

By the Author of *Crossfire*, *Inner Demons* and *Dark Reflection*

HIDDEN AGENDA

A Shadowrun Novel

R. L. King

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by

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Prologue

This can not be happening.

Juliana Harvath, more commonly known to her friends as Kestrel, sat on the edge of her bed in her small townhouse and stared across the room at her image in the mirror.

The image stared right back at her as if issuing a challenge: a trim, athletic woman in her early thirties, dressed in faded jeans with holes in the knees and a ratty U-Dub sweatshirt. Her reflection's short, white-blond hair was tousled, its bright green eyes fixed on their counterparts in the real world. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, her hands gripping the edge of the mattress as if she were afraid she would tumble right off the edge of the bed if they didn't.

The fear might not have been entirely unfounded.

No, no...this can't happen. I've always been so careful –

With an explosive motion she pushed herself off the bed and began pacing around the room, kicking aside drifts of clothes that she had tossed on the floor and never bothered to pick up. There was a nice hardwood floor under there somewhere, but she rarely saw it.

As she moved around the end of the bed her foot caught on another pair of jeans in a heap on the floor and she savagely kicked them aside, not even seeming to notice when they flew up and knocked several things off her nightstand. *Damn it, no! There is no way this could be true. There's been some kind of mistake. That's all. Just a mistake.*

The thought comforted her for about thirty seconds. Then the doubt began creeping in again.

...but what if it is true?

Ceasing her pacing, she threw herself back down on the bed amid the tangle of sheets and the heavy down

comforter. She wrapped her arms around one of her pillows and hugged it tightly to her, sighing.

What if it is?

I always thought it would be so easy, but –

She flipped over and stared up at the ceiling. *Get yourself under control*, she told herself sternly. *This is nothing to panic about. Not yet. It's got to be a mistake, and you're not going to know whether it is or not until you try it again. One could be a mistake. Two –*

She sighed again, knowing why she hadn't tried it again yet—because she was afraid of the result. She was afraid of knowing for sure. Because if she did, then her mind would have to venture into areas she had absolutely no desire to approach.

If it was true, she wouldn't have a choice.

It was the fact that *not* knowing for sure was about the only thing she could think of that was worse than knowing for sure that caused her to get a second opinion. She showered, dressed in something a bit more respectable (which for Kestrel meant a T-shirt and leather jacket over the same old ratty jeans) and headed out in her green Eurocar Westwind.

She didn't know why she drove to a different part of town, but she didn't bother asking herself those kinds of questions anymore. She got what she needed and returned to her condo. The waiting seemed interminable, but it really wasn't all that long. And when it was all over, she had her second opinion.

It was the same as the first opinion.

Kestrel slumped down on her bed and flung her pillow across the room so hard it knocked a picture off the wall. It landed with a crash, its glass shattering and sending little shards skittering across the floor.

That's fitting, she thought bitterly. *That's about the way my life feels right now.*

The next day, she got a *third* opinion—a human one—in hopes that perhaps the more impersonal approach of her previous two methods had somehow been the cause of her current state of misery. *I did it wrong. I never was any good at that sort of thing. I mean, it's kind of like cooking, right? Mixing things together and hoping you get the right answer. Hell, I wasn't very good at chemistry either...*

She'd gotten straight A's in chemistry, but that was beside the point.

She arranged an appointment with an old friend of hers, someone she'd met several years ago on a run and kept intermittently in touch with. Lucinda Santos could be counted on to be competent, thorough—and above all, discreet. They had lunch before the appointment. It had been Kestrel's idea: make the whole thing look more like a social call and less like—

—like what it was.

They talked, caught up on old times, discussed trids they'd seen and books they'd read. By unspoken mutual agreement neither brought up uncomfortable subjects. After lunch the actual appointment had been quick, businesslike, and efficient. Kestrel waited, leafing through an old magazine without seeing any of its content, while Lucinda disappeared.

She was gone for about ten minutes. Kestrel's head snapped up as the door opened. She didn't have to ask what the answer was: she could see it in Lucinda's face. "Yeah?" she asked glumly.

Lucinda nodded. "I'm afraid so."

"You're sure? I mean, there couldn't have been any mistake?" She grasped at the straws of hope while feeling them slipping through her hands like wet eels.

"No. No mistake. I checked it myself." Lucinda looked at her with compassion. "I'm sorry. I wish I could

have given you the answer you wanted —” She paused a moment and met Kestrel’s eyes. “Have you given any thought to how you want to proceed?” Her voice was soft, professional, non-judgmental.

Kestrel sighed. There was so much she wanted to say, but the thoughts were jumbled in her head, racing around far too fast for her to catch any and bring them into a coherent pattern. “No,” she finally said, surprised at how normal her voice sounded.

Lucinda nodded knowingly. “Well, I’m here if you want to talk. You’ve still got plenty of time to make up your mind.”

“Thanks.” Kestrel stood up, dropping the magazine back into the rack next to the chair. “I guess I’ve got a lot of thinking to do.”

She spent the rest of the day walking around. Her movements were aimless; she had no particular destination in mind, so it wasn’t really possible for her to get lost. She just had to get away from everything she knew for awhile. She didn’t want to talk to anyone, see anyone, do anything. She wanted answers, but none presented themselves.

I thought it would be so easy. I thought it would never happen, but if it did, I’d know what to do. I’d know if I was ready, and if I wasn’t — then I’d just take care of it.

I’m not ready.

So why is this so hard?

It was early evening by the time she got back to her townhouse. She was no closer to an answer than she had been before. She thought she might still be in shock. Either way she knew she didn’t want to be alone tonight. She didn’t want to be alone with this knowledge that had descended upon her and threatened to swallow her up. She had to discuss this with *someone*.

Smiling a little for the first time that day, she picked up her phone and called Gabriel.

1.

Kestrel settled back in her seat and played with her napkin as she waited for Gabriel to arrive. The restaurant was not a fancy one—she wasn't in the mood for that tonight. She just wanted somewhere that she felt comfortable, where she could be herself and no one would look twice at her. That vague feeling of anonymous belonging that you got at favorite haunts was something she prized very highly tonight.

Izzy's filled that bill for her. She smiled a little to herself, remembering the last time she had been here—it had been with Ocelot, several months ago. The two of them had come here a lot when they'd been together. She still missed him sometimes; it wasn't as if they didn't see each other, but the spark of the relationship had faded to more of a strong friendship these days. It was probably for the best. In their line of work, attachments could be very dangerous things to have.

That thought brought a little twinge to her spine, but she shook it off.

She tossed the napkin aside and looked up to check the sports scores on the trid unit high above when she caught sight of Gabriel coming in. She smiled as he made his way through the crowd. He was dressing a lot more casually these days, unless he was doing business: tonight he wore faded jeans, a leather flight jacket that looked like it had seen duty in at least two wars, and a skintight polo shirt that matched the violet of his eyes. As it often did, a little tingle went through Kestrel as she looked at him. Even though she knew he could look like anything he wanted to and therefore his astonishing beauty was really sort of cheating, he still had a strong effect on her. She didn't miss the fact that he had a similar effect on many of

the other women in the place too, but that amused her more than anything.

"Hi," she said as he finally got close enough that she could be heard over the crowd and the trid units. "Thanks for coming. I know it was short notice." She'd called him only an hour and a half previously, right after she'd gotten home from her long walk.

He returned her smile, his eyes sparkling, and shrugged. "I'm always happy to have dinner with you, Juliana. You know that."

She did know that. She also knew that he'd seemed a lot happier since they'd finally gotten that business with Stefan and the Horrors over with. She hadn't seen him often in the last month, but despite the atrocities he'd had to endure in that ordeal, his demeanor had been much more carefree since their return, like someone who had had a tremendous weight lifted from his psyche. She supposed that was probably true. "Well," she said teasingly, "I was afraid you might be jetting off to some high-society party or something."

"Not until next week," he replied in the same tone. He slid into the booth opposite her and glanced at the menu, which was painted in large white characters on a big board high up on the wall near the grill. "What are we having?"

"I haven't ordered yet. Whatever you want. My treat."

He smiled. "I like everything."

"I know you do." She chuckled, watching him lounge in the seat, utterly relaxed. His hair was windblown, no doubt from driving too fast with the windows rolled down. When the server came over to take their order, she considered and then grinned. "We'll have the Carnivore Supreme. Large. With extra cheese." After the woman had written that down, she added, "And a Gargoyle Ale for —

" She paused. "No...let's make that a large iced tea for me. Gabriel?"

He tilted his head slightly at her but didn't comment. "Gargoyle Ale sounds fine."

The server transferred her gaze and her attention from Kestrel to Gabriel. "May I see your ID, sir?"

Kestrel couldn't help laughing a little under her breath. She suspected Gabriel set himself up for this sort of thing on purpose, because it amused him. It would have been so easy for him to simply add a few years to his apparent age, but he seemed quite content to continue appearing to be around twenty, even with the occasional difficulties it presented.

Smiling, Gabriel took a credstick from his jacket and handed it over. The woman slid it into her reader, looked at him, looked at it, and shook her head in surprise. "Thank you, sir," she said, handing it back. Kestrel knew from past experience that Gabriel's fake ID always showed him to be exactly one week over the age of twenty-one. "Why one week?" she'd asked him once. "Because I don't always want people to think it's my birthday," he'd told her, quite reasonably.

After the server had gone, Gabriel turned his attention back to Kestrel. "How are you?" he asked softly.

She paused for a moment before answering. *How am I? That's a tough one.* Finally she shrugged. "Okay, I guess. Actually that's sort of why I asked you to have dinner with me tonight."

His gaze immediately turned serious. "Is something wrong?"

"Not...*wrong*, exactly," she admitted. "Gabriel – would it be all right if we ate first, and talked about it afterward? There *is* something I want to talk to you about, but...just not yet, okay?"

He nodded. "Of course, Juliana." His tone was soft, concerned without prying.

Dinner seemed to take forever. Their pizza and drinks arrived fairly quickly (the place was crowded but the service was good) and as Kestrel had requested they kept the conversation light as they ate. She was surprised at how hungry she was; she hadn't thought she would want much to eat, and had ordered the Carnivore Supreme mostly for Gabriel's benefit. Instead, she managed to polish off her half of the pizza along with two tall glasses of iced tea.

Gabriel was amused. "Haven't you eaten anything today?" he asked, tilting his head at her as she gnawed at the small pile of crusts remaining on her plate. "We could get another pizza —"

She smiled sheepishly and dropped the crust as if she'd been caught pilfering the Crown Jewels. "No. That's okay. I think I've had about enough." She glanced guiltily at the remaining crusts and then shoved her plate aside. "Yeah. I've definitely had enough."

Gabriel nodded slowly. Kestrel could see in his eyes that he was worried about her, wondering what 'not *wrong*, exactly' problem she had to discuss with him. She was grateful that, despite the fact that he had the ability to easily find out without even asking her, he never did it. In fact, she knew that even the thought of doing that would appall him. Kestrel loved having a Great Dragon for a best friend, but she had to admit sometimes that she was particularly glad the Great Dragon in question possessed an overdeveloped sense of honor. Otherwise, things could get a little tricky.

"Okay..." she said, wrapping her hands around her iced tea glass and watching as their server gathered up the plates and the pizza pan and hustled them away. "I guess I don't have any more excuses to wait, do I?"

His eyes were gentle. "You don't have to tell me anything if you don't want to, Juliana."

She nodded. "I know that. I *want* to tell you. Hell, you're the only one I *do* want to tell. But it isn't easy, so be patient with me, okay? I haven't had much time to come to terms with it myself."

Gabriel's expression didn't change. He merely sat there silently, offering support but making it clear that he would sit here all night if necessary.

"Okay..." She said again. She didn't meet his eyes. *How do I do this? Do I just come right out and tell him? Do I give him the whole story of how I found out? Do I –*

"I'm pregnant," she blurted, surprising herself.

Gabriel's eyes widened. He looked almost as startled as she did. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I...see," he said at last. His voice was utterly neutral.

Kestrel knew why: because she hadn't told him how she *felt* about it yet. How could he respond with a hearty "Congratulations!" or a sympathetic "I'm sorry to hear that..." if he didn't know which way her feelings were going? How could he, anyway? *She* didn't even know. She nodded. "Yeah, that's about it. I found out for sure today."

He hadn't taken his eyes off her. "How...are you doing?" he asked carefully.

She sighed, crumpling up another napkin without even noticing she was doing it. "I don't know," she admitted. It felt easier to talk about it now that she'd let the cat out of the bag. "It wasn't something I expected, that's for sure. I've been taking something for years, and it's never failed me before." She sighed again, looking down at the napkin. "I just don't know what I want to do. I always thought if I ever got pregnant before I was ready I'd just go have it taken care of and get on with life. But –" She spread her hands. " – now that I *am*, it doesn't seem

that easy. It's moved away from being academic, and now it's *personal*. Do you understand what I mean?"

Gabriel nodded. "I understand," he said softly.

Kestrel was grateful for his minimalist approach. He seemed to sense that she wanted someone to talk to, but wasn't ready to have solutions offered to her just yet. "I don't even know who the father is," she said miserably. "Probably Jean-Paul, that night in Switzerland...but there were a couple of other guys in that same timeframe. I'm not sure I even want to know. I might be able to handle a baby, but I'm not sure I want a ready-made family...you know what I mean?" She smiled; it was half-teasing, half-bittersweet. "No offense, Gabriel, but if this has to happen, I wish it could be you. It might make things a whole lot easier."

She was surprised at the effect her joking words had on him. His eyes widened, his body stiffening slightly as his gaze locked on her. She grinned uneasily. "Don't worry, you're off the hook—it's not like it's possible or anything, right?"

He didn't answer. He was still staring at her.

"Right?" Her tone got a little more urgent.

He shook his head, looking more than a bit shellshocked. "No."

They got out of there fast after that. Gabriel wouldn't say anything else about it in the restaurant; he was moving as if someone had just set off a loud bomb behind him and he was still getting himself back together. At his request she left her Westwind at the parking garage and followed him to his Dynamit. Only after they were moving did he speak again. "I'm sorry, Juliana. Please forgive my abruptness, but it is imperative that we be certain, and we could not do that in the restaurant."

She stared at him. He was acting totally out of character: her supportive companion had changed into a nervous wreck at her announcement. “Gabriel...will you tell me what’s going on? This isn’t making this any easier for me—”

He turned, his eyes gentle but a little haunted. “I know. I’m sorry. I—” His hands tightened on the steering wheel as he urged the sleek little car to greater speed.

She took a deep breath. “So—you’re telling me it is possible that it’s yours?”

He nodded without looking at her.

“But—I thought humans and dragons—”

“Please, Juliana. I’ll tell you everything you need to know, after we know for sure.” He kept his voice soft, but she could sense an edge of tension to it.

Kestrel drew breath to speak, but then remained silent. She knew if he said he would tell her, he would tell her. She watched neon-lit scenery of a Seattle night go by, trying to think about anything but the subject at hand until at last they pulled into the parking garage of the building that housed Gabriel’s Downtown penthouse apartment. She accompanied him to the elevator and watched as he punched in the familiar code that would take him to the top of the building—the 36th floor that did not have a button to go with all the others. Anyone going to that floor wouldn’t need the button, because they would be expected.

Kestrel loved Gabriel’s apartment. She loved the high, soaring windows that surrounded it, the magnificent view of the Seattle skyline, the beautiful artwork and comfortable furniture, and the knowledge that it was as big as it was because it needed to accommodate not only the young man who moved ahead of her now, but the massive dragon that was his true self. She knew he loved it too, although not with the same depth with which he

loved his lair in the Algonkian-Manitou Council lands. Right now, she felt glad to be here, in familiar surroundings.

She watched him as he crossed the room to the window. He put his palms against it and for several moments stared silently out over the city. Then he turned back to her. "I'm sorry, Juliana," he said again. "I know this isn't easy for you, and I am not being very comforting. I also know that this isn't what you expected — my response, I mean."

She moved closer to him. "No," she said after a moment. "I guess it isn't. But then again, I'd never have thought that there was any chance —" she let it trail off, but they both knew what she meant: *any chance that it was yours*. "If I'd had any suspicion...I wouldn't have told you like this."

He nodded. "I know that." He fixed his gentle but intense gaze on her. "Juliana—I need to know for sure. Would you object to my — checking?"

"Checking?" She looked at him oddly. "Checking how?"

"Magically." His voice shook just the barest bit. "By doing an astral examination, I'll be able to determine if the child is —"

"—part dragon," she finished. Her voice was shaking too.

He nodded; the nod ended in his bowing his head. He kept it lowered, waiting for her answer.

"Is it — dangerous?"

"No." He raised his gaze again. "There is nothing dangerous about it—it is simply a somewhat deeper version of a typical astral examination."

Kestrel nodded, stalling a moment for time to think this through. Everything was happening so quickly. It was only yesterday she'd suspected that something might

be wrong—only yesterday when she'd taken the two pregnancy tests. It was only today that Lucinda—Dr. Santos—had confirmed her suspicions. That was hard enough to take...but now—? *You don't ever do things halfway, do you?* she told herself wryly. "Go ahead, then," she said. "I want to know too."

Gabriel nodded, solicitous but slightly preoccupied as he instructed her to lie down on the couch and make herself comfortable. He pulled up a chair next to the couch and sat down, pausing a moment. Then, taking a deep breath, he put one hand on her forehead and the other on her abdomen and closed his eyes.

Kestrel did not close her eyes. She watched his face for any sign as he remained there, unmoving, his senses off somewhere that she could not reach. His expression did not change throughout the procedure. Several minutes passed and then he opened his eyes.

"Well?" she asked, moving to a half-reclining position.

"The child is about a month along," he said softly. "It is healthy and developing well. And," he added, almost as an afterthought, "it is indeed half dragon."

2.

Kestrel stared at him. "Half...dragon," she whispered. "Then – it is possible?"

He nodded a little wearily. "It is possible," he told her. He leaned over, his elbows on his knees. "I am sorry, Juliana."

Kestrel paused for several moments before she said anything. Her thoughts were in turmoil. She looked at him and then at herself, some small part of her perversely amused at the irony of the situation: veteran shadowrunner and Great Dragon, sitting here looking like a couple of confused teenage parents-to-be. Gabriel especially, with his youthful appearance and casual attire, particularly fit the part. Finally, she ventured: "Gabriel...how...how do you feel about this?"

His gaze came up. "It is my fault," he said. His tone was soft and tired.

She put a hand on his arm. "It's *our* fault," she said firmly. "There's no point in talking about blame now. It's happened, and we need to deal with it. What I mean is – do you want to –" She was surprised how hard it was for her to say it. *Weird how things can look so different when it's your own life you're talking about.* "–I mean...should we...continue? Or –"

Gabriel sighed. "That is your decision to make, Juliana," he said. "Not mine."

She nodded. "I know that. Ultimately it *is* mine. But...I want to know what you think. You're involved too."

He got up and began pacing, as was his habit when he was troubled. "There is more to this than I have told you. You'll need to know the whole story before you can make an informed decision about how to proceed."

She came up to a full sitting position, regarding him warily. "More?" Her mind raced around, zipping from

one dire possibility to another, from the plausible (*could having a half-dragon baby injure me?*) to the absurd (*am I going to lay an egg instead of having a baby?*) and everything in between.

He came back over and sat down next to her. "There are some—issues—outside the fact that you would be bearing a half-dragon child," he said, looking into her eyes.

"What kind of issues?"

He didn't answer for several moments. "Issues of dragon society," he said at last.

"Dragon society..." She was confused. "What about dragon society?"

"Among dragons, what we have done is forbidden." His voice was very soft.

She gasped slightly. "Forbidden?" She felt foolish for continuing to repeat his words, but her reality filter was getting a bit clogged with all these new revelations. She had to do something to slow the flow.

Gabriel nodded.

"What...does that mean?"

"It means that if any other dragons were to find out about what we've done, it could be very dangerous."

"Dangerous...for whom?" She didn't want to ask, but she had to know. "For you?"

"Whether it is dangerous for me isn't the issue," Gabriel said quietly. "I accept the responsibility for what I've done. I am more concerned about the danger to the child."

Almost involuntarily she touched her abdomen. There was no outward sign that a life was growing inside her yet, but after Gabriel's verification she felt—different. Like it hadn't been true before but now it was. Abruptly she asked, "Did you get to see what sex it is, or is it too early to tell?"

He closed his eyes and nodded once. "I know. I didn't say because...I wasn't sure you wanted to know."

She smiled a little. *Even in the middle of this he's being considerate. Why are all the good ones either married, gay, or dragons?* "I—I'd like to."

He nodded. "The child is male," he said. There was nothing in his voice that indicated whether he was pleased, displeased, or indifferent regarding the knowledge.

"Male..." She looked down at herself again. "A son..." Taking a deep breath, she looked back at Gabriel. "What kind of...danger is he in?"

He stood again; it appeared as if he was going to start his pacing once more, but he merely stood there, his hand resting lightly on the back of his chair. "A very long time ago—back in the Age of Magic before the one when I was born—certain dragons mated with members of the Young Races—elves, mostly, and some humans. I can't go into the details, partly because it isn't permitted and partly because I don't know them all, but suffice it to say that a great deal of trouble was caused by these actions. As a result, the dragons came together and chose to forbid the practice of producing what came to be known as 'dragon-kin'—children resulting from the mating of a dragon and a human or metahuman."

Kestrel was leaning slightly forward in her chair, listening intently to his words. "So...if the other dragons found out that we'd produced one of these...dragon-kin—"

"It's conceivable that they might attempt to have him killed," Gabriel said softly.

She took a deep breath. "What about you? And...me?"

He sighed, brushing his hair off his forehead. "You would be in no danger—undoubtedly this would be

considered a transgression on my part...which it was," he added after a pause.

She let that go for the moment. "And what about you? Would they try to kill you too?" She looked up at him. "There's no way I'd ever risk putting you in that kind of danger—"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. They would not try to kill me. The usual punishment for this offense is banishment." He spoke in an even tone, but Kestrel could hear the tension in his voice.

"Banishment? From—what?"

"From dragon society." He sat heavily back down in his chair. "Our society is not as closely knit as it was in the last Age—and even then the dragons only came together to decide important issues that affected all of dragonkind. But if they chose to enact the punishment, it would mean that I would be barred from any contact with other dragons—and any who violated the order would be subject to the same punishment."

"Oh, Gabriel..." She was up instantly, sitting on the arm of his chair, her hand clasping his shoulder. "No..." She shook her head. "No. I'm not going through with this. It's too much of a risk. This is my fault. I was the one who talked you into it. It's not fair of me to—"

"Juliana." He stopped her with the single word, spoken softly. "That doesn't matter. It doesn't matter whose fault it is, and it doesn't matter what might happen to me if the other dragons find out." He covered her hand with his. "All that matters now is what you want to do, and what—if anything—we owe to this child."

She looked down at him; his expression was once again neutral. *He doesn't want to influence my decision.* She was silent for a long time; when she spoke she once again changed the subject. "Is there any way—for anyone to know? Would another dragon know just looking at me?"

Gabriel shook his head. "They would have to be looking for it specifically. I can use masking magic to make the child look like a normal human before he is born."

She nodded, taking that in. "What...does a dragon-kin baby look like?" She was afraid to ask, and hesitated. "Would he be...like a dragon? More like a human? Or is there any way to tell before he's born?" She couldn't help but shudder slightly at the thought of a miniature dragon forming inside her. She loved Gabriel deeply in both human and dragon form, but — this was *different*.

He smiled slightly; it was a tight, not entirely happy smile, but she could see the amusement in his eyes. "Dragon-kin children appear as the parent who bore them. It is almost unheard of for a dragon-kin child to be born of a human father and a dragon mother, because that would require the dragon female to remain in human form long enough to incubate the child — something most of them are not willing to do."

"So — he would look completely human?"

Gabriel paused. He took a deep breath and looked like he was about to say something, but then fell silent.

"What?" Kestrel looked at him, concerned.

He brushed his hair back off his forehead again; it was becoming a nervous habit. "Most of them look almost fully human, but there is always some trait that marks them as dragon-kin. Some of these traits are not noticeable unless you specifically look for them — others are much more obvious. There is no way to know which way he will go."

"What kind of traits?" she asked. Once more she was afraid to know and afraid not to.

Gabriel thought a moment. "These are only legends passed down," he said, "because as I said, no known dragon-kin have been born in thousands of years. The less

obvious traits I have heard tell of include pointed ears, eyes with slitted pupils or very distinct coloring, lack of body hair...that sort of thing."

"And the more obvious ones?" Her hand tightened on his shoulder.

Again he paused, then spoke reluctantly. "Some have been said to have had vestiges of a tail or wings...scales on part or all of their bodies...horns..."

Her eyes widened. "And there's no way to tell."

"Not unless the manifestations are particularly obvious—and even then it would be too late to humanely end the pregnancy."

She shivered a bit at his words, instinctively drawing back a little from him. The feeling surprised her. For someone who had gone through most of her life without the faintest hint of a maternal instinct, this mother-bear protectiveness that had come on at the thought of destroying what was growing inside her came as quite a shock. She covered it by once more changing the subject. "You said that...while the baby was growing, you could mask him so he would look human. What about after he's born?"

Gabriel got up, slipping out from under her hand. "I don't know," he said at last. "It would take some careful research—careful because it is important that no one else know anything about it. I suspect some sort of ritual will be necessary, but I will let you know for sure once I know myself." He turned back around to face her. "Does anyone else know you are pregnant?"

"Only Lucinda—Dr. Santos. She's the one who did the test. But she won't tell anyone."

Gabriel nodded. "It is your decision, of course, but it would probably be best if you didn't tell anyone else about it yet."

Kestrel nodded. "I wasn't planning to take out an announcement in the *Intelligencer* or anything," she said a little wryly. "I'm still not quite sure how I feel about this."

"You have time to think about it," he said softly. "Just let me do the masking, and you won't have to worry about anyone discovering what's happened." He came over to her and took her shoulders in a gentle grip. "Juliana, I'm sorry. About all of this. I haven't been very compassionate to you about this. You came to me with something that troubled you, and here I am telling you about dragon society. Don't let me influence your decision. I'll support whatever you decide—I give you my word on that. I just want to make sure you have all the facts before you make up your mind."

She was touched, knowing how rare and how absolutely binding a dragon's word was. "Thanks, Gabriel," she said in a tone that was barely above a whisper. "I appreciate that. I'm a little confused right now—it's nice to just have somebody to talk to, you know?"

He nodded. "I understand. And I will be here if you want to talk more." He pulled her into a hug.

She smiled, burying her face in his soft jacket, loving the smell of the leather. Suddenly she chuckled.

Gabriel tilted his head. "What are you laughing about?" he asked. He sounded a little more like his old self.

"Us," she said, her eyes twinkling. "I think I understand now how my foolproof birth control failed."

"Oh?"

She nodded. "Yeah. It was calibrated for the kind of regular guys I usually go out with—you know, humans and elves. It wasn't any match for a dragon!"

He hugged her closer, kissing her forehead and joining her in chuckling. "You know, you might just be right."

3.

When Kestrel awoke the next morning, alone in her townhouse bedroom, her first thought was: *It was all a dream. That's all. It has to be.*

Right?

But it wasn't, and as the dust-strewn shaft of morning sunlight slanted through the window and across her face, she knew it.

Burying her head under the pillow and her body under her thick comforter, she tried once again to make sense of all the conflicting emotions that were flying around inside her head. *What do I want to do? Can I even make this decision?*

She had stayed late at Gabriel's the previous night, waiting while he set up and performed the ritual that would hide the child's unorthodox origins from prying magical eyes. It wasn't anything spectacular—there had been no circles or dramatic shifts of light or pyrotechnics—but she had sensed an intensity in Gabriel's violet eyes, in the set of his jaw, that hadn't been there before. *He's worried*, she had told herself at the time, but hadn't mentioned it to him. If he *was* worried, adding her worries to his would serve no useful purpose.

After the completion of the spell, he had leaned back in his chair and regarded her seriously. "I did not hide the fact that you were pregnant," he told her, "but merely the fact that the child is not entirely human."

She nodded. "That's—okay," she said. "If anybody notices magically, I'll—just tell 'em it's none of their business."

He smiled a little and stood. "Let me take you back to your car. Or I can take you home if you like and we can pick up the car tomorrow. Or—" he added after a brief

pause, "you can stay here tonight if you like. You are always welcome."

Kestrel shook her head, matching his small smile with one of her own. "No...I think if you don't mind I just want to go home for awhile. I need some time to think."

He nodded, rising. "I understand. I think...I do too."

She got up and went to him, putting her arms around his neck. "We'll figure this out. I told you — there's no way I'm going to do anything that's going to put you at risk. You mean too much to me for that. I just need to work it out on my own."

He had taken her back to the pizza parlor, where she'd reclaimed her car and driven home in the late-night darkness. She noticed the headlights of the Dynamit as it followed her home and then rolled off into the night after she had arrived safely; the thought had made her smile. Gabriel was about the only man alive from whom she would accept such treatment, let alone find it touching. She, who held her own in the world of human and metahuman predators as well as any man, was oddly comforted to know she was under the protection of a Great Dragon, even if he did spend much of his time in the guise of a twenty-year-old human.

She slept surprisingly well, but awoke early. The brief flash of thought that the whole thing might have been a dream provided her with perhaps a few seconds' respite before the enormity of it all came crashing in once more. Obviously sleeping on the problem hadn't offered up any useful answers.

I'm going to have a baby.

I'm going to have a half-dragon baby.

I'm going to have Gabriel's baby.

Sighing loudly, she pulled her head from beneath the pillow, flung the pillow across the room, sat up, and ran her hand back through her hair, feeling it spiking up

between her fingers. Across the room, her mirror-self repeated the actions but likewise gave her no new insights. “What am I gonna do?” she muttered under her breath. She threw aside the covers and padded into the bathroom, where in just a few moments she was standing in the midst of a steaming hot shower. Sometimes the water helped her think. She wasn’t sure why—maybe it warmed up her brain or lubricated her blood or something—but some of her best ideas came to her in there so she didn’t fight it.

She looked down at herself, at the trim line of her flat stomach with its faintly visible abdominal muscles. *How long before I lose those?* she thought with a little vanity. She realized she knew next to nothing about being pregnant—that was always something other people did. She’d had no interest in baby dolls when she’d been a little girl, and small children bored her more than intrigued her now. As for motherhood, it was always something that lurked in the back of her mind, something she’d do *later*. Although she always thought she’d want children some day—one, maybe, or two—that day never seemed to come. She was too busy doing other things.

And now here it was. The big one. That would have been complicated enough, but then there was the *other* big one to deal with. The big scaly one.

This time, the shower offered no solutions. She got out, dried off, and methodically went through the motions of dressing, then forced herself to sit down and really *think* about what had happened—and what was going to happen. *I have to get rid of all these fuzzy ideas that this is happening to somebody else. It’s happening to me, and to Gabriel, and we have to decide pretty soon what to do about it.*

Ten minutes later she was in her car and headed back over to Gabriel's place. He answered the door after her first knock. "I thought you might come," he said softly, motioning her inside.

She looked him over. He was dressed much as he had been last night, but something about him looked...older. It wasn't something she could put her finger on, but it was there. "Is it—okay?" she asked.

He nodded, moving into the vast main room. "I was hoping to see you," he admitted. "Would you—like anything?"

Kestrel shook her head. *Nothing but for this not to have happened*, she thought, but was surprised to realize that she was not as certain of that as she had been the previous night. "I—just needed someone to talk to."

Gabriel sat down across from her, his violet gaze earnest, intense, and comforting. He waited.

"You know—it would be easier, in a way, if you'd just force me to make a decision."

"I cannot do that, Juliana. You know that."

"Yeah...I know it. Just like we both know I'd resent it if you tried to." She sighed and brought her eyes up to meet his. "I did a lot of thinking last night. I didn't sleep much, so I had to do something."

He nodded, a silent, patient presence.

Kestrel took a deep breath. "I kept going back and forth, feeling like every time I'd made a decision, it was really the other one I wanted to make." She paused. "I mean—this isn't the usual run-of-the-mill pregnancy. That would be tough enough to deal with, but you know the last thing I ever want to do is hurt you, or cause you any trouble."

"I told you, Juliana—you must not concern yourself with that. The only considerations here are you and the child."

She shook her head, leaning forward. “No, they’re not, Gabriel. I know you’re trying to make it easy for me, but you matter as much as I do.” She paused again, running her hand back through her hair. “I know you don’t like to think about this—hell, I don’t either—but you’re going to be around a *lot* longer than I am. I’m not going to make you deal with the consequences of a decision that’ll mean absolutely nothing to me in fifty or sixty years at most, while for you it might shape what’ll happen for the next several thousand years. You mean too much to me to do that.”

Gabriel had lowered his gaze at the last part of her speech. For several moments he didn’t say anything. Then, softly: “Juliana...this is my fault. I should have known it was possible for this to happen. It did not even occur to me when we—”

“You mean you didn’t think we could—” She looked at him. “I thought you said it was forbidden, not that it isn’t possible.”

“No. It is possible. I knew that. What I meant was that it is very rare—so rare that in almost every case when it occurred, magical intervention was necessary. While a dragon in human form is biologically identical to a true human, there are other factors involved that make natural conception a far more remote possibility than it is for two true humans.” He sighed. “It isn’t correct to say that I didn’t think it was possible—but rather that it did not occur to me to consider the possibility because of its remoteness. You had no way to know what might happen, and I didn’t tell you. That makes it my fault. I will *not* make you suffer for my mistake.” His voice was soft, but held an edge of adamance.

She got up and moved over to sit on the edge of his chair, putting her hand on his shoulder. “Gabriel, listen to me. We’re going to figure this out, and we’re going to do

it in whatever way we have to so you don't get in trouble with the other dragons. You said I got to make the decision, right?"

He nodded without looking at her.

"All right, then—that's the first part of my decision. What I need help from is how to make the rest of it." She reached down and gently tilted his chin up, forcing him to look into her eyes. "Okay?"

This time she felt his nod, but she could still see the reluctance in his eyes. He took a deep breath as if gathering his strength, then pulled away from her and turned so he could look up at her. "I must ask you some questions, and you must promise to be honest with me, no matter how much you think it might hurt me. Can you do that?"

She paused, then nodded. "That's what I'm asking you to do, so I can't very well do any less."

He got up and began pacing the room, pausing every once in awhile and then resuming again. At last he stopped in front of her. "Do you want to terminate the pregnancy?"

She had thought the answer would be difficult for her, but it followed in a whisper immediately after his question: "No."

Gabriel nodded. "Do you want to keep the child and raise him?"

Kestrel wasn't sure if she detected an odd edge in his voice, but regardless, she found the answer to this question to be much more nebulous. "I—don't know," she said at last, lowering her head.

Gabriel's voice was still gentle. "It isn't necessary to make a decision yet, but you must decide soon."

She looked rather miserable. "I know...it's just—" Now it was her turn to get up and begin to pace. "The question about—having him—You know, I never thought

I'd get pregnant, at least not until I was ready and had everything planned out. That's something that happens to other people, not to me. Teenage girls have accidental pregnancies, not somebody like me. But I always thought that if it happened and I wasn't ready, I'd just—go to the doctor and have it taken care of." She looked up at him. "Weird, huh? Now here I am in exactly that situation, I barely even feel any different...I certainly can't feel him in there or anything...but yet, I feel like it's kinda my fault he's there. It doesn't seem fair to him to just...tell him, *sorry, kid, but I screwed up and you're gonna pay for it.*" She paused again, looking into Gabriel's eyes. "That's not all it is, though. I still think if this had been a different situation—if it was just one of the guys I slept with and didn't really care about—I still could have done it without much remorse. But this—with what you mean to me, and the fact that he's a part of you, a part of *us*—" She spread her hands futilely. "Am I making sense, or am I just babbling?"

"You're making sense," he said softly. "I understand."

Kestrel dropped back down into a chair with a loud sigh. "I want to give him a chance, but I'm not sure I'm ready to be 'mom' yet. I also know that if I have him and decide to raise him with you around, somebody's going to figure it out. If not some dragon, then somebody else. It's too risky, I think. But I don't know what the alternative would be. It seems wrong to just—put him up for adoption."

Gabriel was silent, watching her with a serious expression as she spoke. He appeared to be deep in thought.

"Am I right?" Kestrel asked him. "That somebody might catch on, I mean?"

He nodded reluctantly. "If you go through the pregnancy in public, bear the child and raise him here in

Seattle, yes—I think someone might make the connection.”

She tilted her head. “You said ‘here in Seattle.’ Are you saying that you think it might be easier somewhere else?”

“I don’t know, Juliana.” He paused. “If you were to leave Seattle, go somewhere else and raise him there, it is possible that no one would know.”

“But...” She looked at him, hearing what he was not saying. “...you said ‘if I were to leave’. You wouldn’t be able to go with me, would you?”

“No,” he said softly. “If we were together with the child, I believe the danger would follow. He would be at risk.”

“And you...”

He did not answer.

Kestrel took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay,” she said. “So far, our options are to...end it, which I don’t want to do, or for me to go off somewhere and raise him without you. I don’t like either of those. What else have we got?”

Again Gabriel didn’t answer, but Kestrel could see in his eyes that he was on to something—something he didn’t like.

“Gabriel—what is it? What are you thinking?”

He looked up at her with haunted eyes. “There is a solution,” he said softly, “but I do not think you will like it.”

She moved over next to him. “I haven’t liked the two I’ve come up with, either, so you might as well let me hear it.”

For a long moment he didn’t speak. Then he looked up at her again. “The safest way for the child, I think...is if you were to bear him in secret. Hide the pregnancy until the child is born, and then find someone else to raise him.

I know you don't like the idea of giving him up to a stranger, but his best chance for survival is if no one can make the connection between him and...us."

Kestrel closed her eyes, surprised at how much his words were affecting her. Two days ago she would have given just about anything to have this whole situation erased from her life, and now here she was agonizing about the fate of a child who hadn't even existed a month ago. "In...secret..." she said slowly. "How could I do that? Can you magically hide the pregnancy?"

"Yes...but I don't think that would be the best way. It would be risky—even with my power, it is possible that someone more powerful might see through the illusion."

"Then...what *would* be the best way?" She was afraid she already knew the answer.

For a moment it seemed that he would not meet her eyes, and then he forced himself to do so. "The best way," he said, his voice taking on a bit of a husky edge, "would be if you were to go somewhere where no one who did not already know the truth would encounter you until the child is born."

She stared at him. "Gabriel...you mean...you think I should go spend the next eight months at your lair?" The thought stunned her a bit. She loved Gabriel's lair, but the thought of spending the better part of the next year there without the chance to go anywhere else—"I—I don't know if I can do that."

Gabriel nodded. "I know. I understand. We could try to find another place—a place where we could remain until the time came—"

"—but your lair would be the safest," she finished.

He nodded again. This time he didn't look at her. "I don't want to do this to you, Juliana. I wish there was an alternative. I told you I would do whatever you wish and

I will – but if you ask me for the safest alternative, I must tell you the truth. I owe you that.”

Kestrel sighed. This situation was getting harder to keep straight by the minute.

4.

Several thousand miles away from where Gabriel and Kestrel were discussing their options, a small, elderly prop plane buzzed its slow and methodical way across the muggy skies over Amazonia.

In the back of the plane, in a patched and stained seat that was a far cry from his usual first-class travel preferences, Alastair Stone slumped against the cloudy window and idly watched as the verdant countryside rolled by beneath the plane's wing. Contrary to what anyone who knew him might have expected, his expression was not one of disgust or discomfort, but rather of controlled excitement. He was tired now, but that hadn't done much to dim the light in his bright blue eyes.

This was going to be fun.

He shifted, trying to get comfortable in a seat whose springs had most likely sprung before he was born, and checked his seat belt again. It had an annoying habit of popping loose when he twisted the wrong way, so he had developed the practice of tugging on it every few minutes to make sure it was still doing its job. He hadn't wanted to take it off, as there had been a lot of turbulence in the last hour or so.

He noticed that the other passengers had likewise chosen to keep their belts on. There were eight in the passenger compartment in addition to himself: five graduate students, one other professor, and two local guides who had been hired by the University to handle the logistics of the trip. Two of the grad students were from Applied Thaumaturgy, two from Parabotany, and one from Parazoology. The other professor, a balding and rather bookish soul named Dr. Henry Whittaker,

currently had his nose buried in a laptop computer and looked as if he was trying desperately not to get airsick.

Stone smiled to himself, glad that Whittaker had found something else to occupy his time for awhile. Stone didn't know Whittaker—they had met only yesterday as they boarded the plane out of Heathrow that had flown them to Miami on the first leg of the trip, but he suspected that the little Parabotany professor knew him. Or at least knew *of* him, which might be worse. Whittaker had been casting nervous glances Stone's way almost since they had gotten on the first plane, only at times when he thought Stone wasn't looking. The trouble was, after the first couple of times, Stone *pretended* not to look but still kept close track of the number of glances.

He probably thinks I'll come unhinged any second now and start tossing manabolts around the cabin.

Stone couldn't completely blame Whittaker for that particular observation, assuming that it was true. It had, after all, only been a month or so since...the incident.

His mind drifted back to his return to the University after he and his friends had finally dealt with the situation on the metaplanes. He hadn't called ahead or made any kind of appointment, but somehow Rodney Leifeld had known he was coming when he'd shown up in Leifeld's office one afternoon. That sort of news travelled fast indeed.

Rodney, to his credit, had proven that his friendship with Stone had not been diminished by the recent events. He had asked few questions, but simply sat back and listened as Stone had explained as much as he could about what had happened. Stone had had to alter a bit of the story, of course—to do otherwise would have drawn in other individuals whose stories he had no right to tell—but in the end his old mentor had accepted the story of a metaplanar menace that had become particularly attuned

to Stone after a nasty quest, and the fact that said menace had been successfully dealt with by some of Stone's more powerful friends from America.

Rodney's friendship was proven to an even greater extent when Stone had asked if there was something he could do—now that he was free of the unpleasantness, he wanted nothing more than to “get back in the saddle” and try to forget the whole thing as quickly as possible. Rodney had come through with just the thing: there was a graduate-level excursion to Amazonia planned to allow the students to study the indigenous flora, fauna, and magical phenomena, but the husband of one of the professors who had signed on to accompany the group had taken suddenly very ill and therefore the professor would be unable to go. They had been prepared to cancel the trip, but if Stone would like to take the professor's place, then—

Stone had accepted readily, even though it would mean he would only have a few days at home before the trip was due to depart. “It might be just the thing I need,” he told Rodney. “A chance to clear my head a bit and get away from the familiar.”

“I was hoping you'd say that,” Rodney told him. He smiled warmly and his eyes showed more emotion than was normal for him. “I'm glad to have you back, Alastair,” he said softly.

“I'm glad to be back,” he answered in the same tone. Then he smiled rather impishly. “You didn't think you lot could get rid of me *that* easily, did you?”

“Wait until you see the plane you're going to be flying in,” Rodney joked.

Wait, indeed.

Stone cursed softly under his breath as the little craft hit another pocket of turbulence and threw him sideways

into the window. Outside it had begun to rain—in this part of the world storms came up and calmed down even faster than in England, and this one looked like it was shaping up to be impressive. Stone watched the heavy drops spatter into the window, the wings, the engines as the choking gray clouds roiled and fought with each other for their pieces of the sky. He hoped the storm would settle before they landed; although their first night was to be spent in a small hotel in Iquitos, the plan was to head out first thing the next morning. It would take them the better part of two days to reach the designated campsite.

In front of him, Whittaker was looking positively green now. One of the parobotany students, a young woman named Catherine Merriwether, had twisted around in her seat and was digging in a small backpack. After a moment she came up with something in a packet, which she offered to Whittaker. He took it gratefully, albeit shakily, and swallowed its contents along with some water. A few moments later he relaxed and settled back.

Stone smiled in some relief. Whittaker's comfort aside, about the only thing that could have made this trip any worse was to have to share a small cabin with the aftermath of the professor's airsickness.

"Something funny, Dr. Stone?"

Stone turned to find his seatmate, applied thaumaturgy student Peter Hsu, watching him. Hsu, a tall, slender young elf with spiky black hair, probing eyes, and an impudent grin, seemed completely unaffected by the turbulence. "No," Stone said. "Nothing funny. Just wondering when we're going to land."

Hsu chuckled. "You like your planes a little more substantial, don't you?"

"Well, if given a choice, yes." Stone turned slightly toward him and adjusted his seatbelt again. "But for some things I'll make an exception."

Hsu nodded. "I must say, although I'm sorry of course that Dr. Zubinski's husband became ill, I'm glad you're going along in her place."

"And why is that?" Stone asked, even though he already knew the answer. When Hsu didn't answer right away, he added, "You think I'll liven things up a bit, don't you?"

"Well..."

Stone smiled and sighed in mock exasperation. He was pleased that he was popular with the students due to his unconventional methods, but the way some of them told things it wasn't possible for Alastair Stone to get involved in anything that *didn't* turn into an adventure. Occasionally a dangerous adventure. But then again, Dr. Martha Zubinski was not known for her ability to get students charged up about what they were doing. She was in her late forties going on sixty and preferred spending her time in the library rather than the lab. Stone suspected that she was probably glad to have the excuse not to go. Taking a deep breath, he shrugged. "To be honest, my friend, I would prefer *not* to liven things up too much this time. I'm sure you've heard that things have been a bit too lively even for *my* tastes of late."

Hsu looked sympathetic as he nodded. "I'm glad to see you're back and well, sir."

"That goes for both of us," Stone said, nodding in emphatic agreement. "That's not the sort of thing I'd wish on my worst enemy."

"But yet you're turning around and shepherding a bunch of grad students on a field trip," the young man teased. "Now *that's* what I call dedication."

Stone chuckled. "Dedication has nothing to do with it. It was either this or sit around at home with the caretaker of my house and an overly protective blackberry cat watching me for signs of incipient madness."

"Still, I have to tell you I'm not the only one who's glad you're along. Gina and I were half afraid we'd spend most of the trip peering at magically active algae."

"No worries about that," Stone assured him. "I'm sure Dr. Whittaker has that—" He stopped as the plane took another stomach-churning dip and then settled itself again. Out the window to his left, a bright bolt of lightning split the sky.

"Weather's getting worse," Hsu said. He glanced at his chrono. "I think we've still got an hour or so before we land. I hope the plane holds together."

"Indeed," Stone agreed, checking his seatbelt again.

Hsu subsided into silence and settled back, leaving Stone to try to find something else to concentrate on so he could avoid thinking about the likelihood that the plane would *not* hold together until they landed. He wished he could pull out his laptop and get some work done, but that meant getting up and right now that wasn't high on his list of desires. He sighed, leaning back. It wouldn't be long now. Just another hour or so and they'd be on the ground.

Around the cabin, the others appeared to have come to similar conclusions. Dr. Whittaker was clutching the arms of his seat so hard his knuckles were whitening, but he looked calmer than before. Next to him, Catherine Merriwether looked like she did this sort of thing every day. Behind them, the other Parabotany student, Ram Prakesh, was deep in conversation with the second Thaumaturgy student, Gina Kane. In front of Stone, Kevin Frasier was reading a magazine, oblivious to the pitching and rolling of the tiny plane. Stone suspected that Frasier

would be oblivious to just about anything frightening: tall, muscular, and a little too fearless for his own good, the lone Parazoology student had a reputation for getting himself into—and out of—scrapes that would get other students killed. Stone liked him.

Finally, up at the front of the cabin and looking somewhat nervous, were the two guides, ork Gustavo Santiago and human Diego Corazón. Both were battle-hardened, capable-looking men in their mid-thirties, although at the moment they both looked like they'd rather be on the ground dealing with some of Amazonia's more virulent flora and fauna than imprisoned on this rickety plane several thousand feet up. Currently they were talking in hushed tones to each other and casting furtive glances toward the closed door leading to the plane's cockpit.

Stone leaned back in his chair, tightened his seatbelt again, and closed his eyes. There was no chance he'd sleep on this roller-coaster of a flight, but perhaps he could at least rest. Once they landed it was going to be a whirlwind of gathering equipment, finalizing arrangements, and preparing to set out again from Iquitos the next morning, so he figured it would be wise to get his rest in when he could. Besides, with the sky darkening to a resolute slate gray outside the windows, there wasn't much to look at anyway. Just a little rest—

A loud *crack* rudely broke through the low hubbub of conversation, accompanied by a flash of bright light. Stone's eyes flew open as the plane lurched sharply to the side, smacking his head against the window. He yelped in pain but the pain was soon forgotten as more important considerations claimed his thoughts.

Around the cabin the passengers, even the stalwart Frasier, were looking around nervously as the plane continued pitching crazily back and forth. The sky outside

was choked with dark clouds, and a hard rain pattered against the small craft's skin. The ominous sound of thunder crashed all around them, accompanied by another bolt of bright lightning.

"What's going on?" Stone demanded. He realized that one of the guides, Santiago, wasn't in his seat anymore and looked around for him. "Where's Santiago?"

"He went up to talk to the pilots a couple of minutes ago," Peter Hsu told him. "You were asleep."

"Is there a problem?" As if to punctuate his words another peal of thunder rolled across the sky and the plane dipped to the right.

"Nobody knows yet. I —"

"Shh." Stone put his finger up for silence and listened. There was something subtly wrong, a sound, but he couldn't place its location. It was —

It was one of the plane's engines. The low comforting drone of one of the props was off somehow. The note was wrong, the discord between it and its counterpart just enough out of phase to attract Stone's notice.

"What is it?" Hsu demanded in a harsh whisper. "What do you hear?"

Stone didn't answer. He looked around the cabin at the faces of his fellow passengers and saw only unfocused fear—except on Frasier's. Their eyes met for a moment and the young man dipped his head in a slight nod, his eyes cutting meaningfully toward the left side of the plane.

At that moment two things happened: the door to the cockpit opened and Gustavo Santiago emerged, looking pale under his deep tan, and the prop whose subtle wrongness had just claimed Stone's attention sputtered and stopped.

“Oh my God!” Henry Whittaker cried as Santiago quickly dropped into his seat and fastened his belt. “We’re going to crash!”

If anyone was hoping for comforting words from Santiago to refute Whittaker’s near-hysterical claim, they got none. “Everyone strap in,” the guide called, his voice hoarse. Already all the passengers could feel the plane losing altitude. “The pilots are going to attempt an emergency landing before the second engine fails.”

5.

Kestrel stared down at her feet for a moment longer, then forced herself to change the subject. "Okay," she said. "I don't know if I like the idea of staying at your lair or not, but let's put it aside for a minute and think about the other half of the situation. What do we do after he's born?"

For a long time Gabriel didn't answer. When he did speak at last, his voice was soft and full of regret. "As I said...the wisest thing to do would be to find someone to raise him—someone who does not know us and thus not permit anyone to connect the child with us."

Kestrel nodded slowly. "But..." she said, not looking at him, "I'm not sure I want to just—give him to a stranger. Whoever raises him—I want to be able to keep track of them, even if it's just knowing where they live. I know I—we—won't be able to visit him, but I want to be able to know he's all right...that they're not—" She sighed.

"—That they're treating him well," Gabriel finished gently. "I understand." He thought a moment. "I know little about methods of adoption in this society—it isn't something I've ever had cause to research."

"Usually you just give the child up and the authorities pick a family to adopt him," Kestrel told him, getting up to pace again. "The birth parents don't even know who that is, unless special arrangements are made. It's supposed to be better for the child that way. Sometimes adoptions are arranged between the birth parents—usually the mother, because in most cases like this the father's out of the picture—and the adoptive family, but that wouldn't be an option for us either."

"So we need something halfway between the two." Gabriel nodded. "A way for us to know who will raise him, but not for them to know us."

Kestrel sighed loudly as she was hit once again by the unreality of the whole thing. The discussion still had a certain abstract feel to it, as if they were discussing the hypothetical future of some hypothetical child. "And we can't even do too much research about *that*," she reminded him, "because if anybody catches us poking around looking for information about adoptions, they're going to get wise in a hurry."

Gabriel nodded reluctantly. "Unfortunately, it is an area where my power means little. I have, as I am sure you do, access to deckers who can do such research with no trace, but even the most trustworthy of deckers would not be able to withstand the scrutiny of a dragon, should one become interested."

"So we need somebody else—somebody we can trust—to find us someone," Kestrel said. "What would be best is if they could set it up and then somehow...forget about the whole thing afterward, so they—" She stopped, her eyes widening. "Wait a second. I think I have an idea!"

Gabriel tilted his head questioningly and waited.

She took a deep breath, staring off into nothing as if working the question out in her mind. "Do you think—" her gaze settled back on Gabriel "—that if we could find someone like that who'd be willing, you would consider using a little dragon magic on them to make them forget?"

"I don't understand," Gabriel said, leaning forward a bit. "I don't think there's anyone like that who—"

"Harry," Kestrel said in triumph, nodding once for emphasis. "It's perfect, Gabriel, if he's willing. He already knows about you so we wouldn't have to reveal your secret to anyone else...plus, he's got more contacts than anybody I know except maybe you. If he'd consent to—"

Gabriel sighed. "I don't know, Juliana. I don't like to use that sort of magic on anyone, and why would he consent? He has no reason to trust that I would do only what I suggested and no more."

"Is there anyone else?" Kestrel moved a little closer to him, looking into his eyes. "There aren't that many options. The team can't do it—Ocelot wouldn't know anybody like that, and Winterhawk, if he does, would probably only know people in England. I'd like to keep the kid a little closer to home than that if possible. Joe and 'Wraith—I doubt they'd know anyone either and besides, we don't even know where they are right now. Whatever decision we make, we need to make it fairly quickly."

Gabriel met her gaze silently for a few moments, then got up and went over to the window, staring down at the Seattle skyline below. It was a hazy day fed by a noncommittal sun, the sort of day that couldn't quite decide what it wanted to be. "What concerns me," he said at last, "is what happens if he refuses. I would not blame him for doing so—even with magic involved he would put himself at risk by helping us. If we tell him what we want and he refuses, then he will have the knowledge. I won't take it from him without his consent. That puts not only Harry but you and the child at risk. The more people who know about this, the greater the risk will be."

Kestrel pondered that, nodding slowly. Caught up in her idea, she hadn't thought about what might happen if Harry said no. Sighing, she levered herself up off the couch and joined Gabriel at the window. When he didn't turn, she silently observed him for a few moments, noting as she often did the irony of what he was versus what he appeared to be at the moment. She had never asked him why he had chosen that particular guise—why he presented himself to the world as a man barely out of boyhood, a young man with sim-star looks who got

noticed wherever he went. He certainly didn't have an ounce of pretension in him, and although Kestrel had on occasion seen him show flashes of arrogance or vanity, neither had ever been hurtful or malicious toward anyone. She supposed it was just part of what he truly was—after all, dragons—especially the Great Dragons—were so far above common metahumanity in intelligence and wisdom that Kestrel wondered if their relations with the younger races were sort of like the relationship a human might have with a particularly smart and beloved animal, like an ape who could communicate using sign language. She wondered sometimes if Gabriel ever thought of her and her friends that way, but couldn't bring herself to believe it. She suspected that he was a bit of a special case, though, probably because of his youth. Another thing she occasionally wondered about was if his attitudes toward her and toward humanity would change as he grew older and began to take his place among his own society. She didn't worry about that much, though, because much as she hated to think about it, she knew that she would not be around to see it. None of them would. Even the three- or four-hundred year lifespans of the elves (most of them, anyway) were nothing to the eons in which dragons moved. *And here I am getting ready to have a baby with one of them. Life just keeps getting weirder every day.*

He was watching her now, his violet eyes quiet and patient. She wondered when he had turned. "Sorry...just thinking."

"I'd be surprised if you weren't." His voice was soft.

She sighed again and watched a small plane as it rose up into the sky and disappeared into the haze. "I'm out of ideas, Gabriel. If we can't trust Harry, I just don't know anybody else to turn to."

He moved a little closer, putting a gentle hand on her arm. "I am willing to trust Harry if that is what you want, Juliana. Again, I am simply warning you about the possible consequences. If we are to be successful in keeping the child safe, we must try to anticipate as many moves as we can."

Kestrel nodded. "I know. I have to learn to think like a dragon, right?"

He smiled a little. "No. Let me do that part. I want you to think like a human. That way, between the two of us, we'll have a better chance of covering all the eventualities."

Kestrel was silent for a long time, looking out the window and trying to rack her brain for any other way they could find a safe and secret home for the child. She paced around, considering her own family, old college friends, old acquaintances from her past in Boston—but every time, she continued to come back to the same problem: all of them were too close to her, and if anyone traced the child to her then they could trace him back to Gabriel. At least if Harry found someone for them, there wouldn't be any connection between the two. But if they told Harry, then they'd have to reveal the details of Gabriel's involvement—

—or would they?

"Gabriel!" She spun around, nearly tripping over the couch as an idea struck her.

Startled, he turned away from the window and was next to her in a burst of motion almost too fast to follow. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes—I'm fine." Her voice was edged with excitement and impatience. "I think I've got an idea."

He steered her over to the couch and sat facing her. "Tell me."

She paused for breath for a moment before continuing. "The problem with telling Harry is that we'd have to let him know you're the baby's father, right? We'd have to trust that he'd agree to help us, and the problem would come in if he refused, right?"

Gabriel nodded.

"What if we didn't have to tell him you were the father?"

His eyes showed confusion. "I don't—"

She leaned forward and gripped his forearms. "What if we could tell Harry that someone *else* was the baby's father? Someone who'd be a logical choice, who he'd believe—and who would have almost as much of a reason as you would to keep a kid secret?"

Gabriel's expression suggested that light was dawning and that his mind was trying hard to keep it in the dark. "Kestrel—"

"Ocelot!" she finished in a burst. "If we told Harry the child was his, then that would solve the problem and he wouldn't even have to know you were involved."

Gabriel held up a hand in a *stop* motion. "Juliana, slow down. First of all, I doubt he'd ever consent to it. You know as well as I do—probably better—his feelings about the two of us. Why would he do it? And second, Harry is one of the most intelligent humans I know, and one of the shrewdest. The first thing he's going to ask is why you came to him instead of to me. Considering his knowledge of my secret and of our close working relationship, he would certainly wonder, would he not?"

Kestrel wasn't willing to give up her plan. "We can work on that, Gabriel. I think we can convince Ocelot to go for it as long as he's not in any danger—and why would he be? If we can take you out of the equation then this becomes a simple case of a couple of shadowrunners getting pregnant and wanting to find a home for the kid

away from the dangers of the shadow life. No dragons would be sniffing around two puny humans and their illegitimate child—why could they possibly care? And as for why we’d ask Harry instead of you—Harry knows Ocelot isn’t crazy about you. Maybe Ocelot would insist on going to somebody he trusted fully and I went along with it.” She let her breath out and looked into Gabriel’s eyes. “What do you think? Could it work?”

The young man’s expression had been changing as she spoke, from denial to grudging interest. “It could,” he admitted, reluctance warring with hope in his tone. “Of course, the hardest part is going to be convincing Ocelot to go along with it. Do you realize how he’s likely to react when he finds out about your...condition—and especially how you came to be in that condition?”

Kestrel nodded soberly. “Yeah. That’s going to be the hard part, all right. He’ll probably tell me to go frag myself—and I can’t say I’d blame him for it. But even after everything that’s gone on, he’s still a good friend. He might go along with it, especially if he doesn’t have to do anything but let us borrow his name for awhile.”

Gabriel’s eyes were very serious. “And if he refuses? If he’s angry with you? Juliana, I am sure you know how much I value his friendship, but the fact does remain that he is not the most...emotionally stable person in the world. He could cause more trouble than Harry if he lost his composure at the wrong time—or within earshot of the wrong people.”

“I know.” Her voice was soft and full of resignation. “I know. I trust him. I don’t think he’d let the secret out even if he refused to help. But this one’s got to be up to you, Gabriel. I won’t make the decision, because it’s not me who’s got the most to lose here. Like I said, you have to live with the consequences of this for the rest of your

life—which is a whole lot longer than mine. So you decide, and I'll go along with your decision."

Gabriel's gaze never wavered from her face, searching her eyes. Silence hung in the air as the seconds stretched out into minutes. Kestrel remained still, enduring his gentle scrutiny, until at last he lowered his eyes and sighed. "Let's go talk to him," he said softly. "All he can say is no."

Kestrel knew better, and she suspected Gabriel did too, but it would have to do for now.

6.

The inside of the plane's cabin had degenerated into a state of barely controlled panic. Outside the storm raged on, and the remaining engine roared in protest as it was forced to compensate for the loss of its counterpart. The plane bucked and jumped wildly, flinging the passengers back and forth in their seats and continuing to lose altitude at a steady pace.

Alastair Stone struggled to keep his seatbelt fastened, then finally gave up and stood, gripping the seat backs to keep himself balanced against the plane's pitching. Peter Hsu gave him a look of wild-eyed fear and was going to say something, but Stone didn't give him the chance, moving quickly back and dropping into another vacant seat two rows behind and across the aisle just as the plane gave another mighty heave upward followed by a steep drop. Thankfully, this seat's belt functioned correctly, and he got it fastened in just enough time to avoid being slammed into the ceiling.

Gina Kane was across the aisle from him. She looked over at him, her eyes full of fear, her hands gripping the arms of her seat. "I don't want to die, Dr. Stone," she whispered.

Stone shook his head. "We're not going to die, Ms. Kane. Planes like these are designed to glide—they can make emergency landings even without engine power. It's not like one of the big jetliners." He forced himself to sound calm, even though he was anything but: he had no idea if his words were correct, or if he was saying them only to calm the student—and himself. "Besides," he added, "We've still got one engine. If they can get down low enough before it fails, we'll have a good chance. Who knows—they might even be able to land before it goes."

"Do you really believe that?" came Peter Hsu's voice from Stone's former row. "That they can land, I mean? Look at the jungle down there. There's no place to set down a plane." His voice was strained, his expression suggesting that he was desperately trying to make himself believe Stone knew what he was talking about.

Stone glanced forward at the two guides, who looked terrified, and weighed his words. "I have to believe it, Mr. Hsu," he said at last. "I'm not a trained pilot, so I have to trust that those who are know what they're doing."

Hsu looked like he was going to say something else, but he never got it out—the plane pitched sideways, the wing with the nonfunctional engine dipping down while the other tilted upward. All around them computer tablets, loose carryon bags, and other unsecured items rolled around on the floor and came to rest first against the left wall, then back into the middle of the aisleway as the plane righted itself again.

Stone listened, realizing that something had changed again. It took him only a moment to identify it: the remaining functional engine had changed tone, sounding very much like the way the other one had sounded before it gave out. He gritted his teeth and looked around, noting that once again Kevin Frasier appeared to have noticed while the others had not. He turned in his seat, trying to look out the window to see how far up they still were, but there was no chance: even though it was only mid-afternoon it was dark outside, made so by the roiling clouds that had taken over the sky and the sheets of rain that poured from them. He wondered where they were, how far they had been blown off course by the whipping winds.

The cabin lights went off, plunging them into deep dimness. Someone screamed, and then there was a popping sound from somewhere up front. The engine

whined, screaming with defiance, and the plane tilted downward on a steeper angle. "They're taking it down faster," Frasier said unnecessarily. "That means —"

The engine's whine grew higher and higher, louder and louder, and then sputtered and died. The absence of its sound was for a moment eerie, replaced by nothing but the unceasing patter of the rain hitting the cabin and the low moans of the passengers—moans that instantly became cries of panic. "Oh, God!" cried Dr. Whittaker, his voice bright with terror. "We're going to crash!" As if heeding his words, the plane made another downward tilt and seemed to pick up speed.

Alastair Stone didn't scream, though he did clamp his hands tightly on his seat-arms as Gina Kane had done. *Think, damn you*, he ordered himself. *You're no use to anyone if you go to pieces!* His mind went over possibilities as fast as he could, but none seemed practical. He wondered at his own arrogance, thinking he could do anything to affect the situation. He was just a passenger. The pilots knew what to do—they would be relaying their location to the authorities via the radio, and soon after, someone would—

Suddenly Stone knew there *was* something he could do. Without a word to anyone, he re-checked his seatbelt to make sure it was tight, then closed his eyes and made himself concentrate. It wasn't a difficult magical technique, but in a situation like this, even simple things required focus. He formed the pattern in his mind and released it, rewarding himself with a tight little smile as the air shimmered in front of him. He had done it! But he wasn't done yet. Forcing himself once more to concentrate, he conveyed the necessary information, then with one final thought, released the shimmering ball of astral energy. It immediately shot upward, penetrating the roof of the plane as if it were not there. Stone didn't

try to follow it with his eyes, but slumped a little in his seat. *There. Let's just hope there's something left for them to find when they get the message.*

The plane bucked hard again, jolting out of his concentration. His head smacked against the soft headrest of the seat, then jerked forward. He vaguely became aware that people were yelling, and then suddenly the voice of one of the pilots rose above the hubbub in the cabin, crackling over the speaker. "Everyone get into crash position!" he called shrilly. "Everyone into —"

Stone didn't wait for further instructions. Even though he hadn't listened to an airline safety briefing in years, some things just stayed with you. He bent his body forward, wrapping his arms around his tucked head, and waited, hoping desperately that his last-ditch attempt to get them help was successful.

The roar increased. The plane seemed to be going down at a high rate of speed, but it also seemed to have leveled out some. The anticipation was almost worse than the fear—not knowing when it was going to happen. Stone's entire body was taut, his hands clenched together, beads of sweat growing on his forehead and running down his back. The passengers were silent now, except for the whispered mutterings of someone praying a couple of rows up.

"Here we go!" cried the pilot. "Hold on —"

Impact.

There was a loud scraping sound across the bottom of the plane and then an even louder *thump* followed immediately by a jarring crash that flung everyone forward against their seatbelts and then sideways. Stone barely even noticed as his head was slammed into the window. All around him people were screaming, but he couldn't make out individual voices or even tell if his was among them. The plane jerked again, hard, wrenching

itself first one way, then another as the wings tore off, then continuing to slide along slamming into trees and ripping them free of the ground.

It was all over in only a few seconds, but for a moment no one realized they had stopped. The screams continued, but the sound was both quieter and different now: some of the voices had been stilled, and some cried out from pain rather than panic.

Stone sat up slowly, assessing. His head hurt, but he didn't have time to notice that now. His middle hurt where the seat belt had dug into him, his hands where they'd been clenched, and his back from being wrenched sideways. But he was awake. He was alive.

Slowly he unbuckled his belt and rose. The acrid smell of smoke hung in the air, but he didn't see any evidence of fire. All around him people were either slumped in their seats, moaning in pain, or trying to get out of their belts. Kevin Frasier was already up—his face was bleeding and he walked with a limp, but otherwise seemed unhurt. "Frasier!" Stone called, then tried again when the first attempt came out as a weak croak.

"Dr. Stone." Kevin Frasier quickly made his way back to where Stone stood in the aisle. Up front one of the guides, Santiago, was heading back as well. The other one, Corazón, lay on the floor, moaning.

"We have to get everyone out of here," Stone said. He looked around. "I smell smoke."

It soon became clear that no one else on the plane was going to be any help to them. Everyone was injured to some degree, but even those with minor injuries milled around in shocked confusion, unsure of what to do. Frasier, with the help of Santiago, pried open the cabin's twisted door and looked down. "It's a bit of a drop down," he announced. "About two meters."

"What about the pilots?" Stone asked. "Can they tell us about emergency gear?"

Frasier and Santiago turned their attention to the cabin door, but they couldn't get it open. "They're probably injured. We'll have to go in from the outside."

Stone nodded. "Let's get started, then — we have to get people out of here."

And so began a feverish period of activity as the three of them hurried back and forth getting the injured out of the plane, then herding the shocked remaining passengers to follow. Stone's levitation magic was useful—he remained in the plane while Santiago helped or carried people to him and Frasier took charge of them down below. The rain still fell hard, drenching them all as they dragged the passengers into the small clearing the plane had made in its crash landing. Outside they could hear the cries of predators, but they didn't seem close and the rescuers didn't have time to notice them.

Nobody noticed how long it took to get everyone out, but after what seemed like an eternity the last passenger, Gina Kane, was lowered down into Frasier's waiting arms. Stone dropped down after her. "That's done," he said grimly. "I doubt the plane will catch fire in this rain, but if something nasty and chemical starts pumping fumes into the cabin, we won't be there to breathe them."

Frasier nodded, looking every bit as grim as Stone. "True—but we're not out of trouble yet."

"At least it appears we're all alive," Stone said. "We—we—" He didn't finish, because at that moment he was overcome with a sudden wave of dizziness that seemed to originate in the spot where he'd hit his head—the injury he'd forgotten about until now. "We can't—"

Frasier caught him as his knees gave out and he pitched forward.

7.

Kestrel paced around the living room of her townhouse, glancing up at the chrono on the kitchen wall. Fifteen minutes — that was when Ocelot was due.

Everything was set up — she'd even cleaned up the place, which wasn't something she did for just any old reason. When she'd called him earlier, she had just said that she had something she wanted to talk to him about, something she needed his help with, but given no details beyond that. She had been careful not to make it sound like any sort of romantic invitation. Just a friend in need of someone to talk to. He had agreed to come by at seven and she had promised to pick up some takeout chicken to save him the indignity of having to endure her attempts at cooking.

She was more nervous than a teenager on her first date.

By mutual agreement Gabriel was not here. They had discussed things further earlier in the day and come to the conclusion that it would probably be better if Kestrel broke the news to Ocelot on her own. The meet at Kestrel's place was a nod to the fact that Ocelot might not take things well and it would be best if they weren't in public.

She was rearranging the plates on the table for the third time when the knock came. He was early. She was almost relieved.

"Hi," he said when she opened the door. He looked past her almost as if expecting to see someone else in the room, but shrugged when he didn't. "What's up?"

Kestrel smiled nervously. "Hi. C'mon in." She stood aside to let him go past her, watching him move. He was dressed in his usual outfit of snug jeans, leather jacket, T-shirt, and motorcycle boots. She still hadn't gotten used to

his newly short hair, which was just beginning to grow out again after a month – it would take a lot longer than a month for it to regain the length it had been before the Pit personnel had hacked it off. Right now it was in that shaggy not-quite-short, not-quite-long stage. Kestrel found it strangely sexy.

Naturally he knew something was up. She could tell that by the way he looked at her, half suspicious, half worried but trying not to let on. He waited silently in the entryway as she moved back past him.

“Hungry?” she asked, hating herself for the awkwardness in her voice. She wished she could just blurt it out like she had with Gabriel, get it over with, but she knew that wouldn’t be the right approach. Ocelot required a bit more...preparation to get him into the right frame of mind.

He shook his head. “I’ll take a beer if you’ve got one, though.”

She nodded and handed him one from the fridge, wondering if he’d want something stronger before they were done. As an afterthought even though she didn’t really want it, she grabbed one for herself and then went back out to the living room, where she sat down on the couch.

Ocelot eyed her oddly for a moment, then sat down next to her. “What’s this about? I can see you’ve got something on your mind – why don’t we get it out so we can talk about it.”

He was trying to be supportive. She could see that, even though she could also see he was confused. *I wonder if in his wildest thoughts he’s even got an idea of what I’m about to say. Is this the right thing to do? Maybe I can just –*

He gave her a ghost of his old smile and put his hand on her arm. “What’s wrong? It can’t be that bad, can it?”

You don't know the half of it. "Ocelot, I—" She let her breath out slowly, then plunged in. "I need your help."

"Yeah, you said that on the phone. That's why I'm here. What's going on?"

"Just—let me get this out, okay? It's not easy for me, and I don't think it'll be easy for you to hear it. But I want you to promise to hear me out. Will you do that?"

The suspicion in his eyes stepped up a notch, but only a notch. "Yeah. I'll hear you out."

She could see the gears turning in his mind as he tried to anticipate what she might be planning to tell him. She didn't know where to start, because every entry point into the conversation represented a spot where he could potentially lose his cool, which would then make it more difficult to tell him the rest. She took another deep breath. "The—the reason it's so important that you hear the whole story before you decide what to do is because the safety of an innocent person could be in a lot of danger if you don't."

"I said I'd hear you out," Ocelot pointed out, leaning forward. "Come on, Kestrel. You know me that well. I don't know what you're afraid of, but don't worry about it. I said I'd help, so I'll help." His pale blue, catlike eyes searched her face, still holding a mixture of worry, suspicion, and wariness.

She looked down into her lap for a moment, one hand almost unconsciously moving to her abdomen for a moment. It was still as flat as ever, with no evidence of what was to come. Her eyes fixed on his as she finally spoke. "I—I'm pregnant, Ocelot."

For a moment he stiffened, drawing back a bit, his face flitting through a progression of expressions from shock to anger to denial to resignation in the space of a few short seconds. "You're—"

Kestrel nodded. "Yeah. And that's not the whole story. But that's one of the big parts."

Her words were not lost on him. "*One* of the big parts..."

"Yeah." She paused. "The baby's not yours...but you knew that, right?"

Ocelot nodded slowly. The two of them had not been together since before she and Gabriel had taken off for their trip around the world several months ago. "How—long have you known?" He kept his voice carefully flat and neutral, although it was hard to tell if he was doing it to keep himself under control or just to be non-judgmental.

"A few days."

"And—you're sure?"

She nodded. "I've had it confirmed by...two pregnancy tests and...two experts. I was kinda in denial about it myself."

Ocelot let his breath out slowly. Kestrel recognized it as one of his ways to give himself a little time to think before having to respond. There was something odd in his eyes, but it was hard to tell what it was. "Uh...okay. You're pregnant. But—what do you want me to do about it?" Apparently he realized that hadn't come out quite the way he'd intended, because he added, "How can I help you? This isn't exactly my area."

Kestrel looked down at her lap again. There was an elephant in the room, trying desperately to hide itself behind the fake potted plant in the corner—the question that she knew Ocelot wanted to ask and that she wanted to tell him. "That's not the whole story. Like I said, there's more to it. The other big part."

Ocelot nodded, making a 'go on' gesture.

Instead of speaking, Kestrel got up and began pacing the room, glancing back at Ocelot on the couch every few

seconds. She was a bit surprised that he hadn't already done the same thing—he usually had a harder time than she did remaining still when he was nervous or uptight. After a few moments of pacing, she turned back to him. "The other big part," she said slowly, "is the part I mentioned before—the part where an innocent is going to be in danger if I handle this wrong. That's why I'm being so careful. You promised to hear me out, and you're doing that. But Ocelot—I need you to promise me that, no matter what you decide to do about this after I tell you, you won't put this innocent person in danger by your actions. Can you promise me that?"

For a long moment Ocelot didn't answer. The suspicion was rising in his eyes again. "Kestrel, I don't get it. You're not making any sense. You want me to help you, but you won't tell me anything. You're givin' me riddles here. What's going on?" Rising, he moved over to her.

She didn't answer, looking out the window at the passing cars on the street. It was odd, she often thought, that you could be going through some sort of emotional upheaval inside your home—a conversation like this, or even something far worse like death or a great sickness—and yet outside the window, life went on as if nothing was wrong. She watched a blue American meander its way down the street and disappear around the corner, then switched her attention to a woman pushing a baby in a stroller. The woman stopped for a moment to crouch down and speak to the baby, then they moved on. "Oh, hell, Ocelot. I trust you. There aren't many people in this world I trust more than you. I'll just have to tell you and trust that you'll do the right thing." She turned back around and looked into his eyes. "The other big thing is who the baby's father is."

Ocelot didn't answer, but continued to watch her. The suspicion was gone now, at least for the moment, to be replaced by something harder to read.

Kestrel took a deep breath. "Ocelot...the baby's father...is Gabriel."

He didn't move. He didn't stiffen. In fact, he could have been carved from stone for all the reaction he had to her revelation. He merely stood there, eyes still fixed on her face, and waited.

"Ocelot?" She put her hand on his arm. "Ocelot, say something. Please."

He was silent for a few more seconds. When he spoke, it was only one word: "Gabriel."

She nodded slowly. "Yeah."

He met her gaze again, shaking his head a bit as if trying to clear cobwebs from it. "You're...sure about this."

Again she nodded. "He was...one of the experts who confirmed it."

"So...he knows about it already."

"Yeah." She moved back over to the couch and sank down, suddenly weary. "Yeah...and not exactly on purpose, either. When I found out, he was the first one I told. I figured it had to be...one of the guys I met while we were traveling. Never in a million years did I think it could be—"

"I didn't even think that was possible." His voice held a strange tone, similar to the look he'd had in his eyes before—a little sullen, a little angry, but mostly just confused.

"Neither did I. But...it is. Gabriel confirmed it. He was pretty shocked about it himself."

Ocelot turned and came back over, but didn't sit down. "So—what, he didn't know it was possible either?"

She shook her head. "He knew. But he said it was so remote that it almost never happened without magical help."

"And you didn't have any magical help." This time he couldn't keep the tinge of bitterness out of his voice.

"Ocelot—"

"No, it's okay. It's okay..." He finally allowed himself to drop into the chair opposite her. "So—I guess the question's the same one as before: what do you want me to do about it? Why aren't you handling this with him?"

She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then back at Ocelot. "I am handling it with him. That's part of why I need your help."

"I don't get it. But then, I don't get a lot of things here." He leaned forward. "You're going to go through with this? Are you even sure the kid's going to be—"

"What? Human? Normal?" She sighed. "Not completely. That's the other part of the story. The part about the innocent."

"Are you talking about the baby, or Gabriel? Because Gabriel isn't exactly—"

She held up her hand. "In a way, I'm talking about both of them. None of this is Gabriel's fault. I talked him into what we did. It was my idea. But mostly it's the baby I'm worried about. It's not his fault that any of this happened."

"His?" Ocelot gaze sharpened. "So—you already know, or is it just wishful thinking?"

Kestrel sighed. "I already know. Gabriel told me about it when he confirmed the pregnancy—and that it was his. But listen to me, Ocelot. This is the important part." She paused a moment, looking down at her hands, then back up. "If anybody finds out about this, Gabriel could be in a lot of trouble—and it could be even worse for the baby."

"Wait a second." Ocelot leaned forward, gripping the arms of his chair. "What kind of trouble? Who's gonna find out?"

"Dragons."

"Dragons? You mean—they've got a problem with this?"

Kestrel nodded. "A big one. That's how I know Gabriel was serious when he said he never thought this could happen. See, what happened was forbidden in dragon society. If any of them find out what we did—about the baby—Gabriel will get banished from his society and the baby—"

"What about the baby?" Ocelot asked in a low voice.

"They'll kill him," she whispered.

Ocelot was silent, taking that in. "Man," he said after a long pause, "You don't get yourself into *simple* problems, do you? You're getting to be worse than 'Hawk.'"

"Will you help us?" Kestrel's voice was soft, gentle, pleading.

Another long pause. "Kestrel, I don't even see what you want me to do. If Gabriel can't handle this, how do you expect me to—"

"I want you to pretend to be the baby's father."

"What?"

Kestrel nodded, ignoring his shocked expression. "We've been thinking a lot about this, and we've come to the conclusion that the only way to keep him safe is to ask somebody like Harry to find a nice couple to adopt him, to raise him far away from here and us. But the problem is, if we go to Harry, we have to let him in on the secret. Since Gabriel won't magically take memories from anybody who doesn't consent, we're afraid that if Harry says no, he could be in danger in addition to the baby and Gabriel."

"And you," Ocelot added. "And now, me." He sighed. "So you don't want to tell Harry about it, but it's okay to tell me? I'm sure as hell not in any hurry to let Gabriel screw around in *my* mind making me forget things."

Kestrel closed her eyes for a moment. "I was pretty sure you'd help—and I trust you enough to know that even if you don't, you wouldn't tell anybody. I figured—Gabriel and I both did—that nobody would even have any reason to poke around if they thought you were the father. We've been together for awhile, and it's not uncommon for a couple of shadowrunners with a kid to want to get the kid away from the...family business. If we're a little bit discreet about it, we might be able to pull this off without anybody catching on."

Ocelot leaned back in his chair. He still looked a little shellshocked by the whole thing, but was clearly trying to get it under control. "Okay. Let me see if I got this straight. You're pregnant with a baby that's half dragon. Gabriel screwed up bigtime by letting this happen, and now if the dragons find out about it they'll kick him out of the Dragon Club and kill the kid. Not to mention what they might try to do to you. So you want me to pretend I'm the kid's father so we can go to Harry and get him to find some nice couple in Peoria or somewhere to raise the kid. Have I got it so far?"

"Yeah." Kestrel didn't look up.

"And what about the pregnancy? I take it it's not very far along yet, right?"

This time she did look up, to find him eyeing her abdomen. "Gabriel says it's about a month along. It won't show for awhile yet."

"So are you just going to hang around Seattle while this is going on? Couldn't somebody catch on? Somebody

magical, I mean? Does this kid look like a normal kid, or is it...a lizard or something?"

"Ocelot—"

"Sorry," he said hastily. "I didn't mean it that way. I just want to know if somebody might catch on, that's all."

She sighed. "Gabriel did a ritual to make the baby look like a normal human to anybody checking magically. He said it would be harder to hide the pregnancy altogether."

Ocelot nodded, then glanced up, looking around the room. "So where is he, anyway? I'd think he'd be here being supportive or something."

"We both thought it would be best if I talked to you about this alone at first. I know you're not exactly — crazy about him. Especially now."

Ocelot sighed. "Kestrel, you gotta understand — this wasn't anything like what I was expecting. It'll take me some time, okay?"

"Yeah. I know. It's *still* taking me some time."

He drained the rest of his beer and put the can back down on the table next to the chair. "So—you didn't answer my question. Are you going to stick around Seattle and be pregnant? That could make it tough to spirit the kid away secretly, right?"

"I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet. Gabriel says the safest thing to do is go stay in his lair until the baby's born. Even most of the dragons at full power can't get through the shielding there, and there's really no reason for them to suspect anything."

Surprisingly, Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, he's probably right. About it being the safest, I mean." He sighed.

Kestrel leaned forward. "So—now you've heard the story. You know how hard it was for me to ask you this, knowing—knowing how you feel about things. I've agonized over it for awhile now, but it's the only thing I

could come up with that might have a chance of working and protecting everybody involved." She patted her abdomen. "It's weird, Ocelot—I never wanted a kid. I figured it would happen someday, but I sure as hell wasn't ready for it now. But now that he's here—I figure I owe him a chance, you know? None of this is his fault."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean," he said reluctantly. "I don't like it either, but I know what you mean."

"So you'll help?"

There was a long pause. "I don't know, Kestrel," he said at last. "Probably. But you gotta give me a little time to think about it. I don't want to make a decision like this without thinking it over, you know?"

It wasn't what she was hoping for, but better than she had expected. "Yeah. I know. But we can't take too long. Whatever we decide it has to be soon. The longer we wait, the more chance somebody might catch on."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. Don't worry. Just let me have till tomorrow morning, okay? Why don't we meet then, at my place. And you might as well bring Gabriel with you. He's in the middle of this, so he ain't getting off that easy."

Kestrel got up, picked up Ocelot's empty beer can, and dropped it in the recycling bin. She leaned on the counter for a moment, head bowed. "Yeah." Looking up at him, she smiled faintly. "Yeah, that sounds good. We'll do that." Impulsively, she crossed the room, pulled him up, and drew him into a hard hug. "Thanks, Ocelot. You're a good friend. I know this isn't easy for you, but I knew I could trust you."

"Hey, I ain't said yes yet," he pointed out, but he knew as well as she did that the only thing left to do tomorrow morning was to formalize what had already occurred.

8.

Alastair Stone awoke to two sensations: a splitting pain in his head and the feeling of water seeping up the back of his coat. For a moment he was disoriented, briefly wondering if he had passed out at the pub and someone had spilled their ale on him, but then the memories came flooding back. He groaned.

"Dr. Stone's waking up," came a female voice, close to him. A warm, damp hand settled on his forehead. "Don't get up yet, Dr. Stone. It's me—Gina."

"Gina—? I—" More memories rushed back into his protesting head. He remembered the crash, and then hurrying around, herding people, dragging them, blood— He sat up, then groaned again and clamped his eyes shut, feeling like someone had just whacked him with a sledgehammer.

"She did tell you not to get up yet, Doctor," another wry voice spoke.

Stone slowly opened his eyes again and was greeted by the sight of two tanned, muscular legs in front of him, about a meter away. Directing his gaze upward he saw that the legs belonged to Kevin Frasier. The parazoology student's face was grim, but his eyes held faint amusement.

"Frasier..." Stone squinted and put his hand to the back of his head. It was feeling a little better now—he didn't think he was hurt badly. Around him he could hear the sounds of the jungle—the calls of birds, the whispers of small creatures moving through the underbrush, a faint hissing that might have been a far-off river or waterfall. The rain had stopped, at least for the moment. He was sitting on a thin carpet of vegetation; it looked like someone had cleared a space. "What happened?" he

asked, forcing his awareness to return faster. "How long have I been out? What about—"

"Hold on," Frasier said. Gina Kane had already moved off; Stone didn't see where she went. "We crashed. You remember that, right?"

Stone nodded.

"After we went down, you and I and Santiago got everybody off the plane—most everybody else was panicking or too hurt to be much help. You passed out after that—I think you hit your head on something when we hit and it finally caught up with you."

Stone took a deep breath. "What's our status?" He held out his arm, obviously asking the student for help in standing.

Frasier eyed him dubiously for a moment, then grabbed his arm and hauled him up, holding him there a few seconds to steady him. "You weren't out long—we're still evaluating. All we know for sure is that the pilots are both dead. The plane's nose hit first at a shallow angle, and then we slid. I have to hand it to them, though: they saved our lives. They must have pulled it up at the last minute so we flattened out some. It was a bloody good landing, all things considered."

"And the others?" Stone looked around again; from his new upright vantage point he could faintly make out the outlines of the downed plane among the greenery a few meters off, and other prone figures being tended. The air was heavy with mist, making it difficult to make out features.

"They're all right—as all right as they can be, anyway. It's a good thing some of us have healing spells, that's all I can say. Dr. Whittaker was banged up right proper, Ram's got a broken arm, one of Corazón's legs is messed up, and everyone else's got some injury or another. Nothing too serious, though, thank God."

Stone shook out his coat and began moving toward the plane. "Has anyone checked the radio yet? Does the plane have any sort of homing device? Flares?"

Frasier looked at him oddly. "We've been down less than an hour, Dr. Stone. So far it's all we've been able to do to tend to the wounded and get everyone away from the plane."

Stone nodded, not stopping. "Why away from the plane? is there danger of fire?" He had a vague memory of suggesting the move away, but he couldn't remember why.

"No, but it's leaking fuel. It's so damp around here that fire's not likely, but we figured it would be best if we got the injured away to where we could heal them and let them rest. The plane's not much use as shelter anymore." Frasier followed along behind Stone, matching his long strides.

They broke through a curtain of vines and Stone saw what he meant. It was a wonder that they had made it through the crash with only the two pilots as fatalities: the plane was broken into three pieces, its belly ripped open, its skin hanging in great rent chunks. Most of both wings were missing, probably sheared off by the plane's slide along the ground during the desperate landing. The odors of fuel and ozone and smoldering plastic joined the rich living smells of the jungle.

Undaunted, Stone headed for what was left of the cockpit section and began clambering up the side. His headache, along with all the other myriad aches in his body, were momentarily forgotten.

"Dr. Stone?" Frasier called. "What are you –?"

Stone ignored him, as he ignored the burned and bleeding bodies of the plane's pilot and co-pilot, who were hanging from their seats suspended by their shredded safety harnesses. One fairly quick look told him

what he needed to know, and it wasn't good news. "Radio's shot," he muttered. It didn't look fixable either, given the fact that the entire instrument panel had been ripped loose and now dangled on blackened wires in the pilots' laps.

"Dr. Stone?" Frasier called again.

Stone dropped back down, slipped on some vines, and fell unceremoniously to the ground. Growling, he scrambled back up using the plane for support. "Radio's bugged," he announced, shoving his wet hair back off his forehead in frustration.

"Can we fix it?" Peter Hsu was coming up behind Frasier. His formerly clean and pressed jungle-prep-style clothes were now muddy and covered with dried blood which might or might not have been his own. His spiked hair drooped in the dampness. He looked very tired.

Stone shook his head. "No chance. You're welcome to take a look at it if you're some sort of electronics genius, but—" he spread his hands to indicate he didn't think it was going to happen. He looked back toward the other two sections of the plane as if trying to decide something, then sighed. "Come on. Let's get back to the others. We're going to have to decide what to do from here, and we should all be together when we do it."

Hsu and Frasier exchanged glances, and both shrugged. At least for the moment it sounded like Stone knew what he was doing, so they followed him.

He found the others in the middle of a tiny clearing on which the place he'd awakened had apparently been the far edge. Dr. Whittaker, Ram Prakesh, and Diego Corazón lay in various areas of the clearing, while Catherine Merriwether, Gina Kane, and Gustavo Santiago knelt near them, tending their injuries. They themselves looked somewhat bloody and rather shell-shocked, but showed

no signs of serious injuries. They looked up as Stone, Hsu, and Frasier came through.

"Dr. Stone!" Merriwether called. She was sitting near Dr. Whittaker, having propped his head on her pack. The professor looked pale but his eyes were open.

Stone's eyes raked over the group, taking stock of who looked the most injured. "Has everyone been healed?"

"Not yet," Merriwether said. "I healed Dr. Whittaker and Peter healed Ram, but it took quite a bit out of both of us. We were resting a bit before we worked on Señor Corazón."

"I'll take care of him," Stone said. "Then I'll be wanting a report on everyone's condition. Once we know that we can go from there."

Nobody questioned Stone's taking over the little group, at least for the moment. He moved over to the two native guides and knelt next to Corazón. The man's left leg was very bloody; it looked like Santiago had done his best to bandage it, but had only succeeded in stopping the immediate danger. At the moment he sat near Corazón's side, using his hat to shoo away the cloud of insects that smelled a feast and were persistently trying to partake.

"His leg was slashed by a piece of metal," Gustavo Santiago told Stone. "Can you help him?"

"I'm certainly going to try," Stone murmured. "Just stay here and keep quiet so I can focus." Without waiting for an answer he settled himself down in the damp vegetation next to the guide closed his eyes, and moved his hand over the man's leg. His brow furrowed with concentration as he summoned up the healing spell and directed its energies at the bloody wound. He remained still and quiet for over a minute, the only sign of his effort the beads of sweat that stood out on his pale forehead. At

last his shoulders slumped and he let his breath out. "There..." he whispered.

Santiago looked first at Corazón and then at Stone. "He is —?"

"Healed, for the most part," Stone said faintly. "He'll probably have a nasty scar, but I've stopped the bleeding and healed up the damage. It's the best I can do in these conditions."

Santiago nodded. "Thank you, señor."

"We're going to need everyone in the best condition we can get them," Stone said, dragging himself back to his feet and fighting the wave of light-headedness that threatened to disrupt his equilibrium. His gaze sharpened a bit as he regarded Santiago again. "Have you got any idea where we are?"

The guide shook his head. "No, señor. I can make a few guesses, but I heard the pilots speaking just before the plane began to go down. They were blown off course by the storm, and the thunderstorm made their instruments malfunction — they could not get a signal out on the radio. When the engine failed, they simply tried to land safely without concern for location."

"So the radio was gone before we went down," Stone muttered. "Lovely. So here we are in the middle of bloody bugger-all and we don't even know which way we were supposed to have been heading." He didn't expect an answer to that and didn't get one, so he turned to the rest of the group. "May I have your attention, please?"

The others all looked up at him. When he swayed a bit on his feet Kevin Frasier silently got up and moved over next to him, not touching him but there if needed for support.

Stone took a deep breath and forced himself to calm — it wouldn't do anyone any good if he gave in to his fears now. "All right," he said briskly, hoping he sounded more

convincing than he felt. "I think the first thing we need to do is take stock of our situation – where we are, who's got what injuries, and so forth. After that we'll need to come up with a plan of action and figure out where we need to be going."

"Going?" Catherine Merriwether looked up, surprised. "I don't think we should be going anywhere, Dr. Stone. We've got injured people here, and isn't it best to stay with the plane, so they can find us?"

"Perhaps it is," Stone agreed. "That's what we need to find out. But as Señor Santiago has informed me, it's possible that no one knows where we are. The thunderstorm that came before things began to go to hell most likely bugged the radio transmissions, and we were blown off course both by the storm and by the pilots' attempts to land the plane safely."

"Are you saying that nobody's going to be looking for us?" Peter Hsu asked. His eyes showed fear.

"I'm sure someone will be looking for us when we don't land in Iquitos," Stone reassured him. "But depending on how far we are from there, it could take quite some time for them to find us. I think it would be best to assume that we're on our own, at least for awhile." He paused. "Before we crashed, I attempted to send a watcher spirit to contact a friend of mine. If nothing else, if the watcher was successful in reaching him, he will be looking for us. I am hoping, though, that the pilots were in contact with someone before the radio went dead."

When no one answered, Stone continued. It felt strange to him to be taking charge of such an endeavor, since this was a situation more common to his life as a shadowrunner than his life as a university magic professor. In the group he normally ran with, he would have been the last choice to take the lead in a survival situation. Now, though, he could sense that most of the

students were fighting off the ragged edge of panic and that something had to be done, even if it was just coordinating the efforts of those who knew more about jungle survival than he did. As the two professors involved, it naturally fell to either him or Whittaker to do something, and the parobotany professor was clearly not physically or emotionally up to the task. That left Stone.

He looked around the jungle. It was hard to tell if it was getting dark because the vegetation grew thickly over their heads, but a glance at his chrono (which was fortunately still functional) reminded him that it was late afternoon. "All right," he said again. "Regardless if we're moving or staying put, there are some things we need to concern ourselves with. Namely food, water, shelter, communications, injuries, available supplies, and security." He looked around the group to see if anyone else had other ideas.

"Security?" Gina Kane asked.

Gustavo Santiago nodded. "He is right. It is not safe out here in the jungle. The danger is probably avoiding us temporarily because the disruption of the crash has frightened the predators away, but they will return."

That elicited some fearful looks from several of the students. Although they had studied up on Amazonia and its flora and fauna before embarking on this trip, they had expected to spend their time here in a relatively controlled atmosphere, where the nastiest of the predators were kept at a distance. Low muttered conversations started up around the clearing.

"Please," Stone called in his best lecturing-professor voice. "Your attention. We can't afford to be fragmented now. We'll be much safer if we have some plans in place and stick to them." He looked around. When he saw he had their attention again, he continued: "Now. The good news is, food and water shouldn't be a problem. One

thing this place does have is both in abundance, and with two parobotany students and a professor, I'm quite confident that we can separate the harmful potential foods from the safe ones. Yes?"

Catherine Merriwether nodded. "I can already see some fruits that are safe to eat," she said, looking up at the trees.

"Good. After we're done here, those who aren't injured too much will go back to the plane and retrieve what they can of everyone's packs. I don't know what's still intact, but we'll gather whatever clothing and gear we have so we can take an inventory of it all." Unconsciously, Stone began pacing around as he spoke, just as he did when he was lecturing back at the University. He was surprised at how much survival information was coming back to him—he must have absorbed more from listening to his shadowrunning companions than he'd thought. "Does anyone have any kind of communication device? Cell phones, radios, anything?"

"The cell phones won't work out here, Dr. Stone," Peter Hsu said, pulling out his own and demonstrating.

"I assumed so," Stone agreed, "but we have to check everything. What about radios?"

Gina Kane pulled a small combination radio-chip player from her waist pack. "I have this, but I don't think it'll be much good."

Stone nodded. "Well, don't run it more than necessary. Later we'll see if we can at least pick something up. P'raps we can find out if they're looking for us." He paused a moment, then took a deep breath. "All right. The next thing we need to find out is what kind of magic we've got at our disposal. I think that's going to be our best weapon, except for our wits, of course. Whatever we do, we can't lose those or we're in trouble." Another pause. "When I call your name, I want you to tell me what

spells you know that you think might be useful in this situation. I'm particularly interested in offensive spells."

Catherine Merriwether looked shocked. "Dr. Stone—those are illegal!"

Stone nodded grimly. "We'll discuss legality when we're back home, Ms. Merriwether. Right now our survival might depend on being able to discourage the local wildlife from taking an interest in us." He turned back to the group, his gaze falling on Dr. Whittaker first. "Henry?"

The spell situation wasn't as encouraging as Stone would have liked, but it was better than he was afraid it would be. Two of the students, Hsu and Kane, had Stun spells ("for protection," Hsu said with a slightly defensive look toward Merriwether when he revealed it) and the parobotany students both had Nutrition, which put the problem of emergency nourishment firmly to rest. Other assorted useful spells included Magic Fingers and Detect Life. By the time Stone's inquiry reached Kevin Frasier they had a fairly good complement of useful magic in their arsenal.

"Me, I've got levitate, I've got confusion and a light spell...and I've got a Manabolt," Frasier said boldly, looking Stone right in the eyes as if daring him to protest. "And a pretty good one, too."

Not only did Stone not protest, he smiled. "Good man! I knew I could count on you." He clapped Frasier on the shoulder. Someone else with a real offensive spell made things look even better. As he had listened to the other students reveal their magic he had been once more reminded just how broad the chasm was between his academic life and his shadowrunning life. Any shadowmage with a spell list like any of those wouldn't last through his first run, let alone live long enough to learn some useful magic.

Frasier grinned back. "I spent a year in Australia—there are places there that make this look like a picnic in the park. They practically *make* you learn something offensive or they won't let you in."

His explanation seemed to mollify Merriwether, who had been about to say something. She settled back into silence for a moment, then looked at Stone. "What about you, Dr. Stone?"

Stone took a deep breath. This was the moment he had been dreading. Did he reveal his impressive collection of spells—many of them both highly illegal and very deadly—and potentially put himself up for trouble when they got out of this, or did he act like a good little professor and only admit to those spells a good little professor would be likely to know? Finally, with all the students' eyes on him, he took the middle route. "I've got the usual complement of useful spells. Plus enough nasty things to give the jungle beasts second thoughts about considering us for dinner." Not giving Merriwether a chance to ask any questions, he pressed on: "One more thing: has anyone got any elementals with services left?" It was a shot in the dark, but every shot was worth it. It was getting dimmer now—soon they'd have no choice but to spend their first night here.

The students all shook their heads. Elemental summoning was a strictly regulated activity, usually permitted only under University control for purposes of study or spell research. Even if one of the students had been able to get the proper permissions to summon one in a non-laboratory setting, the cost of the summoning materials was prohibitive on a graduate student's meager budget.

Stone nodded. "Henry?"

Dr. Whittaker shook his head. "Sorry, Alastair, but no. I hadn't had need for one in awhile." The parobotany

professor was looking a little better now that he'd been healed: the color was coming back to his face and he was sitting up a bit more. He seemed grateful that Stone was taking charge, because it meant that he didn't have to.

Stone sighed. "All right, no elementals, because I haven't any either." He found himself wishing that the trip had included at least one shaman—with their very useful ability to summon nature spirits wherever they happened to be, one would have been a welcome addition to the group—but there was no point in worrying about that now.

"Dr. Stone?"

Stone looked around and saw Ram Prakesh trying to get his attention. The student was also sitting up now, cradling his healed but still painful arm in his lap. "Yes, Mr. Prakesh?"

"You said that you summoned a watcher as the plane was going down. Could you summon another one? Or one of us could?"

"Or someone could astrally project?" Gina Kane added. "Get out of here and find someone to help us?"

Stone leaned back against one of the trees, feeling his fatigue begin to catch up with him again as his initial adrenaline rush began to fade. "It's a possibility," he admitted, "but not one I'd be quick to try this early." He looked around at the group. "How many of you have ever been to Amazonia before?"

None of them raised their hands, not even Dr. Whittaker.

"Well, I have, and one thing I can tell you about this place is that magic is bugged up here. Sometimes, depending on where you are, spells and spirits can turn out quite differently than you expected. Sometimes they don't work at all, and sometimes they're more or less powerful than you intended—occasionally significantly

so. Add to that the fact that the astral plane in this area is far more alive than any place I've ever visited with the exception of the Dunkelzahn mana rift and what you end up with is that that sort of thing is far from safe here. You've probably read about all this, but believe me, if you haven't actually experienced it you don't know how disquieting it can be. If it comes down to a life-or-death situation I'll attempt a projection, but I don't think we're there yet." He looked around, challenging anyone to argue with him. No one did.

Stone let out his breath slowly. "All right, then. It's getting dark, and regardless of whether we're going to stay here until someone finds us, we're going to have to stay here tonight." He looked around at the group again. "We'll need to retrieve our gear from the plane, and I need a couple of people to remain here with Dr. Whittaker and Señor Corazón. Preferably someone with an offensive spell. Volunteers?"

In the end it was decided that Gina Kane and Gustavo Santiago would remain with the injured while the others trekked back and forth to the plane and dragged any salvageable gear back. Santiago called Stone aside. "Señor, if I am to stay, can you retrieve my rifle if you can locate it? I have the ammunition here in my pack. Even with all of your group's magic, it will be useful to have a weapon."

Stone promised to look for it, nodding to Santiago and rejoining the group.

At that moment, Catherine Merriwether called to him: "Dr. Stone?"

"Yes?"

"What about the pilots? We can't just leave them there."

Stone hesitated. He hadn't thought about that. "It will have to wait until morning," he said at last. "The light's

going, and it's more important that we get our gear together while we can—since we haven't any guarantee that it'll be there in the morning. Tomorrow morning we'll—come up with something. All right?"

Merriwether didn't look satisfied, but she realized that Stone was right. She nodded reluctantly and moved off.

Stone followed her toward the plane. In truth he didn't like the idea of leaving the pilots' bodies unburied either, and not only because it would be disrespectful to the memories of the men who had saved their lives. Dead bodies attracted nasty scavengers, and that plane was too close to their campsite for Stone's liking. It couldn't be helped, though. He hoped there would still be something left to bury in the morning. Smacking at the persistent insects that buzzed around his face, he continued on.

The others had already reached the plane by the time he arrived, and were busily moving among the ruined seats and bits of wreckage. There was a small pile of bags and other gear already gathered in a burned spot a couple of meters from the largest chunk of the plane; Stone recognized his own laptop bag in the pile. Immediately he set about joining the search.

He knew they were going to be in trouble, gear-wise. They had not brought with them any survival and camping gear, communication equipment, or provisions. The plan had been to pick all that up in Iquitos, where it was waiting for them, and then load it up in the group's chartered boat for transport out to the study site. Even the site itself, while primitive by the standards most of these students were used to, was still a far sight more civilized than the middle of the Amazonian jungle. It had been set up for just this purpose and was used by various university groups as a base for studies just like this one, and was equipped with small huts, a firepit, and other

primitive amenities. The decision to not load themselves down with gear on the plane had been a sound one—of course no one had expected the plane to crash. Now, though, that meant that they were in for some tough times.

Stone tossed another singed backpack into the pile and shoved his hair back off his forehead again. They had only the clothes they were wearing and a few extras in the form of sweaters and other layering items, plus whatever the students and the guides had seen fit to bring. He had already seen two bottles of sunblock—that would help. Both guides had carried large and well-stocked packs, and Kevin Frasier's had been almost as big, but those would only be useful if they could be located. The wreckage was not spread across a large area but even a relatively small one could be difficult to search in this land of crawling vines and fast-growing ivy and cloying, sweet-scented flowers.

As they continued their search in the quickly ebbing daylight, the sounds of the jungle night began to rise. The cries of birds and the skittering of small creatures gave way to the far-off screams of predators and the rustling high in the trees of unseen dangers. Stone grimly tossed another pack in the pile and glanced at the students. They huddled closer together, looking around nervously every time one of the sounds split the low-grade rumble of normal jungle life. With another look up at the sky he made a decision. "Come on," he said briskly. "Let's pick up what we've got and get it back to the others. We don't want to be separated after dark."

"But I haven't found my bag yet, Dr. Stone," Catherine Merriwether protested. "I've got food, water, my datapad—"

"In the morning, Ms. Merriwether," Stone said. "I'm telling you, it's not safe out here at night." He noted that

the group had managed to discover Santiago's pack (with his rifle hooked through one of its many straps) and Frasier's as well, though they had not yet found Corazón's.

"It's not quite dark yet," she protested. "Don't worry—I'll just be a moment. Just one last look." She turned without waiting for an answer and headed back toward the plane.

Stone sighed, his gaze darting back and forth between the rest of the group—all of whom were following his instructions and picking up gear—to the retreating form of the parobotany student.

"She's like that," came an apologetic voice from behind him. He turned to see Ram Prakesh standing there, holding two packs over his good shoulder. His broken arm was held in a makeshift sling made from a tied-up sweater. "She does what she wants."

Stone sighed. "Yes, I'm beginning to see that. Go on back with the others—I'll go after her."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Prakesh looked like he would much rather be following Stone's advice, but he forced himself not to look nervous.

"No—go on, before they get too far away. I meant it when I said no one should be alone out here. I'll find her and bring her back."

Prakesh nodded. "Okay. I'll tell the others. If you're not back in ten minutes we're coming after you." He grabbed another pack from the nearly-empty pile and headed off.

Stone didn't watch him go. He could no longer hear the sound of Merriwether's footsteps over the calls of the birds and insects and the rustling of the vegetation. "Bother..." he muttered to himself, and started after her. She was going to get an earful when he caught up with her—he wasn't crazy about being alone out here himself,

even despite his collection of offensive magic. Having to chase after a stubborn student who should have known better was —

He only got a few steps closer when he heard the scream. Instantly he processed it as female and ahead of him. “Merriwether!” he called, already moving. He didn’t even notice his boosted reflexes kicking in, allowing him to run more than twice the speed of a normal person. Shifting his cybereyes to thermographic mode without a thought, he scanned the area for a heat signature. “Merriwether, where are you? What is it?”

The scream came again, inarticulate and high-pitched. Stone broke through the vegetation and skidded to a stop, eyes widening.

Catherine Merriwether was in the middle of the clearing, thrashing and screaming and tearing at something around her neck. Stone could see her panicked expression as her hands snatched at the thing. “Get it off me!” she screamed. She dropped to her knees and continued to thrash and grab.

Stone moved in swiftly. “Hold still, Merriwether!” he snapped at her, but she wasn’t hearing him. The rather impressively-sized boa constrictor that had wrapped itself around what it no doubt thought was a nice warm meal had sufficiently freaked her out that any kind of reasonable voice was the last thing she was going to listen to.

“Get it off! It’s choking me!” She slapped at it, grabbing hold of its tail and trying to fling it off; however, the snake was far too strong and tenacious for that.

In an instant Stone was next to her, gathering the energies for a spell. He clamped his hand around one of the snake’s coils and released the energy, nodding in satisfaction as the creature went rigid and then limp, then slid harmlessly from around Merriwether’s neck. She

slumped, coughing and sputtering, clutching her neck. "Oh— Dr. Stone—it was—"

"You're all right," Stone said rather curtly, hauling her up to her feet. "Come on, Merriwether— let's get back to camp, shall we? P'raps now you'll believe me about being out here alone, yes?"

For a moment the woman looked indignant, but when she paused to think about what had happened, she nodded. "Yeah," she breathed, still rubbing at her neck with both hands. "Yeah—I guess I do." She met his eyes. "Thanks."

"We'll need to stick together and look out for each other if we're to get out of here with our hides intact," Stone told her. He didn't have time to say anything else because at that moment Ram Prakesh burst through the trees, followed by Kevin Frasier.

"What's happened?" Prakesh demanded. "We heard a scream—"

"Everything's—okay," Merriwether got out between breaths. "I was—an idiot—I'm okay now."

Frasier was eyeing the snake, then looked at Stone. He raised a questioning eyebrow, and Stone nodded. Frasier nodded back in understanding. "Come on," he said, "Let's get back to the others. They're going through the packs." With him on one side and Prakesh on the other, they led Merriwether back toward the campsite.

Stone followed behind, breathing a little hard. One good thing: the arrival of the other two students had prevented Merriwether from asking him what spell he'd used. He didn't think she would have approved of something called 'Death Touch,' even if it *had* been used to save her life.

Back at the camp, the other students were settling in as best they could. The packs had been claimed by their

owners, who were now busily rifling through them looking for useful items. As Stone and the others came through the trees they all looked up, relieved that their wayward group members had made it safely back. Catherine Merriwether slumped down near some of the others and was silent. Nobody bothered her.

"Looks like we've found quite a number of our packs," Stone said approvingly, looking around. Only two students, Merriwether and Peter Hsu, weren't currently going through one. "Before the light goes completely, let's see to two things—Señor Santiago, can you see about setting up a fire? I don't know the first thing about doing that in these kind of damp conditions, and I doubt any of the rest of us do either." He looked questioningly at Frasier as he said this—he was beginning to rely on the Parazology student as someone with level head and a good-sized store of useful knowledge.

"I'll help," Frasier said, nodding and getting up. He and Santiago moved off.

"As for the rest of us," Stone continued, "let's get an inventory of what we've got in our bags." He pointed to various spots in the center of the campsite as he spoke. "Food and water there, medical supplies and things like sunblock and insect repellent there, electronics over there. Also maps, guidebooks—anything else you have that you think might be useful, put over here. Let's see what we've got to work with."

By the time everyone had complied with Stone's request, Santiago and Frasier had managed to start a little fire. Everyone surveyed the piles of gear, realizing that it wasn't going to keep them going for very long out here in the middle of nowhere. From the students' packs they had a small pile of energy bars, three bottles of water, two mini first-aid kits, four tubes of sunblock, three bottles of insect repellent, and five packs of water-purification

tablets, Kane's radio and Hsu's, Stone's, and Whitaker's cell phones, four pocket secretaries including one with an Amazonia guidebook loaded on it, various light sweaters, jackets, and other assorted clothing, three flashlights with one set of spare batteries, and three laptop computers, of which only one was functioning properly. When Frasier and Santiago finished with the fire they opened their own packs, adding, between them, two lightweight thermal blankets, Santiago's rifle and two boxes of ammunition (both of which the guide refused to surrender—Stone wasn't surprised), some more food bars and water, a heftier first-aid kit, a sleeping bag, a small mess kit, and two pairs of leather gloves.

"Well," Stone said, "we've got what we've got, and we'll need to make the best of it." He looked around. It was fully dark now, the blackness seeming to press in on them, testing the power of their small fire to keep it at bay. With all the vegetation around them it was an oppressive feeling—even the sky was mostly obscured by overhanging branches and vines. "I realize it won't be easy, but we'd best try to sleep if we can. Tomorrow will be a long day." Pausing a moment, he considered the group. "There are nine of us, so that means six can sleep while three remain awake for watches. We'll take two and a half hours each, and each watch should have at least one person with offensive magic." He paused again. "Let's see—I'll take the first watch along with Mr. Prakesh and Ms. Kane. Second watch will be Mr. Frasier, Señor Corazón, and Ms. Merriwether. Third will be Professor Whittaker, Señor Santiago, and Mr. Hsu. Is that acceptable to everyone?"

There was a general murmur of agreement, and then Peter Hsu spoke up. "Dr. Stone?"

"Yes?"

Hsu sounded a bit hesitant. “Uh—what exactly do we *do* on watch?”

Stone was silent for a moment as the reality of the situation caught up with him once more. He was treating these people like shadowrunners, falling into the familiar patterns he had followed with his team when they were forced to spend nights in dangerous territory. These people weren’t his team, though—most of them were graduate students whose idea of roughing it was spending holidays in youth hostels. He sighed. “Sorry, I’m getting a bit ahead of myself. Don’t stray too far from the camp—just keep your eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary, and if it seems dangerous, wake the rest of us up.” He smiled wryly. “I realize everything around here seems dangerous, but we should be all right with the fire.”

“Make sure you keep it going,” Frasier added, nodding toward the small pile of extra firewood next to the blaze.

“And stay within sight of each other,” Stone said firmly. “I don’t want to frighten you unduly, but there *are* dangers here, and they can strike quietly and without notice. We should be able to handle most of it if we keep our heads and watch out for each other, but wandering off alone is madness here.” His gaze fell briefly on Merriwether as he said this.

“Damn straight,” she added with feeling, rubbing her neck.

The next few minutes were spent with the six group members who weren’t on first watch arranging themselves around the campfire and trying to make maximum use of their single sleeping bag and two thermal blankets. Fortunately it was not cold even at night, so they opted to use the blankets as ground cover and bundle up as necessary in their spare clothing. With

backpacks to use as pillows, it was still uncomfortable but not as bad as it could have been.

When everyone had settled in, Stone motioned Gina Kane and Ram Prakesh a short distance from the camp so they could converse without disturbing the others. Around them, the sounds of the jungle seemed to grow louder—insects cricked and skittered, night birds cried out, and the wildcat scream they had heard earlier sounded again from a different direction. Kane looked around nervously. “We won’t have to deal with whatever *that* is, will we?”

“Probably not,” Stone said. “Sounds like a jaguar. I doubt it would attack a group this large.”

“You doubt,” Prakesh said. He looked even more nervous than Kane did, but visibly forced himself to calm. “Okay, so what do we do?”

Stone considered. “Let’s just keep moving around the perimeter of the campsite. Just the sound of movement might be enough to keep most things away. You can sit down for a bit if you get tired, but don’t get too comfortable and fall asleep. And don’t ever wander out of the circle of the light.”

There was a long pause. “What if we have to—?” Prakesh began, a little embarrassed.

“Use the facilities?” At Prakesh’s nod, Stone again paused to think. “When that happens, we’ll establish a latrine area a little distance out. The price of privacy is that you’ll need to let us know you’re all right every few seconds. If we don’t hear back, we’ll come after you, so best not to forget.”

Kane smiled, but turned serious again. “And no astral reconnaissance, right? Not even perception?”

“Perception should be all right—just don’t project and don’t summon anything unless it’s life or death. I’m sure

you've felt the strangeness around here. It's about a hundred times worse on the astral."

Prakesh and Kane nodded, and the three of them set off on their patrols. Inside the camp, the restless movement of the other six gradually gave way to soft breathing as one by one they dropped off to sleep, their exhaustion finally triumphing over their fear of the unknown.

Alone at last with his thoughts, Stone sighed softly and considered their options. He wondered if his hastily-summoned watcher had made it to Ocelot with its panicked message, and if Ocelot was even in any position to do anything about it if it had. He wondered too if he shouldn't have tried sending one to Gabriel as well—the dragon would definitely be better equipped to deal with the situation and would doubtless do everything he could to do so, but the likelihood of a simple watcher being able to locate him was remote. No, Ocelot was the better choice—if he had gotten the message.

He hadn't heard any other planes overhead, which probably meant that no one else knew they had gone down. Sure, there would be inquiries when the plane hadn't arrived at its destination on time, but such inquiries in this part of the world could move exceedingly slowly. *Best to assume no one is looking for us and that we're on our own*, he thought. *If that turns out not to be true, then all the better for us.*

They would have to try to get out of here tomorrow. They could not simply remain with the plane. Stone knew how fast vegetation grew in Amazonia: he suspected that by this time tomorrow the plane would be completely covered and nearly untraceable from above by any but the most sophisticated equipment. *If even that. This place played bloody hell with our GPSs last time.* Further, he knew that even powerful mages would have a nearly impossible

time finding them in the midst of the Amazonian jungle, which was more potently alive than almost any other area in the world. The aura produced by all the magically active flora and fauna here would effectively block out the relatively tiny auras of nine individual people, even if seven of them were magically active themselves.

No, they would have to take charge of their own fates if they had any hopes to get out of here alive. Stone closed his eyes for a moment, suddenly overwhelmed by the situation. Here he was with six graduate students who between them had three offensive spells and (except for Frasier) no combat experience, one timid professor whose significant experience was wholly in a classroom setting, and two guides who probably had combat experience but none with the sorts of things they were likely to have to deal with before they got out of here. Could he lead them? His natural leadership abilities were strong, but not in this sort of situation. His area of expertise was largely of the civilized world—he happily left the survival matters to his more skilled friends. Would he be able to take what he'd learned and lead these people to safety, or would he make a mistake and get them all killed?

"Dr. Stone?" A soft voice spoke near him, breaking into his thoughts. He looked up to see Kevin Frasier standing there, watching him worriedly. "Are you all right?"

Stone nodded wearily. "Yes, yes. Just—thinking." He glanced at his chrono—fifteen more minutes remained in the first watch. "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"It was about time to relieve you. I woke up a bit early so I thought I'd give you some more time to sleep. I'm not really tired."

Stone shook his head. "Nor am I. Why don't you tell Señor Corazón to get some more rest—he can use it with that injured leg. I'll take another watch."

"Are you sure? That was no small bump on the head you got today. You should rest too."

"It was nothing—I don't even feel it anymore." That wasn't entirely true—he still had a slight lingering headache—but it was mostly so. "I think I'd rather stay awake awhile."

Frasier regarded him silently for a moment. "You're worried, aren't you?"

Stone cocked a questioning eyebrow at him.

Frasier shrugged, motioning around the clearing. "About this. About us. About getting out of here alive."

"Aren't you?"

"Yeah. Of course. That's why you should rest—you're one of our strongest weapons. Without you, I wouldn't put our chances at nearly as high." He paused a moment, watching as Prakesh and Kane stopped to exchange a few whispered words before crossing and continuing their rounds. "Do you mind if I ask you something, Dr. Stone?"

Stone shrugged. "Go on."

Frasier didn't answer for a few seconds as if considering how to phrase his question. When he spoke, his voice was very soft so as not to carry to anyone else. "You're—not just an Applied Thaumaturgy professor, are you?"

"What makes you say that?" Stone kept his expression neutral.

"Not sure exactly. Mostly the way you kept your head through this whole thing—how easily you took over, as if you've done this sort of thing before. And the spell."

"Which spell is that?"

"The one you used to save Merriwether. I'd bet a year's money that it wasn't on the legally approved list."

This time it was Stone's turn to be silent for a long time. "What would you say if it were true?" he asked at last.

"I'd say I'm glad," Frasier said seriously. "I think we're going to need it to get out of here. If there's anything I can do to help, just let me know."

Stone nodded. "All right, then—yes, it's true. But if you don't mind, I'd rather not elaborate, and I'd rather it went no further than you. If we *do* manage to get out of here with our skins in one piece, I don't want to deal with the consequences."

"Didn't hear a word," Frasier said, but his voice held more than a bit of relief. "Not a word at all. I'll go tell Corazón he's got a couple more hours of sleep."

Stone watched him go, wondering if he'd done the right thing by owning up to his extracurricular activities. It was too late to take it back now regardless—but on reflection he didn't want to. It made him feel a bit better to have someone else around who might be able to handle this situation, and he realized having similar knowledge probably made Frasier feel better as well.

He just hoped that Ocelot had gotten the message. He didn't like their chances at all if nobody was looking for them. Despite Frasier's (possibly misguided) confidence in him and the presence of their two guides, he wouldn't want to stake all their lives on his skills if anything went really wrong.

9.

By the time Ocelot heard the familiar rumble of the sleek black Dynamit pulling up in front of his house, he'd already been up for several hours. In fact, he hadn't really slept much at all. Oddly, though, except for a few bruises left over from his stint at the Wharf Rat the previous night and the vestigial pounding echo of the ghosts of too many Scotches, he didn't feel too bad. Physically, anyway. Mentally, the jury was still out.

When he opened the door he looked past Kestrel to Gabriel, who was standing behind her. There was something different about him, but Ocelot couldn't put his finger on what. It was as if there was a slight—dimming—in the young man's eerily potent aura, but it was not a dimming of sadness or regret. Perhaps it was a newfound maturity. Ocelot wasn't sure, but he could certainly tell that Gabriel wasn't taking this situation lightly. "Hey," he said briefly, motioning them in. They moved silently past and into the room that served as the little house's combination living room/dining room/kitchen/bedroom. Neither sat down. "Want anything?"

Both of them shook their heads. Ocelot noticed that they remained close to each other, never straying more than a meter or two away. He wondered why this didn't bother him.

Gabriel took a deep breath. There was a fragile quality to him, from the clear guilelessness in his violet eyes to the vulnerability of his slim body clad in jeans and thin shirt, unprotected by even his usual leather jacket. He looked as if he was about to speak, then looked at Kestrel instead.

They look like a couple of kids afraid to tell their father about what happened, Ocelot realized in surprise. A corner

of his mind wondered if he'd ever have Gabriel in this sort of position again, but to his surprise the thought didn't appeal to him.

"So..." Kestrel began softly, raising her gaze to meet Ocelot's. "Did you get a chance to think about — things?"

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah." He saw her eyeing the bruises on his face and his forearms, but she didn't acknowledge them. He was sure she knew where he'd been last night. "Before I make a decision, though, I got some questions, okay?" He was looking at Gabriel as he said it.

"Of course." The young man's voice was even softer than Kestrel's. "We will answer them to the best of our ability."

"Okay," Ocelot said, slightly mollified. He pushed off the wall where he'd been leaning and began pacing the room, pausing often to inspect the weapons hanging on the walls. Gabriel and Kestrel remained where they were, their eyes following him. "As far as how this happened — that ain't my business and I'm not gonna ask about it. What I'm more concerned with is makin' sure you guys have really thought this through all the way." He held up his hand when Kestrel drew breath to speak. "No, hang on. Let me finish. It's not that I don't think you did — it's just that this is a pretty emotional situation and people in the middle of those sometimes don't see all the ways to go. Even dragons," he added, looking again at Gabriel. He shrugged. "No way to know if I'm gonna come up with anything you don't, but I just want to talk this through. Okay?"

Gabriel inclined his head gravely. "Of course," he said again. Next to him, Kestrel looked at the floor.

"So — what other ideas did you come up with?"

Kestrel spoke before Gabriel did. "We spent quite a bit of time going over it," she said, her voice taking on just the faintest hint of defensiveness even though she knew

Ocelot was right. “Gabriel did this same thing to me, made me think about what I wanted to do. I’m not going to put him at risk by keeping the child, but I want to give the kid a chance to live. That leaves out the first two obvious choices. After that, we came up with four: give him up for a conventional adoption, try to set something up ourselves, having Harry find somebody knowing Gabriel is the father—and having Harry find somebody thinking someone *else* is the father. You were the logical choice.”

Ocelot nodded. That much she was right about. “What about—anybody else? I know there’s been more than just me.”

“But none of them meant anything to me, Ocelot. I certainly wouldn’t trust them with a secret like this.” She looked into his eyes. “We’ve been through some rough times, but I’ve never stopped thinking of you as a friend. There aren’t too many people around I trust enough to ask this of.”

“And what about you?” Ocelot turned to Gabriel, who still hadn’t moved. His tone was probably a little harsher than it should have been, but then he was sure that everyone in the room knew that if he did this, he wouldn’t be doing it for the dragon. “What’s your take on the situation?”

Gabriel was silent for several moments, as if gathering his thoughts. “My first priority, of course, is Juliana,” he said at last. “It is her decision to make, but I will not see her come to harm because of it.”

“Even if it means *you* coming to harm?” Ocelot asked.

“Even so,” Gabriel said softly.

“So you’re willing to risk—whatever might happen if the other dragons find out—to follow what she wants.” He leaned forward a bit, watching Gabriel carefully.

“Yes.” This time, his reply was immediate.

"But that isn't going to happen," Kestrel put in. "I already told Gabriel that, and I'm telling you. Whatever we do here, it's going to be with the understanding that I'm not going to put Gabriel's standing among the dragons in danger. I don't have a right to do that. I know he doesn't like to think about it, but considering how long he's going to be around, it's just not fair to him."

Ocelot turned back to her, his expression unreadable. "So that's your choice even over the kid's life?"

She bowed her head. "Yes," she whispered.

"And how do you feel about this?" he asked Gabriel. "Do you agree?"

"Of course not." Gabriel also spoke in a whisper. "But I have given my word to support whatever Juliana chooses. The decision is hers."

Ocelot took a deep breath, looking back and forth between the two of them. "I'm not sayin' yes yet," he said at last. "But I want to know — what, *exactly*, do you want me to do?"

Both their gazes came back up. Kestrel spoke. "We want you to be the child's father for any legal documents that have to be filled out. I know Harry can probably do it without the documents, but if anybody checks, we want it to be airtight. If it gets back to anyone, it'll be you and me, not Gabriel."

"That's all." There was a hint of irony in Ocelot's tone: he knew as well as any of them did just how much Kestrel was asking.

She nodded. "You don't even have to see the kid. You don't have to know where he ends up, unless you want to. You don't have to have anything to do with him. We just have to convince Harry that he's ours and that we want to have him raised somewhere safe, away from the shadow life."

Ocelot looked away for a moment. "So you want me to claim a kid who's not mine, that I'll never get to see or meet or anything."

Kestrel, sensing the edge of bitterness in his voice, moved over and put her hand on his arm. "Ocelot..."

He shook his head quickly. "No, it's okay."

"It's not like you're abandoning him," she whispered. "If anything, you're helping him to have a better life than he could ever have otherwise."

He nodded after a moment, and raised his head. Gabriel remained where he had been, standing in the middle of the floor. His eyes were full of sadness. Ocelot looked at the young dragon for a moment, then back at Kestrel.

"Will you do it?" she asked softly. "I know I—we—don't have any right to ask you to, but—"

Ocelot took a long slow breath. "Kestrel, I just—" He stopped, his eyes sharpening as they fixed on something over Kestrel's left shoulder. "What the—?"

Both Kestrel and Gabriel turned quickly to see what he was looking at. Kestrel gasped.

A shimmering form was manifesting in the corner of the room.

Immediately Gabriel stepped forward, moving between Kestrel and Ocelot and the form. He held up a hand to stop them from advancing.

"What is it?" Ocelot demanded.

Gabriel was silent for several seconds as he observed the form. It shimmered and shook like an old flatscreen vid unit receiving a faulty signal. Its form was vaguely humanoid, but it was difficult to pick out any features. "It looks like a watcher," he said at last.

Before either of the others could reply, the indistinct form began to speak. Its voice, like its image, broke and stuttered as if trying to reach out over a long distance—or

as if its power was fading. "Ocelot," it called. "Help me — plane — Amazonia — going down —"

Ocelot came forward, and this time Gabriel didn't stop him. "What the hell —?" he muttered. "Who are you? What do you —"

"Ocelot," it repeated. "Amazonia — plane — University — please help — call — someone —"

"Shit!" Ocelot yelled. "It's 'Hawk! It's got to be!"

"In Amazonia?" Kestrel's tone was disbelieving as she too watched the quivering apparition.

"Ocelot — please — can't — Plane — going down —"

"I'll be back!" Gabriel snapped, already flinging himself down into the nearest chair. Seconds later his head slumped forward as his astral body departed. A moment later the spirit in the corner vanished.

"What the hell just happened?" Kestrel demanded, her eyes darting back and forth between Ocelot, the place where the spirit had been, and Gabriel's limp form in the chair.

Ocelot wasn't feeling much more settled than she was. "I think 'Hawk's in trouble. I don't know what else it could be. He sends watchers sometimes to deliver messages. It sounds like he's in Amazonia."

"What's he doing in Amazonia? We barely just got away from — what happened before. Why would he go off somewhere like that?"

"I dunno. 'Hawk's weird like that sometimes. That thing said 'University.' Maybe it's one of his trips." He looked at Gabriel. "I guess he went off to follow it. Maybe we'll get more information when he gets back."

They waited impatiently for ten more minutes until at last Gabriel stirred and raised his head. His eyes were filled with concern.

"Well?" Ocelot demanded. "Did you follow it?"

The young man nodded. “Unfortunately it wasn’t able to lead me the entire way—apparently it was summoned in haste and didn’t have a great deal of power. It was already on its last reserves when it found us.”

“What did you find out?”

Gabriel got up and ran a hand back through his hair. “It was indeed sent by Winterhawk. He was in a plane flying over Amazonia—they had some sort of trouble. He summoned the watcher to seek help as the plane was going down.”

10.

The first thing Alastair Stone noticed when he woke up was the dampness. It was everywhere—his clothes were damp, his hair was damp, and his entire body felt like he had been sweating all night. He sat up slowly, cursing the stiffness in his body—although he was in good physical condition, he was getting a bit old to be sleeping on the hard ground with nothing but a thermal blanket beneath him. *Old Whittaker must be bound up like a pretzel*, he thought a trifle sourly as he swiped his hand across his stubbled face.

“Morning, Dr. Stone,” said Peter Hsu. The Thaumaturgy student looked somewhat rumpled but otherwise reasonably awake.

“Morning.” Stone looked around the camp. The fire was still burning in the center, and some of the party was moving around near it gathering things and stowing them in backpacks. A few were still asleep, though they were showing signs of rising. “Anything to report?”

Hsu shook his head. “No—it was pretty quiet after you went to sleep. Lots of weird noises, but nothing got near us. Except the plants,” he added, pointing.

Stone hadn’t noticed until Hsu indicated it, but sure enough it appeared that in many places the local flora had encroached into their clearing significantly more than had been the case the previous night. He nodded. “It does that. It’s probably covered up the plane already, without the fire to keep it at bay. If you’re patient you can almost see it growing.” He noticed also that Whittaker and Prakesh were over near one clump of it, examining it with interest. Whittaker appeared to be using the situation as an opportunity for an impromptu lecture.

Stone got up the rest of the way, feeling even more rumpled than Hsu looked and wishing ardently for a

shower, a shave, and a change of clothes. "Right, then," he said, sighing and once more shoving his damp hair off his forehead, "let's get everybody together and see what we've got for breakfast. Then we'll decide what to do from there."

Aside from the food items they had in their backpacks, it quickly became apparent that there was plenty of available food in the form of fruit growing abundantly in the area around the campsite. Whittaker, Meriwether, and Prakesh gathered a good supply while the others picked up their small campsite, put out the fire, and stowed their gear in their packs. "You should eat lightly," Gustavo Santiago told them as a few began tucking in to their breakfasts in earnest. "Take some with you and eat throughout the day—do not fill yourselves up now or you will have discomfort when we are moving. There will be plenty to eat along the way."

The students all took his advice and put their remaining fruit in their pockets. "Are we moving, then?" Catherine Merriwether asked through a mouthful of banana. "I still think it would be best to stay near the plane—that's where they'll be looking for us."

"If they are looking for us," Santiago, who was sitting near Stone, muttered.

Stone nodded slightly in acknowledgement, then looked up at the group. "Ms. Merriwether's suggestion makes a certain amount of sense," he admitted, "although this isn't a standard plane-crash situation. In the first place, no one is keen to go into the Amazonian jungle for any purpose, let alone to hunt for a plane that it's possible no one even knows where it went down. In the second place, even if someone *does* know our approximate location, mounting a rescue expedition around here isn't a simple matter."

"He is right," Diego Corazón said. He was looking better this morning after a full night's sleep. "There is much—" he struggled for a moment with the word "—bureaucracy here. Before it would be possible to begin a rescue mission the proper papers would need to be secured—"

"—and the proper palms greased," Stone added. Corazón nodded in agreement.

"So you think it would be best if we tried to find our way out on our own," Frasier said.

Stone nodded. "Not out, perhaps, but at least to somewhere safer than here. I've no idea how close we are to civilization or even to a river—if we find a river we might be able to find a village or something near it. But with the astral the way it is and the way this place buggers up electronic equipment, I doubt sitting here will do us any good at all."

"What about the pilots?" Merriwether persisted. "You said we could revisit that in the morning. We can't just leave them there to rot in the jungle."

Stone sighed and drew breath to answer, but Frasier spoke first. "Catherine, they're dead. They don't care anymore what happens to their bodies. I know that sounds harsh, but I don't think it's wise to risk our lives trying to get them out of the plane and bury them, do you?" He paused, looking like he didn't want to continue, but forced himself to do so: "Besides—after a night in this place, I doubt there's much of them left to bury."

Merriwether shuddered, and so did a couple of the others.

"He's right," Stone said gently. "I didn't want to say it, but you heard the jaguar last night—I'm sure he's got plenty of friends, not to mention the scavengers. I think we'll have to settle for some sort of memorial when we get out of here."

Merriwether didn't look happy, but she sighed at last and nodded. "Okay," she said. "I'm outvoted, and you know more about this than I do. Let's go if we're going."

After a brief consultation between Santiago, Corazón, Stone, and Frasier, the group chose a direction approximately , figuring that based on where they had intended to land and how far out they'd been when the engines had failed, this direction would likely take them to either a river or the coast in the shortest amount of time. They applied fresh coats of insect repellent and set out with the two guides in the lead, Stone next, and the wary Frasier taking the rear position. The others maintained a loose clump in the middle of the group.

It was slow going: it was not terribly hot, but the humidity was so high that all of them were quickly soaked with unpleasant slicks of sweat that would not dry. Stone was only too happy to turn over leadership of the group to Santiago and Corazón—the ease at which they moved through the vegetation and the watchful postures they maintained, guns ready, gave him confidence. He too remained vigilant, and when he glanced over his shoulder at the rest of the group he could see that they were picking their steps carefully and keeping an eye overhead. Before they'd set out, the guides had warned them about dangers from above—not just snakes like the one that had attacked Merriwether but also monkeys, jungle cats, some of the larger predatory birds, and a few species of vines. Apparently their warning had not gone unheeded.

They had walked for only about an hour when the Santiago held up his hand, calling a halt. Stone made his way to the front of the group. "What is it? Is something wrong?" He glanced around looking for immediate threats but saw none.

Santiago shook his head, swiping the sweat off his forehead with his kerchief. "No, señor. The climate here can drain one's energy quickly. Because the humidity is so high, the sweat does not evaporate as it should. We should stop frequently for water and light meals. We will not move as quickly this way, but it will prevent exhaustion."

Stone nodded, looking back at the group. Dr. Whittaker had already dropped to the ground, panting with exertion. Merriwether and Prakesh both looked tired as well. Frasier moved around the perimeter keeping watch, as did Corazón. Stone, satisfied that everything was well for the moment, joined them.

They resumed their trek again after about twenty minutes, and once again Santiago let them walk for about an hour before declaring another rest period. "I'd forgotten how frightful it is here," Stone told Whittaker. "I'd say it was like walking through a damp sweat sock, except that it smells better. The bugs are about right, though," he added, smacking at a large one that had lit on his neck.

"I meant to ask you about that," Whittaker said. "What were you doing in Amazonia? It hardly seems a choice holiday spot, and as far as I know the University hasn't sponsored any trips here in the last few years. This one was a bit of a big deal, as I recall."

Stone nodded. "I didn't go with the University, and it certainly wasn't a holiday. I—" He paused to make sure he worded the explanation just right — went with another expedition. Some friends and I provided our services to a group who was seeking those kiwis mentioned in Dunkelzahn's will. Remember?"

Whittaker looked surprised and astonished. "You're not serious!" His tone was more excited than Stone had ever heard, and possibly even a little envious.

"Every bit," Stone told him. "Nasty business."

"Oh? Come to think of it, I don't recall ever reading anything about those kiwis—did your group manage to find them, or did it end up being a futile effort?"

"Oh, we found them all right." Stone's voice grew grim. "Once Dunkelzahn's people found out about them, they decided they didn't want them after all."

"Why is that?" Whittaker leaned forward expectantly.

"Let's just say they were playing host to some rather nasty beasts and leave it at that, shall we?"

Whittaker looked disappointed, but nodded. "As you wish, Alastair. Perhaps you can tell me more at some later time."

"Perhaps so," Stone agreed, rising. He suspected that Whittaker knew as well as he himself did that this wasn't going to happen. There were just too many pieces of his other life tied up with that story for him to share the details with anyone.

The march continued for the rest of the morning, with most of the marchers getting progressively more tired and drained as the day went on. By noon, Santiago and Corazón led them into a small clearing and dropped their packs. "We will rest here for the remainder of the afternoon," Santiago said. "The afternoon is too hot for us to continue, but in three hours or so we should be able to get three or four more hours in before we make camp."

Nobody argued—in fact, most of them were already following the guides' lead, tossing their packs down and finding reasonably clear looking spaces on the ground to sit down.

Stone chose a spot near Frasier and Gina Kane. It was raining again, and although they found ready shelter under one of the area's ubiquitous trees, the ground was damp and uncomfortable. Most of them were sitting on their packs. "Do you think your watcher spirit made it to

your friend?" Kane asked suddenly. She looked like she had been deep in thought for quite some time.

Stone shrugged. "I certainly hope so. I did summon it while we were in the air, which means that it might have avoided some of the more...interesting aspects of the astral around here. I see no reason why it wouldn't find him, but I wouldn't advise placing too many of your hopes on the possibility."

Frasier nodded. "I wonder how much longer we'll have to hike before we find a river or some other landmark we can navigate by. I hope it's not too long, because I doubt some of our group are going to be able to keep it together for much longer than a few days."

"We'll do what we need to," Kane said, sounding a little nettled.

Frasier quickly raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm not trying to put anyone down," he said quickly. "That's not what I mean. But this kind of heat and humidity can be insidious. It saps your energy slowly, and don't forget, some of these people were injured. Just because they're healed now doesn't mean we were able to replace the blood they lost, nor completely get rid of the trauma they've suffered."

Kane was mollified by his words, her look of annoyance turning to one of contemplation. Finally she nodded. "True. But we don't have much choice, do we? We can't just sit here and wait for the vines to grow over us." She glanced over to where the parobotany students and Whittaker had once again huddled up to examine some bright flowers surrounded by creeping vines. "And now that we've moved away from the plane, nobody will even know where to look for us."

"I'm afraid you're right," Stone agreed. "We are on our own here, but I think we're up to the task. Most of our group are young, and no one is in frightfully bad shape,

just a little out of condition. What we've got in our favor is that there's plenty of food and water, and with all the mages we have in the group, injuries aren't a big issue unless someone wanders off."

"Is it really as dangerous as you're leading us to believe?" Kane asked, lowering her voice. "Or was all that just exaggeration to keep everyone together?"

Stone shook his head. "Every bit is true," he said. "You didn't see the snake that attacked Ms. Merriwether—that thing was as big as she is. Snakes, jaguars, monkeys—I don't want to alarm anyone unnecessarily, but there are some very nasty things in this jungle."

"Nastier than that," Frasier added, "but fortunately most of the really scary things are fairly rare and don't come out often."

"Like what?" Kane asked, eyes widening.

Frasier looked at Stone, who shrugged and reluctantly took up the story. "I've seen a basilisk once, and a couple of macareu in the water..."

"And dragons," Frasier put in, dropping his voice even more.

Kane stiffened and her eyes flashed. "Yeah, right. You're lying, Kevin! You said yourself you've never been down here before. Now you're just trying to scare me."

Frasier grinned. "No, I haven't been here before, but everybody knows dragons live in Amazonia. Didn't you do your research? There are even great dragons, feathered serpents: Hualpa lives here, and the rumors say so does SIRRURG and at least one more. Not to mention who knows how many smaller dragons. Isn't that right, Dr. Stone?"

"I don't think we have anything to worry about from any dragons," Stone said, catching the look on Kane's face which warred between fear and anger. "They tend to

mind their own business. Unless you blunder into their lairs, and that's not an easy thing to do."

"Speaking from experience?" Frasier chuckled.

Stone was spared having to answer because suddenly there seemed to be a commotion on the other side of the clearing. He leaped up and hurried over, followed closely by Kane and Frasier.

The group that had been looking at botanical specimens had scrambled up and were now backing away, holding their hands up in protective poses. Stone was about to ask what the problem was when a large chunk of wood sailed through the air and smacked him in the shoulder. It wasn't hard enough to hurt but it nonetheless did startle him. "What the—?"

This time it was a yellow fruit that looked like an oversized banana, and it hit Kevin Frasier in the chest. The two parobotany students and Whittaker were making a quick retreat back toward where Stone, Frasier, and Kane stood. "What is it?" Stone demanded, looking around for the source of the thrown objects.

Before he could answer, the entire group (including the two guides and Peter Hsu, who had come in from the far side of the clearing) were suddenly pelted by objects ranging from fruit to wood chunks to large wads of vines. Stone got a quick impression of a large brown face that almost looked human before it ducked back into the trees.

"Monkeys!" Santiago said at the same time Stone figured it out. He backed up toward the center of the clearing. "Move away from the trees," the guide ordered. "We will go now. Gather up your things."

"Are they dangerous?" Prakesh asked, hastily stuffing things into his pack as everyone else scrambled to do the same. "They're just monkeys, right?"

Now that he'd gotten a look at their attackers, Stone had a better idea of what they were dealing with. "If

they're like the ones I've seen before, they are dangerous," he said. "They like to jump out of trees and attack." He joined the group gathering up gear and looked at Santiago. "Agropelter?"

The guide nodded grimly. "They will not leap down on us as long as we stay in the clearing, but this is their territory. If we don't leave, they will grow bolder."

"No problem," Kane said. "Hey, if they want it, they can have it. We'll just find another damp, overhumid part of the jungle."

Once everybody stopped running into each other in their frightened haste, the gear-gathering went fairly quickly. In less than five minutes they were packed up and ready to go. Santiago and Corazón moved on either side of the group, rifles at the ready. A few more items came flying out of the trees and hitting various people, but no one was hurt. Frasier plucked a banana out of the air and proceeded to eat it as the expedition fell into line and hurried away.

Nobody spoke for several minutes—they were moving faster than they were accustomed and needed all their breath for hiking. Finally Stone broke the silence. "Well, *that* was fun. Nothing like an encounter with the local wildlife to liven up an afternoon."

"What *were* those?" Catherine Merriwether asked. "I've never seen a monkey get that aggressive before."

"How many monkeys have you seen?" Frasier asked with a grin. "Outside a zoo, I mean."

Merriwether gave him a dirty look and looked back at Stone first, then at the guides, still waiting for an answer to her question.

"Agropelters," Corazón said. "Large, low intelligence, very aggressive, especially when their home territories are threatened. Although they are mostly vegetarians, they are quite capable of killing humans. And they are known

to congregate in groups. I count us lucky that we were able to escape with nothing worse than a few bruises."

Everybody got sober after that, and kept careful watch in all directions as they continued their march. The guides slowed them down to about half the speed they had been going to flee the monkeys. "It is not wise to travel at this time of day," Santiago said, "but the agropelters have large territorial areas and it would be best for us to leave them before we settle down for the night. We will go slowly to ensure that everyone can keep up."

The afternoon passed mostly in silence—at least in silence from the group of travellers. The jungle itself, as usual, was alive with sounds: the familiar bird calls and far-off predator roars, rustlings in the vines, and a few sounds no one could identify. However, there were no signs of the two sounds all of them would have given a lot to hear: water or civilization. "It's strange," Peter Hsu said at one point, dropping back to walk next to Stone, "Not hearing any of the things we take for granted: cars, planes, radios—anything mechanical or technological at all."

Stone nodded. He had been thinking the same thing, though not quite in the same words. "I'd like to have been here back at the beginning, when the dragons took over and began magically reclaiming the land. It must have been quite a sight to see. Too bad the only ones who saw it aren't talking."

Hsu tilted his head and gave him an odd look. "You know, Dr. Stone, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were enjoying all this."

Stone didn't answer for a moment. Then he chuckled, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Enjoying? Hardly. A plane crash that killed our two pilots and dropped us into God knows what with a group who isn't used to wilderness survival—not the sort of thing I get up in the morning looking forward to. It's just that for the moment we seem

to be all right and on the right track, and I *do* like Amazonia, for all its dangers. I wouldn't have volunteered to come along if I didn't."

"I thought I liked it," Hsu said ruefully. "Now I'm not so sure. If we get out of this, I think I'll confine my magical studies to places a little more civilized."

"I wouldn't blame you," Stone agreed. He was going to say something else, but at that point the group stopped. It was only then that he noticed that the sunlight filtering through the network of branches up above had dimmed somewhat. He glanced at his chrono and was surprised to see that it was already late afternoon, almost moving into early evening.

Santiago came back to confer with Corazón, then both of them turned to Stone. "This is good place to camp for the night," Santiago said. "There is still no sign of water, but the clearing we have reached up ahead is large enough that we can establish a safe perimeter around the camp. Neither Corazón nor I have seen any sign of agropelters."

"Whatever you think is best," Stone said, nodding and pulling off his pack. "You're the experts." Raising his voice to be heard by the group, he called, "We're stopping here for the night. Señor Santiago says there's a suitable clearing up ahead. Let's set up camp and see what we can do about something to eat."

Everybody was happy to settle in, and soon they had a comfortable, if not cozy, camp set up in the middle of the place the guides had indicated. It was a larger clearing than any of the others they'd seen so far, which meant that once they had set up, there was about a three-meter area of clear space between the camp and the jungle. Subconsciously it seemed to be making everyone feel a little safer, especially since there weren't branches overhead and they could actually see the sky for a change.

The sun was going down slowly, coloring the jungle with rich reds and golds to go with the unrelenting green.

It was about the time when Stone looked around and realized that he hadn't seen Kevin Frasier for awhile that he heard a voice from the trees on the left side of the clearing: "I've got dinner!" Frasier broke through some brightly-colored foliage carrying what looked to be a small deer in his arms. The deer wasn't moving, although there didn't appear to be any blood on it.

Stone didn't know whether to be angry with him for leaving camp or to congratulate him on his prize. Finally he took the middle ground. "I thought we agreed we were going to stay in camp," he said evenly.

Frasier nodded. "I did. This little fellow came poking around while you lot were setting up, and I've been watching him. When I got a good shot I stunned him—just had to nip out for a second to retrieve him."

"So he's not dead?" Catherine Merriwether asked.

"Not yet. Why? Is he endangered or something?" Frasier grinned—as the resident parazoology expert he would know this better than anyone.

"How should I know? But you're going to—?"

Surprisingly, Professor Whittaker spoke before Stone had a chance to. "Catherine, this is not a normal situation. We must do what we must to survive, and that means making use of the area's resources. It certainly wouldn't hurt us to have some protein." He was looking rather hungrily at the deer.

"You didn't think we were going to eat vines, did you?" Gina Kane asked.

"Don't worry," Frasier said. "I'll make sure it's killed humanely—it won't feel a thing. And if you don't want any, there are plenty of other things to eat."

Merriwether looked unconvinced, but didn't argue. Instead, she, Prakesh, and Hsu got up and began moving

around the fringes of the camp, gathering fruit from the abundantly-stocked trees. Santiago and Corazón were already getting a fire ready, and speeded their efforts at the sight of the deer. They, like Whittaker, looked like they wouldn't object to a little meat to supplement the ubiquitous fruit.

Frasier was as good as his word, and even Merriwether couldn't complain about the care he used to kill the deer quickly and painlessly. He dressed it out and gave it to the two guides to cook, then went off to bury the entrails where they wouldn't be a lure to predators. Once again Stone was glad Frasier was along—this was exactly the sort of thing he knew nothing about. He had no doubt that he could have spotted and killed the deer, especially with his enhanced cybernetic vision and superior offensive magical skills, but once he'd killed it he wouldn't have had the first idea about what happened next. He wondered, if he got out of this alive, if he should prevail on his nature-loving troll teammate Joe to teach him some wilderness survival skills.

Before long the deer was roasting nicely over the fire, and the meat-eaters' stomachs were rumbling in anticipation. Prakesh, Hsu, Merriwether munched contentedly at their haul of fruits, upwind of the aroma that was making everyone else hungry. The sun was going down fast now—it was already twilight by the time the guides pronounced the first helping of deer ready to eat. Everyone except the three vegetarians gathered around and claimed a chunk of meat, and soon the camp resembled some kind of bizarre semi-civilized caveman gathering as they all gnawed away heedless of niceties like utensils and napkins.

Stone noticed that, like himself, the two guards and Frasier were keeping an eye on the clearing's perimeter as

they ate. So were Prakesh and Kane. Everyone else, including Whittaker, were focused on their meals.

None of the jungle predators bothered them while they ate. "Maybe they don't like cooked meat," Frasier joked.

"Maybe we're just lucky," Merriwether said.

"You are probably closer to correct, *señorita*," Santiago said. "As soon as we are finished, we should gather up the remains and bury them. We can wrap up any cooked meat we don't eat, but it will not be good for long in this climate." He himself was already finished eating and so got up and began carefully picking up bones and scraps of fatty meat. Some of the others were about to get up and join him when suddenly Corazón stiffened.

"What—?" Stone started, but the guide cut him off with a raised hand.

Immediately everyone grew silent, and it was only a few seconds before they all heard what had startled Corazón. It was a rustling sound out in the jungle, getting louder as if something was approaching them at a high rate of speed.

The two guides instantly went for their rifles. Stone, shifting into combat mode without even noticing it, motioned for the students and Whittaker to take cover and did so himself behind one of the trees. Frasier looked ready with a spell behind another tree. Nobody made a sound except for some harsh breathing. They waited.

It didn't take long. After only a handful of seconds more a dark figure broke through the treeline and crashed into the camp—a dark humanoid figure. As soon as it reached the fire it dropped to its knees, looking around wildly. In the firelight they could all see that it was a human, his stubbled face pale, his eyes wide, his ragged clothes stained with blood. "Please," he cried in Spanish,

“Help me!” Then he pitched forward and landed in a heap next to the fire.

11.

Ocelot stared at Gabriel, the color draining from his face. "You mean his plane crashed?"

"Is he alive?" Kestrel demanded.

"What else did you find out?"

Gabriel held up his hands for them to stop. Pausing for a moment to organize his thoughts, he said, "I didn't get much. As I said, the watcher's power was waning, and Amazonia is not an easy place to traverse on either the astral or the material plane."

"Do you know if he's alive?" Ocelot repeated. There was an edge of panic in his voice, his body poised to *do* something even though he had no idea what that something was.

"Clearly he was alive when the watcher was here," Gabriel said. "Otherwise it would not have completed its instructions. The fading I saw was not the winking out of a spirit no longer controlled, but rather the slow dimming as power level decreased with time."

"So he's probably alive now," Ocelot said. "And he needs help." He spun around, looking wildly about the room in search of something, anything, that would allow him to take action. Then he rounded on Gabriel. "Can you find him? Can you find out if he's alive? Maybe even...do that astral projection thing and let him know we got his message?"

"I can try." Gabriel nodded soberly. "But I warn you – as I said, Amazonia is not a place where it is easy to locate someone in this way. It is so strongly magical that even at my power level, especially without knowing anything else about his possible location –" he sighed. "I will certainly try." He lowered himself back into the chair again and once more slumped to the side.

Kestrel looked at him for a moment, then at Ocelot. Her expression clearly said, *now what?* without any need for her to speak the words.

Ocelot's eyes settled on her for a moment. "Kestrel, I'm sorry. I can't think about this business with you and Gabriel right now. It's going to have to wait for awhile until I can figure out what's up with 'Hawk.'"

She nodded like that was obvious. "What are you going to do?"

He crossed the room in two quick steps and snatched up the phone, pushing a pile of clean laundry and two empty beer cans out of the way. "I have to find out where he was supposed to be going. That means calling somebody who should know."

"Who?"

"The watcher said something about University. If he's gone off somewhere in Amazonia on a field trip with his grad students, Aubrey'll know where he was headed." As he spoke, he was rummaging around in the little community's memory, trying to find the number for Stone Manor.

"You know you're gonna worry the hell out of that poor old man if he doesn't already know about this," Kestrel pointed out.

"Yeah, but better now than after a few hours when nobody reports in." He found the number he was seeking and began punching it in. In his haste he hit a wrong key, swore, and forced himself to slow down and enter the sequence correctly. Across the room, Gabriel had not moved.

Ocelot tapped his foot impatiently as the connection was made and the ringing began. It rang four times before being picked up.

"Stone Manor, this is Aubrey speaking."

Ocelot's concentration focused completely on the voice on the other end of the line. "Aubrey? It's Ocelot. Terry."

"Terry?" The voice sounded suprised. "I didn't expect to be hearing from you, sir. Dr. Stone isn't —"

"— isn't home. I know. Listen, Aubrey—have you heard anything from him recently?"

There was a moment's silence. "How recently, sir? He only left yesterday."

"Where was he headed?"

"Sir, I don't —"

"Please, Aubrey. It's important. Where was he going?"

Another pause. "He's with the University, sir. He and another professor and some graduate students were on a trip to Amazonia to study—whatever sort of magical things they study. He didn't go into detail with me about it."

Ocelot let his breath out slowly. At least now he knew that the spirit was on the level. "Aubrey, listen to me. I need to know as much as possible about where specifically he was going."

"Sir." The old man's voice took on a slightly more stubborn edge. "Would you please tell me what's happening? Clearly you are seeking Dr. Stone, but —"

"Something's happened," Ocelot said, cutting him off. "A watcher showed up here and tried to deliver a message from him, but it was at the end of its power and it wasn't very clear. It sounds like—" he paused a moment, forcing his voice to calm, "—it sounds like his plane went down."

There was a gasp on the other end of the line. "Dear God..."

"Aubrey! Don't lose me now!" Ocelot snapped. "I need your help. Speed's important, because at least a few

minutes ago he was still alive. I need to get to him fast. And you need to do two things: tell me where he was headed, and get hold of whatever authorities you can and tell them about this."

"Y-yes, sir." Aubrey was clearly trying to regain his composure in the face of Ocelot's shocking pronouncement. "But – the radio – Wouldn't they –?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything else about this except what I told you. I'm gonna go on the assumption that nobody knows this happened except us. So get on it, Aubrey, okay? And where was he going?"

The old man took a deep breath. "Amazonia. There was a trip planned – one of the other professors' husbands fell ill and she was unable to make the trip, so Dr. Leifeld asked Dr. Stone if he wanted to go in her place. He and another professor have taken a group of graduate students and were planning to spend two weeks there studying magical phenomena."

Ocelot nodded. "Okay. Do you have the itinerary?"

"Yes, sir. Hold on –" There was a long pause and then the RECEIVING DATA icon on the bottom of Ocelot's phone began to flicker. "I'm sending it now, sir."

Ocelot waited until the transmission was complete, sent the data to print, and then turned his attention back to Aubrey. "Okay, good. Got it."

"Sir, I –"

"It'll be okay, Aubrey. I'm gonna head down there as soon as I get off the phone. I'll find him. What I want you to do is, like I said, contact whoever you think might be able to help. The airline people, the University, whoever. Let's get as many people on this as we can."

"Yes, sir." Aubrey's voice shook slightly but Ocelot could hear him regaining his stubborn grit. The old caretaker would do what was necessary, so Ocelot could concentrate on his end of the deal. "And – thank you."

"Null sweat, Aubrey," Ocelot said with more confidence than he felt. "We'll get it done. I'll call you when I know more. You do the same, okay?" He hit a button and punched in his mobile comm number, sending it to Aubrey.

"I—I will sir."

"Thanks. I'll call you." He broke the connection and snatched the paper containing the itinerary from the tiny printer.

"What did you find out?"

He turned, startled—he'd almost forgotten Kestrel's presence. "He was headed to Amazonia." Glancing down at the paper in his hand, he added, "Left Heathrow last night, changed planes in Miami earlier today. So that's where I'm headed to start, I guess." Without further comment to her, he snatched up a duffel bag from the floor and began flinging things from the pile of clean laundry into it.

"Ocelot, wait!"

"Can't. I have to get going. Need to make flight arrangements. Maybe Harry can—"

"Ocelot!"

"What?" This time he turned, impatience showing in his eyes.

"I'm going with you."

He shook his head and turned back to his packing. "Forget it."

"What do you mean, forget it?" She glared at him.

"I mean, you're not going with me."

"Why not?"

"You just aren't." He finished stuffing clothes into one duffel and grabbed another one, stalking around the room and occasionally pulling a weapon off the wall. These he wrapped and shoved into the second duffel.

"Ocelot, that's ridiculous. I—" She stopped when she heard a sound on the other side of the room. Turning, she saw Gabriel was stirring in the chair. Argument momentarily forgotten she hurried over to his side. "Did you find anything?"

Gabriel stood up and stretched, the bones in his neck making gentle *cricking* noises. His eyes were somber. "Not much. Not as much as I'd have liked. The background count there is incredible. It's as if the entire place is alive." He paused a moment, then continued. "I think I found the general vicinity of where the plane went down."

"Could you tell if he was alive? If anyone was?"

He shook his head. "No, I couldn't get that level of detail."

"Can you show me where the place is on a map?" Ocelot demanded, coming over. He was already punching up a map of Amazonia and its neighboring countries on his vidscreen.

As Gabriel studied the map and tried to place what he saw in a location, Kestrel turned to him. "Ocelot says we can't go with him."

"What?" The young man turned his head slightly to look at her as if he had not quite heard her correctly, then returned his attention to the map.

"He says he's going alone."

"Insanity." Gabriel leaned closer in, moving the pointer around the map and zooming in for a better look.

"Look—" Ocelot began.

Gabriel glanced up again. "Why not?"

Ocelot looked as if there was something on his mind that he didn't want to come out and say. "I—Kestrel—"

"You don't want me to go because of what I told you!" Kestrel exclaimed, her eyes smoldering. "Ocelot, if you're suddenly growing a protective urge after all this time—" She wheeled on Gabriel. "Gabriel, tell him. It's—"

"It would be safer if you remained, Juliana," Gabriel said softly. As she drew an indignant breath, he added quickly, "but you know me well enough to know that I would not presume to make such decisions for you."

Mollified, Kestrel turned her glare back on Ocelot.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Ocelot growled. "I said I was going alone. That means *neither* of you are going with me."

Gabriel shook his head. "Don't be a fool, Ocelot. Our primary mission is to find Winterhawk and the others as quickly as possible."

"Yeah. And I need to get going *now*."

"He's a *dragon*, Ocelot, or have you forgotten that already?" Kestrel leaned over the back of Gabriel's chair and peered at the map over his shoulder. "Having him along can do nothing but help find 'Hawk faster. And you know I'm better in the wilderness than you are."

Ocelot sighed. They were right, of course, both of them. How could he come out and say that he didn't want Kestrel to risk herself when she was — *ah, hell. I can't treat her like this. She'd hate me for it. I'm just gonna have to trust that she can take care of herself.*

And that I can handle being that close to her for this long after...what's happened, a little voice in the back of his mind added.

"Okay, fine," he snapped. "You can go. But we have to get going now."

Gabriel stabbed a button on the vid unit and sent another file to the printer, already pulling a mobile phone from his pocket. "That's as close as I can get — the background count is making it difficult to get any more precision. Perhaps when we get there I can probe more deeply." Without waiting for an answer, he punched a button on the phone and put it to his ear.

"What are you doing?"

"Transportation," he said briefly, then turned away.

Ocelot sighed. He didn't often like to admit it, but dragons could be very useful companions when you needed something done in a hurry. Especially dragons with the kinds of connections Gabriel had. He looked at Kestrel and let out a long sigh.

She touched his arm gently. "He'll be fine," she whispered. "We'll find him. He's tough, and he knows how to take care of himself. And if they've got a whole planeload of mages they can probably handle injuries." *I hope so*, he thought, but said nothing.

12.

Stone was the first to react. "Everyone stay where you are," he ordered. "Corazón, Santiago—cover me."

The two guides nodded grimly and adjusted the aim of their rifles as Stone moved with caution from behind his cover. He kept low, covering the distance in quick steps, and dropped down next to their visitor. "He's not dead," he announced after a moment. "But he's in bad shape. Best if you all keep an eye out for anything approaching while I heal him up."

Some of the others emerged from their cover; those who remained hidden watched from their posts. Kevin Frasier came over to stand near Stone as he wove his healing spell. Several tense moments passed, then Stone nodded. "There," he said. "That should take care of him, at least enough so he's not in danger of dying. It looks like he's taken quite a few injuries, not all of them recent."

When it became reasonably apparent after several more minutes that no one was hot on their guest's tail, the rest of the party finally ventured from behind the trees. Gina Kane and Frasier helped Stone lay the injured man out next to the fire and make him comfortable while the others finished cleaning up the evening meal, stowing the remainder of the meat, and burying the refuse. When the work was done and the fire was burning cheerfully, everyone sat down around it and tried to settle in. It wasn't easy—they were all nervous, and now it wasn't just about the local flora and fauna.

"I wonder who he is," Peter Hsu said, examining the sleeping man from across the fire.

"He looks local," Ram Prakesh said. "I mean—like he's from this area, not a tourist."

"Dressed like a local too," Kevin Frasier added.

"But what could have happened to him?" Gina Kane asked. "People don't just go wandering around this jungle without a reason, especially not alone. I wonder if he was running from some animal, or—" She let it trail off, but everyone there knew what she would have said: *—or if people were chasing him.*

"There aren't too many nasty creatures out here that couldn't outrun a human," Stone said, sounding grim. "And certainly not one in as bad a shape as this poor chap is."

Everyone looked around nervously again. "So—" Catherine Merriwether said, spacing her words with care, "—you're saying that you don't think it was an animal that was chasing him."

Stone shrugged. "I don't have any idea. And don't forget—if he was being pursued by people, those people might prove to be our salvation. We know nothing about this man. He could be an escaped prisoner, for all the information we have. I suggest we wait until he awakens, and then perhaps we can get some answers from him. If the authorities are after him, I'm sure we could prevail upon them to see us back to civilization before they take custody."

The others exchanged glances and slow nods; that thought hadn't occurred to them, but they knew better than to hope at this early point.

Nobody let the unconscious man out of their sight for more than a few seconds as they finished getting their camp ready. They were setting watches and preparing for sleep when the man stirred. "He's waking up," Prakesh, who had been watching him at that moment, announced.

Everyone crowded around, but Merriwether waved them off. "Give him some air," she told them. "How's he going to feel if he wakes up with the whole lot of us staring down at him?"

In the end Stone, Merriwether, and Santiago remained next to the man while the others moved a little distance off and waited. It wasn't long before he opened his eyes. In the space of seconds they went from unfocused to terrified. He struggled, trying to get to his feet and muttering something in Spanish.

Santiago pushed him back down and replied, also in Spanish. Stone, who didn't speak the language, felt suddenly out of his depth. "What's he saying?"

It was Merriwether who answered. "He's afraid about something. He's not very coherent yet."

Santiago continued speaking softly to the man, who appeared to be slowly calming down. After a few moments the guide looked up, his expression grim. "He says he is being pursued by men with strange guns. He does not know who they were. He says he was taken from the streets of Iquitos—knocked unconscious with some sort of stun weapon. When he awakened he was in a cell."

Stone considered that. "Does he have any idea where he was? Or anything about these men?" Around him, he could sense the others looking around nervously again. If the man was telling the truth there was a good reason to do so. Before Santiago could relay his words, he added, "And ask him what he means by 'strange guns'."

"I haven't heard any gunshots since we got here," Whittaker said. "Wouldn't a sound like that carry fairly well out here?"

"Not necessarily, señor," Corazón said from behind Santiago. "The jungle can play tricks with sounds."

Santiago was speaking to the man again. He waited for answers, then looked up at Stone. "He says he does not know where he was—he lost track of direction as he ran. Also, he was taken from the place where they were holding him, blindfolded, and left in the jungle."

"Why on earth would they do that?" Whittaker sounded surprised and scared. "Anyone who knows Amazonia knows that leaving an unprepared man out here is signing his death warrant."

"Ask him about the men, and the guns," Stone said, cutting him off. His gaze had sharpened on Santiago's face—he was beginning to get a very bad feeling about this.

The guide did as requested. "He says again that he does not know who the men were. There were some who might have been natives of the area, and others who were Anglos. They wore some sort of uniform, but he did not see any insignia or logos on it."

"And the guns? Why were they 'strange'?"

Santiago shook his head. "He can say no more—he only saw one of them for a moment, but he said it did not look like a normal gun, and it did not fire normal ammunition. He says he was released with one other man, and that man was killed by this weapon."

There was a low murmur of voices from the group hanging back, but Stone ignored it. He glanced over at Frasier and saw that he was looking thoughtful as well. "You say they were held somewhere out here in the jungle? Was it a permanent building, or some sort of camp?"

Santiago consulted the man again. Their guest was becoming more aware now, and thus more wary. "He says it was a permanent building. Not tents." There was a pause where the man said something else, then Santiago smiled a little. "He asks if he might have something to eat. It was the smell of the deer cooking that led him to us."

Behind them, some of the students hurried to get some of the meat from storage and deliver it, along with an assortment of fruit, into the man's hands. He sat up slowly and ate with gusto, concentrating mainly on the

meat. Stone noticed that every few seconds his eyes came up to glance around the clearing, as if he were waiting for something.

While the man ate, Stone motioned for Frasier to accompany him a few meters off, out of earshot. "I don't like the sound of this," he murmured.

Frasier shook his head. "No, I don't either. Do you think he's being purposely evasive? I didn't see anything but fear in his aura."

"Terror, I'd say," Stone agreed. "Whatever was chasing him out there, it's got him so scared he's willing to risk running right into the middle of a large group of strangers to get away from it. The question is: is whatever's following him dangerous to us?"

"I don't suppose you've any idea what they mean by 'strange guns,' do you?"

"No. Not without a better explanation. If this man is a peasant, even a high-tech assault rifle could look strange to him, if he's never seen one before. But even if that's so, if the pursuers are hostile then any sort of gun isn't good—we've no armor and a group of untrained people, any of whom might panic if someone starts shooting."

Frasier considered. "It's not for me to decide, but if it was, I'd say let's move. Now. Even though it's dark, I'm not sure I'd be comfortable camping here. He wasn't making any effort to hide, which means he might have led them straight to us. I'd rather have a look at them before they get one at us, if that's possible."

Stone was nodding along approvingly. In another life, he was thinking, the parazoology student might have the makings of a decent shadowrunner. "I agree," he said. "I just don't know how well it'll go over, asking everyone to move now after they've settled in."

"Just remind them of what might happen if we stay," Frasier said. "The prospect of getting shot at should be enough to rouse them."

Stone nodded and moved back over to the rest of the group, some of whom were still clustered around the newcomer and the rest of whom were prowling the perimeter of the campsite. After a quick consultation with Santiago and Corazón to verify that they were in agreement, he turned to the group at large and called, "May I have your attention, please?" He didn't have to raise his voice much—what conversation there was came out in low murmurs. When everyone was looking at him, he continued: "In light of what's just occurred and the fact that we might be in danger if we remain here, I believe it would be in our best interests to move our camp."

Most of the watchers looked astonished. "Now?" Dr. Whittaker demanded, eyes wide. "We've just settled in—"

Other voices added to the hubbub:

"—it's dark—"

"—what about the fire—"

"—but it's not safe to—"

Stone raised both hands to silence the objections. It took several seconds before they died down. "Listen," he said patiently. "Señor Santiago and Señor Corazón agree with me, as does Mr. Frasier. We are paying for our guides' expertise, and although this isn't the sort of thing we were expecting, I trust their judgment and share it. If our guest has someone nasty on his trail, I'd prefer not to have him lead them straight to us."

"We're not going to leave him here, are we?" Merriwether protested, glancing at the man. He appeared not to be understanding anything they said in English.

Stone shook his head. "Of course not. We'll take him along. We—" He paused, thinking. "Mr. Frasier, would you mind checking our friend's clothing? Let me know if

you locate any sort of small device—it might be sewn into a hem, or perhaps disguised as a button that doesn't look quite like the others."

Frasier seemed to get his meaning immediately, but the others looked at him blankly. "What are you looking for?" Peter Hsu asked.

"Tracking device," Stone told him. "If this man was set free to be hunted by someone, they might not be playing quite sporting about it."

They all stared at him like he had just sprouted wings. He sighed. *More things to explain when we get back. University professors aren't supposed to think of things like that.* He couldn't worry about that now, though—if Rodney wanted to sack him for this, that would just have to be the way it was. Right now they needed to survive, and leading men with guns into their midst because they didn't think to check for the obvious wouldn't be the best way to do that.

"I don't find anything, Dr. Stone," Frasier announced. "Of course, it could be very well hidden, but nothing too obvious."

Stone moved over next to the man, who was still eating but looking at them with a mixture of fear and suspicion. "Señor Santiago, can you please find out this man's name?"

Santiago nodded and spoke in Spanish. The man answered instantly: "Gilberto Juarez."

Stone addressed Santiago again. "Would you please tell Señor Juarez that I'm going to scan him magically, and that it won't cause him any discomfort?"

The guide relayed the message. Juarez looked nervously at Stone, but nodded. "Is it safe to assense here?" Gina Kane asked.

"I won't be doing it for long," Stone said. "Just a few seconds, to make sure they haven't implanted anything

subcutaneously without his knowledge." He looked up and gave her a crooked smile. "If I start twitching or anything, smack me a good one in the head. That should do it."

She chuckled as the tension was broken. "It's not every day you get to smack your professor without flunking. I'll keep that in mind."

Stone grinned. "Can the rest of you please start striking the camp and putting out the fire? I'd like to be ready to go as soon as possible."

There was a moment's pause, but then most of the group moved off to do as he asked.

The assensing did only take a few seconds and went off without incident. "Nothing," Stone said, sounding relieved. "Apparently whoever is pursuing Señor Juarez has at least some sense of fair play."

"I don't know if that's a relief or not," Frasier said. He had been scanning the perimeter the whole time. "Seems to me like if they were still chasing him we'd have seen them by now, don't you think?"

Stone shrugged. "Who knows? There's always the possibility that our friend is delusional, or making the whole thing up. His aura seems truthful, but with delusions you can never tell—they *believe* they're telling the truth, and that's hard to spot."

"I'm still glad we're moving. Delusions or no, we won't last long against armed opponents unless we see them first."

With almost everyone else helping it didn't take long before the camp was struck and the fire was out. The people with flashlights had them out but hadn't turned them on yet. "All right," Stone called. "Let's get moving." He wished that Juarez knew more about where the mysterious installation was located so he would know they wouldn't be walking right into it, but it couldn't be

helped. "I'm going to take point, along with Mr. Corazón—the two of us won't need the flashlights. The rest of you —"

"I don't need a flashlight either," Peter Hsu said. He sounded almost reluctant. "Do you want me up there with you?"

"Do you want to be?" Stone asked him.

"Would it help?"

Stone shrugged. "Having someone else to spot potential threats couldn't hurt. It's up to you." He could tell Hsu was scared but willing to do what was necessary.

The elf considered for a moment, then nodded and moved over toward Stone.

"As for the rest of you," Stone went on, "form a group. Those who don't have flashlights, hook up with those who do. Mr. Frasier, will you lead the second group? And Señor Santiago, perhaps you could take up the rear with your rifle?"

Santiago nodded, making Stone feel like he might have made the right decision.

"Let's try to keep it quiet," Frasier said. "We aren't going to be able to hide the flashlights, but if we keep our voices down we should be all right."

"Are we going the same direction as before?" Ram Prakesh asked. "We still don't know if it's right —"

"Same direction," Stone said firmly. "Unless Señor Juarez here has any ideas." He looked questioningly at Corazón, who relayed his words in Spanish to their guest.

Juarez thought a moment and shook his head, looking rueful. "He says he is lost," Corazón told them. "Between being unconscious when they brought him here and being blindfolded when they released him, his sense of direction is confused. He apologizes."

Stone waved him off. "Tell him it's not a problem. I didn't expect any help, but it couldn't hurt to ask. All

right, then: let's go. We'll travel for an hour or two, and after that we'll look for another campsite. With luck we should be able to settle down again before midnight."

Everyone looked relieved at that; some of them had been wondering if Stone intended to have them walk all night.

They set off. It was eerie and more than a little frightening walking in the darkness: the flashlights illuminated the mist that floated ominously over the ground, and the sounds seemed to be louder. Stone, Corazón, and Hsu separated themselves from the rest of the group by a few meters, and Stone noticed that the ork guide held his rifle in a ready position at all times, his gaze darting constantly left, right, up, and down. Off to the side of their path they heard rustlings much louder and closer than those they had encountered during the day—at one point, Stone was sure he heard something large padding along parallel to them, only a few meters away but invisible through the thick jungle. He glanced at Corazón and saw that he had heard it too and was looking very frightened. "Jaguar?" he mouthed.

Corazón nodded. "Almost certainly," he whispered back, tightening his grip on the rifle.

"Almost certainly what?" Peter Hsu asked. His voice shook a little.

Stone shook his head. "Heard something out there—he was confirming it's an animal, not a person." He didn't see any point in frightening the already jittery student by revealing the true nature of their follower. Although more than a little fearful himself, he was confident that if the jaguar attacked their group could handle it, but he didn't think it would attack such a large assemblage.

He was right. After about fifteen minutes more, the padding sound receded into the jungle. A moment later there was a loud growling roar and the sound of

vegetation being pushed aside. Both sounds faded into the distance. "What was that?" came a frightened voice from the second group, loud enough for the first group to hear. That was followed by a sharp "*shhh!*" and a few seconds of silence before they resumed walking.

Stone's nerves were on edge. Despite the fact that the jaguar had probably not been a threat, he couldn't shake the feeling that there was *something* out there, something dangerous. He glanced over at his companions: Corazón looked resolute and alert, moving nimbly over the carpet of damp vines. Hsu hung back, and Stone could tell the sweat on his forehead was not entirely the result of the humidity. "Mr. Hsu, do you want to go back with the other group?" he asked calmly. "I think Señor Corazón and I can handle things up here if you'd feel more comfortable—"

Hsu shook his head quickly. "I don't—"

A high-pitched whine split the air. Corazón screamed and dropped to the ground. He writhed for a moment and then lay still.

13.

Ocelot checked through his pack again, rearranging the items inside for the fifth time since the small plane had taken off from a private airfield outside Miami. He'd checked them a few more times before that, on the little jet that had brought them to Miami from Seattle. He didn't say "Can't this thing go any faster?" but he was certainly thinking it.

Behind him, Gabriel sat silently against one of the windows, looking out over the verdant jungle below. His face was unreadable; he hadn't spoken for over an hour. Next to him Kestrel was catching a catnap, leaned against his shoulder. She held a small pack in her lap; another lay between her feet. The engines droned an incessant background to Ocelot's growing impatience.

They had been in the air for a couple of hours so far, and counting. This didn't include the hour they'd had to wait in Miami while Gabriel wrestled with the local Carib League authorities who were unwilling to let the plane take off without what they called 'proper authorization.' Working his way up the chain until he was finally introduced to the tiny airfield's commander, the young man had produced 'proper authorization' in the form of a rather hefty credstick, and they had been on their way.

The pilot, who had conversed with Kestrel because she was the only one of the three of them who spoke any Spanish (Gabriel could understand any language using his telepathic abilities but had not yet learned to speak this one), was a rather burnt-out-looking ork rigger named Javier Lopez. They had told both Lopez and the airfield authorities about the plane crash, but both had seemed disinterested. The commander promised to radio ahead to Iquitos and let them know, but both he and Lopez told them that if a plane had indeed crashed into

the Amazonian jungle, a rescue expedition would probably be unsuccessful due to the shifting topography of the magic-rich Amazonian lands. Still, though, enough nuyen could go a long way in convincing anyone to do just about anything, and Javier Lopez was no exception. Especially when all he had to do was deliver them to Iquitos.

Ocelot finished rearranging his gear and shoved his bag disgustedly back under the seat. All he wanted to do was *move*, to get out there and find 'Hawk, and here he was forced to sit in this tiny craft for several hours, cooling his heels and allowing his mind to conjure up all sorts of terrible fates that could be befalling his friend while he, Ocelot, did nothing. He sighed loudly and stretched out, putting one foot up on the empty seat next to him.

Behind him, Kestrel had awakened and sat back up, also stretching. She glanced out the window, noted that the scenery hadn't changed since she'd gone to sleep, and settled back. "Have you ever been to Amazonia, Ocelot?" she asked suddenly.

He twisted back around to look at her, glad to see that she no longer had her head on Gabriel's shoulder. "Yeah."

She looked surprised. "Really? You never told me about it."

"It was awhile ago. The whole team went. We got hired to babysit a group of scientists looking for some weird fruit."

Gabriel glanced up. "This wouldn't have anything to do with Dunkelzahn's will, would it? I recall that it contained a mention of a fruit in Amazonia—a kiwi, if I remember correctly."

"You got a good memory. Yeah, that was the one. It was a nasty situation. That's why I'm worried about 'Hawk. He knows what to expect down there, but magic

can get tricky and sometimes it's good to have some muscle on your side, you know?"

Kestrel nodded soberly. "And if he's with a bunch of magical grad students, odds are good that muscle is one thing they haven't got." She paused a moment, then regarded Ocelot again. "So what's it like? What should we expect? I've been in the jungle before, but Amazonia—well, I've heard it isn't like anything else around."

Ocelot noticed that Gabriel seemed interested in his words as well. He shrugged. "It's hot, it's muggy as hell, and there are plants everywhere. It's like you can almost see 'em growing if you look hard enough. Not to mention some of the nastiest awakened creatures around, awakened vines, bugs—" he shuddered. "Wouldn't be my choice of a place to go back to, if it wasn't for something like this." He glanced at Gabriel. "I'm surprised you haven't been there. Seems right up your alley, seeing as how you wouldn't have to worry about much of the local wildlife."

"It was on my list," the young man said mildly. "But the fact is, you're not quite correct about my having to worry about the—as you call it—'local wildlife.' The lands of Amazonia are home to at least seven dracoforms that I am aware of. There are probably more who are a bit more secretive."

"Dracoforms?" Ocelot's eyes widened. "You mean dragons?"

"Feathered serpents, in most cases," Gabriel told him. "They are known for being rather territorial about the lands they claim as their own, especially in regard to the trespassing of other dracoforms."

Ocelot took a deep breath. "Tell me there aren't any in the area where you think the plane went down."

Gabriel shook his head. "No, the nearest one I am aware of lairs about a hundred kilometers to the north of

the likely crash site. And at any rate, they don't tend to pay attention to the activities of humans and metahumans, as long as they're left alone."

"But if you show up—"

"I said dracoforms, not Great Dracoforms," Gabriel said, "None of the Greats lair near where we're going. Except for Hualpa, who has far more important things on his mind than to be concerned with us, the others should not be an issue. My masking should be more than sufficient to conceal my true nature from the adults."

"Ah, the little guys," Ocelot said with only a bit of sarcasm. "Nothing to worry about, then."

Gabriel started to answer, caught Ocelot's tone, and chose not to.

"So," Kestrel broke in before things could go any further, "standard jungle-type provisions should apply? I know how to outfit an expedition for a normal jungle run, but—"

"Yeah." Ocelot seemed grateful to have something to do other than watch the unending greenness below and listen to the rumble of the plane's twin prop engines. "We can pick up most of it in Iquitos, most likely. Didn't get time to do any research, but it looks big enough that we should be able to find most of what we're looking for."

"We'll probably want to hire a local guide," Kestrel said. "From the sound of it, it's pretty easy to get lost in there."

Ocelot nodded reluctantly. "Yeah...you got a point." He didn't like trusting someone they'd never met, but he had to remind himself that they had Gabriel along, and the dragon should be able to deal with just about any eventuality. He also remembered how on the team's last trip down here their GPS systems were only intermittently useful, often scrambled by the strange forces that had taken hold of the jungle. "Yeah, that

should probably be our first priority when we land. Once we've got a guide he can help us find the right gear. But we have to *hurry*."

Kestrel reached up and put a hand on his arm. "We're hurrying as fast as we can, Ocelot," she said gently. "We'll find him."

The plane landed at an even smaller airfield than the one they'd left a few hours previously. It was barely more than a strip of cleared land with a couple of small dusty buildings nearby that served as terminal and office. A motley-looking collection of locals lounged outside the buildings, drinking beer and watching the action. As the three companions exited their little craft, they could feel the eyes of the locals scrutinizing them from head to toe. "Great," Kestrel muttered under her breath. "Doesn't look like they get too many *gringos* around here."

"Not exactly a tourist spot," Ocelot agreed. Although the lounging men didn't make any move in their direction, the silent examination was making him nervous. He tightened his grip around his two duffel bags, drawing the one containing his weapons in closer to his body.

As they approached the terminal building, the locals' expressions changed from bored interest to closer scrutiny. They stopped their conversations and watched as the newcomers drew closer.

Kestrel stepped boldly up to them. "*Hola*," she said, switching easily to Spanish. "*We are seeking a guide to take us into Amazonia. Our friend's plane has gone down and we must search for him.*"

One of the men spoke, and for a few moments he and Kestrel exchanged words in rapid-fire Spanish. Kestrel reached into her pocket and pulled out a small sheaf of low-denomination bills, which she handed to the man. He

counted them, stuck them in his pocket, and said something else. "*Gracias*," Kestrel told him. Nodding farewell, she turned back to her companions.

"What'd he say?" Ocelot asked, still eyeing the man a bit dubiously.

"He said we'd probably not have much luck hiring a guide, but the best place to look is a place called Aquino's, downtown. He said there's a guy who hangs out there named Reynaldo Ruiz, and if we can convince him to take us out, he's the best guide in town."

"Are you sure this guy's on the level?" Ocelot's suspicion (added to by the fact that he hadn't understood a word of the conversation beyond *Hola*), was warring with his impatience to get to Amazonia and start looking for 'Hawk and the downed plane.

"He was telling the truth," Gabriel said. "Particularly after Kestrel gave him the money."

Kestrel nodded. "It's a good thing we took the time to get some local currency—I don't think that guy would have been as happy to get a handful of nuyen." She looked around. "We'd better get going. It's not far to Aquino's, but it'll be dark soon."

The three of them gathered their gear and headed out after instructing Javier Lopez to remain in town and be available when they needed to return to Miami. The pilot didn't have a problem with that—he'd already befriended one of the other pilots and they were bound for another of the local cantinas for some R&R.

Aquino's proved to be a rather busy place, given the size of the town. They heard it before they found it, as the raucous strains of what sounded like synth-pop music with a Latin flair dominated the area around it. It was a two-story adobe building with a bar/cantina/restaurant on the bottom floor and rooms for rent on the second.

Once again Kestrel, Ocelot, and Gabriel felt all eyes on them as they entered through the place's swinging, old-West-style half-doors. It wasn't long before people returned to their own pursuits again, but the three companions could still sense the low murmurs of conversation that persisted even after the scrutiny was toned down to an occasional glance their way. The place smelled good—a combination of spicy food and various kinds of liquor, with just the faintest tang of sweat underneath.

"Okay, well this is easy," Ocelot said. "You're looking for something, you ask at the bar, right?"

"Why not?" Kestrel headed through the crowd, heedless of the looks she was getting from the largely-male population of the cantina. Gabriel and Ocelot followed behind her, with Ocelot wishing he'd taken the time to learn some Spanish.

Before they could make it all the way to the bar, the crowd in front of them parted to let through two men: one dressed in loose pants and a voluminous patterned shirt, the other wearing more standard jeans and white T-shirt with a tan vest over it as an attempt at propriety. The first man, large and effusively grinning, strode up to them and offered his hand. "Ah, *señors* and *señorita*," he cried in English, "welcome to Iquitos!" His small dark eyes darted over the threesome and, apparently deciding that Ocelot was their leader, grabbed his hand and began pumping it with enthusiasm.

"*Were we expected?*" Gabriel's mental voice gently touched Kestrel's and Ocelot's minds.

"Not that I know of," Kestrel whispered. "Maybe there isn't much to do around here. Or else somebody at the airport called ahead."

Gabriel nodded and stepped forward. "I'm afraid you have us at a loss, Señor —"

The man's gaze shifted to Gabriel for a moment, his mind obviously processing the incongruity of this man, obviously by far the youngest of the group, speaking for it. To compensate, he turned back to Ocelot and grinned again. "Señor Gonzalo Marquez-Camarillo," he announced proudly. "We don't get many visitors to our little town, but we like to make those who do visit us feel welcome."

"Look at the rich gringos," Kestrel thought with sour amusement at Gabriel. He merely smiled and nodded once to indicate he'd heard.

"Listen," Ocelot said, taking that moment to reclaim his hand from the man's sweaty and overzealous grip, "We'd love to chat, but we need to find a guide and get going. We've got a plane down out there."

Gonzalo Marquez-Camarillo's broad face furrowed in concern. "A—plane, señor?"

"Our friend's plane has crashed out there," Kestrel added. "In Amazonia. That's why we're here. We need to get to him as fast as possible." She cocked her head at him. "We'll need to hire a guide, and we need gear and provisions for several days at least. And a Jeep if we can get one. The gentlemen at the airport said we should talk to Reynaldo Ruiz. Do you know where we can find him?"

The man appeared taken aback by Kestrel's abruptness. "A plane, Señorita? But—there must be some mistake. There has been no report of a plane crash anywhere near this area."

"No report?" Gabriel looked surprised. "But you are the closest town to their last reported position. Wouldn't you pick up a radio distress signal?"

"Yes, señor, if there was one," Marquez-Camarillo said patiently, almost as if speaking to a small child. "But I can assure you that there has been no such signal. Isn't that right, Francisco?"

The man in the jeans and T-shirt nodded and came forward. He was a tall, lean, weather-worn man in his early forties. "I fear so, señor. My brother Ernesto is the controller here—he monitors the radios. There has been no distress signal."

The three companions exchanged glances. "Maybe their radio was malfunctioning," Ocelot suggested. "Maybe that's why 'Hawk sent the watcher." Turning back to the two men, he shrugged. "I don't know why they didn't signal, or why the guy in Miami didn't call here like he said he would, but they're out there and we're going after them. And while we're at it, we'd better report the crash to the local authorities so they can get somebody out there to help look."

Marquez-Camarillo looked as if he couldn't decide whether to be miffed or apologetic. "Señor, I'm sorry, but I *am* the local authority. I am the chief of police here in Iquitos. I fear that as much as I would like to send searchers out to look for your lost plane, I hope you will understand that without any sort of distress signal, I cannot simply —"

"—you can't just take our word for it," Kestrel finished, a little bitterly.

The man spread his arms in a gesture of futility. "I am sorry, señorita. The jungle—it is a dangerous place, and without proper authorization, the Amazonian authorities —"

"Okay," Ocelot interrupted. "You can't go, but we're going. Now. As soon as we can get our hands on what we need. Can you help us with that at least?"

Marquez-Camarillo looked at them and then at Francisco.

Francisco shrugged and turned back to the three. "You and your friends plan to set out there —" He swept his arm out toward the jungle — "alone? With only a

single guide? Reynaldo Ruiz is good, of course, but I doubt that he—" Clearly he didn't think these three rather pale and obviously wealthy city-dwellers had a chance of succeeding in such folly.

"Hey, we'll take all the guides we can get," Kestrel said. "But we need to get going. The plane's already been down for several hours."

"And you plan to leave as soon as possible?" Francisco looked out one of the windows, which showed a sky just beginning to take on the dim edges of twilight. "Señorita, the jungle—it is even more dangerous at night."

Ocelot blew air through his teeth impatiently. "Look—our friend is out there now. It's gonna be dark soon and he's gonna be out there in the dark. We'll have to camp in the dark. So what's the big deal?"

"Can you help us?" Gabriel fixed his calm gaze on the two men. "Or if you cannot, can you show us someone who can?"

Francisco sighed. For a long moment, he didn't say anything. Then he nodded toward the end of the bar, where a hard-looking man in his mid-thirties sat drinking a beer. "That is Reynaldo Ruiz. He is indeed your best chance to find someone in the Amazonian jungle, if he will take the job. He does not work cheaply, though, and I do not believe that he will leave tonight. There are authorizations to be secured, papers to be obtained...and unless you have brought supplies, provisions, and —"

"We'll worry about all that after we talk to Señor Ruiz," Kestrel said. She flashed a smile at Marquez-Camarillo and Francisco. "Thank you, señors. You have been most helpful. We won't bother you any more." Turning to Ocelot and Gabriel, she nodded toward the town. "Looks like we've got ourselves a destination, guys."

The two officials looked as if they were preparing to say something else, but changed their minds. They nodded to the newcomers and moved off into the crowd, keeping an eye on them from a distance. Their conversation, whatever it was, was lost in the hubbub of the cantina's activity.

Reynaldo Ruiz had apparently been tipped to the fact that three *gringos* would be looking for him soon, because he was already watching them as they jostled their way up to the bar. His lean, weather-beaten face wore a slight smile, his hand resting easily next to a large half-full glass of beer. He took particular interest in the tall, athletic-looking blonde woman who was currently leading the push.

"Reynaldo Ruiz?" the woman asked as the three of them finally reached the bar.

Ruiz nodded slowly. His expression was calm, unperturbed. "I understand you seek a guide," he said in accented English.

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "We need to get into Amazonia. And we need to do it soon."

"Indeed," Ruiz said, nodding. His eyes were still and impossible to read. "And why is it that you seek to enter Amazonia so quickly? It is a difficult thing—perhaps you are aware of this."

Ocelot drew breath to say something else, but before he could, Gabriel stepped forward. "Señor Ruiz," he said softly, "A very good friend of ours and several others were on a plane that has crashed somewhere in the Amazonian jungle. I am sure you can understand our haste. Every hour we wait lessens the chance that we will find our friends in time."

Ruiz looked into the young man's clear violet eyes and for the first time there was a slight break in his

smooth expression. "Señor," he said, "I understand. If there are lives at stake, then of course you must act as quickly as possible. But I do not know if you are familiar with the Amazonian jungle. It is not a place that one enters in haste, and putting aside the physical dangers, there is the matter of the Amazonian authorities. In order to enter you must have the proper papers, authorizations, itinerary on file—"

"We'll give you 20,000 *soles*," Kestrel broke in. "Half as soon as we leave, and the other half when we come back. Plus a bonus if we find our friends and get them back here safely. But you have to take care of the—authorizations, and you have to do it now. We want to leave tonight."

Ruiz' eyes, which had widened involuntarily at the mention of the proposed payment, showed disappointment at Kestrel's final words. "I am sorry, señorita," he said, and he truly sounded like he *was* sorry. "There is no way that we can leave tonight. Tomorrow morning at dawn would be the soonest. It will take that long for me to get my boat ready, gather supplies—"

"He is telling the truth," Gabriel's voice spoke in Ocelot's and Kestrel's minds.

Kestrel sighed. "Tomorrow morning, first thing? But you can take care of everything and get us in then."

"For what you offer, señorita, I think it can be arranged," Ruiz said with a tight little smile. "Where do you seek to go?"

"Then you'll take the job?" Ocelot asked.

Ruiz nodded. "Yes, señor. I cannot turn down such a payment as you offer." There was a slight edge of something in his voice, but Ocelot couldn't make it out.

Gabriel pulled out the printout he had made at Ocelot's place and spread it across the table. "This is the

plane's approximate location," he said, pointing to the marked X on the map.

Ruiz studied the map and nodded. "You realize, do you not, that it will take us at least two days to reach this position, and that is if we do not run into any trouble. By that time, the jungle vegetation will have grown over most of the wreckage."

"We'll worry about that when the time comes," Kestrel said. "And as for trouble—we can handle ourselves better than you might think. We should be able to deal with most of what might come up."

Ruiz didn't look like he believed her, but he wasn't going to argue with someone who was offering that much money. He pointed at a river that flowed near the crash site, only a couple of kilometers away. "We will begin here, using my boat. I will drop anchor here—after that we will have to strike out overland. That will be the most dangerous part. As I said, two days is if we do not encounter any trouble."

Ocelot nodded. "Do we need to outfit ourselves, or will you take care of that?" It certainly didn't appear that there would be anywhere to buy supplies in town this late at night.

"I will handle the provisions and gear," Ruiz said. "I have friends who will open their stores for me with the proper...inducement. Meet me here at Aquino's at dawn." He looked at Kestrel. "I will need funds to procure the proper provisions and authorizations we will need."

Ocelot started to say something, but Gabriel cut him off. "How much?"

Ruiz thought about it for a moment, mentally ticking off the charges in his head. "Five thousand *soles* should cover it."

Again Ocelot started to say something, and again Gabriel smoothly interrupted him. "That will be fine.

Please see to it that you get everything we might need." He pulled out a credstick, fiddled with the numbers, and handed it to Ruiz. He looked the man in the eyes. "It is very important to us that we find our friends, Señor Ruiz. Anything you can do to help us in this endeavor will be well appreciated – and well compensated."

Ruiz nodded slowly, as if some unspoken communication had just passed from the young man to him. "I understand, señor. I will do everything I can. Meet me here tomorrow at dawn and we will be underway."

"Gracias," Gabriel murmured. "Is there somewhere we can stay for the night? We have not made prior arrangements."

"There should be rooms available here," Ruiz said. "Ask at the bar."

Gabriel nodded, collected his two friends with a glance, and bid Ruiz goodnight. When they had moved off, Ocelot glared at him. "Gabriel, you throw money around like that and he's gonna rook us for every nuyen we've got."

"Do you want to bargain with Winterhawk's life?" Gabriel asked softly. "I have more money than I could possibly ever use. If it will help us to find him faster, then so be it."

Ocelot settled down a bit as he realized this was true. "Is he honest, though? Will he take the money and run?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. He is not entirely honest, but I sense that he does have the abilities he claims. He can guide us, and his desire for more money will bring him back in the morning. He wants very much to earn the remaining money we have offered him—including the bonus."

"I thought you didn't read minds," Ocelot said.

"I do not. That I could read simply from his aura."

"Oh." Ocelot sighed. "Okay, well, since we can't leave tonight, we'd better get some sleep. I want to get out first thing in the morning. And I guess I'd better call Aubrey and let him know what's up."

It turned out that there was only one large room available for rent that evening at Aquino's, so, not having any other choice, they took it. It was about what they had expected of a hotel room in the area—simple, mostly clean, with few amenities. There were two beds and a chair; Gabriel, who didn't plan to sleep much anyway, volunteered to take the chair. When everyone was settled in, Ocelot went out to the balcony and took out his cell phone. Doing the mental calculation he figured it would be early in the morning in London, but he decided Aubrey probably wouldn't mind an update.

The phone rang several more times than his last call. When Aubrey picked up, he sounded tired. "Stone Manor."

"Aubrey?"

Immediately the tiredness dropped away. "Terry? Is that you?"

"Yeah. Just wanted to let you know we're in Peru. We've found a guide and we'll be heading out first thing in the morning to try to locate the crash site."

There was a sigh at the other end. "Thank God. Do you know where to look?"

"We've got a pretty good idea. What about you? Did you get hold of the authorities?"

There was a louder sigh. "Oh, sir, it's turning into quite a nightmare. I've called all sorts of people, including Dr. Leifeld, the head of Dr. Stone's department. He's gotten the British Consulate into it, because the Amazonian authorities are dragging their feet, wanting proof that a plane actually crashed. They claim there was no radio communication. They're trying to work it out,

but Dr. Leifeld told me it will be at least a day, perhaps as long as two, before they send anyone out to search. They're convinced that if a plane *did* crash in Amazonia, the occupants are—" His voice hitched as he was unable to finish the thought. "So a day or two more won't make a difference to them."

Yeah, that's about right. Damn bureaucrats argue over crap while people are in trouble. "Don't worry, Aubrey. You do what you can, rattle as many cages as you can on your end, and we'll do what we can here. You'd be surprised at what money can buy when you're waving enough of it under somebody's nose."

"Sir, of course I'll see to it that you're reimbursed for—"

"Don't worry about it, Aubrey. It's taken care of."

"Yes, sir." Aubrey sounded exhausted. "Please, sir—be careful. I have heard that it's very dangerous in Amazonia."

"I will. And just so you know—I'm not alone. Kestrel's with me. And Gabriel."

There was a long pause. "Gabriel, sir? The Gabriel who visited us earlier this year?"

"That'd be the one. So you don't have much to worry about, security-wise. And if anybody can find 'Hawk...'"

"Yes, sir." The voice on the other end sounded a bit more hopeful. "Thank you for telling me. I will do what I can here. Do you want me to come—"

"No. There's no need for you to come down. We've got it under control. Just do what you do there. I'll try to call back, but don't worry if you don't hear. Phones don't work too well in Amazonia, so once we leave we'll probably be out of touch."

"Yes, sir. Thank you. And good luck. My prayers will be with you all."

"Thanks." He didn't add *we're gonna need 'em*, but he thought Aubrey might have sensed it anyway.

It was very late that night when Ocelot, who hadn't even thought he was asleep at all, was awakened by the slightest of sounds. His eyes flew open, his muscles tensing, his mind instantly throwing off the fog of sleep. Was someone —

"*Remain still,*" came a gentle voice in his mind. Gabriel's voice. Ocelot could see from his position that the young man was slumped in his chair, feigning sleep. Across the room, the tiny noise came again: *skritch, scrape...*

"*What is it?*" he thought back, forcing himself to relax and appear to be still deep in slumber. Whatever was making the noise, it had either already awakened Gabriel or else he had never gone to sleep in the first place.

"*Someone is attempting to break into the room,*" came the calm reply. "*I'd like to see who it is and what they want.*"

The scraping persisted, tentative and very quiet.

"*Is Kestrel awake?*" Without moving his head, Ocelot glanced over toward the other bed where Kestrel appeared to be deeply asleep.

"*Yes. She awakened about the same time you did. Just a moment,*" he added, as the scraping sound once again got a little louder. There was a *snik* as the cheap lock on the balcony door gave way and then the sound of the door handle being pulled.

In his bed, Ocelot tensed, waiting.

The balcony door was slowly and carefully opening. Behind it, a small, shadowy figure moved into the room on silent feet. Leaving the door open, the figure tiptoed along the wall toward Ocelot's bed, reaching into one of its pockets as it went. "*Now,*" Gabriel's voice spoke in

Ocelot's mind as the open door swung just as silently shut and closed with a click.

Ocelot wasted no time. Leaping out of bed at the full speed of wired reflexes, he had the wiry figure in his strong grip before it even had a chance to move. "Turn the light on," he growled as Kestrel jumped from her own bed to join him. She switched on the ancient lamp on the nightstand between the two beds.

The figure, now revealed to be a boy in his late teens, was writhing in Ocelot's grasp, muttering a stream of Aztlaner, English, and Spanish obscenities as he began to realize that he was in serious trouble. He was dressed in loose-fitting pants, T-shirt, shapeless jacket, and socks.

"Looks like we've got us a visitor," Ocelot said through his teeth. He shook the boy by the wrists. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Their captive did not answer, except to glare sullenly at Ocelot and continue in his attempts to break free of the iron grip that held him.

"Maybe we should see what he was trying to get out of his pocket," Kestrel said. Without asking permission, she began to rummage in the boy's jacket pockets. Her eyes widened as she pulled out the items and tossed them on the bed. "That was *not* what I was expecting."

"Shit," Ocelot agreed, nodding. "Ares Squirt pistol? Looks brand new, too. I didn't think anybody down here except politicians and mercs could afford one of those things. Especially a kid."

"It *is* new," Kestrel confirmed, picking it up to inspect it more closely. "Fully loaded, too." She handed it to Gabriel and picked up the next item, a large metal hip flask full of liquid. Unscrewing the cap, she carefully waved her hand across the open mouth to waft some of the scent to her nostrils. "This is getting worse," she said grimly, wrinkling her nose and re-capping the flask.

"Booze?"

"Gasoline."

Apparently the boy knew that word, for at that moment he made a lunge toward the window. Ocelot pulled him up short and twisted one of his arms behind his back, yanking it painfully upward. The boy stopped struggling.

Kestrel looked at the flask and at the third item the boy had carried: a cigarette lighter. "Guys—if I didn't know better—and I don't—I'd say somebody was trying to kill us. Not just rob the *turistas*, but really kill us."

14.

"Bugger!" Stone snapped. Then, louder: "Down!" When Peter Hsu merely stood, frozen in fear, Stone lunged at him and dragged him down. Another high-pitched whine signaled something zooming by above them.

Hsu's eyes were wide. "What—?"

"Come on!" Stone hissed, shoving him back toward the second group. He was breathing hard, adrenaline coursing through his body. He didn't know what had taken Corazón down, but he knew from the sound that it wasn't an animal. All he could hope was that whoever had spotted them hadn't seen the second group yet. He took a deep breath and made a fast decision. "Hsu," he whispered, "Get back to the other group and tell them to get down and stay quiet. Hurry."

The elf was almost in a panic. "What are you going to—"

"Do it!" Stone ordered. "And stay down yourself. Go!" He was amazed at how easily he had shifted from professor to shadowrunner—Alastair Stone would observe propriety. Winterhawk would not—not if it meant risking somebody's life. He gave Hsu a hard shove and moved away from him.

He didn't know what the hell he was planning, which was part of the reason he wanted to get away from the rest of the group. All he knew was that, of all of them, he had probably the best chance of dealing with the threat—that was, if he didn't do something stupid and get himself killed. Corazón was probably dead. Santiago had his rifle and his jungle survival skills, but no armor and probably minimal combat skills. Frasier—he had common sense and leadership ability, but Stone doubted he'd dealt with this kind of situation before. He sighed. What he wouldn't

have given for even one of his teammates right now: Ocelot, 'Wraith, or Joe. Or Kestrel. He smiled grimly to himself as he visualized a spell formula and faded into invisibility, thinking, *Or Gabriel, as long as I'm indulging in flights of fancy. He'd make short work of whatever this is.*

But none of them were here. Just him. He hoped the group wouldn't panic at Hsu's words and run in different directions into the jungle—if that happened, they were likely all dead. And that was assuming that Hsu himself hadn't panicked before he even got to them.

He crept as silently as possible through the trees and vines, hoping that whoever had shot Corazón was either alone or part of a very small group—and that the group didn't have any magic on their side. Right now that was the only advantage his side had, and he hoped they could keep it.

He froze as he heard a rustle nearby, followed by the low sound of voices. Stone quickly put a tree between himself and the sound (better safe than sorry: even if they didn't have magic, they might have ultrasound targeting devices) and listened. His eyes widened as he realized they were speaking English! He couldn't make out everything they were saying; he was trying to decide whether to risk a claudience spell when the voices rose a little. He held his breath: they were coming toward him.

"—don't see him," one was saying. "I'm sure I hit him."

"Don't worry about it," the other said. "This place'll eat him up by tomorrow morning. Nothing but a few bones."

"I wanna know how he got away from us that long," the first said, sounding disgusted. "He was a fraggin' peasant, and half-starved. We shoulda had him in half an hour tops."

"Whatever," the second said. "Come on, Hank—you heard the guy scream. He ain't alive anymore, or if he is, he won't be for long. There's nobody out here but us to hear him. We already got B. Let's go back. I could use a drink and some sleep."

They were close now. Stone silently moved to once again put the tree between himself and the speakers. He could see them now: two humanoid figures in jungle fatigues, about ten meters away. They didn't appear to have noticed him.

When the first one replied, he sounded louder still. "I'm tellin' you, Zack—there was more than one. I saw at least two of 'em together. We need to check it out before we go back."

"Listen—this place can play tricks with you. You know that. It was probably a monkey or something, or a vine. Come on—we'll report it, and they'll send a patrol out tomorrow to make sure we don't have any uninvited guests. All we were supposed to do was find the subject and neutralize him. You did that."

Stone let his breath out slowly and held it again, waiting for the two to come to a decision. He could see them now: he wondered if he should take them out, or at least stun them and take their weapons. *Better not. Not yet anyway. They don't—*

"What the hell was that?" The first man demanded, whirling around. He raised his weapon.

For a moment Stone thought he'd been spotted, but then realized with horror that it wasn't he the man had reacted to—it was something in the direction where the rest of the group had been!

He acted without thinking, as the second man also spun and raised his gun. Shifting into combat-mage mode, he gathered magical energy and flung it at the two

men. It blossomed around their heads and they both fell soundlessly, dropping the guns.

For a moment he just stood there leaning on the tree, finally allowing himself to breathe. He had no idea if he'd done the right thing, but he knew he'd had to prevent the men from going after the defenseless group. Noiselessly and still invisible, he moved toward the downed men.

They were stunned, not dead, but Stone knew from experience that they'd be out for awhile. The jungle would get them before they awakened, most likely. He didn't feel guilty about that. Men like this knew the job was dangerous when they took it.

He hunkered down next to them and examined them for a moment. Both were human, both Anglo. As Gilberto Juarez had said, they wore jungle-camo fatigues, along with combat boots and heavy open-faced helmets. One wore a pack on his back. Also fitting with Juarez's story, there were no visible insignia on the fatigues—nothing to mark them as legitimate military personnel. Stone glanced around—he didn't know which he was more afraid of: that the rest of the group would get worried and come looking for him, or that friends of this patrol would be out looking for them. Either way, he knew he'd better act fast.

Quickly he rifled through the two men's pockets, flicking his gaze to their faces every few seconds to make sure they weren't waking prematurely. There was little to find until he got to shirt pockets: each man carried a holographic ID card of the type that permitted entry into locked buildings. It was hard to read in the low light even with his cybereyes, but as he caught a glimpse of the logo he tensed and let a long, slow breath escape through his teeth. "This is not good..." he muttered. Debating whether to take it or not, he finally decided not to—he didn't know which pieces of the men's gear might have tracking

devices attached to them, especially in light of new information.

He did take their glasses, which he recognized as standard-issue low light/thermo. Somebody in the group could use them—Frasier, maybe, and Santiago. Then he looked at the guns.

There were two, each one near the man who had dropped it. Stone recognized one as a standard assault rifle of the type most of his teammates owned. The other looked odd. It was shaped mostly like an assault rifle, but the contours were all wrong and the barrel oddly shaped, with a flaring at the end. Juarez's words came back to him, the ones about the "strange gun." Yes, this would qualify. He didn't touch it—if this was some sort of experimental prototype, it was the thing most likely to have a tracker on it, and his curiosity about its nature for once played second to his desire to keep his group safe. He did, however, notice that a thin cable snaked from the gun to the pack on the first man's back. He flipped open the pack and saw that its entire interior was taken up by some sort of large battery. *Laser?* he thought idly, but then shook his head. *Probably not.* He'd seen lasers before, and they hadn't looked anything like this. He wished he could examine it, but it was too dangerous.

Instead, he turned to the other. Ripping a swatch from the bottom of his shirt, he picked up the standard assault rifle in it (so as not to leave fingerprints), removed the shells, and stuck them in his pocket. Moving more quickly now he patted down the men and found more shells, which he also took. He wished he could take the rifle itself. *Can't be helped*, he thought grimly. He knew he was probably being overly cautious and his teammates would laugh at him if they were here, but at least he'd rendered the thing useless without someone going back for more shells. He wished he knew what the other gun was, and

what kind of ammunition it ran on—if any at all besides the battery power. He had found no other ammo on the men.

He'd been here too long. The others probably thought he was dead already, and who knew what they'd do in that case—probably strike out on their own, or try to look for him. Either way would be dangerous for all of them. Stone rose, took one last glance down at the unconscious man, and then took off through the jungle toward the group's last known position.

He found them by following their voices. They were making some effort to be quiet, but only in the sense that they weren't shouting at each other. He was glad there were no more patrols nearby to hear them.

They were very jittery: he found this out by nearly getting shot by Santiago when he entered the clearing, forgetting he was still invisible. "Who is that?" the guide demanded, raising his gun.

Stone dropped the spell and shimmered into view, raising his hands. "Don't shoot," he said quickly.

Everyone stared at him, wide-eyed, and then they were clustered around him. "We thought you were dead!" Merriwether cried. "When Peter came back—"

"Why did you run off like that?" Whittaker demanded. "What were you expecting to—"

Again Stone raised his hands, this time in a calming gesture. It didn't work very well because he didn't look very calm. "Listen to me," he said. "This is important."

"Where is Corazón?" Santiago cut him off. "Is it true that he is dead? Shot?"

Stone tried to raise his voice above the muttering and whispering. "Yes," he said. "Now listen. Please. It's life or death."

That shut everybody up in a hurry. Stone took a deep breath, noticing Frasier near the back of the group with

his eyes constantly in motion. "I found the men who killed Señor Corazón," he said.

"Where?" Prakesh asked. "Why were they —?"

Stone cut him off again. He was beginning to suspect that blunt force was the only way to keep this group together and coherent. "Listen to me. We're in grave danger here, so let me finish. The men were a patrol, chasing Señor Juarez. From what I overheard, it sounded like they mistook Corazón for Juarez. But the sticky part is, they know that Corazón was with someone else. I listened to them until they heard something over here and were coming to investigate, at which point I — handled the situation."

"What did you do?" Merriwether asked, eyes wide. Her tone suggested she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

"I knocked them out with a stun spell, if you must know, Ms. Merriwether," Stone said, a trifle brusquely. Merriwether and her airy notions were beginning to get on his nerves, and he struggled not to show it. "What happens to them after that is none of my concern — I don't tend to show a great deal of mercy to men who shoot at me. Now then," he continued, "I examined the men. They were carrying guns, of course — including the 'strange gun' Señor Juarez referred to."

"What did you do with it?" Santiago asked fearfully. He looked around as if expecting to see it in Stone's hands, or strapped across his back.

"I left it there," Stone told him, "along with the assault rifle." He reached in his pockets and held up a handful of shells. "I did, however, take these, which might buy us a bit of time."

"I don't understand," Gina Kane said. "Why didn't you take the guns? Wouldn't they be helpful to us, especially if someone is after us?"

"Normally I'd say yes," Stone told her. "Except for the one thing I haven't told you yet. I searched their clothing and found little, except the shells – and ID cards. Our two pursuers, and probably all their friends as well, work for Ares Macrotechnology."

The students looked at him blankly, all except Frasier. Finally, Prakesh ventured, "I've – heard of them, of course. They're a UCAS company...make weapons and armor, don't they? But why –"

"Because they're not supposed to be here. Am I right, Dr. Stone?" Frasier asked from the back of the group.

Stone shrugged, then nodded. "That would be my guess, yes," he said. "My suspicion is that they're testing out that 'strange gun,' and it sounds like they're doing it on sentient targets. I'd bet a year's pay that the place Juarez refers to, where he was held, is some sort of secret test installation. And I'd bet two years' pay that it's not far from here."

Everyone stared at him in wide-eyed horror. "You mean –" Whittaker said slowly, "–they might be shooting at *us*?"

Stone nodded again, his expression grim. "That's exactly what I mean, Henry. I don't know where the installation is, except that it has to be nearby. I also don't know how many people they have there, or whether they're planning to release any more prisoners for target practice."

"But –" Gina Kane said softly, "we're not prisoners. Surely they'll figure that out when they see us, won't they?"

Kevin Frasier answered before Stone spoke. "Maybe you didn't hear Dr. Stone, Gina – they're not supposed to be here."

"So?" Catherine Merriwether asked.

"So," Stone said, "that means we're in a lot of danger. They've been using human targets for their prototype testing. Trust me, even in the ruthless world of megacorporations, that isn't exactly looked on in favor. If they're willing to kill these unfortunate prisoners, don't think for a minute that they wouldn't be willing to kill us as well to keep this location secret. Corporations don't build secret installations in the middle of the Amazonian jungle because they can't get enough of the heat and humidity."

"They build them because they're doing something they're not supposed to be, and they don't want it to be discovered," Frasier added, just in case anybody was still straggling behind the point.

For a moment everyone was silent, digesting the words. Their faces were pale in the dim illumination of the single covered flashlight they were risking. Finally Peter Hsu spoke: "So—what do we do, then? How do we get out of here without them finding us?"

Yes, that was indeed the question. Stone took a deep breath and sighed, pushing damp hair from his forehead. When he spoke, it was reluctantly. "I think," he said, "that as much as I hate to say it, we're going to need to know where that installation is so we don't blunder into it accidentally."

"You want to get *closer* to it?" Whittaker demanded, forgetting to lower his voice.

Stone glared at him. "Keep it down, Henry, unless you want to get us all killed now." Then his voice softened a bit. "Not all of us. What I'm proposing is that I and one or two others go on a scouting mission, while the rest of you remain here, quiet and keeping watch for any patrols. It looks like they're sending them out in two-man teams, and I don't think they've got any magical support. If you keep your wits about you, you should be able to

spot them and deal with them before they see you. We've probably got at least until the missing patrol was supposed to report in before they'll send out another."

The group wasn't looking happy about the prospect of splitting up, even briefly. "There's no other way?" Whittaker asked.

Stone shrugged. "We could pick a direction and hope for the best, but without knowing where they came from, we could encounter unexpected surprises. If we know where they are, we can make sure to pick a direction that's away from them."

"But they still might come after us," Kane pointed out.

"They might," Stone admitted. "But I think our only real chance for survival if they do is to be ready for them. We've enough offensive spells between us that if we can catch them by surprise, we can deal with them."

There was low muttering, but nobody could come up with a better idea. "Who – who will go?" Peter Hsu asked.

"I will, of course," Stone said. "And – Frasier? Want to come along?"

Frasier looked like only the gravity of the situation was keeping a grin off his face. "Couldn't keep me away, Dr. Stone."

"I thought not. I think unless any of the rest of you are eager to join us, the two of us might have a better chance. Señor Santiago, you'll be in charge of the group here." He reached in his pocket and took out the two pairs of sunglasses he'd taken from the patrolmen, handing one to Santiago and one to Frasier. "A little present from our friends."

The two recipients of the glasses both knew what they were, and immediately put them on. Frasier nodded approvingly. "That's a lot better."

"What are those?" Ram Prakesh asked.

"Low-light glasses," Frasier told him. "Help us see in the dark."

"If we liberate any more we'll bring them back with us," Stone said. Then, to Frasier, "Thermo as well. There's a switch on the temple."

The student tried it and grinned. "Yes, these'll do fine."

Stone got back to business. "All right—Santiago, what I need you to do is keep the group together and keep everyone quiet. I'm betting they won't send anyone else out for at least half an hour or so, but I can't be sure." He looked around, his gaze settling on Gina Kane. "Ms. Kane, you said you had a stun spell, yes?"

She nodded.

"All right—I'm putting you in charge of magical defenses. Coordinate with Mr. Hsu." He addressed the rest of the group. "Everyone, I can't stress enough the need to stay quiet. Voices travel a long way out here, and the patrols might have hearing enhancements." He cursed himself for not checking to see if the men he'd stunned had cyberware, but it was too late now. Besides, having the group believe the patrols could hear them more easily would keep them quieter, and that couldn't hurt. "Also, it would be best if you stayed low, close to the ground. The others will have glasses like these, which means they can pick out heat traces. It's harder here in the jungle, but they can do it. If you stay near the ground you might be able to blend in with the plants a little. It's not a great solution, but it's better than nothing. You'll have to make due without a fire, of course." He paused, looking around at their nervous faces. "And *stay alert*. That's the most important thing you can do. Remember, you've got the magical abilities here. Don't project, but use astral perception. If you see them first, you can stun them before

they can shoot you. You've got the advantage if you use it. All right?"

They all nodded slowly, reluctantly.

"Good," Stone said. "We'll be back soon — don't worry if it takes up to an hour or even two. If it's much further than that, there's no point in finding the place because we should be able to avoid it. If we don't return by morning —" he paused, thinking " — Señor Santiago, you'll have to take your best guess and try to get everyone out."

Santiago nodded. He was still looking a little shell-shocked from the loss of his partner, Corazón. "Do not worry, Señor. I will take care of them." His expression was hard and his grip on his gun was steady.

Stone didn't doubt it. He was glad Santiago was here — he felt secure leaving the students in his care, more so than he would if he'd had to leave them with Whittaker. "All right, then. Mr. Frasier, shall we?"

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"Damn straight trying to kill us—and make it look like an accident," Ocelot agreed. He was still holding onto the young intruder's arms and seemed to have discouraged him, at least for the moment, from further escape attempts.

"Not just that," Gabriel said, his gaze on the boy, "but risk killing countless others in the process. I doubt this building is terribly fire-safe."

Kestrel pointed at the sheaf of *soles* lying on the bed next to the other three items. "Lot of money for a kid his age, especially around here, wouldn't you say?"

"Ask him what the hell he's doing here, will you?" Ocelot growled.

She moved in front of the captive and asked a question in Spanish. The boy muttered something sullenly and looked away.

"What'd he say?"

"He says he doesn't have to tell us anything."

Ocelot yanked the captive's arm up harder, causing him to squawk in pain. "Tell him he'd better tell us something or he's gonna be carryin' this arm home with him. That's if we let him go at all."

Gabriel gave Ocelot a disapproving look, but didn't say anything.

Kestrel's expression hardened as she said something else to the boy. Ocelot, even with his limited knowledge of Spanish, could tell that she wasn't translating his threats verbatim.

The boy's eyes darted between his three captors. Suddenly, all the fight went out of him. He slumped in Ocelot's grasp, his head bowing, and mumbled something.

Kestrel didn't wait to be asked this time. "He said he's sorry. That he saw the rich tourists come into town and thought he'd break into our room and see if he could steal anything. He asks our forgiveness."

"Bullshit," Ocelot said. He could tell from Kestrel's eyes that she didn't believe the kid's story any more than he did. A glance at Gabriel confirmed it. "Tell him that's not good enough. Tell him to give us the *real* story if he wants to keep breathing."

Again Kestrel said something in Spanish. This time, the boy stiffened a bit and genuine fear showed in his eyes. Kestrel glared at him, popped her hand razors, and held them in front of his face, then said something in a harsh tone.

The boy's eyes got huge and he immediately let loose with a stream of Spanish, wriggling desperately in Ocelot's grip. He looked imploringly at Kestrel as he spoke.

"Okay," she said, "this is getting weirder. He says we're right—he was lying. He says a guy hired him tonight to break into our room, and that the guy who hired him gave him these things, along with the money."

"He speaks the truth," Gabriel murmured.

"Does he know what this guy looks like?" Ocelot demanded. "Was it—" he started to say the name, then quickly amended "—our guide?"

Kestrel asked him this, and the boy shook his head. He looked a little more calm now, but not much.

"He says he didn't see the guy closely," Kestrel said after more conversation. "But it wasn't Ruiz—he says he knows Ruiz and this wasn't him. It was someone dressed in dark clothes and hiding deep in the shadows. He doesn't think it's anyone from around here."

"This doesn't make any sense," Ocelot said. "Why would somebody be after us? It's not like we're doing anything illegal—"

"—for a change," Kestrel added wryly.

Ocelot ignored her and continued: "And besides that, hardly anybody knows we're even *here*. If somebody's hirin' people to kill us, and to burn down a whole building full of people to do it, they've got to have a better reason than we look like rich *gringos* and they want our cred."

Kestrel asked something else, then shook her head at the boy's reply. "He says he has no idea why this person wanted us dead. He took the job for the money."

Gabriel nodded. "I sense that he knows no more than he is telling."

"You sure you couldn't—" Ocelot raised his free hand and wiggled his fingers behind the boy's head where the captive couldn't see.

"No." Gabriel didn't elaborate; he didn't have to. Ocelot knew his policy on intruding into the minds of the unwilling—he just had to take the shot anyway because he was Ocelot.

"So what are we going to do with him?" Kestrel asked. She looked contemptuously toward the items on the bed and back at the boy.

"What happens to murderers?" Ocelot asked. He made a slashing motion across his own throat. "Hey—maybe it'll convince whoever's after us to stay out of our business."

Gabriel shook his head. "*No,*" he said in their minds. "*There will be no killing tonight.*"

Ocelot sighed. "I was afraid you'd feel that way." He glared at Gabriel. "So what the hell are we supposed to do with him—let him go? I'm not nuts about letting murderers go on their merry way."

The boy's eyes shifted back and forth between the three, but he said nothing.

"Wait," Kestrel said. "I have an idea." She motioned toward the items on the bed. "Get those out of sight, okay?"

As Ocelot was occupied, Gabriel did as she requested, moving the Squirt, money, flask, and lighter into one of the nightstand drawers.

When that was done, Kestrel said something to the boy. For a long time he didn't answer, then he nodded resignedly.

"What'd you tell him?" Ocelot asked.

"I told him we're going to call the police and tell them he tried to break in to rob us. They'll throw him in jail for awhile but he'll probably be out in a day or two—especially after we're gone."

"So we're not going to say anything about the attempted murder?" Ocelot sounded indignant.

"It is easier this way, Ocelot," Gabriel said softly. "Perhaps if those who hired him think we detained him for mere theft, it will give us a bit of a head start."

"You think they'll be that dumb?"

"No." Gabriel shook his head. "I don't. But there is not much else we can do."

The police, in the form of Francisco and a disheveled-looking compatriot who looked like he had been roused from his bed, arrived fairly quickly given the time of night. They hustled the boy away and apologized profusely for any inconvenience the visitors had experienced. Shortly after they left, the owner of Aquino's came up to apologize personally, his expression suggesting that he feared the guests would (completely justifiably, in his mind) beat him mercilessly for the breach of protocol. They sent him away with assurances

that everything was fine and accepted his offer of paying for their room and providing free breakfast the next morning.

When everyone had left, the three occupants of the room breathed sighs of relief and finally allowed themselves to sit down. "Well, that's it," Ocelot said, running his hand back through his hair. "I don't think *I'm* sleeping any more tonight. How 'bout you guys?"

Kestrel shook her head. "Nope. We've only got a couple of hours before we're supposed to meet Ruiz anyway. It's hardly worth it." She opened the drawer and drew out the items. "I'd give quite a bit to find out what's in the Squirt, but I'm not ready to test it myself."

Ocelot looked at Gabriel. "Any way you can tell?"

The young man shook his head with a small amused smile. "I'm sorry, Ocelot. I do have many abilities, but discerning the chemical compositions of liquids by assensing them is not among them."

"I just want to know if it's deadly poison or just something to knock us out," Kestrel said, eyeing the little gun dubiously. "I don't think I want to carry it around if it's packing something deadly."

"We could mail it to Harry and have him analyze it," Ocelot said, "but chances are we wouldn't get back the results in time. Besides," he added, "what difference does it make, really? Whether we got killed by whatever's in that gun or by the fire the kid was gonna set afterward, we'd still be just as dead."

"The question is, why?" Gabriel said. "Clearly someone wants us dead, but there is no explanation." He turned to Ocelot. "Is there any reason why Winterhawk's expedition might be the target of anything? Could the crash be more than an accident?"

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "I hadn't even thought of that. I don't know. I mean, from the sound of things it's a

planeload of grad students, a couple of professors, and not much else. I could call Aubrey back and ask if they had anything weird on board—I mean weirder than a planeload of mages—but somehow I get the feeling he's either not gonna know or else the answer's gonna be no."

"So this just gets stranger," Kestrel said grimly. "We'll talk to Ruiz when we see him, and see if he's got any idea what's up. Other than that, I guess the only reasonable thing to do is keep our eyes open and be paranoid all the time."

"So what else is new?" Ocelot asked sourly.

The sun began its day with a spectacular sunrise that tinged the sky over the Peruvian jungle with dramatic pinks and oranges. Kestrel, Gabriel, and Ocelot arrived early downstairs at Aquino's, but Ruiz was already there waiting for them, his hands wrapped around a large cup of steaming kaf. He sat at one of the tables in the back corner of the nearly empty cantina; four large packs were piled on the floor next to him, three of which looked considerably newer than the fourth. "*Hola*," he greeted them with a nod. "I hear you had some excitement here last night."

"Oh?" Kestrel asked, a little suspiciously. "How did you hear that?"

Ruiz didn't seem offended by her suspicion. "Everybody hears everything in this town. It's just the way it goes. So you caught little Pablo Escuela trying to break into your room. Did he get anything?"

"Pablo Escuela?" Ocelot leaned forward, frowning. "You know this kid?"

Ruiz nodded. "Yeah. One of the local good-for-nothings. Usually they hang around the cantinas trying to get people to buy them drinks, and commit petty crimes when they can get away with it. He probably saw you

flashing all the *dinero* around and saw an easy chance." He smiled lazily. "Not so easy, though, from what I hear."

"We don't like thieves," Ocelot growled. "If it'd been up to me, he'd have gotten worse than a trip to the lockup." He was watching Ruiz carefully for any sign that their would-be guide knew anything about the other aspects of the incident; he noticed that Gabriel was doing the same thing.

Ruiz shrugged. "Boys will be boys. He tried, he failed. I wouldn't worry about it. We'll be out of here in less than an hour anyway. It would have been sooner, but I was not able to locate the man who was going to crew for me. That's all right, though—I've handled things on my own many times."

Kestrel nodded, reverting to business immediately. "So you got all the supplies?" She looked at the packs. "That doesn't look like two days' worth to me."

"The rest of it's in the boat," the guide told her. "Down at the river. I've got a couple of *amigos* looking after it for me, but we'd better get going. You got time to have a cup of kaf, but I wouldn't take much more than that."

"I'm with you there," Ocelot said. "The sooner we get on the road, the better I'll like it. I'm sure 'Hawk ain't havin' any fun out there waitin' for us."

The three did take Ruiz up on his suggestion for a quick breakfast, as they didn't know when they'd be eating again. As they drank their hot kaf, the guide handed out the packs. "This is just the basic stuff," he told them as all three immediately opened them up and began looking through them. "Concentrated food bars, canteens, insect repellent, snakebite kits, thermal blankets, mess kit, survival knife, rope, water purification tablets, fire starters, those kinds of things." He ticked them off on his fingers as he enumerated each one. "The rest of the stuff's

on the boat, but these packs you keep with you at all times. You've each got a radio in there, all keyed to the same frequency. They don't have much range on 'em, but we'll be able to communicate if we get separated. You've also each got a portable GPS—those will be your best friends out there, even if everything else is lost. They don't always work, but if you're patient you can usually get a signal. Oh, and you owe me another five hundred *soles* for permits." His smile was a little unsavory. "It seems that Señor Marquez-Camarillo became a bit more interested in our trip when he saw the supplies I was purchasing. It does not surprise me. It is possible we will need more when we reach the border."

"We'll worry about that when we get there," Gabriel said. He started to reach for another creditstick, but Kestrel beat him to it. With a grin, she withdrew five hundred *soles* from the money they'd taken from Pablo Escuela last night and passed it across the table.

"Let's not make a habit of this, okay?" she said with a sweet but predatory smile. "We're taking a short trip to Amazonia, not buying off the whole country."

"Of course, Señorita," Ruiz replied, unruffled, as he tucked the bills away in one of the many pockets of his vest. "I will do my best to keep expenses to a reasonable level." He looked at them, taking in their lightweight but well-covering clothes and sturdy boots. "I see you are all dressed properly," he said with approval. "You would be surprised at how many *gri*—at how many people from your part of the world expect to traverse the jungle in shorts, Hawai'ian shirts, and floppy sandals."

Kestrel shrugged, smiled, and shouldered her pack. "We read the guidebook," she said. "What say we get going?"

They arrived at Ruiz' boat ten minutes later, following a ride through town in a rickety-looking Jeep that didn't look like it would have held together for much longer than that.

Fortunately, the boat looked more seaworthy, if almost as unattractive: a low-slung, battered-looking craft with peeling paint and sagging timbers, the *Esperanza* nonetheless looked otherwise well cared for—the low, smooth rumble of the unseen engines below attested to that. It floated serenely in the greenish, murky water, tethered to a wooden dock by a heavy length of rope. Two men dressed in jeans and T-shirts hailed Ruiz as the four of them approached, then went about their business.

The boat had a small cabin in the middle; Ruiz directed his passengers downstairs where they stowed their packs next to the pile of other gear the guide had purchased. Kestrel, with practiced eye, did a quick inventory of the supplies and nodded approvingly.

Ruiz took them on a quick tour of the boat as his two friends completed the last of the pre-voyage checks. Belowdecks, in addition to the supplies, were six narrow and uncomfortable-looking bunks, a tiny galley, an even tinier head (Ocelot was glad when he saw it that they hadn't brought Joe along—he doubted the troll would have been able to fit through the door, let alone manage the facilities), and the engines. Abovedecks the boat was set up as a pleasure craft, with a few folding chairs, clamps for fishing poles, and an observation deck up on top of the cabin. Ruiz, aware of his passengers' urgency, made the tour short and then excused himself to see about the last-minute details before they could be off.

Ocelot, Kestrel, and Gabriel remained up at the front of the boat looking out over the river, although their gazes roved over the shoreline as if checking to see if anyone was paying too much attention to them. Ocelot turned to

Gabriel. "You'd know if someone is trying to sneak up on us, right?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes, although it is wise to be vigilant. While close range threats will not be an issue, those at longer range might. I cannot look everywhere at once."

"Like snipers," Kestrel said grimly.

"Yes."

"Don't you worry," Ocelot assured him. "Sixth sense or no sixth sense, I'm not dropping my paranoia for anything. Not till we're back home with 'Hawk.'" He looked around. "I sure hope we'll have an easier time getting into Amazonia than we did last time."

"Oh?" Kestrel turned from where she was watching some fishermen on the opposite bank. "How did you do it last time?"

"In the dark. Dodging machine gun fire."

"Oh. Well...yeah. I hope so too," she said wryly.

Ocelot shrugged. "The way Gabriel's throwing money around, I think it'll work out okay this time. The Amazonian border guards are nothing if not greedy as hell."

"Let's hope so." She leaned out over the railing and watched the swirling water below. The air was full of the smells of water and vegetation and gasoline. Around the boat, the area around the river was beginning to come to life as more fishing boats moved past them and out to their daily catches. Overhead, a flock of large birds flew by, calling raucously to each other.

Footsteps behind them announced Ruiz' return. "Are you ready to set off?" he asked. "The preparations have been completed."

"Let's get going, then," Ocelot said. He was not enjoying the scenery, the local wildlife, or the pastoral scene of the Peruvian fishing village at sunrise. The only

thing on his mind was getting to the crash site and finding Winterhawk.

Ruiz nodded and pulled a map from one of his pockets. "Assuming we have no problems before that, we will cross into Amazonia at mid-day. As it seems you know, the crossing will not be easy. I have obtained the proper papers, but I have represented you as tourists only. We are taking a river voyage and will only be leaving the boat to camp near the water. Please do not say anything about searching for planes. The authorities are not well disposed toward anyone entering their jungles."

Kestrel nodded. "We'll play good little tourists until we're in, but once we're there —"

"Of course," Ruiz said. "If you will excuse me, then, we will set off." He headed back toward the *Esperanza's* tiny bridge. A few moments later the engines began rumbling more loudly, churning up the water behind the boat into a greenish froth. Ruiz's friend on shore slipped free the rope holding the boat to the dock, and the big craft moved ponderously out onto the river.

The next few hours passed pleasantly enough, with the three passengers remaining up near the front of the *Esperanza*, enjoying the gentle rocking of the boat on the water, scanning the shores on both sides of the river for any sign of trouble and finding none. All they passed were several more fishing and tourist boats, thick vegetation that hid almost everything set back from the shore more than ten meters or so, and a couple of tiny villages. Children on piers waved at them as they went by, and they waved back. Except for their grim mission, which was always foremost in their minds, this could have been an enjoyable pleasure cruise.

As the sun came up, so did the heat. It was an incessant, sticky, humid sort of heat, the kind that settles

down over the body like a damp blanket and refuses to go away no matter what you do to remove yourself from it. Before they'd been on the river for two hours, the three travelers' clothes were sticking to them, their hair hanging damply over their foreheads. "Well," Kestrel said, "it's not a dry heat, is it?"

Ocelot, who had almost forgotten how insistent the jungle humidity could be, took off his sunglasses, dried the mist off them, and put them back on. "Hell no." He looked at Gabriel. "You can't do anything about this, can you?"

"Such as?" He seemed amused by the question.

"I dunno—magic us up an anti-humidity field or something?"

"Probably—but it would be a bit conspicuous, wouldn't it?"

Ocelot let out a loud sigh and shoved his hair back again. "Yeah, I guess it was. It was a thought, though." He slapped at a buzzing insect, examined his hand, wiped it on his pants, and then slathered on another coat of insect repellent from his vest pocket.

As they got closer to where Ruiz said they would be crossing the border, Kestrel took a small pair of binoculars from one of her pockets and began scanning the area up ahead. For awhile she just leaned her elbows on the railing and moved the binocs back and forth, but then she tensed. "Guys—"

Ocelot was instantly tense too. "What?"

"I don't like the look of this." She handed the binocs over to him. "Take a look and see what you think. Two o'clock especially."

Ocelot did as she requested, scanning the indicated area. "Shit," he muttered. "Looks like an awful lot of guys to be guarding one river border."

"I wonder if they're expecting something," she said.

"You mean like us?"

"Or something else. Smuggling, maybe. Though smuggling *into* Amazonia seems a little weird. Don't most people try to smuggle things *out*?"

Gabriel had been silent during this exchange, but now he spoke. "Anticipation. They're definitely waiting for something. Difficult to tell if it's us or something else, but they have nothing good in mind for whatever it is."

Kestrel looked first at Gabriel, then at Ocelot. "You think this has anything to do with—last night?"

Ocelot shrugged. "No way to know, but I for one am gonna be careful. I wish I'd brought more weapons with me." He reached into another of his pockets, his hand closing around the monowhip he was never without.

Ruiz came out from the craft's tiny bridge. His brow was furrowed with concern. "I do not like this," he said.

"You mean the reception committee waiting for us at the border?" Kestrel asked.

The guide looked surprised that she'd noticed, but he nodded. "Yes. It is unusual for so many men to be waiting." His eyes narrowed. "You are not attempting to smuggle anything illegal into Amazonia, are you? If they search my boat and find such things, we could all be in very deep trouble."

Kestrel shook her head. "Aside from a few personal weapons—and if they want to get us for those, they're fools but we can deal with it—nothing else. We're here just for what we told you: to find our friends and get out safely."

Ruiz' eyes bored into hers for a moment, then moved to the others. Then he sighed. "This is going to be difficult. Usually it is a matter of having the proper papers and providing a few—financial inducements in the right places. But these men are waiting for something. I have

done this crossing enough to know that there will be trouble."

"Don't worry, Señor Ruiz," Gabriel said softly. "We will handle it. You do what you normally do, and we will take care of the rest. You must trust us."

Ruiz looked at him oddly. "I do not know what you mean, señor. You cannot take on this many —"

"It will not be necessary to take them on," Gabriel assured him in the same soft, unruffled tone. "Please. If there is no other choice, just do as you had intended, and do not be surprised by anything you see. Remember — we are tourists."

Ruiz appeared dubious and more than a little frightened, but he nodded. "I hope you know what you're doing, señor, and that you understand the danger we are facing." He headed back to the bridge shaking his head.

As the boat moved forward, it became clear that the group of men at the border did not intend to allow them to simply float past. Kestrel and Ocelot tensed further as the unmistakable sound of guns being readied carried over the gentle lap of the water at the boat's sides. "Stay calm," Gabriel murmured. "They cannot see us as we are."

Ocelot looked down at himself—he didn't *look* invisible—and wondered what Gabriel meant by that. Still, one thing he didn't argue with the dragon about was magic. He stood next to Kestrel, hand still on his monowhip, and waited while Ruiz brought the boat to a smooth stop.

In what seemed like an instant the little craft was full of men with guns. Reynaldo Ruiz came up from the bridge and looked around, taking in the nasty-looking automatic weapons and the hard expressions of their wielders. "What is it, gentlemen?" he asked calmly,

though Ocelot could hear the tiniest edge of tension in his voice.

"What are you carrying, Ruiz?" one of the men asked.

The captain glanced toward the bow of the boat. For a fraction of a second surprise showed in his eyes, but he quickly squelched it. "Merely tourists," he said, nodding toward Ocelot, Kestrel, and Gabriel.

Except for two who remained to hold guns on Ruiz, the others turned their attention to the three passengers. "Tourists," one said contemptuously in English, his gaze raking over them.

"Señor Ruiz has agreed to give us a day tour of the area," Gabriel said, his voice much brighter and more cheerful than his usual soft tones. He was giving the gunmen a look like he thought they were all part of the show. "I'm George Stevens, from Nebraska. In the UCAS. This is my wife Katherine and our son Tom." He indicated Kestrel and Ocelot with a sweep of his hand, then slapped at a mosquito on his neck. "You sure grow 'em big around here, you know that?"

The official's look of contempt grew. He looked the three of them over again, then waved his fellows off and turned back to Ruiz. "We are going to search your boat. We are looking for some—fugitives. If we find them hiding here, it will not go well for any of you."

"Search as you will," Ruiz said calmly. "You will find no one else. Perhaps if you give us a description of these—fugitives you seek, we can inform you if we see them in the course of our trip." He lowered his voice, matching the official's disgust for unprepared tourists. "I do not expect these three to wish to stay out for long."

The official chuckled a little, then became all business again. "There are three of them as well—two men and a woman. One of the men is much younger than the others.

We had heard that you were speaking with them last night about taking them into Amazonia."

Ruiz nodded. "Yes, I know the ones you mean. There was some—trouble in the village with them last night. I think they have gone back where they came from. I do not know. They didn't appear in the morning, so I was forced to take these tourists instead."

The official didn't look like he entirely believed Ruiz's story, but said nothing. The others came up from below. "Nothing there but some gear," one informed him. "We scanned the area."

"I told you," Ruiz protested. "Would I try to fool you? This is my livelihood, after all."

The official gave him a dirty look and sighed. "See to it that you remain on the proper side of the law, Ruiz. I would like nothing better than to catch you at something." He held out his hands. "That will be one thousand *soles*, please."

"For what?" Ruiz's tone suggested that he knew it was inevitable.

"Search tax."

Ruiz reluctantly passed over the requested amount and the men slowly backed away and leaped back into their own small boat. After a few moments they were on their way again.

No one spoke until they'd gone around a small bend in the river and out of sight of the border patrol. "What did you do to us?" Ocelot asked Gabriel then.

Ruiz, who had come back on deck, grinned. "It is a fine trick, señor. You did not tell me you had magic. That will make things easier." At Kestrel's quizzical look, he continued: "While the guards were on the boat, you three appeared—"

"I was an overweight middle-aged man, Kestrel was my frumpy-looking wife, and Ocelot was our ten-year-old son," Gabriel said with an impish smile.

"And they *bought* that?" Ocelot demanded.

Gabriel shrugged, still smiling a bit. "Apparently so." He didn't say *Hey, I'm a dragon*, but it was in the smile.

"But what about before that?" Kestrel asked, a little worry creasing her features. "They must have been observing us before we arrived."

"I've been holding the illusion for awhile now," Gabriel said. "Ever since I sensed the presence of the guards. I just altered it so Señor Ruiz was affected as well."

Ruiz was eyeing the group with new respect. "I admit, señor, that I was skeptical at first about this entire trip — but I have changed my mind. I think now that you might be successful."

"We'd better be," Ocelot muttered. "I'll tell you this, though—I'd be a hell of a lot happier if I knew why those guys are after us. I'm finding it hard to believe that they've got their shorts in a wad this bad over nothing but us searching for a crashed plane."

16.

Stone and Frasier didn't speak until several minutes after they had faded into the jungle and gotten away from the remaining group. They moved as silently as they could, both invisible, keeping track of each other through astral perception. It wasn't as easy as it should have been—everything around them was so alive astrally that they had to be careful not to be distracted by the vibrant colors and constantly shifting patterns. Stone still liked Amazonia, but his affection was getting a bit frayed around the edges at the moment.

He stopped and, after looking around to make sure there were no threats in the vicinity, shimmered back to visibility. Frasier did the same a few seconds later. "So," the student said, barely above a whisper, "what's your plan? You realize it's going to be difficult to find this place out in the middle of this jungle, right? We could walk right past it fifty meters away and not see it if it's small enough."

"I don't think it's that small," Stone said. "Juarez said they had permanent buildings, and although a test installation like this doesn't have to be enormous, they need sufficient facilities to handle their operations—barracks, prisoner holding facility, labs, weaponsmithing, vehicles, security center, the whole bit. Plus, if it's permanent odds are decent that it's been here awhile." He shrugged. "If we don't find it we don't find it, but I'd feel better knowing where it is in relation to us."

Frasier nodded. He didn't look inclined to question Stone's words. Instead he looked at him. "You're hiding a lot more than I thought you were, I suspect," he said in a conversational tone, still keeping his voice very low.

"Probably," Stone replied evenly. He looked around to check direction, then re-cast his invisibility spell and started off again.

Frasier did likewise. "Good idea or no," he continued, "I don't know too many university professors who would voluntarily want to get within ten clicks of a place like this."

Stone chuckled. "I don't know too many parazoology students who get this excited about danger, while we're about it."

Frasier made a *touche'* gesture. "Actually, I didn't tell you everything about me, either. Remember I said I was in Australia for awhile?"

"Yes?"

"I was in the army at the time. I did a stint with one of the magical units before I decided to go to Uni. It was only a year, but they taught me a lot."

"I'm surprised they didn't teach you more combat spells," Stone said, not sounding at all amazed by Frasier's revelation.

"It was more of a support role—that's part of why I didn't stay. It was a test program, and I didn't like it much. They don't like to put mages in harm's way if they can help it. I wanted to be where the action was."

"So you chose parazoology?"

"I like animals—especially challenging ones. I was thinking after Uni I might go into magical security. You know, training paracritters for security applications."

Again, Stone chuckled. "Remind me to tell you some stories after we get out of here."

There was a long pause. When Frasier's voice came again, it was softer. "Dr. Stone—do you believe we *are* going to get out of here? All of us?"

Stone didn't answer right away. He weighed his blunt opinions against his hopes and his approved sugar-coated

professor response. Finally, he said, "I don't know, Mr. Frasier. I think some of us will get out of here. I hope all of us will—but we won't, will we? The pilots and Corazón are already dead." He sighed. "All I can say is that I'm going to do everything I can to make sure every one of us gets home safe and sound. And if my watcher is successful in reaching my friends, our odds look a lot better."

"Which friends did you contact? Can they—well, can they do anything besides try to fight through the Amazonian bureaucracy and maybe launch a rescue expedition sometime after all the right palms get greased? I don't mean to sound cynical, but I know how things work around here, and I'd rather rely on ourselves than on outside help."

Stone smiled even though Frasier couldn't see it. "That's a good way to look at it, and probably a hell of a lot safer. But my friends aren't the type who wait for the bureaucratic wheels to turn. And depending on which of my other friends the one I sent the watcher to contacts—well, things might get interesting in a hurry."

"Oh?" Frasier's disembodied voice sounded intrigued.

"I wouldn't count on it, but let's just say that I've got friends in some pretty amazing places." He paused, then added, "And no doubt even if my watcher isn't successful, there will be people looking for us. I'm sure the University will have gotten worried when we didn't report in and are already in the process of investigating. There's the Amazonian authorities, though as you said I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for them. And there are all the parents, friends, relatives, significant others, and so forth of the other group members. I'll wager that with all of that breathing down their necks, the authorities will have to do *something*."

"It's just a question of whether we'll be around when they finally do it," Frasier said.

"Yes, exactly."

They walked in silence for a few more moments, then Frasier spoke again. "Dr. Stone?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know more than you're telling about the 'strange gun' you found? Was there any other reason why you didn't take it? I'd like to know what we're up against, especially if they'll be shooting at us with it."

"I'm hoping we can avoid that, Mr. Frasier," Stone said dryly. He took a deep breath. "I don't know what it was, exactly. If I had to make a semi-educated guess, I'd say it was some sort of energy weapon. The man who carried it wore a backpack with a large battery, with a cable running from the battery pack to the gun itself."

"Laser?" Frasier sounded puzzled. "Portable laser weapons exist already, don't they?"

"Yes. I thought at first it might be a laser, but the barrel was oddly shaped—wrong for a laser weapon, unless they just did it for show. That doesn't tend to happen. Ares goes for function over fashion in my experience." He sighed. "I wish we could have had a look at Corazón—seeing what it did to him might have given us a hint about how it operates. But that's not an option now." Again he paused. "Don't have too much confidence in my gun-related skills, though. I'm not terribly adept at either shooting them or identifying them. If my friends show up, they might have some better ideas."

"So your friends are weapons experts, then."

"Some of them are. As I said before, I don't even know who will come. "

Frasier subsided into silence, apparently satisfied with Stone's answers. They walked for a few more minutes, hearing only the soft sounds of their footsteps and the low

murmur of the jungle noises. They were perhaps fifteen or twenty minutes' walk from where they'd left the rest of the group now. One thing that was nice about walking in near-darkness, Stone decided, was that the humidity was marginally less cloying and the temperature cooled down enough that he wasn't sweating constantly and making a good banquet for the ubiquitous flying insects. He was about to say so when Frasier stopped. "Odd..." the student mused.

"What's that?"

"I don't hear any of the predators. Jaguars, monkeys...not even the slither of snakes. For that matter, nothing seems close, not even the birds up in the treetops."

Stone stopped. "And from this you infer—?"

"Don't know. It might be nothing. It might mean that something around here is frightening them off."

"You mean perhaps like our installation?"

"Maybe so."

"We should be quiet then," Stone said, tensing. "If they're near we don't want them to hear us—and possibly we'll hear something ourselves if we keep our ears open. I'm going to try a spell and see if I can't get a direction."

Ducking down behind a large tree, he dropped the invisibility spell and cast a long-range clairaudence in its place. "Keep an eye out," he muttered to Frasier, then closed his eyes and concentrated.

The spell ranged out in a circle around him, bringing in far-off sounds. He tried to filter out the normal jungle noises and focus on anything that didn't belong—they were far enough away from the group now that the spell's range wouldn't reach them, so anything unnatural was potentially suspicious. Everything he heard—the birds, the rustlings in the vines, the skittering of tree-dwellers—sounded far off and indistinct. He—

The crackle of static followed by the broken-up sound of a radio voice hit him suddenly, so loud to his magic-enhanced hearing that he clapped his hands over his ears and almost cried out in surprise.

Frasier was there instantly, looking worried. "Dr. Stone?"

Stone waved him off, dropping the spell. "No, no — I'm fine. It just surprised me, that's all." He closed his eyes and pointed in the direction the static had come from. "There. I heard radio static and a voice coming from that way."

"Any idea how far away?" Frasier was already looking the way Stone had pointed as if expecting a patrol to be bearing down on them.

Stone shook his head. "No. Not too close — the range of my spell is a few hundred meters."

"If you heard static and voices, it means somebody's on a radio. You think they're already sending out more patrols?"

"That's what I'm afraid of, yes."

"What should we do, then?"

Stone pondered. "We're this close now — I still want to get a look at the place, if only to gauge how many men they're likely to have." He paused and looked at Frasier seriously. "Listen — I think it's best if you remain here. I'll sneak in and see what I can see, then come back and —"

Frasier was shaking his head. "No way, Dr. Stone. I'm coming with you. I know you feel as a professor like you're responsible for my safety, but this isn't exactly a normal situation. I'm responsible for my own safety, and I think we'll both be safer if we stay together."

Stone sighed, but couldn't hide a small smile. "Somehow, Mr. Frasier, I thought you might say that. But don't go getting yourself shot, all right? You can't imagine

the frightful amount of paperwork you'll be setting me up for if I manage to get you killed."

Frasier grinned. "I promise. I know how you deskbound professor types hate paperwork. I wouldn't do that to you."

"Good man." Stone returned the grin, but got serious again in a hurry. "Stay with me, then, and stay low. You know as well as I do that there are things that can spot us even if we're invisible. It still won't be easy for them to get a shot at us, but I don't want to give them the chance."

Invisible again, the two of them crept forward toward the direction where Stone had heard the static. They moved slowly in semi-crouched positions, staying close to the trees. It was fortunate that there were enough of them around here that they would provide good cover—Stone suspected that the hit on Corazón had been a lucky shot. He hoped so. Even though Kevin Frasier was more competent than some of the professional shadowrunners he had met, he still didn't relish the idea of leading a student into deadly danger. If Rodney Leifeld ever found out about this, he'd have Stone's head—and probably deserve to.

He realized he'd let his mind wander a bit when something touched his arm. Just in time he recognized it as Frasier behind him, so he wasn't startled into dropping his spell. "What is it?" he whispered, stopping.

Frasier pointed. "I saw something over there through the trees. Only for a second, but it's mostly in the right direction."

"Something moving?" Instantly Stone was tense again, checking out the area in question.

"I don't think so."

"Let's check it out."

They shifted direction slightly, moving even more slowly, watching even more carefully. They both knew

that if they were getting close, the danger had just gotten worse.

So thick was the vegetation in this part of the jungle that they almost stepped out into the clearing before they were even aware of it. They both pulled themselves up short as they broke through the trees, ducking back in so fast they almost fell over each other in their haste. "Holy shit..." Frasier breathed. "That was close."

"Close indeed, my friend." Stone had crept forward and was peering, still invisible, through the carpet of vines close to the ground. "Have a look at this."

Frasier joined him, moving a few more vines aside so he could see. "I think we've found it..." he whispered.

His statement was, of course, unnecessary. What they were looking at was a large cleared area, maybe a hundred meters on a side. Several smallish plascrete buildings were clustered around the interior of the clearing, along with a few that looked pre-fab. Perimeter lights shone from the tops of the buildings, illuminating the bare area between them and the edge of the vegetation. A few meters away from where Stone and Frasier hid rose a heavy chain-link fence with the unmistakable symbol for electrification posted along it at intervals of about ten meters. Several individuals dressed in the same camo fatigues as the other men they'd seen and carrying assault rifles patrolled around inside the fence. The only other things they could see from their vantage point were the dark shapes of three vehicles parked next to one of the buildings.

Stone took a deep breath. "Well, now we know where it is," he said. "Let's get back to the group so we can get the hell away from here as fast as possible." He made as if to back up, but stopped when Frasier didn't move. "What is it?"

"Wait." Frasier's voice sounded half apprehensive, half excited.

Stone didn't like the sound of that at all. "Frasier —"

"No, wait, Dr. Stone! Listen!" Excitement was beating out apprehension, though Frasier was still careful to keep his voice down. "This might be the answer to getting out of here."

Stone glared at him, momentarily forgetting that the student couldn't see him. "Frasier, if you're going to suggest some wild-arsed scheme like trying to steal one of those jeeps —"

"Not the jeep," Frasier said reasonably. "Think about it—what would you find in a jeep out here? What does everyone who didn't come in on a crashed plane have with them in Amazonia, if they've got any sense at all?"

"Insect repellent," Stone snapped, sounding a little more impatient than he wanted to. Right now his number one priority was getting himself and Frasier back to the camp so they could get away before the Ares patrols found them, and Frasier sounded like he was looking for more adventure.

"A GPS!" Frasier said. His tone was triumphant and he ignored Stone's sarcasm. Then his voice turned earnest again. "Dr. Stone, imagine it—if we could get one of the GPSs out of the car, we could use it to find our way straight to civilization, or a river, or someplace where we can get out. Think about it—no more wandering around randomly. We can just pick a direction and go there. I know they don't always work right out here, but all we need is a quick reading and we're there."

Stone took a deep breath. He was about to tell Frasier exactly what he thought of that idea when he realized that it actually wasn't a half bad one after all. It was true that the jeeps probably did have portable GPS units, and probably true as well that the Ares personnel didn't keep

them locked out here. There was no point—anyone who infiltrated the installation would be after what was in the buildings, not the cars, and who else was likely to try to steal them—monkeys out for a joyride?

Frasier took his silence for interest. “Well? What do you think? I know we can’t get the car itself out of there, but with invisibility and levitation, we should be able to pull this off.”

“No, Frasier. “ Stone’s voice was even, resolute. “I should be able to pull it off. I still think it’s insanity, but I also see your point. If it’s done right the risk should be low. But I’m not going to let you put yourself in that kind of danger. Not while I’m in charge of this expedition.”

“But Dr. Stone—”

“No buts, Mr. Frasier. That’s it. I know you’ve been in the army, but I daresay I’ve a bit more experience with covert breaking-and-entering than you do. I’ll not say any more about it than that, but that’s the way it is. Either I do it and you stay here, or we both leave now. Which is it going to be?”

To his credit, Frasier accepted Stone’s words gracefully, knowing there was no arguing. He sighed. “All right, then. I’ll stay here and keep an eye on things. If I yell, run.”

Stone nodded, his mind already working on how he was going to do this. “Hold on—” He sat down against a tree and cast another spell, zoning out. After a few seconds, he smiled. “Well, you were right, I think—I can’t get a good look with clairvoyance because the jeeps are in the buildings’ shadows, but it looks like they do have portable GPSs in there. I was half afraid they were built in, in which case they’d be useless to us.” He stood up, brushing himself off. “All right, here goes nothing.” Taking a deep breath he moved off through the trees, leaving Frasier waiting and watching.

The fact that the lights didn't illuminate the motor pool was an advantage, he realized. When he reached the edge of the clearing and turned the corner toward the back part of the complex, he could see that it looked clear. His heart was pounding so hard he was afraid the Ares men would be able to track him by it, and he realized he was sweating more than usual out here. This wasn't the kind of thing he normally did, and certainly not alone. Once more he wished his team was here—or even just Ocelot. The two of them worked well together, and Ocelot was better suited for sneaking around in the dark. *Stop stalling*, he ordered himself. *If you take too long, Frasier will come after you and then we'll be in trouble for sure.*

He watched from his hiding spot for several more minutes until he was sure the patrols only passed the jeeps infrequently, with large gaps when it wasn't guarded. Then he moved out of the tree cover, still invisible, and cast his levitation spell.

As soon as he felt the familiar sensation of his feet leaving the ground he floated forward, making no sound while crossing the cleared area leading to the fence. Getting up and over was no effort—he made sure to go high, knowing they might have monowire up there, as invisible as he was and every bit as deadly.

He kept the spell up while crossing the compound to the jeeps, since the chances of them noticing magic were lower than the chances they would notice the footsteps of someone sneaking across the compound. He was right—no one came around the corner, no alarm was raised. *Now if I can just get it out of the car without setting something off. I hope I don't need any tools to get it out of there, or I'm out of luck.*

He wasn't out of luck. He couldn't help grinning to himself as he drew close and saw that each jeep bore a

small GPS module slipped into a housing in the car's dashboard. All he'd have to do is disconnect it.

Floating up to the jeep nearest the fence (and thus furthest from the light), he reached carefully out and grasped the little module, rocking it back and forth to separate it from the housing and then slipping it free. He noticed with satisfaction that the thing looked like it could either run on the car's battery power or its own self-contained battery pack, and it looked like it could handle Amazonian conditions without failing. *Good old Ares and their military precision*, he thought. He slipped the GPS into his pocket and glided away after taking one last check to make sure nobody was approaching. In less than a minute he was back over the fence and across the cleared area. He only realized he was holding his breath when he got back into the trees and was forced to let it out. No more time to rest now, though—he had to get back to Frasier so they could rejoin the others.

The parazoology student was right where Stone had left him. He was still watching, but he looked impatient and more than a little worried. "I'm back," Stone said softly so as not to startle him.

Frasier whirled to face his invisible form. "Did you get it?" His voice held excitement.

"Got it," Stone told him. "I'll show you when we get back. We need to get out of here now. I don't want to be around when they discover it missing."

This time, Frasier didn't object. "I don't think they noticed anything. A couple of them went by while you were gone, but they were headed the other way." He paused, silent several minutes as they walked. "You'd think they would keep a better watch on the place," he said at last.

"Not too surprised, " Stone told him. "Remember, they're out here in the middle of the great bugger-all. It

would take a pretty serious effort for anyone to get out here unseen, at least if they have any sense. The only reason they haven't found us yet is that they didn't expect anyone to crash a plane out here."

"Do you think they saw the plane go down?"

"Probably. But they probably think we're all dead. I doubt they'd waste their resources trying to locate the wreckage, not when they're such a small operation."

"Still, I'll feel better when we're out of here," Frasier said. "I mean, completely out. This has been an interesting trip and all, but —"

"I understand," Stone assured him. "Believe me, I understand. Right now I'd give half a year's pay for a hot shower, a nice shave, and a dry bed."

"Amen to that," Frasier agreed.

They continued on, walking once again in silence. The darkness and the overhang of trees and vines covered them like a warm damp blanket, blocking out the light of the stars and the moon. The moist vegetation made little sound except for a faint *squish-squish* beneath their feet. "I think we're about five minutes away now," Stone whispered. "We should be —"

Frasier whirled. "Shh! I thought I heard —"

His words came too late. First came the far-off sound of gunfire. Then the familiar high-pitched whine split the silence. Stone tried to fling himself behind a tree, but in mid-dive all rational thought left him as his right arm suddenly lit up in an agony that felt like a thousand tiny knives ripping at his flesh. He screamed and went down, writhing.

17.

The *Esperanza* spent the remainder of the afternoon after the border crossing floating lazily down the river. Ocelot was impatient, his mind filling in dire scenarios that could be happening even as they floated, but he knew there wasn't any faster way to go. Despite its languid pace the boat was still moving faster than they could have hiked in, and the jungle was just too thick for any sort of vehicles. Not to mention the fact that the authorities wouldn't have taken kindly to them stomping through the delicate ecosystem. Gabriel could probably have dealt with it, but it would have blown their cover and caused problems of its own.

None of this meant that Ocelot had to like the delays, though.

He stood up at the front of the boat, leaning on the railing and watching the scenery go by without really seeing it. His eyes scanned far ahead, almost as if he expected to see Winterhawk and his group waiting on the riverbank.

Kestrel came up next to him and held out an energy bar. "Hungry?"

He shook his head. "No, thanks. Eating's the last thing on my mind right now."

She nodded, stowing it back in her pocket. "It won't be long now."

"Yeah — that's what everybody keeps saying. But who knows what kind of shape 'Hawk is in out there? What if he —?" He couldn't finish the thought.

She put a hand on his shoulder. "You heard Gabriel before — he's alive. That means he can heal himself. And don't forget there are other mages there too. You said he knows Amazonia —"

Ocelot nodded morosely. "Yeah, he does. But he's not exactly a master survivalist. He always left that kind of thing to the rest of the team."

She smiled a little. "You'd be surprised at the kinds of things you remember when you need to. I'm sure he's doing fine."

He turned a bit and looked at her. "What about you? How are *you* doing?"

The question caught her off guard. She gave him a startled, curious glance but otherwise didn't answer.

Ocelot shrugged. "We never really got a chance to talk about—things. I just wanted to know how you were doing, that's all."

She leaned over the railing and stared down into the water. "Okay," she said. "I haven't really felt much of anything physically, if that's what you mean. I imagine it'll start up pretty soon, if it's going to."

"So are you really okay with it?"

Again she paused before answering. "I guess I don't really have a choice about it, do I? But even so—yeah, I'm okay with it. I don't like what we're going to have to do, but it's the best way for everybody, I think." She looked up quickly. "I'm not going to ask you to make a decision yet, though. We need to take care of this first, I know that. We have time."

Ocelot nodded slowly, not looking at her. "Where is he?"

"Gabriel? I think he's in the back, watching the wildlife. I think he's fascinated by this place, especially since he's never been here before."

"Yeah...it's a pretty fascinating place. Pretty deadly too, though. And *damned* uncomfortable." He punctuated this by swatting a mosquito that had settled on his cheek. He took a deep breath. "I can't get over thinking about last night," he said suddenly. "I know I'm probably being

way too paranoid, but it sure seems odd to me that somebody would care enough about the fact that we're here to send an assassin to try to kill us in our beds. And then there were those guys at the border. If I didn't know better, I'd say there was more to this than we're seein'." He gave her a challenging look, as if daring her to refute his words.

Instead, she nodded. "I've been thinking the same thing," she admitted. "We haven't told anyone except Aubrey that we're here, and as far as everybody who knows anything knows, we're searching for our friend who went down in a plane crash. Which is all they *can* know, because it's the truth. Why wouldn't they want us to find him?"

Ocelot went back to staring at the water. "I can think of lots of reasons, but most of them are either lame or too farfetched to be useful."

"Such as?"

He sighed. "The lame one is that they don't like anybody putting their dirty feet into their precious ecosystems, so they're willing to accept a few sacrifices to keep people out."

"That's possible," she said. "That could explain why they claim they never heard nor saw anything of a plane going down. What's the farfetched one?"

"That maybe they *do* know something about the plane crash—and it crashed somewhere it shouldn't. Somewhere they don't want anybody to know about."

Her eyes narrowed. "You mean they're afraid somebody might find out they're doing something they shouldn't be in there?"

Again Ocelot shrugged. "Who knows? I told you it was farfetched. Not to say that there aren't things going on in there that shouldn't be, but the odds that the plane went down near one of them are pretty low."

"Maybe they *think* it did," she said. "That could be just as bad." She pushed herself up and turned around so she was leaning on the railing facing toward the back of the boat. "But you're probably right—that's a pretty out-there theory. My guess is they just had us pegged for rich gringos and so they took a chance that they could roll us for our gear and credsticks. If that's so, then we probably won't have any more trouble from them now."

"I hope you're right," Ocelot said, but he didn't sound convinced. He was pretty sure she wasn't either. Reaching in his pocket, he pulled out his comm unit. "I think I'll see if I can reach Aubrey again and see if anything's moving on his end."

Kestrel nodded. "I'll go see what Gabriel's up to." She squeezed his shoulder and moved off.

Ocelot watched her go as he listened to the comm ring. When she disappeared around the corner of the cabin he finally let himself relax a little.

"Stone Manor." Aubrey spoke quickly, as if he was in a hurry.

"Aubrey. It's me."

"Terry! Where are you?"

"I'm on a boat, floating down the Amazon River. We've crossed into Amazonia, and I guess we've still got comm reception, at least for now. Anything new happening there?"

The caretaker's sigh was audible even across the bad connection. "Sir, it pains me to say this, but I'm beginning to think I'm not going to be much help to you. It's getting worse. Dr. Leifeld and I have been making absolute pests of ourselves, as have the parents of at least one of the students and the girlfriend of another, but it's as if our words aren't being heard. Somewhere between here and the Amazonian authorities, things are getting lost. Every time we call we have to start from scratch."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean, from scratch?"

Aubrey sighed again. "I mean that every time we call, we either get someone we haven't spoken with before, or they've misplaced our file, or the person we need to talk to is out to lunch—you understand. Once or twice might be understandable, but every time? If I were inclined to be more suspicious, I'd think that they were deliberately dragging their feet."

"Be suspicious, Aubrey." Ocelot's tone was grim. "I think that might be exactly what they *are* doing. But don't worry—we're here now and they won't stop us. You know how...persuasive Gabriel can be when he wants something."

"Yes, sir." Aubrey's relief was evident. "I'm glad you're there, and I only wish I were with you. But—" He paused. "If they *are* stalling, why would they be doing so? Someone is bound to question why it took them so long to respond to an obvious emergency."

"Maybe," Ocelot told him. "I don't know what's going on, but I'm really starting to think something is. Frankly I don't give a frag what it is as long as we get 'Hawk and the rest of them back home. They can play whatever games they want then—we'll be long gone."

Aubrey nodded slowly. "Yes, sir. I hope you're right. Do you have any idea how far from him you are now?"

"Not sure—I think we're a day or so away yet. This boat will take us to a spot as close as it can, and then we'll have to hike it. We're hoping Gabriel can give us a little help pinpointing their location once we get there." He started to say something else, but the little comm unit crackled in his ear. "Aubrey, I'm breaking up here—I'm gonna have to sign off. I'll try to call again, but no promises—I think we're getting too far from civilization to get a signal. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Thank you, sir. I hope I'll see you all soon." Aubrey's last words were almost lost in a burst of static, and then the signal faded out.

Ocelot slowly snapped his comm shut and put it back in his pocket. That was that—they were truly on their own now, out of communication range. He sighed and leaned back on the railing, watching the muddy water churn up under the boat's bow. He wondered what Kestrel and Gabriel were talking about and thought about going back there to see, but decided against it. He wasn't sure he wanted to talk to them right now.

The remainder of the afternoon and early evening passed without major incident, with the *Esperanza* continuing to make her slow but steady way toward the point where they would have to disembark and head off overland. The only excitement of the afternoon came from the sighting of a pair of macareu floating lazily ahead of them; Ruiz was clearly nervous about it, but they didn't mess with the boat. Ocelot saw Gabriel up near the front watching them and suspected that the dragon might have had something to do with that fact, but he didn't ask.

When twilight began to fall, Ruiz came up from the tiny bridge and asked them if they were ready for dinner. "You have an autopilot on this boat?" Kestrel asked.

Ruiz nodded. "I would not trust it with my life, but it is sufficient to keep us headed in the right direction long enough for me to handle brief tasks like preparing meals."

"What about overnight?" she asked. "We can keep going, right? We don't have to stop for the night?"

Ruiz looked troubled. "I would not advise it, señorita. Travelling by night is not safe here."

"We'll risk it," Ocelot said bluntly.

"I can pilot the boat if you need to rest," Kestrel added. "You won't have to trust it to the autopilot. But we need to keep going."

Ruiz took a deep breath, his gaze taking in each of their faces. At last he nodded. "As you say. I hope, however, that your magic is powerful enough to deal with the predators that come out to feed at night. Most of them are no threat to us as long as we remain in the water, but some of them—" he shivered a little.

"We wouldn't be any safer on the shore," Ocelot pointed out. "In fact, it might be more dangerous, right?"

"It is not safe anywhere out here," Ruiz said.

"Then we'll keep going," Gabriel told him softly. "Don't worry—we can handle the local wildlife. There should be little danger."

Ruiz eyed him, obviously trying to reconcile his youthful appearance with his evident confidence and demonstrated magical abilities. "I will trust you, señor—I have seen your illusions, and if the rest of your magic is as strong, then you might be right." He checked his chrono. "If we travel through the night, we should reach our destination by sometime tomorrow evening."

Ocelot looked frustrated, but he said nothing. He knew that was the fastest they could do, but he still couldn't shake the insane notion that getting out and running would somehow be faster.

He woke at dawn, uncurling himself from the uneasy catnap he'd fallen into sometime in the wee hours of the morning. Something had awakened him, but he couldn't be sure what it was. A sound—

There it was again. This time, he had no trouble identifying its source: someone was in the process of being violently ill at the front of the boat.

He jumped up and hurried in that direction, confused. It couldn't be Gabriel—he didn't think dragons got seasick. It probably wasn't Ruiz. So that left—

"Kestrel!" She was there, her body slumped miserably over the rail. He was there in a few swift steps, his hand on her back. "Hey, are you okay?"

She smiled wanly up at him. "Morning. Did I wake you?"

"Uh—no. I've never known you to get seasick before."

She chuckled mirthlessly. "I don't think it's seasickness, Ocelot."

"Then what is—" He stopped, tensed. "Oh."

She nodded. "Yeah."

Gabriel chose that moment to come around the side of the cabin, looking concerned. "Juliana? Are you all right?"

She looked a little embarrassed. "I'm fine, Gabriel. It's nice that you're all so attentive, but can't a girl hurl in peace around here?"

"Hurl?" The young man's look of concern turned to one of confusion.

His expression seemed to amuse her. "Hurl. Barf. Blow cookies. Feed the fish."

He nodded slowly. "Are you ill?"

"No. Not—ill."

It wasn't often that Gabriel was at a loss in a conversation, but this was one of those times. He looked back and forth between Ocelot and Kestrel, eyes questioning.

Kestrel patted Ocelot's shoulder. "Will you tell him? I would, but I really need a date with a big glass of water and a nice toothbrush."

Ocelot waved her off. After she had disappeared into the cabin, he turned back to Gabriel. "She's not sick," he said, trying to keep from sounding like he was grumbling. "Have you ever heard of morning sickness?"

Gabriel tilted his head. "But you just said she wasn't—"

Ocelot sighed. *Dragons!* "Not that kind of sick. It happens to—pregnant women—sometimes. I don't know much about it—hell, I don't really know *anything* about it, except that they tend to get queasy in the mornings for awhile. I think it's a pretty early thing. I guess it must not happen to dragons."

Gabriel's gaze had sharpened at the word *pregnant*. "I see," he said softly. A pause, and then: "So—she will be all right?" He sounded almost guilty, as if he considered this to be his fault.

"Yeah, she'll be all right." He looked Gabriel up and down. "You know, if you're going to be a father you really should look up some information on this stuff. Kestrel's not gonna be too happy if she starts asking you to go out for pickles and ice cream and you act like you don't know what the hell she's talking about."

The look of confusion was back. "Pickles and—?"

"Forget it. You'll find out when you look it up."

Gabriel nodded. He regarded Ocelot for several moments and then dropped his gaze. "You know, I don't have to be telepathic to sense your tension."

"Yeah, well..." Ocelot shrugged, pulling himself up to a seated position on the railing with his back to the water. "It wasn't exactly what I expected, you know? I'm still working on it."

"It wasn't what any of us expected," Gabriel said quietly. "I know that Juliana is not entirely comfortable with it, but I also know that she is adamant about wanting to see it through."

"Yeah..." Some of the tension had dropped from his voice, replaced by weary resignation. "She always did have a thing about seeing things through to the end. And I guess I understand how she feels, that it's not the kid's

fault all this happened." He looked at Gabriel again. "But you don't know how this is gonna play out, do you? You don't even know if it's gonna be safe for her to do this."

Several seconds of silence passed. "It has been done before," the young man finally said, "although not that I know of in this age. If any others have done it, they have kept it extremely quiet, which does not surprise me given the potential for negative consequences should they be discovered. If it will make you feel any better, I have never heard of a case where the female human died, or even experienced significant distress beyond normal, from bearing a dragonkin child."

"But all that means you *don't* know, right?" Ocelot's tone was challenging now.

"Not entirely," Gabriel admitted. "But it is not my decision. It is Juliana's. I have told her the risks, and she has chosen to see it through. I will be with her to deal with any eventualities that might occur. I won't risk her life for this."

"You haven't told her that, have you?" Ocelot chuckled a little, but it wasn't a happy chuckle. "Seeing as how you still have your head, I'd say no."

"No." Gabriel shook his head. "Will I? I don't know. We will see how things go."

"Are you really planning to take her to your lair after this? Is that what she wants?"

Again he looked out over the water. "She fears for me, even though I have told her that it isn't necessary. She has told me that she wants to do whatever is necessary to keep the pregnancy a secret, in hopes that she can bear the child without anyone finding out she was ever pregnant. I suggested that my lair might be the best place for this—it is certainly the safest place I have access to, and I can control the environment to ensure that she is both safe and...entertained."

Ocelot wasn't sure he liked the sound of that. Without thinking, he spoke his thoughts aloud in a growl: "You sure as hell 'entertained' her before, didn't you? Isn't that why this whole thing started in the first place?"

Gabriel's posture slumped noticeably and his head bowed. He did not reply.

Ocelot realized he might have gone a bit too far with that. "Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't have to say that."

"It is what you were thinking, was it not?" Gabriel didn't raise his head.

"Yeah..." he admitted with reluctance. "But I didn't have to say it." He paused, then sighed. "Ah, hell, Gabriel—dragons know about jealousy, don't they? It ain't a secret from anybody. That guy who pretended to be you back on the metaplanes said it pretty well, even though the last thing I wanted was to listen to him. It's a human thing—well, a metahuman thing, I guess, too, but you know what I mean. Guys get jealous when they find out women they—fuck it, women they care about—are sleeping with other guys. With me, it wasn't that I minded she did it, because I always knew she liked that kind of thing and it didn't mean anything to her. But with you, it *did* mean something. I know what she thinks of you. It isn't easy for me to admit to myself that she wants you more than she wants me. You get that, don't you?"

"Of course." Gabriel's voice was soft, his eyes gentle. "And for whatever it might be worth, I don't think Juliana 'wants' me in that way—not anymore. I think what happened that night was an isolated incident—something that she felt needed to happen, but I think she learned something about herself then." He sighed. "My only advice to you, Ocelot, is that if you love her, show her—but don't rush her. She isn't one to make such decisions lightly."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, I know that. Neither am I. Maybe that's why we get along so well." He was wondering why he was saying all of this out loud, but he couldn't help it—Gabriel had that effect on people, and apparently he himself was no exception. He forced his expression to harden, but both of them knew it wasn't genuine. "All I've got to say is that you'd better take care of her with this, or you'll be hearing from me."

Gabriel's nod was solemn, as if he were taking the words seriously even as he knew the tone was joking. "I give you my word on that," he said softly. "I will not allow any harm to come to her. But the promise is unnecessary—I had made a similar one long ago, both to Juliana and to myself." He dropped his gaze. "Although I have already broken it once," he whispered.

"You're talking about when you...when the Horrors —"

He looked up. "Yes."

Ocelot shook his head. "You can't blame yourself for that, you know. Hell, even *I* don't blame you for that. I still have nightmares about that whole time. I know Kestrel doesn't think you're responsible for it."

"I know that as well," he said, suddenly sounding very tired. "But that doesn't change the way I feel about it. I have accepted it, but I will never fully forgive myself for what I did to her."

"Did what?" Both of them looked up to see Kestrel approaching them. She looked considerably happier than she had a few minutes ago.

"Nothing," Ocelot said quickly. "We were just —"

"You guys were talking about me," she said, a little gleam in her green eyes. "Weren't you?"

"Yeah," he told her. "I was explaining to Gabriel here about what was up with you."

"Are you feeling better?" Gabriel asked her.

She nodded. "Yeah. That's the only saving grace of this—it doesn't last very long, apparently. You know, I know next to nothing about this whole business. I should probably get a book or something."

"That is what Ocelot was telling me," Gabriel said. "That I should, I mean."

"You two are hopeless." Ocelot had to grin.

Kestrel swatted him playfully. "Yeah, like you're the expert."

At that moment, Ruiz came forward from the bridge. "Good morning," he said. He looked out past the bow at the river in front of them and shook his head in amazement. "I must admit I am surprised, but pleased as well—the night passed uneventfully. I would not have thought it possible."

The three passengers exchanged glances while Ruiz's attention was occupied, and Gabriel gave them an almost imperceptible nod.

Damn, it's nice to have a dragon along when you're in dangerous territory, Ocelot had to admit.

Ruiz turned back around. "I am going to need some sleep—perhaps two or three hours." He looked at Kestrel. "You say you can pilot the boat?" He didn't appear to be happy about the idea, they could tell.

She nodded. "No problem. You go sleep and we'll call you if anything comes up that you need to know about."

Ruiz pulled off his hat, mopped at his sweaty brow with a bandanna handkerchief, and dropped his hat back on his head. "The autopilot should be able to handle things if the trip continues to be this...uneventful, but I do not feel comfortable leaving our fate under the control of a machine."

"Me neither," Ocelot agreed. "Don't worry—if Kestrel says she can handle it, she can handle it."

"Come, then," he said. "I will show you what you need to know."

The remainder of the day was almost an anticlimax. They continued their progress down the river, watching the jungle vegetation grow thicker and even the faintest signs of sentient habitation grow sparse and eventually disappear. Ocelot was bored and impatient—he kept checking and rechecking his weapons, almost wishing something would attack them just so he could have something to do. He spent a lot of time pacing the decks of the boat, looking around in all directions for potential threats and trying not to think about what Winterhawk might be doing out there in the jungle. The heat and humidity were oppressive; brief rainfall came and went frequently. Ocelot didn't bother trying to go under cover to avoid the short soakings—he was already soaked through from sweating, so he figured a little more wouldn't make any difference.

Gabriel, for his part, spent most of the trip up near the bow, his elbows propped on the railing, his gaze far away. Ocelot wasn't sure if he was meditating, catching an open-eyed catnap, or discouraging the same potential threats that he himself was half-hoping to encounter. Whatever he was doing, Ocelot didn't bother him.

Kestrel, when she wasn't piloting the boat almost as expertly as Ruiz had done, stretched out on the top of the cabin like a cat, soaking up the filtered sunlight when it wasn't raining. To anyone who didn't know her she might have looked utterly relaxed, but Ocelot could see the faint tension in her muscles and knew that she was actually quite alert, ready to leap up and deal with anything that might be stupid enough to attack them.

It was early evening when the low thrumming chug of the engines slowed down and the boat made a little

shuddering motion that startled all three of its passengers into full watchfulness. Behind them, the engines stirred up the dirty water into muddy froth. Ruiz had long since awakened and resumed his duties on the bridge. Ocelot was the first to reach him. "Something wrong?"

"No, señor." Ruiz looked surprised, pointing over toward the shore. Ocelot, along with the others who had come up behind him, noticed that the captain was steering the *Esperanza* slowly in that direction. "We have arrived. This is the point where we will need to strike out overland. I can take you no further on the river."

Ocelot was surprised. All the impatient waiting throughout the day had turned into almost a routine; he had begun to think that they would never reach their destination, and now here they were. "Let's go, then!" he said, already heading for where they'd left their gear.

Ruiz took a deep breath. "Señor—I know that it will do me no good to say this, but you have hired me as your guide and I would be remiss in my duty if I did not. I advise you to remain here on the *Esperanza* until morning and set out at dawn. The danger on the river is insignificant compared to what you might face in the jungle at night."

This time it was Gabriel who answered before Ocelot could. "Señor Ruiz, we thank you for your advice, but we must go now. Remember, our friends are out there in the danger you speak of, and we are better equipped to handle it than they are."

Ruiz nodded like he expected that answer all along. "Yes, señor. I understand. If my friends were lost, I would have the same impatience." His expression suggested that he was having serious doubts about these *gringos'* abilities to survive in the Amazonian jungle, magic or no magic.

"One other thing," Gabriel said, as behind him Ocelot and Kestrel began gathering packs and making

preparations. "I think it would be best if you remain here on the *Esperanza* and waited for our return. We will likely be coming back with several injured people and we will want to leave quickly."

Ruiz looked surprised, his expression warring between confusion and relief. "I do not understand, señor. You have hired me to guide you, and now you want me to—"

Ocelot picked up Gabriel's reasoning. "We hired you to get us here," he said, dropping a pack at Gabriel's feet. "Besides, if you go with us there won't be anybody to watch the boat. You wouldn't want somebody to steal it, would you?"

"That is not likely here, señor," Ruiz said, smiling a little. "Unless the monkeys have learned to pilot a boat since the last time I was here."

Kestrel chuckled. "All the same, that's what we want to do. Look at it this way—you're getting paid the same amount whether you go with us or not. This way you get to kick back on your boat, read a magazine, fish, and wait for us to come back. A lot easier than trudging through the jungle, right?"

"I get paid if you return, señorita," Ruiz pointed out.

"We'll be back," Ocelot growled. "We're good for the money. We've already paid you more than the trip's worth up front."

Ruiz couldn't deny that. He sighed. "All right, señor. Let us discuss your route."

Gabriel got out the map and spread it out, and for the next few minutes they all pored over it under a flashlight. Ruiz offered suggestions for the best way to reach the likely crash site, and gave them a rundown of the gear he'd included in their packs. He pulled out one of the GPSs and held it up. "You know how to use these, right?"

Kestrel nodded. "Yeah."

"Like I said back in town, this is your best friend. The terrain out there—it can change, and fast. I've seen times when I went to sleep and woke up in two completely different areas, even though the GPS said I didn't move. Trust its reading, not your eyes, if you get lost."

"But not too much," Ocelot put in. "Last time I was here we had 'em too, and they weren't always accurate. Still, it's better than nothing."

They gathered up the rest of the gear, topped off their packs from Ruiz's stores, and soon were ready to go. It was about seven o'clock, already dark. The captain rowed them to shore in a small rubber raft. "Good luck to you," he called as they jumped ashore, shouldered their packs, and set off. "I will await your safe return." *If you return at all*, he thought grimly to himself.

Several hours later, long after the three travelers had gone and Ruiz had finally allowed himself the luxury of two or three hours' sleep in the cabin, he was abruptly awakened by a sound. He was immediately alert—his ears and his brain, sensitized to the normal noises of the jungle by many trips down this and other rivers, didn't bother waking him up if it wasn't something out of the ordinary, and out of the ordinary out here usually meant dangerous. Silently Ruiz picked up the rifle he kept next to his bunk and tiptoed out of the cabin and up the short stairway to the deck. Maybe it was just the *gringos* returning, admitting defeat and asking him to guide them in the morning after all.

Something grabbed him roughly from both sides as he reached the head of the steps, pulling his arms behind his back and forcing him to drop the rifle. It clattered to the deck next to him. He didn't even get a chance to cry out before a strong hand clamped over his mouth. "Shut up,"

a gruff voice hissed in his ear. "We want to talk to you about your passengers."

Half an hour after that the intruders were gone. Reynaldo Ruiz never heard the muffled explosions or saw the fire that consumed his beloved *Esperanza*, the boat he had worked much of his adult life to afford. He was unconscious when the fire started, and by the time the charred remains sank to the bottom of the Amazon River, he was far past caring about anything.

18.

Unlike the late Diego Corazón, Alastair Stone didn't have the mercy of being dead, or even unconscious. His mind stubbornly refused to let go its hold on awareness despite the fact that the white-hot pain coursing through his right arm and shoulder was the worst he had ever experienced in his life. It felt like somebody was trying to slowly pull it off, one nerve ending at a time—or like it was flying apart from the inside out. He lay on the soft carpet of vines with his legs drawn up to his chest and his eyes clamped shut, moaning softly and trying hard not to scream again. He was also trying not to think about what had happened to him, which wasn't as hard because his mind wasn't processing information properly. Except the pain. That it was processing just fine.

Above him, he heard sounds but couldn't make sense of them. There were the calls of men—one close, two farther away. There were the sounds of gunfire, and he thought he heard something thud into the trees near him. He heard someone curse nearby, and then breath being let out slowly as if in relief. Then nothing. For one brief merciful moment it didn't hurt anymore.

"Dr. Stone?"

The pain came back with the voice. Someone touched him gently on his uninjured shoulder and he cried out as the knives redoubled their assault.

"I'm sorry..." said the voice. Soft. Worried. A little panicky around the edges. "Dr. Stone—are you still with me? Please—you have to still be with me!"

"Still—here—" Stone managed through gritted teeth. He forced his eyes open and saw Frasier standing over him, white-faced and breathing hard.

The student scrubbed at his face with his hands for a moment, his expression mixed relief and fear. He dropped down on his knees next to Stone. "I got 'em," he said.

"Got—?"

"The bastards who shot you. I took 'em out with manabols. But we have to get out of here, Dr. Stone, before somebody else shows up. Can you walk?" He spoke quickly, urgently.

Stone noticed idly that Frasier wasn't invisible anymore, forgetting that he himself had cast the spell. He also noticed the assault rifle strapped over the student's shoulder. "Frasier—" His voice was weak and ragged. Even talking hurt. He could feel beads of sweat on his forehead but his body felt cold. *Shock*, his clinical side said in his mind.

"I didn't take the other gun," Frasier was saying. He was almost babbling, trying hard to keep his fear under control and barely succeeding. "I remembered what you said about the tracking devices. But we have to get out of here." He darted a glance back over his shoulder.

Stone shifted position and screamed again, a weak little cry as the movement jostled his injured side. He drew his legs up again, harsh sobs wracking his body. "Go on—" he rasped.

He didn't see Frasier shake his head, but he heard the resolve in the student's voice. "No way. I'm not leaving you here. You're coming with me or we're both staying."

Stone didn't reply, and he didn't move. After a moment he felt a strong hand under his good arm. A bright flash of pain so intense he almost didn't feel it washed over him, and once again the welcome relief of darkness.

When he awoke again he was moving. His body was in an odd position, his head lolling back and forth. For the first time he got a look at his arm and it almost caused

him to pass out again: it was horribly swollen and would probably have been more so if his sleeve hadn't been constricting it. His bare forearm was blotched with red; his sleeve was stained with blood and more trickled down from beneath his rolled-up cuff. *What did they do to me?* The thought was oddly detached—he realized that he was deeper in shock now. He tried to speak to get Frasier's attention, for he determined that his unusual position was the result of being borne along in a fireman's carry, but all he succeeded in producing was an inarticulate moan.

Still, Frasier noticed it. "You're all right, Dr. Stone." His voice sounded marginally less fearful now, though he also sounded a bit winded. "We should be back at the camp any minute now. Just hold on—"

"Frasier..." Stone fought to get his thoughts in enough order to manage a coherent sentence.

"What is it?"

"Arm—sleeve—" To his own ears, his words sounded garbled and blurry.

Frasier must have heard something, though, because he stopped. Gently he swung Stone over his shoulder and leaned him against a tree.

It was all Stone could do to remain conscious as a new wave of pain spiked at him. It was duller now than before, but it worried him that his arm swung uselessly at his side, its heavy, inert weight pulling down on his shoulder.

Frasier got a look at him and his eyes widened in fear. "Oh, God—I'm sorry, Dr. Stone. Your sleeve—" He pulled out a pocket knife and knelt down, gently slicing at Stone's shirt to cut away the sleeve that was constricting his arm.

Instantly the pain exploded, like the feeling of sensation rushing back into a limb that had fallen asleep. Instead of the familiar 'pins and needles' sensation,

though, it felt like *real* pins and needles were being plunged into his flesh from every direction. He groaned and sagged to the side again.

Frasier caught him and sat him upright once more, looking worriedly into his half-closed eyes. "That's it," he said, decisive. "I'm going to have to try to heal you here. I don't think it will be safe to wait until we get back." He took a deep breath. "I wish I knew what that was they shot you with. It wasn't a laser, that's for sure."

Stone slowly shook his head, which looked more like rolling it back and forth against the tree. "No...laser..." he agreed in a whisper.

Frasier took a look around to make sure they weren't being followed and then settled down to attempt a healing spell. Stone closed his eyes and waited for the relief.

As the spell progressed, he could tell something wasn't right. The intensity of the pain dropped down somewhat, which wasn't of much use considering where it had started. He forced his eyes open again and looked at Frasier questioningly.

The student looked very tired. He swiped the back of his wrist against his forehead and let out a long sigh. "I'm sorry, Dr. Stone—that's the best I can do here. It's the strangest injury I've ever seen—it's almost like there are a whole lot of smaller injuries rather than one big one." He paused, and when he spoke again his tone was reluctant. "I don't think I'm going to be able to fix it any more, sir."

Stone closed his eyes again and let his head slump. No... For a moment all he could think of was the fact that he was going to lose his arm. He quickly realized, though, that he couldn't worry about that now. He was going to lose his *life* if they didn't get out of here soon. Frasier's healing had dulled the edges of the shock a little, but he knew he needed medical attention fast. Now the pain was

starting to spread out from his arm and shoulder and into his side and chest. It was slow, but it was happening. He doubted it was going to stop any time soon.

"And that's not all," Frasier said, even more reluctantly. "While I was in a hurry to put distance between us and that installation, I think I might have taken a wrong turn somewhere. We should have been back at the camp by now, but I'm not seeing any sign of it."

Stone let that sink in, and then his fogged brain remembered something. "Pocket..." he whispered, gesturing weakly with his good arm.

For a moment Frasier looked puzzled, but then recognition dawned. "Right! The GPS! I'd almost forgotten about it in all the chaos." He carefully removed it from Stone's pocket, switched it on, and began studying its tiny screen. It was close to dawn now, and the world was getting ever so slightly brighter as the sun began to rise.

Stone took the time to rest, closing his eyes again. In the back of his mind he thought about trying to do a healing spell on himself, but the pain wouldn't let him concentrate sufficiently to form the pattern. Every time he started he would move slightly and set off a new spasm of pain. Finally he gave up and let himself slump again, fighting to stay quiet. It wasn't helping that he was shivering—why was it so cold out here? This was supposed to be the jungle.

Frasier had, for the moment, forgotten about him. So intent was he on the GPS screen that a squadron of Ares soldiers could have sneaked up on him without his awareness. Fortunately for him and Stone, this didn't happen. At last he looked up. "I think I've got something," he told Stone. His expression darkened as he saw the state of his companion. "Dr. Stone?"

Stone opened his eyes wearily. Clear and electric blue, they were at odds with the rest of his disheveled, grimy appearance. His expression was dulled, unfocused.

Frasier moved over next to him. "I think I've found it," he said gently. He held out the device. "Look—we're only about ten kilometers from a river, and about fifteen from a city. We were going almost the right direction, but we'd have missed it if we kept up the way we were heading. We can make that. It'll be a long walk, but we can—"

"Camp..." Stone whispered. "Where—?"

Frasier took a deep breath. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "It should be around here somewhere, but since I didn't have the coordinates when we left—"

Stone nodded. He was seized by another bout of shivering and rolled back into a ball at the foot of the tree, trying to get warm. He didn't care anymore about the camp, the jungle, anything—his mind felt sluggish and unresponsive. *The shock's getting worse...*

Above him, Frasier noticed this and made a decision. He kept talking even though he was pretty sure Stone couldn't hear him anymore. "I think I know the right way," he said. "I'm going to take a chance and try to find it. If we don't get there in the next ten minutes or so, we'll just have to head for the river and hope we can find a village or a boat. We can't leave you out here like this—I'll have to sleep sometime, and if I do we're both dead."

Stone vaguely heard rustling sounds and then he was lifted again, slung back over Frasier's shoulder as gently as the student could muster. He didn't scream this time—he didn't have the energy left to scream. He just closed his eyes again and hoped his companion knew what he was doing. His life was in Frasier's hands now.

19.

Ocelot had decided early on that if you had to go on a trek through the Amazonian jungle in the dark, there were worse ways to do it than in the company of a Great Dragon.

The heat was still as uncomfortable as ever. The flies still went after every inch of their exposed skin, and the sweat still ran down their backs without evaporating in the high humidity. The difference was that, despite the fact that they could all hear the sounds of the jungle predators off in the distance, nothing bothered them. It wasn't even as if the denizens of this particular corner of the Amazonian rainforest avoided them—it was more like they simply did not pay any notice to the interlopers in their domain. "So," Ocelot had said soon after he had noticed this fact. "Are you doing this, Gabriel?"

"Doing what?" The dragon had taken point and was pushing his way through a particularly thick clump of vines, stopping to consult his handheld GPS once he got through.

He waved his arm in a sweeping gesture to encompass their surroundings. "This. Keeping all the nasties from bothering us. I know it's been awhile since I was in Amazonia, but I know it wasn't this easy last time."

Gabriel started off again. "I am not keeping them from bothering us—I am merely preventing them from noticing us. It is less—intrusive that way."

"You're worried about messing up the ecosystem?" Ocelot supposed that shouldn't have surprised him—Gabriel had never struck him as much of a back-to-nature type, but it seemed to be a trait many dragons had in common.

"This is every bit as effective and probably less noticeable should anyone be paying attention to our activities."

Kestrel moved to catch up with him. "Do you think they are?"

Ocelot did likewise, remembering the conversation he'd had with Kestrel on the boat the previous day.

Gabriel didn't answer for several seconds. "I think the possibility exists," he said at last, carefully. "The attack in Iquitos disturbs me."

"Us too," Ocelot said. "We were talking about it yesterday. Especially after Aubrey said it sounded like they were dragging their feet down here about getting the expedition going."

"Do you have any evidence that anyone's watching us?" Kestrel asked.

"No. Just suspicion."

Ocelot felt the hairs on the back of his neck tingle. If a dragon was suspicious, then he was downright nervous. "Uh—Gabriel—is there any chance you could do anything to speed this along a little? Like maybe summon a spirit to track down their location, or go astral, or —"

Gabriel nodded. "I was going to do that soon. I would hesitate to astrally project unless absolutely necessary here, but a spirit should be effective. I wanted to get closer, because even powerful spirits can go awry here and I don't want it to have to travel far to find them."

"Is this close enough?" Ocelot was trying to look around everywhere at once, glad now that they all had low-light vision and could rely on the scant moonlight for visibility. Flashlights would make them stand out like beacons if anyone was looking.

Gabriel regarded him for a moment, then nodded. "All right—I wanted to get a bit closer, but this should be fine. Hold on." He moved a few paces off and closed his

eyes. He remained deep in concentration for a few seconds, then a large form shimmered into half-existence in front of him. Ocelot and Kestrel watched it with curiosity, but it wasn't clear enough for them to get a good look at it. After a few more seconds it winked out. "There," Gabriel said, satisfied. "If it doesn't lose its way and fail to return, it should be able to tell us where the group is. I hope they stayed together—it will be significantly more difficult to find them if they have separated."

"Can we keep going?" Ocelot asked, trying to keep the impatient excitement out of his voice. They were close now, he could feel it, and ever minute they were having to wait to find Winterhawk and the others seemed an eternity.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes—the spirit will be able to find me when it returns. Let's move on."

Another hour passed and the spirit did not return. "Do you think he got lost?" Kestrel asked. "It shouldn't take him this long, should it? Unless they're—"

"They're out there," Ocelot stated, glaring at her for emphasis. "But—" he continued to Gabriel, "She's right, isn't she? The spirit should have found them by now."

Gabriel sighed. "We must have patience. The astral plane here is—extremely complex. Even spirits, especially non-native ones, can find it difficult to navigate. It is not a matter of locating someone in a building or in the middle of a desert. It—" He stopped abruptly.

"What?" Ocelot demanded.

Gabriel closed his eyes for a moment, then pointed. "Over there. I saw something."

Immediately Kestrel and Ocelot tensed and unslung their weapons from their shoulders. Gabriel put up his hand, motioning for them to wait, and crept forward.

After a few moments he stopped, looking down at something on the ground.

Ocelot vaulted over at top speed, fearing the worst. "What is it?" he snapped again. Then he too stopped.

Gabriel was staring down at the remains of a human. Whoever it was had obviously been dead for at least a few hours: the body had already been set upon by the local predators and was missing large chunks; perhaps even more disquieting was the fact that some of the vines had already poked their way through parts of it and were growing upward out of the skin in a most macabre fashion. The smell wasn't too bad yet, but it was getting there fast.

Kestrel skidded to a stop behind them and stared down at the body. "Oh, my God..." she whispered.

Gabriel had knelt down next to the body. "I don't think this was one of Winterhawk's group," he said. "Look at the clothing."

Ocelot nodded. "He's dressed like they did back in Iquitos. Like the townspeople."

"Perhaps one of their guides?" Gabriel suggested. He was dividing his attention between the body and the surrounding area.

Kestrel was examining the face. "Look at his expression—what's left of it anyway. He was terrified." Her breath caught and she leaned in for a closer look. "Guys..." she said, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper.

Ocelot got down there next to her. "What? Did you see something?"

"Can we risk a flashlight if we cover it?" she asked. It seemed the question was rhetorical, because she was already digging in her pack for one. She put her hand over the end and turned it on, shining the light into the

corpse's face. Immediately she stiffened. "Do you recognize him?"

Ocelot looked closer, trying not to pay too much attention to the places where carnivores had torn pieces out of the cheeks, one of the eyes, and the nose. "Should I?"

Gabriel spoke softly from above. "Pablo Escuela."

"Pablo who?"

"Remember, back in town?" Kestrel reminded him. "He's the kid who broke into our room and tried to kill us."

If Ocelot's hackles were tingling before, they were dancing a jig now. "But..." he said slowly, "He was in jail. Back in Iquitos. How the hell did he get all the way out here? He couldn't have been following us, could he?"

Gabriel didn't answer; he had leaned in closer and was examining the body. "Whatever killed him," he said, "it wasn't an animal. It's difficult to tell now that the animals have disturbed the body, but something caused massive systemic shock in this man."

"What do you mean, massive systemic shock?" Ocelot asked. "Death will do that to you."

Gabriel shook his head. "No, that isn't what I mean. Something caused most of the blood vessels in his body to burst. I see evidence of extensive internal trauma, long before the predators fed on him."

Kestrel whistled softly. "What—what could have caused that? Magic?"

"Possibly," Gabriel said. "Again, it's difficult to get a reading because the area is so profoundly magical, but I would say not. This doesn't look like any spell I've ever encountered, and there are no traces of increased magical activity around the body."

Ocelot was getting impatient again. "This is all great, but who knows if it even has anything to do with 'Hawk?"

Whatever it is, if it doesn't help us find him, I say let's just go on. If the kid was following us, it serves him right if he got his ass nailed."

Gabriel shot him an odd look, then sighed and nodded. "Yes—let's find Winterhawk. After that, depending on what condition they are in, perhaps we can—" He stopped as a shimmering appeared in the air in front of him. For a moment his eyes went unfocused, then he nodded and snapped back to awareness. "The spirit has found a small group of people in close proximity to each other. It was not able to discern if any of them was Winterhawk, but it thinks so."

"Alive?" Ocelot asked quickly.

Gabriel consulted the spirit again. "Yes. Alive."

"Then let's go!" He grinned in spite of himself. "Where are they?"

"Some distance south of where we expected the plane to be. Apparently they chose to leave the plane and try to find civilization on their own." Gabriel slung his pack over his shoulder. "Come. The spirit will guide us."

The news gave Kestrel and Ocelot renewed energy. That, coupled with Gabriel's magical intervention to keep the jungle from impeding their progress, meant that they made even better time than before. They stopped briefly only a couple of times for light meals of energy bars from their packs, water, and local fruit, and Ocelot was reluctant to do even that. Finally, three hours or so later when it was getting near dawn, Gabriel held up his hand for them to stop. "We're close now," he said softly. "The spirit has faded, but it communicated the likely location to me before it left, and we are near it. Keep your eyes open—they will no doubt be watchful for threats."

Ocelot was about to ask Gabriel if he could just send another spirit out to tell Winterhawk they were coming

when Kestrel suddenly stiffened in front of him. "What?" he whispered.

She pointed. "I saw something move over there," she whispered back. Quietly she pulled her gun down from her shoulder, keeping it pointed at the ground.

Ocelot and Gabriel immediately turned their attention in that direction. "I don't see anything—" Ocelot began.

"There!" Gabriel said in their minds, pointing. *"Stay near me—I am protecting us if it is a threat. Ocelot, call out to them."*

Ocelot was happy to do just that. "'Hawk!' he yelled. 'Uh...Dr. Stone! Are you there? It's us—Ocelot and Kestrel and Gabriel! We're here to take you back!'"

There was a few seconds' pause, what sounded like a quick muffled conversation, and then the vegetation rustled and a thin figure emerged with its hands up. "Please don't shoot!" the man called. His British-accented voice shook with terror and fatigue.

All three of them rushed over to find themselves facing a man of about fifty with disheveled graying hair. His clothes were torn and dirty, his cheeks covered with gray stubble, and his eyes were nearly wild with fear. "Please," he said, panting. "Don't kill us."

"We're not here to kill anyone, sir," Gabriel said, keeping his voice gentle. "Who are you?"

"I'm—Dr. Henry Whittaker," he said. "Parabotany Department, London University." He was fighting to catch his breath and looked like he might faint at any moment. "Please—did you say you've come to help us?"

Another figure came out from hiding in the trees. This time it was a woman in her mid twenties, tall and slim with short dark brown hair. Her face was crisscrossed with small cuts. She looked as disheveled as the man did, but not quite as terrified. Looking first at Dr. Whittaker

and then at the newcomers, she ventured, "You're—not with the men with the guns, are you?"

Ocelot was darting glances around the area. "Where are the rest of you?" he demanded. "Where's Win—Dr. Stone?"

Whittaker was trying to speak but not having much success. The woman took up the conversation. "Did you come because of Dr. Stone's watcher?" she asked, her eyes showing faint hope. "The one he sent when the plane was—?"

"Yes," Gabriel told her. "Where is he?"

She let out her breath slowly, but didn't look completely relieved by the information. "I'm Gina Kane," she said. "One of Dr. Stone's students. Listen—I can tell you the whole story now, but I don't think that's the best thing to do. We have to help the others. Everything's gone wrong and Dr. Whittaker and I have about run out of options."

As she spoke, Whittaker was looking around as if expecting someone to pop out of the trees at them. He barely seemed to be paying attention to Gina Kane's words.

"Don't worry," Gabriel said softly. "Nothing will harm us for the moment. No one else is near."

"How do you know?" Kane asked. Her tone was a mixture of suspicion and hope.

"He knows," Kestrel said. "Now come on—tell us what's going on. This is more than just a plane crash, isn't it?"

Kane nodded, miserable. "Yes." She visibly tried to pull herself together and arrange her story in a way that would make sense. "There's—something out here. Something dangerous. We were trying to find a river, a town—anywhere we could get our bearings—but someone killed one of our guides. Dr. Stone and Kevin

went off to try to find out what was going on so we wouldn't stumble on it—It was only half an hour or so after they left that the men—the ones with the guns—attacked our group.” Her voice caught and tears sprang to her eyes, but her voice remained reasonably steady. “We got some of them, but—two of our group were killed. They—took—two others. Dr. Whittaker and I managed to get away, but now—” she shook her head. “We thought we’d be killed for sure.”

Ocelot was trying to make sense of all this. “You say Dr. Stone and somebody else went off to find something? What? When?”

“It was—about two...maybe two and a half hours ago. I don't know—what happened—if they're still alive—” She shook her head, sinking down to the lush carpet of vegetation covering the ground. “I just don't know,” she whispered again.

Ocelot forced himself not to panic. “But where did he go? What did he expect to—”

“Someone's coming,” Gabriel hissed, cutting him off.

“Oh, no...” Whittaker moaned, dropping down next to Kane.

Ocelot and Kestrel had their guns ready. They took cover behind trees and waited tensely.

Whoever was coming through the trees was making no effort to be quiet about it. The heavy thudding steps came closer, sounding almost like the newcomer was staggering under a heavy load. They broke through the trees and stopped, breathing heavily, not even seeming to notice the others. It was a tall young man about the same age as Gina Kane, and over his shoulder he carried the unmoving form of Winterhawk.

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Ocelot was there instantly. “Hawk!” he called.

The man carrying Winterhawk looked dully at the group and then sank to his knees. He was sweating profusely, pale, and looked like he couldn’t go any further, but still he was gently lowering his burden to the ground. “Found—you—” he said between harsh breaths. He didn’t appear to notice that the group now contained three new members he’d never seen before. He looked like a man who was beyond fighting or caring.

Ocelot was over there in an instant, helping to get Winterhawk down. He got a look at the mage and his stomach sank. ‘Hawk’s face was gray in the rising dawn light, his hair plastered to his head, his breath shallow and uneven. What was almost worse, his right arm was badly swollen from his shoulder down to his hand, red and bloodstreaked. “Shit...” he whispered. He looked up. “Gabriel, he’s in a bad way. I think he’s in shock.”

Frasier nodded, still panting. “Got—hit—with that strange gun. Glancing blow—still bad. Couldn’t—heal—”

“Strange gun?” Kestrel demanded as Gabriel moved quickly over to examine Winterhawk’s injuries.

Again Frasier nodded. “Don’t know—what kind. Some kind of—energy weapon.”

“Laser?” Ocelot looked up from watching Gabriel work over Winterhawk.

“No. Not—not a laser. We don’t know—what it was.” He paused a moment, leaning back against a tree and closing his eyes. Then he opened them and spoke again, this time with a stronger voice. “There’s—something going on around here. Dr. Stone says—Ares. Testing—weapons—on prisoners. Secret. We saw—their installation.”

Ocelot bit out a curse under his breath, every nerve on the alert. A secret Ares installation testing weapons on innocents in the middle of the Amazonian jungle? This whole situation had just gotten about ten times worse than it had been a few minutes ago. "Gabriel?" he called. "How's 'Hawk?'"

"Shh..." Gabriel's voice sounded distracted; he didn't look up.

"'Hawk?' Frasier finally seemed to be realizing that he was talking to strangers. "Uh — do you mind telling me who you are?"

"We're friends of Dr. Stone's," Kestrel said. "He sent a watcher spirit to ask for help, and we're the help. You can call me Kestrel. This is Ocelot, and the guy over there is Gabriel."

"'Hawk is — a nickname," Ocelot added, aware of how lame that sounded. "We go back a long way."

"You must be Kevin Frasier," Kestrel said to draw attention away from Ocelot. She offered him her canteen and an energy bar from her pack.

Frasier nodded, accepting both gratefully. "Yep, that's me." He noticed Whittaker and Kane in the background and his eyes narrowed. "Where's everybody else?" When they didn't answer he sat up a little straighter. "Something's happened here, hasn't it?"

Kane nodded wearily. "They attacked us after you left. Ram and Santiago are dead, and they've taken Catherine and Peter."

"Taken them?" Frasier's gaze sharpened. "What do you mean? Like taken them back to their —?"

"I don't know," Kane told him. "They grabbed them, stunned them with something, and carried them off. Like I was telling these people, Dr. Whittaker and I managed to get away from them, and they didn't follow us. I guess

they figured we'd be dead out here in hours by ourselves."

"They were probably right," Whittaker said faintly. "If you hadn't found us—"

Ocelot wasn't listening—he'd turned his attention back to Winterhawk. Gabriel's eyes were closed. His hands moved back and forth a few centimeters over the mage, concentrating mostly on his arm and the right side of his chest.

"What's he doing?" Gina Kane asked, coming over.

"Healing him, I hope," Ocelot told her.

Frasier looked dubious from his spot against the tree. "I tried that already," he said. "The injury is significant—it's as if it's a whole lot of small injuries rather than one big one. I did the best I could, but it didn't help much."

"Gabriel's very good at what he does," Kestrel told him. She had her gun in her hands and was prowling around the immediate area, keeping an eye out for approaching threats. So far she was seeing none, but she wasn't taking chances.

It appeared that no one was inclined to do anything else until Gabriel finished with Winterhawk. The other members of the London University group looked nervous but grateful for the chance to rest for a few minutes in the company of well-armed and well-equipped rescuers—Whittaker finally let himself lie down, and Kane took a seat near Frasier. All three of them were happy to accept food and water from Kestrel's and Ocelot's packs. They all waited.

At last Gabriel looked up from what he was doing. "I think he'll be all right," he said softly. He shot a significant look up at Ocelot and Kestrel. "His injuries were almost identical to the ones we found on Escuela. The only thing that saved him was that he was hit in the arm, while Escuela was apparently hit in the torso. Still,

he was in grave danger. Another few hours and he might not have survived."

"So—they were both shot with this weird energy weapon?" Ocelot asked, trying not to think about how close his teammate had come to death. He was looking down at Winterhawk—the mage was still unconscious, but his color looked significantly better and the swelling in his arm had gone down to almost nothing. All that remained now to show he'd been injured were the red patches and remains of the blood streaks. "Do you have any idea what it is yet?"

Gabriel didn't answer, but Frasier did. "I saw one of them," he said. "I got a good look at it when I took down the guy who shot Dr. Stone. I don't know what it was, but I can sketch what it looked like if that will help."

Kestrel was already pulling out a datapad. "Any reason why you didn't take it with you?"

Frasier indicated Winterhawk. "He told me not to—said if they were testing experimental weapons, they probably have some sort of tracking device on them. Didn't want to lead then straight to us."

Ocelot was impressed. *'Hawk must have been paying attention more than we all thought he was.* He moved over to look over Frasier's shoulder as the student took the datapad and began making a sketch.

When it was finished, Ocelot still didn't recognize it. Frasier wasn't the world's greatest artist, but the drawing he made showed what looked like a rifle with a larger-than-normal stock and an odd flaring near the end of the barrel. "You sure it flares like that?" Ocelot asked.

Frasier nodded. "Yeah. That's one of its most noticeable features. It's also got a cable that comes out here—" he indicated the end of the stock "—and goes to a big backpack with batteries in it."

Kestrel was staring at the picture. "This looks..." she started, then turned to Frasier. "Did it make any kind of sound?"

"All I heard was a whine — a really high-pitched one — for a second or two. Then nothing."

Kestrel's eyes widened, but she didn't say anything; instead, she went back to studying the picture.

"You think you know what it is, don't you?" Ocelot asked.

"I think so. I didn't think they existed — at least not in something this portable." She met Ocelot's eyes. "Sound waves. High-frequency sound, focused tight enough that you can hit individual people with it. It's no wonder it did the damage Gabriel was talking about — this kind of ultrasonic energy could rupture every blood vessel in a person's body, not to mention vibrating their bones into powder if it's sustained too long." She shivered a little. "Nasty, nasty stuff. No wonder they're testing it out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Shit..." Ocelot murmured. "And 'Hawk and the rest of these guys dropped down right in the middle of it." Something occurred to him suddenly. "That explains a lot."

"About what?"

"Why everybody was dragging their feet about letting us come in here and search. Think about it — that kind of place has got to have some kind of approval. They're probably greasing all kinds of government palms to the tune of big nuyen to get the authorization to have this place here. That means it's in everybody's best interests to make sure it doesn't get found."

Kestrel nodded slowly. "Right...so they just assume that the plane crash victims are lost anyway, so they throw roadblocks in front of any kind of investigation until it's too late. They'll probably issue some report in a

week or so saying they've found the wreckage and everybody's dead."

"You mean—no one else is looking for us?" Whittaker sounded incredulous. "But—"

"That's about the size of it, Prof," Ocelot said. "I was talking to Aubrey, Dr. Stone's caretaker, and he was telling me that his and the University's search efforts were getting hosed up worse than ours were. Looks like we're it. And as soon as 'Hawk wakes up, we need to get the hell out of here. We've got a boat waiting to take us back home."

"But—" Gina Kane spoke up. "What about Catherine and Peter? We can't just leave them there. They'll be killed for sure."

The three rescuers exchanged glances. Ocelot was about to say something when a groan interrupted him. Winterhawk was coming to.

Ocelot dropped down next to him. "'Hawk?"

The mage's eyes opened. For a moment he looked like he wasn't focusing properly, then his expression turned to confusion. "Ocelot? This is—a dream, isn't it?"

Ocelot grinned, unable to disguise his pleasure that 'Hawk appeared to be all right even though everything else was definitely far from all right at the moment. "Nope—You got the real thing. Your watcher worked. Nice stubble, by the way. How do you feel?"

Stone paused for a moment to do an assessment of his physical state. "Much better," he said, sounding surprised. He glanced over at his arm and looked startled. "It's—"

In answer, Ocelot hooked a thumb over his shoulder to where Gabriel and Kestrel stood watching.

"Ah..." A slow smile spread across Stone's face. "I've had some expert assistance." Slowly he sat up and let his breath out. "Expert indeed. I still feel exhausted and

vaguely like I've been run over by a lorry, but compared to before—" He trailed off, realizing that they weren't alone in the clearing.

Frasier came over. "Dr. Stone—welcome back."

Stone looked up at him. "Frasier. I—you—" He smiled. "I think I owe you one, don't I? Several, in fact."

"Don't worry about that right now, sir. We—still have some problems."

Stone got to his feet, gripping Ocelot's arm for support. He looked at his teammate as if to say, 'what's going on?'

Still, it was Frasier who answered. "They hit the camp, Dr. Stone—that's what Gina and Dr. Whittaker have told us. Prakesh and Santiago are dead, and Hsu and Merriwether have been taken away."

Gina Kane nodded. "Dr. Whittaker and I ran for our lives. They were shooting—" She shuddered, remembering.

Stone's gaze sharpened. "Dead? When?"

"Half an hour or so after you and Frasier left. It was terrible—" Behind her, Whittaker nodded grimly.

"And you say Hsu and Merriwether were taken?"

"They grabbed them—stunned them with something and carried them off. We don't know where they went—or even if they're still alive."

Stone digested this information for a few moments, then sighed and looked the newcomers. To the students and Whittaker, he said, "Can you excuse us for a couple of minutes, please?"

They didn't look happy about it, but didn't follow as Stone, Ocelot, Kestrel, and Gabriel moved off to the other side of the small clearing.

"We have to go after them," Stone said. "I can't leave two students God knows where out here."

"You want to go up against an Ares installation?" Ocelot asked. "With an old professor and a couple of grad students?"

"No," Stone said. "With us. They're not expecting anything like what we can do. They're looking for frightened students, not—well—us." This last was said with a significant look toward Gabriel.

"Hey," Ocelot said, raising his hands, "after all this frustration I sure as hell wouldn't mind the chance to kick a little butt and take a few names. But we can't do it herding these kids around. And the old guy looks like he's going to keel over from fright any second now."

"We'll have to find a safe base for them," Stone said, distracted. "But don't discount these 'kids' quite so quickly—if it hadn't been for Frasier there, I'd be dead right now."

"That's great," Ocelot said. "But they're still noncoms. Even if they've got combat experience, it ain't for dealing with something like this. If we take 'em along we're going to be spending our time babysitting 'em."

"Why don't we take them back to the *Esperanza*?" Kestrel asked. "It'll take a bit longer, but they should be safe there with Ruiz while we take care of the situation."

Gabriel nodded. "I can arrange some magic around the boat so no one will notice them while we are gone. I agree that we can't leave prisoners behind."

Stone looked back and forth between them. He was still pale and looked very tired, but his eyes were bright. "You've heard about what we'll be up against?" he said at last.

"The sound weapon?" Ocelot nodded. "That's another reason I want to kick their asses—they're grabbing people off the streets back in Iquitos to be their little test subjects. Just like a bunch of fucking corpses."

"Sound weapon?" Stone tilted his head, breaking in before Ocelot got up a good head of steam. "Is that what that damned thing was?"

"Ultrasonic," Kestrel said. "That's what we think, anyway, based on what Frasier said it looked like and how it behaved. Nasty. You're damn lucky you just got winged."

"I'm beginning to think so," Stone said. He sagged a little against a tree as the realization of what had almost befallen him sunk in.

"You sure you're up for this, 'Hawk?" Ocelot asked. "You don't look so hot. Maybe you should go back to the—"

"Don't even suggest it, my friend." Stone's tone was cold and even. "These bastards have killed three of our group, along with God knows how many others. They aren't going to get away with it—and I'll be damned if I'm going back to London and explain to Merriwether's and Hsu's people why I left them behind while I could still function." He bowed his head. "Henry and I are already going to have enough explaining to Prakesh's parents."

Kestrel gripped his arm. "It wasn't your fault. But that doesn't help, does it?"

Stone shook his head. "No. It doesn't." He looked up, eyes blazing. "But I can bloody well make sure it doesn't happen again."

Thus united in their purpose, the four of them turned back to where the others waited. "All right," Stone said. "Here's the plan. Apparently my friends here arrived in a boat, and it's waiting for our return." He glanced at Ocelot. "How far from here is it?"

"About a day's walk. Less if we can move fast."

Stone nodded. "We're going to head back there. With the fortification in our number and offensive capabilities provided by my friends, we should be safe. Once we

arrive at the boat, you'll remain there with the captain until we can set off back for Iquitos."

"But what about Catherine and Peter?" Kane asked again. "We can't leave them there."

"After we've seen you safely to the boat, we're going to see about getting them back," Stone said grimly.

"You're going to go back to that place?" Whittaker was shocked. "You were nearly killed before! We should go back to Iquitos as fast as we can and summon the local—"

"The local authorities?" Ocelot said before Stone could reply. "Yeah, sure, Doc—you mean the same ones that did everything short of blowing us up to keep us from coming after you in the first place? That ones who are probably getting paid more than you make in ten years to cover this whole thing up and keep it quiet? You know what'll happen then? We go to the cops like good little tourists and tell 'em, they make all the right noises about doing everything they can and keeping us informed. Then they make a couple of phone calls, and your two kids end up as jaguar chow half an hour later. Is that what you want?"

Whittaker stared at Ocelot, wide-eyed and fearful. Clearly he was beginning to wonder if the solution wasn't as bad as the problem. He turned to Stone, appealing: "Alastair, you can't—"

Stone shook his head. "I wouldn't have put it quite so—baldly—Henry, but essentially it sounds like he's right. Believe me, the sorts of places that we've stumbled upon out here aren't generally operating openly. That's why they have to build them out here in the middle of the great bugged-all."

Kestrel nodded. "Even megacorps can't get away with everything. Even if legally there's nothing that can be done because of extraterritoriality, public opinion will fry

them if it's ever found out that they're doing stuff like this. Plus, and probably more importantly to them, they can't take the chance that the other corps find out what they're working on. This is going to be worth way too much money to them to risk having it found out."

Whittaker let his breath out, his gaze going between the three newcomers and Stone. "Do you think there's a chance?" he asked at last. "That they're alive, I mean?"

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "Why would they take them prisoner if they wanted them dead right away? Maybe they ran out of test subjects. Either way, we need to get moving. The sooner we get you guys back to the boat, the sooner we can take care of business."

"I'm going with you," Frasier said suddenly.

"Huh?" Everybody turned to look at him; it was Ocelot who spoke.

"I'm not staying back on the boat and waiting. I can handle a gun."

"No fraggin' way," Ocelot said, shaking his head for emphasis.

Stone also shook his head, albeit with less vigor. "Not this time, Frasier. My friends here are professionals. They know how to handle themselves in situations like this, and they know what they're getting into. I know you don't like it, but as long as this is a London University sponsored activity, Dr. Whittaker and I are responsible for the safety of the students."

Frasier glared at him, but didn't say anything else. Stone suspected he was holding his tongue for now and planned to renew the battle at a later time, but right now he didn't have time to deal with it. "We'd better get going," he said. "Lead on, you lot."

Ocelot and Kestrel took point with Stone right behind them, and Gabriel provided a silent presence bringing up the rear where he could keep an eye on everyone. He

hadn't said much since they had located the crash survivors. After a couple of hours of walking, Kestrel dropped back to talk to him. "You okay?" she asked. "You've been quiet for awhile."

"I'm often quiet," he said with faint amusement in his eyes. "I usually find it is better to listen than to speak."

"Got something on your mind?"

He shook his head. "Not really. I've been sensing an — odd presence — for awhile now, but it is far too faint to identify. It is probably just some property of the jungle itself. This place is so *alive*, Juliana — it's incredible. I would like very much to come back here some time under less dire circumstances."

She smiled. "Maybe we can go to Rio or something — afterward."

He nodded. "Afterward," he echoed softly. "Have you given any more thought to my suggestion about my lair?"

"I think so." She shifted her pack on one shoulder and her gun on the other. "It does seem like the smart thing to do, assuming I don't go crazy there."

"I will make sure you are entertained," he told her. He smiled a little. "I wouldn't let you go crazy, Juliana. No more so than you already are, at any rate," he added.

She ruffled his hair. "Yeah, sometimes I think I'd have to be crazy to do some of the things I've been doing lately. By the way, can you apply some of that dragon magic of yours to getting rid of my morning sickness? I'd really prefer not to be heaving every morning for the next few months."

"I will see what I can do," he promised.

21.

Nothing bothered them on the remainder of their trek, and Ocelot suspected once again that it was Gabriel's doing. The students and Whittaker, who didn't know the true nature of the silent, handsome young man who was providing their rear guard, were nervous and agitated--their eyes constantly darted around as if expecting gunmen to pop out from behind every tree and they jumped at every shadow and animal noise. "It's all right," Stone tried to assure them, particularly Whittaker and Kane. "I don't think anything's going to attack us now."

"How can you be sure?" Whittaker demanded. "Those--men are around here somewhere. They could be tracking us as we speak."

"You'll just have to trust me, Henry," Stone said. "Gabriel back there is a mage who makes you and I look like a couple of first-year thaumaturgy students. If he's not worried, I'm not worried."

Whittaker glanced back over his shoulder. "Little young, isn't he?" he asked dubiously. "He looks like he could *be* a first-year thaumaturgy student." It was clear he wasn't prepared to trust his life to someone barely old enough to be one of his students.

"He's--a bit of a prodigy," Stone said. He dropped his voice down. "Remember that bit of--unpleasantness--I went through recently? No doubt you heard."

Whittaker nodded slowly. "Yes. I--heard a bit about it." He looked a little uncomfortable, as if not sure it was something that should be brought up in polite company. The truth was, everyone in the University's magical departments had heard about it, along with significant numbers of the remainder of the school's population.

"Well--Gabriel was the one who brought me back. I can't explain the whole story, but suffice it to say that he's

the reason I'm back to the questionable level of sanity I enjoy today." His half-grin showed Whittaker, who tended to be rather conventionally literal-minded, that he was kidding about the last part. He quickly resumed a sober look, though. "Honestly, Henry, I mean it. There isn't another person on this earth that I'd have less hesitation about trusting my life to."

For a moment Whittaker didn't answer. Then he cast a surreptitious look up toward Ocelot. "What about--him? Forgive me, Alastair, but he hardly seems the type I'd expect to find among your circle of friends."

Stone chuckled. "What, you think I spend all my time with you lot down at the pubs?"

"He sounds American."

"He is. So is Kestrel. Ocelot--well, he and I have been through a lot together. He's not the most tactful chap in the world, but you can count on him when things start getting nasty. Believe me--our odds of getting everyone out of here in one piece just shot up significantly with these three on our side."

Whittaker nodded slowly, then let out a long, slow sigh. "I'm not looking forward to talking to Ram Prakesh's family. It was terrible, Alastair--they showed no mercy at all. Ram was trying to run away, and they shot him in the back. The blood--"

Stone bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Henry. I wish I'd have been there."

Whittaker didn't reply. Stone looked up, wondering what was on the older professor's mind, but didn't ask. Instead he too sighed and continued to trudge along through the damp vegetation. All he wanted now was to get the two prisoners back alive and for this whole sorry situation to be over--or at least as much so as it ever could be.

"We're getting close," Ocelot said, consulting the GPS in his hand. "We should be breaking through at the river any minute now."

Kestrel nodded, double-checking his readings against her own. She slowed down, and Ocelot did likewise.

Stone came up to see what was happening. "What's going on?" He looked tired but alert.

"We're getting close to the river," Ocelot told him. "We don't want to bust in on any surprises."

The rest of the group caught up with them. "Are we almost there?" Gina Kane asked. She was trying hard not to show that the pace was exhausting her.

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "Let's all keep it quiet." He turned to Stone and Kestrel. "I'll scout ahead and see if we're in the right place. We're gonna be out in the open once we get near the river, so it'd be nice if we were visible for as short a time as possible.

Everyone waited tensely while he suited action to words, taking off into the trees. A few moments later he was back. He moved over to where Stone, Kestrel, and Gabriel were talking in low voices. "Guys, we have a problem," he said.

Kestrel was instantly alert. "What? Are they at the boat?"

"There ain't no boat."

"What?" she demanded. She pulled out her GPS and checked the reading again. "But this is where it was." Her eyes narrowed. "You mean Ruiz split out on us? After all we paid him? When I get my hands on that--"

Ocelot shook his head. "I think it's worse than that. Come on and see."

Frasier came over to them. "Is something wrong? Come on--don't keep us in the dark. We have a right to know."

Ocelot was about to say something but Stone nodded and spoke instead. "Yes, I guess you do. Let's all go look."

"Wait," Gabriel said, holding up a hand. Everyone watched him as he closed his eyes for several moments, then opened them and nodded once. "All right."

They followed Ocelot for a hundred meters or so until they stepped out from the cover of the vegetation and onto the riverbank. Beyond them the muddy river meandered by, quiet and undisturbed by whatever had occurred. "I'm confused," Gina Kane said. "I thought you said there was a boat."

It was Stone who found the first indication that something had happened. He bent down and picked up an object from the ground, examining it. "I think the operative word, Ms. Kane," he said grimly, holding up a ragged section of polished wood, "is *was*."

"What do you mean?" Whittaker demanded. "What is that you have there, Alastair?"

"It's a hunk of the boat," Ocelot said.

"Here's another one," Frasier called, holding up a similar piece of wood.

"What does it mean?" Kane asked. "Are you saying the boat--"

Kestrel was looking at Stone's find. "If I had to guess from this," she said, "I'd say something very nasty happened to this boat. Like it was blown up."

Kane and Whittaker gasped. Frasier stared. "B-blown up?" Whittaker demanded. "But--"

Gabriel was looking over the river, a clouded look in his eyes. "And Senor Ruiz with it," he said softly.

"How do you know that, Gabriel?" Kestrel asked, coming over.

"I can feel it. It isn't strong--I think it happened not long after we left--but someone was terrified here. Someone's life force--ceased to be."

Ocelot kicked a clump of vegetation hard enough to uproot it and send it flying into the air. "Damn damn damn," he growled. "Not only does this mean that our ride's fucked, but we're back to babysitting again."

"Hey," Frasier said, eyes flashing, "You don't have to worry about us. We can handle ourselves. We've done all right so far, haven't we?"

Ocelot glared at him. "Listen, kid. This is reality. Yeah, you did okay. You got Hawk out of a bad situation and I'm damned glad you did that. Maybe you *can* even handle yourself in this, though I'm betting you don't even really know what you're in for. But what about those two?" He indicated Kane and Whittaker with a curt head motion. "You gonna send them into combat? You want them getting shot at with assault rifles, with no armor and no combat training? You want to have them wait somewhere and hope nothing finds them before we take care of the problem? I'll tell you this--I sure as hell don't. But that doesn't matter, because we're doing it anyway. Ain't no choice. We can't call anybody and even if we did who knows whose pockets they're in? We're stuck." He whirled and moved quickly off before the astonished Frasier could reply to his tirade.

Stone sighed and clapped Frasier on the shoulder. "Don't mind him, Frasier," he said. "Like I said before--he's like that. But he's right, you know."

"I know," the student said, his tone grudging. "But I don't have to like it."

"No," Stone agreed. "You don't. But that's the way it has to be."

Kestrel was by the river, conferring with Gabriel. "Do you still think we can do this?" she was asking as Ocelot came up to them.

"I think so," the young man said. "It will be more difficult, but I think we can do it."

"Somebody's gonna have to stay with them while we go in," Ocelot said. "With patrols out it's too dangerous to leave 'em alone." He looked over at Kestrel, in a rare instance weighing his words before he spoke. "Maybe--" he started, then took a deep breath. "Maybe you should stay," he finally got out.

"Me?" She looked puzzled. "Why me?"

Ocelot wouldn't meet her gaze.

Then, suddenly, she caught on. Her eyes hardened. "This is because I'm pregnant, isn't it?" she demanded. "Ocelot, damn it, I told you you can't--" She cut off her words abruptly, looking over Ocelot's shoulder with wide eyes.

He spun around to see what she had spotted.

Stone stood there behind him, an expression of astonishment on his face. He was staring at Kestrel.

She took a deep breath. "You--heard, I take it."

Stone inclined his head. "I couldn't exactly have missed it," he said gently. "I trust--congratulations are in order?" He glanced back and forth between her and Ocelot.

They both shook their heads vigorously. "It's a long story, 'Hawk,'" Ocelot said. "Maybe one to tell some other time. It's weirder than you think."

"I'll take your word for that," Stone said, tilting his head. "P'raps when we're back to civilization."

"Yeah," Kestrel said. "Civilization." She glared at Ocelot. "But I'm not staying behind. If you suggest it again I'll slug you so hard you won't need a plane back to Seattle."

Ocelot put up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Sorry!"

She nodded once in amused finality. "About time."

"But that still leaves us with the same question," Stone said. "We need to come up with something."

"I think I can help," Gabriel said, coming over. "If they are willing to remain in one place until we return, I can set up magical protections around that place so they won't be noticed by patrols or by the local fauna."

"They'll be safe?" Stone asked, a little hope showing in his eyes.

"Yes. In this kind of time I won't be able to protect them from powerful threats, but I do not sense any such threats in the immediate area."

"Let's do it, then," Ocelot growled. "Remember, once we do this we've still got the problem of how to get back without the boat."

"One problem at a time," Kestrel said.

22.

Whittaker and Kane were not happy about the idea of sitting tight until Stone and his friends returned, and neither was Frasier. The difference was that the former pair came to their feelings out of fear, while the latter came to his from indignation at being left behind.

"Look, Frasier," Stone said, "Someone who can handle himself in a fight needs to remain behind and make sure everyone's safe. Even with Gabriel's magical protections, I'd feel a lot better knowing that someone who knows how to use a rifle is here."

Frasier sighed. "You know that's bollocks, Dr. Stone, and so do I. I'm not used to being left behind when there's work to be done."

"I know," Stone told him, nodding. "But listen to me—I don't think you should risk assensing too much here, but take a look at Ocelot and Kestrel and tell me why I'm saying what I'm saying."

Frasier did as he was told, and his eyes widened. "They're—both packed so full of cyberware they barely register on the astral."

Stone nodded again. "Exactly. I hate to say this, Frasier, but you'll be a detriment in this group. I can't keep up with them, but I can move faster than you can. You'd be left behind in ten minutes."

Frasier sighed again and kicked at the ground. He glanced at Gabriel. "What about him? He assenses as a mundane, which I know isn't true."

"Exactly," Stone said with a grim smile. "Don't you worry about Gabriel—he'll be looking out for the lot of us."

"Someday I'm going to ask you more about this, Dr. Stone," Frasier said, finally giving in.

"Maybe I'll tell you some of it. We'll go to a pub and have a few ales. I owe you a bloody bit more than that. For now, though, keep a good hold on that rifle and stay quiet—we'll leave you food and supplies, and we shouldn't be gone more than a day or so. Can you hold out that long?"

Frasier gave him a half-grin. "We've held out this long, haven't we? What's another day without a shower?"

"That's the spirit," Stone said, returning the grin. He didn't tell Frasier that he wasn't feeling nearly as confident about this whole thing as he was projecting, including his own involvement in it—he was still exhausted from his ordeal and from a general lack of good sleep, but there was no way his friends were going to leave him behind on this one. It simply wasn't an option.

They prepared to go: Gabriel moved off by himself and began weaving his protective enchantments while Ocelot and Kestrel gave Frasier, Whittaker, and Kane a quick primer on survival. They left them the remainder of the food in their packs and their spare canteens and admonished them once more to remain where they were, stay quiet and try to rest, and above all not to run off. "We won't run off unless your protections fail," Kane told them. "If that happens, all bets are off."

"We'll hurry," Kestrel said, glancing over at Gabriel, who was finishing up.

None of them except Gabriel knew exactly how right she was. It wasn't fifteen minutes after they had left the students' location that he stopped. "We need to go much faster than this," he said. "Even with what I did back there, I don't feel comfortable leaving them alone for two days."

"Got any ideas?" Ocelot asked. "We could run, but I doubt 'Hawk is gonna be able to keep up after everything he's been through. Hell, I'm not sure *I* can keep up in this fraggin' heat and humidity."

"That's not what I had in mind," Gabriel assured them. For the first time in awhile, he smiled. "How about if we fly? Or rather, I fly and you ride?"

Stone's eyes widened. "But wouldn't that be just a bit obvious?"

"Not if we're invisible and shielded. I thought about doing it before, but I decided that those people back there have already been through enough without our having to explain me to them."

Kestrel nodded. "Yeah, I can see that. Especially since we all thought we had a boat to go back to." She glanced at the others. "I'm up for it if you guys are."

"Anything that will get Merriwether and Hsu back and get us out of here faster is fine with me," Stone said.

"Yeah," Ocelot said, sounding a bit more reluctant than the other two but still willing. "Let's get this done and get the hell home."

Logistically it ended up being interesting, because there wasn't a clearing nearby that was big enough for Gabriel to change to his true form. In the end, he levitated himself upward, turned invisible, and then shifted. He then used another levitation spell to bring Stone, Kestrel, and Ocelot up and communicated with them telepathically until they were settled in their places between his massive wings.

"If anybody looks up here are they gonna see us floating along like fraggin' Superman?" Ocelot asked a little nervously.

"*You are included in my invisibility,*" Gabriel's mental voice came back. "*No one can see you. Now hold on – I won't let you fall, but I'm going to fly fast.*"

What followed was a wild ride. The three passengers hung on for dear life as the powerful wings pumped next to them, propelling them through the sky at a high rate of speed. Gabriel was true to his word, though: no one fell off. In one instance that appeared to be a close one, Stone lost his grip and tumbled sideways, only to come to a stop against a soft invisible field. Kestrel and Ocelot quickly hauled him back up and they were on their way again.

The trip that had taken them many hours on foot required only a couple of hours of flight time. At last Gabriel backwinged a bit, slowing down and losing some altitude. *"Look below,"* he told them. *"That's the facility down there."*

All three of them crawled over to peer past the dragon's wings and get a look. *"That's it all right,"* Stone muttered. *"It looks a lot bigger on the ground, but I daresay it's big enough to be dangerous just as it is."*

"Are you sure they can't see us?" From Ocelot's vantage point, it appeared that they were frighteningly vulnerable to anyone who wanted to take aerial potshots at them.

"Do not worry," Gabriel said again. *"Their weapons and tracking gear cannot penetrate my shields."*

"Damn it's nice doing this kind of thing with a dragon," he said, only a little bit sarcastically.

"I will set you down now, and join you in a moment," Gabriel said. He moved about half a kilometer away from the installation and lowered the three of them down in the same way he had brought them up. In a few seconds, he had joined them, back in human form.

"Okay," Ocelot said. *"So how do we want to do this?"*

"I think we should risk some astral reconnaissance," Stone said. *"Our first priority is getting Merriwether and Hsu out of there, so we need to know where they're holding them."*

"Let me take care of that," Gabriel said. He stopped a moment, looking around as if he had suddenly heard something.

"What is it?" Kestrel's hands went to her gun strap, but she didn't unsling it yet.

Gabriel didn't reply for a few moments, then shook his head. "Nothing. I was just sensing the same thing as before—a presence of some kind. It's gone now, though."

"Well, let's get a move on, then," Ocelot said. "The sooner this is over, the happier I'll be."

"Hold on—" Gabriel closed his eyes and appeared to be focusing elsewhere in classic astral-recon fashion. He was gone for about ten minutes, and by the time he got back his companions were beginning to get restless. "Datapad," he said distractedly, holding out his hand.

Kestrel gave him hers, and he quickly sketched out the layout of the installation. "They have minimal warding on a couple of the buildings—probably the research lab and the place they're holding the prisoners." He pointed to each building as he described it. "This is a barracks here. This appears to be food preparation. These two are labs, and this back part here is probably a firing range. This building here is warded—I chose not to penetrate the wards, but given that the prisoners are not anywhere else in the complex, it appears to be a good bet that they are being held here. Probably security."

"How many people?" Kestrel asked.

"About thirty at the moment, scattered throughout the complex. I didn't range out seeking patrols, but judging by the number of beds in the barracks, I'd say the place has the capacity to hold about fifty troops, plus prisoners and about ten officers with their own quarters."

"Some of them are dead," Stone reminded them. "We got a couple, and Frasier said they did too."

"Thirty..." Kestrel was saying, shaking her head. "I wonder how many of those ultrasonic guns they have."

"No way to tell that," Gabriel said. "Not without a time-consuming clairvoyance spell. I suggest that our best plan is to get in quietly, free the prisoners, and get out."

"I want to frag this place so they can't just go get another crop of prisoners and start up business as usual in a week," Ocelot said.

Stone nodded. "Yes. I agree."

Gabriel regarded them for a moment, then nodded. "All right. We'll do it that way, then. I will protect you and assist in the destruction of the structures, but I won't aid you in your killing."

Ocelot had long since grown used to this kind of talk from the young man. "No worries there," he said, his eyes blazing. "I think we can handle that all by ourselves. It'll feel good to kick a few corper asses. If the local wildlife gets a snack out of it—hey, never let it be said that I don't support wildlife."

"Quietly first," Stone reminded him. "First we get the prisoners out. Once they're safe, *then* you can have your way with the rest of the place. Don't blow up the jeeps, though—we might need them, especially if Merriwether and Hsu are injured."

"Good point," Kestrel said, nodding. "If we drive slowly we might even be able to take 'em back to the river. Beats walking."

"Okay then," Ocelot said. "Let's go."

Gabriel nodded. "I'll make us invisible to them—it isn't an invisibility spell, but rather one that will simply cause them to disregard our presence."

"Like the one at the prison in Los Angeles?" Stone asked, glancing at Ocelot. His friend's hair still hadn't grown back from where the guards had cut it.

"Yes." He regarded them for a few moments, closed his eyes briefly, then nodded. "Done."

They moved stealthily out of the trees, creeping along the treeline until they reached the area opposite the fence nearest the building Gabriel had identified as warded. Ocelot, who hadn't experienced the dragon's concealing magic, felt very vulnerable when they left the cover of the trees and approached the fence. He could see Ares personnel patrolling the cleared space between the fence and the buildings. The two he saw didn't have guns like the ones Frasier had described, though—just normal assault rifles. Still deadly, but at least he knew what he was dealing with.

When they reached the fence Gabriel silently levitated them up and over, setting them down only when they were outside the door to the building. As they expected, it was locked. "What now?" Kestrel whispered. "I didn't exactly bring my maglock passkey or my electronics kit along."

Gabriel considered. "I can defeat it, but it will probably trigger alarms. Alternatively we could wait until someone opens it, but that could take time."

"I say just take it out and we'll handle what comes," Ocelot said. His rifle was slung at his side in a ready position, his monowhip in his hand.

No one had a better idea, since none of them had come to Amazonia with any inkling that they would be battling corp troops instead of slogging through stifling jungles. Gabriel leaned in close to the door, put his hand on it, and a few seconds later there was a faint *pop* and an even fainter crackle of electricity somewhere deep within the wall. Ocelot reached past him and tried the door. The mechanism moved freely. With a thumbs-up signal he stepped back.

"Stay near me," Gabriel whispered. "I can't protect you as well if you're too far away." That said, he swung the door open.

They half expected someone to start shooting at them, but no one was in evidence. If an alarm was sounding, it was a silent one. They were standing in a small room with doors leading off from either side. "Any idea?" Ocelot whispered to Gabriel.

He wasn't listening—he appeared to be checking the astral again. After a few seconds of silence he pointed to the right. "There," he said. "Now that we're inside, I can see what is here without disturbing the wards. There are two prisoners held in small cells."

That was enough for Stone. He strode over to the door and tried it—once again it was locked. He stepped aside to let Gabriel make short work of it, and then they were on their way down the hallway. "I'll stay here," Kestrel said once they were inside the door. "Make sure we don't have any surprise visitors. Hurry up."

Ocelot nodded and quickly caught up with the others.

The hallway was about ten meters long, lined on each side with five heavy doors with bars set into tiny windows at eye level. Stone hurried past the others and began peering into doors. "Here they are!" he called. "Down here at the end!"

"Dr. — Stone?" came a slightly slurred male voice from one of the two cells Stone was indicating. "Is that you?"

"We're here," Stone assured Peter Hsu. "Hang on and we'll have you out of there."

"Hurry!" an equally slurred female voice called from across the hall. "They're —"

Stone didn't wait to hear the end of that. He moved back while Gabriel broke the locks on the students' doors, then he ran into Hsu's cell. The student lay on a crude stained pallet on the floor; his hands were cuffed behind

him with heavy plastic restraints and he wore a blindfold tied tightly around his upper face. *Guess they didn't have mage masks*, he thought bitterly as he removed the offending cloth. "Little help in here," he called.

Hsu looked exhausted, too drained to be afraid anymore. "Thank the spirits you came," he said wearily. "They were going to let us go tonight—they were going to test those guns on us."

"It's all right," Stone muttered. "You're all right now—we'll get you out of here and we'll be on our way home before you know it." He kept talking as Gabriel came in and casually broke the restraints behind Hsu's back where the student couldn't see.

They had just gotten Merriwether free when Kestrel's voice came down the hallway, almost simultaneous with the loud klaxon of an alarm. "Incoming!" she called, leveling her rifle at the door and ducking back behind cover.

Hsu and Merriwether, still looking drugged, showed near-panic. "No..." Hsu mumbled. "Please don't let them shoot us."

"It's all right," Stone assured them again, hoping it was true. He realized just how much they were counting on Gabriel's aid—he himself, Ocelot, and Kestrel could handle a lot of things, but thirty fully armed corp troops were probably not among them. At least without a lot more preparation and gear than they had.

"Come on," Gabriel said, moving swiftly up next to Kestrel. He glanced past her out the door and then hurried out. The others quickly followed, with Stone and Kestrel practically dragging the frightened, disoriented students.

Outside the door two of the Ares troops lay on the floor, felled by Kestrel's assault rifle. Ocelot scooped up one of their own rifles, shouldered it, and tossed the other

one to Stone. Both were standard assault rifles—still no sign of the ultrasonic weapons. “I wonder if they’ve run out of their little toys,” Stone said as they waited for Gabriel to check what was in store for them outside.

“Or they’re waiting to use them on us outside,” Ocelot said.

Stone didn’t waste time with the rifle, instead slinging it on his shoulder for use as a backup for one of his friends. “They’re taking positions outside,” Gabriel said grimly. “We need to hurry—I don’t know if even my shielding can keep us all safe from this many of them.”

“Can you protect us from ultrasonic?” Kestrel asked.

“Probably. To some extent, certainly. But so many—”

Ocelot peeked through the tiny open door crack, watching the Ares troops falling out and getting behind cover. He couldn’t take a shot at them without opening the door far enough to leave them vulnerable. “It’s almost like they were expecting us—how else could they get it together this fast?”

“Can we go out a back door?” Stone asked, looking around. “Did you see one, Gabriel?”

“No. This is the only way out.” He moved up next to Ocelot. “Let me have a look. I might be able to drop enough of them with a stunning spell to give us an easier time of it.”

A flurry of rounds exploded into the side of the building and everyone but Gabriel dropped hastily to the floor. “Hurry up!” Ocelot yelled. “I don’t think they’re gonna wait anymore!”

Gabriel nodded. He stood still for a moment, then opened the door a little more and loosed a spell. Another volley of rounds answered, but none got through his shielding. “Let’s go,” he called to the others. “Stay close—we’ll head for the jeeps. I’m not bothering with the disregard spell—too many of them for it to do any good.

If things get too bad, I'll — take stronger steps. But I'd like to avoid that if possible."

Kestrel wondered if "stronger steps" meant killing, or revealing his true form and thus his full powers. Her money was on the latter. She too hoped it wouldn't come to that.

When they stepped cautiously outside Ocelot was once again struck with how useful it was to have a great dragon on your team—he couldn't see all the Ares forces, but a good dozen of them lay unmoving on the ground, slumped out of their cover positions. Bravado aside, he knew that he and 'Hawk and Kestrel would have been hopelessly outclassed by sheer numbers if they'd tried to do this by themselves.

They ran, with Stone and Kestrel still dragging Hsu and Merriwether behind them. The remaining Ares troops who hadn't been taken out by Gabriel's spell fired at them, but none of the rounds penetrated the dragon's shielding. They fired back and managed to wing a couple of them, though the light security armor they wore and their cover made it hard to get a good shot. "Can you take out the lab?" Ocelot yelled as they ran by the building Gabriel had identified as the research laboratory. "Even if we don't get the rest, we need to make sure they don't —"

Gabriel didn't wait for him to finish. He raised his hands and in mid-run flung a glowing ball of energy at the lab building. It blossomed around the structure and then it was on fire, blazing up into the sky.

"We're almost there!" Stone called, trying to encourage the two exhausted students—and himself. "There are the jeeps, and they're not guarding —"

"That will be far enough," a sudden voice boomed in their heads, loud enough to cause pain.

All of them whirled around, even Gabriel.

"Oh...holy shit..." Ocelot breathed.

Behind them, hovering in the sky with its iridescent plumage glittering in the early-morning sunlight, was a large and very angry feathered serpent.

23.

"Go!" Gabriel's voice echoed in their minds, almost as loud as the serpent's had been. *"Get out quickly! I will deal with him!"* He was already moving forward, separating himself from his companions.

"Gabriel!" Kestrel cried.

"Go," he repeated. *"I will meet you back where you left the others by the river!"*

Ocelot grabbed her arm. "Come on, Kestrel!"

She glared at him, but then nodded and took hold of Merriwether's arm again. She, like all of them, knew that things had just gotten a lot more dangerous, and their only chance at survival was to get out quickly.

Ocelot, not burdened by dragging along an exhausted prisoner, reached the corner of the building around which the jeeps were parked first. He skidded to a stop and peered around the edge, half expecting to see another contingent of Ares guards waiting to pick him off. Instead, he saw only two guards pounding around the opposite side of the building. For a brief second this brought relief as he swung his assault rifle around, but then he got a look at the weapons they carried. "Fuck!" he called over his shoulder, ducking back fast. "Now we know where the ultrasonics are!"

Behind them they could already hear the sounds of a battle, but they dared not look back to see if Gabriel had changed form and was taking on the feathered serpent as his true self. Ocelot wheeled on Stone. "Can you pick them off if they come around here?"

"Yes, but —"

Ocelot didn't wait for an answer. Instead he vaulted upward, catching the edge of the single-story building's roof and launching himself upward to land, catlike, on

top. A moment later Kestrel did the same thing, leaving Stone with the two students.

"Dr. Stone—" Merriwether began, her voice shaking with terror.

"Quiet!" His voice came out as a harsh rasp; he didn't even look at her. If he stopped now, he would have to admit to himself that the thought of facing those ultrasound guns—the things that had almost killed him—again was frightening him more than he realized. He knew he was running on sheer adrenaline because he had to, and the moment he slowed down he wouldn't be of any use to anyone. Hesitantly he crept forward, a spell ready, and peered around the corner of the building.

There was no one there. Then he saw one of them—they had done the same thing: ducked back behind cover on their side of the building when they'd seen the escapees. Without turning, he said to Hsu and Merriwether, "Watch the corner behind us. If you see anybody, yell at the top of your lungs." He didn't check to see if they had even heard him. Off in the distance a primal scream of rage and pain rose to the skies, but Stone couldn't tell if it was Gabriel or the unknown feathered serpent.

"Hawk!" It was Ocelot's voice, and it was above him. He spun, barely catching himself in time to avoid throwing a deadly spell at his friend on the roof. The two students cried out in startlement but didn't run—it sounded to Stone like some of the drugs were wearing off and they were getting their senses back.

"Don't *do* that!" Stone snapped.

Ocelot grinned. "C'mon. Kestrel and I got 'em. The jeeps are free for the moment. Let's get our asses outta here." He held two things up in triumph. Stone's eyes widened: one was his familiar monowhip; the other was

one of the experimental guns. He wasn't wearing the backpack, though.

Kestrel dropped down next to him. She, too, carried one of the ultrasonic weapons along with her own assault rifle, and in her case Stone could see the straps of the bulky pack on her shoulders. Unlike Ocelot, though, she didn't look triumphant—she looked worried. She glanced back over her shoulder in fear as the cries of the dragons rose again.

"What *is* that?" Merriwether moaned. She sounded like she couldn't deal with the possibility of anything else bad happening to her today.

"Don't worry about it," Stone said. "Believe it or not, that's our ticket out of here. Come on." He grabbed Hsu's arm, motioning for Kestrel to grab Merriwether. They ran.

There were three jeeps in the parking area, including the one that Stone had stolen the GPS from. He noticed it hadn't been replaced. "Don't take that one," he told the others. "Not unless you replace the GPS first."

Kestrel was already trying one of the others. It started up on the first try. "Our good luck," she said. "Guess they don't want to deal with keys if they have to get out fast." She climbed into the driver's seat. "Hurry up!"

Ocelot paused to shoot out the tires of the third jeep before leaping into the remaining GPS-equipped vehicle and firing it up. Stone practically shoved the two students into the back of Kestrel's car, ordering them to "Stay down!" and then threw himself into the passenger seat of Ocelot's jeep. Almost as soon as he was set Ocelot was off, waiting for Kestrel to pull out in front of him.

"What about Gabriel?" she yelled back over her shoulder, hesitating. None of them could see the two dracoforms now, but everybody could hear them.

"He can take care of himself!" Ocelot yelled back. "He's giving us a chance to get out—let's take it!"

"He's right," Stone called. "He's bigger than the other one. It shouldn't be much of a contest."

Kestrel looked dubious, but she knew they were right about having to get out. She gunned the engine, leveling the ultrasound weapon to take out anything in front of them.

They broke free from the cover of the building and immediately saw five Ares troops bearing down on them, using other buildings as cover. The sound of automatic gunfire filled the air, for a moment covering the sound of the battling dracoforms. "Down!" Ocelot yelled, swerving in wild evasive maneuvers to keep them from the line of fire. Two rounds tore through the windshield, but the armored glass held enough that it didn't shatter. Driving with one hand he swung his assault rifle around and let loose a volley of rounds, none of which hit but all of which served to make the troopers duck back from the onslaught.

Stone, peering through the bottom few centimeters of the jeep's cracked windshield as he crouched in the footwell, got a bead on two of the soldiers and released his spell. They clutched their heads and dropped. "Step on it!" he yelled, fighting drain. "I don't know how many more times I can do that!"

"The gate!" It was Kestrel this time. Like Ocelot, she was driving erratically to present a bad target, but she was looking up ahead. The heavy chain-link gate that separated the complex from the rest of the jungle was closed, and they all knew the whole fence was electrified.

"Shit!" Ocelot snarled. He knew they couldn't just plow through, not without risking electrocution. But if they levitated over they would lose their vehicles, and he doubted the students would make it very far on foot. He glanced quickly over at Stone, hoping the mage had an idea. He—

"Get down!" Kestrel ordered. Then, suddenly, a high-pitched whine split the air, the gate was gone, and the air was full of deadly flying shrapnel. "Yes!" Kestrel whooped, raising the ultrasound gun into the air in exultation as two more of the unsuspecting guards were cut down by pieces of fence moving at high speed. The two jeeps screamed out of the complex and down the barely visible, already overgrown road leading away.

As they plunged into the jungle Stone risked a look back over his shoulder, and thus he was the only one of their group to see the two massive forms—one glittering gold, one rainbow-hued and feathered—locked in combat high above their heads. He wasn't a praying man, but as the vegetation loomed once again and obscured his view, he uttered a short plea to whatever gods that might be listening that he had been right about Gabriel's chances.

He didn't have long to consider his plea, though, for suddenly there was a screeching ahead of them and Ocelot was slamming on the jeep's brakes so hard its back end slewed around and almost caused them to spin out. "What the—?"

And then he saw it. Rising up not ten meters in front of them was what looked like an animated writhing mass of vines and vegetation. It was blocking the road, which at the moment was the least of their worries. It was also coming closer.

Kestrel hadn't had as much warning and her jeep had spun out fully, crashing into the thick growth on one side of the faint road. Her vehicle was on its side, but already she and the two terrified students were crawling free of it and scrambling to use it for cover. "'Hawk—" Ocelot yelled, his tone suggesting the leading edge of fear, "—what the hell *is* that thing?"

"Jungle spirit, most likely," the mage said quickly, feeling his heart thundering in his chest. *Just when we*

thought we were safe – will we ever be safe again? “And a damned big one, too!”

The spirit wasn't idle while they speculated about its nature. Making a deep, primal rumbling sound in the back of whatever passed for its throat, it moved with obscene ease through the tangled mat of vines that made up the jungle floor. It didn't have a face, but it paused for a moment as if peering back and forth between the two groups of potential opponents, gauging which to attack first. Then it struck out with ropy tentacles, snatching up the jeep behind which Kestrel and the students hid and flinging it toward Ocelot and Stone. The two barely ducked out of the way fast enough and the jeep sailed past them to crash into the unseen dimness.

“Where did it *come* from?” Ocelot demanded without taking his eyes off the thing. “You said they didn't have magic.”

“They have a bloody *dragon!*” Stone yelled back indignantly. “*Now* they have magic!”

“Fucking great!” Ocelot was already going for his monowhip. “Can you fight it?”

“A spirit probably summoned by a dragon. Sure. No problem! I do it every day before breakfast!” Stone's sarcastic tone did nothing to hide his growing fear.

The spirit had apparently sensed Stone's magical nature and thus considered him a prime target. With a roar it rose up and flung itself in their direction, tentacles waving.

“Get down!” came a voice from behind them: Kestrel's. Ocelot barely got a glance at her leaping to the top of the overturned jeep and bringing the ultrasonic gun around before the spirit was blocking his view again. “Let's see what he thinks of a snootful of *this!*” she called savagely.

Ocelot dived at Stone, dragging them both down and to the side as the spirit lunged past. He expected to see the thing explode in a hail of tossed salad any second now, just as soon as Kestrel could —

Nothing happened. The spirit swung back toward them, unharmed, whipping its tentacles in a most malevolent fashion.

“Damn this piece of junk!” Kestrel screamed. She ripped the backpack from her back and flung it aside along with the Ares weapon, drawing her assault rifle in its place.

Ocelot didn’t ask what had gone wrong. There wasn’t time. Instead he leaped from behind cover and slashed at the huge spirit with his monowhip, and was rewarded by a wet scream as several of the lashing tentacles were sliced free. “Eat that, asshole!” he yelled. “Hawk—little help here!”

Stone was already in action. He had backed off a bit and was now making his way back over to where Merriwether and Hsu crouched behind trees on the other side of the road. Kestrel had her assault rifle on full auto mode and was spraying the spirit to little avail: the thing was just too strong to be much affected by even powerful firearms. Ocelot had a better chance with the monowhip. “Hsu! Merriwether! Are you with me?” Stone called.

They both looked at him with eyes that were still full of terror, but they were clearer now than they had been. The drugs were wearing off at last. “What—?” Hsu stammered. Behind Stone, the spirit screamed again as Ocelot lopped off another of its many limbs, and then there was a grunt of pain as it connected with one of its own attacks.

Stone didn’t have time to mollycoddle the students. “Hsu! Hit it with a stun spell! Now!” he barked. “Merriwether—you’re with me! Astral!”

He didn't wait to see if they would respond, but instead flung himself against the far side of a heavy tree and launched his consciousness into the astral. Yes, it was dangerous, but right now the spirit was more dangerous. The transition was wrenching—he knew his fading strength wasn't going to hold for much longer and he was running on the astral equivalent of adrenaline. *I hope Gabriel takes care of him before he sends any more of the damned things after us – I've got my doubts we can handle this one.*

After a second of disorientation he spun around to face the spirit. The thing was huge and alive and potent—he could see by the areas leaking glowing life-force that Ocelot had hurt it with his monowhip, but he hadn't slowed it down enough. Immediately it lost interest in the mundane hacking away at it and turned to face the bright pulsing form of Stone's astral body. Stone began forming the beginnings of a banishing, hoping he'd have the power to do it. At best he could keep it occupied while Ocelot continued to assault it back on the material plane. *Where the hell is Merriwether?*

And then she was there next to him. Her astral form looked like some kind of archetypal earth-mother in a flowing gown and long braided hair held in place by a circlet of flowers. She glowed with the brightness of someone who had not had cybernetic enhancement, but her aura was dulled from the drugs and flaring from fear. "Dr. Stone—"

Stone spoke through gritted teeth, fighting to keep his concentration focused on the patterns he was forming. "Keep an eye on the area," he ordered. "If anything attacks—deal with it."

"How am I supposed to—?"

"I don't *care*, Merriwether!" His voice came out harsher than he wanted—the pattern had almost slipped

when he had to duck out of the way of one of the spirit's wayward attacks. "Just do it!"

Her aura flared indignation for a moment, but then she got a good look at him and she nodded. "Okay—I'm here. You do what you have to do."

Thus assured (but not terribly *reassured*), Stone promptly ignored Merriwether and returned all of his concentration to the task at hand. He knew he didn't have a prayer of banishing this spirit—it was simply too powerful. At the height of physical condition and magical power he might have had a chance. Now, injured, exhausted, and drained, he knew the best he could hope for was to distract it, to deflect its attacks and keep it occupied long enough for Ocelot to take it out by mundane means. He hoped Hsu could do something—even a stun spell would be useful if the student could get it through the spirit's defenses. And Kestrel—she must have a hand weapon somewhere. The woman bristled with as many deadly toys as Ocelot did. If only—

The spirit swayed as something hit it. "Yes!" Stone grinned to himself as he realized it was a spell: Hsu had come through after all!

It wasn't enough, though. Hsu's spell had helped but the student simply didn't have enough magical punch to do significant damage to something this big and powerful. The spirit shrugged off the attack, shook its tentacles in a most disgustingly humanlike fashion, then waded forward again toward Stone.

That was it: at that moment he decided to risk an offensive spell of his own. The more he could reduce its power, the easier it would be for Ocelot to deal with it back on the material. He drew back, gathered energies, and let loose with one of his most powerful magical attacks.

It hit, but he barely saw it. His vision exploded with bright pinpoints of light, his head swimming with sudden gray clouds dancing in his brain. He heard the scream and saw vague glimpses of something flaring around the spirit, and then he was falling. *This is it, then –*

Something—somebody—caught him as he fell backward. “I’ve got you, Dr. Stone!” came a breathless, frightened but nonetheless resolute voice. Merriwether.

He struggled to get back to his feet. “I’m all right –” His voice came out slurred and muddy. “I—we have to –”

There was another scream, this one louder than any of the previous ones. Stone’s head snapped up almost involuntarily, and he could feel Merriwether stiffen in fear—but the spirit wasn’t going after them. If anything, it seemed smaller, its tentacles flinging around, writhing, reaching for anything it could grab. Stone felt Merriwether’s strong hands dragging him back out of its reach. “Let’s go back,” she urged. “It’s smaller—it’s dying –”

“Go,” Stone urged her. “I’ll follow –”

She winked out. A moment later, so did he. They didn’t get to see the spirit flare up in a final death-throe as Ocelot dealt it a final blow with his monowhip and sent it back to whatever metaplane from which it had originated.

The moment his consciousness slammed back into his body, Stone wished he had remained astral. His head pounded, throbbing like someone was hitting it with a sledgehammer. His vision hadn’t cleared, and he first felt and then tasted blood trickling from his nostrils. The drain from all the spellcasting had finally caught up with him. He blinked, disoriented.

“Hawk!” Somebody was hauling him up—no, *two* somebodies, one on each side. Ocelot and Merriwether.

“Come on—we have to get out before that thing sends another spirit after us!”

He felt himself dragged over and dumped into the back of the remaining jeep. Kestrel leaped into the driver’s seat and the students scrambled in next to Stone. For a moment Ocelot wasn’t visible—he’d run off into the jungle. Stone was about to say something when he returned, carrying something heavy in his arms as he ran. He dropped it into the back of the jeep next to Stone and the two students, who could then see what it was: a spare battery pack for the vehicle, no doubt salvaged from its unfortunate counterpart.

“Go!” Ocelot yelled, swinging himself into the passenger seat. As he did, Stone got a good look at him: his shirt was ripped and there was a bloody welt across his chest and arm. Stone, running on autopilot mode now, struggled to get forward toward his teammate, but someone shoved him gently back down.

It was Merriwether. “Stay there, Dr. Stone,” she told him firmly. She seemed a lot more in control of herself now than she had been. “I’ll help him. You rest.”

He nodded, only too happy to comply. Settling back against the back of Kestrel’s seat, he closed his eyes. If he could just rest for a few minutes while they got out—

He didn’t even feel himself slipping away as the swirling gray mists finally took him.

24.

When Stone came to, they were still moving, but slowly. Overhead the canopy of vines and jungle flora crawled by, making it look like the jeep was jouncing its way through a long green-clad tunnel. He raised his head a little, pleased that the headache seemed to have downgraded itself from 'sledgehammer' to 'several small animals tapdancing, and not quite in unison.' Still unpleasant, but not enough to render him nonfunctional. "What—?" he began.

Ocelot turned in his seat. "Ah, you're back. You okay?" He carried an assault rifle cradled in his lap, pointing outward, but didn't seem to have more than his usual level of tenseness. The portable GPS unit had been restored to its place in the jeep's dash.

Stone nodded. "I will be," he rasped. He looked around: Kestrel was still concentrating on driving, and Hsu and Merriwether sat silently in the back with him, watching the scenery. "Where are we?"

"Almost there," Kestrel told him. "Maybe another half-hour or so back to where we left the others." She sounded distracted.

Stone immediately knew why. "What about Gabriel?" he asked hesitantly.

"We haven't seen him since—back at the installation," Ocelot said before Kestrel could answer. "We figure he's waiting for us at the river."

Kestrel tensed, and Stone could see she didn't believe that at all, but she said nothing. He turned to the students. "Nice job back there," he told them, and meant it. "I doubt we could have handled that thing without your help."

Hsu nodded slowly. He still looked shellshocked by the whole business. "Glad — we could do it. But I do hope we don't have to fight another of those things."

"Me too," Merriwether said. "I've never seen a spirit that big." Her eyes got wise as she made a connection. "That — back there — that was a dragon, wasn't it?"

Stone nodded. "Feathered serpent, actually," he corrected. "South American variant."

She let her breath out slowly. "And your friend — Gabriel — do you think he was able to fight it?"

"It ain't after us, is it?" Ocelot said from the front. "I'd say if it had taken Gabriel out, it would be after us next. That didn't happen."

Hsu shook his head in amazement. "You said he was a good mage, but — one guy taking on a dragon? I don't know..."

"He can handle it," Kestrel said, her tone a little dull. "At least — I hope he can."

"I don't understand," Merriwether said. "What was a dra — a feathered serpent doing there? If we were in his territory, wouldn't he have come after us a lot sooner?"

"Wanna know my guess?" Ocelot said.

"Go right ahead," Stone said, settling back again. He still didn't feel up to sitting upright.

"I think it's behind that installation."

Hsu's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"

"Think about it," Ocelot said. "Here's a secret testing facility out in the middle of the Amazonian jungle. They couldn't just build it out here without somebody finding out, which meant they had to have permission. Maybe the wizworm was bankrolling the operation."

"But why?" Stone asked. "What would a feathered serpent want with an experimental ultrasonic gun? Well, aside from the monetary gain, of course. We can't discount that."

"I wonder..." Kestrel mused. When everybody turned to look at her, she went on as if talking to herself: "I wonder if this doesn't have something to do with the civil uprisings in the Yucatan."

"You mean...the serpent's financing weapons that can be used by the rebels?" Ocelot asked.

"Or the Azzies," Kestrel said, nodding. "Who knows which side it's on."

"But if it was Aztlan, wouldn't we have found an Aztechnology facility out here?" Stone asked.

"Who knows?" Kestrel said. "Corporate politics makes for some pretty strange bedfellows. We'll probably never know for sure."

"That's okay with me," Hsu said. "I don't care, as long as we get out of here alive."

Apparently nothing wanted to mess with something as large as the jeep, because although they saw numerous snakes, birds, and a few things even larger, none of these approached them as they continued to pick their slow way through the jungle. Everyone settled back to rest and consider his or her own thoughts until at last Kestrel glanced over at the GPS. "We're close. I think I caught a glimpse of the river up there through the trees."

"Do you remember where we left the rest of the group?" Stone asked, looking around.

"Should be right—" Kestrel pointed off to the left, cutting off as someone rose from behind a tree. Her hand went to her gun, but she lowered it (as did Ocelot) when they saw that it was Kevin Frasier.

Then they were surrounded: Frasier, Kane, and Dr. Whittaker all emerged from their cover and hurried over. "You made it!" Frasier cried, grinning as he saw that the two prisoners were with them, alive, and seemingly as well as could be expected. "You did it!"

Whittaker, forgetting propriety and his usual reserve, pulled first Merriwether, then Hsu into a bear hug. "Oh, thank God," he moaned. "Now we can get out of here, go home—"

"Where's your friend?" Frasier asked suddenly. "Gabriel?" He looked around, expecting to see him approaching in another jeep.

"He's not with you?" Ocelot demanded, also looking around in a similar fashion, except this time at the area where the group had been hiding.

Kane shook her head. "We haven't seen him since you all left. Did you get separated?"

Kestrel nodded slowly. "Yeah. We—got separated." With a bleak look she turned her gaze back in the direction from which they had come. "Ocelot, do you think he—"

"I think he's fine." Ocelot's voice was firm. "Let's just wait and see for awhile, okay?"

The others were talking among themselves, and in a moment Whittaker's voice rose in astonished terror: "*A dragon?*"

"Don't worry about it, Prof," Ocelot told him. "It was handled."

"*Maybe* it was handled," Hsu muttered. "I know you have confidence in your friend, but do you really think he could fight a dragon?"

"Damn straight I do," Kestrel growled.

Whittaker took a deep breath. "I—uh—do hate to say this, but—well—how long are we going to wait? What if—well—" His words dropped off in uncertainty.

"What if he doesn't come back?" Ocelot finished for him.

"He's coming back," Kestrel insisted, glaring at Whittaker. "And we're going to wait for him. If he doesn't

come back by tomorrow morning, I'm going back after him."

"Kestrel—" Ocelot began.

"Don't even start, Ocelot!" She redirected her glare on him with the speed of a snake. "There's no way I'm going to leave here without knowing what happened to him. You and the rest of the group can go back, but I'm not."

Stone moved unsteadily over to them. "Kestrel, Ocelot, please—let's not get into it now, after all we've been through. I don't think it will hurt for us to remain here for awhile waiting for Gabriel's return. It's unlikely the remainder of the force from the installation will come after us this far, and we've proven we can handle ourselves out here. But at some point we're going to have to make a decision."

Kestrel nodded. "Yeah..." she mumbled. "I know. But not yet, okay? Not yet..."

Whittaker didn't seem to care for the idea of remaining there any longer than necessary, but it was equally clear that his rescuers weren't inclined to leave one of their number behind, and the students were firmly in the rescuers' camp. Keeping a close eye on the river and anything that might be approaching from that direction, they settled down to wait. In truth, many of them (particularly those who had been on the expedition to rescue the prisoners, and the prisoners themselves) were grateful for the opportunity to rest for awhile. Stone went down to the river and washed the blood from his face, then fashioned a pillow out of a pack he borrowed from Kestrel and lay down against a tree, letting himself relax voluntarily for the first time in days. The small animals had almost finished their tap-dance number, which was a relief. Aside from bone-numbing exhaustion, he was beginning to feel vaguely human again.

Two hours passed. The temperature rose along with the humidity, and spells of brief rain soaked them to the skins. Ocelot pulled out his comm unit and tried to get a signal, but they were too far away from civilization, and besides, the battery was all but dead. One by one the others showed signs of restlessness, pacing around the riverbank and trying to find things to keep them occupied. Finally Kane sighed, but said nothing.

"You want to go home, don't you, Ms. Kane?" Stone asked gently, coming up behind her and looking out over the river.

"Of course I do," she said. "Don't we all? But I know we can't leave somebody behind. I just wish we knew something." She paused, then turned to look at him. "Dr. Stone, did he have a chance? Was it really a dragon? Because if it was, don't we have to face the fact that maybe—" She trailed off.

"It was really a dragon," he told her. "A dracoform, at any rate. And you'll just have to believe me when I tell you that I'm confident that Gabriel was able to deal with it. I can't say more than that, but I know what I'm talking about."

"He does," Frasier said, approaching from the other side. He grinned a little at Stone. "I've learned that over the last few days—he might sound like he's barking mad, but he hasn't steered us wrong yet."

"Thank you for that vote of confidence, Mr. Frasier," Stone said dryly.

Kane sighed. "I do hope you're right," she said, moving off. "We've lost so many already..."

When she was gone, Frasier stood next to Stone and looked at the river. "He's more than he seems too, isn't he?" he asked suddenly.

"Who?"

"Your friend. Gabriel."

Stone shrugged. "Aren't we all? I think we've learned that on this little trip, if nothing else."

Frasier was about to answer when there was a rustling in the trees behind them. Immediately everyone was on the alert: Ocelot and Kestrel readied their guns while everyone else stood at stiff readiness and waited.

The trees parted and a figure emerged. It was Gabriel. He looked around at everyone staring in astonishment back at him and smiled a little. "Sorry I'm late," he said. "Did I miss anything?"

25.

Everyone continued to stare at Gabriel in stunned silence for several seconds. Kestrel, especially, drank in the sight of him. She ran over and caught him up in a hard hug. "Gabriel!"

He looked pale and tired under the smile, his face streaked with grime, his hair disheveled. Looking him over, though, Kestrel didn't see any indication of injury. Nothing physical, anyway.

Now clustered around them, everybody was talking at once: "What happened?" "Where's the dragon?" "Are we safe?" "Can we go home now?"

Gabriel didn't answer any of the questions, but just stood and waited for them all to run their course. When it was quiet again, he said softly, "Let's go home. Everything is fine now."

Whittaker and the students obviously weren't pleased by the lack of information, but the thought of the last hurdle to their going home being finally cleared spurred them to excited action. They hurried to load up the jeep, and the others set about helping them. Everyone moved with more energy than they thought they had left—they were going home!

Before long they were loaded up and begun on their slow way along the river bank—slower than usual because the vehicle now carried nine people and their gear, a fact which seriously compromised even its previous slow speed through the thick vegetation. Nobody said much—Gabriel, especially, seemed even more reticent than usual. He did not appear to notice (or at least to acknowledge) the glances the others were casting his way; his thousand-meter gaze suggested that while his body was present in the jeep, his mind was far away. Everyone seemed content to sit or lie back, watch

the mesmerizing greenery trundle past, and wait for it to be over.

It was after about two hours of driving along the riverbank thusly (they'd had to stop and switch to the second battery pack Ocelot had brought along about halfway through the trip) that Frasier spotted the first indication of movement up ahead on the water. "Look!" he said, pointing. "Is that a boat?"

The others scrambled for a look, and Kestrel took a pair of binoculars from her pack for a better view. "It is!" she called, excited. "Looks like fishermen—maybe they've got a working radio on that thing!"

Ocelot wasn't so trusting. "You sure they're fishermen?" he asked, reaching for the binocs. He had stiffened and gripped his gun in anticipation.

"Whoever they are, they mean us no harm," came a murmur from the back of the jeep. It was Gabriel—by this time everyone had almost forgotten about him, thinking he was asleep.

That was good enough for Kestrel. She gunned the jeep's protesting engine to greater speed, hurrying down the bank in anticipation of meeting up with the first sign of civilization many of them had seen in days.

From his place in the rear of the jeep next to Gabriel, Alastair Stone smiled a very tired smile, half satisfaction, half resignation. "About time," he mumbled. "Right now I could spend about eight hours in a nice hot bath." It was only after thoughts of all they had lost in these past few days resurfaced in his mind that the smile faded. They might be back to the real world soon, but it wasn't over yet. That much he knew.

"Is he dead?" Kestrel asked softly. "Did he—hurt you? Is that why it took so long?"

It was almost twelve hours later, and they were in Trujillo, Peru. The last few hours had been a whirlwind of activity: the people on the boat had indeed been fishermen and had indeed had a working radio, which meant that the crash victims and their rescuers had paid them handsomely to permit them to broadcast their plight and their location on a large number of frequencies (in case the Ares forces were still attempting to squelch the whole thing). Apparently Ares had given up at this point, however, because shortly after that they were met by a much larger boat containing a contingent of public safety officials, medical personnel, and other similar types. The group had been whisked off and taken quickly to Trujillo, where those who needed medical attention were conveyed to the hospital (Stone had refused to go) and the rest of them were installed in the nicest rooms the local first-class hotel had to offer. After that they had been besieged by reporters, first of the local variety and then, as some hours passed and news reached the rest of the world, more persistent types from some of the larger international publications. Ocelot, Kestrel, Stone, and Gabriel had retreated to Kestrel's suite and locked the door to avoid them, and this was the first chance they had had to speak privately in hours. They did so now over a myriad of delicious-looking dishes representing the best the hotel had to offer: apparently its staff felt it was an honor to be hosting such a group (and the additional revenue provided by all the reporters didn't hurt either). Some among the group had worried for awhile that Ares and those in their employ would make an attempt to pick them and the vulnerable University students off one by one, but that didn't materialize—apparently the harsh spotlight shining on the situation had convinced them to cut their losses and get out while they could.

"What?" Gabriel's gaze switched back on and locked on Kestrel—he had been mostly in his own world since they had boarded the second boat. He replayed what she had said and shook his head slowly. "No. He's not dead."

Ocelot stared at him. "You let him live? Or—he didn't win, did he?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No, he didn't win. Truly he didn't have a chance, not without allies. Adult feathered serpents are nowhere near the size of great western dragons, and the magical disparity was—" He shrugged. "He was a formidable opponent, but the battle did not last long before he acknowledged defeat. There was no need to kill him."

"Then—" Stone began, pausing to savor a sip of wine. He looked and felt much more human now after a long shower, a shave, and a fresh set of clothes. "—what took you so long to get back to us?"

"We had a lot to discuss," Gabriel said.

"You and the serpent?" Ocelot asked. "You kicked his ass and then you sat down to *talk*?"

Gabriel's expression suggested that, despite the fact that he often wore the guise of one, he would never truly understand humans. "Of course," he said simply.

"What did you talk about?" Kestrel asked.

Gabriel shrugged. "What he was doing, why he was doing it—and the fact that he will no longer be doing it. I believe that Hualpa will see to that, but I am not concerned. He has given me his word that he will no longer support the Ares project."

"Who is he?" Stone asked. "Is he someone you—know?"

"No, we have never met before this. His name is Dzitbalchén."

"That's a mouthful," Ocelot muttered.

"So what did he tell you?" Kestrel asked curiously, again.

"I don't think it's wise to talk about it here," Gabriel said, looking around. "Not with all the—outside influences—around."

"You think the press might be trying to eavesdrop?" Stone asked, looking around a little nervously.

"That's true—I wouldn't put it past them," Kestrel said, nodding. "They've been trying to talk to us all day. We're going to have to give them a statement just to shut them up."

"I don't want to be news," Stone said. "Right now, all I want is to get out of this godforsaken place and go home." He shook his head as if clearing it. "I'm not looking forward to the explaining I'm going to have to do when I get there, but at least it will be familiar."

Ocelot started to reply when his phone, which he had recharged in the room, suddenly went off in his pocket. He looked perplexed for a moment, then answered it. "Yeah?" He listened for a few seconds, then grinned and held it out to Stone. "It's for you."

Stone looked ever more perplexed than Ocelot, but he took the phone. "Yes? This is Alastair Stone." A pause, and then he too grinned. "Aubrey! Yes, indeed, it's good to hear your voice too." He listened a little longer, rolling his eyes in amusement at his friends. "Yes, Aubrey. Yes. I'll tell him. No—I'm sorry we didn't call sooner. It's been a bit chaotic down here....Yes, all right. Tell him I'll call him when I get back. We should be leaving here tomorrow, so I'll be back then." Another pause, and then his tone sobered. "Yes, that's quite true...No, I don't know yet. I'll have to come up with something, I know...Yes. Listen, Aubrey—I need to be going now, frightfully busy—I'll talk to you tomorrow. Will you pick me up at the airport?" He smiled. "Yes, but I had to ask.

Goodbye, Aubrey – what? Oh, right. I'll tell him that too." He closed the phone slowly and returned it to Ocelot. "He says to tell you he's angry with you for not letting him know sooner that we were safe – and that he doesn't have words for how grateful he is for what you've done." He looked at each of them in turn, his eyes glittering with sudden emotion. When he spoke again his voice was husky. "He's right, you know. I can't even begin to express my gratitude to all of you."

Ocelot smiled. "Hey, it was your watcher that found us. If you hadn't done that, we'd never have known."

"Perhaps so," Stone said, "but without your intervention –"

Gabriel leaned back in his chair. "Don't speak of it. It's over now, and although it didn't end as well as we might have hoped, I think it ended as well as can be expected."

Stone nodded soberly, and didn't speak. He was thinking of Ram Prakesh, of Santiago and Corazon, of the nameless pilots who had died so all of them might live, of the remaining students and Whittaker, many of whom would probably suffer from nightmares for years to come, even if they didn't need therapy to deal with what had happened. It was a lot to think about.

"I don't know about the rest of you, but I could do with a stiff drink or three," Ocelot said in an attempt to break the suddenly somber mood.

Everyone allowed that that was a good idea indeed. Kestrel located the room's bar and together they set about making the idea a reality.

Late that night, after the reporters had left, Kestrel found Ocelot leaning on one of the railings of the walkway out in front of the hotel, looking out over the plaza in front. She hadn't expected to find him here – she'd spontaneously decided to go out for a little walk

and spotted him as she exited the hotel. "Hi," she said, coming up beside him.

He turned to her, then back to his gazings. "Hi."

"What are you doing out here?"

Ocelot shrugged. "I was getting cabin fever back there in that damned room. I figured if anybody tried to get me to make a statement, I'd just have to pop him one and get on with it."

She smiled. "You didn't pop anybody, did you?"

"Nah. Haven't even seen any of 'em lately. They probably thought we all went to bed and went off to get drunk somewhere." He looked around. "Where's Gabriel? I know 'Hawk's dead to the world, and probably will be until morning."

"He went off somewhere by himself. He said he'd be back in awhile. I didn't ask him where he went."

"Probably best not to know."

She nodded, leaning on the railing next to him. Several minutes of silence passed before she spoke again. "So—" she said hesitantly.

Ocelot didn't answer, but neither did he make any indication that he didn't want her to continue.

Thus emboldened, she continued: "Uh—" Taking a deep breath, she spit it out in one unbroken sentence: "Have you given any more thought to what Gabriel and I asked you about?" It seemed to her like that had been a million years ago, not just a few days.

Again there was a long pause. Kestrel was beginning to think that he wasn't going to answer when he finally spoke. "Yeah."

She didn't let herself breathe this time. "And —?"

He wasn't looking at her. "Yeah. I'll do it."

For a moment she didn't believe she'd heard it right. "You — will?"

Now he did turn to her. "Come on, Kestrel. You knew it all along, didn't you?"

She shook her head in surprise. "No—I guess I didn't."

Ocelot sighed. "Well, you should have."

"I—" She turned to face him. "What changed your mind? I mean—before you said you weren't sure."

"I'm still not sure. But—" He shrugged. "What else can I do? It's not like I'm putting myself in danger if I do it."

She smiled a little, mostly in her eyes. "That's it, isn't it? You're afraid if you don't do it, I'll be in danger."

Ocelot didn't answer that. "We'll still have to convince Harry, you know. That won't be easy. And Gabriel can't charm him into it, either. It'll have to be us."

"I think we can manage it," she murmured. She moved a little closer to him, until their arms were almost touching. Slowly, hesitantly, she leaned her head over until it was resting on his shoulder. "Thanks..." she whispered.

"Yeah," he said. His tone was gruff but he made no attempt to move away from her. "Don't say I never gave you anything."

Epilogue 1

Several days later, it was raining in London.

Alastair Stone made his way slowly down the hallway toward Rodney Leifeld's office. It wasn't far, but he was in no hurry to reach his destination. His footsteps echoed in the silent hall — it was a Saturday afternoon, and no one else was here. The Thaumaturgy building was eerily quiet, as if it were holding its breath in anticipation of something but not quite sure what.

Leifeld was waiting for him. It wasn't the first time they'd seen each other since Stone had returned from Amazonia, but it was the first chance they'd had to talk outside the harsh glare of the spotlight. "Rodney," he said quietly.

"Alastair. Come in." Leifeld stepped aside and ushered Stone into his inner office, motioning for him to sit down in one of the chairs facing the desk. Stone noticed that his old friend seemed to have a few more lines in his face, a little darker circles under his normally cheerful eyes. "Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

Stone shook his head, lowering himself heavily into the chair nearest the door. He was still tired — even several days' good sleep hadn't yet erased his ordeal completely. "How are you, Rodney?"

"I should be asking you that." Leifeld settled into his own chair, leaning back with a sigh. "How are you feeling?"

Stone shrugged. "As well as can be expected," he said.

"Your friends got home all right?"

"Yes. I've heard from them. They're — fine." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, meeting his friend's eyes. "You've had a time of it, I'll imagine."

Leifeld didn't insult Stone by attempting to deny it. "Ram Prakesh's family are considering bringing suit

against the University, but I doubt they'll follow through with it."

Stone lowered his head. "I wouldn't blame them if they did."

"It's nothing you need worry about—they're focusing on the plane, claiming it was unsafe and not properly inspected. From what I hear, Alastair, you're coming out as quite the hero. Frasier practically fell over himself praising your performance out there."

"I'm no hero." Stone didn't raise his head. "I did what everyone else there did—what was necessary to survive. You can't call a strong instinct for self-preservation heroism. If you want to call anyone heroes, save it for my friends, or for Frasier for dragging my sorry arse through the jungle after I got myself shot. I wouldn't be here talking to you if it weren't for them."

Leifeld nodded slowly. "Yes, I've heard that too—but I'm not going to let you run yourself down over this. It wasn't just Frasier—all of them said the same thing, Whittaker included. Especially after the real trouble started." He glanced up. "I've always suspected there's more to you than meets the eye, my friend. The students are speculating about you, you know."

"And you?" Now Stone did look up, his gaze settling on Leifeld in challenge.

The older man shrugged. "It's your business, Alastair. I know you've got some cyberware and I know you go off to America for some purpose you won't discuss. But as far as I'm concerned, you're one of the best professors I've got here, and I think it best if I don't pry too deeply. I can't guarantee that the students will give you the same courtesy, though."

"I can handle the students." Stone's voice was tired. "Once I get back to work the memories will fade. At least I hope they will. I don't want to be some kind of celebrity,

especially not for something like this. It was an altogether unpleasant time, and I've already attended one funeral too many. I'd rather just forget about the whole thing."

Leifeld nodded. "Do you mind if I ask you to clarify a couple of points I don't yet understand before you forget it?"

Stone made a 'go ahead' gesture.

"This—installation—in the jungle. They were testing experimental weapons, yes?"

Stone nodded. "Portable ultrasonic energy projectors."

"Nasty things."

"Quite. Although I've since spoken with one of my friends who has a knack for finding out things that aren't easy to find out, and he says some deckers of his acquaintance have managed to discover that the company has decided to scrap the program—not just because of our activities, but because they came to the conclusion that the weapons weren't robust enough to be useful under adverse conditions. Apparently they were easy to knock out of alignment when jostled about too much, or even used for too long, and once they were misaligned their performance was unpredictable." Stone smiled a little to himself. Gabriel had shared that bit of information with him and the others a couple of days after they'd all returned home. Stone had been quite pleased to hear that in all likelihood he and his team wouldn't be facing these horrific weapons on some upcoming run—at least not for awhile.

Leifeld was nodding along with Stone's explanation. "And there really was a dracoform—a feathered serpent—behind the whole thing? That wasn't just something the press made up to sell more datafaxes?"

Stone shook his head. "No, I saw him with my own eyes. I've forgotten what Gabriel said his name was—

Dzit-something I can't pronounce." He smiled, but it wasn't a pleasant smile. "Along with that last bit of information I just told you, he discovered something else as well – apparently the biggest reason, aside from human guinea pigs, that the project was so hush-hush was that it was a joint venture between Ares and none other than Aztechnology. Dzit-whatever works for the Azzies, and he was bankrolling Ares' research in hopes of their coming up with a weapon they could use against the rebels in the Yucatán. The odd part was, as nearly as Gabriel's deckers could find out, only parts of Aztechnology knew about the existence of the installation. It was a pet project of one of the higher-ups along with our feathered friend. It's all being scrapped now, and a few heads have rolled, or so I hear."

"I see." Leifeld smiled a tired smile. "You know, you've always had a reputation for being the chap to make a situation interesting. I suppose this is no change."

"I wonder if I wouldn't just like to take a long holiday from being 'interesting'," Stone muttered. "I'm getting too old for it, I think."

Leifeld shook his head. "I don't think so. I think you're just tired right now and need a nice long rest." His gaze sharpened. "You don't think any of this is your fault, do you?"

Stone sighed. "No. Not on an intellectual level. But on a purely emotional level I can't help but think these things tend to follow me around. If I hadn't gone along –"

"That's bollocks." Leifeld's tone was gentle but insistent. "You know it as well as I do. If you hadn't gone we'd probably have had to scrap the trip."

"And that would have been so bad?" Stone said bitterly. "If we'd scrapped it, Prakesh and the rest would still be alive. I hear Hsu's withdrawn from the University. Is that right?"

Leifeld nodded reluctantly. "It's only a leave of absence, he says."

"Yes, and I'll believe that when I see him back in my classes. I shan't hold my breath."

"Nor shall I," Leifeld said with a sigh. "But you can't blame yourself for it, Alastair. You were probably the reason I'm signing his withdrawal papers instead of attending his funeral." He paused, then got up and came around the desk, putting a fatherly hand on Stone's shoulder. "Listen to me, Alastair. It was a bad situation, and you handled it as well as anyone could be expected to handle it. As far as I'm concerned, you're a hero—but if you want to just try to forget it and move on, I'll support that as well. I'll support whatever you want to do. Want to take a leave of absence as well?"

"No!" The sharp word came almost involuntarily as Stone twisted around to look up at Leifeld. He shook his head. "No...That's the last thing I want to do. But I think if it's all the same to you, I'd rather just stay 'round here for awhile. No more field trips in the foreseeable future. Paperwork and a few fluff classes are sounding like just the thing."

"I think we can arrange that," Leifeld said, patting his shoulder. "Just the thing, indeed."

After leaving Leifeld's office, Stone dawdled back down the corridors of the Thaumaturgy building. He took the stairs instead of the elevator, wanting the exercise but not sure why. He smiled a little as he thought of Rodney—the head of the Department of Thaumaturgy had been more like a father to him than his own father since he had been a skinny fifteen-year-old overachiever contemplating his future career. He wondered if Rodney had had any inkling that he would turn out like he had, and doubted it.

He hadn't told Leifeld everything, of course. In fact, his own mind was still reeling a little from the piece of information Kestrel, Ocelot, and Gabriel had dropped on him as they got together for a final drink before going their separate ways. He supposed he must have looked quite undignified as he'd goggled at them in frank amazement when they told him. He hadn't even suspected that dragons and humans could –

He smiled, wondering if Kestrel and Gabriel had gone off to Gabriel's lair yet to prepare for the blessed event. He wondered too if Ocelot was doing all right. Because he was an objective (well, reasonably objective, anyway) observer, he probably had a better idea of the strange interpersonal dynamics between those three than any of the three themselves did, but he stayed carefully out of it because none of it was any of his business. He felt honored that they would share their secret with him – even though he had overheard part of it, it would have been easy enough to let him go on believing that it was Kestrel and Ocelot.

He reached the ground floor and went out through the imposing front doors of the Thaumaturgy building, pausing to draw on his overcoat and put up his umbrella. It was shaping up to be quite a storm. *Aubrey will have a fire going, and a nice cup of hot tea sounds like just what the doctor ordered.*

He almost didn't see the figure waiting for him at the foot of the steps, not until he was almost upon him. "Hello, Dr. Stone."

Stone was startled. "Frasier! What are you doing here?"

Kevin Frasier lounged against the building's wall under a brief overhang, the collar of his coat pulled up against the rain. He wore no hat and carried no umbrella. "Was walking by the building and saw your car."

Stone nodded, continuing toward the car park and motioning for Frasier to come along. The student fell into step next to him. "What can I do for you, Frasier? I still owe you a drink—I think the whole bloody pub is more like it."

Frasier waved him off. "I told you—don't worry about it. I think everything sort of evened out by the time we were done, anyway. I guess I just wanted to see if you were doing all right."

Stone looked at him oddly. "Why wouldn't I be? I mean—any more so than the rest of you."

Frasier didn't answer.

Af ter a moment, Stone glanced at him again. "That's not really why you stopped by here, is it?"

"A little," Frasier admitted.

"And the rest?"

Again a long pause. "You know I'm set to finish my Master's this year, right?"

Stone nodded. He'd looked up the academic records of the students before the trip, though most of the information had slipped his mind in the subsequent days.

"Remember I said I thought I might like to go into magical security?"

Again Stone nodded, wondering what Frasier was getting at and afraid he already knew.

Frasier took a deep breath. "Well—" He jammed his hands in his pockets and trudged doggedly onward. "I thought—perhaps—you might be able to give me a recommendation or two."

Stone stopped. He was about to ask why Frasier would make this request of him instead of his own Parazology professors, but then he understood. "You—" he said slowly, "—want...*my* sort of recommendation."

Frasier nodded, looking at him with a challenging gaze. "That's exactly what I want. I learned some things

about myself on that trip. One of them is that I don't want to go back to a dull life of cataloging specimens and feeding devil rats."

Now it was Stone's turn to pause. The two of them walked along in silence for several moments, the rain pattering on Stone's umbrella. Finally, he spoke: "You know what you're asking, I trust?"

"I think so."

He smiled a little, with a small, harsh chuckle. "Tell you what, Frasier—you finish your Master's, then come talk to me. I think I might be able to find you something that's to your liking."

Frasier grinned. "Thanks, Dr. Stone. I thought you might." He stopped. "Well, here's your car so I should let you go. You'll be back, right?"

Stone's sigh was rueful as he looked back over his shoulder at the buildings of London University, the place that had been his life for so many years. "Try to keep me away, Mr. Frasier."

Epilogue 2

It was the sort of beautiful day that is rarely found outside areas where few people ever get to see them. The only thing marring the silence of the pristine, cloudless blue sky was the faint *chup-chup-chup* of helicopter blades as the small craft approached its landing spot.

Inside, the two occupants of the passenger compartment paid no attention to the pilot, who was going about his business with discreet efficiency. They sat in companionable quiet, looking out their respective windows at the grandeur of the mountain scene spread out below them.

"So," said Alastair Stone at last, "Are you ready for this?"

"No," said Ocelot without looking at him. After a moment, he added, "But I'm not ready to miss it, either."

Stone nodded and subsided back into silence for awhile, gazing back out the window. "Have you talked to them since—?"

Ocelot shook his head. "No. She sent me a couple of messages through encrypted sources—probably Gabriel's deckers had something to do with it. But nothing other than that. Not until—"

Stone nodded again. He too had gotten the invitation two days ago—cryptic enough that any prying eyes wouldn't be able to make sense of it, but clear enough that he himself had no trouble figuring out its purpose.

It was time, and they were invited to be part of the event.

With one exception, it was the first time he and Ocelot had seen each other in eight months when they met there at the tiny airport where the small, state-of-the-art 'copter was waiting to whisk them off to the a place deep within the Algonkian-Manitou lands. They had looked each

other over like a couple of cats, neither quite sure what to say to the other. It hadn't been long, though, before their old ways had taken over once again and they were hashing over the past few months like they hadn't been apart. Stone had noticed immediately that Ocelot seemed more on edge than usual, but he knew the reason why and didn't bring it up. He was well aware of how hard this was for his friend.

A lot had changed in eight months. The eerie dreams had finally faded to rare vestigial mini-nightmares that barely fazed him any longer. He had thrown himself into his work, taking on almost the courseload of a full-time University professor but remaining firmly in his comfortable world of classes, study, weekly pub crawls, and early-morning runs around the Manor's grounds. He hadn't taken any jobs in his "other life" and hadn't expressed any interest in any more trips abroad. For his part, Rodney Leifeld had done exactly what he'd said he would do: he had supported Stone, worked to clear the remaining paperwork and bureaucratic hurdles resulting from the tragic trip, and been a welcome presence, along with Aubrey, when Stone needed someone to talk to. He was grateful to both of them for it.

"How's Cynthia?" Ocelot asked, swiveling around in his seat.

As always happened when anyone mentioned that particular topic, Stone smiled, his whole face brightening. "She's well. Very well."

"She settling in?"

"As much as she ever settles anywhere," he said fondly. "She's in Paris now, unveiling her autumn collection."

Ocelot shook his head in amused amazement. "Man, if anybody had ever told me a year ago that you two—"

"Tell me about it," Stone said, still smiling. "I still pinch myself occasionally to make sure I'm not dreaming, and it's been three months now."

"Life's funny sometimes, that's for damned sure." He looked out through the helicopter's front window. "Speaking of that, it looks like we're getting close."

They were. Stone and Ocelot were quiet again, watching as the pilot skillfully brought the 'copter down and perched it neatly on a narrow ledge that hadn't appeared to have been there only seconds earlier. They could see a figure standing there waiting for them. Getting out, they waved thanks to the pilot, who immediately fired up the helicopter again and took off over the craggy peaks. Stone wondered if Ocelot knew they had been flown in by a spirit, but decided not to bring it up.

The figure on the ledge approached, and they saw immediately that it wasn't Gabriel. It was mostly humanoid, looking like a man-shaped form hewn from the rough stone of the caverns. "If you will follow me," it said, its gravelly voice deferential, "I will take you to the master. He apologizes for not being here personally, but he is in the midst of a delicate magical technique that cannot currently be interrupted."

Stone and Ocelot both tensed. "We're not—too late, are we?" Ocelot asked.

"Too late?"

"The—baby isn't here yet?" He seemed oddly disturbed by the thought, despite his clear misgivings on the subject.

"No, sir." The weird thing about elementals was that their tones never changed. "Merely preparation."

Thus reassured, Ocelot and Stone followed the elemental. It disappeared into what looked like solid stone, and they followed it without hesitation. Neither of

them had ever been inside Gabriel's lair before, but both remembered a similar instance almost a year ago when Kestrel had done the same thing. The effect was odd but over quickly: they emerged into a large brightly lit cavern. Apparently the illusion that covered this entrance only worked in one direction.

The elemental turned to face them, and as it did it held out its arms and formed a large platform between them. "It will be faster if you will allow me to convey you," it said. "We have some distance to travel."

Ocelot looked at Stone, who shrugged and climbed onto the platform. After a moment he did likewise. He doubted this would be the weirdest thing he would see today.

Once its passengers were safely seated, the elemental started moving. Its speed increased significantly until it was moving with ease through the halls of the lair at a very healthy pace. Ocelot and Stone could only hold on and watch the walls and occasional openings flash by. "This place must be huge," Ocelot muttered under his breath at one point.

They kept moving, passing through open caverns, along narrow ledges, and next to beaches bordering a vast network of underground lakes and rivers. It was about twenty minutes by Stone's chrono when the elemental finally slowed and then stopped. It set them gently on their feet and resumed its humanoid shape. "The master and the lady are beyond in that cavern," it told them. "They await you." Its service thus discharged, it melted down into the rock floor and disappeared.

"Okay..." Ocelot said, letting his breath out. "Let's do this." He moved toward the opening to the cavern the elemental had indicated, and Stone followed him.

They didn't know what they expected to see, but whatever it was this wasn't it. They both stopped and stared into the room. "Uh—" Ocelot finally got out.

The cavern looked more like a room than a chamber hewn from living stone. It was lit by what looked like natural sunlight streaming in from a window in the far wall, even though Stone and Ocelot both knew they were deep underground now. In the center of the room was a large, comfortable looking bed; on the far side was a large trideo unit flanked by a state-of-the-art stereo system. Unseen speakers were piping what Ocelot knew to be one of the mellower of Kestrel's favorite bands into the room. Kestrel herself lay in the bed, a heavy comforter pulled up around her chin. She was smiling. The only indication that she was to be giving birth any time now was the obvious bulge of her abdomen rising under the comforter. She certainly didn't look like she was in any kind of distress. "Hi, guys," she said. "Not quite what you expected, is it? C'mon in."

They didn't move. Currently neither of them were looking at her: instead, their attention was fixed on Gabriel, who was crouched down next to the bed, deep in concentration. Around him on the floor, extending out several meters and completely surrounding the bed, was an intricate magical circle which glowed faintly even against the illusionary sunlight. He appeared to be putting the finishing touches on something—as he finished, the one part of the construct that wasn't glowing began to do so. He stood then, swiping his hair off his forehead, and smiled at them. He didn't look tired as they might expect; in fact, he looked even more radiantly happy than Kestrel did. "Welcome," he said. "Forgive me for not meeting you at the entrance, but I had to finish this before the baby arrived."

"Uh...sure," Ocelot said, uncertain. He was still looking at Kestrel, his expression unreadable.

"What is that, exactly?" Stone asked, professional curiosity finally breaking through his surprise.

"This?" Gabriel indicated the circle, picking his way over it with care to stand next to Kestrel's bed. "It's a small enchantment—mostly designed to ensure that Juliana feels no pain during the birth process, but it's also the first step in the larger enchantment I'll need to set up after the child is born."

Stone grinned. "You know, Gabriel, from what I understand you could make a fortune as an obstetrician if you can pull that off."

"It's simple, really," Gabriel said with a shrug. "It's just a matter of tricking the body into believing that it isn't feeling pain. I'll be monitoring the process throughout the birth to make sure that nothing goes wrong, but so far everything seems to be progressing normally."

From the bed, Kestrel's eyes twinkled. "I told him that some women get off on that whole pain experience of birth—shared sisterhood or something. I am not one of those women."

"How do you feel?" Ocelot asked, moving closer but stopping short of the circle.

Gabriel waved him forward. "You can come in—just don't step on the lines. I left walkways."

"How considerate," Ocelot muttered, but he looked more amused than annoyed—that is, the part of him that wasn't still looking overwhelmed. He did move in closer, though.

Kestrel shrugged. "I feel pretty good, all things considered. Gabriel sure kept his word—I wasn't bored for the last eight months here. I had every toy I could possibly want, and if I wanted something that wasn't here, he brought it in." She pointed to her datajack. "You

should see some of the sculpted systems he had access to. I've taken more vacations in the last few months than I have in the last few years." She looked up at him. "I've missed you guys, though. I'm really glad I got to get out of here for a couple of days so I could attend the wedding. I'd have hated to miss it."

"So—" Ocelot said, still sounding like he was walking through a minefield, "—uh—how long before—?"

"Not long now," she said. "I can feel him moving around in there. I think if Gabriel wasn't working his magic on me, I'd probably be feeling some pretty painful contractions by now."

Gabriel nodded, confirming this.

"Have you—figured out who will—?" Ocelot let it trail off. The conversation he and Kestrel had had with Harry had gone easier than they had expected, but it had still been hard on both of them. To Ocelot's immense surprise, Harry had not asked questions about the situation, and hadn't even charged them anything for his services. Furthermore, and even more surprising, he hadn't showed much amazement at Kestrel's unexpected pregnancy. As far as either of them could determine, there was no suspicion in the fixer at all: he had believed their story and acted accordingly. He promised to find a suitable couple to adopt the child, and to make all the arrangements in secret so neither side knew the details of the other side. It was all either of them could ask.

Gabriel smiled a little. "I know. Juliana does not. She says she doesn't want to know—that it will endanger the child should anyone become suspicious."

"Plus it'll be easier that way," she said, for the first time looking a little uncomfortable. "Making a clean break is always easier than dragging things out." She shifted position under the comforter, gritting her teeth a little.

Gabriel was immediately attentive. He glanced up at Stone and Ocelot, indicating a couple of comfortable looking chairs on the other side of the room. "I think it's time. You can sit over there—through that doorway you can find food and drink, and if there is anything in particular you want, call for Kri and he will get it for you." He looked down at Kestrel, his expression growing a bit more intense. "I'll have to ask you to excuse me now, though—I believe I'm needed here."

The two men exchanged glances with each other and with Kestrel (who gave them a thumbs-up signal and a gritted-teeth grin) and then moved off as directed. They both looked nervous—both of them pointedly avoided the world occupied by things like birth and children, and actively shied away from any knowledge about the subjects. This was a black box to both of them. As much as they both wanted to support Kestrel, they knew they were more useful right where they were—out of the way.

Things moved quickly after that, and any trideo dramas Ocelot and Stone might have chanced to see about the birth process didn't prepare them for what they saw. Gabriel no longer paid them any attention: his entire focus was on Kestrel. He had done something to the air around the bed that simulated a gauzy curtain surrounding it—Ocelot grudgingly admired the fact that even in the midst of all this, Gabriel was still being considerate to both Kestrel (who doubtless didn't want the observers seeing *everything*) and to him and Stone, who didn't really *want* to see everything. Gabriel kept up a low, comforting commentary to Kestrel throughout the process, using his magical abilities to give her pinpoint updates on what was going on. It was all so calm and orderly that when after an hour or so he finally said, "All right—I can see the top of his head now—" Ocelot had to give Stone a prod in the arm to wake him from the light doze he had fallen

into. The two of them leaned forward in their chairs, watching the fuzzed outlines with growing tense interest and anticipation.

A few minutes later Gabriel stepped back from the bed, holding something in his hand. There was a sharp smack and then the sound of a high, keening wail. "Yes!" came Kestrel's triumphant voice from behind the veil.

Ocelot and Stone, caught up in the moment in spite of themselves, grinned at each other in relief. Both of them, far back in their minds where they wouldn't admit it to anyone (including themselves), had harbored the persistent fear that something was going to go wrong. Now that it hadn't, they could relax.

Gabriel dropped the comforter back over Kestrel and then dropped the veil, leaning forward to put the squalling child into her arms. He rose and faced Stone and Ocelot, his bright violet eyes shining. "Gentlemen—it's a boy."

Stone was about to say something at least somewhat appropriate when there was a gasp from the bed. Everyone immediately wheeled around to face Kestrel, the two onlookers with fear jumping to their eyes. Could their concerns have been correct after all?

Kestrel didn't look distressed, though—just surprised. She was staring at the baby with a mixture of wonderment and shock. "He—"

Ocelot bounded over there, ignoring the circle, but Gabriel was already there first. "What?" Ocelot demanded.

She looked up at him, then indicated the little reddish bundle in her arms. "Look—look at his eyes." To Gabriel, she added, "I guess we know what his 'feature' is now..."

Ocelot didn't have any idea what she was talking about, so he stood there in confusion and waited for the baby to open his eyes again. Stone joined him, curiosity

once more overshadowing his discomfort with the situation.

It didn't take long. The newborn rooted around, clenched his fists, let out another long wail, and then opened his eyes. Stone and Ocelot stared. "Uh—" Ocelot began.

"Uh—" Stone agreed.

The baby, oblivious to the excitement, only began crying again, squeezing his eyes—his solid violet eyes with the slitted pupils of a dragon—tightly shut in the effort.

"All right," Gabriel said at last, appearing in the doorway of the comfortable cavern where Kestrel, Ocelot, and Stone waited. "I'm ready."

Three days had passed since the baby's birth, and none of them had seen Gabriel more than a few minutes during that time. Instead, Kestrel had spent her time attending to the baby with the help of a couple of Gabriel's on-call spirits and the various how-to trids she had absorbed during her eight months in the lair, and Stone and Ocelot had spent their time keeping Kestrel company and doing their polite best to avoid any sort of baby-tending duties. She hadn't minded—in fact, she was feeling rather proprietary toward the small bundle who, once he'd been cleaned up and dressed, turned out to have fair skin, wispy blond hair, and an inquisitive manner that reminded his mother very much of his father. It didn't take her long to get used to the eyes—after all, she'd seen dozens of people with cybereyes every bit as odd (including Ocelot's ice blue cat eyes) and thought nothing of it. The baby's were remarkable only in that he was so young.

She had consciously made an effort to refer to him only as "Baby," "the little guy," "Junior," or other terms

of similar vague endearment, and no one had asked her why she hadn't picked a name for him. They knew. It would just be harder to give him up if she named him. Ocelot privately wondered if she was going to be able to do it. He was about to finally give voice to this concern when Gabriel made his announcement.

They all rose. Kestrel had explained to Stone and Ocelot that Gabriel had been preparing an extremely complicated ritual designed to disguise the baby's nature from anything but the direct scrutiny of a more powerful Great Dragon. Because the ritual's effects would have to last many years and grow with the child, the preparation for it was long and arduous. Gabriel had apologized at the beginning for his absence, but told them that his complete concentration was vital to success. He had given them the run of the lair and promised to return as soon as possible.

"The ritual's ready?" Stone asked.

Gabriel nodded. He looked tired but satisfied. "Yes. If you'll all follow me, we'll begin."

He led them down a series of stone hallways that Stone would have sworn had not been there the day before (*more illusions*, he decided) and stopped in front of a stout wooden door. Swinging the door open, he motioned for them to precede him into the chamber beyond. In Kestrel's arms, the baby fussed quietly: even he seemed to sense that something big was to come.

They entered the chamber—and stopped, all three staring wide-eyed and slack-jawed at what surrounded them. Gabriel had to gently push his way past them to get inside. "It's a bit more complex than anything I've ever done before," he admitted. "I've taken into account as many possible eventualities I could foresee, which I hope means that the child will suffer no undue scrutiny during his life. It—" he broke off, realizing that no one was listening to him. They continued to simply stare.

The chamber was black. The velvety black of a moonless night surrounded them on all sides: walls, floor, ceiling. On every inch of every surface, shining in faint blue all around them, were signs, drawings, and sigils, held together by intricate lines and writing in some language none of them even had a frame of reference for. Though faint, the tracings provided enough light for them to see by, illuminating them in eldrich backlighting. The effect, especially after Gabriel silently shut the door behind them, was that they were floating in some vast, endlessly dark space.

"Wow..." Kestrel finally breathed. The baby in her arms gurgled and pulled impatiently at his blanket, then began to cry softly.

"Wow indeed..." Stone was looking around with a professional eye. He could no more make sense of the writings and images than his companions could, but he could sense the sheer power behind them. He had no doubt that this was a ritual strong enough to hold off the scrutiny of most of the world's most potent beings.

Ocelot took a step forward, noting the small raised stone platform in the center of the room. Carved from its top was a cradle, and inside the cradle were a number of small, soft pillows. Next to it were placed what looked like several stone cups and a long, narrow knife made from a material Ocelot didn't recognize. Although it was black, it was a different sort of blackness from the room. Somehow, though it shouldn't have been possible for it to do so, it too glowed.

Gabriel let them take it all in for a few moments, then said softly, "Shall we begin?" He held out his arms for the baby.

Kestrel had spotted what Ocelot had seen moments before. "Gabriel—what's the knife for? And the cups?"

Gabriel took a deep breath. "The ritual I will perform here is very powerful and very old. Part of the time I have spent away from you was in study, to ensure that I have all the details correct and have not missed anything. It is imperative that it be done correctly the first time—there will be no second chance. The knife is part of the ritual, which requires symbolic life force from its participants."

"You're going to take blood from the baby?" Kestrel drew back with him involuntarily.

"Just a few drops, Juliana." Gabriel's voice was soothing, his eyes clear. "From him, from you, from myself—and from Ocelot."

"Me?" Ocelot demanded, surprised.

"We want to present the charade that you are the baby's father, do we not? By adding your life force to the ritual, we will be able to fool any but the most exacting scans anyone might perform on the child."

"Like blood tests and such," Winterhawk said.

"Yes, and magical examinations. It won't withstand a full DNA scan or an aura analysis by a strong magician, but such things are rare—we shall have to hope that he won't do anything requiring them until we're able to tell him of his true nature."

Kestrel was still trying to get around the blood. She looked at him, confused. "You mean, we're going to tell him? But—"

"Eventually," Gabriel said. "When he grows to adulthood, he has a right to know. What we are doing here today is meant simply to allow him to have a safe—and normal—childhood."

She nodded slowly. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had known they would have to tell him someday. A bit perversely, the thought comforted her. "Okay..." she said after a moment. She let her breath out. "I trust you, Gabriel. I know you won't hurt him." Even

so, it was with some reluctance that she handed the small, blanket-wrapped bundle over to the young man.

Gabriel took the baby and laid him gently in the stone cradle, arranging the pillows and blankets around him with care. He took several moments at this, and when he looked up at them again, there was something odd in his eyes. "There is something else," he said at last.

"What?" Ocelot asked, moving in closer.

Gabriel's gaze met each of the others' in turn. "While preparing this ritual, I have built another component into it. Something I want to offer to you all, in gratitude for everything you have done for me in—recent events." He paused, then spoke again before any of them could say anything. "It is purely voluntary, I assure you, and refusing will not affect the primary ritual in any way. But I hope that you will accept. It is the least I can give you for all you have done."

Kestrel tilted her head. "What is it, Gabriel? What are you talking about?" The others looked equally confused.

Gabriel smiled a little. "What I am doing here with the child violates dragon law—his very existence violates it, as you know. What I offer you does not, though it somewhat frowned upon in this Age. It is offered rarely and never lightly." He indicated the cups and the knife. "The child, as a dragonkin, will be all but immortal, carrying the blood of the dragons from which he is descended. I cannot offer you that same immortality, but it is within my power to give you a very limited form of it."

Stone's eyes got wide. "What—do you mean?" he asked in a hushed whisper.

"If you desire it," Gabriel said softly, "I can extend your lifespans. Not significantly—perhaps another twenty to thirty percent over your natural spans—but the beauty of it is that it will slow the aging process to the point

where you will remain essentially as you are until the last years of your lives."

Ocelot stared, hardly daring to believe he'd heard it. "You mean—we wouldn't get any older? We'd just—stay this way until—" He shook his head. There had to be a catch somewhere. There just *had* to be.

Gabriel nodded. Seemingly picking up on Ocelot's concern, he smiled a little. "I assure you, I am capable of doing it. I have been considering it for awhile now, but this ritual gives me the opportunity."

"What—does it require?" Stone asked, his tone a little shaky.

"From each of you—only a few drops of blood."

"And from you?" Kestrel met his eyes nervously.

"A—bit more." He met her eyes.

"What?" Stone demanded. "I sense you're not telling us the whole story, Gabriel."

Gabriel sighed. "It is why this is not offered lightly—I cannot lie to you about its nature. Essentially I am offering you all a tiny fraction of my own life force—such a small fraction that I will barely notice its loss. When mixed with each of your life forces and added to an elixir I will create and you—if you choose—will ingest, it brings about the change. It is instant, irrevocable, and does not require any sort of future fortification."

"Will it hurt you?" Kestrel asked, leaning forward across the small platform to look into his eyes.

"Yes," he said simply. "But only briefly." His violet eyes met hers. "Juliana, let me do this. I have no way to repay any of you for what you did for me—for my brother—against the Enemy. This doesn't begin to repay that, but it is a small gesture I can make. I ask you—all of you—to let me do it." His normally soft, even voice shook with more emotion than any of them had ever heard from him.

Stone and Ocelot exchanged glances, but neither spoke. Instead, they both looked at Kestrel. Her gaze was still locked on Gabriel.

"Think about it," he said. "It will give you the chance to see this child grow up, to still be young when he is an adult. If you won't do it for yourselves, or for me—" He indicated the baby. "Do it for him."

She looked at the child, then back at him. "Gabriel, I'd never do anything to hurt you—"

"Birth is painful," he reminded her. He chuckled. "Well, not in your case, but usually it is. Sometimes a little pain is worth enduring for something more valuable. That is how I feel about this. Please, Juliana, I beg of you—let me give you this gift."

Several minutes dragged out as she remained silent, continuing to alternate her gaze between the child and Gabriel. Tears glittered in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks as she nodded once.

Gabriel smiled and put his hands on her shoulders. "Thank you, my friend." He turned to Stone and Ocelot. "And you—will you accept my gift as well?"

Ocelot, too, nodded slowly.

"I—would be honored," Stone murmured, inclining his head.

Gabriel's smile widened. "Good. Then it's settled. If you'll all take your places surrounding the child, we'll begin the ritual."

After it was over, Stone found to his surprise that he didn't remember much about the details of what had transpired. It was a long process, every bit as arduous as Gabriel had described it. The young man stood over his son, intoning incantations in some strange arcane language, tracing intricate patterns over him in the air. Around them, the etched symbols and words on the walls

glowed more brightly as the process went on, going from faint blue to a white so brilliant it was almost painful to look at. At one point he picked up the black-bladed knife and traced more patterns with it over the child, then motioned for Kestrel and Ocelot to extend their hands, palm up. Methodically he nicked each palm and allowed a few drops of blood to drip into one of the stone cups. He did the same to his own palm, mixing his blood with theirs, all the while reciting more incantations. A glowing nimbus formed in the cup, extending its radiance a few centimeters above the rim. Then, with utmost gentleness, he likewise nicked the baby's palm. This time, though, instead of dripping the blood into the cup, he dipped his own finger in it and stirred the contents of the cup. There was a faint *whooshing* noise and a puff of smoke formed above the cup. His voice grew louder and more insistent, his jaw tightening as the cadence of his words became less of a recitation and more of a song, rhythmic and hypnotic. He dipped his finger in the cup again and when he withdrew it, it was covered in blood and surrounded by what looked like an aura of bright blue. Bending over the child, he drew a symbol on his forehead with the blood.

"*Gethanian!*" he cried, and the walls of the chamber echoed with the word. As the fascinated onlookers watched, the bloody symbol sank into the child's forehead, disappearing as if it had never been there at all. Gabriel's shoulders slumped a little, but his eyes never left the child's face. A moment later, the baby opened his eyes.

They looked like normal human eyes, colored almost the same shade of ice blue as Ocelot's.

"There..." Gabriel whispered, satisfied. "That was the hard part. Now...my gift."

He began to chant again, but quieter this time. Stone, standing with Gabriel on one side of him and Ocelot on

the other, felt the faint touch of the young man's mind on his; he didn't resist it. In a moment he could see Ocelot tense a little as he got the same touch. Kestrel merely smiled.

They knew what he wanted them to do even though he didn't use any words they could understand. One by one each of them held out his or her hand (in Ocelot's and Kestrel's cases, the one they hadn't offered before) and allowed Gabriel to make a small cut with the knife. He gathered up three more of the stone cups, dripping each participant's blood separately into one of them. Then his voice spoke in their minds: *"I am preparing the elixir, and I will give you your instructions now, in case I am momentarily not able to do so. When the contents of the cup begin to glow, drink. Do not wait too long – the magic is fleeting and the potency does not remain for long. Whatever you might see, do not worry. All will be well. Do you understand?"*

They all nodded apprehensively. Kestrel, especially, seemed reluctant. *"It is all right, Juliana,"* came his reassuring voice. *"I give you my word all will be well."*

This time she nodded with a little more certainty. She smiled at him and once again made no attempt to stop the tears from running down her face.

"I treasure you all," the gentle voice spoke in their minds. *"I wish there was more that I can do for you, but even a dragon's power is limited."*

He plunged the knife into his own chest.

Kestrel screamed. Ocelot and Stone, thunderstruck, gasped and reeled back in shock. For a moment, none of them had any idea of what to do.

Gabriel, the knife buried to its hilt in his body, swayed on his feet, staggering backward a step. His jaw was tight, his teeth gritted, his eyes clamped tightly shut against the sudden pain. Strangely, though, no blood sprayed from the entry wound—in fact, there didn't seem to be any

blood at all. As the three watchers gawked in stunned amazement, he slowly drew the knife out again. Still there was no blood—just a bright glow that eclipsed the dark luminescence of the blade. The glow shone both on the knife and on the wound. Gabriel, sweat standing out in large beads on his face now, struggled to remain upright as he dipped the knife into the stone cups, one after the other. Each one immediately began to glow with the same light as the blade. “*Now...quickly...*” he whispered, and dropped to his knees before sagging bonelessly against the platform where the baby lay.

It was Ocelot who acted first. He reached out and, with a glance at Gabriel’s still body, picked up one of the cups. Before he could talk himself out of it, he raised the cup and drained the contents. There was no taste, but he felt it tingling with power as it went down his throat. His entire body felt suddenly more alive, as if he was clutching a wire with a low-grade electrical current running through it.

Stone snatched up the second cup, and shoved the third into the stunned Kestrel’s hands. “*Do it,*” he told her harshly. “He did it for you, you know—don’t let it be in vain.” He too drank.

After a couple of seconds, so did Kestrel. Tears were streaming down her face now, and she was shaking. As soon as she had finished the draught she flung the cup away and dropped down next to Gabriel.

It was only then that Stone and Ocelot noticed that the strange lights in the cavern had all gone out, and the blackness had disappeared. Instead, they stood in a simple stone cavern, lit by the same bioluminescent moss that covered much of the rest of the complex.

Kestrel was rolling Gabriel over. He looked pale, but the tight look of pain had gone from his features. Instead of the glow, a small trickle of blood now ran down the

front of his shirt, but as she pulled it aside to get a better look, she could see that it appeared to be no more than the nick he had made in all of their palms. The baby forgotten now, she stroked his forehead and held his head in her lap, her tears dripping down onto his face. Stone and Ocelot stood waiting, silent and unsure of what to do.

It was several minutes before Gabriel opened his eyes, and the first thing he saw when he did so was Kestrel's worried face. He smiled. "I told you everything would be well..." he whispered.

She was half laughing in relief, half sobbing. "Yeah..." she said, her voice husky. "Yeah, you did. And you always keep your word, don't you?"

The helicopter arrived to take Stone and Ocelot away the next day. They had all said their goodbyes the previous night—true to his word, Gabriel had recovered fully from the strange ritual and showed no ill effects from it. The others didn't feel any different following the eerie sense of power they got from drinking the magical mixture—Gabriel said they wouldn't, and they probably wouldn't see the results for several years so they would simply have to trust him. Nobody had any trouble with that, not anymore. Not even Ocelot.

That last night had been hard, because earlier the same day another helicopter had arrived, this one to take the baby away to his new home. Kestrel had surprised Ocelot by putting up far less of a fight than he'd expected about letting the child go—she had simply requested an hour or so alone with him. When she emerged carrying him in her arms, she said simply, "We've said our goodbyes...and he knows I'll see him again. Someday."

Gabriel had smiled. "Count on it," he said. The pilot and the attendant, both spirits, had taken the baby gently

away in his blankets, bowed to Gabriel, and left the room. Kestrel watched them hungrily but didn't move.

Ocelot put his arm around her shoulders. "You know Harry will do right by him," he said gently. "He'll have a great life."

"I know..." she whispered. "I know."

She had elected to stay on at the lair with Gabriel while the others left. "We'll be back in Seattle shortly," the young man told them. "Juliana is simply...not quite ready to go back to the world yet."

So when the helicopter arrived, it was only two passengers who boarded it. They waved as it rose above the peaks, watching the two tiny figures on the ledge until they disappeared into the mists. Stone leaned back in his seat. "Well, that's that," he said.

"Yeah." Ocelot wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry about it. He was silent for several moments, then sighed. "So I guess you'll be going back home to Cynthia and your University, huh?"

"Indeed," Stone said. "That's the theory, anyway. I do hope nothing else happens to change my plans."

Again, Ocelot sighed. "I guess I never expected it to end this way."

"What to end this way?"

He shrugged. "The team. Us. The whole thing."

Stone swiveled in his seat. "Who said it has to end? All right, granted I'm probably out of the shadowrunning business, but that doesn't mean we can't get together. You know you're always welcome at my home."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, I know. And to be honest with you, I don't think I'm sorry about all this. I know I've been living on borrowed time for awhile now. There aren't too many old shadowrunners out there, you know?"

"Quite true," Stone agreed. "So what will you do with yourself now? You've certainly got enough money squirreled away that you won't have to work if you don't want to, right?"

"Yeah." A pause, and then, "I dunno what I'll do. Maybe I'll finally open up that dojo I've been talking about and never thought I'd live long enough to see."

Stone chuckled. "Sounds like you'll be living a little longer than you thought, if we can believe our young friend."

"Yeah, ain't that the truth." He subsided into silence for several long moments. "Maybe we'll even get to see the kid grow up. I wonder what he's gonna be like. What kind of life he's gonna have. And especially what he's gonna do when he finds out someday that his daddy's a dragon."

"That, my friend, we'll just have to wait and see about," Stone said, smiling. "I have a feeling we'll have the chance someday to do just that."