had done that on purpose. It continued to sit there on his shoulder, its presence noticeable only by a slight pressure and the movement of its feet as it shifted for balance.

He was free! The ropes were all broken. Now all he had to do was get up and sneak out of here before anyone figured out that he was gone.

*What if the door is locked?* a little voice said in his head. *Rats can't unlock doors, no matter how intelligent they are.*

*Don't worry about that yet,* he answered himself angrily. *Until you get to the door it's irrelevant.*

He knew this was going to be the hardest part, but it was also the most important. If he couldn't make it out of this place under his own power, he knew they would find him, bring him back, and probably do worse things to him than they had before. He didn't know how much more of that he could endure without cracking. He had to get out now while he had the chance. It would be the only chance he would have.

He took a slow deep breath and thought of Kestrel. *She would do this. She probably has done things like this in her life. She is strong. You must be strong too.*

The rat waited, its body quivering a bit more like a small live wire sitting on his shoulder.

*This is it.*

He stood up.

And immediately fell back down again as his legs gave out underneath him, dropping him in a heap on the concrete floor.

The only thing that kept him from screaming as red-hot agony lanced through him (quick thought flitted through his mind as he hit the ground: *that rib must be broken after all*) was that the fall knocked the wind out of him to the point where all he could utter was a weak little half-moan, half-whimper.

His first thought upon coming to his senses enough to have a coherent thought was not of himself, but of the rat that had been on his shoulder. Had it fallen off? Had he crushed it? Painfully he tried to turn his head, to spot any movement in the near darkness.

It was there, or something was. A small figure stood a few centimeters from him visible only as a dark shape. Relieved, Gabriel closed his eyes again. Every part of his body hurt. His right side, with the broken rib, felt like something was digging into it every time he moved the slightest bit. His left side, where the scar was, ached. His

wrists, and ankles, raw and bleeding from the ropes, burned. His muscles throbbed with dull, steady pain. *I'll just stay here for a few moments...just rest here...the floor feels so good...cold... Wonder if I'm getting feverish...maybe the rat was a hallucination...*

Something nipped him on the fingertip.

He gasped, stiffening, yanking his hand back away.

Chittering in the darkness. It sounded almost reproachful.

Gabriel sighed. The rat was right. He was going to have to get out of here. The pain didn't matter. If he stayed and they discovered him like this, they would either kill him or torment him until he was forced to agree to something that would be worse than death.

He drew a long, slow breath and steeled himself for the attempt to get up. Perhaps if he used the chair, he could—

Footsteps.

He froze, listening.

Had he really heard footsteps, or was it just his own mind playing tricks on him?

No, there they were again. They were coming closer, echoing on the stone floor. He could hear them more distinctly now, with one ear pressed to the floor. One set. Heavy tread, but not the same as the one earlier. He waited.

The footsteps continued to draw closer. Gabriel's fists clenched involuntarily as he waited to see what would happen. He knew that no matter how strong his will was, his body was simply in no condition to fight. He might be able to get the first shot in, but that would mean getting up and getting into position before the unseen person reached the door. That did not seem at all likely.

The sound got still closer. *If they find me like this they'll lock me up more securely—they might even use chains or*

*handcuffs. Even if the rat could help me again, it couldn't get through those –*

The footsteps paused. Right outside the door, from the sound of it.

Gabriel tensed.

A moment passed, and then the sounds resumed again. As they receded slowly into nothingness, Gabriel allowed himself to relax as a profound sense of relief overwhelmed him.

The rat chittered at him.

He raised his head slightly. "I know..." he whispered. No more time for rest now. By the time he managed to get up, enough time would have passed that it might be safe to make his break for it.

Scrabbling around on the floor, he slowly got himself turned around so he was facing the chair where he had been tied. His motions were a long way from his usual fluid grace—slow, jerky, filled with starts and stops as he waited for a particular pain to recede enough to allow him to think properly— but eventually he managed to grasp the chair legs and drag himself first to a kneeling position and finally to a fully standing one, supported by the chair-back. He stood there, breathing hard, allowing himself to savor his victory for a few moments before continuing. His head felt disconnected, foggy; he barely noticed the hunger anymore because it was one of the least demanding of his problems. Next step: cross the two meters or so to the door.

He felt something pulling on his pantleg and then on the shreds of his shirt; a moment later the rat had resumed its position on his shoulder and was chittering away in his ear. He had to smile a bit, reminded suddenly of the cheerleaders at the sporting events he had attended with Kestrel. "All right," he whispered. "I'm going."

He didn't hesitate this time. He knew that sometimes the way to go was simply to *do it*, and this was one of those times. Clenching his teeth, he shoved off the back of the chair and took the two steps to the door, allowing himself to run into the wall next to it. His unoccupied shoulder took up the impact and added a new pain to his collection, but he was *there*. The door was right next to him. He could see the knob in the faint light.

*Almost there...*

He forced himself to pause a moment, to gather his bearings and to listen at the door. Shuffling over a couple of steps until he was in front of it, he pressed his ear against the metal surface and closed his eyes, trying to pick out any sign of sound on the other side. Like the floor had, the door felt good against his face, soothing his cracked jaw. He stayed there a little longer than was necessary, but did not hear anything outside. "This is it..." he whispered to the rat. "Are you...coming with me?"

The creature didn't move.

"I'll — take that as a yes."

He was almost afraid to try the door — afraid that if it ended up being locked after all this effort, he might just collapse in a heap on the floor and give up. But that didn't matter, because he knew he had to do it anyway. With a shaking hand he reached out, his hand resting on the smooth polished doorknob, and then convulsively he turned it.

It turned freely — he could feel the latch open.

He sagged against the door in a relief that was almost as debilitating, for a moment, as the disappointment of finding it locked would have doubtless been. Then, though, he felt a little strength returning to him, a little more resolve. "We can do this..." he told the rat softly. "Let's go."



He opened the door slowly and blinked at the sudden influx of light that streamed into the room. Allowing himself one glance backward at the place where he had been held captive, he saw that the part of it he could not see when bound looked very much like the part he *could* see—a small, unadorned stone room with no windows and no other furniture save for a heavy wooden chair bolted to the floor. His mind flitted briefly over the question of how the rat could have possibly gotten in, but it didn't settle there long. It didn't matter, really. All that mattered was getting out.

The hallway was stone as well, lit by a couple of lightbulbs covered by crude shades hanging from the ceiling. It was chilly down here and there were still no windows—*Must be a cellar*, Gabriel thought. That belief was supported by the fact that off to his right a few meters down the hall, a stone stairway led upward into darkness.

He looked with dismay at the stairway: getting up there wasn't going to be easy. He wondered what awaited him at the top, but decided it didn't matter. He'd rather die trying to escape than starve to death in that room. He took a last glance around to see if there was anything useful down here and found nothing—the room he had occupied was the only one, so there was nothing but the room and the stairway.

Breathing in harsh shallow gasps to keep his broken rib from moving around too much, he pressed his back against the wall and began shuffling toward the stairs. He had to stop several times, clamping his eyes shut against the pain, fighting the temptation to drop to the floor, to rest. He knew if he did that, he would not get up again. He could rest when he was out of here. He refused to think about how long that would be or how much of this place he would have to find his way out of—none of that was at all relevant right now. What was important was

the next step, and the next step after that. His mind returned idly to something Kestrel had told him about a long time ago: an organization that the humans had started back before the Awakening to help people deal with their addictions—their motto was *One day at a time*. It was a good motto; Gabriel changed it to *One step at a time* and made it his mantra as he worked his way down the corridor.

One time when he paused to get his breath for a few seconds he happened to look down at himself. He was shocked by what he saw: His white shirt, tattered and shredded, was soaked with blood in spots and splattered in others, his wrists rubbed raw and caked with dried blood from where the ropes had bitten into him. He couldn't see his face, which was probably just as well—if it looked half as bad as it felt, he was all set to frighten small children and probably himself as well. *It won't matter if you get out*, he told himself sternly. *Move*.

He had reached the stairs now. They loomed above him, seeming impossibly high. Without noticing consciously he counted the steps: fourteen. There was no railing.

He didn't pause this time. He started, staying close to the wall for balance. Each step of his right foot lanced agony up into his broken rib, each exertion to pull his body upward tortured bruised muscles. His breathing grew sharper, harsher, but he moved steadily, not allowing the pain to impede him. He focused on images of Kestrel and of Stefan, taking strength from the thought that if he did not make it out of here, he would never see her again, never be able to help his brother.

*(If he even wants help anymore, the little voice said in his mind)*

*(Hush, he snapped back at it)*

When he finally reached the landing at the top his body was bathed in sweat and his thirst was ravenous. He closed his eyes, pressing his hands and the side of his face against the door, allowing himself to rest for a moment. He could hear no sound of movement on the other side of this door, and wondered if perhaps everyone was asleep or at some kind of meeting. *Odd that they didn't leave a guard*, he thought, but then figured that the way they had tied him up, there wouldn't have been any chance of his getting free.

*No chance*, he agreed, glancing at the rat that still sat on his shoulder. He opened the door.

Outside it was darkness. Cautiously he shoved the stairway door open all the way so the scant light from below could help him see; he could pick out numerous dark shapes pushed up against walls, covered with shrouds — *a storeroom?*

It was a big room, about five meters on a side. The floor was covered in thick carpeting that muffled his footsteps (not that his sock-clad feet would have made much sound in any case); there was a door on one side and a window covered by drapes on another. Far off in the distance he could hear the faint strains of dance music. As his eyes became more accustomed to the dimness, he could make out the shapes of some of the objects: long and oval, with heavy bases sticking out from beneath the shrouds that covered them; smaller, U-shaped, with smaller bases — gambling equipment. A stray thought struck him: *they said they were holding Stefan at the Fortuna Club — I wonder if this is it?*

It didn't matter what it was, though. All that mattered was that he get out. "Door or window?" he whispered to the rat, not expecting an answer.

The rat chattered.

"I don't speak rat," he said wryly. "Door?"

Silence.

"Window?"

Chitter.

"Right. You're—the boss." He immediately started moving toward the window. He was still going slow, but there was anticipation in his motion now. Windows led outside. Once he was outside he could hide, get away, find someone to help. Then he would come back here and try to convince Stefan —

A key rattled in the door on the other side of the room.

Gabriel's blood went cold for a moment. He looked around frantically for a place to hide, and his gaze fell on one of the big tables by the window. Moving far more quickly than he thought himself capable, he hurried over and dropped down behind it just as the lock rattled a last time and the door swung open.

Gabriel crouched there, unable to see anything, concentrating on keeping his breathing quiet so the intruder wouldn't hear him. He discovered that if he crouched a little lower he could watch the man's feet as they moved past—dark-clad, booted, large.

They were running across the room now, toward the stairwell door he had left open. He heard a muttered oath, then he could no longer see the feet but he could hear the footfalls as they hurried down the stairs.

He briefly considered trying to slam the door shut and lock it to trap the man inside, but rejected the thought for two reasons: first, he didn't remember if the door *had* a lock, and second, he wasn't sure that in his current condition he would be fast enough to do the job before the man could reach the top again. Instead, he turned and concentrated on the window.

Gritting his teeth, he raised up and turned, ducking behind the heavy drapes. There was a light on outside

which allowed him to see—dimly—that the lock on the window was a simple one. Even better, the window was tall and began close to the ground so he wouldn't have to climb very far to get out.

The footsteps were coming back up the stairs again. Gabriel fumbled with the lock, lifting the catch and throwing the window open; it swung easily on oiled hinges and made no sound. Paying no heed now to his injuries, he clambered out and swung the window closed behind him. He saw the drape flutter and settle back into position behind him, and then he was out.

It was cold out here, and a little windy. The wind felt good on his fever-hot skin. There was no visible moon, but the reddish clouds glowed slightly and the building's perimeter lights gave him enough illumination to see. He was standing in some kind of courtyard, but he could hear the sound of traffic far away, and farther still the sound of gunfire. He never thought he would be so happy to hear gunfire. He turned toward the courtyard's exit—

"Hello, brother."

He spun, and the pain was only the secondary reason why he regretted doing it.

Stefan stood there, resplendent in his tailored suit, flanked by four suited goons holding machine guns. He was smiling, and it was not a brotherly smile.

"Stefan..." Gabriel fought to remain upright, to face his brother without weakness.

"Good job breaking out—I have no idea how you did it, but that kind of ingenuity is something we can use." He took a couple of steps forward.

Gabriel felt the rat moving around behind his neck, clinging to his shirt there. "Stefan, please—you're not—" He was swaying on his feet now. The scar felt like it was on fire.

Stefan smiled. "Oh, yes I am, brother. Every bit. And I always have been. You were simply fooled by what you wanted to believe. You forgot—in our family we always took the long view. One does what one must, allies himself with those he must, for expediency's sake. But never more than that. You should have learned that lesson long ago, but you were always too idealistic." His gaze hardened. "Now—I will give you one last chance, because you are my brother and family is important to me. Will you join us? Will you give up this misplaced idealism to save your life, as I have?"

"No!"

Everyone froze, for it had not been Gabriel who had cried out.

It had been the rat.

The cry was agonized, tortured, and for a split second, Gabriel was convinced—familiar.

"No!" he echoed, as the creature came back around to his shoulder. He glared at Stefan. "I won't do it, Stefan."

"So be it," Stefan said dismissively, and stepped back, nodding toward his companions.

The goons fired their guns.

Gabriel saw the muzzle flashes. He heard the roaring *budda-budda-budda* as four machine guns fired simultaneously in his direction. He heard the rat on his shoulder scream as it was hit by a round and blown back.

He felt nothing.

Fade to black.

## 39.

The walk through the canyon was accomplished in a tense silence. The five runners were spread out slightly, close enough that they could come to each other's aid should it become necessary, but far enough apart that conversation was discouraged. They had been like that ever since they had entered the pass; that had been more than an hour ago.

The pass itself had a dark, oppressive feel to it that made them think that the walls were preparing to close in on them high above, to cut off the sickly, red-tinged light that trickled in to illuminate their path in a series of shifting beams thrown out from between thick clouds. The shadows that fell from the jutting rocks that lined the path were weird, misshapen things, like silent monsters observing their progress. More than once one or more of the team had gotten the impression that they were being followed, but whenever they turned to look there had been no sign of life or movement there.

Ocelot had taken the point position without question or discussion; no one argued with him. He made his way forward with a combination of purpose and explosive movement, his posture suggesting that he considered every rock, every impediment to his progress to be a personal affront. Several meters behind him, Winterhawk, ShadoWraith, and Joe followed him in a loose affiliation, closer together but each one clearly alone with his own thoughts and not inviting any sort of conference.

A few more meters behind them, Kestrel walked alone. She was alert, her eyes constantly and almost obsessively scanning the area in front, behind, and above them for potential threats, but anyone who looked at her too closely could see that the portion of her mind beyond that required for vigilance and continued motion was

somewhere far away. Every once in awhile one of the three ahead of her would glance back to see if she was still following; she refused to meet their eyes and looked elsewhere until they turned back around again.

Ocelot had not looked back once.

There did not seem to be an end to the canyon. It varied between roughly five and ten meters wide; it was impossible to see how far it stretched out ahead of them because its path was convoluted, bending back and forth in smooth curves and occasional sharper angles veering off to one side or the other. A couple of times Winterhawk looked speculatively upward, considering the possibility of levitating to the top high above to see if he could see anything from there; 'Wraith had given him a questioning raised eyebrow and he had shrugged, abandoning the idea for now. He wasn't in any particular hurry to separate himself from the rest of the team at the moment. He had already tested his magical abilities and found that they were functioning properly; that in itself had been a relief to him. One could never tell on the metaplanes what things were going to be like—each one had its own laws that you had to learn to live with. Right now, he was secure in the knowledge that he *could* perform a bit of aerial scouting if it became necessary, but right now he didn't think it was.

It was Joe who broke the silence half an hour or so later. "This is weird," he said, looking around. "How much longer do you think this thing goes on, and where's it leading?" The canyon had continued in much the same way with no sign of either an exit or a change in scenery.

Winterhawk shrugged. "Don't know. I'll admit this is odd, although *odd* doesn't really have a proper definition here."

Ocelot had stopped impatiently up ahead at the sound of Joe's voice; after a moment he turned and stalked back.



"We gonna keep goin' or what?" His eyes were hard, purposeful, devoid of any emotion beyond the desire to continue moving.

"The way we're supposed to go," 'Wraith said.

"Yeah, but for how long?" Joe looked around. The light was starting to dim a bit—they hadn't noticed it before because it had been so subtle, but it was definitely darker than it had been when they had started. "We can't just keep walking forever, can we?"

"I think we should keep going, at least for awhile," Kestrel said, coming up next to them. "Maybe we'll reach the exit before it gets dark."

"Or maybe we won't," Ocelot said shortly.

"So what do you want to do—just stop?" Winterhawk was quick to break in before the conversation escalated to something none of them wanted to deal with. "I don't fancy staying here for the night, I don't know about the rest of you."

They stood in a circle now, regarding each other tensely because none of them had any idea what to do beyond continuing as they had been and none of them wanted to admit it. Occasionally one of them—usually 'Wraith, but the others more often than was customary—glanced around to make sure that nothing was sneaking up on them, but those glances revealed nothing but rocks and darkening sky.

When the fog rose around them it did so in such a quick progression that they almost didn't have time to notice it before it engulfed them. It started low, the sort of thick white mist that rises up from the ground, and quickly grew higher as the runners continued their conversation. 'Wraith noticed it first, when it had reached ankle level. "Look," he said, pointing.

By the time the others looked—the space of less than a second—the fog had risen again and was at knee level. It

seemed to be both coming up out of the ground and rolling in from both ends of the canyon. Ocelot's gaze darted quickly off in all directions, but he could see no place where the fog hadn't either reached or wasn't about to reach. "Hawk? Can you get us outta here?"

"Not all of us, I'm afraid." Winterhawk had already considered the levitation possibility again, but was loath to leave his friends behind.

"Stay together," Kestrel called, moving in closer and reaching out to them. The fog had reached waist-high on everyone but Joe and 'Wraith now. "We don't want to lose each other!"

The others quickly agreed and moved in, each one grasping the hands of his or her nearest neighbors. By coincidence or design, Ocelot and Kestrel ended up on opposite ends of the chain. The fog was chest-high. "Let's try to keep going forward slowly," Ocelot said. "Maybe it'll fade as fast as it came up."

"Careful," Joe added. "We don't know what's up ahead."

"We also don't know how long we can breathe this stuff," Kestrel pointed out. "Come on. Let's go."

They started moving forward again while they could still tell what direction forward was. The fog rose steadily, fortified by more drifts that continued to roll in from the two ends. In only a few seconds it had risen high enough to cover Kestrel's eyes, then Ocelot's and Winterhawk's, then 'Wraith's and finally Joe's. It was a cold, dank mist with a faint odd odor, white and swirling, so thick that each of them could barely see the shadowy forms of the people on either side of them. Each could feel his or her neighbor stiffen as they were engulfed. "Can you still hear me?" Ocelot called, his voice unnaturally loud in the whiteness that stopped vision every bit as effectively as darkness did.

"Still here," Winterhawk's came back with quick reassurance. The others joined their voices to the call.

"At least we can still breathe," Kestrel said. The mist seemed to be no more harmful to respiration than normal fog; apart from the odd odor, there was no immediate problem apparent in that regard.

"So we just keep moving forward?" Joe asked. Looking down he could see the ground for about a meter diameter around his feet, but no further.

"Either that or stop and wait for it to clear." Ocelot didn't sound like that was his choice of action.

"Don't know if it will," 'Wraith pointed out.

"So we go?" Winterhawk asked. "All in favor?"

Everyone was in favor, so they went on. It was a disconcerting feeling, walking along grasping the hand of someone they couldn't see, looking down at their feet to make sure there was still ground beneath them. Several times someone tripped, but the clasped hands meant that they did not have to fall. Fortunately Joe, with his large frame and huge feet, was not one of the trippers. None of their cybernetic vision enhancements helped them see: thermographic vision revealed a uniform level of chill with the bright red glows of their bodies in its center, and low light was no help at all. They went on, shuffling their way forward with no idea of where they were going or when they were going to arrive.

The fog lifted.

Its departure was even more sudden than its arrival; although there was no hint of a wind, the effect was as if someone had set up a large fan in front of them and turned it to its highest setting. The white mists dissipated into nothingness behind them. "What the—?" Ocelot whispered.

The canyon was gone.

"Not in Kansas anymore," 'Wraith said.

"No..." Winterhawk agreed speculatively. "No, I don't think we are at all."

Where before there had been spread out before them only an unforgiving landscape of red rocks, dust, and rising cliffside walls, now their vision was filled with the sight of a city. It was nearly full dark; no stars were visible through the haze of clouds (at least the *sky* was the same, if nothing else was); illumination was provided by streetlights, the occasional glow of a building's window, the flash of neon, and the darting headlights of automobiles.

They were on the edge of it now, but the city seemed to have no suburbs—instead, it rose out of the desolate ground like some sort of mirage growing up out of a barren desert. Within it, life pulsed and hurried and went about its business; outside was nothing but unrelenting rock and the far-off line of the horizon and the mountains. The roads were the strangest of all—from their vantage point, the runners could see that they extended to the edge of the city and went no further. It was as if the city were the only thing of anything importance in the world—there was nowhere else to go, or nowhere else anyone would *want* to go.

The runners stared. "Gabriel's *here*?" Joe asked.

"Good bet," 'Wraith said. He was looking at the city. "Odd—looks familiar, but not quite."

Winterhawk nodded. "I was having the same feeling. 'The buildings, the signs—it's got sort of a malevolent, 'hell goes Art Deco' feel to it. I know I've seen it somewhere before, but I can't place where."

"Speaking of hell meeting Art Deco..." Kestrel said, "Check out our clothes."

They hadn't been paying any attention to their attire—the sight of the strange self-contained city ahead had captured their attention fully. Now they did as

Kestrel directed and looked first down at themselves and then at each other. "Interesting..." was 'Wraith's only comment.

They were dressed in a sort of modified, stereotypical 1930s-gangster-era style, in dark pinstriped suits, wingtip shoes, and fedoras. Winterhawk's mageblade, which still felt in his hand no different than it had before, appeared instead as an elegant walking stick topped with a fiery blue gem. Kestrel's outfit was slightly out of character for the era but different from the men's: she wore black slacks and a white blouse covered by a long tan trenchcoat. Her hat had a wider brim than her companions' and slanted low down over her eyes.

"Okay..." Joe said, examining each of his friends in turn. "So we're gangsters?"

"No tommy guns," 'Wraith said. He sounded slightly disappointed. As if to punctuate his words, the sound of gunfire broke the silence of the night. It sounded far away and died out quickly.

"Sounds like we might get some soon if we play our cards right," Joe said.

"How the hell are we gonna find him in a city that big?" Ocelot said, crouching down and leaning his elbows on his knees. "There's gotta be at least a million people down there. Doesn't seem like stopping people on the street and asking them, 'Hey, have you seen this guy?' is gonna be very useful."

"Won't know until we get there," 'Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded. "It's fairly clear that's where we're supposed to go, so what are we waiting for?"

It took them about half an hour to trudge down the hillside and into the outskirts of the city. As they were doing so, no one appeared to be paying any attention to

them. They saw the occasional glimpse of movement around the city's edges—cars only, no individual people—but even as they drew up close and prepared to enter, no one acknowledged their presence. Twice more on their way down they had heard the sounds of gunfire: once a barrage from a machine gun and once a series of loud *cracks* that could only be some kind of handgun. “Busy place,” Joe had remarked.

They stopped for a moment at the edge of one of the streets leading into the heart of the city, as none of them thought that their aura of invisibility would continue to cover them once they'd gotten inside. “Any last words?” Ocelot asked. He'd been trying to be flippant but it came out sounding ominous instead.

“We'd better stay together,” Joe said. “We might not have any way to contact each other if we get separated.”

“And lie low,” Winterhawk added. “At least until we get the feel of the place.”

“We're so good at *that*,” Kestrel said wryly. “But we can try.”

Ocelot took a deep breath. “Okay, then. Let's go.”

They stepped onto the road at roughly the same time, but it was Kestrel who turned back and gasped. “Look!” she whispered.

The others quickly whirled to see what she was pointing at and were hit with varying degrees of shock: where before they had seen the gray strip of road extend to the edge of the town and stop, it appeared now to continue out into the desert. It looked every bit the part of a perfectly normal road leading out of town. “What the hell—?” Ocelot demanded.

“Stuck here now,” Wraith said dispassionately.

The others realized he was probably right. No one wanted to test the hypothesis by trying to take the road out of town, but they all suspected that wherever they

ended up, it would not be back where they were only a few moments before.

"Isn't magic grand?" Winterhawk asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm.

"Come on," Kestrel urged. "We're here now. Let's find him, do whatever we're supposed to do, and get the hell out. This place is already giving me the creeps."

"Not surprising," Wraith said. "Horror controlled."

Winterhawk nodded soberly. "We'll be needing to be very careful. I can feel it—this is not, as you say, a nice place at all."

"Does your magic still work in here?" Joe asked, glancing around for unwelcome visitors. They had moved off to the side of the road; it wasn't much cover, but it was better than standing out where any passing car could see them.

Winterhawk looked startled, as if that hadn't occurred to him. He held out his mageblade/walking stick in front of him and attempted to levitate it. It floated up out of his hand and hovered in midair. "Apparently so," he said, satisfied. The cane lowered back into his hand.

"At least *something's* working in our favor," Ocelot muttered. "We need to get some weapons, though. Can't rely on magic for everything."

Wraith nodded. "Agreed."

Kestrel was looking around. They were standing in a vacant lot that was overgrown with scrubby plants and strewn with garbage. The night air was chilly and a bit damp; it carried a faint musty smell and something else she couldn't quite identify. "Let's go into town," she said, pulling her coat closer around her. "That's probably where the action is."

They set off in that direction, trying to stay under cover as much as possible. All of them felt uneasy, like something was waiting to happen, but things seemed

quiet for the moment. Every step forward increased their feelings of foreboding.

A couple of cars passed them and went on without slowing or stopping. The runners watched them go by. "Mid to late 1930s," Ocelot said, and 'Wraith nodded in agreement.

"But not quite," Winterhawk said. "It looks rather like the Horrors tried to do the American gangster era and didn't get it quite right. Like—"

"Like a movie," Joe put in. "Like those old gangster movies from the 1900s."

"Makes sense, really," Winterhawk said. "The metaplanes, or the Horrors, or whoever's building this little scenario, is getting it from our minds, so it only stands to reason that they'd get it a little skewed."

"Our minds, or Gabriel's?" 'Wraith asked.

"Whichever way they went, they've certainly put a dark spin on things." Winterhawk took another nervous look around. "I keep expecting vultures to swoop down or something."

They heard the scream before they saw its source. Loud, piercing, terror-stricken, it rose up into the night and then died into what sounded like a sob.

The runners barely had time to exchange glances before they were moving. They ran toward the sound, spreading out to remain under cover but still keeping each other in sight. They all knew this could be a trick.

It certainly didn't look like a trick, though. As they rounded a corner they could see a small neighborhood park laid out ahead of them, its block-sized grassy expanse cut through with small paths and lit sporadically by smaller versions of the few streetlights the runners had seen. These things were not, however, what had captured their attention. That had been seized by the dark form of one of the black cars parked across the sidewalk, its doors



open, its occupants—four burly men in dark suits—moving menacingly toward a terrified man pressed back against one of the trees. Next to him was a woman, probably the source of the scream. The two victims' eyes were locked on the men approaching them. Two of the men carried machine guns—big old-fashioned drum-fed tommy guns that looked like they came out of an old flatscreen gangster flick—while the other two did not appear to be armed. It was they who were advancing on the couple against the tree.

"Looks like we got our guns," Ocelot whispered to 'Wraith. There was an odd, satisfied gleam in his eyes. He'd been waiting quite some time for a chance to kick some butt, and here was his opportunity.

"I'll try to get the two with the guns from here," Winterhawk murmured. "Get into position first and give me a signal when you want me to go. Be ready if I don't get them both."

The other runners melted off into the night. Winterhawk kept his eyes on the scene below, peripherally aware of his friends moving through the trees to surround the park.

The two unarmed men were moving closer to the frightened couple. One of them said something, his voice deep and gruff, but Winterhawk couldn't hear what it was. The male victim said something that earned him a vicious backhand across the face from the second of the two tormentors. The two with machine guns stepped forward in anticipation.

Across the park, Ocelot waved. They were in place.

*All right, let's go then,* Winterhawk told himself, and cast his spell.

The satisfying flower of bright magical energy erupted around the two gun-wielding gangsters. One dropped like a rock, his gun falling to the grass, while the

other clutched his head with one hand, kept hold of the gun, and bit out a loud curse as he fell to his knees.

The other two men whirled.

The runners were already in action. Ocelot vaulted from his hiding place between the trees, aiming a vicious kick at the head of the injured machine-gunner. Kestrel came in from a different angle, going for one of the two apparently unarmed men. The man attempted to draw something from inside his coat, but by Kestrel's standards he was moving in slow motion. He dropped like a rock under her assault.

Winterhawk, hanging back where his magical abilities would be most useful, caught a movement out of the corner of his eye and stiffened. "In the car!" he called. "There's another one in the—"

He needn't have worried. Joe was already on it. On his way into position he had picked up a pair of his favorite improvised weapons—large rocks—and now proceeded to put one through the driver's side window of the car. This took out not only the window but the man behind it, who had been attempting to get it lowered so he could bring his tommy-gun around. The gun barked once and Joe cursed as a round tore into his arm, but then the man slumped. Joe grabbed the gun. "'Wraith!" he called, and tossed the gun over the roof of the car to the elf.

As soon as it settled into 'Wraith's hands, his expression changed slightly. He looked...pleased. With fierce calm he spun around and let loose with a volley of lead that made short work of the remaining gangsters.

As the echoes of the gunfire died down and the runners allowed themselves to take stock of the situation, they once again noticed the two victims. They stood huddled against the tree, their arms around each other, staring with terror at the team who had just liberated them.

"It's okay," Kestrel reassured them. "They won't bother you anymore." The dead or unconscious bodies of all five of the gangsters lay strewn around the grass; 'Wraith and Joe were already going through their pockets and collecting their weapons.

"You – you –" The man seemed barely able to speak; the woman didn't even try. He looked at the bodies and then at Kestrel. He had an angry red welt rising on his face and his lip was bleeding slightly from where the men had backhanded him.

Winterhawk came up next to her. "We're no threat to you," he said, his tone soothing. "Why were they attacking you?"

The man tried to get himself under control, watching the elf and the troll tossing guns into the back seat of the black car. "You – who are you?"

"We're new in town," Kestrel said.

"They'll kill you..." the woman whispered fearfully. "When they find out –"

"You let us worry about that," Winterhawk told her. He cocked his head in question. "*Who* will kill us?" Glancing around, he noticed that Ocelot was keeping an eye on the scene to make sure they didn't get any more unwelcome guests at their little party.

The man seemed to be getting a bit of his courage back. He nodded toward the bodies. "Their people. Those men – were part of the Salazaros." When no recognition showed on the faces of the newcomers, he sighed. "You *must* be new in town if you haven't heard of the Salazaros. They're one of the biggest gangs in town."

"So why were they bothering you?" Kestrel asked. "You don't look like gangsters."

The woman shook her head. "We're shopkeepers. We own a little grocery store not far from here. The Salazaros – they collect...money from us each month –"

"Protection money," Kestrel said grimly.

The man nodded. "They get the money, they leave us alone. But this month—sales...they weren't so good...and we had to send some money to our son and his wife—their new baby is sick, and —"

The woman patted his arm, then looked at Winterhawk and Kestrel. "We tried to explain it, but they didn't listen. They came back tonight—tore up our store—We tried to run away, but—" She shook her head, tears springing to her eyes once more. She buried her face in her husband's shoulder and sobbed. He slipped his arm around her and looked at their rescuers helplessly.

"What about the police?" Winterhawk asked. He looked over his shoulder at the sound of a car door closing and saw that Joe and 'Wraith had finished loading up the car with the gangers' equipment; 'Wraith was in the driver's seat and Joe was coming over. "Can't you call them about this?"

The man shook his head. "Police? No, the police can't help anybody. They're so overpowered by the gangs that they don't even try anymore. Mostly they just worry about what little non-gang crime there is—but the gangs mostly take care of that themselves."

"Don't like competition." Kestrel's tone was bitter.

Winterhawk took a deep breath. "Well—we can't stay here, and we can't leave you here. Is there—somewhere we can take you?"

The man appeared to be trying to gather his thoughts. His wife looked up, brushing tears from her cheeks, and said, "Could you—take us home? We can get our car and go stay with our children for awhile. We can't go back to our store—"

'Hawk and Kestrel exchanged glances, and then the mage nodded. "Of course. Is it far?" Gently he began

guiding the terrified couple toward the car; Kestrel got on the other side and did the same thing.

"No. Only a few blocks from here." The man looked at them as if just realizing something. "How—how can we ever thank you for this? It was so dangerous—no one does that sort of thing anymore. No one helps—"

Kestrel smiled. "Guess we're just the good guys. Don't worry about it. Just be careful." She opened the car's back door and helped the couple in, then got in next to them. It was a tight fit with seven people, but they managed.

"You should be careful as well, my dear," the woman said. "The gangs are—" She gasped, looking forward to the passenger seat, which Joe had claimed. "Oh! You're hurt!"

"It's okay," Joe said. He was clutching his left arm, where blood trickled from between his fingers. "We can take care of it later. Didn't go through." He had one of the machine guns across his lap; Wraith had a second (it was awkward as he was driving, but he wouldn't give it up) and Kestrel had the third leaning against the seat next to her.

The woman nodded, looking dubious. "Be careful," she said again.

The couple's home was an apartment in a shabby building only a few minutes away from the park. No one appeared to be waiting for them at the moment, but they all knew that could change any minute. The runners accompanied them to their car and waited while they got it going. "Are you sure there's nothing we can do for you?" the man asked. His gaze darted around nervously—he clearly wanted to be off—but he knew how much he owed these odd newcomers.

Most of them shook their heads, but Joe spoke up. "Do you know somewhere we can stay? A hotel or a

rooming house or something where they won't ask any questions?"

The man smiled. "Yes. That I can help you with. My cousin runs a small rooming house. His name's Albert Ferone." He gave them the address, and nodded. "You just tell Al that his cousin Frank sent you, and he'll take care of you. It's the least I can do."

As he was about to pull out, 'Wraith took something from his pocket and handed it to Frank. "Here."

Frank stared at what the elf had given him: it was a small sheaf of money. "What—?"

"From the men. Not all—we need some. To get you started."

None of the other runners objected to 'Wraith's generosity. Frank looked mystified, but grateful. "Thank you," he whispered. "God bless you all."

He drove away, leaving the five runners standing next to their newly-acquired car.

Winterhawk let his breath out slowly. "Well," he said at last, "We *did* want some weapons and transportation."

The five of them rearranged themselves more comfortably in the car and 'Wraith started driving again, toward the destination Frank had given them. "What did you get from them?" Kestrel asked the elf.

It was Joe who answered, pulling things from his pockets. "The three machine guns, plus three pistols and all their wallets. 'Wraith has the money."

Silently 'Wraith withdrew another wad of money from his pocket and passed it back to Kestrel. "Count?"

She did. "Looks like we've got about four hundred dollars here. That should be enough to keep us in food and shelter until we find Gabriel."

"If not, we can always mug another bunch of gangsters," Winterhawk said wryly.

Joe handed a pistol to Ocelot and one to Winterhawk. He held up the third and 'Wraith claimed it after Kestrel waved it off. "We should check the trunk," Joe said. "There might be ammo back there." He opened the glove compartment and found only old cigarette packs, a dirty coffee cup, and a rolled-up girlie magazine. He was reaching to close it when he winced, clutching his arm. "Man...this is worse than I thought."

"Almost there," 'Wraith said, turning a corner. "This is the street."

Winterhawk nodded. "Can you hold out until we get inside? I'll heal you then."

"Yeah," Joe said. "I'll be okay. Forgot what it felt like to get shot without armor, that's all."

They pulled into the driveway leading up to the rooming house, which was a small, self-contained structure set slightly back from the street. The sign out front read *Ferone's Rooming House. Rooms Available.* Winterhawk opened the door when the car had come to a stop. "Let's not all go—we might spook the chap. Somebody come with me."

Ocelot and Kestrel moved to swing out of opposite sides of the car at the same time; they looked at each other and then Ocelot got back in. "You go," he said.

She nodded, her gaze lingering on him for a moment, then joined Winterhawk. The mage gave her an encouraging pat on the back and they headed for the door. "Hope we don't wake him up. It's a bit late for visitors."

If Albert Ferone had been asleep there was certainly no sign of it. The door opened a few inches only seconds after their first knock. "Yes?" came a voice from the darkness inside.

"Mr. Ferone? Good evening. My name is Stone, and this is my associate, Ms. Harvath. We and some friends

are in need of rooms. Have you any available? Your cousin Frank suggested that we come here."

"Frank?" The door swung wide, revealing a man in his mid 40s who bore more than a passing resemblance to his storekeeper cousin. He looked them up and down. "How is Frank? How do you know him?"

"He ran into a bit of trouble with the Salazaros," the mage said softly, "but he and his wife are fine. They've gone to stay with their children. We're new in town and looking for a place to stay, so after we helped them out of their jam, he suggested we come here."

"Oh, dear..." Ferone suddenly remembered his manners. "Please—come in. Come in. Are your friends here?"

Kestrel nodded and hurried off to get them. In a few minutes all five runners and their gear were inside Ferone's parlor. He closed the door behind them, eyeing the machine guns warily, but said nothing.

Winterhawk looked at Joe, who was clearly in pain and trying to hide it, and then at Ferone. "Mr. Ferone, if you would be so kind, could you please show us to our rooms and let us know what we'll owe for the night? We're all quite tired, and we'd be happy to talk more in the morning."

Ferone looked startled, but nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm a bit jumpy lately. Please follow me."

He led them up the stairs to three rooms at the end of a hall. "This is all I have available. The lady can have the small room here to herself—these two are larger, so you gentlemen can share. Bath's down the other end of the hallway." He paused, looking them over as if he was considering saying something, but decided not to. "Sleep well. We can settle up in the morning."

After he left the team got together in the largest of the three rooms and closed the door behind them. 'Wraith



helped Winterhawk get Joe's jacket off; the mage's eyes widened when he saw the extent of the wound. It was worse than he'd thought. The bullet hadn't gone all the way through, but it had plowed a deep furrow across the troll's upper arm. Ocelot went off to the bathroom to get something to clean up with while Winterhawk sat down next to Joe and began his healing spell. By the time Ocelot returned he had finished and both he and Joe looked tired—Joe from blood loss and 'Hawk from the drain of casting the healing spell without any of his usual foci.

"Better rest," 'Wraith said. "Can't do much tonight. Start in the morning?"

"Start *what*?" Ocelot was pacing again. "We haven't got the first clue where to start with this."

Winterhawk nodded. "From the look of things, we'll have to be careful. We could put not only ourselves, but Gabriel in danger if we ask indiscriminate questions."

"With *his* magic?" Joe spoke up. "Nobody'd be able to touch him."

'Hawk sighed. "Good point. So we might assume that he's safe from harm—although Neferet *did* say he could be in danger. Either way, it still doesn't help us with where he is."

"Like a run," 'Wraith said suddenly.

Ocelot stopped. "Huh?"

"A run," the elf repeated. "Unfamiliar city. No contacts. Forget the rest."

The others nodded slowly. "Yeah," Ocelot said at last. "That's the way we're gonna have to handle it. At least we've got a car and some weapons now."

"So we'll start in the morning?" Winterhawk asked. "I'm afraid I'm not going to be much use without at least a few hours' sleep—magic works here, obviously, but it's harder to cast. Drain's nasty."

'Wraith nodded. "Morning."

"Yeah," Ocelot agreed. "And maybe by then those guys' friends won't be looking quite so hard for us, too."

Kestrel didn't look pleased about having to hold off the search until the next day, but she knew it was the only wise course of action. "Early," she said. "I'll see you guys then."

Ocelot sat up in bed and sighed. It didn't surprise him that he couldn't sleep, but he'd hoped that maybe he'd be able to for at least a couple of hours. Across the room in the other bed Winterhawk slept deeply, his slow breathing rhythmic and peaceful. The mage had been asleep almost as soon as his head had hit the pillow; Ocelot envied him but knew it was for the best.

It had been about an hour since the five of them had parted and gone off to their various rooms. Ocelot had gotten into bed the same time Winterhawk had, but had succeeded only in tossing and turning fitfully as his mind refused to quiet. Finally, sighing again, he swung his legs around and stood up. *Maybe a drink of water will help. Probably not, but at least it's something to do.* Moving on silent bare feet he crossed the room, opened the door, and stepped out into the hall. He stopped as he noticed movement outside.

Kestrel was just opening the door to her room. She started almost guiltily at the sound of the door and then her eyes met Ocelot's. "Hi."

He paused, his hand still on the doorknob. "Hi." His tone was neutral.

"I was just coming back from the bathroom — couldn't sleep."

He nodded. "Yeah. Me neither."

She took a deep breath. "Ocelot, I — I think we need to talk."

"About what?" He didn't know why he said it, why he was being deliberately cruel.

Kestrel looked away. "Please. Just for a few minutes. Will you—come in?" She swung open the door to her room and motioned toward the interior.

Ocelot shrugged. After a pause he moved slowly toward her, past her into the room.

It was a small room, barely half the size of the one he shared with Winterhawk. The bed was tucked under a slanting wall that probably followed the roof line; the sheets were disarrayed as if the occupant had been doing more tossing than sleeping. There was a small desk with a wooden chair next to the window and a dresser by the door. Ocelot leaned against the dresser with his arms crossed over his chest and waited.

Kestrel paced, her restless energy not allowing her the luxury of sitting down. "I didn't want you to find out that way," she said at last, not looking at him. The window looked out over a small grassy backyard lit by a streetlight; she watched this as she spoke.

"Sounds like you didn't want me to find out at all." He couldn't keep the gruffness out of his voice, but to his credit he tried.

She wheeled on him—her eyes crackled with anger that didn't reach her face. "It wasn't really your business, you know. It's not like we're—exactly together anymore."

"Yeah. I guess we're not." Ocelot had never been comfortable with this kind of conversation—it was the social equivalent of picking one's way through a minefield in the dark and there was no room for his usual explosive action. "So was what he said true?"

She tilted her head. "What?"

"All of it. You heard it, didn't you? That you want him, not me? That he's better in bed than I am?"

Kestrel sighed loudly, shaking her head in exasperation. "Ocelot, that wasn't Gabriel. I don't understand this Dweller thing very well, but it was pretty clear it was *trying* to get you to fight it. Of course it'll say things like that."

"So is it true or not?"

"I'm not going to answer that. You have no right to ask."

He pushed himself off the dresser with a loud sigh of his own. He knew she was right, but something deep inside him wanted her to answer anyway. "Okay," he said. "Fine. But what happened to 'it's not gonna happen'? What happened to 'he doesn't date outside his species'?" He paused. "That — thing — that looked like him said it was your idea. Was it?"

Kestrel sank down onto the bed. "Ocelot —"

"Was it?"

She nodded, looking back up at him. "Yeah. It was. Is that what you wanted to hear?" This time the anger *did* reach her face. "You know, I really don't like this Neanderthal side of you. You know I sleep with other guys. I know you sleep with other women. Why does this one *bother* you so much? What is it about Gabriel that upsets you this way when none of the other guys I'm with does?"

Ocelot didn't answer.

Kestrel stared at him, wide-eyed, as something in his posture, in his eyes revealed the answer to her. "He was right about *you*, wasn't he?"

"What?"

"About settling down. About us, and the future. You *do* think about that, don't you? And Gabriel — somehow he threatens that, because you know he's not just somebody I see for a little fun and move on." She moved closer to him, taking his shoulders in her hands.

"Ocelot...listen to me. I don't *know* what I want to do in the future. I don't let myself think about it. I'm not ready to think about it yet. I'm having fun doing what I'm doing, and I'm not planning on changing it anytime soon." She paused, sighing. "I don't know what to tell you."

"You love him, don't you?" His eyes met hers.

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Why now? Yeah, I know how you feel about him, but—How many times?"

"Huh?"

"How many times have you slept with him?"

"Ocelot—"

"Come on. Just tell me, okay?"

She thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Just once."

"Why?"

She pulled her hands back and went over to the window, her back to him. "You're asking a lot of questions you have no right to ask, you know."

"I know. And I can't make you answer. I just want to know."

Turning, she leaned back so her hands were gripping the edge of the windowsill. "All right—you want to know, I'll tell you. It was because he was torturing himself over what he thought he'd done to me. He'd just told me what had happened, that the Horrors had tried to take over his mind, that they were back and he didn't know what to do—I was scared, Ocelot. He was too. It was a natural thing. It wasn't calculated or planned. It just—happened. I wanted to feel alive again—to help him see what it felt like to be human and alive and scared and comforted." She glared at him. "I don't regret it for a minute. If I had it to do over again, I wouldn't change it. Is that what you want to hear?"

Ocelot looked down. "So...when we get back—all of us, I mean—that's the way it is?"

There was a long pause. She shook her head, her expression confused and frustrated and uncertain all at the same time. "I don't know. I don't think so." She met his eyes. "It was wonderful, Ocelot. I know I don't regret it, and I know Gabriel doesn't. But—I don't think it's going to happen again. Take that for what it's worth."

"What—he doesn't want to?" Now it was Ocelot's turn to be confused. "But you said—"

"No, no. I don't *know*. I can't explain it. It's just—a feeling. Like—it was meant to be and now that it's over, we can move on. Do you understand?"

"No." Before she could reply, he added, "but that's okay. I don't have to understand." He met her eyes. "I don't like it, Kestrel. You're right. I can't compete with him. I see the way you look at him. Nobody can compete with that. I thought we were—over. That was one thing that Dweller bastard had right—I was wrong about that. You can do with that whatever you want to, but it's the truth. That was why I didn't end up trying to beat the shit out of him—because I realized somewhere in the back of my head that everything he said was true."

She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and smiled a tiny wry smile. "This relationship stuff isn't easy, is it?"

"Hell, no."

"Why do you think I like doing it like you guys do—have a little fun, no strings, move on? A lot easier that way."

"Yeah..." he agreed. He was silent a moment, then said, "Okay, so where are we now?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Where do you think we are?"

"Damned if I know."

She leaned over and kissed him on the tip of the nose. "Tell you what—I can see you haven't gotten all the way through this yet. Why don't we just put the whole thing on hold for now and bring it up again when we get back, okay?"

He looked into her green eyes and nodded. "Yeah. This ain't the time for it. What's going on right now is too dangerous—can't let personal stuff get in the way. Later, maybe. Not now. It ain't over, but it'll have to be over for now."

She smiled. "Yeah." Impulsively she pulled him into a hug. "You're a good friend, Ocelot. No matter what else happens, you'll always be a good friend. Whether we can go—other places—we'll figure that out. I promise."

He sighed, but a little smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "Do you know how much guys hate being told women consider them good friends?"

She punched his shoulder gently. "Better get used to it, chummer. 'Cause I do know one thing about my future—if I ever end up with *anybody* on a permanent basis, he'd better be a good friend before he's anything else." Motioning toward the door, she added, "You'd better get to sleep. Morning's going to be here soon and you can't afford to be tired tomorrow."

"Yes, Mom," he grumbled.

"Ocelot?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember what you said about how much guys hate it when women say they're good friends?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, double that and that's how much women hate being called 'Mom' by guys they're interested in." Her smile was genuinely playful now.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, and closed the door behind him.

The next morning when they arrived downstairs, they found Albert Ferone waiting for them. A simple but obviously lovingly prepared breakfast was laid out on the table; when they looked at him questioningly he merely indicated for them to sit down. "Frank called last night," he said when they had done so. "He told me what you did for him and Millie. Frank and I—we grew up together. I don't know how I can thank you for helping him out like that. I do know one thing, though—you've got yourselves a place to stay for as long as you want it."

"Mr. Ferone—" Winterhawk began, but the man waved him off.

"Don't even mention it. It's the least I can do." Ferone tucked into a plate of pancakes, motioning for them to do the same. "Plenty more where that came from."

"We appreciate everything, Mr. Ferone," Kestrel said, smiling. "We're glad we were able to help your cousin. None of us like to see people being—bullied like that."

Ferone nodded soberly. "You folks aren't from around here, are you?"

Ocelot shook his head. "You could say that."

The man put his fork down and looked at his guests with an expression of worried intensity. "Well, let me tell you this—be careful. This town ain't a nice place, not since the Salazaros and the Rileys took over. The only way you stay alive is by keepin' your head down and stayin' out of their way. And for God's sake don't get noticed. If I was you, I'd get in that car of yours and head right back out of town, back to wherever you come from. I'd hate to see somethin' happen to you, after what you did for Frank and Millie."

Kestrel shook her head. "We can't do that. We're here looking for someone. A friend of ours who's—lost."



Ferone's gaze settled on her. "Yeah? I don't get out as much as I used to, but if you tell me about him, I'll keep my eye out and ask a few friends to do the same." He shrugged. "It's a big city – not much chance, but it's worth a shot."

Kestrel nodded. "I don't know what he'd be going by here—possibly Gabriel, possibly something else. He's young—early twenties—about my height, black hair...probably the most obvious thing about him is his eyes. They're bright purple. He's the kind of guy you'd remember if you saw him."

Ferone took that in while chewing a mouthful of pancake. "Like I said, I'll keep an eye out. Is he—like you?"

"What do you mean, like us?" Ocelot asked, frowning.

The man considered a moment before answering. "Is he the kind of person who might get himself into trouble helping folks out of jams?"

Kestrel grinned at the description. "More than we are, probably."

"A real do-gooder," Ocelot added.

Ferone nodded. "Have you got any idea why he's here? You say he's 'lost.' How do you know that?"

"*Lost* isn't precisely the word," Winterhawk said.

"He's looking for his brother," Kestrel added. "He—his brother, I mean—is in a lot of trouble, and he wants to help. We just think he might have gotten in over his head, so we're trying to find him and help him."

"You think this brother might be in trouble with the mobs?" Ferone asked, nodding sympathetically.

"Yes..." Winterhawk said slowly, as if realizing something. "Yes, I think that's probably exactly what's happened."

The man let out a long sigh. "I wish I could tell you I thought things would work out, but when you get in that

kind of trouble—ain't much anybody can do to help you. Nobody goes against the gangs—at least not and gets out alive. They don't stand for anybody tryin' to muscle in on their territory."

"What about the police?" Joe asked. "Frank said they weren't much use, but—"

Ferone shook his head. "They aren't. Oh, they try, but they're outgunned and outnumbered and they know it. The only reason they haven't given up completely is 'cause half of 'em are on the payroll of one or the other of the big gangs. They take care of the little crime stuff that the bosses don't want to get their hands dirty with."

"So you think..." Kestrel said slowly, "...that if Gabriel's brother is messed up with these gangs and Gabriel goes after him—"

Ferone looked down. "Sorry, but I'm not gonna lie to you. If you're gonna find him, you'd better do it before he finds them, or you'll probably never see him again." He looked up at them. "I'll do my best—I do have a few friends I can ask to take a look around. But the only other advice I can give you is to hurry and to stay low. Frank told me how you took out that group of goons that was after him and Millie, but the mobs've got a lot of guys and a lot of firepower, and they're nasty as hell. You know what I mean?"

In less than an hour they were out on the streets, cruising around in their stolen car and getting the lay of the land. Ocelot, using some paint supplied by Ferone, had done a bit of an art project on the car's license plate just in case anyone happened to be looking for it. He couldn't do much about the car itself, but they soon realized that a low-slung, four-door black car was about

as ubiquitous here as a business suit in downtown New York City.

Several hours later all they had to show for their efforts was a lingering despair about what was going on in the city. They had agreed before they went out that it would be dangerous to their mission to try to repeat their performance with Frank and Millie Ferone, especially given that their weapons had limited ammunition and they didn't have a way to get any more. None of them was happy about it, but the reason they were here was to find Gabriel. If they got themselves killed in the pursuit of that aim, it wouldn't do anyone any good. They had to keep reminding themselves that this entire reality had been manufactured for their benefit and that the whole thing was literally taking place in their minds.

It got harder and harder to look the other way, though. In the course of the approximately five hours that they drove around looking for anything familiar or potentially useful, they saw two drive-by shootings (both resulting in obvious and irrevocable fatalities) and three instances of various citizens being hassled by large men in pinstriped suits. Clearly the mobsters were every bit as much in power around here as their host had claimed. The acts were open, blatant, committed in the full light of day (such as it was) as if daring anyone to challenge them. The team noticed that no one did—anyone who wasn't being directly affected got out of the way as quickly as possible, melting into the shadows and the insides of the buildings. There were no heroes here, it seemed.

Aside from the activities they had witnessed, the city itself was depressing. "I've never seen a bigger collection of black and dark gray buildings outside of some overwrought vampire movie," Winterhawk commented at one point, staring morosely out the car's shotgun-seat window at the towering brick and concrete structures that

rose up along the roads. "It's the middle of the bloody day, and it still looks like it ought to be midnight."

"Batman," Wraith said suddenly. He was driving, obsessively scanning the area for potential threats. He still had the tommy gun in his lap down below the level of the window.

"Huh?" Ocelot leaned forward in the back seat. "What's Batman got to do with anything?"

"Movie. 1990 or so. Looked like this."

"Yes," Winterhawk said, nodding with the look of someone who, after having had a thought on the tip of his mind for a long time, finally had it revealed to him. "That's it. Not quite, but damned close." He looked at Kestrel. "Gabriel wouldn't happen to be an aficionado of late-20th-century superhero movies, would he?"

She shrugged. "Not unless the superheroes had scales, as far as I know. But anything's possible."

"So we've got Batman meets Al Capone," Ocelot said, running a hand back through his hair. He considered a moment, then shook his head. "Nah, that doesn't even *rate* on the Weird-O-Meter. They'll have to try harder next time."

"Guys, we're gonna have to talk to somebody," Joe spoke up. "We can't just keep driving around. It's looking pretty certain that we're not just gonna see Gabriel walking down the street."

No one said anything. They all realized immediately that Joe had named the thing they were all trying not to think about—and that he was right. "Where, though?" Ocelot asked after a long silence. "This is a big town, and aside from Ferone, we don't know anybody."

"How does one find the shadow community when the whole *town* is in the shadows?" Winterhawk added, looking around.

Kestrel sighed. "I guess we hit the bars — that's what I used to do when I came to an unfamiliar town and wanted to find out where the action was."

"If Gabriel's where the action is," Ocelot said.

"Gabriel *is* the action," Winterhawk reminded him. "He's the reason this is all here. Who knows — it's possible this place doesn't even look the same for him as it does for us. We've no way to know for sure. But I'll lay odds that he's in the middle of things wherever he is."

"So all roads lead to Gabriel if we let 'em?" Joe asked.

"Moo," 'Wraith said.

"I hope you're right," Ocelot said slowly. "This doesn't feel like 'moo'. I don't know why, but it doesn't. Maybe it's because all the other times, we just kinda got led to whatever situation we were supposed to deal with. This time we just get the situation, but hardly any clues about what the hell we're supposed to do with it."

They were still cruising around the downtown area. There were enough cars like theirs that no one thus far had paid them any attention, so they weren't bothered as they continued to drive slowly down the town's main drags.

They found a good prospect after only a few minutes' drive. Bars were prevalent — so far they had not passed a block that hadn't had at least one — but they were all looking for something that *felt* right. None of them could verbalize exactly what that meant, but they all knew it — remembering where they were, it was not such a far-fetched notion.

The bar took up the corner of a large black building, its doorway set at an angle to the streetcorner. The name in neon above the door was *The Palm Club* — a neon palm tree flanked the words on one side, while on the other side a jaunty martini glass with an olive tilted rakishly inward. The neon looked a little washed out this time of

day, but still glowed boldly. Several of the dark cars were parked nearby.

Without consulting anyone, 'Wraith angled their own car into one of the few empty spaces and shut off the engine.

"We all going in?" Ocelot asked.

"Why not?" Winterhawk was watching the people moving in and out of the bar—mostly men, mostly pinstriped suits.

"We can't take the guns in—at least not the big ones," Kestrel pointed out.

"If we talk to the wrong person, we'll need to make a fast getaway," Ocelot said.

"I'll stay," 'Wraith said. He didn't look entirely pleased about it, but he likewise didn't look pleased about leaving their precious artillery unguarded in the car.

"I'll stay too," Joe volunteered. "I'll probably make people nervous in there and I'm the most memorable."

"Okay," Kestrel said. She handed her tommy gun to Joe, who leaned it against the seat next to his own, and opened the door. "Let's go then."

"We'll make it quick," Ocelot said.

The interior of the Palm Club was about what one would expect of a gangster-era bar in the middle of hell. Like everything else around here the interior was gloomy, all dark wood, dim lights, and smoke. A long black bar dominated one whole side of the establishment, which consisted of a long, narrow space that extended far back into smoky murkiness. The walls were covered with framed photographs of large men in suits who were grinning in a not completely wholesome fashion. The carpet was dark red, so dark it almost looked as black as the rest of the place. There was something else odd about the place but it took the three who entered a few seconds to notice it: the music playing from some unseen source

would have been a cheerful barroom tune except for the fact that it was being played in a minor key.

The bar was surprisingly full for this early in the day; the runners wondered if the concepts of 'night' and 'day' even had any real meaning here. "Nice place," Ocelot muttered under his breath.

"Lovely," Winterhawk agreed.

"Guess somebody forgot to tell the Horrors that the whole gangster thing was kinda tied up with Prohibition," Kestrel said, looking around at all the alcohol. "Either that or these guys just don't care."

All eyes seemed to be on them as they made their way through the crowd and back toward the bar itself. There seemed to be two classes of patrons here: the ordinary citizens who did their best to melt into the walls, stay out of the way, and enjoy their drinks in quiet, and the gangsters, pinstriped, loud, and boisterous, bellied up to the bar. Currently the two groups were leaving each other alone, although occasionally one of the gangsters would deliberately jostle someone's table on his way back toward the rear of the bar. The table occupant never objected to this, but merely tried to keep his eyes down until the trouble had passed. The relative harmony between the two classes of people was a bit confusing, given previous experience, until the runners noticed the presence of a couple more of the large men behind the bar. "They're probably charging the poor slots to get in here," Ocelot muttered as he became aware of this.

As if on cue, one of the men approached the group. "Afternoon, lady and gents." His voice was amiable enough, but the eyes that lurked beneath his heavy brows were two chips of ice. "This your first time at the Palm?"

"We're new in town," Winterhawk said. "Nice place you've got here."

"Thanks. We like to keep it that way. We got a two-dollar per person cover charge. To cover—overhead, ya know." He was talking to Winterhawk, but his eyes were on Kestrel. "Course, we could waive the fee for this nice lady here if she'd consent to let me buy her a drink—"

Ocelot shoved six dollars into the guy's hand as Kestrel's eyes hardened. "Here you go. Six bucks."

The guy looked mildly disappointed but didn't say anything. He carefully counted the money and squirreled it away inside his suit jacket, then motioned them past. "Enjoy yourselves," he told them before heading off in search of more unsuspecting newcomers.

"I think I need a shower," Kestrel said after he had gone, her lip curling with distaste.

"Just be cool," Ocelot said under his breath. He flashed her a quick fierce grin. "And remember that you can kick the shit outta anybody in here if you want to."

"There's that," she admitted, mollified for the moment.

Winterhawk was scanning the faces of the bar's other patrons. "This isn't going to be easy," he said, looking dubious.

He was right. After forty-five minutes they had gleaned no useful information. They'd split up and tried to engage various bar-goers in conversation, but the gangster types quickly grew suspicious of their questions and the civilians were afraid to say anything even if they knew it—which none of the three runners thought they did. Even the judicious application of a few dollars here and there in the form of free drinks or outright bribes failed to gain them anything useful. Ocelot sighed as they got back together. "This stinks," he muttered. "We're not gettin' anywhere. This isn't the way it worked before."

"That's not surprising," Winterhawk reminded him. "Remember what Nef—what our friend said about the



balance of power 'round here: I don't think we can count on Fate to be our friend in this endeavor."

"We'd better get going before somebody gets really suspicious." Kestrel glanced toward the door. "Joe and 'Wraith have been out there for awhile."

"Yeah." Ocelot headed for the door. His expression was frustrated and demoralized.

As the three runners made their way out of the bar no one impeded their progress. Several pairs of eyes, however, did pay a larger-than-expected amount of attention to their departure.

They repeated the same performance, varying only the particular individuals who went inside, at two different bars in two other parts of town and got essentially the same results. No one had seen or heard of anyone matching Gabriel's description; nobody had been aware of any newcomers arriving in town in the last few days; nobody offered any suggestions for where else they might look. It was difficult to tell if they were telling the truth—the few gangsters they bribed all had the same smug *I'm in control here and I know it* look, and the ordinary citizens had all looked vaguely frightened, not just of the gangsters but of the team and of the world in general.

Coming out of the last place they had stopped, a slick gambling joint called the Fortuna Club, Winterhawk, Kestrel, and Joe dropped into the car in frustration. "Nothing?" Ocelot asked as 'Wraith pulled away and merged back into traffic.

"Not a damned thing," 'Hawk said, running a disgusted hand back through his hair. "Just the same collection of large unpleasant men, a few wretched little chaps losing their savings at their rigged tables, and the usual assortment of ladies of questionable virtue."

"They looked like they wanted to toss us out," Kestrel added. "It's a good thing Joe went in with us that time. I don't think they wanted to mess with him."

"So now what do we do?" Ocelot sighed loudly. "We can't go to every damn bar in town. They're gonna get suspicious eventually, if they aren't already."

"Why don't we go back and see if Mr. Ferone's come up with anything?" Joe said. "Remember, he said he was gonna try."

Winterhawk shrugged. "It's as good an idea as any. It's getting dark; p'raps later on more people will be out and we can try a few more."

They made the drive back to Albert Ferone's rooming house in silence, each one of them alone with his or her own thoughts. They parked the car in the back and wearily went inside, taking their weapons with them.

Ferone was in the sitting room, in a pose that suggested that he had been waiting for them. He wasn't alone. His visitor was a middle-aged man with a craggy face, dressed in a dark suit with a white shirt and a thin black tie. "I was hoping you folks would come back sometime today," Ferone said, rising. "This is Mr. Wallace. He came by earlier. He wants to talk to you."

"What about your calls?" Ocelot asked, not looking at Wallace. "Did you find out anything?"

Ferone shook his head. "No. I didn't call Mr. Wallace—as I said, he came by. None of my friends had any suggestions. But—" he nodded toward Wallace "—I think you should talk to him. Please, sit down. I'll get some refreshments."

The runners warily took seats around the room. As usual, Winterhawk spoke first. "What can we do for you, Mr. Wallace?"

The man seemed unperturbed by their scrutiny. He had the look of someone who had seen and dealt with just

about everything in his lifetime and was no longer even affected by such things as suspicious examination. "I think it's the other way around," he said. His tone and his expression were weary; he looked like he hadn't slept for quite some time. He paid no attention to the weapons they carried. "I understand you folks are looking for someone."

"How did you find that out?" Ocelot asked. "I thought Ferone said none of the people he called could help us."

"He didn't call me. I just met him today, in fact." Wallace didn't look at Ocelot specifically as he spoke; his restless gaze moved over all of them, settling for a moment on each before moving on. "I heard about what you did last night—how you took out five of the Salazaros to help a couple of folks you didn't even know."

"So?" Ocelot still wasn't satisfied. "What's that got to do with who we're looking for?"

"Everything," Wallace said, still unmoved by Ocelot's suspicion. He paused a moment, then his gaze grew challenging. "Tell me, if you will—why did you do what you did?"

"Because it was right," Kestrel said firmly. "Because we all hate bullies. Because we couldn't stand just sitting there and watching it happen."

Wallace nodded once. "Even though you knew how dangerous the Salazaros were?"

"What dangerous?" Joe asked. "Yeah, they had guns and we didn't, but we were stronger, faster—"

"It wasn't even a contest," Kestrel finished.

Winterhawk's eyes narrowed a bit. "Tell us, Mr. Wallace—what is your interest in our purpose? Why did you come here seeking us?"

Wallace took a deep breath. "I have purposes of my own for that, which I'll reveal to you in due time," he said

mildly. "But that's only one of the reasons I'm here, and not the most important one as far as you're concerned." Again he paused and again a look of something hard to identify crossed his eyes. "You're looking for someone. That's why you're here, yes?"

Kestrel nodded, leaning forward in her chair. "What do you know about that?"

"Tell me about the man you're looking for."

The runners exchanged glances, and it was Kestrel who spoke. She gave Wallace the same description of Gabriel that she had given Ferone last night, then looked at him hopefully.

Wallace bowed his head for a moment. "How do you know Gabriel?" he asked softly.

The runners looked at him in shock; they had not named the object of their search. "He's—an old friend of ours," Winterhawk said. "How do *you* know him?"

For a long moment Wallace didn't answer; he appeared to be weighing something in his mind. Finally he looked up. "He's—or he was—one of my best young agents."

"What?" Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Joe spoke simultaneously, while at the same time Kestrel was saying "Was?"

"Agent?" Ocelot continued, tilting his head in confusion. "What kind of agent?"

"I can explain that to you later," Wallace told them. "It's important, but not as important as the rest of what I have to tell you." He was looking weary again.

"You said *was*." Kestrel spoke cautiously, as if afraid to name the thought in her mind for fear of bringing it to life. "What did you mean by that?"

Wallace sighed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I hate to be the one to have to tell you, but he—he disappeared recently while on a mission. It's very possible that he is—" He

didn't say it; he didn't have to. The word *dead* hung unspoken in the air like a dark cloud.

Surprisingly, this revelation did not have the expected effect on Wallace's audience. Winterhawk shook his head. "No," he said firmly. "He's not dead."

"Sir," Wallace said, "I know he is your friend, but —"

Again the mage shook his head. "No. It's not that. I can't explain it to you, but he isn't dead."

The other runners were nodding. How could they explain to part of the illusion that the illusion itself would no longer exist if its *raison d'être* was dead? "Why...do you think he might be dead?" Kestrel asked. "What kind of mission was he on?"

"I should never have sent him out so soon," Wallace said under his breath, as if he were talking more to himself than to the group. "I knew he hadn't gotten over what had happened to his brother yet —"

"What about his brother?" Winterhawk asked quickly.

Wallace looked up, surprised. "You do know what happened to his brother Stefan, don't you?"

"Tell us," Joe said.

The man looked at him for a moment, then nodded. "Same sort of thing, a couple of months ago. He was one of our top men—he and Gabriel were on their way to being the best team we had. But something happened—Gabriel made it out, barely, but Stefan didn't. Officially he's dead. Unofficially—" he looked away. "—well, I'm not sure how much credence I give it, but some say he went over to the other side. Gabriel never did believe it. He'd just gotten back to duty after taking some time off to heal up and come to terms with what had happened. We sent him out on a mission with a rookie agent." He sighed, pausing to rub his forehead before continuing. "Everything went to hell. The rookie was killed and Gabriel disappeared. We think they probably killed him

too, but—" He shrugged. "Now you say you don't think he's dead. Any idea why?"

"Why don't you tell us about this agency of yours, Mr. Wallace," Winterhawk said. "What is its purpose?"

Wallace sighed again, but did not look angry. "All right," he said, his tone weary. "It doesn't matter if I tell you, because the reason I'm here is to see if you might want to work with us. We can always use folks like you who can't stand to see the city controlled by—"

The door opened and Ferone entered, carrying a tray of glasses as if it were an afterthought. His expression was guarded. When he spoke, he addressed Wallace. "I think there's someone outside."

Wallace and the runners were instantly alert. "Where?" Wallace asked, his hand going to the inside of his jacket.

Ferone shook his head. "Not sure. I was getting the drinks together and I saw somebody movin' around outside the window." He was visibly trembling; he put down the tray on a table before he dropped it. "I kept as calm as I could and got away from the window; it might be nothing, but I figured you'd want to know."

Wallace withdrew a large handgun from inside his jacket and scanned the faces of the others. "They might have followed me here," he said. He was all business now, crisp and controlled. "I didn't think I was watched, but it's hard to tell these days." His gaze dropped to the guns they held and then back up to their faces. "If it's trouble, are you in?"

"Damn straight," Ocelot said, a rather fierce gleam in his eyes. He glanced at 'Wraith and saw the same look. "Wouldn't mind at all the chance to take out a few of these bastards."

Kestrel nodded. "Let's try to take one alive – if you're right and they've got Gabriel, maybe they'll know where he is."

The runners were already in motion. Closing his eyes to fire off a quick spell, Winterhawk said grimly, "Looks like about eight of them all told. Still moving into position. Four in the front, four in the back. They seem to be waiting for some signal. Heavily armed."

Ferone looked around nervously. "Oh, my God –"

Wallace took charge. "Mr. Ferone, I suggest you go down to your basement and wait there until the situation has been secured. If you have any weapons, it would be helpful if you would put them at our disposal."

"I don't have any weapons," Ferone said. "Just one little handgun up in my bedroom –"

"Too dangerous. Just go downstairs and wait until you hear from us."

Ferone looked like he didn't have much faith in their ability to handle eight armed attackers, but having no alternative, he nodded and headed off.

Wallace had already forgotten about him. "We have to hurry."

"Need to get outside," Ocelot said. He was pressed flat against the wall next to the window, leaning over to peer out with his thermographic vision. "I can see some of 'em out there – we need to take 'em out before they can all start shooting."

"Magic?" 'Wraith asked, arching an eyebrow at Winterhawk.

"Might be able to get one," the mage said. "I doubt they're close enough together for more."

"How are we gonna get out there without them seeing us?" Joe asked.

"I can make someone invisible," Winterhawk said, "but that doesn't solve the problem of the window."

The sense of urgency was growing in all of them; they knew they only had at most a few more minutes before their attackers took action. "Any windows on the side of the house?" Wallace asked.

"There's one in the bathroom on the second floor," Ocelot said, "but it's too small to get out."

"For you, maybe," Kestrel said. "Not for me."

Ocelot looked like he was going to say something, but then decided not to. Instead he nodded. He snatched up a poker from the rack next to the fireplace and handed it to her.

"Back," 'Wraith said, already moving.

Continuing to communicate in clipped phrases, the elf, Joe, and Ocelot arranged themselves around the bottom floor of the rooming house. 'Wraith and Ocelot were in the back, while Joe and Wallace took the front. Kestrel and Winterhawk had already disappeared up the stairs. Tensely, the four of them waited what felt like an eternity until Winterhawk returned, holding Kestrel's machine gun. "She's out," he said grimly. "I don't think they saw her."

"Not invisible?" 'Wraith asked.

'Hawk shook his head. "Couldn't keep her in sight after she went 'round the corner." He handed the machine gun to Ocelot and took up a position alongside one of the windows.

Ocelot stowed his pistol, gripped the heavier gun, and nodded.

Kestrel crouched behind a bush near the corner of the house and scanned the trees. There were four of the men back there, all right—her thermo vision was picking up their heat traces loud and clear.

She had slithered out through the small window in the upstairs bathroom (she had been right: none of the



others, including the slim Winterhawk, would have fit through) and then, hanging for a second from the side of the house, dropped silently down to the grass below. Waiting a moment to make sure no one had spotted her, she crept along the wall until she reached her current position. *Okay, time for a little speed now.* The poker was in her right hand, the pistol stuck in her belt under her coat. She didn't regret leaving the machine gun behind with Winterhawk—it wouldn't do her much good out here anyway, and right now she was in the mood to do some good old-fashioned butt-kicking.

She took a deep breath and moved, crouching low to remain under cover of the hedges next to the house. The rear yard was large and wooded, affording her good concealment. Keeping her sight on the nearest of the four heat traces, she made her way closer, closer —

She was behind him now. Pausing, she checked to make sure the others hadn't noticed her. They were still faced toward the house, watching as if in anticipation of something. Sparing a brief moment to wonder what exactly they were waiting for, she covered the last few feet at the unearthly speed of her wired reflexes, bringing the poker down upon the man's head.

There was almost no sound except for a quick *thump* and a soft grunt from the man. Kestrel grabbed him under one arm and lowered him silently to the ground behind one of the trees. Slinging his gun over her shoulder, she moved on.

Inside, Ocelot stood flattened against the wall near one of the kitchen windows in the back of the house, taking careful glances at the sight outside. At the window on the other end of the same wall, 'Wraith was doing the same. As Winterhawk came silently up behind Ocelot and

handed him Kestrel's machine gun, he whispered, "She's got one already. Saw him go down. One more and we go."

'Hawk nodded, adjusting the coat and hat they had hung on Ferone's hall-tree. It was set up in front of the back door, waiting for the next stage of their plan. The mage prepared his spell and waited.

"Two down," came 'Wraith's dispassionate voice several seconds later.

"Go!" Ocelot hissed, already crossing the kitchen. Crouched low, he grabbed the doorknob and flung the door open while 'Wraith hefted his machine gun and took aim.

Winterhawk, crouched on the other side of the door, made a gesture at the hall-tree and suddenly it was moving as if alive. Waddling on its stubby legs, it moved into the doorway and continued on its way outside, coat flapping in the light breeze.

The night erupted with gunfire as the remaining two gangsters hiding in the trees opened fire on what they thought was one of the house's inhabitants coming out to see what was going on. The rounds tore through the coat and into the walls next to the door.

'Wraith and Ocelot acted simultaneously. Ignoring the window, the elf let loose with a barrage from his own machine gun, aimed at the glowing form of one of the thugs—now glowing even brighter with the addition of his white-hot gun barrel. Ocelot took advantage of the lull in the assault caused by the thugs' confusion at the hall-tree's failure to go down and their scramble for cover to vault out through the same door and disappear into the night. He shoved the machine gun into 'Hawk's hands on the way by.

From the front of the house they could all hear more gunfire, but there was nothing they could do about it at

the moment. Likewise, there was nothing they could do to help Kestrel, who was still out there somewhere.

In the front of the house, Joe and Wallace had waited grimly for something to happen. Joe used his natural troll thermovision to keep track of the four gangsters who had spread themselves out along the street in front of the house, hiding behind trees and parked cars. Wallace, who didn't have any sort of special vision, merely waited at the window, gun ready.

"They're not moving yet," Joe whispered.

"How do you know that?" Wallace had not yet figured out these odd newcomers, but he did know enough to see that they had abilities far beyond those of one of his typical agents. He wondered why he had never heard of them before this; it would be hard for a group such as this to remain under cover for long.

"I can see 'em. They're waiting for something. They —"

That was when the sounds started from the back of the house. "That's it," Joe said as barely two seconds later the four on their side began firing. "They're on the move now. Two staying here, two heading for the back."

"Can they handle two more back there?"

Joe grinned in answer. "Don't worry." He raised his machine gun and took a shot through the window at one of the remaining figures.

Kestrel kept low as the bullets started flying. The night, so still and quiet only a few moments ago, was now broken by shouts and the irregular cracks of gunfire on both sides. She had seen Ocelot come out seconds earlier and had provided covering fire for him with her pistol — she thought she might have hit the gangster but she wasn't sure: he had dropped down behind the bushes but

whether it was for the purposes of pain or cover she couldn't tell. She continued her progress through the bushes, and stiffened as she heard the sounds of running feet and shouts approaching from around the front of the house. Then she smiled. They had her surrounded.

Too bad for them. She changed directions.

Inside, Winterhawk grimly watched the proceedings using a combination of thermovision and awareness of the sounds of the gunfire. He wished he could use his magical senses, but astral vision didn't work on the metaplanes—it was one of the few absolutes he had ever discovered about them. They had agreed that he wouldn't use his magic anymore in an offensive fashion unless the tide was turning against them—drain here was more harsh than it was at home, and chances were good his power would be needed for healing. He usually hated being stuck in a support position, but this time he didn't mind. Eight armed thugs (well, six now, he reminded himself) against his four friends wasn't even in the same neighborhood as a fair fight. They would be all right. *It'll probably be cathartic for them*, he thought with some amusement as he leaned against the doorframe and observed the show.

Ocelot moved fast and low, crossing the expanse of lawn before the thugs could figure out that he was there. He heard the sound of pistol fire behind him and wondered if that was another of them shooting at him or Kestrel covering him. Either way, nothing hit him so he ignored it. There were still two of them back here somewhere. He'd lost track of them for a moment as he ran, but after he pulled up behind a tree it only took a second's glance to re-establish his targets. It only took another second after that to watch one of them clutch his

chest and go down under a barrage of 'Wraith's machine-gun fire. The other one ducked down lower and took off further into the trees. Ocelot followed.

The thugs out front seemed determined to do their best to blow the front off Albert Ferone's rooming house. They had both let loose with their guns, the rounds tearing big chunks out of the place's wooden front, blowing the windows into thousands of tinkling shards, taking out objects on the other side of the room.

Joe and Wallace waited, pressed against walls at both ends of the room away from the windows. Wallace was watching the troll, who didn't look at all worried about this new turn of events. Joe caught him looking and grinned. "They'll have to reload soon at that rate," he said. "We'll get 'em then. They're being stupid."

"They're frustrated," Wallace agreed. "This should have been easy for them—eight of them against six of us, them having the element of surprise and all—"

"All the better for us." Joe checked his gun and, as there was a brief lull in the gunfire, moved with a speed that belied his size over to the edge of the window where he neatly picked off one of the figures crouched behind a car. "This is like catching fish in a barrel."

Wallace gave him an odd look but didn't answer.

Kestrel stayed hidden until the two remaining thugs had moved past her. It was obvious they couldn't see anything beyond what a normal person could in this kind of light—she wondered what they would think if they knew they were facing five enemies who could observe their movement as clearly as in daylight. *More* clearly, actually, because the glow of their body heat and the heat of their weapons made them stand out sharply against the dark of the night. It wasn't quite fair, really, if you got

right down to it. Not that Kestrel cared about that, though. They'd chosen the fight, they'd picked the weapons—and they or their brethren had Gabriel. That meant that if they got more than they bargained for, that was just their bad luck.

She silently followed the two thugs through the trees, anticipating their expressions when they discovered they were sandwiched between her and Ocelot.

Ocelot was far enough away from the main fight now that he could occasionally hear his quarry breathing ahead of him. He recognized that pattern: it was the sound of a frightened animal. The tide of the battle had turned and this guy knew it. He would fight if he had a chance, but otherwise he was running for his life. Inexorably, Ocelot continued through the trees. His own breathing was quiet, his steps nearly silent in the grass and the carpeting of damp leaves beneath his feet.

He could hear someone behind him, crashing toward him with the subtlety of an elephant. Possibly two elephants—it was hard to pick out individuals when he was focusing his attention forward. He wondered where Kestrel was, but didn't worry about it overmuch—she could take care of herself as well as he could, and this wasn't exactly the most challenging fight they'd ever been involved in. He ducked behind a tree and peeked around, trying to identify the locations of the two approaching thugs.

Kestrel had worked her way around the two gangsters she'd been following, and was now moving slightly ahead of them and off to the side, keeping them in sight out of the corner of her eye. She spotted Ocelot ahead and could see from the tenseness in which he held himself that he was preparing to spring into action as they

went by. She smiled, creeping in closer. She wanted to get in on this action.

There were no more visible targets out the back window. 'Wraith glanced at Winterhawk. "Staying in?"

'Hawk shrugged. "No reason not to. They'll yell if they need us. That's three out of four down, at least."

The elf nodded, then indicated the front of the house with a head motion. "All right alone? Might need help out front."

"Go ahead." The mage waved him off. "I'll be fine here. I'll keep an eye on things and come running if anything changes."

'Wraith didn't answer. Picking up his machine gun, he headed off.

""Wraith?"

He stopped and turned back.

'Hawk tossed him the machine gun Ocelot had left with him. "Nobody here, except p'raps those chaps outside, want me using this."

A tiny smile quirked the corner of his mouth was the elf's only acknowledgment. He deftly caught the rifle and went on.

Out back, Ocelot and Kestrel were closing in on the two men who had come from the front part of the house. They crept through the trees, silently, keeping an eye on both their quarry and each other as they approached. Oblivious, the two thugs moved slowly, their gun barrels constantly moving, unaware that their targets were only a few meters away.

Closer they got, converging until the four of them were no more than five meters away from each other. Ocelot slipped halfway behind a tree, waiting for them to go by so he could nail one with his cyberspur; Kestrel

sneaked quietly behind them, ready to take care of the other one. She smiled to herself. It would only be a moment—

A movement caught her eye, behind Ocelot. The third gunman, the one Ocelot had thought had run away! He stepped out from behind a tree a few meters back and took aim at Ocelot's unprotected back.

Kestrel moved before she thought. Shifting into full jacked speed, she flung herself forward, past the two thugs they had been trailing. "Look out!" she yelled, diving forward to take Ocelot down. She heard guns go off and her leg exploded in pain; she went down hard and rolled, trying to find cover, clutching at her leg.

Ocelot was up again almost as soon as he was down. He spun, popping his cyberspur, his eyes filling with rage as he saw Kestrel go down. He launched himself forward, plunging his spur through one of the two thugs while viciously kicking the second who hadn't had time to move away in the split-second when all of this occurred. Rounds from the third one's machine gun tore into a tree above his head but then there was silence.

Ocelot didn't stop to figure out what had caused the man to stop firing. Instead, he savagely drove his spur through the neck of the thug he'd kicked, grabbed his gun, and hurried over to Kestrel.

"You idiot!" he snapped when he saw that she was awake. "You could have yelled, you know!" Worry and fear took the edge off his words.

"Yeah, well—" she got out through gritted teeth. "Next time I'll do that."

He gathered her up in his arms and hurried back toward the house as Joe and 'Wraith, followed after a moment by Wallace, came out the back door. "Got all of 'em out front," Joe said. He spied Kestrel. "She all right?"

"Will be," she said.



Winterhawk joined them. "Get the one way out there," he told Joe and 'Wraith, already helping Ocelot get Kestrel lowered down to a couch so he could heal her. "I used a sleep spell – he's the one we can question."

They nodded and hurried away. Wallace kept an eye on the area outside while Ocelot hovered over the scene as Winterhawk began his spell. He took Kestrel's hand. "That really was a dumb stunt," he told her, but there was gratitude and grudging admiration in his voice.

She nodded. "Yeah...I realized that about the time my feet left the ground." She shrugged. "But hey – I'm not through with you yet."

"Just don't do it again, okay? Next time, yell."

"Would you have?"

He sighed. "Did anybody ever tell you you were frustrating as hell?"

"Only two or three times a day." Her smile turned to a grimace as the magic began to take effect.

He sighed even more loudly. "Yeah...well I'm tellin' you again." He dropped into a chair to wait for Joe and 'Wraith to return.

They did so after a few more minutes. Joe carried the sleeping gangster while Wraith sported an impressive array of machine guns slung over his shoulders on straps and several handguns stuck in his belt. Joe dropped the gangster none too gently on the room's other couch.

Winterhawk finished his spell and sagged back into his chair; sweat beaded his forehead. "There," he said. "Sorry I can't do anything about the trousers, but other than that you should be good as new."

"Thanks," Kestrel told him, swinging around to sit up. She swayed a bit but looked otherwise reasonably well all things considered.

"We'll keep watch," Joe said, indicating himself, 'Wraith, and Wallace. "Call if you need help getting him

to talk." He cracked his enormous knuckles and grinned tuskily.

"Hurry," 'Wraith said. "Must leave before more come."

Ocelot nodded grimly. He looked at Winterhawk. "You up to it? I'm afraid I might just run him through if he looks at me the wrong way?"

The mage nodded. Standing slowly to verify his balance, he perched on the edge of the couch occupied by the sleeping gangster. He slapped the man's face, first gently and then with a bit more vigor. "Wakey wakey."

After a few moments of this the gangster's eyes opened. They immediately widened when he saw 'Hawk looking down at him. He tried to scramble up, only to encounter Ocelot's hand on his other shoulder. "Wouldn't do that," 'Hawk said conversationally. "He's not feeling too charitable toward you right now, and frankly neither am I."

The man glared. "Whatta you want?"

"Information, and quickly."

"Fuck you. I ain't tellin' you nothin'." The man's eyes darted around as if expecting something; when it didn't happen he resumed his glare at Winterhawk.

"Oh, I think you will." He matched the man's glare. "A friend of ours is being held by some of your people. We want to know where."

The man shrugged. "I dunno."

A slight *snik* broke the room's silence as Ocelot's cyberspur slid from its sheath. It ended up barely a centimeter from the man's chin. "Wrong answer, asshole."

"Especially since we haven't told you who it is we're looking for," Winterhawk agreed. "Young chap, dark hair, purple eyes, good-looking—do you know who I mean now?"

Neither 'Hawk nor Ocelot missed the quick look of recognition that passed across the man's face before it became a truculent mask once again. "Never heard of 'im."

Winterhawk raised his hand so it was visible over the man's face. Magical energy in the form of blue fire flickered around it. "Which way would you like to die, then?"

The gangster tensed but said nothing.

"Fuck it," Ocelot growled. "Just kill the bastard and get it over with."

'Hawk nodded. "I'm beginning to consider it." He contemplated his hand for a moment. "You do the honors, will you?"

"Gladly." Ocelot grabbed the man by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him upward, barely nicking the soft underside of his chin with the blade. Blood welled out and the captive gasped. "Last chance, scumbag. Your life worth a little information?"

The man held out for a few more seconds and then his eyes bulged out. "No! Don't do it. I'll tell!"

The blade pressed in just a bit more. "So tell."

"The Fortuna! He's at the Fortuna! Salazaro's holding him there!"

"Wrong answer," Ocelot said, digging with the blade, which had still only gone in less than a centimeter. "We were there."

"He's *there*!" the man screamed, trying not to flail too hard and drive the blade further into his own flesh. "*He's there!* In the back! There's a cellar in the storeroom! That's where he is, I swear it!" He looked like he was about to cry.

Kestrel stood up. "Come on. Let's go. Throw him in the trunk—if he's lying we can deal with him later."

The door on the other side of the room opened and Alfred Ferone entered. He looked around nervously. "I heard the shooting stop—" he said. "Is—everything—?"

"Everything's fine, Mr. Ferone," Winterhawk said. "I suggest you get out of the house for awhile, but I don't think you'll be bothered again."

He nodded as if he didn't quite believe they'd dealt successfully with eight armed attackers, and left the room again as Joe, 'Wraith, and Wallace came back in. "We're movin' out," Ocelot said, hefting the gangster, whom he had conveniently knocked out with a punch to the jaw. "This guy better hope he was tellin' the truth, 'cause I'm not done kickin' ass yet tonight."

The Fortuna Club was much more impressive after dark than it had been during the area's weird twilight-day. They could see the huge blue and green neon sign blazing out the club's name from quit a distance away—from the look of things this was the place to be, as the Fortuna's parking lot was packed with cars. The sound of dance music blared out into the night, occasionally getting louder when someone opened a door.

"Go around the back," Ocelot whispered to 'Wraith. Those who had been present at the interrogation had already shared their information with the others; the plan was to try to break in through some unguarded area and try to find the storeroom from there. 'Wraith was already steering the car around the block and toward the rear of the club.

It was a big place, more of a resort than a simple nightclub. Around the back, along with more of the building, they could see a parklike area with a courtyard, a large pool with a fountain in the center, and a grassy patch that extended back for about fifty meters, ending up in a line of trees. 'Wraith was about to turn off the lights

and coast the car off the road when Kestrel pointed and hissed, "Look!"

The others quickly followed Kestrel's line of sight as 'Wraith pulled the car to a stop. Something was happening over at the other side of the courtyard, partially obscured by a low wall and some bushes.

"What is it?" Winterhawk whispered.

'Wraith and Kestrel were already getting out of the car; the others quickly followed. 'Wraith peered into the darkness. "Can't tell. Several figures, near the window."

"You can't identify them?" Ocelot tried to make sense of the scene but he didn't have 'Wraith's built-in magnification. He could see moving shapes glowing in his thermo-vision, but nothing else at this distance.

"We have to get closer," Joe said. "Come on." He started moving. The others gathered their weapons and went after him.

Just as they drew up almost close enough to get a good look at the figures, they all heard someone scream "NO!"

"That's Stefan!" Kestrel cried, picking up speed.

"No—there!" 'Wraith called, pointing. Sure enough, Stefan in human form stood amid a group of gangsters pointing machine guns at a swaying figure near the window. It was very clear that he had not cried out.

"And that's Gabriel!" Kestrel was paying no attention to any of them now. She raised her gun and fired at the gangsters, trying to concentrate on them and not on the bloody figure in shredded clothes pressed against the window.

"Kestrel—" Ocelot yelled, but it wouldn't have mattered. It was as if she hadn't fired at all. They could hear the bark of their guns, but the figures on the other side of the courtyard did not react to the sound, did not fall or dive for cover. They merely remained where they

were, raised their guns, and let loose with a barrage at Gabriel.

"No! *Gabriel!*" Kestrel screamed. She skidded to a stop and readied her gun again.

And stopped.

The figures in the courtyard slowly faded into nothingness, like a mirage that had stayed around too long. The sounds of gunfire echoed for a moment after before they too faded.

As if no longer needed now that the actors were gone, the scene likewise shimmered and melted away.

## 40.

Blackness lifted slowly, like a struggle through decreasingly thick layers of cotton.

Voices, far away and indistinct: "He's coming around, Doctor."

"Good, good. I'll be—"

Consciousness floated away again; the feeling was one of riding on top of a balloon that was gently drifting through clouds, changing direction at the faintest hint of a wind. It was at the same time a peaceful feeling and a disturbing one, because somewhere the consciousness knew that the feeling was wrong. Drifting was wrong, aimless motion was wrong—

"Can you hear me?"

The voice was male, soft, determined but kindly.

Somewhere inside the emerging consciousness tried to make a connection between the sounds and some sort of answer; it did not know if it succeeded. It drifted again and when it returned, the voice was still there.

"Can you hear me?"

Again the connection floated away; this time, though, the consciousness did not go with it.

"Justin? Please answer me if you can hear me."

A brief red flag flared, half disappointment, half fear. The voice was a mistake. It was meant to be somewhere else.

It was not meant for *him*.

Awareness crept forward faster now as the formless consciousness had arrived at the beginnings of an identity. The haze that surrounded him lightened once again. Vague shapes swam ahead of him, but whether they were truly there or only parts of his own imagination was not something he was yet capable of identifying.

"Justin?"

The same voice again. Soft, patient, its lack of emotion managing somehow to still convey an emotional state.

He thought he might have answered that time, but it sounded like nothing but unintelligible sounds to his ears. He fought for an anchor, for someplace for his mind to grab hold and stop the floating.

Far away the voices continued. They didn't seem to be speaking to him now:

"Discontinue the dosage. He's trying to come around."

"Yes, Doctor."

The second voice was female, soft like the male one but efficient, dispassionate. He felt a presence next to him, a rustle of fabric and the faint change in air pressure as if someone might have been leaning over him slightly, and then it was gone.

"Thank you, Nurse. You may go now. I'll call if I need anything."

"Yes, Doctor."

He could hear the voices more distinctly now, and even manage to attach some meaning to the words. The floating sensation was beginning to fade now, lowering him gently back to earth and to awareness.

Still, he did not know how long it was before he opened his eyes. It was a sudden thing, not the product of a long thought process, but rather, one moment they were closed and the next they were open—he could no longer stand the feeling that he did not know what was happening.

He was lying in a bed. The first thing he noticed beyond that was the man sitting in a chair next to the bed. The man was tall, middle-aged, with severe gray eyes and a bearing of authority; he wore a white shirt and dark tie covered by a white lab coat. There were pens in the pocket of the lab coat, and he held a clipboard in his lap. He was



watching. He smiled—it was a tight little thing, as if he were not the type of person who was accustomed to smiling but he still gave it his best shot because he knew it was expected of him. “Welcome back, Justin. It is good to see you awake.”

He stared at the man for a moment. His mind was suddenly alive with images: a room, a chair, a small creature chittering in his ear, pain, the sound of running feet, the roar of gunfire. These images seemed important to him, but he could not place them in his life. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them again. The images receded. “I—”

“You’ve been asleep for quite some time. Are you feeling better today?”

He thought about that. *Better than what?* his mind supplied, but he did not voice the words. He struggled to rise, to move to a sitting position, but something stopped him. He became slowly aware that his arms were drawn up above his head, held into position by something soft but unyielding. “Why—can’t I move?” His voice sounded strained and ragged in his ears.

The man—the doctor, apparently—sighed ruefully. “I’m sorry about that, Justin. You were a bit violent when you were brought in. It was for your own good. Why don’t we talk for a bit and then I’ll see about having the restraints removed, all right?”

He tilted his head, fixing his gaze on the doctor. “I—I don’t understand. My name isn’t Justin.”

The doctor’s expression suggested that this was well-traveled territory and not altogether unexpected. He jotted something on his clipboard and regarded his patient again. “Do you remember who I am?” he asked, changing the subject smoothly.

His eyes traveled over the man's features, his clothes, his hands. Finally he shook his head. "No. I've never seen you before."

The doctor smiled the tight little smile again. "That's all right. It's quite understandable. You've been through a great deal lately. I am Dr. Henry Sorensen. We've been working together for awhile now, but you've apparently had a setback. Don't worry. Everything will be fine in time."

He frowned as his mind tried to make sense of the conflicting information it was receiving. "Doctor... What... what kind of doctor? I was hurt—" He remembered pains: pains in his chest, his shoulders, his wrists, his ankles, his head, his ribs, his side—all of them seemed to be gone now, except for the dull ache in his side that was at the moment barely worthy of notice.

Dr. Sorensen patted his shoulder; it was a mechanical gesture disguised as a compassionate one—the gesture of someone who never quite grasped emotion but realized that the expression of one was called for. "Don't worry, Justin," he repeated. "Everything will be fine. I'll tell you everything you want to know, but first I want to make sure you're all right. You gave us a bit of a scare before, because you'd been doing so well. Let me just give you a quick check-over and then we'll talk if you feel up to it."

"Why do you keep calling me Justin?" he asked as the doctor pulled out an instrument and pressed it to his chest. It was cold against his bare skin; he shivered.

"Shh..." the doctor whispered, holding up a finger for silence. A moment passed and then he took the instrument away. He noted something else on his clipboard and then addressed his patient. "Because it's your name," he said gently. "Your name is Justin Christopher Griffin."

He shook his head. "No, it isn't. I don't know who that is, but it isn't me." He wondered if he was still in the grip of whatever strange sensations had been plaguing him before, if this were all just a dream.

Sorensen nodded understandingly. "All right—what shall I call you, then?" There was a very slight tone of solicitous condescension in his voice, as if he were consciously agreeing to pretend to grant the fantasies of a five-year-old the stamp of reality for the moment in order to gain some unknown advantage.

The answer came to him before he had time to think about it, with the swiftness of the kind of certainty about which one did not have to think: "Gabriel."

He wondered why the doctor's brow furrowed a bit at the name, why a brief look of disappointment crossed his eyes, why he made more notes on his clipboard. When he finally spoke his voice held the edges of weariness: "I thought we'd worked through that before."

He was confused. "Worked...through—?"

Sorenson sighed. "It's all right. We'll start over. We've got time. There's no hurry, and this sort of treatment is never quick." He stood. "You rest—later on I'll send the nurse in to see if you're feeling better and then perhaps we can talk some more. All right?"

His mind whirled, once again throwing images up against the screen of the inside of his skull. "What? Oh...yes." He looked at the doctor, remembering harsh ropes on his wrists, on his ankles. "Am I a prisoner here?"

Dr. Sorenson shook his head, perhaps a little more quickly than was absolutely necessary. "No, no, Just—No. You're not a prisoner. Think of it more as being a guest. You're here because you need help, and we're here to help you."

"Will you untie me, then?"

He looked troubled, though it was hard to tell if it was sincere. "I'm afraid I can't do that yet. As I said, in a little while we'll re-evaluate your condition and then perhaps, if you're feeling better, we'll remove the restraints." Concern crossed his eyes. "They're not hurting you, are they?"

"No." His mind wasn't moving fast enough yet to take advantage of that question—the fog still interfered with his thought processes, though not as much as before.

"Good." Sorenson smiled his thin-lipped smile again. "I'm glad to hear it." He patted his patient's shoulder again and repeated, "You rest. I'll see you later."

And then he was gone, the door swinging closed behind him. There was a brief *click* that might have been a lock engaging, but it was hard to tell for sure.

He settled back with a sigh. The images weren't stopping. He felt odd with his arms stretched out above his head like that—it gave him a dim memory of another time in his life (*chains...stone altar...blood...no!*) but the details wouldn't quite come yet. He thought they might, if he gave them time. It appeared that he had little else. Tentatively he pulled on the wrist-restraints, trying to see if he could work his hands free, but it was no use. They were soft, pliant, their tethers loose enough so he had some freedom of movement, but the cuffs were snug and strong. He realized that his legs were similarly restrained, but with more play in the tethers. He found he could bring his knees up to a bent position but no further; like the wrist cuffs, the ankle cuffs were soft, snug-fitting, and quite unescapable.

He spared only brief attention for the room. He was lying on a comfortable but rather institutional bed in the middle of a room that was made of whites and beiges and pale grays and the silver of efficient metal instruments. There was a nightstand next to the bed; it contained a

small lamp and nothing else. The chair on which Dr. Sorenson had sat was as institutional as the bed: the kind that could be stacked to the ceiling with its fellows and then brought out to fill a room. Even the chair was beige. There was a window on one of the walls; it looked out on what appeared to be a grassy courtyard. The bars on the window were white, unobtrusive and as tasteful as it was possible for bars to be. The room's only ornamentation, other than the door through which Sorenson had made his exit and another one which presumably led to a bathroom, was a framed print of a seascape on the wall opposite the bed. He noticed, idly, that the glass was gone from the frame.

With nothing else to do, he closed his eyes and allowed his mind to drift, to touch lightly on the images, on the memories, on the faces that flashed across his consciousness. It had the odd quality of trying to remember a dream: if he concentrated too hard on it, it flitted away like an elusive bird that would allow him to come just so close, but no closer.

The faces paraded through his mind in an orderly procession: a tall, dark-haired man; a blondish man with eyes and moves like a cat; a pale, severe elf; an Amerind troll—

—and then there were the other two faces. The faces that quickened his breath and spurred his heartbeat: a wiry blond woman with green eyes and a powerfully-built, dark-haired man with a gaze like a bird of prey. *I should know these people. Why can't I remember?* Impatiently he tried to force the memory, but his only reward was to see it dance even further out of his reach. He sighed, momentarily defeated, and then started again.

He didn't remember falling asleep, but when he woke up, the answers were there as if they had never departed. His uneasy dreams gave way to reality as the fog drifted away and the faces and memories fell into place. *I am Gabriel. I am a dragon. Those people are my friends and my brother. My brother is in trouble. I must help him. That is why I am here.*

It was all back now: the memory of what had happened before he had come here, the memory of the strange dark city and his captivity, the memory of hearing shots, seeing them aimed at him, but feeling nothing—how could that have been? Grimly he struggled against the restraints, exerting more pressure than he had before. He had to get out of here. Even though he suspected it would do no good, he tried to magically open the cuffs. Nothing happened. A couple more experiments confirmed for him what he had feared: his magical abilities had not yet returned.

There was a knock at the door and then a second later it opened to admit a nurse dressed in white pants and a beige scrub top. She smiled when she saw he was awake. "How are you feeling?"

He noticed she didn't refer to him by name. He did a new inventory of himself and discovered to his surprise that there was no sign of any of the injuries that had been inflicted on him by Salazaro and his thugs. The only remnant was still the throbbing ache in his side, which flared up occasionally but was otherwise a dull and constant companion. "I'm fine," he told her. "Can you let me out of these restraints, please?" He forced his voice to remain even, calm, pleasant.

She shook her head as she checked something on the chart attached to the foot of the bed. "Sorry, can't. You know that. Only Dr. Sorenson can do that. But if you're feeling better I'm sure he'll do it after you talk." She jotted

something on the chart and then looked at him again. "So— shall I tell him you're ready?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so."

She regarded him for a moment and then turned away toward the door. Gabriel caught a quick look of kindly pity in her eyes before she left. This time there was no mistaking the sound of the lock.

Sorenson returned several minutes later. He did not knock. Instead, he entered the room with the familiarity of an owner and pulled the beige chair up next to the bed. "Did you rest well?"

He shrugged, as much as he could with his arms above his head. "Well enough. Can you let me out of these, please?"

The doctor looked at him for several moments and made a note. "I don't know. Can we trust you? You seemed quite calm earlier, before your— outburst."

He took a deep breath. "I'm not going to have any outbursts, Doctor. I just don't like to be restrained."

"Do you promise to behave yourself if I let you go?" He indicated the door with a head movement. "There are orderlies outside the door—if you do have another outburst, they'll have to sedate you again. I'd imagine you don't find that pleasant."

He remembered the grasping fog and shuddered slightly. "No. I don't."

"So do I have your word? No misbehavior?"

Gabriel nodded.

Sorenson smiled; it hadn't gotten any more cheerful since he'd left. "All right, then." Rising, he crossed the room and knocked once on the door. It opened and two burly orderlies came in. "Take them off," he ordered.

Gabriel's eyes widened as he looked at the faces of the orderlies. They were Carl and Luke, Salazaro's goons—or their twins. His breathing picked up pace a bit.

"Are you all right?" Sorenson asked, holding up a hand for the orderlies to wait.

He nodded, forcing the reaction away. "Yes. I'm fine. Sorry."

A tense pause dragged on for several seconds and then finally Sorenson nodded once to the orderlies. They moved in and removed the restraints from Gabriel's wrists and ankles, their motions practiced, efficient, and gentle.

Gabriel let his breath out slowly.

"Thank you. You may go now," Sorenson said, dismissing the orderlies from his attention before they even left the room. When they were gone he turned back to Gabriel. "There. Better?"

Gabriel sat up, propping himself against the wall with the pillow at his back. He looked down at himself: he was dressed only in loose-fitting white scrub pants; he could see no sign of injuries on his chest, his arms, or his wrists—nothing but the single scar. He looked at the doctor. "Better," he acknowledged. "Would you mind telling me where I am—and what I'm doing here?"

There was no visible reaction on Sorenson's face to the words, but Gabriel nonetheless got the impression that the man had been asked this question—by him—on more than one occasion. "All right," he said at last. "We'll start again." He leaned back in his chair, not in a pose of relaxation, but rather one of a man who expects to be in the same position for a long time. "Do you remember when you first came here?"

"I just woke up here today."

Sorenson shook his head. "No, not today. I mean—before. Do you remember being here before?"

"I haven't been here before."



The doctor paused to make a note on his clipboard. His eyes rose, but his head did not. "You don't remember your previous stays here?"

Gabriel frowned, his intent eyes meeting the doctor's. "Doctor, I don't think you heard me. I have never been here before."

Another pause. "All right, son. It's all right. We don't have to talk about that now if you don't want to. Suppose you tell me what you *do* remember, then? We'll go from there." His voice was soft, soothing.

Gabriel was silent. There was nothing he could tell this man that would placate him—he had no idea what this particular reality was asking of him.

The silence didn't seem to bother Sorenson. He waited patiently for several moments and, when it became clear that his patient wasn't going to answer, he nodded almost as if he expected it. "I know you've been through a great deal, Justin. I just want you to keep it in mind that we're here to help you. We *want* to help you. But you have to talk to us."

"My name isn't Justin. I told you that before. It's Gabriel." He looked past the doctor as if gauging his chances to get out of the room; he had promised no outbursts, but a swift run for the door could not technically be classed as an "outburst." Still, though, he did not know what awaited him on the other side of the door. He decided to bide his time and try to figure out what he could from the doctor's questions before making a decision about the future.

"Gabriel," the doctor said. His tone was that of a loving father who had suddenly been asked by his young son to refer to him by the name of some fantasy superhero from the child's imagination. "All right, then—if it will help you talk to us, Gabriel it is. You do know," he added

gently, “that we’ll have to get to the bottom of this eventually, don’t you?”

“What do you know about Stefan?” Gabriel asked suddenly, ignoring the doctor’s query.

Oddly, Sorenson seemed to anticipate the question. His features took on a mien of careful contemplation, as if he were deciding what he was and was not allowing himself to say. Finally he nodded. “It’s normal for you to be thinking about him, Jus—Gabriel. It hasn’t been very long since it happened. Do you want to talk about that?”

“I want to know what you know about him,” Gabriel repeated.

Another pause. “Well...I know that he was tragically killed a few months ago, and that you’re having a hard time dealing with his death.” His voice was clinical but gentle.

“How was he killed?”

Dr. Sorenson drew himself up a bit in his chair. “Gabriel, I don’t think we’re quite ready to discuss that. Please—trust me to help you. It will all come out in time, but I think it could jeopardize your treatment if we try to take things too fast.”

Gabriel sighed. “Am I a prisoner in this room?”

This time the doctor was caught off guard, but recovered quickly. “A prisoner? No—no, of course not. I’d prefer it if you’d stay here now and talk with me, but when our session is done you’re welcome to visit the common areas if you like.”

“But I can’t leave—whatever this place is.”

Sorenson smiled. “Not yet, son. That will come too, but you’re here for your own good. If we let you go too soon, you could hurt yourself and others. We need to help you work through these difficulties you’re having.”

“What difficulties?” Gabriel’s voice was soft but implacable. As long as the doctor was going to carry on

the illusion of being helpful and communicative, Gabriel was going to take advantage of it.

This time, though, Sorenson didn't answer. He jotted something else on the clipboard and then looked at Gabriel. "Suppose you tell me about—Gethelwain."

Gabriel stiffened just a bit. "Who?" He kept his voice carefully neutral. It was not what he had expected.

The doctor's expression suggested that he had scored a point, but it lasted only a split-second before returning to clinical detachment once again. "Gethelwain. How do you feel about him?"

"I—don't understand the question." It was true, but he made it sound even more uncertain than he felt in hopes of leading Sorenson to explain.

"Do you still feel as if he is—part of you?" Sorenson's words were the verbal equivalent of carefully tiptoeing toward a destination.

Gabriel fixed his gaze on the doctor. "Doctor, please come out and say whatever it is you're hinting at."

He seemed surprised, and paused to jot something down. "All right—do you still believe that you are a dragon named Gethelwain, Gabriel?"

For several seconds silence hung in the air as Gabriel was too stunned to answer. Finally, carefully, he said: "What... makes you think that I ever did?"

"This." Sorenson held up the clipboard. "Would you like me to refresh your memory?" His voice was as smooth and emotionless as ever—but was there a faint hint of sarcasm there? When Gabriel didn't answer, he went on in a dry tone: "Justin Christopher Griffin, age 20. First brought in approximately six months ago. Believes self to be the human manifestation of a Great Western Dragon named Gethelwain. Has proven unable in all cases to prove this claim. Tests indicate that patient has been deeply disturbed for an unknown period prior to

first admittance—breakdown occurred following the murder of older brother Steven—” he emphasized the name “—by a group of criminals. Treated briefly and released, but re-admitted when he proved that he was unable to cope with reality at this time. Delusions persist despite ongoing treatment.” He lowered the clipboard and looked at Gabriel. “That’s what makes me think so, Gabriel,” he said. His voice was still gentle and now showed no sign of the sarcasm, real or imagined.

Gabriel took a deep breath. This wasn’t going to be easy. “No,” he said calmly. “I don’t think I’m a dragon. That’s preposterous.”

“You’re lying, Gabriel.” Sorenson continued to speak softly, his eyes locked on Gabriel’s. “I can see it in your eyes. You want out of here badly, I know that. I don’t blame you. But you’re here for your own good, to keep you from hurting yourself and others. Lying to me in order to try to get out sooner isn’t going to work.” He smiled as if this didn’t bother him. “I’ll tell you what—I think this is as far as I want to go with this session tonight. I don’t want to tire you out. We’ll talk again tomorrow, all right?”

“Am I free to leave this room?”

“If you’re feeling up to it, of course. I’ll send the nurse in—ask her to show you where the recreation room and the trideo room are. It’s a bit late in the day so you won’t be allowed out on the grounds, but tomorrow you should be able to go outside.” He paused a moment. “Oh. I almost forgot.” He reached into his pocket and withdrew an object. “I’ll need to have you wear this if you’re planning to go out.”

The object in his hand was a metal bracelet. Its only adornments were a small button and a tiny light which was currently dark. Gabriel regarded it with suspicion. “What is it?”

Sorenson smiled. "You should know by now, son. All the patients wear them—it helps us keep track of you. Without it, I'm afraid I can't give you permission to leave this room."

Gabriel weighed his options. He knew nothing about the bracelet and its function, and didn't feel comfortable taking the doctor's word for it. Once again he regretted the loss of his dragon's senses, which would have given him an instant reading on the man. Now, he was forced to rely on nothing but normal human perceptiveness—which was convinced that Sorenson wasn't telling him the whole story. "What else does it do?" He didn't move any closer.

"Nothing. It's merely a locator." His face took on a look of fatherly commiseration. "You know that some of the patients here—well, they like to hide, to run away. We have to have some way to find them or they could hurt themselves."

Gabriel didn't believe a word of it. He sighed. Refusing would mean he would be held prisoner here, while accepting might allow him the chance to at least find out some things about this place so he could use them to his advantage when the time came. Perhaps after he had found out what he wanted to know, he could change his mind, have them confine him to his room and remove the bracelet, and figure a way out from there. "All right," he said reluctantly. He held out his right wrist.

Sorenson looked pleased. Moving with quick efficiency he positioned the bracelet around Gabriel's wrist and snapped it shut with a final-sounding little *click* that was a faint echo of the one that had been made by the door. The formerly dark light flicked on, glowing a bright green. "There. Now you can just ask the nurse to get you a shirt and you're free to go. I hope we can talk again tomorrow."

“Do I have a choice?”

The doctor didn’t answer, except to stand up and slide his clipboard under his arm. “I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said as he opened the door, slipped out, and closed it behind him.

Gabriel did not waste any time in getting out of his room and beginning his exploring. Clad now in a white T-shirt and soft slippers to go with the white scrub pants he’d been wearing previously, brought to him by the pleasant but efficient nurse he’d seen before, he headed down the hall in the direction she had pointed him, toward the recreation room. He had to pass through two sets of heavy double doors to get there; the doors were open now, pressed against the walls by means of small magnetic pads. His bracelet made a tiny *chirp* sound each time he went through a doorway, but the light remained green. He wondered if his course was being recorded somewhere, but decided it didn’t matter.

He could hear the room before he reached it—the low intermittent rumble of conversation interspersed with the sound of music, probably from a trideo unit. He slowed as he reached the last doorway, pausing to get a look around before entering.

The rec room was large and brightly lit; its walls were painted white and there were several windows along one wall, all covered by the same type of artistic but functional bars that he’d seen outside his own window. The furniture was scattered around in smaller groupings: a trideo nook here, a conversation pit there, a ping-pong table on the far side near the wall, a few card tables near another wall. There were about fifteen people, all male, all dressed as Gabriel was, occupying the various areas. Most of them were at the moment watching the trideo, which was showing a baseball game. The majority of the men

were human, with a few dwarfs, elves, and orks; there were no trolls. All of them were wearing the locator bracelets. Stationed near each of the room's three exit doors were orderlies; they were sitting in chairs leaned back against the walls, reading newspapers or watching the trid shows, their watchful gazes occasionally sweeping the area before returning to their pursuits.

He was looking at the group watching the trid when a voice broke free of the rumble: "Hey, look! Dragonboy's back!"

He swung around in the direction of the voice. Three of another group, two humans and an ork, were looking toward him, grinning. As he watched, they got up and approached him.

The ork, who was apparently the ringleader, was several centimeters taller than Gabriel, a wide young man with a slightly off-kilter look in his eyes and a nasty grin. The two humans trailed him like loyal dogs. "Hey, Dragonboy!" the ork boomed as they came up next to him and fanned out. "Long time, no see. You been off flyin' around and layin' eggs or somethin'?"

"Excuse me," Gabriel said softly, ignoring the two humans and trying to move past the ork.

No such luck. The ork's meaty hand fell on his shoulder in a gesture designed to look friendly for the orderlies' benefit, but which actually gripped quite tightly. "Aw, where ya goin'? We wanna hear about whatcha been doin' while you were gone. Don't we, boys?"

The two humans nodded and made appropriate affirmative noises. One was short, skinny, and twitchy, with an unruly nest of dirty-blond hair; the other was of medium height and chubby, with his T-shirt not quite covering his gut. They both had mean little gleams in their eyes.

"I'd rather not talk right now," Gabriel said calmly. He looked at the hand and then at the ork, clearly indicating for the ork to move.

The ork laughed. "Listen to that! Pretty Dragon Boy doesn't want to talk to us. That ain't very social. We're a very social bunch around here, right Freddie?"

"Yeah, Otto. Real social." If Freddie's tone was any indicator, he had very little awareness of what he was saying. As if to prove this, he repeated his last sentence twice more.

"So," Otto continued, "See, it's kinda *expected* around here that if ya go away, ya tell everybody where ya been when ya come back. It's only *polite*, see?" His grip tightened.

Gabriel paused a moment, then smiled. "All right, Otto. I'll tell you where I've been on two conditions."

The ork's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "What?"

"One: you take your hand off my shoulder. Two: you tell me about this place. I've—been forgetting things. That's why I'm back here." Gabriel watched Otto calmly, ignoring his two human friends.

Otto looked at him like he'd just sprouted wings—obviously this wasn't what he had expected. "Uh..." Then he grinned. "Yeah, okay, Dragonboy. C'mon. Let's go over there and make nice so the orderlies don't bother us." He transferred his hand from Gabriel's shoulder to his back and steered him over toward one of the conversation pits. Once Gabriel was installed on an ugly green vinyl couch with Freddie and the other human on either side of him, Otto sat down across from him and moved his chair forward so their knees were almost touching. He leaned forward in anticipation.

Gabriel took a moment to examine the ork's face. As orks went, Otto was one of the more human-looking of the species, with small tusks and a delicate (for an ork,





and ya freaked out. That's when they said you started actin' like a dragon." He laughed. "Good thing no *real* dragons heard about it. You ain't big enough to be a midnight snack." His eyes narrowed. "So—you were gonna tell us what you were doin' after they let you out."

Gabriel nodded gravely. "All right, Otto. That's the deal. But I still want to hear more about this place." He held up his wrist. "What about this? What does it do?"

Otto was momentarily distracted by Gabriel's change of subject. He held up his own bracelet-clad arm. "Oh, this? We all gotta wear 'em. It helps 'em keep track of us so we don't escape."

"What does it do if we do try to escape?"

"Huh?" The ork looked truly confused by the question.

"If we try to escape—what does it do? Does it tell them where we are? Does it hurt us in some way? Does it somehow prevent us from leaving?"

Otto paused a moment to go over all of that. "Uh..." He shrugged. "I dunno. I ain't never tried to escape."

"And you don't *know* anyone who has?"

"Just you."

That was a surprise. "I've tried to escape before?"

"You don't remember that either?"

"No. Tell me."

Otto grinned, making arm-flapping motions. "You snuck away when nobody was lookin'. They caught ya tryin' to fly over the wall."

The two humans had just gotten their giggle-fits under control, but this put them right back into new ones. "Like a dragon!" Freddie choked out.

"Whoosh!" agreed the other human.

Gabriel sighed, ignoring them. "What did they do with me after that?"

Again the ork shrugged. "Dunno. You disappeared after that. I think they stuck you somewhere else." He reached out and gripped Gabriel's arm. "Yer stallin', Dragonboy. You were gonna tell us —"

He stopped suddenly as the attention of both Gabriel and the two humans seemed to be diverted by something behind him. A second later he was grabbed and hoisted up from his seat.

Gabriel had watched the two other orks approaching, but had not attached any significance to them. They were both bigger than Otto and looked even less sane. "Get lost, shrimp," one growled to Otto, giving him a shove to the side. "You too, meatballs." This last was addressed at the two humans.

The two humans looked like they would be only too pleased to remove themselves from the situation, but Otto was having none of it. Otto glared at the new orks. "Frag off! Can'tcha see we're talkin' here?"

In answer, one of the orks grabbed Otto and flung him forcefully into the other one, who caught him and tossed him over the back of a chair. Otto recovered quickly and dived back into the fray; after a moment, so did the two humans. Gabriel backed off a few steps and checked out the rest of the room. The others were starting to pay attention, and the orderlies were putting aside their newspapers and getting up.

Gabriel didn't pause to consider when he noticed that one of the orderlies had, by moving in to help control the developing fight, left one of the doorways out of the room unguarded. *I have to get out of here.* Moving swiftly and silently, he slipped along the wall and out through the doorway. *What about the bracelet?* some part of his mind was asking, but he didn't worry about it. If it was a locator, then let them locate him. With any luck he would be long gone before they could find him, and then he

could see about getting the thing off. He wasn't finding Stefan by allowing himself to be locked up in an insane asylum.

The corridor was oddly deserted. The lights were low, all the doors along the way closed. Gabriel didn't know if they were locked as he didn't check them. He hurried down the corridor toward what his sense of direction told him was the outer part of the building. Any moment he expected alarm bells to sound, but they didn't. He made it unchallenged through two more doorways and found himself in what looked like a lobby area with a large central desk, several chairs clustered around a table with magazines, and a big glass door on the other side.

The room was empty. *Can it be this easy? Am I meant to get out of here?*

He didn't pause to think about it. He kept going, glancing quickly back over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed. No sign of anyone.

He grabbed the handle of the door and shoved, trying to fling it outward. It didn't move. Breathing a little faster now, he looked around the room and was about to grab a chair to toss through the door when his gaze fell on the door's lock. It was a simple spin-type deadbolt that allowed the door to be locked or unlocked from the inside. With one last look over his shoulder he spun the deadbolt open and once again shoved the door. This time it moved easily. He hurried out —

—and dropped as a wave of agonizing pain shot through his body. The source of the pain seemed to be his right arm, but the intensity was such that it was nearly impossible to tell for sure. All rational thought was driven from his mind as he writhed, screaming, clawing at the bracelet on his wrist. He had a vague impression of several large figures approaching him and then that was all he remembered.

"...Gabriel...?"

Pause.

"...Gabriel...are you awake yet...?"

He opened his eyes. His vision slowly cleared.

There was someone standing over him.

He looked around. He was lying on the floor, on something soft. Small room, white walls – padding?

He scrambled to a sitting position as he remembered the pain. The pain was gone now as if it had never been. "Don't stand up," said the voice. "Stay there. We need to talk."

He ignored it and continued to rise.

Pain – brief, then gone – ran up his arm. Gasping, he dropped again, glaring up at the man.

It was Dr. Sorenson. He didn't look pleased. In his hand he held a small device. "Please don't make me do that again, Gabriel. It isn't pleasant for me either."

"What – ?"

Sorenson backed off a bit until he was leaning against the far wall of the room. It was a classic padded cell, the sort that appeared in trid shows about old-time insane asylums. There was a padded door next to him with a tiny window looking out on a lighted corridor. "What are you doing here?" he finished. Shaking his head, he looked down at Gabriel like a stern father. "You tried to escape, son. You incited a fight with the other patients and then tried to run away."

"Incited – ?" He shook his head. "No. I didn't –"

Sorenson looked even more stern. "Lying won't get you anywhere. I tried to trust you, to see if perhaps you might have made some improvement, but I can see that things are as bad as ever – possibly worse. We're going to have to try a new treatment, I think."

"No," Gabriel said, trying to get himself together.

"I'm sorry...Justin," Sorenson said. "I'm not going to let you live with your delusions anymore. I think I might have made a mistake before in allowing it. It has been holding back your treatment. You must be made to see that the world you inhabit is not the real one." He settled back. "Remember, I can tell when you're lying, and lying won't be tolerated. You will answer my questions with the truth. Do you understand me, Justin?"

"My name isn't Justin."

The pain lanced his arm again. It lasted a little longer this time before dissipating. Gasping, he fell back against the wall and clutched his wrist.

Sorenson sighed. "I hate having to do that, Justin. Just so you know, the pain is agonizing but absolutely harmless. There's no physical damage being done to you. If you answer my questions truthfully and behave yourself, you should never have to experience it again. Do you understand?"

Gabriel glared up at him and dragged himself back up to a seated position, leaned back against the padded wall. He didn't answer.

"All right. Now, let's start out easy, shall we? What is your name?"

"Gabriel."

Sorenson's finger was poised over the device he held. "That's the wrong answer. I'll give you another chance, since we're just starting out. What is your name?"

No reply.

The doctor touched the button and watched dispassionately for several seconds as his patient thrashed in pain, then let up. "What is your name?"

Gabriel, eyes blazing, lunged for Sorenson, trying to rip the device from his hands. He wasn't quick enough. Cut down in mid-lunge, he dropped back to the padded floor, screaming. When Sorenson released the button

Gabriel glared at him with wild eyes, his breath coming in short sharp gasps.

Sorenson's expression didn't change. "What is your name?" he repeated.

Gabriel bowed his head. He could feel his heart pounding in his chest; he wondered if Sorenson had been telling the truth about the fact that the pain wasn't doing any physical harm to him. He had lied about the bracelet's purpose –

"I will help you. Your name is Justin. Say it. Justin."

"No –" His voice came out as a harsh whisper, cut off by a scream as Sorenson triggered the bracelet again. He rolled into a ball, his right wrist clutched in his left hand, his back facing Sorenson. "No..."

"Say it." The doctor's voice was implacable. "Justin. Say it!"

"No!"

Sorenson activated the device again. "Say it, Justin! I'm not going to make it stop until you do!"

The pain, the screams, the writhing went on for almost a full minute. At last the word was forced unwillingly from him, coming out as another scream: "Justin!"

Because he was facing away from Sorenson, he didn't see the doctor smile as he cut off the pain. "Good. Very good, Justin." He took a step back. "That will do for now. I'll be back in awhile and we'll talk some more. You rest. You're doing very well."

Gabriel didn't even hear the sound of the door opening and closing behind Sorenson.

He lost complete track of time shortly after that. Sorenson came back, he left, he came back again. The questions varied in specifics but were always of the same type: forcing him to admit to details about his life that he knew were not true.

At least at first he knew they weren't true. At some point—it seemed to him that it took a long time, but he wasn't sure—the doctor added a new component to the treatment: in addition to the bracelet and its agonizing pain, there was the needle—the needle with something in it that made his head float, that made his mind confused about what was true and what wasn't. Sorenson didn't have to use the pain much after awhile, because whatever was in the needle made him calm. He didn't notice how pleased the doctor was looking during the last few visits when he used the drug.

His world became the small room, and that was all he cared for it to be. The rest of the world was too complicated—he could not make sense out of it often anymore. Occasional moments of lucidity were more fearsome than enlightening, as he realized that there was a vast amount of unknown territory out there and, according to Sorenson, most of it was hostile. He could believe that because the nightmares were the worst. He tried not to sleep, although that wasn't possible—when he slept he was haunted by images of dark things, of screams and blood and death, of faces that he thought he should recognize but did not, but that he knew somehow were enemies to him.

He didn't tell Sorenson about the nightmares, but in his rare lucid moments he thought perhaps the doctor knew about them anyway.

Time went on.

The door opened, letting a slim and then widening wedge of light creep into the small cell. A dark figure stood framed in the doorway, blocking the light. "Justin?"

He huddled in the corner where he stayed now most of the time, his eyes wide and fearful like an animal's. He



made a low, moaning sound in the back of his throat and waited.

The figure entered the room—of course it was Sorenson. It was never anyone else. He dragged a chair in as he often did and sat on it, looking down at his patient. “Good morning, Justin. How are you today?”

He didn’t answer.

“Why don’t you sit up? I want to talk to you about something new today. Believe it or not, I think we’re making progress in your treatment.”

He slowly dragged himself up to a half-seated position, his eyes never leaving Sorenson. He plucked almost obsessively at the bracelet on his wrist—he didn’t remember when it had become a habit, but now he couldn’t seem to stop doing it. The little green light mocked him.

The doctor smiled down at him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes...sir.” Somewhere along the line Sorenson had ordered him to refer to him as ‘sir’ or ‘Doctor’ as a sign of respect. Patients should respect the doctors who were trying to help them, he had said. Patients should want to please the doctor. Sorenson’s approval had become very important to him. He thought the drugs might have had something to do with it, but he couldn’t hold a thought long enough anymore to be sure.

“Good.” The doctor seemed utterly unfazed, as he always did, by the fact that his patient was huddled on the floor at his feet. He smiled. “I’m excited about today, Justin. Do you know why?”

He shook his head, too quickly. “No...sir...”

“Do you want to know?”

He nodded.

Sorenson leaned down and patted his head. “Good boy. I’m excited because I think we’re about to achieve a

breakthrough in your treatment. We've had quite a number of productive discussions, and today we're going to begin to get to the bottom of what's causing your difficulties. Are you happy about that, Justin?"

"Yes, sir." His voice was flat, lifeless.

"Today, Justin, we're going to talk about your brother Steven and the people who killed him."

As almost nothing else could have done at this point, that thought had the power to drive a small wedge into the haze that surrounded his mind. He stared up at Sorenson. "Stefan..." he whispered.

"*Steven*," Sorenson said firmly. "Steven, Justin. Say it."

"Steven."

The doctor nodded. "Do you remember Steven, Justin? Your older brother?" He pulled something out of his coat and held it out.

He looked at it. It was a holopic of a man several years older than he was: tall, powerful, dark-haired, dressed in a fine corp-style suit. He reached out for the holo.

Sorenson pulled it back out of his reach. "This is your brother. Steven. He was killed. Do you remember?"

"He is...dead..." He reached for the holo again, stretching out his arm. "Please...sir..."

Sorenson nodded almost dismissively and dropped the holo into his hand.

He clutched at it, staring at it as if it held a great secret. He was shaking.

"Justin?"

His head jerked like it was on a string at the tone in the doctor's voice. He shrank away a bit, holding the holopic tightly and looking up at Sorenson with fearful eyes. "Sir?"

"You need to listen to me now, Justin. If you can't do that, I'll have to take the picture back. All right?"

He nodded. "I'll—I'll listen." He glanced down at the holo and then back up at Sorenson. "I'll listen..."

"Good." The doctor sounded pleased. "Now. Do you remember what happened to your brother Steven, Justin?"

He struggled with the images that suddenly filled his mind: confusing, conflicting images of a big green dragon, a horrific *thing*, a chasm, the man in the suit holding a machine gun, dark cars, a chair, a room, blood— "*No!!*" he cried, dropping the holo to clutch at his head with both hands.

He felt a hand on his back, oddly gentle given the doctor's previous actions. "I know it's difficult for you, Justin. It was a horrible thing, and it's quite understandable that you haven't come to grips with it yet. I promise you, though, it will be good to talk about it, to get it out in the open so you'll know what happened and can grieve for your brother. All right?"

Slowly, he turned his head, looking up at Sorenson with haunted eyes. He nodded, his expression trusting like a child's.

Sorenson returned the nod, resuming his position in his chair. "Good. That's what I wanted to hear, son. That's what it's going to take—I can't help you unless you want to help yourself." He paused a moment. "Now, Justin—can we talk about what happened to Steven?"

He drew himself up a bit, pulling his knees up and achieving a more-or-less sitting position with his back against the padded wall. He picked up the holo and stared at it intently; it shook in his hand. Then he nodded.

"All right. Now, I know this is going to be hard for you. You're blocking out what really happened because your mind doesn't want to deal with it, but you'll need to let go of that block. Remember, I'm here with you and I'm not going anywhere. I'm here to help."

He nodded. "Yes...yes, sir." He hadn't taken his eyes off the holo.

"Look at me, Justin."

He did as he was told. The doctor's face was calm and emotionless.

"Good. I'm going to show you some pictures, and I want you to let me know if you recognize any of the people in them. All right?"

He nodded slowly.

Sorenson reached into the pocket of his lab coat and pulled out several more holopics. He shuffled through them, selected one, and held it up. "Do you recognize this man?"

He examined it intently without reaching for it. Something told him that Sorenson wouldn't surrender these particular pictures. This one showed a tall, slim, sharp-featured man. The man was dressed in a long dark coat over a stylish suit. His hair was dark with two white stripes, and his eyes were brilliant blue. His expression was cold and distant.

He stiffened, holding his breath. The image was familiar, but he could not place it. "I—"

"It's all right, Justin. Everything is fine. Just let me show you a few more, and perhaps it will come to you." Sorenson held up more pictures, showing each for several seconds before moving on to the next one. The first showed a tall, well-muscled man with his long blond hair in a ponytail; he was dressed casually and was glaring with pale blue catlike eyes at whoever had taken the picture. The second showed a pale elf with severe features, wearing jeans, black T-shirt, and bomber jacket. The elf's eyes were stark white with one tiny pinprick of black in the center of each; his expression was even colder than the first man's had been. The last picture was of a massive troll with black hair and Amerindian or Aztlaner

skintone, dressed in jeans, T-shirt, and Amerind-print vest. The troll looked as if he might be preparing to remove the head from anyone who looked at him the wrong way. "Do you recognize any of these people?" Sorenson asked. He had one more picture in his hand, but had not shown it yet. He looked at his patient questioningly.

Sitting there on the floor, he was trying to remember to keep breathing. Thoughts whirled around his head as they had before—images, snatches of conversations, locations—but none of it was making sense. "No..." he whispered. "No...I—Please...sir...I—" He moved away a bit, scooting down the wall toward the corner where he hid.

"Justin, it has to be done. You'll feel better when it's over. Now come on—don't run away from me. That won't help any of us. This is important. I have one more picture to show you today. Will you look at it?"

He stopped, hesitating between the urge to hide and the urge to please the doctor. He drew his knees up again and clasped his hands on top of them, gnawing gently at his knuckle to try to get himself back under control. He raised his eyes but not his head, looking up at Sorenson. "Y...yes, sir," he whispered.

"Good boy." Sorenson put the other pictures away and held out the last one.

His eyes immediately widened. He reached out almost blindly for the picture, but once again Sorenson pulled it away. "No, Justin. You can't have this one. Just tell me if you recognize the person."

He stared. It was a woman this time: slim, tall, toned, with white-blonde hair and green eyes. Like the subjects of the other pictures the woman looked angry at something and was glaring at the camera. She was dressed in jeans, boots, T-shirt, and long black coat. Not

even aware of what he was doing he made a dive for the picture. Sorenson barely had time to back off and hit the button to activate the bracelet device. He screamed and fell writhing to the floor.

Sorenson maintained the pain for only a few seconds. "I'm sorry I had to do that, Justin," he said matter-of-factly, sitting back down as if nothing had happened, watching his patient sobbing at his feet. "You should know better than to do something like that by now. You know it displeases me." He paused. "Are you sorry, Justin?"

"Y-yes...sir..." he got out between sobs. It had been a long time since the doctor had used the pain on him—he was more upset now about the fact that he had disappointed Sorenson than because of the pain itself.

"Are you going to misbehave again?"

"N...n...no, sir..."

"Are you going to answer my questions like a good boy?"

He nodded, his breath hitching in his chest as he struggled to get himself under control.

"All right, then. Let's go on." Sorenson watched and offered no assistance while his patient slowly dragged himself back up. The young man's tear-streaked face, his disheveled hair, his despairing expression had no obvious effect on him. He simply waited. "Are you ready?"

He nodded, swiping a hand across his eyes. He picked up the holo-pic of his brother and held it like an anchor.

Sorenson held up the picture of the woman. "Do you recognize this person?"

He answered before he thought: "F...friend..."

The doctor shook his head. "No, Justin. She's no friend of yours."

A name fought its way up through the quagmire in his head, but didn't quite make it all the way: "Ju...Jul..."

"No, Justin." Sorenson's voice was a little sharper now. "She was your friend once, but she betrayed you. All of them did. They're the ones who killed your brother." He held up the other pictures, fanning them out. "Do you remember? They set you up, Justin. Both you and Steven. This woman befriended you, and then she and her friends took advantage of your trust to break into your home. That was when your brother was killed. Do you remember?"

He was breathing hard now, beads of sweat popping out on his forehead. He could hear the rasp of his own breath in the silence left in the wake of Sorenson's question. "No..."

"It's true, Justin," Sorenson went on inexorably, paying no attention to his patient's distress. "They killed him in cold blood. Would you like to see? Would you like me to prove it to you?"

He bowed his head, burying his face in his hands. "No!" he cried from the depths. The images wouldn't stop. "No! That—that isn't—She's—"

"Justin...you're getting agitated. Do you want me to use the needle again?"

"No!" He tensed, fighting to control himself. "No... please... I'm—I'm all right...No needle... no..."

"Well, then, calm down." He stood up, stowing the pictures away in his coat pocket. "I'm going to leave you for a few minutes, but I'll be back. Get yourself together before I return. It's important that you see what I have to show you, and that you understand it." Without waiting for an answer, Sorenson picked up his chair and departed with it, closing the door behind him.

In the room, the patient watched the door swing closed. He looked at the little window for a moment and then down at the picture in his hand. His breathing was slowing but not by much. He crept over into the corner,

turned his back to the door, and lay down, drawing his knees up and wrapping his hands around them. By closing his eyes and humming softly and tonelessly to himself he found that he could keep the images at bay, at least for a little while. That was all he asked for, just a little while—

“Justin!”

He spun around so fast he made himself dizzy. Sorenson was back—he hadn’t heard him come in. The door was closed again and the chair was back in place, although the doctor was not yet seated. “Sir...?”

“Get up, Justin. You can sleep later. Didn’t I tell you I was going to be back?”

“S—I’m...sorry, sir. I—” He shrank back as if he expected Sorenson to strike him.

The doctor waved him off. “Never mind. Just get up. I have something to show you.”

He noticed that Sorenson was now carrying a briefcase, which he placed on his lap and opened. “What—?”

Sorenson pulled out a small object attached to a long cord. At the other end of the cord was a mesh of contacts and wires. “This is a simsense rig, Justin. I’m going to put it on you. Do *not* touch it or try to remove it. If you do, then I’ll have to use the needle—or the bracelet. Do you understand?”

He nodded despondently. “...Yes, sir.” He did not want to wear that thing, to see the images Sorenson was going to show him, but he didn’t want to make the doctor angry either.

Sorenson approached him and quickly arranged the electrodes of the simsense rig in their proper places on his head. He moved efficiently with no trace of fear, and the patient did not attempt to interfere with him. Returning to his chair, he took up the small box and looked at the



patient. "These are the security tapes from your house the night your brother was killed. We've had them enhanced to show more detail. Now Justin, I know this is going to be hard for you, but I have to be firm. You *must* watch the whole thing. Will you do that for me?"

He nodded, his eyes fearful. "Yes, sir..."

"Good. Close your eyes, and we'll start."

He closed his eyes.

*It was a large house, opulent, everything about it suggesting that its owner possessed wealth and privilege. The cameras – the view kept switching between several – were set at intervals around a large room with marble floors, thick Oriental rugs, big windows, and a massive staircase dominating the far wall. There was a set of French doors on another of the walls, and it was outside these where the figure appeared.*

*It moved furtively, crouched down as it approached the doors. It did not pause long – judging by the ease and speed in which the door swung open, the figure was either a master lockpick or else had a key. Either way, less than ten seconds passed before entry was gained. The figure beckoned and then rose up: tall, swift, dressed in longcoat, boots, and dark cap, carrying a submachine gun strapped over its shoulder. He caught a glint of gold in the figure's hair as he watched the scene. His heartbeat sped up.*

*More figures were coming now: four more, all male, ranging from tall and slim to enormous and almost as wide as the doorway. All carried weapons, all moved nearly silently. The first figure made some sort of sign to the others and they crept into the room, pushing the French doors almost but not quite closed behind them. They moved into the middle of the room, toward the staircase.*

*"Who is there?" The voice – deep, masculine – called from off-camera. The figures' heads all snapped in unison toward the staircase. There was the sound of running feet and then two more figures came into view.*

He gasped. One of the figures was himself, dressed in jeans and casual shirt. The other, the one who had spoken, was unmistakably his brother Stef – Steven.

A light switched on, throwing strong illumination over the room. The figures resolved themselves, as he had expected them to, into the five people in the pictures Dr. Sorenson had shown him. Four men and –

“Juliana!” His breath quickened again as he watched his alter-ego in the simsense feed call to the woman. His voice was shocked, confused – obviously he didn’t expect her to be here.

“Hi, Justin.” The woman pulled off her cap and smiled at him, that smile that always melted him right away ever since he’d met her. “You weren’t supposed to be here, you know.”

“What are you doing here?” This was his brother, stepping up next to him. “Justin, who are these people? Why are they – ?”

“Shut up,” said the troll, waving a gun at Steven.

“Juliana, why?” he was asking her. “You – we – ”

“Just biz, kid,” she said. She looked almost rueful. “We had a job. We had to get in here and grab some of your brother’s trinkets. What better way than to get in tight with his little brother?”

“No – ” He watched himself shaking – he was shaking now in reality as well.

“We’ll have to kill them, you know,” one of the other men said. His accent was clipped and British.

“Can’t leave any witnesses,” the blond-ponytailed man added. The troll and the elf were already moving toward the stairway.

“You’ve already tripped the alarm,” Steven said calmly. “Lone Star will be here in less than five minutes.”

“Well, we’ll just have to be gone by then, won’t we?” the woman said, and fired her gun.

The burst from the SMG caught Steven in the chest, throwing him backward onto the marble floor. Blood sprayed from three separate wounds and spattered down. He was dead

*before he hit the floor, and expression of angry astonishment on his face.*

*"Kill him," the woman ordered over her shoulder as she headed for the stairs. She smiled coldly at him. "Trust's bad for the lifespan, kid. Too bad you won't get a chance to use that lesson."*

"No!" he cried, and it took him a moment to realize that he wasn't yelling in the sim, but in reality. He ripped at the sim-rig, trying to pull it off his head, trying to get it as far away from him as he could. He didn't hear Sorenson yelling at him, and he barely felt the pain as the bracelet was activated again. As his body and his brain spiraled down toward unconsciousness, all he could see were the twin images of his brother lying dead in a pool of blood and the cold contempt on the face of the woman he thought had loved him.

"Justin...?"

He turned his head away. He didn't want to hear any voices right now. The voices whispering to him in his head, half-remembered voices that flitted away like ghosts, were enough.

"Justin, you have to wake up now."

"No..." He flung his head violently back and forth.

Something stuck him in the arm. He flinched away, but then calmed as something entered his bloodstream — something cool and soothing and welcome. It did not send him back to unconsciousness, but left him instead with a rather pleasant floaty feeling. He opened his eyes.

Sorenson was there, sitting in his chair. He was wearing a different tie than before. *Wonder why I noticed that...*

"Justin, how do you feel?"

He shrugged and muttered something unintelligible. He didn't even know what it was supposed to be. He was

lying on the floor in the padded room. Someone had put a pillow under his head. His hair was stuck to his forehead, his shirt stuck to his back. His body seemed to hover slightly above the floor even though he could clearly feel the rough cloth of the padding beneath him.

"Please answer me. I'm worried about you, Justin. It's been two days since we spoke last. Do you—remember what we talked about?"

He struggled to remember, and rage gripped him. Only the drugs coursing through his system kept him calm. His fists clenched. "Steven..."

Sorenson nodded. "That's right. Steven. You remember now, don't you, Justin? About Juliana and the others?"

His eyes hardened as the images replayed in his head. "Killed him..."

"That's right. They killed him. *She* killed him, and they helped. She betrayed you, Justin, in order to gain entry into your home so she and her friends could steal your brother's data. You remember now, don't you?"

He nodded. He wished the drugs weren't dulling the rage. His body screamed for action, but the message wasn't reaching his muscles. "Killed...Steven..."

"Who killed Steven?" Sorenson leaned forward a bit, his posture anticipatory. "Who killed him, Justin?"

"Ju...Juliana..."

"That's right." He gave him a sympathetic smile. "It's a terrible thing, I know. I wish there was another way, but this is the root of your problem. I think you're almost there, Justin. Juliana was your friend, wasn't she? You thought she loved you, but she was just using you. She never loved you. You know that now, right?"

He looked up into Sorenson's intense gaze. Something seemed wrong, but he couldn't place it. It didn't matter anyway. He knew the truth now. "Yes. She...she didn't

love me. Never...loved me..." His voice was a whisper. His fists clenched again. "No...she can't—"

"She can't get away with this?" Sorenson supplied. "What would you do about it, Justin?"

He looked confused. "Can't—do anything...She is...gone. All of them...gone..."

"But if you could," Sorenson prompted. "If you could do whatever you wanted, what would you do?"

Again he was confused. "I—"

"Would you kill them, Justin? Would you kill Juliana and her friends?"

He stiffened, fighting the drug's effects, rolling his head back and forth on the pillow. "No...No...I—I don't kill..."

"They deserve it, Justin. They used you. She betrayed you and killed your only brother. She would have killed you if Lone Star hadn't shown up. She's out there, Justin. She's laughing at you for being such a sucker, such a lovesick boy. She's not like that. She doesn't love you. She never loved you. Isn't your brother's life worth avenging?" His voice was soft, almost hypnotic. His eyes never left his patient's face.

He moved uncomfortably, trying to get his body under his control. "But—"

"But nothing. No one would blame you, Justin. No one at all. After what they did to you, they deserve it. I'll bet that right now they're enjoying the money they made from the data they stole. Think of them—laughing, drinking, having parties—all with the blood money they got for killing your brother." Sorenson leaned in further. "They didn't have to kill him, you know. They could have taken the data and left. They *liked* to kill, Justin. The world would be a better place without them. You don't like to be made a fool, do you?"

Something was still trying to poke its way through his mind, but it still wasn't having any success. "No—" His eyes hardened again. "No...she—"

"What would you do, Justin?"

He fixed his gaze on Sorenson. "Kill...them?"

The doctor smiled. "Right. Exactly." He pulled out a hypo from his pocket. "Now, let me give you something to help you relax, so you can think about what we've discussed. We're almost there, Justin. Almost. You should be ready for release soon. How does that make you feel?"

He didn't answer. Truthfully the thought frightened him, but he didn't think Sorenson wanted to hear that. His fearful eyes found the hypo. "No..."

"Don't worry. This won't hurt. This isn't punishment, Justin. It's a reward. It will make you feel good. Don't you trust me? I've gotten you this far, and we're almost there."

He nodded. "Yes...yes sir." He lay still and allowed Sorenson to inject him. Almost immediately a pleasant, even more floaty feeling than before washed over his body. He smiled.

Sorenson stood, leaning down to pat his shoulder. "Good boy. You get some rest, and when I come back we'll talk about what we need to do to get you out of here." He didn't wait for an answer; it was obvious one was not forthcoming. He left the room and closed the door behind him.

Time passed strangely after that, and perception was even stranger still. He felt as if he had been in this room forever one moment, but the next moment it felt like he had just come here from some other place. He could never remember the other place, though. Sometimes there was pain, sometimes almost unendurable feelings of pleasure. He thought that people were entering the room, talking to him, telling him things, but he could never remember

them afterward. All he could remember, the one constant in his mind, was the thought—it didn't even have words anymore—that Juliana had betrayed him, that she and her friends had used him, had murdered his brother—that she was laughing at him now, him and his naiveté for trusting her, for thinking she loved him as he had loved her.

His life became a progression of images, few of them pleasant. He relived the scene of Steven's death over and over, thrashing around, crying out occasionally, unaware of anything but the visions in his own mind. Rarely he wondered why Sorenson had not returned, but decided that the doctor knew best and would do what was best for him.

Sometimes he slept, and the dreams were similar to his waking visions. Uneasy dreams of death and blood and betrayal, his brother's face as he fell backward onto the floor and Juliana's cold smile. He fought those dreams as hard as he could, but it was almost as if someone else was feeding them to him, fueling them with their own energy. Occasionally he wondered if the occasional small pains in his arm had anything to do with this. The dreams continued.

Then, at one point, the dream was different. It started out the same way as before, with an unsettled, surreal recreation of Steven's death scene—everything was there: Juliana and her friends, the guns, Steven, the house—but then, suddenly, the scene changed. It was a slow, languid change, like a dissolve in an old-time movie, peaceful and comforting rather than the abrupt and jarring changes from the old dreams. One moment he was standing in the house watching Steven's blood spray out, feeling it covering him, threatening to choke him—and then he was in a different place. A place of whites and columns and blue skies and rolling green fields off in the distance.

There was a creature there—an immense creature, long and sinuous and beautiful, with golden scales and soft, deep brown eyes flecked with gold. The creature was looking at him. She (somehow he knew the creature was female, in that way that you know things in dreams) approached, lowering her great head until it was level with him, and he was not afraid. Somewhere, far back in his mind, in the part where conscious thought never reached, he felt that he knew this creature and that she meant him no harm. He looked up into her eyes and got lost there.

*"Fight them, child,"* she said, her soft voice speaking in his mind, flowing over his consciousness like a soothing balm. *"You must fight them or all will be lost. This is not what you are."*

"Who—who are you?" he heard himself ask. Unlike in the real world, his voice sounded strong and confident.

*"You do not know me, but you will, as I will know you. It is ordained."*

"What is your name?"

*"I may not tell you that now. I travel far in my dreams and I have been drawn to you as someday you will be drawn to me. But you must fight them. They seek to destroy you. That cannot be."* There was sadness in her voice.

He had been unable to draw his eyes from hers as she spoke to him; his heart ached at her sadness, at the desire to do something—anything—to ease it. "What do I do?" he asked softly. "I can't—"

*"You are stronger than they are, child. Remember that. Fight them. They have tried to make you believe you are lost, but you can never be lost if you continue to believe and to fight. You must."*

He thought he heard an echo of another thought in her mind, but it was lost on the gentle breezes. (Could it



have been *I cannot lose you?* No, that didn't make sense. He must have misheard her.)

*"Will you fight, child? Will you deny them their victory?"*

His mind returned to the dark figure, the constant presence in his life, the man who guided his thoughts and showed him the way. He wanted so much to please him, but this creature—his entire being was drawn toward her. He felt that he could die now, and happily, if only to see the light in her eyes one more time. "I—"

*"Will you fight because I ask you to, if you cannot find the strength within yourself now?"*

He took a step toward her. "Yes..." he whispered. "Yes... Please... Tell me who you are..."

*"You will know me, child, and I will know you—when the time is right."*

Her voice was already fading—he became dimly aware of the fact that he had felt another of the sharp pains in his arm, and his mind was drifting up toward consciousness. He clung to the voice with increasing desperation, not wanting to let it go, fearing that if he did he would never hear it again. Such a beautiful voice... such beautiful eyes...

*"Your fate is in your hands..."* she whispered. The vision faded into fog and nothingness, withdrawing into the back of his mind as he awakened.

The door was opening. He rolled away instinctively as he always did, drawing up into his protective position with his back to the door.

"Justin, I know you're awake. I know you can hear me. Turn over."

He had become too accustomed to obeying the voice. Slowly, he rolled back over and blinked at the light shining in through the door's window.

Sorenson was standing there. He didn't have the chair. He was smiling. "Stand up, Justin. Can you do that for me?"

He didn't know how long it had been since he had stood up. It seemed like an eternity. He struggled to a seated position, then raised himself on shaking arms to his knees.

When he swayed, Sorenson grabbed his arm and hauled him up. "Good boy. I'm so proud of you, Justin — you did it!"

"Did — what, sir?" His voice was barely more than a whisper, shaky and uncertain.

"You're cured! You're going to be able to leave here soon." Sorenson clapped him on the shoulder. "Isn't that wonderful? The treatments have worked magnificently. We just have to do a few more things today and you'll be free to go."

He simply stared at Sorenson. "Out — side?"

"Yes, outside! Freedom, Justin. Isn't that what you wanted?"

He had to think about that. "Freedom. Yes...yes, sir. I — guess so."

Sorenson didn't seem to notice the tremor in his voice. "Come on, my boy. Come with me and we'll take care of the administrative details, get you some street clothes and a nice hot shower, and you're out of here." He put an arm around him and steered him toward the door.

"But —"

"But what?" The doctor kept steering. They were out the door now and moving down a lighted corridor.

"I don't — feel —"

"You don't feel quite right yet? That's understandable. That last injection we gave you was different from the others — they were to help you relax, while this one was more to bring you back up to full alertness. They'll do

some strange things to your head for a short time while they're interacting, but you'll be fine in half an hour or so." He smiled. "Have I lied to you before?"

He tried to remember when and thought there might have been a time, but he shook his head. "No, sir."

Sorenson looked pleased. "Of course not, Justin. I would never lie to you. I'm here to help you."

"Yes, sir." He followed along with Sorenson obediently. His mind was feeling a little clearer now, but the fog was still there. He wondered if it would ever leave.

They had almost reached the doorway at the end of the hall when an ear-splitting klaxon began to sound. He clamped his hands over his ears and dropped to his knees as around him red lights began to flash in time with the sound.

Sorenson hauled him up. His expression was grim and tense, his gaze darting around. "Get up, Justin! That was the intruder alert! Someone's broken in here. Come on!" He grabbed his patient's arm and dragged him quickly off in the other direction.

He stumbled along behind the doctor, unable to quite get his legs working right after his long period of inactivity. "What—sir—?"

Sorenson didn't answer. Instead, he pulled up next to a panel in the wall. He tapped out a code and the panel swung open, revealing a small rack of weapons. There were three submachine guns and several pistols there. Sorenson grabbed two of the SMGs, shoving one into his patient's hands, and slammed the panel shut again. "Take this, Justin."

He held the gun as if it were a dangerous animal. His eyes were wide with fear. "No—I—" He moved as if to hand it back to Sorenson.

*"Take it, Justin!"* Sorenson ordered. "You have to be able to defend yourself. I'm not going to have brought your mind back only to lose you to some intruder. Come on! I know where we can go to be safe until the problem's been dealt with." Again he grabbed his arm and headed down the corridor.

As they moved down the hallways they were passing other frightened-looking hospital personnel, all heading the other way. At some point he noticed this. "Sir —"

"Not now, Justin!" Sorenson picked up his pace, hurrying through a doorway just before it slammed shut behind them. The klaxons were still sounding; they seemed louder than ever, almost as if they were getting closer to the source rather than further away.

At the end of the hallway beyond the closed door, they burst out into a recreation room much like the one he had remembered from long ago. Sorenson took a split-second's stock of the situation and jerked him sideways toward a desk — but he did not move.

He stood there, staring.

Across the room, the five figures who had just come in from the other side stared too. Then they smiled. Especially the woman. Her smile was the biggest one of all. "Well, look who's here. Hi, Justin."

Sorenson was pulling on his arm. "Justin!" he hissed.

Juliana stepped forward. She carried her own SMG cradled casually across her arm. It wasn't aimed at anybody at the moment. "Long time no see. How have you been, kid?" Behind her, the other four spread out.

His hand tightened on the gun in his hands. His body shook with rage. "Juliana..."

"Yep. It's me. In the flesh." She cocked her head, her eyes moving up and down his body with the familiarity of an owner. "You look terrible, kid. They not been treating you right here?"

He raised the gun in trembling hands. "You... killed... Steven..."

"I sure did. So what are you going to do, Justin? Shoot me?" Her expression changed to one of contempt. "You don't have the guts."

"Shoot her, Justin!" Sorenson hissed from behind the desk.

His gaze darted back and forth between Juliana, her four companions, and Sorenson. A male nurse made a run for the door and the elf calmly spun his gun around and fired once, cutting the nurse down. He didn't even have time to scream.

"Come on, kid," Juliana said, spreading her arms. "Do it if you have the balls."

"Shoot her!" Sorenson barked. His voice, normally so flat and emotionless, took on a decidedly unwholesome impatience.

He blinked. In his hand, the SMG wavered. The rage rose, but the visions were distracting him again. A golden creature—a creature who was the antithesis of rage—

A woman's eyes, green, lively, loving—

The feeling of his flesh next to the warmth of a woman, of looking into those green eyes, of being one with her—

His hatred of himself for hurting her—

*You are stronger than they are, child—fight them—*

An altar, a *thing*, blood—

Blood everywhere—

A little gray creature on his shoulder, trying to warn him—

A courtyard in the darkness—

The sound of gunfire, the feeling of bullets hitting him, but not hitting—

— *not* hitting —

— *not* hitting —

He clamped his teeth together as a connection fell into place in his mind. The scar on his side throbbed like it was on fire. He wheeled and savagely jerked his finger over the SMG's trigger. "NO!"

Three things happened simultaneously at that point:

The rounds from his SMG tore into Sorenson, ripping flesh, exploding bone, sending blood spraying out in all directions.

Sorenson, at the same moment, fired at him. The doctor had aimed straight at his chest, at point-blank range—the rounds ripped through his arm, his leg, his shoulder, sending white agony up and down his body. He screamed.

Juliana and her four friends faded into nothingness without firing a shot.

After a moment, the hospital faded as well.

He stood there, alone, bleeding on a blasted red plain. The gun was gone. There was no sign of any other beings or structures. He fell to his knees and looked down at his wounds. Then he threw his head back and screamed defiantly at the sky:

*"You can't kill me, can you?? No matter what you do to me, you can't kill me! And now I KNOW it! How do you like that? I KNOW it!"*

His cries dissolved into an inarticulate scream of rage and triumph as the blackness settled over him once again and he fell in a heap on the ground.

## 41.

"What the *hell* was that?" Ocelot's voice broke the stillness of the reddish plain on which the group now stood.

There was no longer any sign of the city, the courtyard, the gangers, or Gabriel. Wallace had disappeared along with the rest of the scene. All that was visible now for as far as they could see was red-brown rock, swirling dust, pinkish sky, and far off in the distance, the rugged uneven mountain range.

The other runners were looking around as well, getting their bearings back. "That was odd indeed," Winterhawk agreed. "Nothing like what I would have expected."

"What *did* you expect?" Kestrel kicked at a rock in frustration. "We were right there. We'd found him. Why did it fade like that?"

"Dead?" 'Wraith asked, his emotionless tones tinged with just a bit of reluctance for bringing it up.

"Gabriel?" Joe shook his head. "They didn't shoot him."

"What do you mean, they didn't shoot him?" Ocelot faced the troll. "Didn't you see those guys with machine guns aimed at him?"

"He's right," Winterhawk said. He looked as if he were playing the scene over in his head as he spoke. "They were shooting *at* him—but I think the whole scene faded before they hit."

"But I saw the bullets hit the wall," Kestrel protested. "How could they miss at that kind of range?"

"I don't know, but they did," Joe said.

"Maybe the scene only faded for us," Ocelot pointed out. "Could he still be there?"

"That doesn't make any sense at all." Winterhawk shook his head. "Why would they let us find him and then fade out like that? I'll be the first to admit that this place isn't acting anything like I expected it to, but I think that might be taking things a bit too far."

"So what do we do then?" Ocelot bent down, picked up a fist-sized rock, and flung it out into the flat expanse of rocky nothingness. "We can't just stand here."

"We head back toward the mountains," Kestrel said. "If we can find that pass again, maybe we can get back to where we were."

"I think we *are* where we were," Winterhawk said. He spread his hands to indicate the area around them. "This is where the city was — it's not here anymore, but we are."

"So where's Gabriel?" Joe looked around, scanning the horizon.

"And Unekei," 'Wraith added.

"Huh?" Ocelot turned to face him.

"Don't know. Can't get back without him."

"We're not going to try to find him until we find Gabriel." Kestrel's voice was firm. "At least *I'm* not. If this place is anything like it was before, it doesn't really matter which way we go. We'll find what we're supposed to find, and I think we're meant to find him. So who's with me?"

Ocelot sighed. "Not much choice. We can't go back."

"Not sure about that," 'Wraith said. "Shouldn't yet, though."

"We should at least give it a shot," Joe agreed.

For lack of a better destination presenting itself, the five of them set off back toward the mountain range. The Chasm, far off to their left, was only faintly visible; they didn't approach it. They had walked for only a few minutes when Joe spoke up again. "Guys —"



"Yeah?" Ocelot slowed a bit; he had taken the point position with Kestrel, although the two of them had been walking several meters apart and hadn't spoken.

"I was just thinking about that situation back there." The troll paused a moment to gather his thoughts, then continued: "We all heard somebody yell 'No!' before those guys started shooting at Gabriel, right?"

Everyone nodded.

"And Kestrel, you said you thought it sounded like Stefan."

"It *was* Stefan," Kestrel protested. "No thought about it."

"But—" Joe paused again. "We all saw Stefan there with the gun, right?"

Again everyone nodded. "I see what you're getting at," Ocelot said. "He didn't yell. We saw him there, and he didn't yell."

"So who did?" Winterhawk asked. "I'll admit it certainly *sounded* like Stefan, but—"

"—and why the hell was Stefan shooting at Gabriel?" Ocelot interrupted.

"Good question," 'Wraith said.

"*Damned* good question," Winterhawk agreed. He had that look in his eyes that his friends knew well enough to realize he had something on his mind and wasn't quite ready to discuss it yet.

Ocelot gripped his arm. "Okay, 'Hawk, out with it."

The mage shook his head. "No—nothing."

"—'Hawk..."

Winterhawk sighed. "I haven't thought it all the way through yet. But—according to the note Gabriel left, Stefan is dead. His—essence—his soul, if you will—has somehow been intercepted by the Horrors and they're tormenting him. If that's true, then—why would he be shooting at Gabriel? Why would he try to kill the only

person who has any hope at all of getting him out of this situation?"

"What are you saying?" Kestrel said slowly, her eyes fixed on him. "That—Stefan *isn't* dead? Or that somehow the Horrors have managed to—"

"—turn him against Gabriel?" Joe finished.

"Horrors corrupting somebody? But that *never* happens." Ocelot regretted the sarcasm in his tone when he got a look at Kestrel's eyes.

Winterhawk let his breath out slowly. "I know it's not something we want to contemplate, but he *has* been here for quite some time. What if they've finally gotten through to him?"

"But—if they have—" Joe was looking suddenly very concerned. "Then—"

"—might have lured Gabriel here," 'Wraith finished.

Ocelot sighed and threw another rock, harder this time. "Shit. If they've not only got Stefan but got him on their *side*—"

"Then Gabriel's in a lot more danger than we thought." Kestrel stared out over the red plain. "Especially if he doesn't know it. We have to find him, guys."

"Neferet said grave danger," 'Wraith said. "Knew?"

"Who knows what dragons know and what they're willing to tell?" Winterhawk shrugged.

"We're gonna have to make a decision. We can't just stand here worrying about what might happen." Ocelot slapped the dust off his hands and faced his companions.

"I'm not leaving," Kestrel said. "You guys don't have to stay if you don't want to, but I'm going on." Her eyes were hard and determined, her expression unflinching.

"Who knows where we'll end up if we separate?" Joe pointed out. "For all we know, you'll find Uneke and *we'll* find Gabriel. It doesn't make sense to do it."

"Not yet," 'Wraith agreed.

Without consultation they resumed walking toward the mountains again. "We *do* need to figure out what we're gonna do if we find out that the Horrors twisted Stefan," Ocelot said.

"Do you think we'll have to fight him?" Joe asked. He looked at Winterhawk, their resident expert on things magical.

Again, the mage shrugged. "I've never seen anything even remotely like this in any of my studies. To have one's essence stolen at the point of death—" He shook his head as if trying to rid it even of the thought.

"What about us?" 'Wraith dropped back next to 'Hawk and Joe as Kestrel and Ocelot moved slightly ahead.

"What about us?"

"If they did it to Stefan—"

'Hawk's eyes widened as the implications of that sank in. "My friend, you could have gone all day without saying that."

"You mean they might be able to grab *our* essence if they kill us here?" Joe, too, looked frightened by the thought.

Winterhawk cast about in his mind for something encouraging to say, and surprisingly found it: "Stefan was marked. Gabriel said so. P'raps—p'raps they need something like that in order to—"

"Gabriel said *he* was marked too." That was Kestrel, who had whirled around at the mage's words. She had paled visibly. "So if they kill him—" She didn't wait for an answer. Instead, she turned and began walking faster. "We have to find him."

They all fell silent after that as each one contemplated in his or her own mind the implications of what they had discussed. With most of them, it had not previously sunk

in all the way what they were attempting, and what the consequences might be if they failed—now it was beginning to. They glanced at each other occasionally but avoided each other's gazes. Once more they spread out, close enough for protection but far enough away as to discourage attempts at conversation.

Winterhawk was in the middle group if there was such a thing: Ocelot and Kestrel were out front in their usual point positions, while Joe trudged along behind, keeping a watch on their backs. That left 'Hawk and 'Wraith in the center, each one in a state of heightened vigilance, watching for threats coming in from the side. So far the walk had been remarkably quiet—there had been no sign of any life other than themselves, not even a bird or an insect. Except for the vaguely eerie whistle of the light wind and the puffs of dust swirling occasionally across the plain, the place could have been dead.

Winterhawk found it hard occasionally to maintain his vigilance; the unquiet thoughts in his head kept distracting him, tempting him to introspection. That was exactly what he did *not* want at the moment, because it brought his mind back to a time that he wanted desperately not to think about. Every time he tried to push it out of his mind it came back stronger—the images of the *things* he had seen, the helpless feeling of the encroaching madness, the fear—

—was there something moving over there?

He stopped suddenly as something caught his eye off to his left. Whirling, he faced it.

Nothing.

"What?" 'Wraith asked, coming over to join him. The others stopped too, turning toward the mage.

"I saw something." 'Hawk pointed off in that direction.

The others gazed at the area, pausing for several moments to employ their various methods of enhanced vision. "Don't see anything," Wraith said at last.

"Are you sure you saw something?" Ocelot asked. The plain out there was as lifeless as it had ever been.

"It was *there*," Hawk said stubbornly. "A dark shape, moving — then it was gone."

"Did you look for it magically?" Joe asked.

"Of *course* I looked for it magically!" the mage snapped. "I—" He took a deep breath and shook his head. "I apologize. That was a legitimate question. Yes, I did. I didn't see a damned thing."

"Did you get anything more than a dark shape?" Kestrel asked. "Size? Speed? Two legs, four, more?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Nothing. Just—a shape."

Ocelot watched him for a moment, then sighed. "Whatever it was, it's gone now. Let's keep going and just keep an eye out for it." He sounded almost disappointed that they hadn't spotted it; he would have liked something to fight right about now.

They went on. The landscape continued, unchanged, before them—it did not seem as if they were getting any closer to the mountains that were their destination. The reddish plain continued to spread out in front of them, vast, unworldly, creepy. The air was warm and carried the smell of something unpleasant; none of the travelers tried too hard to figure out what it was. There was no hunger, no thirst, just the endless progression of steps, the swirling dust, and the pinkish cloudy sky overhead.

Ocelot forced himself to look straight ahead, to scan the horizon for threats, to apply himself to the task at hand. Still, he did occasionally glance over at Kestrel, and even more occasionally watched her for awhile as she walked. Her eyes were set, her expression grimly

determined as she strode on, setting the pace for the rest of the group. She looked neither left nor right, concentrating on the space ahead, her goal—Gabriel. A brief feeling of resentment crossed his mind: *I wonder if she'd go to this much trouble to save me.* Despite what he had told her before, back in Ferone's rooming house, this wasn't over. As much as he might have wanted it to be (and he wasn't sure in all honesty that he did), it wasn't. The image of her with Gabriel haunted him, mixed in with the smug, laughing face of the Dweller in Gabriel's form, bringing out all his innermost thoughts and fears for his friends to see, for him to see—for *her* to see. The beautiful face, the flawless physique, the eternal youth—none of those were even *real*! *He's a lizard, doesn't she see that? He's not a man. He's a big, scaly creature with wings and a tail and four legs. He eats cows whole! Doesn't she see that he's not—*

*You're right...*

He frowned. Who had said that?

*You're right, you know...why are you doing this? Why are you helping her? She couldn't do it without you. You know that...*

He blinked, continuing forward. Something in the back of his mind told him that he should be telling someone about these odd voices, but he wanted to hear what they had to say. They were making sense. He listened.

*She couldn't find him without your help. Why are you helping her? If she can't find him she'll come back to you. You know she wants him...she wants to sleep with him, not with you. Think of it...think of what they must have done together, and how much she loved it...How much he wanted it...how long he has been after her, hiding it behind that innocent act of his...*

His teeth gritted; involuntarily his hands knotted into fists. His breathing got a little sharper, his steps a little faster. His mind filled with visions of Gabriel and Kestrel,

their bodies entwined, their eyes locked on each other's faces, their hands —

*This is what you'll give her back if you help her... The voice insinuated itself into his head, whispered in his ear. You know it's true, don't you? She'll be very grateful to you, she'll tell you so, of course — but then she will go away with him, to his bed, and you will be forgotten like yesterday's garbage...*

"No, damn you! Shut up!"

It wasn't until he saw that the others were staring at him that he realized he had cried out aloud. He stopped, his gaze raking them, challenging them to respond.

"Ocelot —" Kestrel began.

"No." He cut her off. "I don't want to talk to you. Let's stop and rest."

"Rest? But —" None of them had felt particularly tired during their trip; certainly not in keeping with the distance they had already walked. So far no one had felt the need to stop, to break the urgency.

"Yeah. Rest. You got a problem with that?" His voice rose a little, but he didn't seem to notice. "So we find him ten minutes later? Is that gonna make a difference, or do you already have plans in mind?"

"Ocelot!" Winterhawk's voice was clipped and a bit harsh. "What the bloody hell are you on about all of a sudden?"

"Shut up, 'Hawk. This isn't about you. It's not about any of you. It never was. It's about *her*." He hooked a thumb at Kestrel. "Her and Gabriel." Stalking over, he stopped a meter or so from Kestrel, who was watching him as if he'd just announced he was boarding the four o'clock bus to Mars. Crossing his arms over his chest, he said, "So what if I told you I was just gonna stop here? That I was just gonna go back and find Uneke, go back home, and give up this whole show? What then?"

‘Wraith and Joe, standing back from the action, exchanged glances. Winterhawk moved a little closer, watching the scene carefully but saying nothing as yet.

Kestrel’s eyes were blazing. “You want to tell me what the problem is, Ocelot?” she demanded. “I thought we talked about this back at the rooming house. You said —”

“Screw what I said.” His tone was not loud, but it carried the blunt belligerence of a schoolyard bully. “It ain’t like that anymore. I’ve been doing some thinking, and it ain’t okay. Why the hell should I help you find him when all you’re gonna do is go right back to him and tell me to fuck off when we get back?”

Kestrel hadn’t been oblivious to the others around her before, but she was now. Her green eyes crackled with anger as she got in his face. “Ocelot, stop being an ass! I don’t know what kind of thoughts you’ve been having over there in that thick cranium of yours, but if you’d share ‘em with the rest of us occasionally you might be able to break your little one-man groupthink session before it gets you in trouble!”

Ocelot didn’t back down. “Oh, yeah—you think I don’t see it? It’s so obvious I couldn’t exactly *miss* it! I’d like to see you put yourself out like this for any of the rest of us—but because it’s Mr. Perfect Dragon who’s in trouble—even though it’s his own damn fault—you drop everything and run! Hurry, hurry—can’t slow down, can’t think about anything else—‘cause all you want to do is get him back here so you can get in his *pants* again!”

Winterhawk, ‘Wraith, and Joe stared at Ocelot in shock, but that was all they got to do before Kestrel reacted. Her face white with rage, she let him have it with a right cross straight to the jaw. Ocelot went over backward and crashed to the ground.



Kestrel's voice dripped ice as she stood over him. "You can stay or you can go," she said quietly, "but if you *ever* say anything like that to me again, Ocelot, you'll get the same again. Maybe worse. You have no right to talk to me like that. If you can't get over your insecurities about Gabriel and grow up, the least you can do is not project them on *me*!" Her voice never rose; she held it under tight control as if afraid of what she might do if she lost it. "Got it?"

Ocelot pulled himself painfully up to a half-sitting position, rubbing his jaw with one hand and propping himself up on his opposite elbow. For a long moment he was silent—there was an odd look on his face, as if he were trying to make sense of something.

"Well?"

He nodded. "Yeah..." Looking up at them, he took a deep breath. "Something...just happened."

The change in his tone of voice got through to Kestrel. She and the others stared down at him. "What are you talking about?" she asked.

Ocelot got back to his feet, his expression faraway and confused, showing none of the rage of only a few seconds ago. "It was like...something was—whispering to me. Telling me those things. They sounded so right—I *wanted* to believe them. But—" His gaze did a circuit of his friends' concerned faces. He sighed loudly and shook his head. "It was almost like I was along for the ride inside my own head."

"So—you didn't mean those things you said?" Kestrel asked carefully.

He paused a long time before answering. "Yeah...I meant some of them," he said at last. "But not all of them." He took a step closer to her. "Kestrel—I meant it when I said I'm not okay with this yet. But the rest of that stuff—about you, I mean—" Again he shook his head.

"That stuff I didn't mean. It made sense at the time, but now—Like I said, I could see it happening but I couldn't stop it."

She regarded him with suspicion for a moment, then let her breath out. "So what happened, then?"

Winterhawk stepped forward. "Don't forget where we are," he pointed out quietly.

"You think the Horrors are whispering in Ocelot's ear?" Joe asked. "Why now?"

"Why not?" Wraith asked.

Winterhawk shrugged. "I don't know why now. P'raps it was they that I saw before. P'raps they're trying to sow dissension in our ranks. All I know for sure is that we'd better be damned careful and keep an eye on each other for odd behavior."

"Damn right," Ocelot agreed, rubbing his jaw again. It looked like he was soon going to be sporting a rather impressive bruise there.

"So," Kestrel said quietly, "Are you going on?" The question was ostensibly directed at the group, but she was looking straight at Ocelot when she said it.

After a moment he nodded. "Yeah. We're going on."

Winterhawk, Joe, and Wraith all nodded.

"Okay, then." She sounded weary. "Come on. Let's keep going the same way unless anybody has a better idea." She glanced one last time at Ocelot and then turned and started off again.

Days passed. The only way they could tell this fact reliably was that the sky darkened and lightened again; other than that, they did not get physically tired, or hungry, or thirsty as they continued their seemingly endless trek. It was an odd feeling psychologically to never experience hunger or thirst, to never feel the need for sleep or even rest. Several times they stopped simply

because they felt that it was time to stop for awhile; other than that, they continued on with little conversation. They did, however, keep a closer watch on each other, looking for any sign of the temporary insanity that had gripped Ocelot.

For his part, Ocelot did not speak of what had happened. Once Kestrel tried to bring it up, but he waved her off telling her that they could talk about it some other time, when this was over and they were back home. Each of them, when referring to the end of their quest, always used some variant of that phrase: "*when we return home*" or "*when we find Gabriel.*" Not *if*. Never *if*. It was the only thing that kept them going now.

It seemed odd to them that the Horrors seemed, at least for the most part, to be ignoring them. Remembering the last time they were here, when they had been attacked by hordes of creatures and barely escaped with their lives, they wondered why this time their passage seemed to be continuing unimpeded. If any of them saw odd shapes flitting off in the periphery of their vision or heard strange whispers that seemed to originate from a source very close by, they said nothing of it. They simply went on.

It was at one of their infrequent rest stops that 'Wraith, in his emotionless, dispassionate tones, brought up what had been in a greater or lesser degree on everyone's mind for the past several days: "How much longer?"

All of them tensed at the words, most of them at the same time sorry he had said them and glad that they were finally out in the open. No one looked at Kestrel. "What do you mean?" Joe asked, even though he knew exactly what 'Wraith had meant. They all did. It was just a small attempt to draw it out as long as possible.

"How much longer do we look?" the elf asked. "Haven't found anything. No clues. No sign of him. No new scenarios."

Winterhawk sighed. "Loath as I am to say it, I'm beginning to agree with 'Wraith. I don't know what's going on here, but we're obviously not getting anywhere in our search. Either we're going about it the wrong way, or—" He let that trail off, but everyone heard his words: *or there's nothing left to find.*

Ocelot looked at Kestrel, who was looking down at her hands, and then at the others. When he spoke he chose his words carefully, mindful of what had come before and how they would be received now. "We can't spend the rest of our lives wandering the metaplanes. It isn't helping Gabriel, and it isn't helping us. We've gotta think of another plan."

"Can we go back—try to get more information and try again?" Joe asked.

"That's assuming we can even find Uneke again," Winterhawk said. "Or that he's waited for us after all this time."

Kestrel looked up. Her expression was bone-weary, despairing, but resolute. "You guys are right. We've been here for days now—maybe weeks—and we haven't found any sign of him after we saw those guys shooting at him. Maybe they *did* get Stefan. But I'm not giving up until I know for sure what happened. You can go if you want—go back and try to find Uneke and go home. I won't blame you. But I'm staying until I know."

"Kestrel," Winterhawk said very gently, "I know you don't want to think about this, but—" He paused, trying to think of a way to soften it; finding none, he simply said, "by now if we haven't found him, there's a decent chance that he's—gone."

"Dead, you mean." her voice was as soft as his. She shook her head. "He's not dead."

"Kestrel—" Ocelot began.

She shook her head again, more emphatically this time. "He's not dead. I know it. He's out there somewhere."

"But *how* do you know?" Joe asked. "I know you want it to be true—we all do—but—"

"I don't know how I know." She looked up to meet the troll's eyes. "But I do. I can—feel it, somehow, inside of me. It's not very strong, but I can feel him. He's out there somewhere. And I'm going to find him."

"And if you can't?" 'Wraith's voice was as flat as ever, but there was still the hint of compassion in it.

She sighed and spread her hands, shaking her head. "I don't know. I'm not going to think about that yet."

The four other runners exchanged glances. It was Ocelot who finally spoke. "Okay," he said softly. "We'll keep going for awhile longer. But we can't do this forever. You know that, right?"

Kestrel looked up at him and nodded. Her eyes were haunted. "Yeah...I know that. I know it..." she added in a whisper. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You guys are being good friends. I don't want to take advantage of that for something that might not even work out." She looked up at them. "Two more days. Give me two more days. If we don't find him by then—" She paused. "If we don't find him by then we'll go back, find Uneke, and then I'll have to try something else, but you don't have to be involved if you don't want to. Deal?"

All four of them nodded. "Yeah," Ocelot said. "That's fair."

"None of us want to leave him here, Kestrel," Winterhawk said gently.

"I know that." She got up, dusting herself off. "You're all his friends too. Those damn things might be trying to turn us against each other, but it isn't going to work. I can see that." He stared off at the horizon. "Come on, then. At least let's try to make it to the mountains before the time's up." She started off; after a few paces she stopped abruptly and turned back. "Thanks..." she said, then turned away again.

The others followed.

Another day and a half passed without incident. They mountains had gradually been growing closer—much more slowly than any of them would have expected, but closer nonetheless. The five of them had continued their search, spreading out, scanning the area ahead, to the side, above, and behind, trying to spot any sign of movement, irregular terrain, heat shimmers, or anything else that might indicate that something was out of the ordinary. After all this time, the eerie red dust, pink sky, and jagged mountains had become *ordinary*—it was the only scenery they had seen in many days. Each of them yearned for the sight of blue skies, trees, even the concrete and skyscrapers of Seattle. Anything to relieve this hellish landscape.

Kestrel had become increasingly more quiet and focused as the time had passed, ever mindful that her two days were ticking inexorably away and soon she would have to at least temporarily abandon her search. The only thing was, she knew it wasn't temporary. If she left, she knew that it was very likely that she would not come back. Uneki and Neferet would be convinced that Gabriel was dead, and would not risk sending her here again—especially not on her own. She knew that the potential that she could be corrupted by the Horrors was too great for them to risk sending her back here alone, and that it

was unlikely that her friends would agree to return. It wouldn't be fair to ask them. Gabriel was their friend too, sure — but not to the same degree that he was hers.

She could not shake the certainty that Gabriel was alive somewhere. It had been there for a long time, but she had only just noticed it at the point when Winterhawk had suggested that he might be dead. At that moment she had realized that the thing that had driven her forward so strongly was her absolute confidence that he was out there somewhere. It seemed to originate from the core of her being, and in an odd way it was drawing her toward the mountains. She wondered if, despite what the others had said about the difference of this quest from the others, Fate was doing her best to stick her nose into things here as well. She hoped so. They needed all the help they could get.

As they continued on, she barely noticed on a conscious level that the feeling was changing. As the end of the second day approached, it was no longer simply a certainty that he was alive. Something was drawing her not just toward the mountains, but —

—drawing her toward Gabriel?

Consciously she did not notice this, but below any conscious level, her body responded to it. She held her head higher, picked up her steps, began moving faster. Ocelot looked at her oddly. “Kestrel —?”

She didn't answer, but merely kept moving at the same pace. The others caught up with her, looking at each other with a kind of grim pity. They knew that her time was nearly up, that soon she would have to put aside her quest. Like she did, they knew that if this happened she would not return. This was it. They were willing to give her her last hour, to join her in intensifying the search if it would make her feel like she had done all she could —

"Come *on*," she called back over her shoulder, then broke into a loping jog-trot. It was beginning to get dim — what passed for darkness in this place — but she didn't seem to notice.

"Kestrel, where are you going?" Winterhawk called as he and the others quickened their pace to keep up with her.

"Come on!" she cried again. "Faster! We don't have much time! We don't —

And then they all saw the figure.



## 42.

No!

*His mind whirled in frustration, in fear, in desperation.*

*This cannot be!*

*He cannot be lost now! Not after all he has done. Not after all that all of them have done.*

*He had watched in increased dismay as his captors had carried out their latest plans, watched as the illusions and deceptions had driven his brother further down toward the pit of madness. He had watched as his brother wavered in his resolve, confused and unsure even of what was reality and what was simply the creation of his tortured mind.*

*He had watched – and been unable to help.*

*His attempts in the previous scenario had not eluded them. When he was forced at the end to show his hand, to reveal his presence by speaking through the small creature he had influenced, they had discovered him. The punishment had not been pleasant. It had gone on for longer than he thought he could bear, but always the thought of his brother had sustained him just enough that he managed to hold on. He had to hold on. His brother needed him, just as he needed his brother. They had to succeed. He knew now that both of their lives – and more – depended on it.*

*He was in pain now, but pain was a minor consideration. He was always in pain, so it was simply a matter of degree. Eventually it all began to blend together. When he became aware again he saw that he was too late to influence things to aid his brother in his captors' latest scenario, so he watched and he waited.*

*The events continued; he focused, willing his brother to remain strong, to refuse to give in, even as his own resolve began to fade with his brother's sanity.*

*It seemed all was lost, and then –*

*– another. Another who came and touched him and spoke to him in his dreams.*

*Who was she?*

*He did not know—he tried to reach out to her, but she eluded him. He could sense a peculiar attunement to his brother in her, but it did not extend to himself. She did not remain long, but it was enough. She had come and done what he himself could not – she had reached his brother and pointed him once again on the road toward sanity. He wished he could thank her, but there was no longer any trace of her.*

*He watched again, heartened as his brother struggled upward from the madness and reasserted his will. That will – he had always held his brother in contempt before their reconciliation for just that attribute: his strong will, his unwavering resolve to do what he thought was right. Now he knew that was the thing that would save him, if nothing else could. That and the mysterious presence, and whatever help he could offer now. And, he realized, the influence of his friends, who had left the safety of their lives and their bodies to seek him out and offer him their aid.*

*I am with you, brother, he sent. I am with you and I will not leave you. Together, we will prevail.*

*Concentrating with all his being, he redoubled his efforts to reach out to his brother.*

## 43.

At first it looked like it was just another slight rise in the ground, a lighter spot in the midst of the rocky plain. As they drew closer, though, it resolved itself into a humanoid figure. Closer still and –

“Gabriel!” Kestrel broke into a full run, dropping to her knees next to the slumped form almost before she had stopped moving.

The others caught up as she was checking him over. It was indeed Gabriel, and he was unconscious. Lying half on his side like a discarded toy, he was dressed in dust-streaked, loose-fitting white pants, a shredded T-shirt, and no shoes. Both the T-shirt and the pants were streaked with dried blood. His hair, the parts of it that weren’t plastered to his head like it had dried there, stuck up at odd, disarrayed angles. From the accumulation of dust that had gathered around him, it appeared that he had been here for quite some time. “My God...” Kestrel whispered. “What have they –”

“Alive?” ‘Wraith asked.

She nodded. “He’s breathing, but –”

The other runners quickly moved in to help her determine the extent of his injuries, Joe using his first aid skills and Winterhawk his magic. Ocelot and ‘Wraith stood a meter or so away, keeping watch to make sure no one jumped them.

After Winterhawk did a quick check to make sure Gabriel had no broken bones or serious internal injuries that might be aggravated by moving him, Kestrel rolled him over on his back, pulling off her jacket and putting it carefully under his head as a pillow. He didn’t stir. His eyes remained tightly closed. She looked up at Winterhawk. “Can you heal him?” she asked softly.

"I'm certainly going to try." 'Hawk's voice was grim. "If it's been a long time since he was injured, though—" He didn't finish. Instead, he got down next to Gabriel, closed his eyes, and began concentrating. Joe remained nearby, ready to provide non-magical aid if it was needed. Kestrel alternated between watching Winterhawk's face and Gabriel's; she knelt next to the young man's head and brushed his matted hair off his forehead.

Several moments passed during which the only sound was the low whistle of the wind as everyone focused on their respective tasks. When Winterhawk finally looked up, his expression was perplexed.

"What?" Kestrel asked quickly. "Can't you do it?" She gripped Gabriel's shoulder gently, her own body tense.

Winterhawk shook his head. "No...that isn't it." He paused a moment, then: "Physically there isn't anything wrong with him."

"What?" That was Ocelot, who turned away from guard duty for a moment to look at 'Hawk like he was crazy.

The mage spread his arms in a gesture of confusion. "I don't understand it either. All this blood—the length of time he's obviously been out here—"

"So what's wrong with him?" Kestrel asked. "If he's okay—not hurt—"

"I didn't say he was all right," Winterhawk cautioned. "Obviously he's not all right or he wouldn't be unconscious. We don't know how long he's been here, but it looks like quite some time, which means he's been out for quite some time. And—" He looked down at Gabriel's face "—there's something odd about his aura."

"What kind of odd?" Joe asked.

"I don't know. I've never seen anything like it before. He's very disturbed about something, but I can't tell what.

You must remember, I've rarely seen Gabriel's true aura, because he keeps it well hidden most of the time. This seems—wrong, though, somehow."

"Impostor?" 'Wraith asked.

Ocelot tensed and turned back to take a scan of the horizon for threats. As usual, there were none apparent.

'Hawk paused several seconds before answering, then finally shook his head. "I don't think so."

"He's not an impostor," Kestrel said. There was certainty in her voice.

"How do you know?" Joe asked.

"I can feel it. Don't ask how because I don't know, but I can. The same way I could tell where he was."

"Horror deception?" 'Wraith took a quick glance in their direction before returning to his vigilance.

Again Winterhawk shook his head. "I'd bet not. But that's not the odd thing here. The odd thing is: if this *is* Gabriel, and I believe it is, then why is he here?"

"And why does he look hurt but he isn't? Why is he unconscious?" Kestrel was now gently rubbing Gabriel's shoulders, hoping that perhaps the contact would bring him awake. So far she was having no luck.

"Maybe it's somebody else's blood," Joe pointed out.

"P'raps, but look at this." Winterhawk pulled aside the sleeve of the shredded and mostly useless T-shirt to show a large accumulation of dried blood on Gabriel's right shoulder. There was a similar accumulation on his left arm and another on his left thigh. "It looks like something *did* hurt him here, but all that's left now is the blood."

"This is fuckin' weird." Ocelot dropped into a crouch, leaning his elbows on his knees, and alternated his attention between the rest of the world and what was going on behind him. "It brings up a hell of a lot more questions than it answers."

"All right," Winterhawk said, "you start."

"Okay. What's he doing here? Why is he here? Did he lose a fight with the Horrors? If so, why didn't they just grab him like they did Stefan?"

"And why didn't they kill him?" Joe added. "If he's been lying here for awhile, it would have been easy for them to just—" He glanced at Kestrel and nodded as if the end of his sentence was obvious.

"Where has he been all this time?" Winterhawk asked. "Has he been here the entire time we've been looking for him, or was he off in some other scenario?"

"Why won't he wake up?" Kestrel looked down at him, then back up. "If he's physically all right, why is he unconscious? And what's the odd thing about his aura that you said you saw?"

"Where are the Horrors?" Wraith put in quietly.

Everyone looked around nervously, but no sign of movement could be seen.

"Maybe he *won* the fight with the Horrors," Joe said. "That explains why they're not here."

"But it doesn't explain why *he's* still here," Winterhawk said. "It's conceivable, since we didn't come here together, that Gabriel could have succeeded in what he came here to do and gotten sent home while we remained here, but it doesn't make sense that *he* would remain if he was successful."

"I don't think he killed it." Kestrel's quiet voice broke into their speculations. "Not the one he came here to kill."

"Why not?"

"Look." She pulled up the bottom part of Gabriel's shirt and brushed some dust off his side to reveal an odd-looking wound. It looked like a scar, but a nimbus of angry red flared out from around it. She put her hand over it and looked up at the others. "It's hot."

Winterhawk frowned. "How could I have missed that?" He closed his eyes again and concentrated on examining it. It only took a few seconds this time. "That's definitely the source of some of the oddness in his aura, but not all of it. It's not a physical wound, despite what we see here—it's more of a psychic wound. It's well hidden, but goes deep into his essence."

"That's where they stabbed him—before," Kestrel said. "It never healed...but it never looked like that before, either."

"Before?" Joe asked.

Kestrel nodded. "Back when Stefan died. When he was on the altar. They tried to stab him in the heart, but he managed to deflect it and they got his side instead. He told me about it, showed me the scar. He said he didn't think that one would ever heal completely."

"But—you said it didn't look like this?" Winterhawk asked. He seemed very interested in the answer.

She shook her head. "No. After he got back, it healed like any normal wound would, but it left a scar that never faded, no matter what did to get rid of it. Even magic didn't work. But it just looked like a normal scar like a human would get."

"And now a Horror-inflicted scar is flaring up again." 'Hawk's voice was soft and grim. "This isn't good."

"What do we do?" Ocelot demanded. He looked down at Gabriel. "He can't fight the Horrors like this, even if Stefan's still out there somewhere."

"Even if they haven't turned Stefan to their side," Joe added. "You have to admit, it's starting to look like they have."

Kestrel sighed, looking back down at Gabriel. "I think you're right—at least about the fact that he can't fight them like this. And we have no way to help him here. We can't even get him cleaned up." Her voice held weary

frustration as she looked up at her friends. "I think we have to go back."

The others nodded. They had already come to that conclusion, but were waiting for Kestrel to admit that she had too.

Winterhawk stood up slowly. "So—we're all in agreement? We take Gabriel and go back? Assuming we can find Uneke, that is."

Everyone nodded again. Their expressions were grim and despondent; no one liked admitting failure, especially after all they had been through together. "What about the Horrors?" Ocelot asked. "If we go back it isn't over."

"No choice," Wraith said.

Kestrel nodded. "Maybe Neferet will help Gabriel—maybe if we can get them talking they can come up with something together. She's older than he is and he says she's very wise. I don't see how we can do anything else."

They all stood around for a moment, none of them wanting to take the first step toward tangibly admitting that they were giving up their quest. Finally Joe bent down and gently lifted Gabriel; the troll's massive arms dwarfed the young man, making a reasonably comfortable space for him to rest. "Which way?" he asked.

"I don't think it matters," Winterhawk said. "But let's head back toward the Chasm. That's where Uneke was when we last saw him."

Silently they all fell into step. This time, Ocelot and Wraith took the point spots, while Kestrel and Winterhawk took up positions on either side of Joe. They moved more slowly now, partly because they didn't want to disturb Gabriel with too fast a pace, partly because a general air of despondence had suffused the group and made it difficult to spur themselves to move any faster. They became a bit less careful about watching for



enemies, but it did not matter: their progress was not disturbed.

Gabriel showed no signs of awakening as they continued on their way. He remained quiet and unresponsive in Joe's arms, neither moving nor making any sound. Kestrel became increasingly worried about him and checked him often, as did Winterhawk, but neither could find any change in his condition. The scar did not flare up any worse, although it didn't get any better either. It remained noticeably warmer to the touch than the rest of his body.

It was on the third day with no sign of Uneke that he finally stirred. It happened during one of the few rest stops that Kestrel insisted on, mainly to give Joe a chance to put Gabriel down for awhile and Gabriel a chance to lie still without being jostled.

Kestrel had wandered off a short distance to stretch her legs after sitting next to him; 'Wraith had taken up the watch until she returned. She wondered what the others were thinking, and if they would ever find Uneke again. None of this was making sense to her. Neferet had said that they would all be in grave danger here, that they were going into the center of the Enemy's influence on this side of the Chasm, but yet the threats to them had been almost nonexistent. She didn't know what was wrong with Gabriel; his failure to awaken after all this time was disturbing her more and more with each passing day. She was beginning to wonder if the oddness in his aura that Winterhawk had noticed was something wrong with his mind. She could think of no other explanation for why, although physically he was about as well as could be expected following his ordeal, he did not awaken. She tried not to think too hard about it: such thoughts did nothing to make her feel any more comfortable. She stood

apart from the others, throwing stones out into the vastness.

"Kestrel."

She was startled by the sound of 'Wraith's voice breaking the silence. She whirled around a little too fast to face the elf.

'Wraith indicated Gabriel and raised an eyebrow.

The young man's hand was moving, twitching slightly but unmistakably.

"Awakening?" 'Wraith asked, rising to surrender his place to Kestrel.

She immediately hurried over and dropped down next to him as the others gathered, keeping their distance but watching with hope. Gently brushing his hair off his forehead, she spoke softly to him: "Gabriel...wake up. It's me. Kestrel. We're all here..."

She watched as his eyes moved under closed lids. His hand twitched again and his breathing became a bit faster.

"Gabriel...come on, open your eyes. We've been waiting for you..."

His jaw tightened for a moment and then his eyes opened suddenly. The rest of his body tensed, his eyes widening in what looked very much like fear. More than fear—sheer terror. He looked as if he was trying to speak, but no sound came. His body began to tremble.

Kestrel watched him fearfully, casting confused glances up at the others. "Gabriel? What's wrong? It's me. Kestrel. Juliana." She put her hand on his shoulder, squeezing gently.

She could feel the tautness in his muscles as he shook under her hand. He was whispering something, but she couldn't make it out. Gradually his words became more coherent, but his thoughts did not. "No...please...Don't..." he whispered, staring straight up into Kestrel's eyes. Then he flung himself onto his side, drawing his knees up and

wrapping his arms around them. His left hand clutched at his right wrist as if he were trying to find something that wasn't there. He remained in that position, trembling and whispering to himself.

Kestrel looked up at the others, eyes haunted. Winterhawk was already crouching down next to Gabriel. When he finished his astral examination he looked serious. "I don't know what's wrong with him," he said grimly. "He's obviously agitated about something—possibly us. Unfortunately I can't do his trick of looking into his mind to see what's going on, though, so I can't know for sure."

"Is this connected to what you saw in his aura before?" Joe asked.

'Hawk nodded. "I think so. It's flaring up worse than ever now."

"Can you do anything for him?" Kestrel was keeping herself under tight control, her voice even and flat.

The mage shook his head. "I think the best thing we can do for him now is get him back to someone who might be able to help."

Kestrel looked down at Gabriel huddled up and trembling on the ground and bowed her head. "Yeah," she said, a little hoarsely. "Let's do that. Let's get him home."

Silently, Joe bent to pick him up. He remained rigid, locked into his fetal ball. Joe paused a moment and then slipped his hands under him, lifting him without disturbing his position. He was stiff in Joe's arms for several minutes, then slipped into unconsciousness again. His hold relaxed, his hands loosening from their lock around his knees. Joe straightened him out and started moving.

After another hour or so of walking and no sign of response from Gabriel, Ocelot dropped back from his position at the front of the party and fell into step with Kestrel. The others moved away without comment, giving them their space to talk privately. At first Kestrel resisted, remaining at Joe's elbow, but then she sighed and slowed down so she and Ocelot were in the rear of the group.

"You okay?" Ocelot asked. He sounded a bit awkward.

She shrugged. "What's 'okay'?" For her part her voice held no edge of belligerence or challenge; just weariness and more than a bit of despair.

"Neferet'll help him when we get back. You said yourself, she's older than he is and more powerful. She'll know what to do."

Kestrel nodded without looking at him. "Yeah. I know. It's just—" She shook her head.

"What?"

She paused, watching Joe's broad back as he walked several meters ahead of them. "I've never seen him like that. I mean—I've seen him hurt—hurt bad—but I've never seen him so—afraid. So lost." Again she paused. "He's a dragon, Ocelot. They're supposed to know what's going on. They're supposed to be able to handle things. They don't—"

Ocelot put a tentative hand on her shoulder. "Hey, c'mon. Let's just get him back home and we'll go on from there. It'll be fine."

"Will it?" She turned to face him; her eyes had an odd faraway look. "Will he be all right, or is he going to stay like that?" She sighed. "I hate those things, Ocelot. I want to kill whatever it was that did this to him."

"I think we all want a shot at it," Ocelot agreed. "But I don't think it's gonna happen this time."

"I know. And I hate that too. I don't want to let them win. We're better than they are. It's not right that they should get away with it."

Ocelot put his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slightly slumped forward. He agreed with everything she was saying—he was also concerned that the Horrors would figure out a way around the spell Gabriel had cast to keep their minds safe. But somehow none of that was important at this moment. He looked at Kestrel and saw a lot of himself—a strong, proud individual who was trying hard to keep it together because there wasn't another option. He wished he could tell her it was all right to let it go for awhile, but he knew as well as she did that it wasn't. Not for them. You did what you had to do, you tried to stay alive, and you went on.

"Do you think they *did* get him?" Kestrel asked suddenly.

"Huh?"

She hooked her thumb toward Gabriel. "Maybe they *did* win. Maybe this is what they did to him. They didn't kill him, but did something worse."

Ocelot let his breath out slowly. That thought hadn't occurred to him. "I don't know," he said at last.

"Do you think they got Stefan? Got him to switch sides, I mean?"

This time he did have an answer, even though he didn't like it. "Yeah." Pause. "Do you?"

She bowed her head. "Yeah." Turning to face him, she added, "I don't think he wanted to do it, but you saw those dreams. We all did. How long could anybody hold out against that?" Sighing, she kicked a rock off to the side. "I hope he didn't have anything to do with what happened to Gabriel. Not just for Gabriel's sake, either."

Ocelot didn't answer. There wasn't anything he could say that would be helpful, so he kept his mouth shut. All

things considered, it was probably the kindest thing he could have done.

Gabriel woke up again a few hours later, this time while Joe was carrying him. Given the speed at which he shoved out of Joe's arms, he must have been awake for quite some time before taking action. One minute he was lying quietly, the next minute he had shoved forward, leaping free of the troll and crashing hard to the ground. Wild-eyed, he struggled to his feet and moved off, his gaze roaming restlessly over the five runners. Crouched slightly, he trembled like a frightened animal. New blood welled up on his upper arm where he had cut it on a rock upon landing.

"Gabriel!" Kestrel was already hurrying toward him.

He moved away from her, swaying. "No..." he whispered, his words coming on quick harsh breaths. "No... you won't... you can't..."

Moving slowly so as not to startle Gabriel, the other runners began taking up positions surrounding him. "Gabriel..." Winterhawk said soothingly. "What's wrong? We're trying to help you. Don't you remember us?"

Gabriel's gaze fixed for a moment on Winterhawk before returning to Kestrel, who seemed to be the primary target of his fear. "No...get away... killed Steven..." He paused a moment, then shook his head violently. "No! Not...not right..."

The runners exchanged glances. Something was most assuredly wrong. Before they could console themselves by suggesting that Gabriel had not been fully awake, that he might have been incoherent due to not being fully conscious. But now he was up and apparently awake, if not perhaps altogether back in what passed for the real world. "Hallucinations?" Winterhawk whispered to 'Wraith, who was nearest him.

The elf shrugged. He looked as confused as Winterhawk did.

Gabriel, meanwhile, was turning around in place, trying to keep watch on all five of them at once. He remained in his defensive crouch, his left hand clawing at his right wrist. "No..." he whispered. "Steven..."

"Gabriel?" Kestrel forced herself to keep her voice gentle. "Please talk to us. What's wrong? Let us help. What about Stefan?"

"Steven!" His voice was surprisingly strong, the response quick and almost conditioned. "Steven... no... you won't... not anymore, sir... I know..." He looked at her. She watched with horror as rage crossed his features, but it only stayed there a second or two, to be replaced by confusion. "I don't— no... not... not real..."

"What isn't real?" Joe asked. "What happened to you? Where have you been?"

Gabriel barely paid him any attention. He was still looking at Kestrel. His expression changed to a mix of confusion and searching, as if he was trying to find something in her face. "Killed... Steven..." he whispered. "Betrayed..."

"Who killed him?" Winterhawk asked. "Who killed Steven?" He didn't know why Gabriel kept referring to his brother by that name—or perhaps it wasn't his brother at all, but someone else—but he decided that keeping the young man talking might at least get them some information that they could use to help.

"You!" He dropped to his knees, head bowed, shaking. "You—all of you—but...no!" Flinging his head back and forth, he clenched his fists. "Not right! Not right! Not—" He fell down to the ground, sobbing in frustration.

The runners didn't know what to do. They looked at each other, then back down at their friend who was falling

apart before their eyes. Joe started to move forward, but Kestrel put a hand up and moved in herself.

"Gabriel..." she whispered, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. She was surprised at how much it shook under her touch.

He made a little fearful whimpering noise in the back of his throat, but otherwise didn't respond.

"Gabriel...it's me. Juliana. Please talk to me. I know something's very wrong, and I want to help you, but I can't if you don't talk to me."

He rolled up a little tighter, still silently sobbing. "No..." he muttered. "Killed...Steven...Kill...kill me too..."

She looked up at the others, shocked, and then tried to pull him into her arms. "No...Gabriel...Please tell me what's happened to you. Where were you? Why all this talk about killing? We don't want to hurt you. We're here to help. That's why we came. Don't you remember?"

"Couldn't...kill..." Gabriel resisted her attempts at comfort, shaking out of her grip. "Couldn't...failed..." He shook his head. "Blood...blood...everywhere..."

"Gabriel —"

"Justin!" Again it was the quick, sharp response, of a type that suggested that it was in response to some unknown stimulus. He looked at her for a moment, then buried his head again.

"Who's Justin?" she asked. She glanced at the others, but they had backed off and were letting her handle the situation. She could see that they were still surrounding them a few meters back, keeping watch for threats that might choose this as an opportune time to attack them. When no answer was forthcoming, she asked again: "Who's Justin, Gabriel?"

"Not Gabriel!" This time he didn't bother to lift his head. "Justin..." There was a pause and then his shaking increased. "No... no... not... Justin... not... real..." Suddenly



his body went rigid; at first Kestrel thought that he was sobbing harder, but she gradually became aware that he was not sobbing but rather laughing hysterically. "Can't do it! Can't do it! You can try, but you can't! Go ahead — try!" He flung himself over on his back, spreading his arms wide, and stared up into the sky. "Try, damn you!" he screamed. "I dare you!" He leaped to his feet, screaming incoherently at the sky. Then he crashed to the ground again and did not move.

Shocked, Kestrel and the other runners could only stare at him for several seconds before any of them could act. Still, she moved first. Falling to her knees next to him, she gathered him up in her arms and held him, looking helplessly up at the others. "What's wrong with him?" she whispered. "What's he talking about? Why is he so —"

Winterhawk put a gentle hand on her shoulder. His expression was grim and as confused as hers. "I don't know," he said. He shook his head, sighing through clenched teeth. "I wish there was something I could do — to reach his mind somehow — but —" He bowed his head, his feelings obvious. Gabriel had helped him when he had been gripped by the Horrors' madness; now the situation was reversed and he was powerless to do anything.

Slowly the other runners moved in until they were standing in a tight little ring around Kestrel and Gabriel. "We should go," Joe said. He too kept his voice gentle; he too looked like he regretted deeply his inability to help. "The sooner we find Unekei —"

"Yeah." Ocelot bent and picked up a fist-sized rock, spinning like an uncoiling spring to fling it as hard as he could into the distance. It whizzed audibly through the air and came to rest far away in a small puff of dust.

"Would have preferred 'moo,'" Wraith said. He stood quietly, his tension obvious in his too-straight posture and the way in which he held his shoulders with almost

military stiffness. His gaze flicked compulsively back and forth between Gabriel and the surrounding landscape.

"Yeah, tell me about it." Kestrel's voice held an edge that was hard to identify. She rose fluidly, still holding Gabriel. "Let's go."

"Want me to take him?" Joe reached out his arms as if to do so.

She shook her head. "I've got him. Thanks."

Joe regarded her for a moment, then nodded and moved off. The look she gave him before he did could have been a plea; it could have been gratitude.

"I certainly hope that if anyone who's positively disposed toward us is watching," Winterhawk said to nobody in particular as they resumed their pace, "they might take pity on us and give us a bit of a nudge in the right direction."

No one replied, but they didn't have to. Their agreement was obvious.

The voices were back. They were whispering in his mind. Soft, sibilant little voices, some gentle, some harsh, all of them unintelligible in their mishmash of sound. Occasionally, rarely, one of the voices would break out from the pack for a moment and become clear, but it never lasted long enough for the voice to express a coherent thought. They were all there, voices he recognized, voices he didn't: Sorenson, Steven (*Stefan!* said another voice still), Juliana, a soft female voice he thought he recognized but could not place, the men who were Juliana's friends (what were their names? He could not remember), others that made no sense. He struggled to make sense of them, to sort them out, to focus on one and exclude the others. The problem was, even if he was capable of such a feat, he did not know which one he should listen to. They were all giving him different

messages – which one was right? Were any of them right? He didn't know anymore. He just wanted to go back to the darkness where it was warm and safe. No one could hurt him in the darkness. He could just float away peacefully on it, let it take him where it would, and –

*No!*

One of the voices broke to the surface with surprising vehemence, then sank back down again. He recognized the voice. It was Steven—or was it Stefan? He wasn't supposed to use one of those names, but he couldn't remember which one. It didn't matter, though: whichever name he used, the owner of the name was dead, gone, beyond any place where he could help. It could not have been his voice. *Settle back, close your eyes, let your mind drift, let yourself go, surrender yourself to the darkness –*

*No! You cannot!*

Once again the same voice broke out—strained, exhausted beyond measure, but determined. *You cannot give up! If you do all is lost...*

*But...I cannot...I am tired...so tired...*

*You must fight...*

He could sense the other voices, or whatever held the other voices, trying to pull the one back down again, to cover it over, to replace it with their own. It struggled with them, strong even now in its weariness, the will driving it compensating for the deficiency of strength. There was another voice there, soft, like an echo—the female voice he could not remember, but knew he had heard before: *Fight...it whispered. You must...*

*But how? I cannot fight them... I don't know how... I don't know where to start...* He did not know anything anymore. The truth—if there was indeed any truth at all—flitted about in the miasma with the voices, elusive and ethereal.

*Follow me...* It was Steven/Stefan again. His voice rose in strength and then dropped again, struggling to maintain its individuality in the hubbub of other voices.

*Follow me... you are my brother... you are strong... you must fight, Gethelwain. Even if you cannot save me, you must save yourself... I will not see you led into this hell as I was...*

Geth – his mind wouldn't close around the name. It was forbidden. Someone had told him that he was wrong to claim it, that his mind was unwell, that none of it was true. But it *felt* true. There was something about the name... *Gethelwain*... it resonated in his mind as if it had been there all along, waiting.

*Fight them, Gethelwain. You must. Return home. Live. Do not let them have you. I am lost, but you must be free of them.*

The voice was losing potency now, pulled down like a drowning swimmer into the murky depths. He held on to it, grasping at it, clutching it as his last anchor to the only reality he could understand.

*Fight them, brother... will you give me your word?*

My... He sensed that it was something very important that this voice was asking him to do. But was it reality? Could he trust it? His word...it was a sacred thing, not to be broken—but was that true? What *was* true? What was —

*Give me your word!* The voice fought its way up, refusing to allow itself to be dragged all the way beneath the surface. Still, it was visibly fading now. *You will fight them! You will not let them have you! Your word, Gethelwain!*

*Yes! Yes! My word!*

It was as if a switch had been thrown in his mind. As soon as the thought had escaped his consciousness, a sense of peaceful well-being engulfed him. The haze of confusion began to be lifted from his thoughts. It was slow, but it was real. He had made the right decision. He could feel it.

*I will be with you as long as I can...* As the voice of his brother finally faded away, for the briefest of moments he was sure that it was echoed by the gentle female voice —

but then both of them were gone along with what remained of his consciousness.

They felt as if they had been walking forever, and perhaps they had. Time had long since lost meaning to them as they stumbled on, their resolve slowly carried away by the red winds.

Joe had Gabriel again. As strong as Kestrel's vat-grown muscle made her, she had been unable to go on for more than a few hours carrying a burden that weighed more than she did. Joe had watched her from the corner of his eye, and when he saw her staggering he had silently come over and taken Gabriel from her arms. Her expression had been one of shame, a feeling that she had betrayed her friend, but then she had sighed, bowed her head, and gone on, taking up her position once more at Joe's elbow.

"How much longer are we gonna do this?" Ocelot asked. It was what they had begun to associate as midday, the red sun high overhead, its light filtered through the choked clouds. Like the rest of them he was not physically tired, but the mind-numbing sameness of their trek had begun to take its toll on him nonetheless.

"What else?" 'Wraith slowed his pace a bit and dropped back into the group.

"Hawk, isn't there anything else we can do? Any other way we can get back?"

The mage shook his head. "Don't you think that if there were, I would have suggested it long ago?"

Nobody answered; they all knew that was true. All of them had been hit hard by their experiences, but none had shown any desire to discuss what they had heard, seen, or thought. More than ever they had become five islands, each one self-sufficient within his or her own head.

They were getting closer to the Chasm now and all of them had subconsciously slowed down; the closer they got, the slower they progressed. It yawned ahead, dark and forbidding and unknown, stretching for an infinite distance to their left and their right. They couldn't see anything of the other side yet; even under the best of circumstances it was only possible to see vague impressions of the shifting, squirming forms on the other side, and none of them wanted to add that particular sight to their lists of nightmare visions.

"What if we called for him?" Ocelot asked. "You think he might come if he hears us?"

"He might," Winterhawk said.

"Others might," 'Wraith added.

Kestrel sighed. "I don't think we could attract these damn things if we started waving babies and yelling 'Free Eats'."

Winterhawk shrugged. "I suppose it couldn't hurt. Right now I'd like something to break the monotony, and I certainly don't see him."

They were getting ready to do just that — Joe, who had the strongest and loudest voice, had handed Gabriel over to Kestrel and was preparing to call out — when 'Wraith put up a hand. "Wait."

"What?" Ocelot's voice was tinged with impatience — now that they had decided to do something he wanted to *do* it.

"Look."

Everyone looked in the direction the elf was pointing. For a few seconds no one saw anything, but then a form began to resolve itself from the dust. It was tiny and far away, but it was definitely approaching.

The runners tensed. "What is it?" Joe asked.

"Don't know. Can't tell yet." 'Wraith didn't take his eyes off it as he spoke.

"Do you just see the one?" Winterhawk's voice was a bit strained; he was remembering the strange apparitions that he, and apparently only he, had seen before.

"Yes."

"Maybe this is it," Ocelot muttered, clenching his fists. "Finally."

The five of them spread out, all their gazes locked onto the approaching form. Their muscles taut, they prepared themselves for the battle not all of them were sure they hoped was coming. Slowly the figure resolved itself into a humanoid form, but the dust made it difficult to identify. Winterhawk's hand tightened on his mageblade, while Kestrel held Gabriel close, debating whether she should keep hold of him or put him down now so she could fight if needed.

They needn't have worried. Just as it had been 'Wraith who had seen the figure first, he was the first to relax – even if only slightly. "Unekei," he said quietly.

Winterhawk did not relax just yet. Keeping his eyes focused on the figure, he shifted his perceptions to get a better look at it. While he could not astrally project on the metaplanes, astral perception would give him at least some of the information he needed.

Ocelot was watching him. "Well?"

He shifted back and nodded. "Either it's a bloody good disguise or that's our spirit friend coming." His voice was heavy with relief.

They met the spirit mid-way. He looked the same as he had looked when they had left him all those days ago, his brown silk robes untouched by dust, his face expressionless, his eyes dark and deep. Now they were questioning. "You have succeeded?" he asked without greeting, looking at Gabriel in Kestrel's arms.

Kestrel shook her head, then bowed it. "No."

"You have found the young one."

"Yes," Winterhawk said, "but he didn't accomplish what he came here to do. There's something wrong with him. We can't stay here like this — there's no purpose in it. We have to go back." He sounded reluctant but resigned.

Uneki remained silent for a moment, then inclined his head. "As you wish," he said. It was impossible to determine if his deep voice held regret or disappointment. "I must prepare. It will take less than an hour. First, however—" He looked at Kestrel. "What is wrong with the young one? His aura is unsettled."

She nodded, gently lowering Gabriel down to lie on the ground with his head in her lap. "We don't know what's wrong with him. We found him unconscious, with blood all over him but no sign of injury — except this scar." She pointed out the scar on his side with the angry red halo around it. "He's awakened a couple of times since then, but he doesn't seem to know us — or else he's afraid of us. We think the Horrors messed with his mind somehow."

"That is indeed possible," Uneki said softly. "It is unfortunately the thing at which the Enemy is most adept of all." He indicated Gabriel, dropping gracefully to his knees next to the two of them. "May I?"

She nodded. "Please. Can you — help him?"

"We shall see, child. If not, then we will take him to the Lady after we have returned."

Again Kestrel nodded, leaning back slightly to give Uneki room to work. The others backed off a bit and watched from one side. All of them, but most often Ocelot and 'Wraith, cast occasional glances at the Chasm.

As Uneki held his hands out flat and ran them over Gabriel at a distance of a few centimeters above him, Kestrel was reminded of the first time she had met the spirit, when he had been sent to her by Neferet to help Gabriel back at the chalet in Switzerland when this had all



started. That seemed so long ago now that it was almost in another lifetime for her. Had it really been less than a month ago? She wasn't sure anymore—she wasn't even sure how long they had been here in this place. She wondered what would happen when they returned. Would Neferet help Gabriel further? Would he return here again? She did not think the threat had passed, and she did not think that Gabriel would allow it to continue when he had any power to stop it. *But that's for later*, she told herself. All that mattered now was to get back home, to get Gabriel back to himself again, and then they could deal with the future in the future.

Uneki did not move or speak for several moments, except for the smooth motion of his hands as they glided through the air above Gabriel's body. At last he looked up, meeting Kestrel's eyes. His face was still without expression. "I believe you are correct," he said. "Physically, he is undamaged except for the exhaustion he has suffered from his battle against his own mind. I can see the remnants of a great mental struggle, and the remains of memories that show me that his experiences have not been at all pleasant. Although he has not been physically injured, the Enemy has convinced him that he has been."

"What about the scar?" Winterhawk asked.

Uneki turned his attention to the mage. "The scar is the worst. Though it appears to be a physical wound, most of its effect is psychic. It is a deep wound that extends into the core of his being, and his experiences here have worsened its effect."

"So—how is he now?" Kestrel spoke hesitantly. "Will he be all right if we get him back home?"

"I do not know." The spirit looked down at Gabriel, then back at her. "It is difficult to read him clearly in his condition, but from what I have seen he has a strong

chance that his mind will return to normal following a period of rest."

"There's something you're not saying." Winterhawk's voice was soft but steady.

Uneki nodded once, reluctantly. "Yes. We must consult the Lady for this is not my area of expertise but the scar troubles me."

"You don't think it's going to go away, do you?" Joe asked.

"Will it get worse?" Almost involuntarily Kestrel's gaze dropped to it. It looked about the same as it had before: angry and inflamed. Had the red halo extended further from its center? She couldn't tell.

"I do not know. But it does have a very strong connection with the Enemy. If this is so, then it is possible that the connection can be maintained after he returns home."

The runners exchanged glances. If that was true, then this was *not* over. Their trip had been in vain. They had all suspected that this would be the case, but none of them wanted to admit it out loud.

Kestrel sighed. "We have to go back," she said resolutely. She indicated Gabriel. "There's no way he can fight them like this, and even if *we* could fight something that's doing this to a dragon, whatever is behind this doesn't seem to want to show itself to us."

Uneki inclined his head. There was an air of gentle sadness around him now. "I fear that you are right, child." With inhuman grace he rose to his feet from his kneeling position. "I will make the preparations and we will return." When no one answered, he moved off a few meters and floated about a meter up, crossing his legs beneath his robes and closing his eyes.

Ocelot sighed and looked at the others. For once, he didn't have anything to say. He put his hand on Kestrel's shoulder and squeezed gently.

She sighed and put her hand over his, looking up at him for a moment before bowing her head again.

Uneki finished his preparations in significantly less than an hour. When he came floating over toward them and returned to an upright position, the runners were all watching him. None of them had said a word in the intervening time. There was nothing they *could* say. "Ready?" Joe asked.

The spirit nodded. "Form a circle, seated with Gabriel in the center."

They did as they were directed. "Wait a minute," Kestrel said. "Will he—will he come back with us? We left from different locations. We won't all reappear together, will we?"

"No. He will return to his body inside his lair, and you will return with me to the Lady's home."

Kestrel nodded, dropping her gaze again. She didn't like it, but again there was nothing she could do about it. "Let's get it over with," she said, her voice a little more harsh than she had intended.

"Join hands, including Gabriel. This will be a bit more difficult than before because of the locations involved."

Again the runners silently followed the spirit's instructions. Kestrel took one of Gabriel's hands, and Winterhawk the other, joining him into the oddly-shaped circle they had formed.

"Good," Uneki said. "Now close your eyes and try to relax your minds—we will all be home again in only a few moments."

"No."

## 44.

For a moment everyone except Uneki was startled until they realized the voice had come from below them.

Gabriel had opened his eyes and was looking up at them. His voice sounded ragged and very tired, but there was none of the fear or the confusion that they had seen before.

"Gabriel?" Kestrel squeezed his hand, her eyes wide. "Are you —"

"I—cannot go back," he said, his eyes fixed not on Kestrel but on Uneki. Shaking, he tried to raise himself up to a sitting position.

"You are in no condition to battle the Enemy, young one," Uneki said. "Your friends have asked me to return all of you home. Perhaps then you can consult with Lady Neferet, and —"

Gabriel shook his head. "No." He spoke slowly, as if he had to gather the energy for the words before he could give them voice. His gaze traveled around to the faces of his friends, settling at last on Kestrel's. There was no sign that he remembered having seen them previously here on the metaplanes. "Why—why are you here? I—"

Kestrel put a hand on his shoulder. "We found your note," she told him softly. "I know you asked us not to follow, but what could we do? You know we couldn't let you go alone."

He blinked a couple of times like he was trying to clear his head. "But—how did you —?"

"Kestrel remembered your friendship with Lady Neferet," Winterhawk said. "We looked her up, and Uneki here was kind enough to give us a ride across."

Gabriel looked somewhat startled by that revelation. He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and made another attempt to sit up. This time Kestrel helped

him, propping him up by allowing him to lean on her. "You should not have come," he said wearily.

"If we hadn't come you wouldn't be here." Ocelot had gotten up and was pacing. "You were a mess when we found you."

"What do you remember?" Kestrel asked him, trying to deflect Ocelot's tension before it took hold. "What happened to you? When we found you you were unconscious – you looked like you'd been hurt –"

Gabriel bowed his head. "I...do not remember much of it," he said. "Only...that it was not pleasant."

"You were freaked out," Ocelot told him.

Winterhawk nodded. "You alternated from nearly catatonic to hysterical, trying to run away from us, screaming at the sky –"

The young man's eyes widened; it appeared that their words had brought something back to him. "Screaming – at the sky –" he whispered.

"Gabriel?" Kestrel's hand closed gently over his shoulder.

He wasn't paying attention to her. He appeared to be staring at something that none of them could see. His breath picked up in speed, his body beginning to tremble again. The runners watched silently, afraid that he was slipping back into his madness once more.

This did not seem to be the case, however. He looked fearful, but more in the manner of someone who was remembering a frightening experience than of someone who was living one. "No..." he whispered.

"Please tell us," Kestrel said. "It might help."

"We should return," Uneke said. "I am sure that the Lady would wish to hear what you have experienced as well."

Gabriel shook his head. "No," he said again, with effort. "I am not returning." He looked around at the

others. "You—you must go back, though. There is—nothing you can do here. It isn't you that it wants. You face nothing here but—danger."

"I'm not going anywhere without you," Kestrel said. Her voice was firm. She looked around. "Besides, so far it seems like the only one of us who's in any serious danger is you. Whatever it is that you've been looking for, it's left us pretty much alone."

"Tell us about what happened," Winterhawk said. "Do you remember the gangster scenario? Do you remember your brother being there?"

Gabriel closed his eyes, fighting to chase the fleeting memories and stay away from the fog that even now threatened to creep back into his mind. "The—there was a chair...guns...Stefan..." For a moment a look of deep alarm passed across his face—he looked as if he expected someone to strike him. When this did not happen, he rubbed at his right wrist and looked up at the runners again. "A room... pain..." He sighed. "It doesn't make sense. I can't—Stefan was there...speaking to me...in my mind..."

"Stefan was talking to you?" Ocelot asked. "What did he say?" His voice was a little gruff; like the others he was convinced that the Horrors had tortured Stefan's spirit to the point where he had changed sides again and was actively seeking Gabriel's downfall.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "He...urged me not to give up...not to give in to it..."

"To what?" Joe asked.

There was a long pause before he answered. "I—they—they almost had me." He rubbed his wrist again. "Tried to convince me—that I was not myself...that Stefan was dead and that you had killed him..." He looked up at Kestrel with haunted eyes. "You, Juliana...That...you had betrayed me...and killed Stefan..." Bowing his head, he

whispered, "Please...forgive me... How could I ever have thought—?"

She gently rubbed his shoulders. "There's nothing to forgive. We saw how messed up you were, and knew what it must have taken to get you there. I'm just glad you're all right."

"Do you remember what happened?" Joe asked. "The way you were before—and now you seem a lot better...how did that happen?"

Again, Gabriel paused to think. "I'm—not certain," he said at last. "I think it was—Stefan. I heard his voice in my mind. He...he urged me not to give in...to fight them...to save myself even if I could not save him. He..." He looked up at them. "He made me...give my word that I would fight their influence."

The runners exchanged glances. This did not fit at all with their theory that Stefan had changed sides. "So—" Ocelot began uncertainly, "—that's all there is to it? You promised him you'd fight and that was it?"

"I—don't know." Gabriel looked down at his shredded T-shirt, at the bloodstains on his clothes, at the scratches on his wrist. "There was—another voice. A female voice. I—had never heard it before, but yet—it seemed familiar."

Kestrel tilted her head. "A female voice? Was it me? Was it Neferet, maybe?" She looked at Uneke. "Could she be influencing us somehow, here?"

Uneke shook his head gravely. "No, I do not think so. She mentioned nothing of even making the attempt."

Gabriel was looking confused again. "No...it was not the Lady...nor was it you, Juliana. I think...I was not certain at the time because my perceptions were altered...but it felt like another dragon." He shook his head. "It does not matter. The point is that somehow Stefan, perhaps aided by this other, was able to reach

me...to give me a place to anchor myself while I sorted out what was real and what was the Enemy's illusion. I think I have done that." He didn't sound completely certain of this fact.

Winterhawk nodded. "This is indeed reality—or what passes for it 'round here. But—do you remember any specifics about what happened to you? When we last saw you, you were standing in back of the Palms Casino, looking quite injured, and someone who looked very much like your brother was shooting at you with a machine gun. Do you remember any of that?"

For a long time Gabriel didn't answer. He appeared to be searching his mind for the images Winterhawk had described. Finally he shook his head. "The memories are there—I think they will return in time—but they are vague. I remember being in a room, tied to a chair, and they—" He paused and looked up as something else dawned on him. "They were trying to convince me to change sides. Stefan—he had already done so, they told me. They wanted me to join them. When I wouldn't, they tried to convince me—physically."

Ocelot nodded. "We turned up in the same scenario, trying to find you. We met a guy named Wallace—"

"Yes. Wallace. He was..." He stopped to think again. "He was one of the leaders of the resistance organization." His gaze fixed on Ocelot. "You were there?"

"Yes. Trying to find you." 'Wraith said. "No way to do it. No 'moo.'"

"He means this one didn't go like the others," Joe told him, "where everything just happens the way it's supposed to and we're just kind of along for the ride."

"So—if Stefan was helping you," Kestrel asked, "why was he shooting at you?"

Gabriel bowed his head and closed his eyes. After a few seconds he looked up again. "I—I don't think that



was Stefan," he said at last. He looked like he was slowly uncovering a revelation. "No...of course not. That is the only thing that makes any sense."

"What makes sense?" Ocelot demanded. "Let us in on it, okay? It would sure as hell be nice if *something* around here did."

Gabriel didn't seem bothered by Ocelot's mild sarcasm. "There was a creature..." he said slowly. "A small gray rat. It...came to me...chewed through my bonds...encouraged me when my will began to fade. When I escaped...when Stefan and the others met me behind the club...Stefan gave me one last chance to join them. By that time, I was injured...I was exhausted... I was trying to fight, but I didn't think I could hold out much longer. Something... something yelled 'No!' and then that was when they started shooting." His eyes met Kestrel's. "I think the rat...was Stefan. Somehow — he was trying to help me."

"Interesting," Uneke said. He had been listening quietly to their conversation, offering nothing until now. "So you believe that somehow the part of your brother that remains here is attempting to aid you?"

"I can't see what else it could have been." Gabriel ran a hand back through his matted hair and then clasped his wrist again. "The rat seemed...familiar, but I couldn't place why. When it cried out, they started to —" His eyes widened.

"What?" Kestrel leaned forward, as did the others except Uneke. "They started to what, Gabriel?"

"That's it..." he whispered.

"*What?*" Ocelot demanded.

Gabriel looked back up at them. "You said I was hysterical before — that I was screaming at the sky. Do you remember what I said?"

"We don't know who you were talking to," Winterhawk told him. "but you were yelling something about 'try, but you can't do it.' You were daring it—whatever *it* was—to try something. You never said what it was you wanted it to try, though."

Gabriel looked at the others. They were nodding in agreement. He let his breath out slowly. "That confirms it." He paused a moment, then looked at Kestrel. "They can't kill me."

"What?" She looked confused, and the others weren't far behind. "What do you mean?"

"It seemed like they were making a pretty damn good try at it," Ocelot added.

Gabriel shook his head. The old fire was returning to his eyes. "No. Don't you see? That's the point. They *tried*. They had any number of opportunities. I was a prisoner in two different scenarios. I was powerless. They could have killed me any time they wished. But...they... *didn't*." He spaced out the last three words slowly for emphasis.

"You said they wanted you to join them," Joe pointed out. "Maybe they were trying to scare you."

Gabriel shook his head. Some of his energy seemed to be coming back now that he had come to his realization. "That was what they wanted," he agreed. "But I don't think they had any other option." He smiled a rather nasty smile. "They need my cooperation. Without it, they can injure me—they can try to corrupt my mind—they can do anything but kill me. Not without my consent."

"Your consent?" Ocelot was still looking like he wasn't quite following Gabriel's line of reasoning. "You mean they can't kill you unless you *let* them?"

"They can't *have* me unless I let them," Gabriel said triumphantly. Moving carefully, he got to his feet, where he swayed for a moment but then gained his balance. "That was what all this was about. They've marked me, as

I said in the note I left you—but it is only a very minor mark. Much more minor than the one they had on Stefan, and even his was not strong when compared to others of its type. That was what caused the madness: Stefan reaching across to me—which the Enemy could not do on their own—and the Enemy adding their signals to his. They wanted me. They wanted me to come here and face them, because they thought that once I did, they had me. They tried to corrupt me by turning me against my friends, by torturing me until I agreed to join them, to betray everything I believe in. Once I gave in to them, I would have been theirs—to kill, or more likely to control in some way. But they didn't expect that I would figure out their game." He looked rather pleased, all things considered, but then his expression sobered again. "You'll have to go back. All of you. Uneke, please take them back. I am grateful for what you have done, but the fact that the Enemy cannot kill me does not extend to you, and I don't want to see my friends killed for something that is no one's affair but mine."

Uneke was silent for a moment. When he spoke, his voice was gentle. "You should return with us. You can return here later, when you are well, but you are in need of rest."

Gabriel shook his head. "I have to finish this. Stefan isn't going to last much longer. He is fighting them, but he can't go on forever. If I am to help him, it must be soon."

"If you're going, I'm going too," Kestrel said. "Don't try to stop me. We all got into this together, and we're going to end it together."

"I agree," Winterhawk said.

Joe nodded. "Now that we've got something to do, I want to finish this."

'Wraith did not speak but simply nodded agreement.

Ocelot sighed. "Yeah. Me too. I'm afraid you're stuck with us, kid."

Gabriel did not answer for several seconds. Finally he bowed his head. "I cannot force you to go back," he said wearily. "But I don't wish to see you die, and I fear that if you remain that is what will happen."

"That's what you said last time," Ocelot said. "We're still here."

"Somebody up there must like us," Kestrel added.

"I have a question," Joe said.

Gabriel turned toward him, glad for the moment not to have to deal with the issue of who was staying and who was going back.

"That scar on your side — that's the mark, right? That's how they got you?"

The young man nodded soberly. "The knife was specially prepared for me. I did not realize at the time that it was not only prepared to kill me, but to deal with the contingency that I might live by leaving me with their mark."

"But Neferet said that a mark is destroyed when the Horror that puts it on you is killed. Isn't that one dead? I mean, we all saw it go over the edge with Stefan. Are you telling us that whatever happened to Stefan might have happened to it too? That it isn't dead?"

Gabriel paused to consider that; he didn't look happy about the prospect. "It is dead," he said at last. "It is true that the mark should fade when the one responsible has died. I don't know how it remains, but I do know that the one we fought is dead."

"Could part of it be hanging about, like Stefan is?" Winterhawk asked. "Would that be enough for it to maintain control of the mark?"

Another pause. "Possibly. I do not know. When the Enemy came to me in my dream, though, I did not feel it

there. The one I felt was not one I recognized. It was at that point that it showed me what it wanted of me—that unless I came here and faced it, it would continue to torment not only Stefan, but all of us.” He sighed. “I don’t know what has happened. I am not expert on the ways of the Enemy. Perhaps in the years since the last Age, they have discovered a way to transfer control of a mark to another of their kind. That is something we must find out.”

“Do you think there’s more than one?” Ocelot asked.

“I don’t know that either. I suspect so. But without the one holding the control, any others would have no hold on me.” He took a deep breath. “I don’t want you to come with me. I wish you would return with Uneke and tell the Lady what has happened. But I fear that you will not heed my wishes, will you?” He was looking straight at Kestrel when he said it.

“Sorry,” she said softly. “Sometimes friends don’t do the most logical thing, you know?”

Uneke regarded them all with a gentle expression that was difficult to read. “You are all remaining, then?”

“Looks that way,” Ocelot said.

Gabriel sighed. “Yes. We are all remaining.” His expression suggested that he believed he was leading his friends into certain death.

The spirit nodded. “As you wish. I will remain here until either the Lady summons me back or you return to me. I can do nothing but wish you good fortune. I hope, as I am sure Lady Neferet does as well, that you are successful.”

“Thank you, Uneke.” Gabriel nodded formally to him; it was almost a bow. In that case, then, we —”

He never got to finish the sentence. Uneke watched silently as he, along with the five runners faded from view, becoming one with the swirling dust. The spirit’s

ageless eyes settled on the place where they had been, and then slowly he resumed his seated, floating position. He knew that this was the beginning of the end and that, one way or the other, the outcome would be decided very soon.

## 45.

The place where they reappeared looked strangely but not fully familiar, as if someone had tried to recreate a location by cobbling together a collection of memories from the various individuals who had been there before and didn't quite get it right.

They were all together as they had been before except for Uneke, still in the same positions they had been in while talking to the spirit. The runners and Gabriel looked around quickly, tensely.

They were standing in the middle of a tiered bowl-shaped arena carved in red stone. Almost as one the six newcomers stiffened as they simultaneously realized *why* the place looked familiar: it was at this location that they had fought their final battle against the Horror last time they were here. It was at this location that Stefan had thrown himself into the Chasm when it became clear that it would be the only way to destroy the thing that had threatened them all. This was the amphitheater that had stood in the same spot before everything but the altar had faded in preparation for the final battle.

It was the same, and yet it wasn't. For one thing, it was much smaller. They all noticed that immediately: the previous arena had been large enough to hold thousands and had been occupied by shrieking, gibbering creatures, very minor Horrors and their ilk, all intent on watching the sacrifice that was to have been made that day, the ritual that would have brought Verjigorm, the Great Hunter, into the world from the place where it had waited across the Chasm. This one looked as if it could hold only a few hundred at most; the tiers seemed closer, more intimate. At the moment, the seats were empty. In fact, the entire place was empty and deserted. A brisk wind blew

across the ground, stirring up the familiar red whorls of dust.

"What the hell—?" Ocelot began.

"Welcome," said a voice.

All six of them whirled around in the direction from which it had spoken. Standing there where it had not been before was a figure they all recognized: a tall, slim figure dressed in a flashy suit covered by a long overcoat that swirled around him as it moved. The figure grinned at them. "Good to see you could all make it."

"Oh, shit..." Ocelot muttered under his breath.

"Is that—?" Kestrel started.

'Wraith, Winterhawk, Joe, and Gabriel simply stared at the figure with undisguised hatred. It was the elf from the previous time they were here—the elf that had seduced Stefan into betraying himself, the elf that had seen to the destruction of Gabriel's mentor Telanwyr, the elf that had presided over the time of terror that had led up to the attempted sacrifice of first Stefan, then Gabriel. It was the elf that had changed into something loathsome and horrible for the final battle—the elf that was supposed to be dead.

"Oh, good. You recognize me. It's been awhile since we've seen each other, hasn't it? You're all looking well..." He looked pointedly at Gabriel, who was still wavering on his feet in his bloody ragged clothes, as he said this.

"You're dead, you bastard!" Ocelot yelled, his face a mask of rage to cover the fact that he was shaking.

"What's that line?" The elf tilted his head and put one finger to the side of his head as if deep in thought. "Ah yes!" He looked up brightly. "Rumors of my death have been greatly exaggerated. I believe that's the one."

"No..." Gabriel said in a harsh whisper. "No...You are dead...We all saw you die...felt you...die..."



The elf grinned. "You *thought* you saw your brother die, remember? Can't always believe what you see. Oh!" He raised one slender finger as he remembered something. "Speaking of your brother, he really should be here to join our party, don't you think?"

He snapped his fingers and the runners gasped. Off to one side of the amphitheater's center ring, a large, indistinct figure began to take shape. It shimmered in the air for a few moments, then resolved itself into –

"Stefan..." Gabriel whispered, bowing his head.

It was indeed Stefan. He was in his true form, towering over the lower tiers of the stands; there was still a suggestion of his old powerful figure, but he shimmered slightly, vague and indistinct. He was bound by chains and manacles secured around his legs and his neck, fastened at the other ends to stout metal rings set into the ground. Another set of chains had apparently been fastened directly to his wings—ghostly apparitions of bloody wounds marked the place where they had been driven through. His head was lowered, his posture slumped. When he became aware that there were others there he looked up. Spotting Gabriel he slumped still further. "*I am sorry, brother...*" His voice was audible to all of them but it too was faint and seemed to come from far away. "*Had I known, I would never have tried –*"

Gabriel moved to approach him, but a large muscular creature appeared from out of the ground and grasped his arm, preventing him from getting any closer.

"Oh, this is indeed touching," the elf drawled. "It's really too bad we can't give our two brothers time to have their reunion." He feigned sniffing into a handkerchief.

"What the hell do you want?" Ocelot demanded. Kestrel, standing next to him, could see that his entire body was trembling; she knew it was not just from fear

but from the keyed-up feeling of wanting to act and being unable to do so.

"Yeah," she growled. "You sure went to a lot of trouble to bring us here. Mind letting us in on why?"

The elf turned its roiling eyes on her and smiled; she had to suppress a shudder. "You don't understand," he said. "I didn't go to any trouble at all to bring *you* here." He indicated the five runners with a glance, then pointed at Gabriel. "All I really wanted was *him*. I've already got one brother—thought it might be nice to have the matched set."

"No!" Stefan's eerie faraway voice cried out across the arena. He was struggling vainly against the chains, beating his wings, tearing at the bonds. "*You will not*—"

The elf turned and made a gesture in Stefan's direction; the dragon screamed and sank down, his breath coming so fast and hard that his entire body was wrenched by the effort.

Gabriel, eyes blazing, tried to rip himself free of the creature that was holding him, and for a moment it seemed that he would succeed—he managed to jerk his left arm out of the creature's grasp but then it tightened its grip on his right and threw him down hard to the ground. Before he could get up it seized him and clamped its fingers around both his upper arms even harder than before.

The other runners almost simultaneously tried to go to his aid, bringing five more creatures up out of the ground to grab them.

The elf clucked. "Oh, we can't have this. How am I going to talk to you if you're too busy trying to escape to listen to me?" With a languid wave of his hand he conjured a large cage next to the runners; it was made of metal with thick, substantial looking bars and a solid floor and ceiling. The door was open. He watched, smiling, as

the creatures hustled the protesting runners and Gabriel into the cage, then slammed the door shut. "There," he said, satisfied. "Now I'll wait for a few moments while you assure yourself that there's no way out of my cage without my permission, and then we'll talk."

Ocelot and Joe immediately began trying to break the bars of the cage, the latter because he was the only one of the team who might be strong enough to do it, the former because he had to do *something* to bleed off some of his rage-borne excess energy. Winterhawk, Kestrel, 'Wraith, and Gabriel did not bother. The three runners waited, while Gabriel moved to the front of the cage and continued to watch the elf with a very cold expression in his violet eyes.

The elf smiled as Joe's and Ocelot's efforts got them no closer to escape. They tried everything they could think of: testing the bars at different points around the cage, trying to bust the top loose from the bars, bracing themselves against one corner and trying to press the bars outward with their feet; nothing worked. "I'm telling you it's no use," the elf said. "You see, this is *my* realm—my little corner of the world. I and those like me control things here. If I say you get out, you get out. If I say you float in the air—" Kestrel suddenly levitated off the floor of the cage and floated a few centimeters off the ground—"—then you float in the air. If I say our little golden dragon boy here has to live life like a common human..." He shrugged. "Then so be it." Grinning at Gabriel, he said, "How do you like being without your powers, dragon? Isn't it fun being a puny human? You don't look like you've dealt with it very well so far..."

Gabriel's eyes were as cold as ever, and his smile was even colder. "I've figured out your game, you know. You're doing this because you can't kill me. You haven't any claim on me unless I succumb to your attempts to

corrupt me. You'd best not waste your time, because it isn't going to happen."

"We'll see," the elf said, unperturbed. He was still smiling. "Yes, I'm well aware you've figured it out. You've been yelling it like a madman for the past couple of days. I fear your poor brother had begun to think you'd come unhinged on us." He began pacing again. "But you don't have it quite right. It's true we cannot kill you, or bring you to our side—yet—without your consent. But that doesn't mean we don't still have our—methods of influence."

The elf raised his hand and pointed at Gabriel. Suddenly a white-hot pain, much worse than ever before, worse even than the pain from the bracelet at the asylum, gripped the scar on his side. He screamed and dropped to the floor of the cage, writhing.

Before any of the runners had time to react, the elf lowered his hand again. Gabriel stopped screaming and lay there in a heap, panting. Kestrel dropped down next to him and helped him back to a sitting position.

"See?" the elf said. "We *do* have our influence. Our power might not be strong in this age, but when we concentrate it properly, it is still formidable. Do not forget that. And do not forget also—" He paused a moment for emphasis "—that while perhaps it is true that we cannot kill *you*—, are you willing to take the chance that we cannot kill your friends as well?" As he said this, he redirected his attention pointedly from Gabriel himself to Kestrel.

Gabriel dragged himself up to his feet and stood gripping the bars. His eyes were like two chips of ice, his jaw set hard to stop it from trembling with rage. "What... do... you... want?" he said through gritted teeth.

"Why, *you*, of course!" The elf sounded as if he thought everyone in the area should consider this the

most obvious thing in the world. "That's what we've wanted all along." He grinned, once more resuming his pacing. "You know, it's almost *artful* the way all of this has worked out. I never expected, when my allies managed to help me escape from the little trap your brother laid for me, that any of this would come to pass. I was not, you see, unaffected by the trip down. I lost a great deal of my power, and it simply wasn't possible for me to try a direct approach as I did last time. Especially since you and your accursed friends have deprived me of communication and assistance from my Master. But, fortunately, my allies here managed to do something else as well." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder at Stefan, who was once again trying to work free of his bonds, albeit more carefully this time. "While we weren't able to save your brother's body, we *were* able to save his essence, his spirit, his *soul*, if you will. And because emotions come from the soul and not from the body, he has managed on his own to provide us with quite a nice bit of amusement."

He smiled a particularly oily smile and moved closer to the cage. "The thought of tormenting your brother's spirit for all eternity was pretty heady stuff, especially since, in my weakened state, I didn't have any way to reach across to your plane and get anything accomplished there. I had to settle for second best, but that was all right. My power was growing, you know. All of us are growing more powerful, and you'd be surprised at how many of us are still here, biding our time. We could wait. In a few hundred or a few thousand years, I'd be ready to make my move again. Perhaps by then conditions would be right for the Master to attempt another return. But then your brother did something none of us expected." He looked back at Stefan almost fondly. "He managed to get up the strength and the courage to try to contact you. It

wouldn't have worked at all except for the fact that you are brothers—and as for the rest of you, because of that little bond you all established between you last time you were here—that served to make your minds more receptive to each other's—outside influences.” He was walking up and down in front of the cage now, just far enough out that Joe's long arms couldn't quite reach him. “He, of course, was very furtive about the whole thing, afraid that if we found out we might try to stop him. You see, we'd done some rather—unpleasant things with him already and I think he feared something even worse were we to get wind of his little plan. What he didn't realize was that we were *elated* when we discovered what he was up to. We couldn't reach across—but he could. And once he had opened the conduit, it was a simple thing to—” He paused a moment as if searching for a word “—to piggyback our message onto his. By the time our young friend here figured out what was going on and managed to block out our influence, it was already too late. We'd gotten our message across, and here you all are.” He looked positively gleeful about the whole thing.

“So now what?” Winterhawk's glare was almost as cold as Gabriel's. “You've got us here, what's the next step? We do so hate being kept in suspense.”

“Hmm...” the elf said, pondering. He looked up. “Well, I could just kill all of you except the dragon.”

All around Gabriel, the runners stiffened.

“Or—” again the elf thought a moment before continuing “—I could see what happens if I offer our young dragon friend here the chance to give us what we want or watch each of you die rather horrible deaths one after the other. That might be more useful.”

No one said anything. They continued to watch and wait.

"I *could* do that," the elf-Horror said. "But who knows? Some of you might prove useful. And I'm bored. This whole little scene has been very entertaining—I'd so hate to end it with the same old eviscerations or decapitations or all those other bloody 'ations' you all find so disturbing." He paced around again doing his "thinking" pose. Then he smiled. It was a very unwholesome smile. "I know. Never let it be said that I'm not sporting. We'll make a game out of it. I'll even give you a chance—a tiny chance, to be sure..." He held up his thumb and forefinger with barely any space between them. "...but a chance—that some of you might make it home alive." Approaching the cage again, he regarded each of them in turn. "So—want to play?"

"Fuck off," Ocelot said.

The others, though they might not have used quite such terms, seemed to agree with their spirit. They said nothing.

Something changed for just a moment in the elf's eyes. They seemed to fuzz out for a second, fragmenting into dozens of tiny pieces before reforming into the usual unwholesome black pits. The smile faded, then returned as he raised his hand and clenched his fist. Ocelot, inside the cage, gripped his throat, struggling for breath. Kestrel and Joe each grabbed one of his arms and tried to prevent him from clawing at himself, but they were unsuccessful. After a few seconds the elf released his hold and Ocelot fell back, panting, into the waiting arms of his friends. His glare didn't soften one bit.

"You will show me the proper respect or accept the consequences," the Horror said coldly. "I don't think I phrased my last statement correctly—you *will* play. The only question is whether you choose to participate and possibly prevail, or whether you choose to simply do nothing and die."

"Let them go," Gabriel said quietly. "Whatever game you have in mind is between you, me, and Stefan. They were never meant to be here."

The elf-Horror laughed. "Oh, no! They're here now, and here they stay. Can't have them heading off to gather up yet *another* dragon to bring to the party. I'm afraid I'm not quite equipped to deal with *that* one yet. No, they're here, and they're going to play."

The runners exchanged glances. It wasn't anything they hadn't expected. Gabriel had to try to save them, but they all knew—they were sure Gabriel did too—that it wasn't going to work. None of them spoke. They didn't want to give the Horror the satisfaction of appearing to go along with its plans, regardless of whether they would ultimately be forced to do so. Overhead, the red-clouded sky was growing darker.

"All right, then," the elf-thing was continuing, with a quick sideways glance over at Stefan. "The rules." He returned his attention to the captives. "First of all, we can't have you all together. That wouldn't be sporting. You—" he pointed at Gabriel — "are one team. All the rest of you are the other."

The runners and Gabriel looked at each other. Was this thing expecting them to be on opposite sides in some contest?

If the elf picked up on their line of thought he did not show it. "There will be two contests for each side. In order to win the contests, one member of the team must remain standing and alive at the end."

"What kind of contests?" Ocelot demanded. "And what do we get if we win?"

The Horror looked like it was getting a bit annoyed at Ocelot's constant questions, but it smiled. "I can't tell you what kinds of contests ahead of time—only that they'll be insanely difficult and you'll have almost no chance to beat



them, but you *will* have a chance. Otherwise it wouldn't be fair." His smile turned to a smirk, suggesting that being fair was the last thing on his mind.

"And—" Joe prompted. "If we win?"

"If you win," the elf said, "Which isn't very likely, but let's just assume that at least one member of each team is able to complete the challenges—then you go free. Home. Sprung." He fluttered his hands in the air.

"Oh, come off it," Ocelot protested. "You expect us to believe that you're ever gonna send us home? You're just gonna kill us either way. Admit it. You're gonna kill us and take whatever you want from Gabriel and that's gonna be it. Right?"

The elf shrugged, looking into Ocelot's eyes until Ocelot was forced to look away. "Maybe," he said. "You've got no way to know for sure. I'd give you my word on it, but would you take it?"

"No," Wraith said curtly. It was the first time he had spoken since they had arrived here.

"Well then, there you go." The elf smiled, spreading his hands. "You'll just have to trust me. You've no other choice. As I said, you're going to play. You can choose to just stand still and commit suicide if you want to, but I warn you—that will be the worst of all for you. If you let us kill you without fighting back, then you're surely ours for all eternity." He grinned at Gabriel. "That goes for you too, pretty boy. We can't kill you against your will, true, but if you stand there and do nothing, that shows us that it's your will to die, doesn't it?" His grin widened. "See? It's all so simple and elegant, isn't it?"

The runners and Gabriel said nothing. Their chilled gazes followed the elf as he continued to move back and forth across the front of the cage. Beyond him, Stefan was back to trying to pull free of his bonds. He was looking

straight at them as if trying to communicate something to them, but nothing was forthcoming.

"So here we are," the elf said. "Who's going first?"

No one in the cage responded.

"All right, that's fine. You don't want to choose, so I'll choose for you." He reached into the pocket of his coat and withdrew a large coin, gold on one side and silver on the other. He held it up for them to see. "Gold, the dragon goes first. Silver, the rest of you. Any objections?" When he got none, he raised his hand and flipped the coin high in the air. It spun end over end and landed with a slight puff of dust on the red ground. The silver side was pointed toward the sky.

"All right, then." The elf grinned nastily. "You'll be leaving in a moment. You—" he said to Gabriel, "will remain here until they return. *If* they return. There might be some more rules later, but those will do for now. The only one you have to worry about at the moment," he added, turning back to the runners, "is that at least one of you must survive the contest. If none of you survive, the contest is over and—well—we'll discuss that should the need arise." He gestured upward and what looked like a large, old fashioned television screen appeared in midair, floating there as if it was anchored to something. Currently the screen showed jumbled static. The elf came over and stood in front of Gabriel. "You'll be able to watch their progress, but you won't be able to help them. Isn't that gallant of me?" Without waiting for an answer he strode away again and snapped his fingers. "All right! Is everyone ready to begin? You'll get further instructions when you get where you're going, but you should like this one. It's nothing you haven't done before. I'm quite proud of it, actually. I'd say 'good luck', but you know—I don't mean it!"

As the runners and Gabriel continued to watch him, chilled and silent, the elf smiled. He raised his hands and snapped his fingers. "Let the games begin!"

The runners vanished from the cage, leaving Gabriel alone. Across the amphitheater, Stefan was looking sadly at him again.

## 46.

The scene shifted suddenly, catching the runners off guard. Wherever they were, it was pitch dark. They could not see even their hands in front of their faces.

The lights came up just as suddenly: red lights. Emergency lights. Their tense, angry faces looked demonic, bathed in shadowy crimson. They were standing in front of a featureless, formidable looking metal door set into an equally featureless metal wall.

"What the fu—?" Ocelot started to ask, but was startled immediately by the same thing his teammates were: "Our gear!"

Each of them was dressed as he or she would have been when preparing for a run: armored coats, dark clothing, leather boots and gloves, helmets. For a moment they did not speak to each other as they examined the changes: it appeared that each of them carried their accustomed weapons as well. Ocelot's monowhip was in its usual place in his sleeve, his Dikoted katana slung across his back; Kestrel carried a light machine gun on a strap over one shoulder, an SMG hanging from a lanyard at her web belt, a knife in a sheath on her left leg, and a katana on her back; 'Wraith's Barrett sniper rifle was in his hands and he too had a katana; Joe had a medium machine gun on his shoulder, his combat axe in his hands, and a lumpy bag over his off shoulder; Winterhawk, who rarely carried firearms except for show, had no weapons but did notice immediately that his two strongest power foci, a pin and a ring, were back in place along with his black-bladed magesword.

"Okay..." Kestrel said, as she, 'Wraith, and Joe began checking their pockets for spare clips and extra ammo. "So we've got our stuff back. What—?"

Laughter echoed around them for a moment, and then the elf's voice spoke again, disembodied in the red hallway. "I see everyone's arrived safely...shall we get to it, then? Here is your challenge:

"You'll notice that I have returned all your weapons and tools of your trade to you, and so it seems only logical that the challenge will be related to this trade. Observe!"

Suddenly, an object was floating in front of them: a cube made of some glowing green substance, about ten centimeters on a side. It hovered above them, spinning in the air. "This item is the object of your search. You will find it in a locked cabinet in a research laboratory inside the building you will shortly be entering, but that is all I will tell you about its location. The facility is underground and consists of two levels. Your mission is to enter the facility, elude or otherwise cope with the security forces long enough to locate the cube, and bring the cube back to this location in no more than one hour. The door in front of you will open in a moment, and it will close again exactly one hour from that time. If you are still inside the facility when the door closes, it will be flooded with deadly gas and you will all perish." The voice laughed. "Remember—only one person will have to make it out with the cube for you to be successful, although that won't be much consolation for the ones who don't make it, will it?"

None of the runners said anything, their gazes roaming tensely and restlessly around the hallway. The voice was silent for a moment, then laughed again. "I'll make it easy for you: A running countdown of the time you have left to you will be continuously displayed on a wall of whatever room you happen to be in. That way you'll only have to look up to see how long it will be before you die." Another pause. "Remember—if you lose,

you doom your young dragon friend as well, so try hard! I'll see you in an hour – maybe."

The voice faded, and as it did, the metal door slid open to reveal another featureless room. The runners could already see 59:57 displayed in large, glowing red digits on the wall opposite. The digits, brighter than the red of the ambient light, were counting inexorably down as they watched.

"Come on, let's go," Joe said, already moving into the room. "We need to hurry."

"Split up?" 'Wraith asked.

"No comm gear," Kestrel said. "Better stay together."

"Need a plan," 'Wraith said.

They looked around the room they were in. It had two doors but otherwise no furniture or decor. The walls were made of drab gray metal, as was the floor. The doors were not labeled.

"Let's not lose our heads," Kestrel said. "We don't have much time but we'll need to be careful. We need to get the lay of this place."

"On that," Winterhawk said, already preparing a spell. With his powers restored to their full capacity and no more of the stronger drain he had experienced back on the red plains, he knew his Clairvoyance spell should reach for a decent distance—assuming the place wasn't warded.

'Wraith and Joe were examining the room for weapons while Ocelot and Kestrel checked out the two doors. They both had standard industrial-style knobs; turning the knobs indicated that the doors were not locked. They didn't attempt to open them yet. Ocelot was muttering curses under his breath, clearly not pleased with being forced into this run like some kind of rat in a maze.

The floating red digits read 58:47.

'Hawk was staring at nothing. "What do you see?" Ocelot demanded. "Are you getting anything?"

The mage held up his hand for silence, examined the air for a few more seconds, then nodded. "Yes. Don't have the whole place—can't quite reach—but I think I've got most of it. Too dim to see specifics. Looks like that door—" he pointed to the rightmost of the two—"leads down a hallway toward the elevators. The other level is below us. No time to check all the rooms. The other leads to another hallway that ends after about ten meters."

"Did you see any labs?" Joe asked.

Winterhawk shook his head. "No, as I said—too dark to tell for sure. Did see some large rooms, though. Mostly downstairs."

'Wraith had pulled out his pocket secretary—apparently he hadn't been given his cyberdeck back—and was dashing off quick notes into it. "Start downstairs. Farthest and work back."

Kestrel nodded. "Yeah."

Ocelot looked at the open door behind them nervously, then turned to the one Winterhawk had indicated. "Can we mark this door somehow once we're through it?"

"And prop it open," Joe added. "I sure don't want to not be able to find the way out."

"I wouldn't put it past that bastard to lock it," Ocelot growled.

"Er—time is wasting," Winterhawk said with a look up at the countdown display, which now read 55:32. "Shall we?"

"Anything on the other side of the door?" Joe asked.

"Not that I noticed."

They approached the door and, weapons ready, arrayed themselves around it. Joe carefully turned the knob and eased the door open, shielding the rest of them

with his massive, armored body. Tensely the others waited as he peered around it.

"Looks clear," he whispered. "Elevators?"

'Wraith nodded.

Joe twiddled with his helmet. "I'll run video of the route we take so we don't get lost on our way back."

They moved quickly but carefully out into the hallway. Ocelot found a small knife in one of the pockets of his coat and surrendered it to use for propping the door open as they could not find anything else. They hurried on.

The hallway was wide enough that Joe could take point with Kestrel and Ocelot on either side and slightly behind him, Kestrel with her SMG ready, Ocelot with his hand on his monowhip. Winterhawk moved behind Joe and a bit to the left so he could see over Kestrel's shoulder, and 'Wraith brought up the rear shifted to the left so he could look over Ocelot's. The elf held the Barrett with tense but practiced ease, his sharp eyes roving the entire corridor looking for threats. "What's in the rooms?" Ocelot whispered back to Winterhawk.

"Couldn't tell. Not much light here. They're small, though."

Ocelot nodded and moved on.

The hallway went on for about fifteen meters and then turned a corner to the left. "Elevators are down this way and then another right," Winterhawk said.

"Stairs?" 'Wraith asked.

"Didn't see any."

"Probably near the elevators," Kestrel said.

"Who can tell?" Ocelot's voice was bitterly sarcastic. "Knowing the bastard who put us in here, they might be inside the bathrooms."



"Or there might not be any," Kestrel added. "Somehow I don't think Horrors worry too much about building codes or fire safety."

The floating red digits were following them—now they were hovering eerily on the wall opposite the corner: 51:21.

"We've got to hurry," Joe said. "It's taking too long. We don't have time to be this careful."

"We want to get out of here alive," Kestrel said. "Otherwise it doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter if we're alive and don't get out," Winterhawk pointed out. "Much as I hate to say it, I fear I must agree with Joe in this case."

"It's okay with me," Ocelot muttered. "Screw this slinkin' around. Let's just *do it*."

Kestrel nodded reluctantly, as did 'Wraith.

"Okay, let's do it," Ocelot said.

"Wait," Winterhawk said, holding up a finger. The others looked at him oddly as he made a gesture in the air, but relaxed as the small, shimmering form of a watcher spirit appeared in front of him. He looked pleased. "Didn't know whether they'd let me do that here," he murmured, then addressed the spirit. "You. Nip on ahead of us down this corridor, turn right and look around, and then come back and tell us if you see anything living there. Go on."

The little spirit saluted and drifted off. Winterhawk made an *after-you* gesture at Joe.

The troll peered around the corner. Satisfied that no one was lying in ambush for them he crept around it followed by the others. They had gotten only a couple of meters when the watcher returned. It hovered in front of Winterhawk for a moment and then the mage said, "It's clear—for now. Let's hurry." He dismissed the watcher and followed his friends.

Around the next corner the hallway widened out. The elevators – there were two of them – were on the left side of this short hallway, which was bounded on the other end by a pair of closed double doors. “What’s beyond?” ‘Wraith asked Winterhawk, hooking a thumb at the doors.

“More hallways. This looks like the midpoint of this level.”

There were no other doors in the area. If there was a stairway it was obviously not here. “Should we look for the stairs?” Ocelot hissed. He did not like the idea of entering a tiny enclosed space when the Horrors controlled the game.

‘Wraith looked even less pleased about it, but the time was counting down. “Spare the time?”

“I’ll make it quick,” Winterhawk muttered. Once again he closed his eyes, cast a spell, and then stared at nothing. After about thirty seconds he shook his head with a sigh. “Not a bloody thing. If there are stairs here they’re hiding them damned well. I did take a look down below, though. Nothing apparent waiting for us, but it’s very dark down there so I can’t be certain. Nothing alive in the immediate vicinity. I’m going to leave the spell up until we get down there.”

Ocelot looked relieved by this.

“Let’s get going, then.” Kestrel pressed the button to call the elevator, and was immediately rewarded by a faint far-off rumbling noise. The digits, now hanging in space over the elevator doors, read 47:18.

After a few tense seconds there was a soft *bong* and the door to the left-side elevator slid silently open. Without any conversation, Joe held it open while ‘Wraith and Kestrel examined it carefully for traps. Seeing none, they waved the others inside. Ocelot guided Winterhawk, who was still looking at things far away.

It was a tight fit, especially because everyone except Winterhawk had a large and rather bulky weapon out and held as ready as possible inside the small space. The door slid closed with an air of finality. Kestrel, who was in front, pressed the DOWN button.

The elevator shuddered slightly and then began its descent. The runners stood tensely; it seemed as if the journey downward took forever, but according to the floating countdown, it was less than ten seconds before the elevator settled into place with a gentle *thud*.

Four weapons—two guns, one axe, and a katana—were brought to bear as the doors slid open.

Except for an empty hallway of the same featureless metal as the upper floor, there was nothing there. The countdown on the opposite wall read 46:03. The runners hurried out of the elevator, relieved to be out of the small and vulnerable space. Ocelot was the first to think of jamming another knife into the elevator door to force it to remain open, although Kestrel, Joe, and 'Wraith had obviously been thinking of the same thing.

"Which way?" Joe whispered after that was accomplished. There were hallways stretching out on both sides of them past the elevator alcove.

"Don't know." Winterhawk looked back and forth. "There are large rooms in both directions here. This level is larger than the one above."

"Okay, we'll have to wing it," Kestrel said. "Pick a direction."

"Right," 'Ocelot said.

"Okay, right." Joe started off that way. "I—"

"Shh!" 'Wraith hissed suddenly.

"What?" Ocelot whispered, his gaze darting around.

The runners all fell silent and strained their ears to hear whatever had startled the elf. After a moment they all did: the far-off sound of a long, drawn-out scream.

They could not be sure because of the faintness of it, but it did not sound like a noise made by a human or metahuman.

"Shit..." Ocelot whispered. "I knew it was too good to be true."

Another scream sounded, closer this time, followed by the pounding of running feet and the far-off chatter of gunfire. A moment later an alarm klaxon went off.

"I think this is about to get interesting," Winterhawk muttered over the loud buzzing.

"Come on," Joe said. He brought his machine gun around to the front of him on its strap, so he could have both it and the axe ready to go. Kestrel did the same with hers but kept hold of the SMG.

They moved slowly off down the corridor to the right. It extended down for about fifteen meters, lined with doors on either side, and then ended in what looked like a T intersection. It was difficult to tell for sure, though, in the red light. "All the way to the end?" Kestrel asked.

"Work our way back," Wraith confirmed.

They went on, keeping a wary eye on the doors. They were all labeled on tiny plates next to each door like numbers in an office building, but the characters on the plates were like no language they had ever seen. Joe made a point of capturing the plates on his video record as they went past.

They reached the end of the hallway and stopped again. Joe turned. "Still right?"

"Why not?" Ocelot gripped his katana more tightly as the sound of gunfire, barely audible over the alarms, came again from far away.

They edged their way around the corner in the same formation as before, but had barely made it when Joe stopped again.

"What?" Winterhawk whispered.

"I see something up there."

The others moved around the troll, who was great at blocking hallways, to get a better look. There was a dark, huddled form lying in the hallway a few meters up.

They crept forward even more slowly. 'Wraith was the first to recognize it: "Dead body."

He was right. The crumpled form was that of a human male in what appeared to be a lab coat, though it was difficult to tell as his entire body was soaked in something dark. On a quick but closer examination it was obvious what had caused the soaking: his face and chest were mostly gone, his neck and back slashed by wicked-looking clawmarks. Ocelot swallowed hard and looked back the way they had come. "What—?"

He didn't get to finish because at that moment Joe's booming voice barked "*Down!*" and suddenly the hallway was full of the echoing *budda-budda-budda* of machine gun fire. The troll was already firing his own MMG at something down the hallway—he swore in pain as a round got through his armor and caught him in the upper arm, sending a spray of dark blood across the metal wall behind him.

Kestrel and 'Wraith were firing as they dropped, but Joe's barrage had taken care of the threat: the smoking remains of a small, tanklike drone with a machine gun mounted on its top squatted in the middle of the hallway, unmoving.

The runners quickly got back to their feet, breathing hard. "Damn," Ocelot snapped. "Okay, I guess the reception committee's figured out we're here."

"Must keep moving," 'Wraith said, a slight bit of urgency creeping into his normal monotone. "Probably being observed."

"You're just full of good cheer," Winterhawk muttered, but his expression suggested that he too had

considered that possibility. He looked at Joe, who was trying not to look pained as he dug around in his bag looking for something. "Let me take care of that—"

Joe shook his head, waving him off as he found what he was looking for and pulled out a wad of bandages. "No time," he said. "It's not bad. Come on. We have to keep going." The countdown now read 43:18.

Winterhawk looked reluctant to leave the injury untreated but he knew as well as the rest of them how little time they had. Grimly he followed the others. As they edged their way with caution past the remains of the drone, Joe gave it a couple of hefty smacks with his axe to make sure it would not bother them again. He seemed as strong as ever despite obviously favoring his injured arm.

They passed two more dead bodies when they turned the next hallway. One was splayed out on his back in the middle of the hallway, his face frozen in a wide-eyed rictus of agony, his abdomen ripped open, his viscera spilled on the floor. The second was off to one side a few meters down, torn into two large pieces with a spray of blood extending halfway up the wall and halfway across the hallway. The installation's ventilation system was not entirely successful in removing the appalling smell from the air.

"What the hell is going *on* in here?" Ocelot whispered. Then he tensed. "'Hawk—remember Aztechnology?"

Winterhawk nodded grimly. "That's probably where that thing is getting the memories to build this place."

Surprisingly, that thought seemed to comfort Ocelot slightly rather than disturb him further. He held his katana ready in front of him and, along with the rest, moved carefully past the two bodies, trying not to slip on the blood.

"Guys, we're going to have to try some of these rooms soon," Kestrel said. "We don't know where the end is. If

we keep going too long and don't find it, we'll never have time to search everything coming back."

"A bit further," 'Wraith said. "Think we're close."

"If we picked the right end," Ocelot muttered under his breath. No one seemed to hear him over the klaxon.

They continued on, nervously watching the countdown tick down. When it read 40:11 they had not encountered any other opposition, though they continued to hear screams, gunshots, and the ubiquitous alarm buzzing in their ears. When Joe peered carefully around a corner and announced, "Two rooms and a dead end," everyone allowed themselves a brief moment of relaxation.

"Okay, this is the end," Kestrel said. "Check these two and then start back?"

"Yeah," Ocelot said, and 'Wraith nodded simultaneously. Winterhawk was looking back over his shoulder to make sure nothing was sneaking up on them. So far nothing was.

The two rooms around the corner looked to be both around the same size, one on each side of the corridor. Just like every other room in this installation, they had metal doors with metal knobs. Each had one of the unintelligible identification plates next to it. Without consultation the team moved over to the right-side door, which was technically the closest to being (at least as far as they could determine) the outer edge of the complex.

They glanced at each other, then Joe tried the door.

Locked, as expected.

He backed off and was preparing to attempt to batter it down when 'Wraith touched his arm and shook his head. He moved in with his electronics kit (which was in his pocket exactly where he had expected it to be) and in less than ten seconds the maglock had been disabled.

Joe still took the lead, turning the knob and flinging the door open.

Nothing jumped them.

"Is it a lab?" Ocelot demanded, trying to see around the troll.

"Looks like it." Joe was already moving inside.

The lab looked as if it had been ransacked. Tables were overturned, cabinets knocked down, chairs and stools tossed into untidy piles in the room's corners. "Locked cabinet," Winterhawk called, his gaze sweeping the red-tinged area. "Look for a —"

He didn't get a chance to finish his thought, because at that moment a horrific shriek filled the air and suddenly the entire room was in motion. Erupting up from behind one of the larger piles of ruined junk on the far side of the room, a humanoid creature screamed again and staggered toward the runners. The figure was followed by two fast-moving four-legged beasts who immediately changed their focus to the runners as soon as they spotted them.

Everything happened quickly after that, because all the combatants were moving so fast no one got a good look at anything for several seconds. Two more of the four-legged creatures came from the other side of the room and leaped into the fight, which fast became a free-for-all melee of growls, sharp teeth, and flashing weapons. When it was over the four-legged creatures and the humanoid figure lay sprawled on the floor in pools of dark blood. The team themselves were breathing hard but otherwise unharmed.

The runners stared down at the dead in shock. The four-legged creatures appeared to be some sort of cross between dogs and panthers that hadn't quite gone right: their fur was falling out in great chunks and large open sores were visible next to the slashes the runners had



inflicted. Their faces had none of the beauty of either dog or panther, but instead had a sloped, widened and flattened look that made them ugly and fearsome-looking even in death.

The two-legger was even more shocking. It was a man—or it had once been a man. This one wore a lab coat like the unfortunate victims in the hallways, but half his face had been eaten away by what looked like some kind of acid, his hands were curled into claws, and blood seeped out from beneath his clothes even where there were no apparent wounds.

“Great...” Ocelot muttered, with the sudden urge to clean his katana after it had touched these monstrosities.

“Check,” ‘Wraith said, glancing around. “Cabinets.”

After that it took them less than a minute to check the two cabinets in the room and determine that the cube was not inside them. “If we’re gonna have to do this in every room, we’re never going to find it in time,” Joe said.

Winterhawk was poking around in the one of the piles of junk. “Wait a minute,” he called. “‘Wraith—come here.”

The elf hurried over and ‘Hawk held up a small console that looked relatively undamaged. “This looks like a dataterminal. P’raps if you can—”

‘Wraith was way ahead of him. He snatched it out of ‘Hawk’s hands with a look of triumph and hunted around for a place to plug it in. The other runners waited tensely for several seconds and then the screen came to life, showing an odd logo with more of the strange printing that had been visible on the door plates.

“Just a map,” Kestrel murmured. “If you can get us a map—”

That appeared to be about all ‘Wraith *could* get. Not being able to read the language and being in a tremendous hurry (the countdown was now showing

36:24), he flashed through the icons until at last in only a few seconds the small screen displayed what looked like a floorplan. It took only a few more seconds after that to identify where they were and locate the other labs on this floor. There were only five more, and one of them was across the hallway. They had been in luck: the direction they had chosen contained the bulk of this level. If they had taken the other turn, they would have discovered a dead end after traversing only two hallways. Naturally there was no indication of where the cube was located. 'Wraith transferred the map to his pocket secretary while Kestrel and Ocelot kept a wary eye on the door and Winterhawk took the opportunity to heal Joe's arm wound. When at last they left the room the glowing digits showed 35:02.

The lab across the hall did not contain anything alive, but it did contain a stinking pile of corpses that looked as if they had been torn apart by some large animal—larger by far than the dog-panther things they had seen before. It took the runners only a few seconds to rip open the doors of the two cabinets in the lab and determine that the object of their search was not there. "Next?" Kestrel asked.

"Right fork, that way," 'Wraith said, pointing when they got outside the door. "Two labs."

The hallway the elf indicated proved to be longer than it had looked on the map. There were more dead bodies here, four of them strewn around the hall. Past the lab doors, which were at the far end of the hallway, there was another T intersection. As the runners crept forward as quickly as possible toward the doors, Kestrel and 'Wraith simultaneously stiffened. "Someone's coming!" Kestrel hissed, pressing herself back against the wall and raising her SMG. Across the hall 'Wraith was doing the same thing with the Barrett.

The other three runners barely had time to get into position when the hallway was filled with the sounds of gunfire. Everyone hit the floor as a barrage of rounds zinged past them, fired from at least four barrels poking out from around the corners of the T. They got a brief glimpse of armored forms before the assailants ducked back behind cover.

“Shit!” Ocelot swore. “No cover! We’re sitting ducks!”

‘Wraith and Winterhawk glanced quickly backward: no one was coming from that direction, but the next bend in the hallway was far too long for them to make a run for it.

“We have to get into that lab,” Kestrel announced. “‘Wraith, if we give you some covering fire can you get the door open?”

The elf didn’t answer, but instead moved into position behind Joe and set to work. Joe stowed his axe and swung his MMG around, while Kestrel leveled her LMG. When two of the guards poked their heads and gun barrels around the corner again, they had to duck back quickly to avoid the return fire. “Hurry up...” Joe murmured as one of the guards tried blind fire. It didn’t hit anything, but not by much—a ricochet barely missed Winterhawk, who was behind Kestrel preparing a spell.

“There,” ‘Wraith called, standing up and turning the knob of the lab door. He opened it only a couple of centimeters.

Ocelot hurried inside, followed by ‘Wraith. Winterhawk paused to fire off a spell at the two guards who had once again attempted to get a shot, and pumped his fist triumphantly when they clutched their heads and dropped.

“Two more, I think,” Kestrel called, diving across the hall toward the door as Joe covered her.

"We'd better hurry." Joe dug into his bag and heaved one of his few grenades down the hall before stepping last into the room. "They'll call for backup and we can't be here when they get here." The sound of the grenade's explosion was muffled by the door closing behind them.

This lab looked much the same as the others: its furnishings were ransacked and its smell was appalling. More dead bodies lay sprawled on the floor, some of them crushed under heavy tables that had been pulled down on them. Joe and Kestrel remained near the door, weapons ready, watching for threats while Winterhawk, 'Wraith, and Ocelot examined the three cabinets. Other than office supplies and some unidentifiable things that looked like they had once been in jars on the cabinets' shelves, there was no sign of anything else. Definitely no glowing green cubes. "You think this thing exists at all?" Ocelot snapped in frustration. "I think that fucking Horror thing is just getting its jollies watching us screw around in its little maze."

"No choice," 'Wraith said dispassionately. "Only game in town."

Ocelot blew air between his teeth and swiped his hair back off his face with the hand that wasn't holding the katana. The countdown read 30: 02.

"Come on," Winterhawk said, already moving toward Kestrel and Joe. "We're half down already and not much closer to finding it. We have to pick it up a bit."

'Wraith came up next to him as he reached the two at the door. "Anyone there?"

"Can't tell," Joe muttered. "Hoping the grenade got 'em." He shoved the door open a little more and tried to get a look out. "Winterhawk, can you —?"

The mage nodded and began another clairvoyance spell. "Can't see anything," he said, a bit of surprise coloring his tone. "Not even the bodies. They —"

Ocelot, standing next to him, felt something touch his shoulder. He turned, expecting to see 'Wraith there, but as he turned it registered somewhere in his subconscious that 'Wraith was standing next to him – “Holy *shit!*” he screamed, whirling around and slashing with his katana like a madman.

The others spun at his cry, their eyes widening in terror. Standing behind Ocelot was one of the labcoat-clad researchers – the researchers whose dead bodies they had noted upon entering the room. Its eyes glowed redder than the ambient light, and it was raising hands tipped with long, twisted claws. It made no sound when it moved.

And there were more.

Every dead body in the room that hadn't been crushed beneath furniture had risen up and was now shambling with a surprising degree of quickness in their direction. Even the ones who had been crushed were trying to get up, scrabbling ineffectually at the floor with baleful expressions in their glowing dead eyes. Before Ocelot could get his katana into position, the first zombie-thing slashed viciously at him with its claws, opening up three bloody stripes down the side of his chest. “Watch the damn door!” he yelled at nobody in particular as he swung wildly, sinking the katana into the zombie's shoulder. It opened its mouth in a silent scream but did not fall.

Winterhawk and 'Wraith had backed off along the wall, the former preparing a spell, the latter raising his Barrett and sending two perfectly-placed shots into a zombie's chest. It ignored the shots and kept coming.

Kestrel and Joe remained near the door and attempted to ventilate the zombies with machine gun fire. It had the same effect as the Barrett: none. Grimly Joe drew his axe and Kestrel her katana.

Meanwhile, Winterhawk had gotten his spell off. It flowered around the head of the zombie nearest him. It screamed its soundless scream and staggered backward, oozy discharge running from its eyes, nose, and ears. It slowed but did not stop. 'Hawk raised his mageblade, his jaw set grimly.

There were five zombies in all, not counting the ones that were trying to pull themselves apart to get out from under the heavy furniture. They continued to advance, their red eyes showing single-minded purpose, their clawed hands raised. 'Wraith backed off to watch the door, allowing Joe and Kestrel, both better at hand-to-hand fighting than he was, to enter the fray. Winterhawk was preparing another spell.

They won the battle, but only at the cost of both injury and precious time. Once Ocelot figured out that chopping the zombies' heads off "killed" them, the others made short work of their opponents. When the zombies all lay in a bloody heap in front of them and their heavy breathing was competing with the buzz of the alarm klaxon, the countdown read 27:41.

They paused a moment to take stock of their situation. Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Kestrel had been slashed by the zombie's wicked claws on the chest, side, and arm, respectively. The wounds bled profusely and burned as if there had been acid on the zombies' claws. "We have to take care of these," Joe said, peering once again outside the door for a quick look. "You guys aren't gonna make it bleeding like that."

"Too long," Winterhawk said through gritted teeth.

Kestrel nodded. She had already accepted some bandages from Joe and was wrapping them around her upper arm. "Have to keep going. No time to stop. Maybe—after we find the thing."

"Three more labs," 'Wraith said.

"If it's there," Ocelot pointed out.

"If it's not, we're screwed," Kestrel said quickly. "Let's not think about that until we've checked the others."

Joe carefully shoved open the door and glanced out. Nothing shot at him. "Maybe the grenades *did* get 'em," he told the others, looking at the other lab door across the hall. "Come on. I'll cover 'Wraith again—get the door open."

They got the door open without incident and got inside the lab. There were more dead bodies there—this time they didn't give them a chance to become zombies, but simply chopped their heads off to start with. As it was they still had to take out two of them that had been hidden behind a lab table and had started to animate before they could get to them.

There was no time for healing. Winterhawk had hoped to get a respite that would allow him to heal up at least Ocelot's wound (Kestrel's was on her arm and therefore not as threatening, and his own could wait until last) but between taking out the zombies, hunting for the cube, and watching the door to make sure no one tried to break in on them, it didn't happen. They reconvened in less than five minutes by the door, looking dejected. 'Hawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel were already showing signs of weakness. The countdown stood at 23:33.

"Okay." Ocelot took a deep breath and steadied himself. "Nothing here. Two more, yeah?"

"Down past the T," 'Wraith said. "Don't know how far. Map scale is odd. Adjoining labs."

"Connected?" Kestrel asked.

"Appears so." The elf held up his pocket secretary to show them. "Last chance."

"Okay, let's go then," Joe said. "This is it. If it's not here we'll have to go back upstairs and take our chances with the labs up there."

No one was waiting for them in the hallway. They moved very slowly this time, pressed against the metal walls on both sides, weapons ready. When they reached the end, they saw why no one had been shooting at them. Four guards in security armor lay in heaps, two on each side of the T. Two of them had been cut down by machine gun fire, and all four of them (along with the walls) showed signs of having taken heavy damage from a grenade.

"Chunky salsa," Ocelot muttered, taking his victories where he could get them. His chest was on fire, and he could feel himself sweating under his armor. His legs felt slightly weaker than usual. He forced himself to keep going. It wasn't bad yet, and if he could hold it together or another twenty-odd minutes, that was all that would matter.

"Take their guns?" Joe asked as they moved on past.

"Don't trust them," Wraith said at once.

"Me neither," Kestrel said. "But then, we're already using the Horrors' weapons in a way, aren't we?"

Nobody answered, but they didn't take the guns either.

They were in another long hallway. Like the previous one, it was longer than might have been indicated by the map. The hallway was lined with doors, but other than giving them a wary eye as they passed and taking more than a few glances backward, the runners ignored them. The object of their search was at the end of this hallway: two adjacent doors alone along a final T intersection. So far they had not seen it, but the way the corridor did gentle, sweeping turns, it was difficult to see too far ahead.



They heard the screams before they saw the doors. At first they seemed very loud, but it took the runners a moment to realize that the volume level of the klaxons had been steadily decreasing to the point where now it sounded as if the alarms were muffled behind more metal doors. The screams, on the other hand, sounded very close.

The runners could not be certain that these were the same screams they had heard before, but standing here, much closer to them than they had been previously, they were sure of two other things —

—the screams were human, and they were coming from one of the two labs that were their destination.

Ocelot slumped back against the wall, brushing sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. “Now what?”

Kestrel started to say something, but her voice was cut off by another of the screams. It was longer, this time, and more drawn out — whoever was in there was obviously in agony.

“A trap?” ‘Wraith asked, glancing back in the direction from which they had come.

“Won’t know until we go in,” Winterhawk said. “It’s where we need to go.”

“It probably knows that,” Ocelot said sourly.

They rounded one more slight curve and the hallway forked into a T once more. A careful check around the corner revealed dead ends at both ends of the hall, and two doors, separated by about ten meters, in the wall directly in front of them. The screams were clearly coming from the right-side door. Another one rent the air as they tried to decide what to do. The countdown was on the wall between the two doors and read 20:07. “This had better be it,” Kestrel muttered. “We won’t have time to check many more.”

"Can't see a damn thing inside," Winterhawk said before anyone asked him.

"That might be a good sign," Joe said. He was already up next to the door. The screams were coming more regularly now, as if whatever was being done to the victim inside had been increased in its intensity.

'Wraith defeated the lock with hands that trembled ever so slightly. Weapons ready, they got into position and Joe flung the door open. The runners streamed in –

–and stopped dead in shock, silent except for Kestrel's strangled cry:

*"Gabriel!"*

He was there, and he was not alone. The lab, the largest one by far that they had yet entered at nearly fifteen meters on a side, looked like something out of a particularly gruesome horror trid. The overturned furniture had been cleared away, pushed up against the near and far walls. On the opposite wall, in the corner farthest from the door through which the runners had just entered, a metal table had been set up. It was tilted at an angle and surrounded by six of the zombie lab technicians. Strapped to the table by shining metal shackles was Gabriel. He did not appear to notice the runners' presence; in fact, as they entered he screamed again, a long, wrenching cry of agony.

One of the zombies moved aside slightly and the runners could see why he was screaming. Ocelot looked away quickly, fighting to control his gorge: the zombies had made a ragged incision from the middle of Gabriel's chest down to his abdomen, and were now busily probing at the bloody opening as if in preparation for something. Somehow he had not managed to pass out during this atrocity—or had not been permitted to—and now his screams echoed around the metal walls of the lab.

"NO!" Kestrel screamed. She started to move forward, but Ocelot grabbed her arm and pointed to the side by the connecting door. More zombies, along with some armor-clad security guards and two of the pantherlike creatures, were pouring into the room, the guards taking cover behind the strewn furniture, the zombies and creatures moving in for the attack.

Kestrel glanced over at Gabriel again but she knew they could not help him by getting herself killed. Grimly she leveled her machine gun at the guards and started firing, looking around for cover of her own.

In addition to the six zombies surrounding Gabriel's table, who seemed intent on their work, there were five more zombies, four guards, and the two panther/dog things. Joe made short work of the four-legged creatures, cutting them in half with a full-auto blast from his machine gun, while Ocelot and Winterhawk went after the zombies and 'Wraith ducked behind a broken desk and joined Kestrel in firing at the guards.

It was a surreal scene for the next several moments. Gabriel's screams as the zombies continue to probe at him mingled with the staccato sound of gunfire and the occasional cry of pain from either the guards or the runners: 'Wraith took one down with a head shot only to be grazed across the upper thigh by a shot from another, while Joe took another round in the arm from a second which was then dispatched by Kestrel. By the time the guards, the zombies, and the dogs were dead, every one of the runners had taken gun or claw damage. They looked around quickly for any further opposition and then turned back to the table.

Gabriel screamed again. The six zombies surrounding him began to take an interest in the rest of the room now—turning as one toward the runners, their expressions even more hate-filled than before, they

advanced on them. They moved with surprising speed, even faster than the other zombies had. As the last one moved away from the table, a shimmering curtain of light flared up around it.

"Damn!" Winterhawk yelled, panting as he raised his mageblade again. "A barrier!"

"Kill these damn things!" Kestrel cried, already wading in, ignoring her own bloody injuries as she swung her katana.

More precious seconds passed as the runners slashed and hacked at the zombies with even more ferocity than before. Gabriel's screams had quieted to moans of pain now as he appeared to be struggling for awareness of what was happening around him. When at last the last zombie went down under the runners' combined blades and the barrier flared and died, the floating digits seemed to mock them: 18:41.

"Help me..."

The soft words, the voice so full of pain and fear and desperation, reached them from across the room. Gabriel had raised his head slightly, his eyes haunted and desperate, pleading with them to do something. It was a wonder he was still alive given what the zombies had done to him. "Kestrel... please...help me..."

"Gabriel!" Kestrel did not hesitate. Spinning, she took off at a run toward him.

Later no one would be able to quite accurately reconstruct what occurred next. One moment Kestrel was running across the room toward Gabriel, and the next moment she was intercepted by an even faster-moving form that called "No!" as it ran. She screamed in anger that turned to terror, appearing to teeter for a moment on the edge of nothingness, and then she was flung backward where she landed sprawling. 'Wraith, who had grabbed her, landed on top of her and quickly rolled off.

Kestrel glared at the elf, trying to scramble to her feet. "What the hell—?" she started to yell, and then she noticed that the others were not looking at her. She raised up to see what they were staring at and gasped.

The victim on the table was no longer Gabriel. Instead, it was some sort of hideous zombie-thing, rotting, falling to pieces, but still somehow alive. It was laughing, and as they watched, it faded from sight. Even that, though, was not what the other runners were looking at. Kestrel's eyes widened as she saw that the area around the table for about a three-meter circle no longer had a floor. She crept nearer and saw the pool of greenish, bubbling, foul-smelling liquid filling the area between the table and the rest of the room. "My God..." she whispered.

"Yeah..." Ocelot was staring at the pool as if he could not look away.

"Bloody hell..." Winterhawk murmured.

Joe recovered first. "Guys," he said urgently, "we have to get going. Look at the time."

That snapped them out of their reveries. The countdown read 16:07. They hurriedly checked the lab, staying far away from acid pit in the corner. Kestrel, and to a somewhat lesser extent Ocelot, moved quickly but as if in a daze.

"How did you know?" Winterhawk asked 'Wraith as the two of them checked the last cabinet in the room. "That it wasn't Gabriel, I mean."

The elf took a deep breath. "Wasn't sure. Eyes were wrong. Just for a second."

'Hawk let his breath out slowly. "Well, it's a damn good thing you spotted it, that's all I've got to say."

They were all moving slower now. None of them were injured severely, but the cumulative effects of the claws and bullet-grazes, not to mention the nonstop adrenaline rush for the last three-quarters of an hour, were beginning

to take their toll. They forced themselves over to the other door, the one connecting the two rooms.

"Anything there?" Ocelot asked Winterhawk. He had moved closer to Kestrel and didn't seem inclined to go far from her.

The mage checked quickly. "I don't see anything," he said, "but I wouldn't take my word for it, given what I've missed so far."

The door between the labs was not locked. Surprisingly, when Joe threw it open, they were not met with any opposition. In fact, this room appeared not to have been touched by any of the madness that had occurred in every other lab they had investigated thus far. Pristine and unoccupied, it contained four lab benches with racks of instruments suspended above them, three cabinets, and an assortment of chairs, desks, and stools. Except for the hellish red light, the place could have been any normal corporate research laboratory.

"So *this* is what they're supposed to look like," 'Hawk muttered.

They all peered into the room for a few seconds, examining it for traps using all their available senses. Finding none apparent, they moved inside. With Joe guarding the door to the outside hall and Kestrel the connector, the other three runners hurried to the cabinets. Three well-placed gunshots later, they had the doors open, and—

"Got it! Here it is!" Ocelot yelled. He threw the cabinet door fully open to reveal a glowing green cube, exactly like the one that had floated above their heads what seemed now like days ago.

"Grab it, then, and let's go!" Winterhawk called back. "We've only got thirteen minutes to get back upstairs and out of here!"

Ocelot snatched up the cube; it was light, smooth, and slightly warm. As soon as he touched it, the klaxons, which had quieted, got loud again, reverberating through the lab. He held the cube for a moment and then tossed it to Joe, who caught it and stowed it away in his bag. Everyone headed back through the first lab and into the hallway.

They were almost surprised to see no opposition waiting for them outside the lab. There were no hordes of researcher-zombies, armored security patrols, disgusting hybrid animals, or killer drones—just featureless metal walls and the sound of the klaxon, to which they had by this point had become nearly accustomed. Almost surprised—but not quite. Nothing about this place made sense. It was a good bet that all of them were having variations on the same thought: *the sooner we get the hell out of here, the better.*

They made it back to the elevator without being attacked, but when they reached it they pulled up short.

It was closed.

“Damn,” Ocelot snapped. “I thought we—”

“One of those guards probably messed with it,” Joe said. “C’mon. If it’s the only way up we’ll have to climb.”

Nobody liked that plan, but since nobody could offer a better one, they immediately set about trying to get the door open. Or rather, Joe did. He wedged his axe between the two sections of it and applied his massive troll muscles to the task while the others kept a close watch on both sides of the alcove. The other set of doors, which had been closed when they arrived, was open now. That didn’t make them feel secure.

It took Joe several seconds before he was able to get good leverage on the door and pry it open. It slid aside with agonizing slowness: the other runners were keenly

aware of the seconds ticking down on the floating countdown: 10:01... 10:00... 9:59...

Far off down the hallway they heard a loud *THUD*, followed by another a couple of seconds later. "Hurry... hurry..." Winterhawk muttered under his breath, his gaze flicking nervously back and forth between the doors on either side of the alcove and Joe pushing on the elevator door. By now Ocelot had moved in to help him. Both of them were bleeding harder from their exertions, sweat standing out on their foreheads and darkening their shirts beneath their armored coats.

The elevator car was in place on the lower floor, but it did not respond to input on the buttons. There was no time to wait: Joe quickly widened out the emergency exit shaft at the top of the car with his axe and the others scrambled upward until they were all standing on top of the car. Winterhawk, his features lined with the effort of lifting something so heavy, levitated Joe upward one level so he could repeat his performance with the door up there. By the time they had all climbed up, exited through the forced doors, and stood panting in the elevator alcove on the upper floor, the countdown stood at 6:42.

Then the gunfire started.

It seemed to come from everywhere at once, echoing eerily off the walls along with the sound of running, booted feet. "Come on!" Kestrel urged, already starting in the direction from they had come. "We have to hurry! It's still a ways back to the way out!"

"Yeah, and the asshole might have closed that too," Ocelot muttered, catching up with her. The others quickly followed.

They saw the shadows an instant before they saw the security patrol, and thus got the drop on them. As the four armored guards came rushing around a corner, guns drawn, the chatter of machine gun fire and the flare of



Winterhawk's spell cut them down before they could react. They crumpled into a sprawled heap across the corridor.

The runners paused for just a second to catch their breath, but tensed as another rumbling *THUD* cut through the klaxon, more on a subliminal level than actually audible. "What is that?" Winterhawk asked. They were moving again. "It doesn't sound like guns —"

"Crap!" Joe yelled, suddenly shoving past him and 'Wraith to surge forward, ahead of the rest.

The others looked at him like he was insane for perhaps half a second, then they realized what he was doing.

A section of the ceiling was coming down ahead of them: a thick, heavy metal door rolling down to block off the corridor and prevent them from moving forward. Joe threw himself forward and got under it, preventing its progress by sheer brute force. He cried out in pain as it slammed down on his shoulder, but it stopped moving. Everyone could hear the whine of the machinery's protest. "Get something!" the troll cried in a strangled voice. "Can't—hold—for long—" Indeed, he was trembling as they spoke, his knees already beginning to buckle under him as the door pressed down.

"There isn't—" Ocelot began, but then his eyes fell on the heaped bodies of the armored troops. *Yes there is!* "The guards!" he yelled at the others, pointing. "Hurry!"

Everyone understood instantly. They rushed over to the four guards and dragged their bodies quickly over, arranging them one on top of another so they made a stack a little over a meter high. The guards were wearing heavy armor—the runners hoped it would hold long enough for them to get through. "Go!" Joe rasped. "Get through, then I'll let it go!"

The runners didn't need a second invitation. They threw themselves two at a time underneath the barrier, sliding out on the other side and leaping back to their feet. As soon as they were through Joe began letting the barrier down, dropping to his knees and then slowly bending forward. The bodies took up the slack and performed as they had hoped, although the heavy metal door began slowly and inexorably crushing them down almost at the instant it touched them. Joe let out a mighty cry of pain as he rolled the rest of the way out, dragging his bag and his weapons with him.

There was no time to savor their victory. The glowing red numbers almost seemed to dance mockingly in front of them: 3:01... 2:59... 2:58...

"Come on!" Kestrel cried. "Run! We need to get there before any more of those doors start coming down!"

The others needed no urging. Despite their injuries, they picked up their pace, hurrying down the hallway in a kind of shambling jog-trot. Joe's arm hung almost limply at his side, his shoulder nearly useless now after having taken the brunt of the last door's weight. All of them were pale and sweating—the zombies had no doubt had something on their claws that had affected them, but they all knew now that to stop, even for a moment, was to die. They were all focused exclusively on the hallway up ahead, at the turns and bends they had memorized so as not to get lost on their way out. Their harsh breathing rattled in their throats, each one of them hearing his or her own rasping breath over the sounds of the alarms, the *thuds* of the doors behind them, and the gunfire.

They rounded the next-to-last corner and started down the hallway. One more corner, they knew, only fifteen meters or so, and they would be in sight of the way out. "Not far now!" Joe called, encouraging them on. "Come on—we've almost got it!" The countdown stood at

2:35. The klaxons seemed to be picking up tempo, blaring faster than ever.

At that point came another moment that none of them would be able to reconstruct later. Winterhawk, who had dropped behind a bit, took that moment to glance back over his shoulder. What he saw there made him react before any of the rest of them could even move. "Down!" he yelled, diving forward, slamming into Ocelot with enough force to knock his startled teammate off his feet. After that, three things happened simultaneously: the *budda-budda* of machine gun fire filled the hallway, a *crack* and a *thud* accompanied an unseen metal barrier that came thundering down directly above where Winterhawk was sprawled, and Winterhawk screamed as the machine gun rounds tore into him an instant before the barrier smashed down, crushing his legs beneath it.

"*Hawk!*" Ocelot yelled, scrambling half-up and skidding to a stop next to the mage's prone form.

Winterhawk wasn't screaming anymore: he was clearly too far gone for that. Instead, he moaned inarticulately, his eyes clamped shut, his face dead pale even in the red light. The rounds had torn up most of his shoulder and left side; a pool of dark blood was already forming beneath him. The barrier had almost reached the floor—the unarmored flesh and bone of the mage's lower legs had not been even the impediment offered by the armored guards before. Another pool of blood formed around them, seeping under the door to mingle with that which was undoubtedly already on the other side.

Kestrel, 'Wraith, and Joe were staring in wide-eyed, horrified shock. They moved closer but seemed unable to determine what to do.

Ocelot was oblivious to them. He gripped Winterhawk's undamaged shoulder. "'Hawk... just... just

hold on. We'll—we'll get you out of there—" His voice shook, and so did his hand.

Winterhawk opened his eyes and looked up at him, his torment showing in his eyes. "Go..." he forced out.

"Hawk, we can't—Not without you—"

"Go," he said again, more strongly this time. He struggled up fractionally onto his trembling arm. Ocelot leaned in so he didn't have to speak loudly. "Not... much... time..."

Joe had shaken off the shock and was already down on his knees next to the door, trying to force it open. Kestrel was helping him. They were having no effect. The clock read 1:22.

"No... Hawk... Al... we can't just—"

"No... choice... Terry..." Winterhawk whispered. "Already... dead... You can't... all... all of you... Gabriel... Not... not for me..." That speech seemed to have exhausted him because his head lolled slightly to one side, his eyes closing again.

Ocelot shook him. "No, damn it! You can't—"

A big, gentle hand fell on his shoulder. "Ocelot... We—we have to go."

He looked up to see Joe there. He hadn't seen the troll get up, but he was now standing over him, his face full of sadness and compassion. Ocelot gestured ineffectually at Winterhawk. "We can't just leave him—" he whispered.

Someone else was just as gently hauling him to his feet. 'Wraith's face was more of a mask than it had ever been before. "Not much time," he said softly.

Ocelot allowed himself to be pulled up, looking down at the still form of his best friend. "*Damn you, you fucking bastard!*" he screamed at the ceiling of the hallway. "I'll get you for this! *I'll kill you!*"

He went with them. None of them looked back. The countdown was at 0:42.

They ran. With the last of their strength, they ran. It didn't matter that each step shot bolts of agony up their spines; it didn't matter that their bones and their muscles were exhausted beyond the point of continuing. None of that mattered now. All that was important was that they make it out that door in time—that they had not left a friend behind to die in vain.

They reached the door when the countdown read 0:13. All of them, in the backs of their minds, were sure that the door would be locked—but then again, they had all been equally sure that the door would not be there at all, that somehow the Horror had played some kind of sick joke on them and rearranged the layout of the complex.

Neither was true. 'Wraith reached out a trembling hand and tried the knob—he seemed as surprised as the others were when it turned freely in his hand.

No precautions now. It was too late for that. If anything was waiting for them in the room it would take longer than they had to fight it, so they didn't worry about it. 'Wraith threw the door open and they ran, pitching themselves headlong into the featureless metal room and toward the rolling metal door that was even now beginning its slow descent. If there was anything else in the room, none of them saw it.

0:07... 0:06... 0:05...

Kestrel and 'Wraith flung themselves over the threshold and disappeared.

0:04...0:03...0:02...

Joe followed them and he too disappeared.

0:01...

With one last, quick, anguished look back over his shoulder, Ocelot threw himself through the doorway.

The scene faded from view.

## 47.

"Well, isn't that wonderful—they've made it!" The elf-Horror strode around the cage, glancing up at the large floating television hanging suspended near it. "Or—" he added with a sidelong glance at Gabriel, "—at least *most* of them have." He clucked in mock sympathy, shaking his head. "I didn't think they had it in them. I expected to lose at least two or three on that one. Ah, well. I'll just have to make the next one tougher, won't I?"

Gabriel didn't answer. It was doubtful that he had even heard the elf's words. He sat slumped on his knees against the side of the cage, only his trembling grip around the bars holding him in an upright position.

He had watched with increasing horror as the scenes of the runners' challenge had unfolded before him. His shocked gasp and near-crazed attempts to get out of the cage when the fake Gabriel had appeared in the lab—yelling at Kestrel, yelling at all of them to stay away, that it wasn't real, that he was still *here*—had been met only by the Horror's gleeful laughter. Gabriel had sunken down, exhausted by relief, when 'Wraith managed to pull Kestrel free of the acid trap, but his respite had been short-lived—he was on his feet again instantly as the runners hurried down the hallway and the guard had appeared with his machine gun behind him. Again he cried out to them both in his mind and aloud, trying to use every tool at his disposal to warn them—but it had been to no avail. As the gunfire had cut Winterhawk down and the door had crushed him, Gabriel bowed his head and sunk back to his knees against the bars. He did not watch them leave Winterhawk behind—he didn't have to. He too had a display of the time remaining in the contest, and he knew the stakes were too high for the rest

of them to simply give up and stay with him until the countdown ran out.

Across the amphitheater, Stefan, still chained down and helpless to do anything but observe, continued to watch Gabriel all throughout the contest, an expression of deep sadness and frustration in his eyes. Gabriel glanced at him occasionally but no communication passed between them. Apparently the Horror was blocking it somehow.

Gabriel was still in his slumped position when the four remaining runners materialized inside the cage, their postures in the same attitudes as when they were running headlong through the doorway to the complex's exit, but dressed once again in the clothes in which they had arrived instead of their runner gear. They had to catch themselves against the sides of the cage to keep from sprawling on the floor. They stood there for a moment getting their bearings, and then simply remained where they were, heads bowed, postures tense. They looked at Gabriel but not at the Horror.

"Ah, welcome back!" the Horror said cheerfully. "Well done! And only one casualty! As I was telling your young friend here, I didn't think you could do it. I'm impressed!"

None of the runners answered. None of them looked at him. All four of them were stiff, trembling; Ocelot's fists were clenched so hard his hands were white, his jaw set to keep it too from trembling. Like the others he was still injured, still bleeding and weak from their ordeal, but at that moment he did not care.

The elf-Horror didn't seem to notice their behavior. "That's one down," he said. "Only one more for you, and two for the dragonboy here. I'll give you a few moments to have your little reunion and then we'd best get on with

it." Chuckling, he moved off toward Stefan, turning his back on them.

Gabriel slowly got up and turned to face them, his violet eyes haunted and despairing. He did not speak, but merely regarded them silently.

For a long time, none of the runners spoke either. They stood there facing each other, no one wanting to meet anyone else's eyes. "I want to kill that fucking thing..." Ocelot finally muttered through gritted teeth. "I want to rip it to pieces and—" It seemed as if his entire body was threatening to shake itself apart with the force of his rage.

Joe put a gentle hand on his shoulder, but he too looked like he was trying to control his emotions. "I think we all do, Ocelot," he said. There was an odd note in his voice.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "You're injured," he said softly. "Let me—"

"It doesn't matter," Ocelot muttered without looking at him. "What the hell difference does it make?"

Gabriel sighed and dropped his gaze, nodding.

One by one the runners dropped to the floor of the cage, leaning against the bars, as the cumulative effects of their injuries finally caught up with them. Joe, being the strongest, was the last, but after a few moments even he could not remain upright. Eventually only Gabriel was left standing.

The five of them had not spoken further to each other by the time the Horror came back over. As usual, he was grinning. "How nice," he commented. "You're all sitting down, ready to watch the show."

Everyone ignored him.

Again the elf-Horror didn't seem to notice. He looked at Gabriel. "Ready to go? Your friends managed to get through my little challenge — think you're up to the task?"



Gabriel's only answer was to glare coldly at him and wait.

The elf smiled. "All right, then — off you go!"

Gabriel faded from the cage.

The runners stared at the spot where he had been standing for a moment, then bowed their heads again.

Gabriel, like the runners before him had, appeared in darkness. He remained still, forcing himself to keep under control. Lashing out against the Horror, even if he could do it, would do him no good. The thing would only punish his friends. *They've already been punished enough*, he thought bitterly, trying not to replay the vision of Winterhawk's death in his mind.

Laughter split the silence. "Feeling better, dragonboy?" an unseen voice asked. "I've fixed you up — only fair that you start fresh, after all, because you won't be that way when you're done."

Gabriel didn't answer, but he did notice right away that the pain and weariness had dropped away like it had never been. In light of the circumstances he could not feel grateful. "Get on with it," he said coldly.

"Ooh, our dragonboy has teeth!" The voice chuckled. "All right, then — don't know why you're in such a hurry to hasten your death, but so be it." There was a pause, and the lights came up.

Gabriel was standing in a small room. Its walls were paneled with rough wood, its floor bare. There was no furniture. Its only feature was a single door on one side. He glanced down at himself: the bloody, ripped clothes left over from the asylum were gone; instead, he was dressed in his usual casual outfit of jeans, leather jacket, light shirt and athletic shoes.

"Here is your challenge," said the voice. "You are currently located in a small cabin at the foot of a

mountain. The mountain is heavily forested and there is a single, two-lane road that reaches the top. There is another cabin like this one at the end of the road." There was a pause, and then a television screen similar to the one suspended above the cage appeared, inset into the wall to Gabriel's left. It was fuzzed with snow, but suddenly the snow vanished to be replaced with a sharp, clear picture.

Gabriel's eyes widened. The picture showed the interior of another cabin room that looked like a much larger twin to this one, except that the other one contained Kestrel. She was bound hand and foot, shackled by a heavy manacle to a stout metal pole that extended from the floor to the ceiling. She appeared to be unconscious.

"As you can see," the voice continued, "your dear friend is not having a good time today." The camera panned over across the room; a large and rather stylized-looking pile of explosives lined the far wall of the room, well out of Kestrel's reach. "Your job is to reach her before that goes off, or I fear she'll be even less happy."

Gabriel glared at the screen, then around at the air. He knew better than to tell the Horror to leave Kestrel out of this—it would probably just make the thing do something else to her just because it could. "How long?" he rasped.

"Oh, there's the fun part," the voice said. "Because, you see, you don't *know*. The only aid I can give you is to tell you to get there as fast as you possibly can. Remember, because that is the most important thing—*get there as fast as you can.*"

Gabriel didn't waste time—he immediately headed for the door. It was locked.

Before he could do anything else, the voice added, "I'll open that in a jiff. Just one more thing I wanted to tell you—I know how much you *love* to drive fast, so I thought it would be fun to add that into our little game.

Drive as fast as you want, little dragon. No speed limits here, but be careful or you'll go flying over the edge of a sheer drop. That wouldn't be any fun at all for either of you.

"Good luck—you'll need it. And just remember—as fast as you can, or you'll be needing to listen for a nice *boom* off in the distance. Ta."

The voice's laughter faded as there came a slight *click* from the lock on the door in front of him.

Gabriel grabbed the knob and flung the door open, hurrying through before the Horror changed its mind.

He was standing in a small garage, lit by a single naked bulb hanging on a long cord from the ceiling. It was a rustic-looking place that smelled of oil and wood and rubber.

There was nothing rustic about the car inside, though. Sleek and gleaming black, it crouched on wide tires, looking as if it were in motion even while sitting still. It was the sort of car Gabriel loved—fast, low-slung, powerful, brimming with more performance than most people would ever be able to use—but right now he barely noticed its exterior. It was a means to an end, and that was all that mattered.

He looked around wildly for a button to open the garage door; finding none, he crossed the garage in a few swift steps and threw it open. Outside, it was dark. He was at the head of a long driveway flanked on both sides by trees. At the other end of the driveway he could barely make out the road, its entrance lit by two pole-style lamps.

Breathing hard and forcing himself to remain calm, he returned to the car and opened its driver-side door. The doors were gull-wing style and operated with silent smoothness. He slipped inside and almost before he even realized what he was doing, he had the car started using

the key that was hanging in the ignition. The engine roared to life with a throaty rumble, growling like an animal that strained to be set free from the confines of its garage-cage. He threw it into gear, snapped on the lights, and stomped down on the accelerator, sending the car screaming out of the tiny garage.

He had almost reached the end of the driveway when the car's multiple speakers came to life and the music started to blare. The sound startled Gabriel—he jerked slightly, and the car's hypersensitive steering responded by veering it immediately off to the right side, toward the trees. He wrestled it back, fighting to keep its rear end from fishtailing as he got it back in a straight line, then fumbled for the stereo's controls without looking at them. He spun the car out onto the road and stomped the accelerator again, the shrieking death-metal music still streaming from the speakers. Another moment after that he finally found the controls and snapped the music off. The cacophony was instantly replaced by the rumbling roar of the engine.

The road ahead of him, illuminated in the black car's powerful headlights, was narrow, twisty, and unforgiving. Trees grew on both sides of it, but Gabriel could see that very shortly there would be a solid mountain wall on one side (the opposite side from the one on which he was driving) and an increasingly steep drop-off on the other. He was already gaining altitude, but it looked as if it would be getting worse in a hurry. Grimly he gripped the leather-covered steering wheel, glanced down at the gauges, and kept going.

The car's interior was as if it had been designed for him. The black leather seat and the curve of the various controls of the cockpit cocooned him; the cabin's soundproofing prevented anything but the normally comforting engine rumble from reaching his ears. Under

any other circumstances, Gabriel could have very much appreciated this vehicle. Now, though, he merely hoped that he could keep up his speed and control long enough to get to Kestrel.

He forced himself not to grip the steering wheel too tightly. His hands were knotted, his knuckles white, his jaw set tensely. *I can't let it get to me*, he told himself. *That is what it wants. If I am to be forced to perform in this charade, then I cannot let it affect me.*

He knew even as he had the thought that it was no use. It *was* affecting him. Winterhawk was dead, Kestrel would soon be dead if he did not reach her, he was stuck in human form and unable to use his dragon abilities to get to her—he knew there was no way it would *not* affect him. The trick was to minimize the effect, to do the best he could to keep his emotions under control until this was over, to realize that if he failed he doomed not only Kestrel but Ocelot, Joe, 'Wraith, and probably himself as well.

He could feel the rage welling up in him as he threw the car around yet another curve, forcing it into his own lane and dangerously close to the low retaining barrier as another car screamed past in the other direction. He didn't believe the elf-thing, of course. He didn't believe for a moment that, even if they managed to get through all its sick little challenges, it would let them go. They didn't work like that. The Enemy did not show mercy. They had no honor. To do so would run contrary to everything that made up their existence. No, the only reason Gabriel was continuing this farce instead of simply refusing to participate was that he couldn't just give up. As long as he lived, as long as the runners lived (*most of them*, a bitter little corner of his brain stuck in), there was a chance. The Horrors were not invulnerable, not omniscient—Gabriel, Stefan, and the team had proved

that last time they were here. The things had weaknesses—staying alive, waiting the Horror out might give them a chance to exploit this fact. If they allowed themselves to surrender, not only would there be no chance, but their torment would probably be intensified. No, there was no choice but to go on.

He didn't have to like it, however. He drove the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on the road ahead.

Beyond his own headlights and the occasional lights of cars passing by (they were becoming fewer and farther between as he continued to gain altitude, and seemed for all the effort they made to get out of his way to be remotely controlled, not driven by beings with minds and judgment) there was no illumination on the road. It continued to snake upward, hugging the granite edge of the mountainside on the left, a slender shelf that dropped off on the right side with only the narrowest of metal railings to separate the road from the vast forested drop on the right. Gabriel couldn't see what was down there very often, but when the car was angled just right so that the lights shined briefly over the edge, he saw that it varied between sheer drops that looked as if anything that missed a curve would plummet hundreds of feet to its doom to more gentle slopes that were nonetheless treacherous due to the large number of trees growing along them. Either way he was sure that leaving the road would not be a safe or wise thing to do, either under his own power or not. The shoulders were almost nonexistent in most places and absent completely in a few.

The car at least was cooperating—for the moment, anyway. The wide, grippy tires held the road well through even the most reckless of Gabriel's maneuvers, tracking the line of the curve with perfect precision. Gabriel was glad now that he had spent several days a

long time ago with Kestrel as she taught him how to drive fast. He never went anywhere slowly, and had his share of tickets to prove it—although most of the time he was successful in charming the officer who pulled him over into just giving him a warning, especially when they checked and saw that his record, aside from the aforementioned few tickets, was absolutely clean. Most of the time, though, he had his dragon senses, reflexes, and magical capabilities at his disposal even in human form, so there was never really an issue of getting into an accident or mishap if he was paying attention. If things got too bad (which they never had so far) he could simply levitate the entire car up above traffic and float away. It wouldn't have been his first choice because it would have raised a lot of questions he'd rather not answer, but it was better than hurting someone due to his recklessness.

Kestrel, though, had insisted on teaching him to drive like a human. She'd taught him all sorts of high-speed maneuvers like how to manage sideways drift, throttle steering, the infamous bootlegger's reverse, the proper lines to use for cornering at speed on roads just like this one—it hadn't taken her long to do it, and these days he was better at it than she was, but the lessons had given him invaluable experience that it would have taken him much more time and much more trial and error to learn on his own.

He was using all those skills now, and the irony of the fact that he was using them to help the very person who had taught them to him was not lost on him. The tires screamed and chattered as he threw the car into another curve and realized halfway through that its radius decreased significantly on the other side—he fought with the steering wheel, forcing the car to turn sharper, forcing it not to drift into the opposite lane, then mashed the accelerator when it was pointed right. The car powered

out of the curve with a protesting roar and continued up the mountainside.

He had no idea how long this road went on. It seemed to be taking its time wending its way upward, most of it on a relatively gentle grade that drifted back and forth like a meandering traveler who had no particular need to reach a destination in a hurry. The night was moonless so there was no way for Gabriel to get any reading for how high the mountain might be. There were no lights on the road, so his own headlights were still the only illumination. He hadn't seen another car in several minutes.

He hit a straightaway and increased speed, still gripping the steering wheel tightly. He could make up for a bit of lost time here if he managed it right—*just have to make sure I see the next curve before I'm on it*—

Something darted out into the road and stopped in his lane, staring with wide, terrified eyes at the oncoming headlights. Gabriel barely had time for it to register in his mind before he was upon it. He jerked the wheel sideways and the car responded, shooting into the other lane as he tried to get around the obstacle—it was a deer, frozen in terror and unable to move—before it found its feet again and finished its mad dash across the road. He had one crazy thought: *Where would it go? That's a sheer granite wall!* just before the car sideswiped the side of the mountain. An ugly *screech* of metal on rock broke the silence—the car continued to scrape along the mountainside for another second, jerking Gabriel in his seat, and then he got it back into the lane, hoping desperately that the only damage he'd done had been cosmetic. He got back over into his own lane and went on, finally allowing himself to breathe normally again. He could feel little beads of sweat forming on his forehead and brushed them angrily away, swiping his hair out of



his eyes. His hands were sweating too, and his heart was pounding in his chest. *How much longer? It can't be far now...how high is this mountain?*

He saw the glow around the next corner. It was still a fair distance off, but it was unmistakable against the blackness of the sky and the slightly darker bulk of the trees: a dim orange glow somewhere up ahead. *Juliana?* Gabriel thought wildly, his first thought that the explosives had gone off, that he had been too late. Quickly, though, he realized that could not be the case – he certainly would have heard something if the cabin had exploded, and the only sounds he was hearing were still the rumble of the engine and the rasp of his own breathing. *So what is that glow?*

He kept driving, keeping it in sight as he went. As he drew closer to it, it got somewhat brighter – it was clearly on or near the road. *Something else to stop me? You're not going to stop me,* he thought angrily at the Horror. *I'm going to get to her if I have to run up there. Don't try it –*

He came around another corner and into another straightaway, this one heading upward at a slightly higher grade than the rest of the road. He gasped – the glow was just ahead, at the end of the straightaway as the road curved sharply off again. “No...” he whispered, his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

It wasn't Kestrel. It wasn't the cabin.

It was a school bus.

He could see it on the hillside on the inside part of the curve, illuminated by the wicked orange glow of the fire that was licking up from it and the trees around it. It was on its side, its long yellow bulk pointed downward, hanging precariously up against two trees. Even from here Gabriel could see figures moving, both outside on the hillside and inside, pressed against the windows. He couldn't hear their screams from this distance, of course,

but the way their hands were pressed up against the glass he could tell that they were trapped inside. "No..." he whispered again.

*It's a trick, part of his mind told him. It's that thing trying to distract you from your task. Just drive on by.*

*But what if it isn't?*

*It has to be. This is the Netherworlds. They can't be real –*

*But what if they are? The children in Stefan's sacrifice were real – their bodies were back on the material plane – they truly died when they were killed here –*

*You can't stop! If you stop then Juliana will die! Just go on! You can come back to check on them after you –*

The mental conversation with himself had taken the space of only a couple of seconds, and in that time the car had drawn up closer to the flaming, smoking bus. He could smell the smoke now, mingled with diesel fumes.

A scream split the night, its high-pitched terror rising above the roar of the car's engine.

One of the trees gave way and the bus slid a little further down the hillside with a great screech of metal, fetching up against another small copse of trees a few meters down. More screams joined the first.

*Go on! It's a trick! It wants this!*

He was so close now that he could make out the individual forms of the children pressed against the bus' windows.

*Look! There isn't even a place for you to pull off – no shoulder –*

Gritting his teeth, he growled in a very dragonlike fashion and wrenched the wheel to the side, pulling the car as far off the road as he could. The tires on the passenger side crunched and slid in the dirt and gravel. He skidded to a stop, shut off the car, and flung the door open.

Outside the car all the sounds and smells of the wreck were magnified immensely. The air was acrid, choked

with gray smoke, the chill of the night tempered slightly by the heat of the flames that were licking around the bus. The sounds of the children's screams tore at Gabriel's heart. Without a second thought he vaulted over the railing and went skidding and sliding down toward the bus.

The smell was even worse down here. Smoke mingled with burning rubber, oil, and the mercifully faint stench of charred flesh. Gabriel used a tree to stop his forward momentum a few meters to one side of the bus and surveyed the scene quickly.

The bus was indeed on its side, crumpled and broken but mostly intact. The back end was on fire, but most of the flames were coming not from the bus but from the trees around it. *That's one good sign*, Gabriel thought grimly. It was difficult with all the smoke swirling around to see how many children were still inside the bus, but he knew there were at least a few. Others were outside, some running around crying hysterically, some standing, stunned, a few meters away, some lying on the ground. There was no sign of an adult.

"Help us! Please!"

The voice came from Gabriel's right. He turned quickly to see a boy who looked to be about ten years old, wearing a smoke-stained T-shirt and charred jeans, struggling up the hill. Gabriel hurried down to meet him.

"Please, mister," the boy begged, "help us!"

Gabriel nodded. He studied the boy for a moment and determined that he looked as if he were holding up reasonably well under the circumstances. "How many children?" he asked. His voice was clipped, almost military—the kind of tone Kestrel used to get her point across on runs. No time for gentleness now.

The boy seemed to understand. He took a deep breath, pulled himself together, and pointed at the bus.

"There were about twenty all together. And Mr. Brooks. I think he's still inside the bus with some of the kids."

"How did you get out?"

"We crawled out one of the windows, but there's fire there now. It's not safe."

Another child was approaching, a girl this time, about the same age as the boy. She was limping slightly, steadying herself by gripping a stout stick. Her face was smudged with soot; the soot mingled with blood from a small gash on her forehead.

"All right," Gabriel said, looking around the area again. "I'll help you, but I don't know who else might be coming. We might be on our own. Can you help?"

The two children nodded solemnly. "Yeah," said the boy.

"Just tell us what to do," the girl added. She sounded even more together than the boy did.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Try to gather everyone together in one place, well away from the bus. I'm going to start trying to get the children and Mr. Brooks out of the bus. What are your names?"

"Jim," said the boy.

"Amy," said the girl.

Gabriel nodded. "I'm Gabriel. Are either of you hurt?"

They both shook their heads. "Not bad," Amy added.

"All right. Get started. Don't move anyone who's badly hurt unless they're in danger of being burned. Have anyone else who isn't injured help you. Don't get too close to the bus, though—I'll do that. Understand?"

Again the two children nodded and then they hurried off.

Gabriel looked at the bus. The fire hadn't gotten much worse in the bus itself, but more trees were catching fire. He could see the flames licking further up the trunks of some of the tall trees and realized that when the fire

reached the branches they could drop down onto the bus. He had to hurry.

This wasn't going to be easy. If only he had his dragon powers back, or even magic, he could have made short work of this rescue in no time. No point in dwelling on that, though—he didn't even have Kestrel's enhanced strength and cybered reflexes. He was just a human with human abilities—but he had to do this. There wasn't any other option.

Reaching the bus, he hurried around the other side, hoping to find an emergency exit hatch on the roof. There was no such thing—he'd have to do this the hard way. Returning to the near side, he looked around for a place to climb. The undercarriage was facing him, and he knew it would be hot—he could feel the heat radiating from it even from a couple of meters away. He couldn't climb the roof side, though, and the huge windshield, surprisingly, was still intact. That meant it was probably made of some sort of reinforced glass or plastic that wouldn't be easy for him to break.

That left the undercarriage, hot or not. Gabriel slid his hands down inside the sleeves of his leather jacket, then gripped a couple of the protruding bits of metal and began climbing. He could feel the heat through the leather, but at least it was some protection. If he hurried, he could get to the top before he burned his hands.

He was grateful now as he had never been before that the human form he had chosen was in top physical condition. It only took a few seconds for him to scramble to the top of the bus; aside from singeing his knee a little as he reached the top and clambered over the edge, he made it without injury. He paused a moment to inspect the situation.

The fire was at the other end of the bus. *Away from the engine – good.* At the moment it was mostly burning the

trees nearby, but one of the tires had caught fire and was now sending stinking black smoke upward to join the rest. Gabriel spared a brief thought to wonder if anyone else was going to come, but even as he did, he knew they would not. He thought again of Kestrel and how much time it would take to get all the remaining children out of the bus, then shook his head angrily. There was no time for such thoughts—he had made the decision to help, and he couldn't abandon them now.

He heard screams coming from below him. The children who were still mobile had spotted him and moved toward him, their cries muffled against the crackle of the flames. Looking at the windows, he saw that that they only opened halfway, and the resultant opening wouldn't be big enough to get any but the tiniest child through. The emergency exit was in the back—that was out of the question with all the flames concentrated in that area. There was another problem to consider too: the bus' fuel tank, which was halfway down the undercarriage, wasn't in any danger yet but it could be soon. *Diesel burns more slowly than gasoline, but it will still complicate things if the fire reaches it.*

His gaze fell on the front doors. They were closed; crouching, he could just make out an adult-sized form slumped against the far side of the driver's seat. *Mr. Brooks. No help there.*

"Help!" cried a voice very near. He looked down and saw a girl, wide-eyed with fear, pressing her hands against the window directly below his feet. "Get us out! Please!"

"Can you get the door open?" he called back to her, pointing toward the front of the bus.

It took her a moment to catch on, but then she moved forward. She looked around wildly, then up at Gabriel again.

"The control is there by the gear shift!" he called, pointing again. "Just pull on it!" He had already spotted the fact that the doors opened manually by means of a lever arm connected to a handle near the driver's seat. He hoped the mechanism was still functional; if it had been bent in the crash the children might not have the strength to get the door open.

Precious seconds ticked away while the girl struggled to locate the handle in the smoky cabin and Gabriel struggled to remain calm as he tried to point it out to her. When her hand closed on it, he called, "All right, you've got it! Now pull!"

She grabbed it with both hands and pulled as hard as she could.

The door didn't budge.

Gabriel let his breath out slowly as the girl looked up at him with desperation in her eyes. He crouched down closer to the window. "Is anyone else awake in there?"

"I—I think so." The girl was fighting not to give into her own terror.

"Get them up front with you if they can move—have them help you pull. I'll try to push the doors from the outside."

She nodded and disappeared back into the cabin. Gabriel waited with growing fear and impatience; he was about to try to kick in one of the windows when the girl reappeared, this time trailed by another girl and a boy. Both were smoky, bleeding, sweating, and frightened. The first girl looked up as if expecting that Gabriel wouldn't be there anymore and seemed almost surprised to see that he still was. "Okay," she called.

"All right—everyone grab the lever and pull as hard as you can." He waited for them to get into position, then called, "Ready? One—two—three—pull!"

The children wrenched backward, holding fast to the lever. Gabriel gripped the crack between the two doors, forcing his fingers between the rubber seals and shoving inward. For a moment he was afraid that it still wouldn't work, that the lever arm had been twisted in the crash, but then the doors gave way and swung in. He was thrown forward and almost pitched into the opening before catching his balance painfully against one side of the door. He paused a moment to catch his breath, then smiled down at the children. "Good job! Now let's get you out of here."

He moved around the other side of the door and crouched there, reaching his arm down. "Take my hand and I'll pull you up. One at a time."

The children did as they were told and after a few moments all three of them were sitting on the upper side of the bus. They glanced nervously at the fire and stayed close to Gabriel.

"How many more are inside?" Gabriel asked the first girl, hoping that these three were the last except for Mr. Brooks.

She paused to think. "Four, I think," she said. "They're hurt. And Mr. Brooks too." She looked up at him, tears forming in her eyes. "Are they gonna die?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. I'll get them out." He thought about lowering these three down the front of the bus where they wouldn't risk being burned on the hot undercarriage, but then changed his mind. "Can some of you stay up here for a few minutes and help me pull them out? It will be faster that way."

The kids looked scared but nodded. "Okay," said the boy with another glance at the flames. It was getting harder to see now, with all the smoke in the air.



"It won't be long now," Gabriel assured them. "I'll have you out before you know it." *I hope.* Gripping the edges of the door, he dropped down into the bus.

The air was worse in here: the smoke had settled in and swirled around, obstructing visibility. Gabriel coughed; dropping low to try to get under the smoke he crawled toward the back of the bus. He was grateful for the fact that so far all the smoke was coming from burning trees and the single tire; at least none of the bus' interior had caught fire yet and turned the smoke into toxic fumes.

The closer he got to the back, the hotter it became. The flames hadn't reached the inside of the bus yet but their influence was certainly there: he could feel the temperature rising the farther up the narrow aisleway he went. Sweat ran down his face, crawled down his back, and stuck his shirt to his chest. "Can anyone hear me?" he called loudly, fighting another coughing fit. Because the bus was pointed downward, he was inching his way up a respectable incline; he knew that if any children remained in the back it would be because they were stuck against the seats or wedged in the aisle, and probably either injured or unconscious. It was too hot back there to remain voluntarily.

He was about to call again when he heard a moan. He stopped, closing his eyes, trying to focus on the sound. After a moment it came again: a soft little whimper up a bit higher and off to his left. He grabbed one of the seat supports and pulled himself up.

A boy lay on the floor, shoved up against the back of what had been the seat in front of him. He was curled up as tightly as he could manage in the cramped space, moaning in pain. Gabriel could see that the side of his face was covered with blood and his uppermost arm was bent

at a strange angle. "Can you hear me?" he called, his voice gentle but insistent.

The boy's head moved slightly; his eyes, their whites stark against his blood- and soot-smeared face, regarded Gabriel with fear. "It hurts..." he mumbled. Tears ran down his cheeks, cutting channels through the dried blood.

Gabriel gritted his teeth. If he still had his dragon powers, he could have healed the boy in an instant. *Never mind that. Just get him out.* "I know it hurts," he said softly. "I'm going to get you out of here, but you'll need to help me. Can you do that?"

"Wh—what...do I...do?" The fear was still in the boy's eyes, but it was giving way to a faint hope that hadn't been there before.

""You don't have to do anything. Just try to be calm. It's probably going to hurt, but I'll be as gentle as I can. We have to get you out of this bus."

The boy nodded. "Yeah...it's...getting smoky..." He coughed, then grimaced as the coughing jostled his broken arm.

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment, frustrated at his inability to act and wishing he could do something else to help the child. "All right..." he said at last. "I'm going to try to lift you up. If your legs aren't hurt, try to shove against the wall so I can slide you out of there."

The boy did as he was told, and a few painful moments later, Gabriel had him out of his wedged position and into the area where the windows had been, which now ran along the left side of the floor. He considered his options, looking down the steep incline that led to the front of the bus. There was a space of about eight inches between the top of the seat and the bottom of the window; the area looked relatively smooth. "I think

I'm going to have to slide you down to the front," he said at last. "Carrying is too risky. We'll go slow, all right?"

Again the boy nodded. Gabriel was afraid he might be in shock, but there wasn't anything he could do about that right now. With a bit of careful maneuvering he got the boy's feet pointed down toward the front of the bus and then, holding him by his good arm, gently lowered him downward. It seemed to take forever. Gabriel was acutely aware of the time ticking away, every minute bringing Kestrel closer to the explosion. He forced the thoughts away and went on.

He left the boy at the front of the bus, deciding not to try to hand him up until he had all of them ready to go. The front was in no current danger, but the back was heating up fast. Looking up at the scared faces of his three helpers, still waiting for him on the roof, he forced a smile. "Everything will be fine," he told them. "I'm going back for someone else."

They nodded; it was hard to tell if they had any faith in his optimism.

By the time he got the second child out, the smoke in the back of the bus was getting thick. He found a child's water bottle among the scattered backpacks and bookbags and, using the water to drench a piece torn from the bottom of his shirt, he tied the piece around his nose and mouth. It didn't help much; he was coughing almost constantly now, and his eyes stung.

The second child was in similar condition to the first except instead of a broken arm, she had a broken leg. She too was bloody from several cuts and gashes. Gabriel gathered her up and prepared to do the same lowering maneuver again, taking a look around to see if he could spot any other children before he left. Supposedly there were two more back here.

He spotted one of them just as he was about to give up. He was clearly dead, his head lolling at an odd angle on his broken neck. Gabriel bowed his head for a moment and sighed, then made himself go on. This child in his arms was depending on him to get her out of here. He couldn't help the other one.

Reaching the front again with the girl, he discovered that one of his helpers had climbed down inside the bus. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, his voice sounding husky and rough to his ears. "I told you to wait on the roof. You could get hurt in here."

The boy coughed before answering. "The trees—the fire's closing in—" he got out. "We need to hurry. You'll be—trapped in here if you wait much longer."

If Gabriel was the type to curse, he would have done so. As it was he just took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and nodded. "I've got one more back there," he said, choosing not to elaborate about the dead boy he'd found. "Go back up and be ready with the others to help me pull people out of here."

"Right." The boy nodded and clambered back up on top of one of the seats, then pulled himself through the hole. A moment later his face joined the other two peering downward.

Gabriel paused a moment to catch his breath—the air was definitely better at this end of the bus. While he did so, he checked Mr. Brooks' pulse and discovered that he didn't have one. He rolled the bus driver over enough to see that he too was dead, probably from slamming his head into something hard when the bus had crashed into the trees. Gabriel felt the briefest stab of something like relief—*don't have to get him out of here—that means one more and I can get to Juliana*—and then immediate guilt about it. If this was indeed a real human being and not just some Enemy trick, the loss of this man's life was every bit as

much a tragedy as the loss of Kestrel's would be. Gabriel was having a bit of trouble seeing it that way at the moment, but he knew it was true.

The climb up the aisle was harder this time. He was weakening—he could already feel the strength ebbing from his arms and legs, and his mental processes were slowing down. *It would be so easy to stop now*, a little voice said in his mind, and he recognized the voice as some corner of his own consciousness. *The other child is probably dead – no one could survive back there in that heat for so long. Don't get yourself and Juliana killed trying to save a dead child...*

He shook his head angrily. "One more," he muttered under his breath. "Only one more. Not long now." Grabbing the frame of one of the seats, he pulled himself painfully upward. *One seat at a time. Don't think about the rest of it. Just get there and do what you have to do.*

One seat. Another. A third. They all started to blend together in his mind, filtered through the dark gray haze that hung in the air, that filled his throat and clouded his vision. *One more.*

He was there. The light of the fire illuminated the rear of the bus more brightly than before; impatiently he swiped his wrist across his forehead to get rid of the sweat that was now pouring down his face. "Can you hear me?" he croaked, hoping it was loud enough carry. "Is anyone still back here?"

A scream sounded from the front of the bus, and scarcely a second later something heavy crashed down onto the rear. A sudden flare of orange light pierced the night as the bus shuddered and rocked violently, throwing Gabriel against the hard metal edge of one of the last rows of seats. He felt his head smack into something unyielding and struggled to remain conscious as his vision swam and pain threatened to engulf him.

He lay still for a moment, his hands knotted around one of the seat supports in case the bus moved again. When it did not, he ventured a look upward. What he saw made him stiffen.

One of the trees, still burning, had fallen onto the top of the bus. It hadn't been large enough to crush the heavy metal frame, but even through the smoke Gabriel couldn't miss the massive dent that marked its landing point. The trunk and branches, alive with fire, crackled above, dropping charred bits of leaf and bark down through the half-open windows.

*I have to hurry. If that thing sets the inside on fire –* He struggled up, fighting pain and nausea; it felt like someone had split the side of his head with an axe. Was that sweat or blood running down the side of his face? He didn't know and it was probably better if he kept it that way. "Is anyone here?" he called again, then dissolved into a coughing fit, lowering his head down onto his arms as his body was racked spasmodically.

He felt something on his hand.

Opening his eyes, he stared down and could barely believe what he saw: a small hand was covering his own. As he watched, the hand closed briefly and then opened again.

*The child is alive!* With a renewed sense of purpose Gabriel forced himself up and forward. She was there on the floor, huddled up like the others had been, but watching him with large scared eyes. Her hand closed on his again. He reversed the grip and gently squeezed it, smiling.

"Hi," said the girl. She had brown curly hair and a pixieish, freckled face. Her eyes were red-rimmed from smoke and crying.

"Hi," he whispered back.

"Did you come to get me?"

The bus shuddered slightly again, and the motion was mirrored by the little girl's body. "I did," Gabriel told her. "Are you hurt?"

"I hit my head..."

"Me too," he told her, smiling. "But we have to get out of here. Will you come with me?"

"Are we gonna die?" Her voice was weak but steady.

"No. Not if I can help it." He held out his hands to her and she reached up to take them readily, allowing him to fold her into his arms. "Ready?"

She nodded solemnly. "You're bleeding."

There was the answer to *that* question. "It's all right. I'll be fine once we get out of here." He wondered why he wasn't frightening the child with the horror-movie rasp that was all that was left of his voice. "Just lean on my shoulder and we'll go straight out."

The girl did as she was told, snuggling into the soft leather of Gabriel's jacket as he shifted her to a one-armed grip and used his other hand to hold onto the seats to lower them down. He could barely see through the smoke any longer, but he did see that glowing bits of the tree were beginning to drop down through the windows in the place where they had just been. So far none of had caught the flammable seat cushions, but it would be only a matter of time before the bus was engulfed.

He reached the front with the girl. The two children he had already rescued were huddled up against the front end; the boy with the head wound and the broken arm looked unconscious. Mr. Brooks had been jostled out of his seat by the impact of the tree and was now sprawled across the floor. Gabriel looked upward and saw that his three helpers were still there, looking more scared than usual.

"We didn't think you were coming," one of the girls said. "We thought the smoke got you." Her voice shook.

"Are you all right up there?" Gabriel called, coughing. His legs felt like they were made of softening rubber, his head as if it were full of cotton.

"Yeah," said the boy. "Good thing we were layin' down or we mighta fell off." He glanced down at the tree and then back at Gabriel.

"Did you get everybody?" the second girl asked.

Gabriel nodded. Again, he didn't think this was the time to tell them about what he'd found in the back. "I'm going to start hoisting these three up. You pull them out and then wait for me."

With the four of them working together, the operation did not take long. In less than ten minutes they had all three of the children lying on the top part of the bus, watched over anxiously by the three helpers. Gabriel had climbed on the back of one of the seats and was preparing to pull himself up through the hole when one of the girls asked, "What about Mr. Brooks?"

Gabriel shook his head, wishing he didn't have to tell them. "He's gone," he said gently. He didn't look at the tears that sprang to the girl's eyes as he pulled himself through.

Once on top, he took a moment to assess the situation. The bus had shifted position somewhat and was now held from descending further down the mountainside by a single tree. At the rear, several more trees had caught fire—Gabriel knew that it was only a matter of time before they too fell and threatened the bus' position. He looked at the children. "I'm going to lower you down over the roof side," he told his three helpers. "The undercarriage is too hot—someone could be burned. I'll lower you down first and then you can help steady the injured ones."

The three children nodded and got into position. It wasn't a long drop, so it wasn't hard for Gabriel to hand



them down one at a time. Fortunately none of them weighed much: he didn't think his strength was up to lifting adults now, and his head felt woozier than ever from where he'd hit it.

After the three were down, it was a fairly simple (if painful) matter to lower the injured children into their waiting arms. That left Gabriel on top of the bus alone. "Back up," he called. "I'm coming—"

This time there was no scream to herald the falling of another tree. The crash came unexpectedly, slamming into the back of the bus a few feet forward of where the last one had hit. The bus rocked and shuddered again—a loud slow *crack* sounded from the front end. Gabriel fought to maintain his balance and not to be pitched off the shaking bus.

"The tree's breaking!" screamed one of the children from down below. "Jump!"

Gabriel spared a quick glance forward and saw what the child meant: the slow *crack* was coming from the single tree that held the bus in place. The extra stress placed on it by the bus' movement was causing it to split, leaning precariously forward as the bus began its slow but quickening crawl toward the edge.

Gabriel jumped. Just as he did so, the bus pitched sideways again and then forward, throwing off his balance. He landed hard, slamming against a tree; pain exploded in his arm and his head burned like it too was on fire. Behind him, he was just able to get a glimpse of the bus as it slid forward and plummeted over the edge. A series of dull *thuds* followed by a *whump* marked its unseen passage down to the bottom of the mountain.

For a moment he just lay there, his body racked by pain, his thought processes hazy. Then he heard voices and someone was shaking him. "Gabriel! Are you okay? Please wake up!"

He forced his eyes open and looked up at the three blurred faces surrounding him. After a few seconds both his vision and his mind cleared enough to identify his three helpers. There was something he wanted to remember. Something—

*Juliana!*

He sat upright quickly—too quickly. The kids caught him as he fell over again. “Stay down,” one of the girls told him urgently. “You hurt yourself when you jumped.”

Gabriel shook his head and got up again, this time more slowly, holding his arm tight against his body. He thought it was probably broken. “Can’t,” he rasped, coughing. “Must—go.” He looked around the scene: the bus was gone now, of course, leaving the hillside littered with pieces of broken trees, prone bodies, and little knots of flame. The smoke and the darkness gave the scene an eerie, unworldly quality.

“Go? You mean—leave us here?” The boy sounded very scared. “Alone? With the fire?”

Gabriel closed his eyes briefly. “I’ll be back,” he told them. “I have to go—a friend is in danger. I’ll—get her and them come back to help you.” Something occurred to him. “How—how far is it to the top of this mountain?”

“The top?” The boy tilted his head quizzically. “Is that where you want to go?”

Gabriel nodded wearily. “How—far up the road is it?”

The boy shook his head. “It isn’t. You can’t get to the top on this road. It’s only a couple miles from here, but about a mile up there’s a bridge, and it’s out.”

No... Gabriel stared at the boy, fighting shock and despair. “There’s—no way to get there?” *Juliana...no...*

“Not on the road. There’s a shortcut about half a mile back down—it’s hard to see and it’s just a dirt road, but it goes down through the valley and back up. For the fire

trucks and stuff." He took a deep breath. "Want me to show you?"

Gabriel nodded quickly, already trying to get up. "Please. Yes."

The boy considered it, then he too nodded. "Okay. But you gotta come back here when you get your friend."

"I will."

The two girls watched solemnly as the boy grabbed Gabriel's good arm and helped him to his feet. "Don't take long," one of the girls said. "Please..."

"Not—long," Gabriel promised, already heading toward the incline.

"You sure you can drive like that?" the boy asked as the two of them made it up over the edge and back onto the road.

"No choice." The relatively cleaner air up here was clearing Gabriel's head, but he still felt terrible. He hoped he could manage to get the car to the cabin before it was too late.

The boy's eyes widened when he saw the car. "Wow..." he said under his breath. "That's a beauty."

Gabriel was barely listening now. Now that the children were (at least relatively) safe, his focus was entirely on getting to the top of the mountain.

The drive was hellish. His arm was indeed broken, and it was his shift arm, which meant that every time he had to shift gears a bolt of agony shot up his arm and nearly doubled him over. The boy watched him with concern but said little.

It was a good thing Gabriel had taken the boy with him, though, because when he saw the entrance to the dirt road he knew that he would not have found it on his own. Overgrown with underbrush and the hanging limbs of trees, its opening was nearly invisible from the road. As it was, he had to trust the boy that it was there when he

pointed the car's nose into what looked like a clump of trees and went slowly forward. Past the trees the entrance gave way to a narrow, rutted dirt road that snaked forward as far as the car's headlights could see.

It was slow and painful going. The black sports car was not designed for roads like this and its low undercarriage kept hanging up on ruts and rocks and tree roots. Gabriel was clearly impatient as he was forced to move the car forward at a creep when all he wanted to do was floor it and just *get* there.

"It's not far now," the boy told him. "Just a mile or so." They were heading upward now after having descended for a little more than a mile.

Gabriel nodded and kept driving. At one point it occurred to his befogged brain to ask what the school bus had been doing up here in the first place, but he decided that it wasn't really important. All that was important was driving and concentrating and staying conscious long enough to rescue Juliana.

After what seemed like forever the car punched through another clump of underbrush and there ahead of them was the main road, looking pristine and utterly empty. "This is it," the boy told him. "The top's just ahead."

The cabin was right where it was supposed to be, a small dark form visible at the top just off the road. "Stay here," Gabriel told the boy, shoving open the car's gullwing door and painfully struggling out of the seat. Without waiting to see if his order was followed, he staggered up toward the door of the cabin. He imagined that he could almost hear the ticking of the explosives in his mind, and wondered if the Enemy would wait until he was inside and then blow the place up. His body was barely responding to commands now—he had to fight to

keep from tripping as he made his way to the door. "Hold on, Juliana," he whispered. "I've got you —"

He flung the door open, not knowing what he expected to see. He was almost surprised when the scene inside was exactly what it was supposed to be: the explosives, the massive wooden beam, the manacles, and —

"Juliana!"

Pain not gone but momentarily forgotten, Gabriel moved swiftly across the room to where Kestrel lay, shackled to the wooden beam. He dropped to his knees next to her. Her eyes were closed. Was she —?

She stirred and looked up. At the sight of him she smiled weakly. "Gabriel!" Her expression turned immediately to one of urgency. "We have to get out of here. It's —"

"I know." He glanced at the manacles: they were stout metal and looked very solid. They also looked locked. "Do you know where the key is?"

"Over there, on the table." She indicated the spot with a head movement. "Hurry, Gabriel. That pile of explosives over there has been making funny noises."

Gabriel hurried over, snatched up the keys, and was back at her side in only a few seconds. He forced his hands not to shake as he fumbled to slip the key into the lock one-handed, not wanting to trust his broken arm. There were several keys and he had to try four before he got the right one. The cuff sprang open.

Kestrel was on her feet in an instant, helping Gabriel back up. "Come on," she urged. "You're hurt. Let's get out of here and I'll fix that arm for you." She motioned him ahead of her toward the door.

Gabriel headed back for the door as quickly as he could move. Reaching the doorway (he had never closed the door when he'd come running inside) he looked out

and saw that the boy who had been riding with him had not in fact followed his orders to remain in the car and was now coming up the walkway toward him. Gabriel got only a second to register the look of shock on the boy's face before something hit him hard from the back, slashing through his jacket. He felt white-hot pain lance through him as first the jacket and then the flesh of his back was torn.

Staggering forward, he caught himself with his good arm up against the doorframe and spun. What he saw made him stiffen.

Whatever the thing was that he had rescued, it was not Kestrel. It still had her shape and still wore her clothes, but an insane green light burned in its roiling eyes and its fingers were tipped with long, wicked-looking claws to match the fangs in its enlarged mouth. The claws dripped with blood; the mouth was open in a sickening smile.

It lunged, claws extended.

Gabriel reacted before he thought. Diving forward, he grabbed the door and slammed it shut only an instant before the thing pounded into it. He heard it screaming, felt its strength as it tried to shove the door back open. His back was on fire: hot sticky blood soaked his jacket and shirt. His vision was blurring. He couldn't hold the door for long...

"Here! Use this!"

He turned. The boy was behind him, holding a hefty tree branch about two inches in diameter and three feet long.

Gabriel didn't ask questions. He snatched the limb from the boy and shoved it through the door-pull so it stuck out past the frame, effectively jamming the door shut. It rattled under his hand as the creature flung itself

against the inside once more. "Come on!" he called to the boy. "Run! Back to the car!"

The boy didn't have to be invited twice. Turning, he took off running, awkwardly but quickly, back toward the black sports car.

Gabriel followed more slowly. The blood loss, coupled with the edges of shock finally catching up with him from the broken arm and the head wound, were making him clumsy. He staggered down the path toward the car, very much aware of the rattling and screaming still going on behind him.

He had made it about halfway back to the car when the explosion tore through the house. He felt his body leave the ground, sailing through the air in a graceful arc that felt to his fuzzed perceptions like he was flying.

He was unconscious before he hit the ground, and he did not see the scene fade to nothingness around him.

## 48.

In the cage, the team was losing hope.

They remained in their seated positions, barely reacting as Gabriel faded away, sent off to his ordeal. It wasn't that they didn't care, but simply the knowledge that, no matter how much they *did* care, it would have no effect on the outcome of the situation.

Their minds were numbed by shock and by the effects of their injuries. The four of them were slumped in various positions around the cage, too restless to take comfort from physical closeness.

None of them paid any attention to the Horror, and for the moment it was returning the favor. Its attention was fixed on the floating TV screen, watching as Gabriel made his way out of the cabin, found the car, and went roaring up the driveway toward the road. It chuckled to itself and appeared to be pleased about something.

In the farthest corner of the cage, Ocelot didn't even look up. His chest and leg burned where the zombie-things had raked him with their poisoned claws; he wasn't sure which was worse—the burning in his body or the burning of despair and hopelessness in his mind. He kept replaying the scene back at the installation, watching helplessly as the bullets tore into Winterhawk, as he screamed and fell, as the wall came plunging down onto his legs. He kept seeing 'Hawk's eyes as the mage ordered them to go on without him. *What the hell am I kidding? What are any of us kidding? This thing is gonna kill us one by one and get its rocks off watching us suffer. That's all it's here for.* He forced himself to open his eyes and concentrate on the TV screen, hoping it would drive the visions away. When it did not, he focused instead on the Horror, watching it as it strutted and chuckled and gained strength from Gabriel's desperation. Ocelot felt his anger



growing, a red core deep within him that bloomed steadily brighter, and he did nothing to curtail it. The anger fought the effects of the wounds, the poison, the despair. The anger gave him strength. *I'll kill that thing...just give me one chance and I'll kill it...*

Of the the others, only Joe and Kestrel were watching the screen. Kestrel, in fact, was riveted to it, oblivious to anything else around her including her own pain. Of the four she had taken the least of the injuries from the zombie claws—her shoulder and side burned, but neither of the wounds was deep. All that mattered to her now was that Gabriel complete this new task successfully and be returned to them. She too was angry—angry that the Horror would use a facsimile of her to goad her friend to faster action. She fixed her mind on sending the thought to Gabriel, wherever he was: *That isn't me. I'm still here. Don't let that thing deceive you.* She had no idea if she was getting through, but the act of concentration kept her focused for now, and the sight of Gabriel's plight on the screen temporarily drove away the other thing that was haunting her: the visions of Winterhawk's death.

Joe was the only one who was trying to do anything about his wounds. As he too watched the screen and willed Gabriel to succeed, he painfully ripped pieces of cloth from his shirt and attempted to tie up the bullet wound on his arm. It was tough going because his other arm was nearly useless from the hit it had taken when the barrier had slammed down upon it, but he was giving it his best shot. Perhaps he was only doing it to give himself something to do with his hands; perhaps he still had hope that they would prevail. Even he wasn't sure which it was.

'Wraith had withdrawn into himself. He sat pressed against one of the two far corners of the cage away from the TV screen, his head bowed until his chin rested on his

chest, his posture even in its slumped attitude managing to convey a near-military stiffness. His leg, where it had been grazed by one of the guards' bullets, had stopped bleeding on its own as had the zombie-slash on his upper arm; the pain and the burning were still there, but he barely felt them. The only movement of his body was a very slight, almost imperceptible rocking forward and backward.

Across the amphitheater, Stefan remained as he had been, chained and like the runners unable to do anything but watch. He too seemed very interested in the events on the screen, but there was a droop to his posture that had not been there prior to the runners' return from their ordeal. Occasionally he cast glances at them; none of the runners was looking at him, but if they had been, his sadness would have been clear. After only a few moments he returned his attention to the screen and became even more focused than Kestrel.

On the screen, the black car wound its way up the mountain, the roar of its powerful engine reduced to a rather unimpressive growl by the tiny speaker. Higher and higher it went, flung around bends and curves, the shifting beams of its headlights cutting eerie slices from the granite walls, the narrow strip of road, and the forbidding-looking forest of dark trees. Kestrel leaned forward a bit, drawn by the sight and unable to look away. "Come on..." she muttered.

She and Joe both flinched when the deer darted out on the road. They saw it before Gabriel did – apparently the Horror's sick little movie had a director of sorts, because the camera angle shifted to a view facing the oncoming car, showing the dark form as it broke the plane of the headlights' illumination. "No...Gabriel, look out!" The cry was pulled involuntarily from Kestrel, attracting the attention of both Ocelot and the Horror. She didn't notice.

She stiffened as the car swerved, sideswiping the mountainside with a shriek that carried all too well through the TV's speaker—in fact, it seemed to reverberate all around the amphitheater.

The Horror laughed as the scene shifted to the inside of the car, showing the look of fear and determination on Gabriel's face. "Thought I had him there!" it announced to nobody in particular. "Ah, well—soon enough, soon enough..."

The activity was enough to shift Ocelot's focus from the Horror back to the TV. He joined Kestrel and Joe in watching Gabriel get the car back in its lane and continue up the road. "Bastard..." he muttered under his breath.

They kept watching. The car picked up speed again as it hit a short straightaway, making up the time it had lost in the curves. Then, once again, the camera angle shifted. An orange glow appeared around the next curve, as yet invisible to the car. "What the hell is that...?" Ocelot muttered.

Kestrel didn't get a chance to answer before the black car came screaming around the corner. The view shifted to a reaction shot on Gabriel inside: his face showed determination tempered by confusion as he too spotted the glow.

The Horror was chuckling again.

It was only a few seconds before the glow resolved itself into the burning school bus hung up precariously on the hillside. The car slowed.

"Not much time..." the Horror said, its tone a nasty singsong. "Better get going, Dragonboy..."

Another reaction shot. Gabriel's eyes blazed, darting back and forth between the road and the bus. His thought process was clear: *should I stop and help them? Is it a trick? Or should I just keep going and save Kestrel?* The car slowed

slightly. Kestrel, Joe, Ocelot, and Stefan stared at the screen.

“No, you idiot—go *on!*”

Ocelot glanced over at the sound of the low mutterings from the Horror. His eyes widened. There was none of the malevolent amusement now: the thing looked *pissed*. Quietly, without turning his head more than a little, he watched the Horror while pretending to watch the screen.

Gabriel’s expression was angry and frustrated—they could all hear his growl as he wrenched the wheel to the left and pulled the car off the road in a spray of gravel. By the time the door flew open the anger was gone, replaced by resolve. He leaped over the guardrail and headed downward.

“No, you fool! Damn you—go *on!*”

Joe and Kestrel were still fixed on the scene on the TV and did not appear to hear the Horror mumbling under its breath. Ocelot, however, did. He gritted his teeth—watching it, he was rewarded with a very odd sight.

The Horror too was staring at the screen. Its fists were clenched, its body shaking with rage. As Ocelot watched, its shaking increased—it seemed almost as if it were trying to shake itself loose from something. In fact, for just a second—Ocelot wasn’t even sure he had really seen it—the thing appeared to lose its coherence. For the briefest of moments it was as if it were composed of hundreds, perhaps thousands of small black *things*—and then the vision faded and it was back to itself again.

Almost.

Except for its eyes.

As Gabriel worked his way down the mountainside trying to reach the bus, the Horror’s eyes remained in that odd fragmented state for a few more seconds. Then its

shaking ceased and its eyes, like the rest of it, returned to normal.

Ocelot quickly looked away, afraid that it would notice him watching it—and in doing so, he caught a glimpse of Stefan across the open expanse of red plain.

Stefan was looking at him.

Very intently.

As Ocelot met his eyes, the dragon almost imperceptibly indicated the Horror, then nodded once, slowly. Then his eyes closed and he bowed his head, stiffening as if in pain. He lowered his head to his forelegs and didn't look up again.

For the next several minutes the runners watched tensely as Gabriel fought smoke and fatigue and injury to rescue the children trapped inside the bus. The Horror was strangely silent now, watching but no longer commenting. Once it appeared as if it was considering doing something, but instead it remained where it was, several meters away from the cage, and kept watching. Stefan's head remained down and his eyes remained closed.

Gabriel had them all out now. The watching runners allowed themselves a bit of hope as he handed the last child safely down into the waiting arms of friends, but then stiffened as they saw the tree cracking and heard another child's scream of warning. When Gabriel lost his balance mid-jump and crashed to the ground, Kestrel leaped up, injuries forgotten, and gripped the bars of the cage. After a moment, Ocelot dragged himself up and joined her. Together they watched the children revive Gabriel, and their gazes met when the boy told him that he could not reach the top of the mountain on the road.

"That's it..." Ocelot whispered.

"What?" Kestrel returned her attention to the screen, where Gabriel and the boy were now heading back up the hillside toward the car.

"That's why it's pissed..." He was almost talking to himself.

"Who?"

"That thing. Didn't you see it? It got pissed when Gabriel decided to help the kids. It didn't want him to do that." Ocelot decided not to reveal anything about the strange sight he'd seen—not yet. He was afraid the Horror might be listening to them, although it appeared as intent on the onscreen drama as they were.

"I don't get it..." she began, but then light dawned. "Right..." she said slowly. "Because if he hadn't stopped to help the kids, he wouldn't have found out about the shortcut—"

"—and he'd have ended up at a wrecked bridge," Ocelot finished, nodding.

"So saving the kids—"

"—might've been what he needed to do to beat this bastard." Ocelot nodded back toward the screen. "It's not over yet, though..."

They watched the car creeping its way down the dirt track and then coming back out onto the main road. The cabin was visible up ahead.

"I'm not in there..." Kestrel whispered, trying to focus her mind again. "Gabriel, it's not me...I'm *here*..." Her hands tightened around the bars.

The car pulled to a screeching halt in front of the cabin. A moment later the door opened and Gabriel half-ran, half-staggered up the path to the door. The scene shifted to the inside of the cabin, where "Kestrel" waited, shackled to the big timber. Kestrel and Ocelot, but not Gabriel, saw her face, turned away from the door. The evil smile on it made their skin crawl.

The door flung open and Gabriel rushed in. "Kestrel" rearranged her features into an expression of fear and relief as she was "awakened" and rescued. "Don't do it, Gabriel," the real Kestrel urged from the cage. "Get out of there —"

They started out the door. "NO!" Kestrel yelled as her false double sliced her claws down Gabriel's back. "Get away from him, you —"

The Horror was smiling again. It stood only a couple of meters from the cage now, its head thrown back, its eyes half-closed, taking in the energy from Gabriel's physical pain and the emotional distress of the runners. Its expression turned to one of frustration again as Gabriel slammed the door in his attacker's face, shoved the tree limb into the door-pull, and made his escape.

As Gabriel faded from view along with the car, Kestrel finally let the adrenaline drain from her body and dropped back down to a seated position. After a moment, Ocelot joined her.

Gabriel reappeared not inside the cage but in front of the Horror. He swayed briefly and then slumped to the ground in a heap, breathing heavily.

The Horror stood over him, smiling. "Welcome back," it said, prodding him with its foot. "I must admit I'm surprised. I didn't expect you to risk your precious friend for a bunch of kids you weren't even sure were real. I'd like to say 'well done,' but really it's just going to make things harder for you in your next test."

Gabriel didn't answer. He remained on the ground; the only motion of his body was the rise and fall of his back as he breathed. His jacket was in bloodsoaked tatters where the false Kestrel had attacked him.

Inside the cage, Kestrel, Joe, and Ocelot watched him with concern. Even 'Wraith raised his head slightly and

fixed his odd gaze on the young man. All of them waited, unmoving, to see what would happen next. Stefan had not raised his head.

The elf-Horror looked down at Gabriel for a moment, then shook its head. "No, no, this won't do at all," it said. Gesturing, it summoned two large creatures, one on either side of the young man. At the Horror's command they grabbed him and pulled him to a standing position, holding him under his arms. His face went white from the pain but he managed to glare at the Horror. There was no sign of the soot that had covered his face and clothes from the scenario, but the left side of his face was covered with dried blood.

"Better," it said. "We need to have you awake and aware for this, because, you see, this is the time when you get to make a choice. It's a very important choice, and the way you decide will have a significant impact on the rest of our little tests here, so choose wisely."

It began to pace, walking in a circle around Gabriel and the two creatures who held him upright. "As you know—or at least you should, if you were listening to me—there are to be two tests for each team, you being one team and your friends here—" it indicated the caged runners—"being the other team. Well, now both teams have successfully completed one test each. That means you've both got one more to go." It seemed pleased to be sharing this bit of knowledge, as if Gabriel were not by himself bright enough to remember the details. "Yes?"

Gabriel did not answer, except to continue to glare at the Horror with barely controlled rage in his eyes. He struggled in the creatures' arms until he got his feet under him and shook free of their grips. They let him go; he swayed but remained upright.

The Horror didn't appear bothered by its prisoner's lack of response. "You'll also remember," it went on, "that



in order to succeed in a test, only one member of a team must survive it. If every member of a team fails, then not only that team but the other team and our unfortunate dragon here become—or in his case, remain—mine to do with as I wish. Remember that, Dragonboy?” When Gabriel still did not reply, it nodded. “So here’s the choice. Never let it be said that I’m not *sporting* and don’t give you every chance to be successful. That means I’m going to heal up one of the teams before the next test. All the way, good as new, ready to go.” It smiled rather evilly. “But only *one*. The other team will remain in its current state for its next test.” It clapped Gabriel on the shoulder of his injured arm, grinning when he winced. “And *you*, my boy, get to make the decision.”

In the cage, the runners stared at each other in shock. Kestrel jumped back to her feet and leaned forward, clutching at the bars. She yelled something, but Gabriel couldn’t hear it. He couldn’t hear anything from the area around the cage.

The Horror shook its head. “Oh, no. No help from the peanut gallery on this one, Dragonboy. Make your choice. You have ten seconds. If you don’t choose, then I’ll leave all of you the way you are and we’ll go on to the next test like that.”

Gabriel, teeth gritted, held the thing’s gaze. He could still feel the blood on his back, the dull ache in the side of his head, the pain throbbing at his broken arm. He looked over at the cage and saw the runners there: bleeding, weakened, despairing. Kestrel was still yelling at him but he could see the paleness of her face, the way her body shook with the poison from the zombie’s attacks. He looked at the conspicuous absence of one of their number. He looked at Stefan, who had now raised his head and was watching his brother intently. *They have already lost so*

*much...I must give them whatever chance I can. It is my fault they are here.*

He raised his head and once more met the Horror's eyes. When he spoke his voice was clear and unwavering. "I choose my friends."

The runners stiffened.

Stefan smiled.

For a brief moment something terrible flashed across the Horror's eyes. Once again they seemed to lose their coherence, once again its body shimmered, but it was over this time almost before it began. Clearly the Horror was not pleased with the decision. "So be it," it snapped. "By your foolish sense of loyalty you have probably doomed all of you to eternal torment, but it is your decision to make."

Turning away from Gabriel, it stalked over to the cage. "Looks like your little friend wants to prolong your suffering," it said, and gestured toward them. The gesture looked like an afterthought.

Immediately a bright explosion of pain flowered in each of their cores, sweeping away all thought save the agony of being burned from the inside out. They fell, writhing, to the floor of the cage, their screams echoing around the amphitheater. A haze of bright light surrounded them.

Gabriel made a lunge for the Horror but was brought up short by the sudden flareup of the nearly-forgotten scar on his side. He fell to his knees and by the time he was able to get back up again it was all over.

The bright light faded around the cage.

The runners were still there, picking themselves up off the floor with wary expressions. Ocelot, who had thrown himself into one of the far corners of the cage with his writhing, rose to his hands and knees and looked down at himself in amazement. The pain was gone. The zombie

claw slashes were gone. The fatigue had melted away like it had never been. Had the Horror done this? But –

His thought was interrupted by a yell from Joe. He could not make out what the troll was yelling – it sounded as if he were trying to say something coherent but had become tongue-tied in the process. Ocelot whirled around, fearing another threat –

– and overbalanced, falling hard on his butt, his jaw hanging open in shocked disbelief.

On the other side of the cage, another figure – one who had not been there a moment earlier – was slowly rising as if from unconsciousness.

“‘Hawk??’”

Ocelot leaped up so fast he almost overbalanced and fell again, but he didn’t care. He practically fell on top of the mage, grabbing him, pulling him up. “‘Hawk, is that you?’”

The other runners weren’t far behind him. They rushed over, staring down at the rising figure, hardly daring to hope.

The figure, for his part, didn’t appear to understand what all the fuss was about. He looked up at them, momentarily confused, and then raised to a seated position. “What – what’s going on?” he asked, his tone uncertain. If this was not Winterhawk, it was his perfect double. The appearance, the voice, the phrasing were all dead on.

Ocelot gripped him by the shoulders, nearly shaking him with his eagerness. “‘Hawk! How –’” His eyes narrowed as he inspected the mage more closely. He looked up at the others. “How do we know that sick fuck didn’t –”

“What happened?” ‘Wraith asked Winterhawk, ignoring Ocelot’s question. “Not dead.”

"Dead?" Winterhawk ran a hand back through his hair and looked more confused than ever. "Of course I'm not dead. What are you talking about?"

"We saw you die," Joe told him. "When the door came down. The machine gun fire—"

This was doing nothing to lessen the mage's perplexity. "What door? What machine gun? Have you lot all gone mad?" He glanced around his surroundings. "Did we win?"

Kestrel crouched next to him, casting a look over her shoulder at Gabriel and the Horror. "We saw you die. They killed you in there."

Winterhawk shook his head. "No, they didn't. Whatever you saw, it wasn't me. I was turning 'round to look down the hall and next thing I knew I disappeared and turned up in some dark room. I've been there ever since. I think I fell asleep at some point, after trying everything I could think of to get out."

"Enough!" the Horror called, grabbing Gabriel's good arm and dragging him closer to the cage. "This little reunion is all very touching, but we've got business." It turned back to Gabriel and studied him for a moment before speaking again. "So, Dragonboy, you've chosen like the pathetically honorable little soul that you are to heal your friends even though you knew they could win if only one of them survived. So be it." It took a step back. "Now, you'll see what a grave mistake you've made."

Laughing, it took another step back. As it did so, its form grew larger, taller, wider. No longer in the shape of the slender elf, its body took on a more horrific, muscular appearance, bristling with claws and teeth, its eyes roiling with madness and hatred. When the transformation was complete the thing was over four meters tall, its skin a mottled red-brown plated with lumps and bits of armor in many disgusting colors. In its right hand it held a long,

wicked looking spear. When it spoke again its voice was deep, guttural, like the sound of bones rasping against one another in the depths of some dark and loathsome cave. *"Now you will see your error, boy. And you will suffer. You see, I lied. There is no second contest. There is only the last. Your friends cannot help you. You will face me, and you will fall – and then all of you will belong to me. Especially you, my young friend – just as it has been my plan since the beginning."*

It raised its spear and advanced as inside the cage, the runners looked on in terror.

## 49.

Gabriel staggered backward as the thing approached him. He felt the adrenaline surging through his body, submerging the pain in his head, his arm, his side, driving off the exhaustion. None of it was gone—he could feel it all there, waiting to engulf him worse than ever when this was done—but for now it had to be a minor consideration.

This was it.

He had to win this fight or all would be lost.

The thing was advancing on him slowly, a sickening smile on its ugly, fang-filled face. It was like a cat toying with an injured mouse, knowing that the mouse had everything to lose and could not possibly prevail against its might. The thing could afford to wait.

Gabriel moved back again, matching speed with its advance, mentally kicking himself for losing sight of the fundamental truth—the Enemy were liars. They did things only to further their own ends. They could not be counted upon to keep their word, to honor their promises, or to remain true to the rules of any game they controlled. Still, though, even with this knowledge, Gabriel knew his decision would have remained the same. As long as he was still alive, still on his feet and able to move, he would fight. If it was possible to defeat this thing, he would do it.

He had to do it. There was too much riding on it. His friends and Stefan were depending on him now.

He stumbled a little as his foot hit a rock and threw himself forward to regain his balance. The Horror-thing watched and its smile broadened. It moved closer.

The runners were all standing up now, pressed against the side of the cage closest to the battle, watching

with unblinking eyes and tense bodies. "Bloody hell..." Winterhawk muttered. "He can't beat that thing. Not without his powers. Not injured —"

"He'll give it his best shot," Kestrel growled. "He's hurt but he's still got his mind."

Joe blew air through his teeth. "Damn it, I want to be out there fighting, not stuck in here like some zoo animal."

Ocelot's teeth were gritted. "Damn straight," he agreed. The confinement had already played hell with his mental state — the only reason he hadn't lost it completely was that the bars were open so he could see the outside. Not that there had been much to see up until now. He watched the Horror moving slowly in toward the much smaller Gabriel. "Too bad he ain't got a sling," he said almost to himself.

"Don't think it would help," Wraith replied in his usual monotone. His mood had brightened somewhat (not that anyone could tell) at the return of Winterhawk to their party. At least now he was talking.

"Couldn't hurt," Winterhawk muttered.

Ocelot watched for a few more moments. Across from them, Stefan was also observing the battle with great interest. He had tried once more to pull free of his chains, but with no more luck than he had had before. Failing that, he was now fixing a look of intense concentration on his brother. "Guys..." Ocelot said under his breath. He spoke slowly as if thinking through what he was saying before he gave it voice.

"Yeah?" Joe, next to him, replied in the same tone.

"Were you watching that thing when Gabriel told it to heal us instead of him?"

The troll gave him a perplexed look. "Huh?"

"I was," Kestrel said. "Why?"

"Did you see anything — I dunno — weird?"

"Like what?" Kestrel, like the others, searched her memories for anything out of the ordinary.

Ocelot took a deep breath. "Like—it fuzzed out for a second. Kinda—shook. Did you see it?"

"Yes." This time it was Wraith who answered. "Don't know what it means, though."

"Me neither." Ocelot watched the Horror advancing on Gabriel again as he spoke. "But—it did it once before. During Gabriel's test, when he decided to go after the school bus instead of straight to Kestrel. It was almost like—that thing was pissed at him for doing it, and it couldn't cope with it."

"Interesting..." Winterhawk mused. "Can you be more specific than *fuzzed out*?"

There was a long pause as Ocelot tried to recall the exact picture in his mind. "I don't know," he said at last. "It was only there for a second. It's body got fuzzy like it was shakin' itself apart. Then for a little longer it was the same sorta thing, but just in its eyes." He paused again. "The really weird thing was that after I saw it, Stefan was lookin' at me. He couldn't say anything, but he kinda glanced at the Horror and then nodded, like I'd just seen something important."

"But what's it mean?" Joe asked. "If it's important, it must mean something. There's got to be a way we can use it to help."

Ocelot shrugged. "I dunno. If you figure it out, tell me. I'm just reportin' what I saw."

Winterhawk sighed and leaned back against the bars. "If anyone's going to figure it out, they'd best be about it. I don't think Mr. Ugly out there is going to be drawing things out much longer."



Indeed, it appeared as if Winterhawk was right. In the center of the amphitheater the Horror-thing was already tiring of its cat-and-mouse game. *"You have no chance against me, Dragonboy,"* it boomed. *"How does it feel to know that?"*

Gabriel's only answer was to crouch quickly, snatch up a rock, and fling it with all his strength at the Horror's face. Unfortunately his broken arm was also his throwing arm, forcing him to use the other—the throw was powerful but awkward. The Horror batted the rock away with its spear, laughing. *"Hopeful to the end, I see. Don't you realize I have won already?"*

*"You can't kill me,"* Gabriel yelled back. *"You can't kill me and I know it. I don't think you can kill any of us!"*

*"Do you think that matters to me, even if it were true? I do not need your death—your suffering will be the same, eternal even without death. See how I already control you?"*

Gabriel winced sharply, swaying on his feet and staggering sideways as he gripped his side. *"No—you—won't—"*

It chuckled. *"Ah, but I will. Do you see how easy it is? You are already mine, young one. You simply have not accepted it. You and your cursed friends managed to cut off my connection to my Master for now—but you could not kill me—none of you could, because I am stronger than all of you. As long as I live, you will suffer. One day the Master will be here, and until that day arrives, I will keep you safe for him."* Moving with sudden great speed, it closed the gap between them and swung its spear, catching Gabriel in the side with the blunt end.

Gabriel toppled, rolling, his face twisted with pain. The Horror watched as he got back to his feet, more unsteadily this time.

*"How long do you wish to draw this out?"* the thing asked, moving in closer again. *"I have all the time you like."*

Gabriel's gaze darted back and forth, looking for something, anything, to use as a weapon. There was nothing on the clean-swept red ground except occasional rocks, none of them bigger than the one he had thrown before. There was no Chasm nearby to lure it over, no other sources of aid. Beyond the Horror Stefan was watching him, but Stefan was a captive just as his friends were. He backed off again, forcing himself to increase speed, trying to give himself more time to think. There had to be an answer. He would not simply give up. There *had* to be a way!

In the cage, the runners were feeling more helpless than ever. They had attempted to yell encouragement at Gabriel, but their friend gave no sign that he had heard them. They tried again to break the bars, to slide through them, anything to get free of the cage, but to no avail. Their prison was too strong. "Anybody got any more bright ideas?" Ocelot asked the air. He was pacing now, doing his best imitation of his namesake. When nobody answered, he began slamming himself into various parts of the cage in the vain hope that one of them would give way. His friends didn't try to stop him; they saw no reason to.

The Horror grinned down at Gabriel. "*Oh, this is pathetic,*" it drawled. "*This isn't any kind of show to put on for your friends and your brother. Is this the way you want them to watch you die – running away like a coward? I thought you were braver than that.*" It shrugged. "*Either way, it's boring. I think it might be more exciting if you actually tried to defend yourself.*" It raised one hand; the air shimmered around it for a second and then a sword, much smaller than the spear it already held, appeared there. It tossed the sword on the ground near Gabriel. "*There. It doesn't*

*make any difference to me if you fight back – in fact, it might even be amusing.”*

Gabriel looked down at the sword and then back up at the Horror. He pointedly ignored the offering. “Do you think that I would accept anything from you?” he asked contemptuously. “I’ve had enough of your tricks.” He paused a moment, then stood straight, glaring at the thing. “Do you know what else I think? I think you are stalling because you know you can’t hurt me, not truly – not until you corrupt me. You haven’t managed to do that, have you? You’ve tried. That’s what all this has been about. All these little scenarios and tricks and tests – they’re all about trying to corrupt me so you can claim me. But they didn’t work. I think you’re afraid now, because you know they aren’t *going* to work. You’re trying to trick me into giving into you, and I won’t do it.” His eyes blazed. “Do you hear me? I won’t give in, and *you cannot have me without my consent!*”

The Horror studied him for a moment. Then it burst out laughing. “Ah, Dragonboy!” it managed between spasms of laughter. “That was a fine speech – one of the finest I’ve heard in many an eon. It’s too bad that you’re putting your faith in such a belief, because you see – you are *wrong!*”

Before Gabriel could react, before Stefan could cry out a warning or the runners in the cage even realized what was happening, the Horror raised its spear with frightening swiftness and let it fly.

Kestrel’s scream joined with Stefan’s bellow of fury as the spear found its mark, piercing Gabriel’s chest and driving him down, pinning him as it buried its point in the reddened ground.

## 50.

The five runners looked on from their cage in terror as Gabriel was flung back and down, impaled through the chest by the Horror's massive spear. He didn't even have time to scream before it was done. "No!!!" Kestrel cried, putting every ounce of strength into a last attempt to budge the heavy bars. Next to her, 'Wraith gripped them so tightly his hands shook, and on the other side Ocelot screamed obscenities at the Horror and pounded his fists into the steel. Winterhawk and Joe simply stood, stunned, almost as if they didn't believe what they had just seen.

"My God..." Winterhawk mumbled. "He's—still alive."

The Horror stood over Gabriel, its feet planted wide apart, its hands on its hips—a victorious warrior over a fallen opponent. It smiled down at him, but there was a different quality to the smile now—any twisted sense of humor it had exhibited before was gone. Its eyes were two black pits of malevolence.

Gabriel was barely aware that it was there. His consciousness floated on a soupy mass of pain so intense that it was not even pain anymore, but merely an odd sensation of a slow spiral downward. *Is this what death feels like?* It was an impression rather than a coherent thought.

His vision cleared randomly, showing him the swirling form of the thick spear-shaft that protruded from his chest. He could feel but not see the blood welling up around it, and likewise could feel blood gathering and pooling beneath him and inside him—it was an odd, disturbing feeling. He struggled to speak but coughed instead, alarmed to see bright red droplets of blood flung upward. *No...this isn't the way...I can't—*

The Horror glared down at him. *"Do you see now, dragon? Do you see how wrong you were? I could have had you at any time I desired. You are already mine. How foolish of you to think that it has ever been otherwise."* It reached out and gripped the end of the spear, moving it slightly.

Gabriel's breath caught, his body jerking under the spearpoint.

The Horror smiled again.

Across the amphitheater, Stefan had quieted again, if not calmed. His chains held him down even against his last, most powerful lunge against the thing that had attacked his brother. Forcing himself to calm, he knew that there was only one chance now. Everything was up to Gethelwain. If he, Stefan, was going to affect anything, it would have to be now. He fixed his gaze on his brother and concentrated as he had never done before.

Inside the cage the runners wanted to look away from the scene but could not. Ocelot was on his way to screaming himself hoarse, alternating between increasingly inarticulate obscenities and the wild primal yells of an animal. Kestrel's head was bowed, her resolve still there but fading. 'Wraith had not moved and continued to grip the bars, while 'Hawk and Joe simply watched.

They all knew it would be over soon, and none of them was sure whether having it be quick would be better in the long run.

The last press on the spear jerked Gabriel back to a higher level of consciousness—and with it a higher level of pain. He gasped, struggling for breath, reaching up with shaking hands to try to grip the spear-handle.

*"It won't work, dragonboy," the Horror said, putting its hand on the end of the spear but at least for the moment not moving it. "This is it. The end." It paused a moment, then glared down, its eyes blazing. "But it doesn't have to be the end. You don't have to die. One more choice, dragonboy. That's what I'm going to give you. One more."*

Gabriel fought to glare up at it, but his mind was drifting again. The blood was pooling beneath him at a frightening rate now; the black edges of unconsciousness were beginning to enfold him. He lifted his head slightly and got a brief glimpse of Stefan – or a shimmering form in the vicinity of Stefan – then let his head drop again. The fear and the desperation rose; he tried to drive it away.

The Horror jerked the spear. *"Listen to me!"* it hissed. Its voice was in Gabriel's mind now. *"Listen, for this is the last choice you will have! You were correct, dragon. I cannot kill you or take you as my own without your consent. I cannot kill your friends, for it is only you and your brother who bear my mark. But take no joy from that, for I already have your brother, and your friends are my prisoners. I cannot kill them, true, but I can torment them for all eternity – just as I can torment you. And believe me, young one, your suffering will be the worst of all. All of this is because of you – the uncorruptible, whose one slip brought you within my reach. Now that I have you here, do you think that I will let you go?"* When Gabriel didn't answer, it glared down at him with its strange black eyes. *"If you think what I have done to your brother is terrible, you have seen nothing until you see what I can do with a living being – an immortal being of your power level. You will beg me to release you from your torment, young one!"* It paused, looking around it. *"Do you want that? DO YOU?"* The last words were shrieked as it shoved the spear again.

Gabriel screamed in pain, writhing. He could not move because the spear held him fast to the ground, so every motion caused the spear-haft to tear at him, to grate against his bones. "NO!" he cried. It barely came out as a

whisper, followed by more bright red blood that ran down his neck.

*"Of course not!"* The Horror's teeth were together now, its eyes shining with wicked intensity. *"You would be a fool to allow it! And so I offer you a way out, dragon. Only one, and you must make the choice now. There will be no other chance, do you understand me? DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"*

Again the spear jerked and again Gabriel thrashed. *"Yes!"* The fear was getting stronger now as he felt more of his blood running from his body and the edges of the pain began to fade to nothingness.

*"Good. Here is your choice, then: To save yourself, you have but to give me your brother and the small ones. The small ones are here at your behest and thus you control their fates. You are bound to your brother by blood, and because he is dead he has no further decision in the matter. Give them to me and you will be returned to health and sent back to your home. Otherwise, you can choose to die—because, you see, it is possible for me to kill you if you consent to it—and then you become mine until the day when my Master returns, at which point you become his. Do this and your friends go free, as does your brother. If you do not make a decision, you doom every one of you—your brother, your friends, and yourself—for all eternity."* The Horror leaned once more on the spear, its malign gaze fixed on Gabriel's eyes.

Gabriel struggled to keep his vision from blurring. The spear-point dug into him each time the Horror moved, sending new blossoms of pain shooting through his body. His thrashing was growing weaker now, even as the pain grew stronger. *"I—"*

*"Decide, dragon. Now. It is the best deal you will get. Think. Your brother is already dead. Your friends will be dead before you know it, just tiny sparks in a lifespan such as yours. Give them to me and you will go free. Or die. It is up to you."*

Gabriel let his hands fall back to his sides. He had never felt fear like this before—not even the time in the

cave, when Kestrel had found him near death from Stefan's attack. The pain was so intense...he couldn't think straight—it would be so easy to just—

The Horror's face blackened with fury and it snatched the spear-hilt, wrenching it sideways. "*CHOOSE, you fool!*" it screamed. "*NOW! Or I'll take the lot of you!*"

The pain exploded in Gabriel's head, in his chest, in his entire being. For a moment, everything was fully lucid as the pain drove away the growing feeling of fading in his brain. He looked up at the Horror and for a split second he saw its body shimmer and fragment into hundreds of pieces—and then it solidified and the fragmenting was only in its eyes. The merciless black was replaced by countless tiny pieces fluttering around madly like angry bees—

—and one of them looked familiar.

All at once Gabriel's fear was replaced by a gripping, inexplicable rage as at last he understood. Heedless of the effect the effort was having on his torn body, he drew a deep shuddering breath and cried, "*NO, damn you! If this is your game, then take me! Do it if you can! DO IT!*" His voice trailed off into a cry of pain as more blood spilled from his chest and his mouth, but his eyes were clear and blazing.

For the first time since his brother and his friends had arrived in the amphitheater, Stefan allowed himself to relax.

The words hit the Horror as if it had been struck by a physical blow. It staggered backward, its wild gaze fixed on Gabriel in a combination of rage, fear, and agony. It threw back its head and screamed—a great, piercing shriek that reverberated around the amphitheater, echoing and growing stronger and louder as it did.



Gabriel's own scream rose in its wake as several things occurred simultaneously, so quickly he scarcely had time to react to them:

His side flared with a bright pain that eclipsed even the agony of the spear, as if someone had thrust a burning poker into him – but then, as suddenly as it had occurred, it was gone, leaving behind it an odd sensation of rightness.

The spear faded and disappeared, although the wound did not.

The Horror took two more steps back, its body appearing to be coming apart at the seams.

The cage containing the runners faded from view.

The chains holding Stefan did not fade, but whatever held him voiceless did. “Brother – *fight it!*” he cried into the chaos. “Fight it now! Before it re-forms!”

The Horror seemed in no immediate danger of that. Pieces of it detached and broke into their component parts, which then became small black flitting things, whirling around the same general shape. It was still in the form of the enormous monster-thing, but it was as if the monster's structure was now made up of hundreds of smaller parts that had all cooperated to construct a coherent whole. The pieces buzzed and screeched angrily at each other, the Horror's enraged cry splitting into many pieces and adding to the cacophony.

Gabriel was stunned by what had occurred – it took him a moment to realize that the spear was gone. “*What – ?*”

The Horror screamed again, its fragmenting image forming an expression of fury as it spun away from Gabriel. “*If I cannot have you, I will have them!*” it shrieked and began moving toward the runners. Its speed was still considerable even though pieces of it were breaking away and veering off in all directions.

*"Fight them, Gethelwain!" Stefan cried. "They have no more power over you! I will hold them here!"*

At that instant Gabriel saw the thing bearing down on his friends. "No!" he cried, and was surprised to feel the magic and the power coursing through his body. It had been so long he had nearly forgotten what it felt like. Could he—

He didn't think, but simply acted. Leaping up, oblivious to the pain, he shifted his mind and threw himself forward. As he ran, the bleeding young man shimmered, grew, and took on his true form, screaming defiant rage into the pinkish sky.

The Horror hesitated.

Ocelot and 'Wraith were nearly thrown forward, off balance as the bars of the cage faded. "Shit!" Ocelot yelled, righting himself quickly.

"The bars!" Kestrel was quick to move outside of where the cage had been. "Look out!"

The five runners flung themselves sideways as the disintegrating Horror bore down on them. "Finally!" Ocelot whooped, and threw himself into the fray.

Gabriel, now in dragon form and significantly less affected by the spear wound and the broken arm than he had been as a human, lunged at the Horror with another enraged cry. He knew almost viscerally that this would be a physical fight—no magic now. He also knew it was a fight he would win—unless any of the things were allowed to escape. *Keep them here, Stefan. I will do the rest.*

The Horror spun, trailing black flitting things behind it, and found itself facing not a helpless prisoner but a near-full-sized Great Western Dragon. Immediately abandoning its attack on the runners, it attempted to

evade Gabriel by diving to the side. The only problem was that apparently the coherence that had held it together up until now was fading fast: some of the small black pieces veered to the left, while others veered to the right. The Horror screamed again as it came apart, losing the form of the huge monster and breaking into its hundreds of tiny parts.

The black pieces shot off in all directions.

Stefan watched them, concentrating. For the first time in his near memory, he did not feel weak or in pain. Although he was only an echo of what he had been, an echo was enough. He kept his eyes fixed on the cloud of small creatures and set about doing as he had promised.

Gabriel roared and snapped at the black creatures, feeling a fierce triumph as he felt them crush under his teeth, his claws, the force of his wings. He could still feel the blood running down his body, but for now it was not important. Nothing was important but destroying these things. Not even one of them could be allowed to escape.

The runners quickly discovered that whatever the Horror had appeared to be, these new things that had made up its body were not all-powerful. In fact, split apart as they were they hardly seemed to have any power at all. They darted around like confused bats, searching for a way out of the amphitheater but finding none. At first the runners didn't realize why the things would fly off toward what appeared to be certain escape only to abruptly change direction and head back toward the center, but then Winterhawk got a look at Stefan. "He's keeping them in!" he cried. "He's got some sort of barrier up, and they can't get out!"

"Let's kill the fucking things, then!" Ocelot yelled. His face wore an expression of near-insane glee as at last he was given an outlet for all his frustration and pent-up energy.

The others weren't far behind him. Joe was already snatching up rocks from the ground.

Gabriel ripped another creature apart with his teeth, his mind ablaze with the desire to kill, to rend, to rid the world of these loathsome things once and for all. He let the hatred take control of him now, for there was no reason to stop it—these things had no redeeming features and a quick death was far more merciful than they deserved.

When they tried to evade him by flying higher, he took wing and joined them, swooping through the air, reveling in the feeling of flight, of freedom, after so long in a sort of psychic confinement.

He kept a corner of his consciousness locked on one particular creature, remaining aware of where it was but allowing it to remain unscathed for the moment.

He would have it in time.

The runners were experiencing what could only be described as a long-awaited catharsis as they provided ground support to Gabriel's aerial attacks. Ocelot especially— but all of the runners to some degree— pleased to finally have the opportunity to *act*, were taking advantage of it in full measure. Ocelot had snatched up the fallen sword the Horror had offered Gabriel and was using it to cleave the black creatures in half; Joe flung rocks and smashed the things into the walls of the amphitheatre; Kestrel and 'Wraith simply crushed them in their hands and beneath their feet; Winterhawk, his magical abilities restored when the cage had faded, took

out great clumps of them at a time with his area-effect spells.

"These things are nothin' but a bunch of wimps!" Ocelot yelled at one point. "They're *nothin'* when they aren't together!"

"I wonder why they aren't trying to reform?" Joe wondered as he smashed another one with a rock.

"Maybe they can't." Kestrel's face was slicked with sweat but her eyes burned with fervor. "Maybe they need all of 'em or something."

"I don't know and I don't care." Winterhawk fried another group of creatures with a spell. "Just kill the bloody things!"

The one-sided battle went on, and soon there were only a few of the creatures left. The ground was littered with small black corpses that, after a few seconds, melted into oozy black goo and sizzled into the red dirt. The one Gabriel had been keeping his eye on flitted away, looking desperately for a place to hide, but there was no place to hide.

The dragon advanced on it, its eyes implacable and burning with controlled rage.

"Wait," it cried in Gabriel's mind, its tone wavering, pleading. "*No! We can –*"

Fast as a snake's strike, the dragon lashed out his neck and crushed the thing between its teeth. Its scream grew to a shrieking crescendo in his mind, and then was abruptly cut off as it ceased to exist.

On the far side of the amphitheater, the chains holding Stefan down began to dissolve. Gabriel backwinged down, landing next to his brother's fading form. Behind him, the runners dealt with the last of the creatures.

*"It is done..."* Stefan said softly. His form was already starting to shimmer away, and his voice in Gabriel's mind was but a whisper. *"Thank you, brother. I knew you could do it. I am sorry for all I have put you through..."*

*"Be well, Sildarath. I hope that we will meet again someday – under more fitting circumstances."*

*"As do I, Gethelwain. As do I..."* His voice faded away and was taken by the faint wind. Unfurling his wings, he rose to his full height, head high, and floated upward. As he did, his image became more and more indistinct until at last there was nothing but the pink, cloud-choked sky.

Gabriel watched the spot for several more seconds, looked around the amphitheater to verify that no creatures had escaped them, and then began moving toward the runners who now stood in a little knot on the other side of the arena, watching him.

As he moved, he shifted back into human form. Bloody, exhausted, and staggering, he crossed the blasted battlefield toward the team. He was smiling a weary smile of satisfaction. "It's over," he said softly. "Let's go home."

# Epilogue 1

It was a beautiful day in Seattle. The sun had made one of its rare appearances, the rain seemed intent on providing a respite, and even the few clouds hung wispy and white, high overhead.

As befitted such a day, Denny Park was crowded with picnickers, lovers, barking dogs, kids skating and biking and playing games, and the mingled aromas of various types of barbecue wafting on the gentle breeze.

The six individuals who had taken over one of the basketball courts on the far side of the park and who were now engaged in a game that looked to the occasional spectator as if life or death were the stakes had not made any plans to be here. It had been one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions when they had gotten together and had met with no objections.

The game had been going on for almost an hour and was currently tied. Nobody would have cared about the score except that 'Wraith had started keeping track and Joe, chuckling, had made a bet of it: the losing team had to clean up after lunch. Such a challenge presented to a group of six hypercompetitive individuals ensured that everyone was putting his or her full effort into the game. The time they had allotted for it was nearly up now, so all of them were getting a little desperate.

Gabriel currently had the ball. He had just plucked it neatly from Ocelot's hands seconds previously and was now pounding full-bore down the court toward Joe, who was guarding the opposing basket. Dressed like most of the others in shorts and a light tank top, Gabriel showed absolutely no trace of the injuries he had suffered on the metaplanes. He moved as effortlessly and gracefully as ever, feinting a shot toward the basket and then blasting a

pass at Kestrel who slipped around the massive grinning troll and sank the shot.

As the ball swished through the net, a small form shimmered into being in the center of the court, made a sound like a whistle-shrill, and then winked out again.

"That's time," Winterhawk called, pulling up short of the spot where his watcher had done its timekeeper duties and mopping his hair off his forehead. "Looks like we've won!"

"No thanks to you," Ocelot joked, snatching the ball away from Joe and twirling it on his finger. Winterhawk had been the third member of the Gabriel-Kestrel team, and those two had definitely been responsible for most of the team's scoring.

"Only because you wouldn't let me use magic," Hawk protested. He started off the court and was followed by the others, joking and laughing (well, all except for Wraith) as they headed back toward the barbecue pit and lunch.

"Man," Ocelot said, leaning back at the table after they had devoured the large quantities of food Joe had brought, "it seems like another world, doesn't it?"

Everybody knew exactly what he was talking about without having to ask. Winterhawk nodded soberly. "It does indeed. Only a week and it already feels like it's all happened to someone else."

"Yeah, but it feels *right* for a change," Joe said, hunting around for another piece of barbecued chicken amid the ruins.

"You got that right." Ocelot's tone was heartfelt. Even though the last two weeks had seemed almost like waking up from a bad dream at this point, he didn't think he would ever forget their events.



Almost immediately after Gabriel had come to them at the end of the battle, the amphitheater and everything around it had faded from sight. The team had awakened, returning to consciousness on the soft pallets in the room at Neferet's home where they had left for their journey so long ago. The awakening had been like emerging from a very satisfying sleep: they had felt refreshed, energized, peaceful. Uneke had been there as well, smiling at them. They never found out how he had known they had succeeded, but he had definitely had been pleased to see their return.

Uneke had gone to Neferet, who had asked them to meet her in the same chamber as before. Her face, which they had never seen wearing an expression more hospitable than a gentle kindness, bore a beautiful smile. "You have done it," she had told them softly. "You must tell me of what has occurred, but I can see it in your auras — you have been successful."

"What about Gabriel?" Kestrel asked. "Should we — go to him? Is he all right?"

"I will communicate with him and ask him to come here," Neferet told them. "It would be best if we awaited our celebration and our storytelling until he arrives."

Gabriel had arrived later that day. All the runners had been shocked but very happy to see him looking not only well, but nearly glowing with health, peace, and satisfaction. The scar was gone, he told them, which meant that the Horror whose mark he had borne was truly and irrevocably dead this time. "So — it's over?" Ocelot asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"It is over," Gabriel confirmed. "We destroyed all who had been part of it, and Stefan has been allowed to go on to whatever awaits him in the next world."

Uneke outdid himself with the meal he spread out at Neferet's table that evening. The five runners, Gabriel,

and Uneki himself sat down with Neferet and told her the story of what happened. In many cases, one or more of them was hearing parts of the story for the first time: only Gabriel knew of what had occurred during his imprisonment by the Horrors, while the runners told him of what had happened to them and Uneki had filled in the few parts he knew. Neferet had sat at the head of the table, watching them over steeped fingers and eating little, obviously captivated by the story.

"There's one thing I still don't quite get," Joe said at the end. "What was with the Horror? Why did it come apart like that? Was it really the one Stefan tried to kill, or not?"

Gabriel's expression sobered. "It was, and yet it was not. That was what I realized when it tried to force me to choose to save myself at the cost of all of you and Stefan. Somehow, a fragment of that being managed to survive the fall into the Chasm. By itself it was not powerful enough to affect anything, but it managed to locate other small Enemies like itself and forge some kind of pact with them. They, like it too weak to be effective, banded together with it and pooled their power, which was what allowed it to attach itself to Stefan's attempts to contact me. That was what it wanted all along—it knew it had marked me last time, but the mark wasn't strong enough to allow it to control my actions. The Enemy gains power by corrupting the good—only by forcing or tricking me into performing evil or honorless acts could it solidify its hold on me. That was what all the tests were about."

"So why did it test us?" Ocelot asked.

"Because the Enemy revels in suffering," Neferet spoke up softly. "It does not matter what sort of suffering, as long as it is externally inflicted and results in strong emotion."

Ocelot made a disgusted noise in the back of his throat and nodded.

"When did you realize that it wasn't a single entity?" Winterhawk asked.

"When it tried to force me to choose and became impatient. It knew it could not maintain its power forever—some of the others forming its being were beginning to rebel, convinced that the experiment was a failure. Its only hope was to gain control over me, which would increase its own power and bond the others to it in desire of the suffering they would be fed. It never expected to let any of you go, of course. I knew that from the beginning. When it tried to force my hand I saw something coming apart in its eyes, and for a moment I saw just how weak and ineffectual it was on its own. I felt the rage growing in me—rage that something so small and insignificant had caused so much trouble for all of us—and because I had nothing else, I let that be my strength long enough to deny it its wish."

Ocelot nodded, satisfied. He knew all about the power of rage and what it could do for you sometimes when there was nothing else remaining. "Yeah—I hadn't really thought about it that way, but it's true, isn't it? The thing we thought was so big and powerful turned out to be just a bunch of kids hiding under a big coat." He sighed, shaking his head, but then looked up again. "So—you're sure this time. It's over."

Gabriel regarded him for a moment, then smiled gently. "It is over, my friend. Once again I am grateful to all of you for your friendship, your strength, and your aid. I could not ask for better friends." He looked up at Neferet. "And you, Lady. You have aided me far more than I had a right to ask or expect. Whatever you wish in payment for your kindness, you have but to name it."

Neferet inclined her head in what looked like a ritual motion. "It is my honor, young one, to have contributed to the destruction of those whom we all call our Enemy. In light of that, I release you from any obligation resulting from my aid. I ask only that if some day in the future I should request your aid that I be given similar consideration."

Gabriel bowed his head respectfully. "At any time you name, Lady," he murmured.

They had finished dinner and stayed overnight in Neferet's lavish home. In the morning they bid the Lady goodbye and left with her blessings, chauffeured back to the airport by Uneke. The spirit had also wished them a fond farewell, especially Gabriel and Kestrel. He had looked long into Kestrel's eyes, his gaze lingering there for several moments as he gently touched her forehead. "Be well, child, and have strength," he had said softly. Then he and the car were gone and there was only the plane waiting to take them back to Seattle.

That had been a week ago. Once home, they had set about getting their lives back in order. Unlike the experience of the last time they had been to the metaplanes, this time none of them had suffered from nightmares, disturbed sleep, or any of the other inconveniences they might have expected following such a harrowing ordeal. To the contrary, when they compared notes they found that they all felt better than they had in recent memory: full of energy and hope and the feeling that they had truly done something right this time. This was probably why that afternoon when Joe had called everybody and asked them if they wanted to get together for a barbecue and some R&R they had all agreed—even 'Wraith and Winterhawk, who weren't normally known to go for that sort of thing.

Kestrel grinned. "Never thought I'd be this glad to be back in Seattle." She leaned her head back and looked up at the sky, enjoying the fact that it was blue and not sickish pink. "I'd even be happy to see the rain."

"Not right now," Joe said hastily with a glance toward the table covered with the remains of lunch.

Winterhawk chuckled and looked at Gabriel, who was staring off into space with a contented look in his violet eyes. "So, Gabriel—are you back in Seattle, or are you two going to be heading off to continue your world-hopping?"

Next to him, Ocelot tensed slightly, but only slightly. His gaze grew just a bit more intent as he too looked at Gabriel.

The young man smiled, returning to the here and now from wherever he had been. He shrugged. "I don't know—I suppose I *am* back. I still want to see the rest of the world, but there's time for that. Now, I think I'd like to stay awhile." Glancing at Kestrel, he added, "if that's all right with you."

"Fine," she said. "I wouldn't mind staying in one spot for awhile myself. I think I've seen enough airplanes to last me for at least a few months." She wrinkled her nose in distaste. "It's going to take me *ages* to get all the dust out of my townhouse, though. You should see the place."

"You didn't clean it yet?" Winterhawk asked.

"Why bother, if we weren't going to stay?" Her look of wide-eyed innocence elicited a grin from the mage.

"So what now?" Ocelot asked. "It feels weird to just go back to calling Harry and gettin' another job right away, but I don't think I can take any more downtime."

"Harry," Winterhawk said with a sharp upward glance. "No one's called him yet, have they?"

Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith shook their heads.

"So he doesn't even know we're back, and—right again."

"Knowing Harry, he does," 'Wraith said.

"Good point." The mage paused a moment, looking over the table and the faces of his friends as if memorizing them for later retrieval. "Well, then," he said briskly, grinning at Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith, "it looks like you lot have got cleanup duty. How about it, teammates," he added, turning to Gabriel and Kestrel, "what say we lounge about on the grass and act like the lazy good-for-nothings we are while the losing team here takes care of the drudge work?"

"Sounds like the best idea I've heard all day," Kestrel said with her own grin, reaching out to tousle Gabriel's unruly hair.

Ocelot started to say something but changed his mind. Right now he was feeling good enough that even the prospect of cleanup duty wasn't enough to sour his mood. That kind of feeling didn't come often for him, and he was damn well going to enjoy it while it was here.

## Epilogue 2

*Somewhere in the mountains outside Los Angeles*

Uneke waited to be recognized before entering the chamber. The Lady, in her true form now, lounged on a great rock overlooking a deep underground canyon; her tail and one graceful leg were draped over the edge. She looked more relaxed than he had seen her in quite some time. "Lady?"

"Yes, Uneke? *What is it?*" She waited for the spirit to float over near her, then lowered her head. Her golden eyes picked up the faint light from the few torches in the cavern in a way that almost made them seem as if they were whirling.

"I have been thinking about the young one and his companions."

*"As have I, my friend."*

"It is still difficult for me to believe that they have managed to triumph despite all the Enemy's attempts to destroy them. Such a thing would have been a challenge even for a fully mature representative of your people."

Neferet considered that, then lowered her head further until it rested gently on her forelegs. *"It is true,"* she said contemplatively. *"They are brave, I will give them that, and resourceful. I am impressed by them, although it would not have been the path I would have chosen."*

"No," Uneke agreed, "nor I. Perhaps it is the province of youth." He smiled up at her, showing bright white teeth. "Perhaps, Lady, you and I have simply been too long in this world to believe any longer in idealism."

*"Perhaps."* Neferet's tone was good-natured, but there was an odd note to it as well. *"In any case, it is done, and all of them have managed to return. It is more than I expected."*

Uneke nodded. For a long moment he was silent, as if trying to decide whether to continue. Finally he looked up at her. "Lady..."

"Yes, Uneke?"

"Did you notice —?"

He did not finish the question, but apparently Neferet did not need him to. "Yes," she said softly. "I noticed."

The spirit, although he did not need to breathe, took a deep breath nonetheless. "And — you chose not to speak of it to them?"

Neferet regarded him fondly, her expression turning aside his apprehension at the question. *"They have been through enough for now, Uneke. I do not think that either of them know yet. She will find out soon enough, and he has been too preoccupied to even consider the possibility. Let them have their peace. It is not for me to interfere in such things."*

Again Uneke waited several moments before he spoke. "It is possible that they will come to you when they make the discovery. Will you help them if they do?"

This time it was Neferet's turn to pause. She shifted position on her rocky couch, staring down into the canyon as if she expected to find some answer there. *"I do not know, Uneke. This is not the realm of the Enemy, but something much closer to home. You know the law as I do, but this is a new age and perhaps it is time to consider new law. I do not know. I will make my decision if and when they come to me. It is not something I wish to decide quickly or lightly, either way."*

Uneke pondered that, his dark eyes quiet and subdued. "It will not be easy for them whatever they decide to do."

*"No, and that is true, I believe, in more ways than one. If they do not take care, they risk becoming the focal point of something that has been building since before many of us were hatched."* She sighed, rolling her head to the side a bit to rub it against her foreleg. *"I wish it could be otherwise, my friend, but I fear it is begun now and there is little we can do*



*about it. It will be to them to decide. He knows, as all of us do, the implications and the ramifications of whatever decision is made."*

Uneke nodded. "I hope I have not disturbed you, Lady. It is simply that I too have grown fond of the young one — of all of them, if truth is to be told — and —"

*"I know," she said, her voice gentle. "Wait and see, Uneke. He has proven himself to be an exceptional youngster, at the same time wise beyond his years and reckless enough that he might just be the one to see changes made. Do not count him out yet, nor his friends. Observe and learn — perhaps we will yet see something else extraordinary."*

Uneke tilted his head to look up at her. "You will support them, then, will you not?" he asked with a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Neferet sighed, but there was a twinkle in her eyes as well. *"I do not know why I keep you around, Uneke. You are far too wise for your own good. Now go and let me rest."*

Uneke did as he was told, but as he left the cavern, he was smiling.

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Here's where I get to thank all the good folks who had a hand in the creation of this monster, even if it's just to provide moral support. Sometimes moral support is the best thing of all, especially when it was starting to seem like I'd *never* get done with this and be able to move on.

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Thanks again to Steve and Ken who have once more graciously agreed to allow their characters out to play. Sorry I had to cut 'Wraith's big scene, but this thing was getting freakin' *huge* and I didn't want to draw things out any more. Maybe next time.

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Marilyn Manson - *Mechanical Animals*

Don Henley - *Actual Miles*

Marillion - *Script for a Jester's Tear*

Strange Days - *Soundtrack*

Camel - *Harbour of Tears*

Alan Parsons Project - all sorts of things including *Freudiana*, *The Time Machine*, and *Turn of a Friendly Card*

Savatage - *The Wake of Magellan*

Loreena McKennitt - *The Book of Secrets and Live in Paris and Toronto*

Toad the Wet Sprocket - *Fear and Coil*

Midnight Syndicate - *Born of the Night*

Trans-Siberian Orchestra - *Beethoven's Last Night*

Rush - *Test for Echo and Presto*

The Matrix - *Soundtrack*

Peter Gabriel - *Us*

Jethro Tull - *Crest of a Knave* and *Songs from the Wood*

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Yanni - *Live at the Acropolis*

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— *Rat*

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