

By the Author of *Crossfire*

INNER DEMONS

A Shadowrun Novel

R. L. King

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Notes

Welcome back! Or, welcome if you're new! If you haven't already read *Crossfire* (the first book in the series), you probably should go do that before you read this one or you're going to end up pretty lost.

Just a few things you should know before you read this one: it references some of the *Shadowrun* canon material a lot more than *Crossfire* did, so familiarity with it will help you here. It's not completely necessary – you can follow the story just fine without it – but it will, as they say, enhance your experience. This material includes the *Harlequin* and *Harlequin's Back* adventure module packs, the *Dragon Heart* trilogy of novels by Jak Koke, and the material pertaining to Dunkelzahn's election and subsequent assassination (*Super Tuesday* and *Portfolio of a Dragon: Dunkelzahn's Secrets*).

Old hands will remember that the worlds of *Shadowrun* and *Earthdawn* used to be linked (the former is the Sixth World, and the latter was the Fourth). This isn't really true anymore since the games are produced by two different companies, but it was at the time I wrote these stories. Familiarity with the *Horrors* sourcebook written by Robin D. Laws and published by FASA Corporation will be helpful as well.

That's about it! As always, I hope you like the story. If you did (or if you didn't), please send me feedback at rat@dragonwriter.net. I love hearing from readers.

--Rat, April 2012

Prologue

The unseen observer smiled, in its way. It would have been a profoundly disturbing sight, had there been anyone else around to see it.

There wasn't anyone else around, however. The observer had this particular corner of astral space pretty much to itself for the moment. It liked it that way. There were others of its kind, of course, but they were few here and they had their own errands. The more common denizens of the area tended to avoid the observer – those that even knew of its existence, that is.

Especially those that knew of its existence.

For the others, the ignorant ones, it was more an instinctive thing – a feeling that all was not right here in their domain. In response, they merely diverted their paths almost unconsciously, flowing around the vicinity of the observer as water would flow around a discarded bit of garbage in a clear running stream.

At this point in time, the observer was quite pleased with itself. No reason why it shouldn't be: it had the thing that it wanted more than any other thing there was.

More than almost any other thing.

It had spared little attention for keeping track of how long it had been free; time didn't work the same way here as it did where it had originated, and besides, it did not matter. Things would happen when they happened. The observer could afford to be patient now – as long as it kept well hidden, it could afford to watch, to wait, to plan. Let the others run about with mad glee, cutting swaths of destruction and despair behind them. They were, ultimately, the stupid ones. There was a place for the stupid ones: they were the ones who drew attention away. They were the ones that got caught. They were the ones who lulled the defenders into a false sense of security, causing them to think that danger had passed, while their smarter, subtler, wiser brethren could remain unseen and unnoticed until they were ready with their plans.

Of course, the observer was certain that the stupid ones would not be pleased with their sacrifices. None of them – at least none that occupied such a low station on the food chain – had any comprehension of the long-term plans of their betters. Their purpose in life was merely to destroy, to rend, to kill. Mindlessly, or almost so.

The observer was different.

Occasionally, when it took the time to consider the matter, the observer still found time to be surprised that it had managed to get across and slip past the defenders without being killed. It knew (they all knew, one way or another) that few of its level of power had made it across the abbreviated bridge before it had been once more destroyed, and fewer still had stood successfully against the defenders and their power. Many had fallen that day to the swords and the spells of those charged to protect this world from the observer and those like it. Powerful as the defenders were, though, they were few and the invaders were many. Inevitably there would be those who would slip past the lines and lose themselves in the vastness of astral space until it was time to continue with their plans.

They were nothing if not patient, these few. Most of the denizens of this place thought in terms of their tiny time intervals and planned their lives accordingly, rarely having the foresight to take the future into consideration. After all, to each but the exception of a few, what was the future? Their lives were over scarcely before they had begun. By the reckoning of the observer and those like it, they were inconsequential. At times useful, and certainly at times amusing, but ultimately inconsequential to those whose perceptions spanned the eons.

But there were others. The rare ones. The interesting ones. Those who knew of the existence of the observer and its ilk – those who might possess the power to affect the struggle, should they choose to rouse themselves sufficiently to use it.

The dangerous ones.

The observer's twisted smile grew a bit wider. It had watched, and it had waited. And it had seen. From its vantage

point, unnoticed and hidden, on the astral plane, it had focused its attention on the conflict that had played itself out. Conflict between the special ones was always of interest, but in this particular case it was of more than ordinary interest. Not only because of the nature of the three who were involved, but also because of the potential that it created. All three were powerful – more powerful than the observer had ever had the chance to directly encounter in its timeless existence. Under normal circumstances, the observer would not have presumed to involve itself in their affairs, due to the high likelihood that one or more of them would notice it and destroy it. It was strong by the standards of those that had made it across the bridge, but not by the standards of the three entities whose lives were intertwined – some voluntarily and some not. But now, with circumstances falling as they had, the seeds of a plan had begun to grow in the observer's mind. The seeds were small now and unformed, but they promised great possibilities if the plan could be brought into being slowly and carefully, so none of the three would become aware of it until it was too late for them to act. Yes, the observer thought, satisfied. Slowly and carefully. And soon I will not be alone in my planning.

Now, however, it was alone and therefore had to be cautious. Any one of the three could bring about its downfall if it was not. Its first task was to choose its playing piece, the opening gambit in its game. Would it be the most powerful of the three? No, that would be unwise. That one's experience would point up the subterfuge before it was begun. The youngest? The thought crossed its mind, but was quickly discarded. The youngest, yes, but also the one with the greatest promise. And without question the most resistant to corruption. While it would be most pleasurable to get hold of that one before it went on to realize its full potential, that would have to be for another time. The observer knew that moving too fast and seeking too much would be its undoing. When things had progressed to the next stage, perhaps then it would consider that avenue.

No, it already knew the answer to its dilemma, and that was why it was smiling. There really only was one answer; the fact that it had worked itself out so perfectly was only an added feature. The hatred was deep – it burned with a strong flame within the third one's heart. Hatred, anger, frustration, jealousy, contempt, shame: each was a weapon in the observer's arsenal. These were the things that would serve as a counterbalance to the power that one possessed. And if that power could be harnessed and bent to the proper purposes, then –

– then, the observer knew with satisfaction, things could really start to happen.

The plans were set. It was almost time to begin.

The observer began to move. The few remaining denizens of astral space that had previously been courageous enough to come near quickly found other pursuits.

Things were good.

2.

In the cavernous office at the top of the black tower a solitary figure stood at the window, gazing out over the lights of the city without truly seeing them. He was not having a pleasant evening, which meant that any of his employees who were unwise enough to attempt to enter his presence would likewise not be having a pleasant evening. Fortunately for anyone who might find him- or herself in such an unenviable position, they were not capable of doing so. One simply did not approach the occupant of the top office without a prior request and a good reason, and tonight he was not responding to any communications.

In truth, most of the employees had gone home by this late hour; only the security force, some of the corporate deckers, and a few die-hard workaholics remained in the building, lending its corridors, which were rather somber by any reckoning, an air of eerie calm.

The figure pressed the palms of his hands against the armored glass and tried not to think too hard about what had been going on lately. Thinking about it only made him angry, and anger wasn't going to be of any use at all. Of course, he could take out his wrath on wayward employees and almost anyone else who irritated him, but even that after awhile became unsatisfying. The one against whom he really wanted to vent his feelings was out of his reach. That thought alone was sufficient to send him into a rage.

He tried to avoid that thought for that very reason, but today it seemed stubbornly determined to push its way to the forefront of his mind.

On his spartan obsidian desk was a datapad, and on the datapad was a report. It was one of many he received

each day; he made it a point to read them all, because he liked to remain aware of every activity that affected his business, no matter how small or seemingly inconsequential. It was another source of anxiety (one of many) to his employees that he—or those who acted as his proxies—had detailed knowledge of everything from the highest-level decisions affecting the entire corporation to the lowest-level employee schedules, personnel actions, and supply requisitions. They wondered how he did it: even with a staff of truly staggering proportions, it still seemed to many that it would take more time than lofty corporate suit-types would want to waste to keep track of such minutiae.

He smiled a bit to himself.

If only they knew.

The thought amused him for a moment, taking his mind from the matter at hand, but as he turned around and his gaze fell again on the datapad his expression darkened once more. Picking it up in a swift gesture, he swung his arm back as if intending to fling the offending item across the room. For a second or two his arm hovered there, and then he slowly returned the datapad to the desk, forcing himself to look down at its screen.

It was the final report on the disposition of the ruined building in Seattle. The date on it was already two weeks old, meaning that whichever employee had been charged with sending it upstairs had managed to find reasons to sit on it for quite some time. For once, rarely, the man at the desk did not blame the hapless employee; everyone at the company headquarters (and probably most of those at the branch offices) knew about the disastrous affair that had occurred in Seattle six months ago, and, more importantly, they knew of its rumored effect on their boss. No one believed the official company line regarding the occurrence: it was just too farfetched, even to those well

removed from the event, that faulty gas mains could have caused such a catastrophic destruction of a forty-three-story skyscraper in downtown Seattle. Not that any of them had checked, of course. If they had, they would have had no trouble finding that the corporation charged with providing natural gas to the greater Seattle area had reported no leaks or problems and, in fact, had just completed an inspection of that very area a mere five days prior to the destruction.

If they had checked, they might have found that.

They knew better, though. Those who sought to contradict, doubt, or investigate the official company line tended to have unfortunate things happen to them. Since the affair in Seattle didn't affect them, they chose (wisely) to merely accept what they were told and go on with their jobs.

Their boss was another matter. Nobody at headquarters knew why it was reputed that the simple mention of the Seattle affair was enough to send him into a rage; nobody was even sure where the rumor had gotten started, because certainly none among them was brave enough to test it. As far as they knew, he and his fellow faceless consortium members were simply angry that the building had been destroyed, killing some fifteen employees (mostly security guards) and twenty-some others in the process. True, that should have been enough to make anyone angry. But the company's insurance had covered the damages, compensated the loved ones of the employees and the others, and paid for the damage to the tower's neighbor, which had also been heavily affected. The broken tower had been razed long ago, and although the company retained ownership of the land on which it had stood, nothing had yet been erected in its place. Another mysterious rumor that no one could confirm or deny stated that the company did not plan to rebuild the

tower, nor did it plan to resume business in Seattle. This had raised a few eyebrows, but that had been as far as it had gone. Slowly, life in the corporation had returned to normal.

Almost.

He picked up the datapad and stared at it, noting that the sale of the land had finally been completed. It was the last step in getting the whole thing out of his mind. The Renraku subsidiary had not wanted to pay the price the land was worth, citing the apparent problems with the area's gas lines (problems which they, as well as almost everyone else, knew were nonexistent) and the seller's reluctance to reveal the true reason for the building's destruction. The negotiations had been slow and secretive, but finally the lawyers on both sides had managed to hammer out an agreement that was mutually acceptable and the documents had been signed.

Not by him, of course. He never got directly involved. But he was certainly aware of what had taken place, since the whole thing was contingent upon his approval.

The disposition of the matter had left him with mixed feelings. On the one side, he was glad to have it over with and to be rid of one of the last remaining reminders of his failure. One of the last ones over which he had control, anyway. The true last reminder of his failure still lived, and there was absolutely nothing he could do to change that fact. This knowledge formed the core of his rage.

There was nothing he could do.

He had accepted it at first—not that he had had a choice. The circumstances under which he had made the agreement were decidedly one-sided. He could have protested, naturally, but to do so would have been a grave error and possibly a life-threatening one. The one to whom he had given his word spoke softly, but his power was strong and his influence stronger still. Like it or not,

he was bound by his word and that was that. The fact that he chafed more and more under the constraints as the months went by made little difference to anyone but him.

He was constrained, but the child –

His hand tightened on the datapad as he glared at it with eyes like chips of cold flint. With a *whoosh*, a gout of unearthly flame sprang up around the device, instantly reducing it to ashes, which then fell around the man's untouched hand to float down and cover the obsidian desk.

"Now, now. Such *temper*."

His head snapped up. Who had spoken? An intruder? Here? The last time that had occurred –

"You know," the newcomer said conversationally, "you're going to burst a blood vessel—or whatever it is you guys do—if you don't stop getting so paranoid." The voice was mocking, cheerful, unfamiliar.

The man behind the desk stepped forward, moving around its dark bulk to get a better look at the shadowy figure that had invaded his office uninvited.

It was an elf, that much was obvious. He stood in the doorway of the office, leaning on one side of the jamb with one foot rakishly propped halfway up the other side. He was somewhat unassuming-looking with longish light brown hair, pointed ears, and the tall thin build characteristic of his metatype, but his eyes were sharp and bright blue, twin lasers that missed nothing. His grin was wide and as mocking as his tone. Dressed in jeans, T-shirt and longcoat, he could have been one of any number of the denizens of the sprawl below.

Except for the fact that he had managed to get into this nearly impregnable office unannounced.

The man at the desk was not one for asking questions when confronted by strangers in places where strangers should not be. Raising his hands, he summoned a nimbus

of magical energy and prepared to show the newcomer the folly of his ways.

"Uh-uh," the elf said, still grinning. He shook his finger like a schoolmarm at a recalcitrant student. "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Stefan. At least not until you hear why I'm here."

The figure lowered his hand at the sound of his name. He had never seen this elf before. "Who are you?" he asked coldly. "How did you get up here?"

The elf dropped his foot from the doorjamb, but he still lounged somewhat indolently against the other side. "We all have our secrets, don't we? But you aren't asking the important questions. Who I am isn't really important. What's important is what I can do for you."

"I'm more concerned with how you got in here," Stefan said, raising his hand again. His tone remained cold and unyielding.

"In good time, my friend. In good time." The elf chuckled, a strange sound in the back of his throat. "But trust me—you'll want to hear this. I think after you listen to what I have to say, you'll be less anxious to flash-fry me." He indicated the desk. "So what do you say—can I sit down?"

Stefan considered for a moment. The elf was clearly not afraid of him, which might be a colossal bluff, or it might be that there were reasons for his lack of fear. The last time someone had come up here unannounced, it would have been unwise in the extreme to have attacked first and attempted to pick up the pieces later. "All right," he said, though his tone still did not change. "Sit. But speak quickly, for I have little patience with uninvited guests."

"Touchy," the elf said, clucking. He moved gracefully across the huge room and plopped down into one of the chairs in front of Stefan's desk. He looked as if he were

strongly considering putting his feet up, but grinned instead and leaned back. His relaxed pose suggested that he was not intimidated in the slightest by Stefan's chilly gaze. For a moment, he merely regarded the man on the other side of the desk without comment.

Stefan lowered himself into the tall black leather chair behind the obsidian desk, his pose not at all casual or relaxed. He looked like a stern king waiting for his impudent subject to reveal the reason for requesting the audience. Behind him, the Boston skyline provided a brilliant backdrop through the floor-to-ceiling window.

"So," the elf said, grinning. "How's your brother these days?"

For a moment the words did not register on Stefan. He stared at the elf, the chill in his eyes dropping a few more degrees as his hands gripped the arms of his chair. He took a deep breath. "My brother is not the reason you have come," he finally said in a tight voice.

The elf shrugged. "Bad subject, I see. But don't be too sure about why I've come."

"If this is some sort of misguided attempt at extortion—" Stefan began, rising.

"You *do* always think the worst, don't you?" the elf asked, rolling his eyes. "Extortion? On the contrary. Nothing could be further from the truth. I've come because I want to help you."

"Help me?" Stefan resumed his seat, slowly. "What could *you* possibly do to help *me*?" Contempt joined the chill in his voice.

"You'd be surprised." Suddenly the elf's demeanor grew more serious and the mocking went out of his eyes. "Let's just say that we have—mutually coinciding goals."

Stefan leaned back and watched the elf suspiciously over steepled fingers. "Oh?"

The elf nodded. "There is something that I want that you can help me to get, and in turn I can then help you to get something that you desire very much."

"Don't speak in riddles," Stefan snapped. "It seems a common affliction of your race: the love of the sound of your own voices."

The elf raised a finger and some of the mocking was back. "Uh-uh, Stefan," he reproached. "As I said before, don't discount my offer until you hear it. I merely want to ensure that it is presented in the—proper light, you see. When you've heard it all, I don't think you'll begrudge me a bit of theatrics in the telling."

Stefan did not reply; he merely leaned back in his chair and continued to watch the elf.

"I'll take that as a positive response," the elf said. Again the mocking was gone. "There is a situation that you would very much like to—deal with, is there not?"

"Situation," Stefan said. "Possibly..." His eyes narrowed. "Who sent you here?"

"No one sent me here." The elf smiled a wolfish, predatory smile. "I came because I heard that there's a matter you'd like to take care of, and that there's something standing in the way of your doing that. I'd simply like to offer my services as a—troubleshooter." He seemed somehow amused by the statement.

"Indeed," Stefan said emotionlessly. "And what is it that has given you such an idea?"

The elf shrugged. "I hear things. When you've been around as long as I have, information tends to come your way. That is, of course, if you're listening in the right places."

"And—what *right places* are those?"

"Seattle, for one."

Stefan's gaze grew a bit sharper. "What is it that you have heard in Seattle?"

"Terrible accident," the elf said in a offhand tone. "Something about a gas main breaking under a skyscraper. Big explosion. Tragedy. Lots of people killed. Wonder what could have caused a perfectly healthy gas main to blow like that? Most inconvenient, wouldn't you say?"

"You know that was my building," Stefan said coldly. "You're still speaking in circles. I suggest that you rediscover your point and make some haste in reaching it. My patience is not endless."

Again the elf shrugged, unruffled by Stefan's implied threat. "Heard some more rumors," he said. "Discounted, of course. Can't take the word of a drunk. They don't know what they're seeing."

Stefan leaned forward. "Go on..."

"Well," the elf said, meeting his eyes, "if you read the right papers, seems that there was a quote from one of the people on the scene, who says that she saw a giant winged creature flying away from the scene of the collapse. Wonder who that could have been? Never heard of Seattle having a giant bat problem, have you?"

"What do you want?" Stefan's features darkened with anger at this impudent elf who insisted on dancing around whatever subject he had come to discuss.

"It's simple. I want to help you. With your—family difficulties." The elf grinned. "I want to help you deal with your brother. Once and for all."

Stefan glared at him. This entire conversation was taking a very strange turn. "What do you know of my brother?"

"Oh, I know a lot about your brother. I know he's been a thorn in your side for a very long time. And I know that due to—certain constraints—you're unable to do anything about him, despite the fact that he and his little friends made you look like an utter fool a few months ago." The

grin did not leave the elf's face; apparently he was unaware of the degree to which he was goading Stefan. Or else he didn't care.

"What," Stefan said slowly, taking deep breaths to center himself against the rage as his hands gripped the edges of the desk, "do you have to do with my brother? Assuming that you are correct in your assessment, why would you wish to help me?"

The elf spread his hands. "Maybe I have my own reasons," he said. Before Stefan could speak up, he continued, "I'm sure you know there's been no love between your kind and mine for—a long while. Much longer than you and your dear little brother have been going—er—tooth and claw, so to speak."

Stefan nodded once, imperiously. "So then why help me? I would think that it would be in the best interests of you and your kind to see discord among mine."

"Normally you'd be right," the elf said. "Absolutely. Quite a show. But now—" he paused a moment, as if considering how he wanted to continue—"I have other, more pressing concerns. As I told you, we have coinciding interests." Again he paused. "You see, it isn't your brother I'm interested in at all, but rather the reason why you have been prevented from—showing him the error of his ways."

"I don't wish to play any more word games, elf," Stefan said. His grip on the desk had loosened somewhat, but the chill had not left his eyes. "Tell me why you have come, or go."

"All right—if that's the way you want to do it." The elf sounded almost disappointed. "Your kind never was any fun. No sense of humor whatsoever. No wonder you're no fun at parties." He sat up a little straighter and leaned forward in his chair. "I want your brother's keeper."

Stefan stared at him. "You want—?"

"I want Telanwyr."

There was no sign of mocking in the elf's tone now; he spoke the three words simply, without inflection, as if he were commenting on the weather or the state of the stock market. Stefan did not think it was possible for his uninvited visitor to surprise him now, but the elf had managed nonetheless. Still, he recovered quickly, inwardly cursing himself that he had allowed any reaction to reach his face. "You – want him," he said slowly. "For what purpose?"

"I want to kill him."

For the second time, Stefan had to fight to keep his astonishment from his face. Did this elf have any comprehension of what he was suggesting? "That is absurd," he said, standing. "Obviously you are delusional. I will give you one final opportunity to leave here before I take steps to have you removed."

"Why is it absurd?" the elf asked without moving. "It's been done before. With far greater than he, as I recall. And recently, even."

"What do you know of that?" Stefan asked, once more fixing his cold stare on the visitor.

"Nothing. Nothing at all. Except that it happened. It wasn't exactly a secret, after all. *Someone* must have done it."

"But not you."

The elf shook his head. "No. I'm not insane. And besides, I had no particular animosity against that one. Why put myself out when there's nothing to be gained from it?"

Stefan moved over by the window and looked out over the Boston skyline. "Why Telanwyr, then?" He was not, of course, considering cooperation with this mysterious elf in anything so rash and foolhardy, but he did want to hear the story behind the plan. Information

was power, and the more information he had about his guest and his motivations, the more comfortable he would be. He was accustomed to being the one in control of any interchange in which he was involved. The elf's mocking self assurance was making him uneasy.

"I think that I will keep my reasons to myself," the elf said. "They aren't important to what we're discussing. All that you need to know is that if I achieve my goal, you are then free to achieve yours." He shrugged. "If you really must have something to help you decide, I will tell you that I have carried this desire for longer than you have lived. Believe me, I have thought this through quite thoroughly. Your—difficulties with your brother have merely provided me the means by which I might finally accomplish my desire, while helping you accomplish yours."

"You are asking me to aid you in murder," Stefan said, still in information-gathering mode. "What is it that makes you think I will do such a thing, even if it were to then give me free access to my brother? Why would I not simply go to Telanwyr and tell him that you seek to kill him? Why should I not show more loyalty to one of my own kind than to an unfamiliar stranger?" He smiled, but there was no mirth in it. "Perhaps in gratitude he might release me from the oath I have sworn to him."

The elf shrugged. "He might," he admitted. There was something strange in his eyes as he regarded Stefan. "Anything's possible. I can never be truly certain of what your kind might do. But I know him better than you do, and I don't think that's something he would consider. Deep down, I don't think you do either. He and your brother have been friends for a very long time—that much you do know. Think about it, Stefan—you go to him and tell him I'm planning to kill him. He thanks you for the information, takes steps to prevent me from doing so, and

doesn't release you from the oath. Why would he give you your brother's life in exchange for his own? The life of his prized student, his great hope for the future?" His voice changed subtly, taking on a lower, more persuasive undercurrent. "Where would that leave you then? Exactly where you were before, except with no one like me there to help you. And meanwhile, your brother grows older, stronger, more powerful, and farther out of your reach." He paused for effect, then murmured, "He has great potential, Stefan. Greater than you do, should you care to acknowledge the fact. Your goals will not be attainable forever. You must seize your opportunity when it presents itself, or live forever with the consequences of your lack of action."

Stefan gripped the edge of the desk again. *Potential!* Rage welled up in his heart as the hated word got in there and burned. Potential—that was always what all the elders had said of the child. He had potential. He had within him the seeds of greatness. When he reached adulthood he would surely be numbered among the legends of their kind. How tired Stefan was of hearing such things!

How much he had wanted to hear them in reference to himself.

"How do you even know of my agreement with Telanwyr?" he said through clenched teeth. "It is not in his nature to share such information with anyone, let alone one such as yourself. And especially not if your enmity extends back as far as you claim it does."

"As I said before," the elf replied with his maddening smile, "I hear things. Many things. You of all people should be familiar with that. I make it a point to stay on top of things that affect me."

"You aren't going to answer, in other words."

"Right. My sources are no more relevant than the reasons for my desires."

"All right, then," Stefan said, "Let us talk of what *is* relevant." He still did not have the information he needed regarding the elf's motivations, so he would probe further. Let the foolish elf think that he would aid him, and lead him on long enough that he would eventually reveal his plans. Contrary to what the elf had said, Stefan had faith that if the information was presented in the proper light (that is to say, withheld until the correct agreements were in place), then Telanwyr would have no choice but to concede to his terms. In Stefan's mind, saving one's own skin took on far greater value than any friendships or prior agreements – especially given that the child didn't even know of the agreement Stefan had made with Telanwyr. Undoubtedly being kept in ignorance by his old mentor to avoid the shame of knowing he was being protected, Stefan was sure. But when faced with the choice between obtaining information that would prevent his own assassination and saving the child, Telanwyr would choose the former. Anyone with any common sense would. However, before Stefan could make such a proposal, he had to have more information about what the elf intended to do. "Assuming that I were to consider your offer," he said carefully, "what would you ask of me? If you possess such power that you can enter my domain without my knowledge – and that you can even consider the thing you are intending to do – then what need do you have for me?"

The strange light in the elf's gaze became a bit more pronounced as he fixed his blue eyes on Stefan. "You may rest easy, Stefan: I have no need for you to be directly involved in the act. I have that part well in hand. Your contribution would be only as a – a means to deliver

Telanwyr to the appointed place, where I will have made my preparations."

"How am I to do that?" Stefan asked. "You must know that I am not numbered among those for whom he has a high level of trust and esteem." That was apparently the understatement of the year, given the way Telanwyr had treated him on their last meeting.

"I doubt that is true," the elf said. "I have watched him for many years, you remember. I think that he has a higher regard for you than you might think. He is, after all, essentially an honorable being, and therefore does not hold grudges and hatreds for long. You have never done anything to him, other than threaten his precious student—and he has dealt with that. He has no more reason to distrust you, does he?"

Stefan considered that. It was—barely—possible that the elf spoke the truth. He had never had much to do with Telanwyr, especially not after—*no. I will not think of that.* The older one had always been much more interested in his brother as a student (there was that *potential* word again), but had never shown anything more sinister than a polite indifference toward Stefan. *Am I confusing his indifference for dislike? And if so, then perhaps I should end this conversation now and determine my options before I—*

It was almost as if the elf could read his mind. "Stefan," he said soothingly, "don't do this to yourself. I told you before—it's not Telanwyr you have to worry about. Yes, maybe he doesn't mean you the ill will that you might think he does, but he certainly hasn't paid any attention to you over all these years, has he? Don't concern yourself with him. Your life will be no different with him or without him. But think of how you'll feel when that brother of yours is gone—especially when you know that you've done it yourself. This will give you a chance to wipe the slate clean. No one will have to know

of your failure. Think of it—once you've taken care of him, there'll be no one left to protect those friends of his. Surely you remember what *they've* done to you, don't you?" In a gesture that seemed almost an afterthought, the elf rubbed his eye with one long-fingered hand. The other eye never left Stefan.

Stefan tensed, wondering if the elf had deliberately chosen to bring up the topic most likely to enrage him. His brother's so-called "friends" were the focus of almost as much of his hatred as was his brother himself. It was another subject he tried not to think about because it was guaranteed to cloud his judgment. The "friends"—why would his brother even consider any such as those to be worthy of his time, let alone of his friendship?—had been instrumental in Stefan's failure. The five of them, including the woman to which his brother seemed particularly attached, had turned the tide of the great battle at the top of the now-destroyed Seattle building. He had not thought it possible, but they had managed to hurt him. To pierce him with their tiny firearms and their tiny arrows, and to cover his face with acid carried by an agent that had delivered it through his barriers and into his eyes. *That* one, the one with the acid, had very nearly blinded him. If he hadn't chosen to retreat and find a place where he could heal the damage quickly, he might have lost his sight. He had never forgiven the human for that. He had never forgiven any of them: the other human, the mage who had protected his brother with a barrier; the troll who had penetrated his armor with his machine-gun fire; the elf sniper who had drawn first blood; the woman with her bow, who had pierced his eye at the same time the acid had eaten away at him. He had left them alone, mostly because of his promise to Telanwyr, and partly because his pride refused to allow him to rouse himself sufficiently to exact revenge on a

group as insignificant as they were. But if Telanwyr were no more —

Again the elf seemed to pick up on his thoughts. "It's a win-win situation, Stefan," he said persuasively. "Picture it — your brother at your mercy, and his little pets ripe for the taking. You could take your time with them, make them suffer like they made you suffer. You could do whatever you liked with them, and there wouldn't be anything they could do about it. Would you pass up an opportunity to take your revenge on those who have humiliated you? What would happen if others were to find out the real story behind your fight in Seattle? Would you want others — others of your kind, even — leaning the truth about your failure?"

Stefan nodded slowly. The elf's words sounded reasonable. If he had been thinking a bit more objectively, he might have noticed the continuing, very subtle changes in the elf's tone: it had grown lower, slower, more hypnotic. The blue eyes never left his face, the strange light in them growing and swirling like there was something lurking behind them.

Stefan did not notice any of this, however. His mind was occupied with considering scenarios involving the manner in which he would finally be rid of his brother once and for all. In truth, despite his humiliation at the hands of the small ones, they were almost inconsequential to him. He could afford to let them live, once his brother was gone. Their lives were so short that they would be dead before he noticed them anyway. But his brother — "Yes..." he said, not even aware that he had spoken.

"Yes," the elf agreed in the same hypnotic tone. "No more will you have to hear of his promise. No longer will you have to hear of how he is great while you live in shame based on things that happened millennia ago. No more will he lord it over you that he was given

opportunities that you never had the chance to enjoy. And all it takes for this to be is for you to let me help you. Will you let me help you, Stefan?"

It had been many years since anyone had considered the possibility that Stefan might have a conscience. Ever since he had awakened to this world several years ago, he had used his power and his intelligence and his cunning to get what he wanted, never paying any heed to the small ones he had to exploit to get it. They didn't matter. Their only purpose for existence was to be used by their betters, at least in Stefan's mind. The fact that he was larger, stronger, more magically adept, and possessed of a mind that allowed him to stay several steps ahead of even the most skilled members of the small races told Stefan that his destiny was to rule. Sometimes, when it suited his purposes and he was feeling magnanimous, he could be a benevolent ruler—this was evidenced by the successful business ventures he headed that produced great wealth not only for him but for those who (unwittingly) worked for him. But like another of his kind who was far older and far more adept at the same pursuits, Stefan did not react kindly to anyone who wronged or slighted him—even if the wrong or slight was only perceived rather than genuine. He had stopped counting the number of small ones he had killed or caused to be killed because he had tired of them or because he had discovered them to be plotting against him. The disappearances kept the others in line: he hadn't had an incident since Seattle, and he had definitely been listening. Naturally, no one ever found the bodies, which kept the others guessing even more. If they had known what had become of some of their fellows, Stefan knew, most of his employees would have run away in a screaming panic and caused him a great deal of trouble. No, it had been better to keep some things to himself—such as the source of some of his meals.

Now, however, as he listened to the elf's seductive words, he found to his surprise that a tiny voice in a part of his mind that he did not even know he possessed was raising itself to be heard. Yes, it was true that he hated his brother. It was true that if he were given the opportunity to kill him, he would take it without question. But what the elf was proposing was that he participate in the murder of one of his own kind with whom he had no feud. Killing small ones was one thing, but killing another like himself—not to mention and older and more powerful other—was something different entirely. "I think—" he started, and then paused.

"Yes?" the elf prompted, leaning forward. There was a half-smile on his face that gave his long, thin face a decidedly macabre aspect. "What do you think, Stefan?"

Images flashed through Stefan's mind. He did not know where they had originated, but it did not occur to him to question them. Images of his past. Images of his shame, his humiliation, and of the constant presence of his brother—always there, always held up to him as something to which to aspire. Images of the small ones, of the battle, of he himself, limping away from the ruined building, half-blind, in defeat. The small voice tried once again to speak up and be heard, but the images washed over it, drowning it like the waves of the ocean over the tiny boat of a child. "I think—" he said again, in a voice that sounded strange to him, as if it was not quite his, "—I think that I can help you."

"Excellent!" The elf grinned, but then his face quickly sobered. "I'm glad to hear it. But Stefan, I think we need to clarify something here—It is not *you* who are helping *me*. It is *I* who am helping *you*. Surely you understand that, don't you?"

Stefan didn't; not quite. There was an odd feeling of fogginess, a lightness in his head that was making it hard

to hold on to any idea that didn't directly involve the elf's words. Somehow this seemed normal, so he did not question it or fight against it. "You – asked –"

"No, no," the elf said, shaking his head vigorously. "I merely came to offer you my help. It's very important that you understand that before we can go any further. My disagreement with Telanwyr, as I said, goes back to before you were born; I could have chosen to deal with it at just about any point. But naturally I have other concerns that have commanded my attention – as, certainly do you – so I have not pursued it. Until now, that is. When I found out about your situation, I said to myself, *You know, there's a chance for me to deal with my problem and help someone out in the process.* So that's why I contacted you." He leaned in a little more. "Do you see that, Stefan? I contacted you because I want to help you deal with your brother. I am only removing the roadblock that prevents you from doing so."

Stefan nodded mechanically, but still something managed to penetrate the fog. "What do you want?" he asked hoarsely.

The elf's smile grew approving, and just a touch nasty. "Ah, then we *do* understand each other," he said. "Good. That will make it all that much easier."

"What do you want?" Stefan repeated. Part of his mind was trying to cut through the strange feelings that had taken hold of him, but every time he tried, the images returned bringing the rage with them.

The elf propped his elbows on the edge of Stefan's desk and placed his chin in his cupped hands. He was still grinning. "I want a favor," he said.

Stefan paused. Warning bells were going off in his head, but they were far away and indistinct compared to the images. "A – favor?"

"Yes. Just a simple thing. A little nothing, really. Just a token gesture to show me that you're grateful for what I've done for you." The strange shapes lurking behind the elf's eyes began to take slightly more distinct form, but Stefan did not appear to notice them.

"What favor?"

The elf shrugged. "Don't know yet. I'll let you know when I come up with something. You'll — 'owe me one,' I believe is how the humans say it."

At this point the warning bells in Stefan's head managed to get loud enough that they were noticeable even through the haze. "I—can't—," he said. The voice was telling him that the elf's request ran counter to every shred of common sense in his being. Owing an unspecified favor to be claimed whenever it struck the recipient's fancy? And to an *elf*? The red haze of anger began to overcome the gray fog. "No," he said in a stronger voice. "Out of the question. If you desire something, name your price and I will consider it."

"Suit yourself," the elf said indifferently, rising. His expression was now one of unconcern coupled with annoyance. "I guess you don't want my help after all. That's fine." He shook his head ruefully. "Try to help someone, and this is what you get. I should have known—your kind can't accept help from anyone. It's beneath your pride or something. Well, then—good luck with your brother." Turning, he started to walk out of the room.

Stefan let him get almost to the door before he spoke. "Wait."

The elf stopped, but did not turn. Stefan did not see the smirk on his face. "What? Have you changed your mind?"

As it was, the elf did not see the smirk on Stefan's face, either. He carefully composed his features into his normal

look of imperious disregard before the elf could turn around. "I was—hasty," he said. "Perhaps I might reconsider the matter."

"Really?" the elf asked as if he didn't care one way or the other. He still didn't turn around.

"Yes. Come back, and we will discuss it." Stefan smiled to himself, although he was somewhat annoyed that he had had to allow the elf his little show before the answer had come to him. His brain was functioning much more clearly now; whatever the fog had been, it had apparently disappeared without a trace, leaving him with the obvious answer. What difference did it make if he were to make the elf a promise of a future favor? In reality, that course of action was playing right into his plans. A favor now would require him to do something—perhaps something he did not want to do. But a favor later—

—a favor later had to have a living recipient to be of any use at all.

Yes, Stefan thought. *He will play nicely into my plans. He will eliminate Telanwyr, and then I will eliminate him. He may be powerful, but I am more powerful, and he will not be expecting my betrayal.* He was quite pleased with himself—pleased enough that he did not think to question that he was now (contrary to his opinions less than half an hour previously) fully accepting of the idea that he would participate in the murder of one of his own kind. "Sit down," he said, forcing his voice into a neutral tone.

The elf slowly did so. "You're not wasting my time, are you, Stefan?" he asked, his eyes narrowed. "I do so hate having my time wasted."

"As do I," Stefan assured him. He was feeling much more in control of the conversation now, so he could afford to be gracious. He paused a moment. "I grant you

your favor," he said at last. "To be claimed when you desire it."

The elf smiled again. The strange shifting shapes in his blue eyes were positively roiling now, but still Stefan did not seem to notice. "Good," he said. "Then we can continue. Let's, as they say, shake on it." He rose from his chair and extended his hand across the desk.

Stefan did not like to touch people when it was not necessary, but this time seemed an exception. With some reluctance he also rose and grasped the elf's bony hand. A brief tingle of something passed between them, but it was barely enough to be noticeable. The elf, however, appeared pleased by the gesture. "Then it's sealed," he said cheerfully.

"What do you plan to do?" Stefan sat back down in his chair.

"Oh, I won't tell you that. It's safer that way. As I said, there's really no need for you to get involved beyond getting him to the spot where I need him to be. And it needs to be soon. He's a crafty one, that Telanwyr, and I don't want to take any chances that he might discover anything before we're ready."

"Tell me what you wish me to do."

The elf gazed at him for a moment, then pulled something from his pocket. "It's best if we don't keep in direct contact anymore after this meeting. I don't think Telanwyr has been keeping an eye on you—and I'm certain he isn't keeping one on me—but that could change and ruin everything." He placed the object he had taken from his pocket on the desk, halfway between himself and Stefan.

It was a small statuette, about five centimeters tall, depicting an exquisitely carved, tightly coiled eastern dragon. Made of some sort of veined red stonelike material, the figure had eyes made of two red gems that

seemed to glow with a mysterious inner light. "What is that?" Stefan asked, regarding it suspiciously.

"A crude communication device," the elf said. "It's a minor, single-purpose magical item, and very well shielded. I don't want to take the chance that our communications are being monitored. I have a similar device. Keep that with you, and I will use it to inform you when I have finished my preparations." He indicated the statuette as if he expected Stefan to do something with it.

Stefan, after a moment, reached across the desk and picked up the figure. He felt the same slight tingle he had experienced when he had shaken the elf's hand, but again it did not alarm him. He slipped the statuette into the pocket of his suit jacket.

"All right," the elf said. "When you've been informed, at that point you will do the following —"

The elf carefully outlined Stefan's part of the plan, never taking his eyes from him as he spoke. As he continued, a slow, unwholesome smile spread across Stefan's face while he nodded in agreement. He had been concerned that the elf's plan would be sloppy or not thought through completely, but from what he was hearing, he did not have anything to worry about. The only thing that the elf did not tell him was how he actually planned to do the deed, but that was probably for the best. What he did not know, he could not be somehow forced to reveal.

When he had finished, the elf rose. "I'll be going now," he said with an odd smile. "I've gotten everything I need. I'll be in touch." With a nod and a mock salute, he turned on his heels and strode briskly out of the room without further farewell.

Stefan remained seated behind his obsidian desk, staring for a long time at the door through which the elf had departed. After several minutes, he reached into his

pocket and withdrew the tiny idol, examining it. It was very beautiful – intricately carved and obviously very old. Shifting his perceptions to the astral plane, he found it to be much the same as the elf had described it: a minor item. The eyes glowed a little more brightly on the astral, but it was otherwise unremarkable.

Yes, this will work nicely, he thought as he shifted back to the material plane and turned the chair around to look out over the brilliant late-night skyline. *I will at last be rid of my brother, and Telanwyr will regret that he ever involved himself in a conflict that is not his. And then, when all is completed, I will crush the impudent elf who had the audacity to attempt to cast bargains with his superiors. A favor, indeed! He will see what becomes of those who fall out of my favor.*

Yes.

So pleased was he at his cleverness that he did not even notice that he was holding the statuette in both hands, rubbing his fingers over it with motions that were very much like the caresses of a lover.

3.

It was back on the astral plane now, where it belonged. And to its reckoning, this had been not a moment too soon.

How tedious it had been, how stifling, to have had to clothe itself in one of those fragile bodies in which the small ones spent the entirety of their short and pathetic lives! How could they possibly bear to be locked inside such feeble little flesh shells, their thoughts (such as they were) limited to the numbing confines of the bony husks that contained their brains?

It had spent only a few hours in the form, and the experience had been sufficiently distasteful that it had determined it would never again do so. It shouldn't need to, now. It had performed the job for which it had chosen the form, and now things were moving along nicely.

Surprisingly, it had been easier than expected. It had never dealt directly with those of his race, but it had always been of the thought that they would not be so easy to mislead. True this one was quite young by the standards of his kind, but the other one – the one it had deemed incorruptible – was younger still, and it was certain that it would not have been able to fool that one with anything like the same level of facility.

It smiled its noisome smile, knowing the reason all too well: hatred was a strong emotion, and a strong motivator. Shame was another. When the two were combined, with rage and envy thrown into the mix for good measure, even the most adept of manipulators could be in turn manipulated by those who could comprehend and exploit their weaknesses.

The plan had been set into motion. The snare had been set and it had fulfilled its purpose; now began the next stage. It would have to make haste – its hold on the foolish one was strong now, but without reinforcement, it would slowly fade. It could not have risked more contact than it had made, for fear that that one, or another close to him, would discover what had taken place. The link was weak and tenuous, but it would spend

a significant amount of its time strengthening it. It wouldn't have to hold for long, at any rate: once the other had been destroyed, it would no longer be necessary to keep a hold on the foolish one.

His purpose, then, would be something entirely different.

The Master would be pleased, it knew. Even though it could not currently touch the Master's mind, it still knew. They had long planned for this eventuality, just in case at some point one or more of the smaller ones like itself were able to make it across the chasm. It had been instructed in what it was to do, and it was following those orders to the best of its ability.

The circumstances had been fortuitous, it knew. It knew what it sought, but it did not know if such an individual existed. It had been prepared to wait for a very long time to discover one, but that had not been necessary. Its patience had been rewarded quickly—a sure sign in its twisted mind that fortune favored the Master's endeavor.

Still, though, seducing the foolish one had been the easy part. Compared to the effort it would take to prepare for the destruction of the powerful one, this had been no more than the simplest child's play. The foolish one had been as a boulder precariously balanced at the top of a steeply-pointed mountain: it had taken nothing but the smallest of efforts to push him in the direction it had desired. The powerful one would be another matter. Although he might not be suspicious, he would still be wary, and one misstep could mean not only the failure to bring about his destruction, but also the destruction of itself.

That would not be permitted to occur. It was, as far as it knew, the only servant of the Master that had managed to make it across the chasm when they had at last completed the tenuous bridge. Most of the others that had made it had been the mindless ones, the ravening beasts who thought of nothing but destruction and considered nothing beyond the current moment. Those that did not fit this description were servants of other masters, with other goals. It knew that if there had been others like itself, they would have made contact by now, for all

of them had been well instructed by the Master in exactly what they would do if they found themselves in just such a position. All of them had the same goal, and all of them were devoted to nothing else but achieving this goal.

But it was alone, and therefore charged with carrying out the Master's plan alone. At the beginning it would be more difficult – certainly the destruction of the powerful one would have been more easily accomplished if there had been others. But after, should it succeed – think of the glory that it would enjoy in the Master's eyes when they were at last reunited! A servant who was able to bring about such a thing would surely be favored, and elevated to the position of highest among the Master's minions.

A delicious thought, but one with which it could not indulge itself yet. This operation demanded a delicate touch and a keen concentration. The way must be prepared, the proper components gathered, and the details of the subterfuge finalized. It would leave the details of luring the powerful one to the appointed place to the foolish one, for he knew better than it did what it would take to be successful. But it must not leave anything else to chance. Everything must be in readiness, and every eventuality planned for. The powerful one would not allow any mistakes.

It sighed to itself, bowing to the inevitable: it would have to return to the flesh shell for awhile to procure some of the necessary components. It by itself was not strong enough to destroy the strong one; even if it were, it would not be wise to reveal such power where others might catch wind of it. There were others, even more powerful than the strong one, who would undoubtedly make trouble for the Master if they were to discover the nature of the plan. No, it was possible for the small ones, if properly prepared and equipped, to prevail even against the great ones. It was simply a matter of finding the right group of small ones and telling them only what they must know to accomplish the purpose.

It didn't really matter, of course, what it told them, because it did not expect that they would survive the operation. Those that the strong one did not destroy in his death throes, it would seek out and eliminate.

Or even better, it thought, smiling to itself with glee as another thought came into its mind, I will not destroy them. Destruction is so wasteful, and any that survive could provide me with much amusement, if I use them carefully.

After all, it may be a servant, but even servants had the freedom to play with lesser beings. The Master would not mind. And until the goal had been accomplished, the Master would not even know. At the point that it did know, it would be so pleased by its servant's resourcefulness and cleverness that it would no longer care. At that point, the Master would take over and the servant would once again have the direction and purpose for which it had been created.

4.

"Position two—report."

"In position, boss." The voice came back refreshingly quickly, crystal-clear over his headware radio.

"Three?"

"Three ready."

One by one the team leader went through the numbers until he was satisfied that the other five members of his group were where they were supposed to be. He didn't doubt that they were ready, but it had been his experience that it was always good to double-check, just to make sure. Especially when you were talking about a job this big. In this kind of operation, one screwup could mean not only failure of the mission and the forfeiture of a whole lot of nuyen, but most likely a quick and nasty death for all of them.

Leaning back against the side of his camouflaged GMC MPUV, he coaxed a cigarette from the pocket of his armored coat, stuck it in his mouth, and lit it. Now, there was nothing to do but wait. It would be another hour at the earliest before anything would start to happen.

His name was Corey Burgess, but nobody ever called him that. To everybody who had ever served under his command, he was simply "Cutter." At thirty-two years old he was an experienced veteran at this game, having sold his services to the highest bidder in more operations than he could even remember anymore. He'd served in and commanded mercenary units on six out of the world's seven continents; he'd performed every sordid sort of duty that nobody else wanted to do, from covert operations to political assassinations, and he'd done them very well. Hell, he was still alive and they were still paying him, so that had to mean something. He was the

sort of guy who would do anything you needed done, as long as the price was right.

He was scared shitless.

The price had certainly been right. If it hadn't, he wouldn't even have considered bringing his team into something like this. As it was, he'd done something he rarely did: he'd asked for their agreement before accepting the job. Normally they trusted him enough to take the jobs that they could handle and that would bring them the highest payment; the team had been together almost a year now and his judgment had not proven flawed so far. But this time the job was so out of the ordinary, so lucrative—but so potentially dangerous—that he had consulted them before giving the green light to the mysterious figure who had hired them, and who had, on securing their agreement, handed over six certified credsticks containing five hundred thousand nuyen each.

That had been half of their agreed-upon payment. The other half was payable when the mission was accomplished. It was the biggest single payoff any of them had ever received. And on top of that, the guy had provided them with some wiz gear to supplement their normal arsenal. If they pulled this off, he'd said, they could keep the gear in addition to the cred.

If they pulled it off. That was the sticking point.

It wasn't every day you got hired to assassinate a Great Dragon.

Cutter took another pull on his cigarette and tried not to think too hard about it. It was just another target. Sure it was a fraggin' big target, tougher than a tank and dripping with magic to boot, but it was still a target. Targets could be neutralized. Hell, the fraggin' *President* of the fraggin' *UCAS* had been taken out, and their shadowy

employer had assured them that this one wasn't anywhere near as powerful as the Big D had been.

Cutter somehow didn't find that comforting.

He also didn't find it comforting, though he couldn't exactly put his finger on why, that their employer seemed quite casual about the whole thing. The way he had conducted himself during the meeting, it almost seemed to Cutter like the guy killed dragons as a recreational activity. It wasn't anything obvious; just something in the guy's demeanor that suggested that he was confident about the mission's outcome. Cutter hadn't asked questions: asking questions about the motivations of the people who hired him was not something he did. He didn't care about their motivations. All he cared about was the balance on their credsticks, and this guy's balance had been just fine.

He'd been over the plan several times in the two days since they had been hired, and he couldn't find anything wrong with it. They'd already taken the first steps last night. The guy with the nuyen had chosen the exact spot at which the job was to take place; Cutter was looking down at it now as he leaned on the side of the GMC. It was a lonely stretch of road on a route leading up to a stately old mansion about five clicks further on. Easier this way, the boss had said; no one else is likely to be coming up this direction, so we won't attract any attention.

"Won't he get suspicious?" Cutter had asked immediately. Of a naturally paranoid bent, he considered the concept of an ambush on a deserted road to be the sort of thing that would set off the radar of anybody with half an ounce of sense.

"Don't worry about that," the guy had said smoothly. "I have that part taken care of. You just do your job and let me tend to the details." He had smiled in a way that had

made even hardened Cutter nervous—the smile had given his unremarkable elven features a look of macabre unwholesomeness.

Of course, Cutter figured, anybody who was seriously talking about offing a dragon had to have a macabre streak in there somewhere. Not to mention a masochistic streak.

Things had gotten a bit clearer when he and the team had showed up a couple of hours ago and prepared to set up their gear. To their surprise, their employer had been there waiting for them. Offering no explanation for why he was there, he had proceeded to instruct them as to exactly where they were to begin their attack. He had pointed out landmarks and nearly invisible demarcations on the road and near it, which Trent, the team shaman, had later uneasily identified as the makings of a very large and very subtle ritual circle.

Apparently there was more to their employer than he intended to reveal. By that time he had taken his leave, however, so they couldn't have asked him if they'd wanted to.

Cutter chose to take the philosophical view, though: if the boss was a spellslinger, that would just be more help they'd have in taking down the dragon. You didn't turn down that kind of help.

He had other thoughts that clawed at the back of his mind, but he submerged them. They had taken the job, and now they were going to finish it.

The plan was good, and as long as the wizworm didn't get suspicious, it should work. They had, after all, borrowed a few pages from the book of whoever had managed to off Dunkelzahn—if it had worked then, it might work now. Maybe even better, since the car the dragon would be traveling in (in human form, the boss had assured them) would not be armored. This wasn't

some big important dragon with bodyguards and magical security and a whole herd of people surrounding him. It was just the dragon himself, not expecting any trouble.

Not that that wasn't plenty.

Ah hell, Cutter thought, finishing his cigarette and stubbing it out on the side of the MPUV before tossing it on the ground, *I'm just tryin' to make this look better than it is. Truth is, we'll be lucky to get out of this alive, let alone cack a fraggin' wizworm*. He was beginning to wonder why he'd taken the job, massive pile of cred or no massive pile of cred. Running a hand through his buzz-cut brown hair, he sighed and climbed up to begin checking over his weapons one last time. Since it was one of the few things over which he had control until things started to happen, he was determined that every bit of it was going to be checked and double-checked until he was 100% certain that it was ready to go.

T minus 50 minutes.

Back on the astral plane and once again freed of the confines of the repulsive flesh shell, the thing that had hired the mercenary team looked over the preparations and was pleased.

The circle was well hidden; it had spent more energy on hiding it than it had spent on constructing it, knowing that if the powerful one with his keen senses managed to pick up any taste of it then all might be lost. It was not concerned, though: concealment and duplicity were in the nature of its kind, and it had studied well at the feet of the Master.

Now all that remained was for its hirelings to perform their jobs without botching them. That was the weak link. It hated having to trust these puny and pathetic creatures with this most crucial of operations, but it had no choice. It did not wish to strain its control over the foolish one by

luring him into becoming more involved, and bringing in others was out of the question. Anyone possessed of enough power to perform the task adequately alone would also possess enough power to destroy it; most would choose the latter over the former. Others of its own kind were also not possible, since the squabbling among those who served different masters might escalate to the point where it jeopardized the objective. It simply could not count on their loyalty to the higher cause.

Besides, if this worked, it did not want to share the glory with others. It, and it alone, would bask in the glow of the Master's praise.

The car hummed along through the sparse early-evening traffic, its powerful, well-tuned engine transmitting very little sound into the compact but luxurious cabin. The traffic had not been sparse up until quite recently: escaping Sea-Tac and getting out of Seattle had been a nightmare of snarled machinery and frayed tempers that neither the driver nor his passenger had any desire to repeat. Now, though, as they had broken free of the Seattle sprawl and headed northward on 5, things had calmed down considerably.

In the driver's seat, Henry Bialosky expertly piloted the mid-size blue Mercedes with only a small part of his awareness, supplementing his view of the road with occasional glances in the rearview mirror at his passenger. Apparently the guy was some kind of big noise who was supposed to be treated with utmost respect, and Bialosky was fine with that. As a freelance driver the dwarf had had his share of big noises in his vehicles, which ranged from a plain-vanilla Americar for those who wanted to be really discreet all the way up to a full-boat Nightsky for those who wanted to do it up in luxury. However, not only did this guy not look like anybody important nor *act*

like anybody important, but the specific request for the Mercedes—luxurious but simple—had thrown Bialosky for a bit of a loop. Hey, though—the customer got what he asked for, especially when he was paying well for the privilege. Even if that meant that Bialosky in turn had been obliged to pay his mechanic a little extra to get the Merc out of the shop a couple days sooner than expected. Nothing but routine maintenance (*have to talk to ol' Sid when I get done here*, he thought. *The thing's runnin' a bit sluggish*) but he still normally didn't like having to pay extra.

Bialosky was one of a rare breed: a professional driver who wasn't a rigger. Sure, he'd thought about getting himself a rig a few times—he'd even had the nuyen saved up to do it—but something had always stopped him. *Something, hell. Fear, that's what it is. Nothin' but fear.* He knew it was true, though he wouldn't admit it to anybody else: he was scared of the kind of invasive surgery necessary to implant the rigging controls in his brain. He liked his brain just the way it was, and he didn't want anybody mucking with it. As a result, two things had happened: first, he didn't get the same kind of lucrative jobs as his rigged buddies; second, he'd been forced to become a better driver on his own. He might not have the jacked reactions or "one with the car-ness" of a real rigger, but Henry Bialosky would happily stack his pure driving skills up against just about any rig-jockey out there. At least in his own mind, his sheer love of driving went a long way toward making up for his lack of cyberware.

This was one of the reasons why he valued the jobs he got from one of his occasional employers, a young Seattle fixer named Gabriel. The kid hadn't been in town very long, but he'd made a lot of friends during the short time he *had* been around. Bialosky was one of those friends. The dwarf had met Gabriel only a couple of months ago,

but the fixer had impressed him sufficiently (and paid him well enough) that he would often turn down other jobs if Gabriel had something he needed done. Those kinds of jobs didn't come very often but they always paid well and were usually more interesting than the run-of-the-mill stuff.

The guy in the back seat, bigshot or no, *was* more interesting than Bialosky's average passenger. The dwarf sneaked another look in the rear-view mirror: the guy still sat serenely on the right side of the rear compartment, watching the scenery go by with an amused half-smile on his face. "Mr. Teller" was what Gabriel had called him. Slim, mid-height, with long silvery hair tied back in a ponytail, he wore faded jeans, a pale blue shirt, and a scuffed brown leather jacket. His features had a vaguely elven look to them even though he was clearly human, and his eyes—they were definitely his most noticeable feature. Clear and aqua-colored, they skimmed over the scenery as if Teller was thinking about something a few million miles away. Bialosky wondered what the big deal was about this guy who was at the same time nondescript and very unusual looking, but it wouldn't have been good etiquette to ask. Drivers didn't ask about the affiliations of their passengers. Fact was, they didn't talk to their passengers, either, unless said passengers initiated contact.

Bialosky, a naturally gregarious fellow, had trouble with that last one. "We'll be there in an hour or so," he commented, figuring that if Mr. Teller really didn't want to talk, he'd just grunt something noncommittal and lapse back into silence. They had spoken briefly at the airport, but beyond that, he had seemingly been wrapped up in his own thoughts.

"Thank you," the man said. His voice was soft and had a slight musical quality – again, more elven than human. "How far is it from here?"

Bialosky took the question to mean that maybe Teller actually *did* want to talk. "About another hundred clicks or so," he said. "It's actually in the NAN lands. We'll be crossing the border in about five kilometers." He grinned, half turning around. "So if you're carryin' anything nasty, might want to throw it out the window now."

Teller smiled slightly in reply, shaking his head. "No. Nothing nasty." He switched his gaze over from watching the scenery. "Have you been here before?"

"Where? Up to the house I'm takin' you to?"

"Yes."

Bialosky shook his head. "Nope. I hear it's a nice spread, though. Your friend Gabriel told me some about it when he hired me to take you up here. He said you were gonna catch up on old times."

Teller nodded. "Yes..." he said with a small smile. "It's been a long time since I've seen him."

"Well, like I said, it won't be long now. Once we get past the border, which won't be more than a formality since I've got all the right papers, we'll be on our way."

Again Teller nodded, leaning back in his seat. When he resumed watching the trees go by, Bialosky interpreted that as a polite way of saying he didn't want any more chit-chat. That was fine. Shifting position to get more comfortable, the dwarf settled in for the ride. Another hour or so and he'd have delivered Mr. Teller where he was supposed to go, and then he was free. About the same amount of time to get back to Seattle – hell, he might even get back in time to watch *Lone Star Squadron* on the trid tonight.

The thing watched the car's progress from its hidden astral outpost and was pleased.

He is not at all suspicious. He expects nothing. It had not dared hope that the plan would go as well as it was going, but so far everything had transpired in exactly the manner in which it was intended to. Somewhere in a back corner of its mind, it allowed itself a bit of pleasure in anticipation of the final result. They were not there yet—not even close—but one of the most difficult hurdles had been surmounted.

It had watched as the foolish one had worked his magic, and it had to admit that he was very good at what he did. His initial contact with the powerful one had been a master-stroke: cloaking himself in illusion to disguise himself as the youngster, he had made contact and invited the other to visit him in a new retreat he had recently purchased. The thing had been almost proud, watching the foolish one play to the powerful one's protective instincts and strong affection for the youngster by confessing that something troubled him—something he would like to discuss with his old mentor. The powerful one had agreed; he had, after all, not seen his friend for some time, and a few days to spend together would be a pleasant diversion. He had agreed immediately to come, saying that he would arrive in human form to avoid unwanted attention.

Still disguised as the young one, the foolish one had contracted for the services of a driver often employed by the youngster, instructing the driver to meet his charge at the airport and drive him to the appointed place. He was to drive a specific car: one that had at the time been in the shop for repairs.

The thing had then taken its cue from the foolish one's deceptions, informing its team of small ones about the driver and the car and leaving the details to them. They,

too, had made it proud. So careful were they in gaining entrance to the garage and making their alterations to the car that no one would ever know the difference. The driver, who was not a rigger and therefore not plugged in to every aspect of his vehicle, would never notice the extra few kilos spread out over the upper and lower parts of the car, and the thing's magical abilities had guaranteed that the garage owner would not be aware that anything was wrong.

Almost idly it watched the car as it continued on its course toward what was beginning to look more and more like the inevitable with each passing moment. All was in readiness: the small ones were prepared; the circle was finished and hidden; the foolish one had done his part.

There was nothing to do now but wait. Impatience at this point could mean nothing but failure.

With less than half an hour to go before the big show was due to start, the five other members of Cutter's mercenary team were, with varying degrees of success, attempting to keep themselves at the height of readiness while simultaneously preventing their overactive imaginations from dwelling too long on exactly what they were getting ready *for*.

They were a varied lot, Cutter's team were, and an unlikely one. About the only things the six of them had in common were that they were all very good at what they did and they were all willing to do anything for the right price. It was a testament to Cutter's leadership abilities that they had managed to remain a cohesive and effective team for the almost a year they had been together despite their wildly disparate personalities. With a less competent leader, it was entirely possible that they might have been at each other's throats by now; as it was, they performed

their duties like a well-tended machine, putting aside their personal differences in the service of the cause.

The cause, of course, was nuyen. Lots of it.

That was the thought that was at the forefront of each of their minds right now, trying to drive out the fear of what they were about to do: they had a lot of nuyen in their pockets, and if they were successful, they would have a lot more. Maybe not enough to retire, but certainly enough to make a decent start at it. From then on, they could be even more selective about the jobs they took. If they managed to neutralize the wizworm, their reputations would go through the roof: not only could they choose only the jobs they wanted, but the jobs to choose from would be piling up in front of them in droves. The thought of that kind of reward was enough to spur each of their money-loving hearts into overriding their brains' rational objections.

Each team member was currently checking over the part of the mission over which he or she was responsible; for now, there was no communication. There was no need for any, and most of the time they didn't like talking to each other anyway. The less said, the better it was for everybody.

Closest to the area they had dubbed "Ground Zero" was the team's samurai, Kresge. At nearly two meters tall and a little over a hundred kilos, Kresge looked and acted the part of the classic razorboy, down to his buzzcut white-blond hair, gleaming metallic cyberarm, and no-bullshit attitude. His cybereyes, which were solid red and could glow when he wanted them to, tended to intimidate anybody he didn't want to get too close to him; that made up a good 99% of the world's population. Rumor had it that he used to be part of a top-notch shadowrunning team a few years ago, until he picked himself up a good old-fashioned alcohol habit and they dumped him.

Nobody on the merc team asked him about it, though, for various reasons: one, nobody cared as long as he did his job; two, nobody was quite sure what he would do if he didn't like the question; three, nobody really wanted *their* pasts looked into too strongly either. If Kresge wanted to spend his between-job time holed up in the local booze dives, that was his business. Just as long as he dried up before the bullets started to fly.

Right now, he moved like a silent ghost through the dense underbrush at the side of the road, his camouflage clothing and forest-hued facepaint making him nearly invisible in the fast-ebbing daylight. Pulling the tiny remote-control unit from the inside of his vest, he checked the operation of the two hidden sentry guns, one on either side of the road. The twin Vindicators rose as silently as the samurai had from behind the two small hills where they were concealed. Watching intently, first on one side of the road and then on the other, Kresge checked the firing angles of the two guns, then lowered them back down like sleeping predators until they were needed.

Kresge had never fought a dragon before, or even had any dealings with one. However, he *had* been involved in large numbers of operations where he had seen the effects of heavy weaponry on everything from armored personnel vehicles to fortified buildings to awakened critters. He was firmly confident in the abilities of technology to deal effectively with just about any threat, dragons included. Of the six mercenaries, Kresge was the least distracted by thoughts of what was to come. The assassination of Dunkelzahn—supposedly the greatest of the Great Dragons, with the possible exception of Lofwyr, the big cheese at Saeder-Krupp—last year had added more credence to Kresge's belief that anything could be taken down if you threw enough lead and high explosives

at it. The key was speed and surprise—if they could get the first shot, he was sure, they would take the fight.

Heading back to where his small Jeep was hidden, Kresge checked his remaining arsenal: the microwave target designator mounted in the back of the Jeep and his heavy machine gun, which was loaded up with a full beltload of APDS rounds. They had not skimped on the outfitting in this mission—the gear had cost them big nuyen (not even counting the stuff that their employer had provided), but to make money you had to spend money. Kresge was hoping that he wouldn't even have to use the machine gun; as long as Cutter was firing his big bang-bang, all Kresge had to do was keep the target locked in. As far as he was concerned, the job was as good as done already.

About a kilometer further down the road, a tall, muscular figure checked out a line of drones spread out along a makeshift runway that had been laid out over a cleared area of the forest floor. The figure muttered and clucked to itself as it moved along the line, almost as if talking to a brood of strangely-shaped children.

Although it would have been nearly impossible to tell by looking from the rear, the figure was female. She was a huge, extremely ugly ork, and her name was PK. Nobody else on the team knew what "PK" stood for; one former teammate had made the mistake of asking her, and ended up with a broken arm and a dislocated neck for his trouble, accompanied by a heartfelt "None o' yer damn business!" If anybody had actually managed to *determine* what it stood for—which was, in fact, Priscilla Kinsley—and had referred to her by this name, chances were good that the unfortunate person would be in considerably worse shape than the guy who'd simply asked her what the initials meant. Priscilla Kinsley was fine with the fact

that she was an ork, uglier than most orks, built like a linebacker and covered with scars. What she wasn't okay with was her name.

She was a rigger, and a good one. Her specialty was drone combat, which was why she was now moving up and down her jury-rigged runway, running various diagnostics on her four "babies" in preparation for their big night. She had only recently pulled the camouflage covering from them and maneuvered them into their proper positions—no sense taking chances of their being seen before it was necessary, after all.

The two Wandjinas needed room to take off, which was why she'd had to set up a long runway for them. They waited there side by side, their Vanquisher miniguns and wing-mounted heavy machine guns silent, loaded, and prepared. Behind them squatted two modified Pratt and Whitney "Sundowner" aerial sprayer drones; normally used for agricultural purposes, this particular pair of drones had been stocked with a considerably more deadly payload.

Satisfied that the drones were performing as expected, PK headed back to her Jeep, her heavy combat boots clumping through the underbrush. Stealth was not her thing, but it didn't need to be. If things were going right, she never left her vehicle, where she was plugged into not only its "brain" but those of the drones as well. If things were going wrong, how much noise she made as she got her ass out of trouble wasn't going to make a damned bit of difference.

Climbing into the Jeep's front seat, she shoved the battered Ford baseball cap to the back of her head and snugged the plug into the datajack on her left temple. Immediately readouts appeared in front of her, providing her with constant updates and diagnostic information about the drones and the Jeep itself. For now, she mostly

ignored them. She knew things were working right, and if anything out of the ordinary happened it would pop up to catch her attention. Instead she let her mind wander a bit as she considered what was to come. Down in the right corner of her vision, the digital readout said 18:32. A little less than half an hour before showtime.

She was scared, although she would have happily died before admitting it, especially to anybody in this group. A bit oversensitive to the fact that she was the only woman on the team, PK prided herself on being "more guy than the guys." With her muscular ork build, baggy leather jacket, and short-cut hair, she certainly looked the part. The only thing that gave her away was her voice, which, when she wasn't making an effort to add a streetwise growl to it, was actually a rather pleasant-sounding midrange alto. It was a source of pride to her that her male team members cussed her out (and were in turn cussed out by her) with the same level of fervor that they reserved for each other.

It was Cutter who had recruited her for the team, and it was he that she trusted more than any of the others. Despite the fact that she accepted them all as professionals and treated them as such, there was always the feeling in the back of her mind that they might cut and run if the going got too tough. She never got that feeling from Cutter, which was why she had agreed to sign on as one of the team's two riggers. He was the only member of the team from whom she would take orders, and his request (aside from the money, of course—never forget about the money) was the only reason she was here now.

A dragon. They had to all be fraggin' crazy. Even with all the firepower they had brought to bear and the advantage of both an ambush and an employer who claimed to be able to provide some sort of undefined magical-type support, they still had to be crazy. Dragons

were one of those things that regular people didn't even interact with, let alone try to kill. Hell, most people would be lucky if they ever saw a real dragon in the flesh (in the scales?) once or twice in their lives. Except for ex-President Big D, who seemed to like having his toothy blue-and-silver mug on the trideo at every opportunity, dragons were a reclusive lot. Little people like PK didn't know what they did, why they did it, or even *where* they did it. Mostly the little people liked it that way. What was that somebody had once said? "Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for thou art tasty and good with ketchup." Wise words. Even better than that other tired old proverb everybody spouted whenever the subject came up.

PK sighed, adjusting her position in the Jeep's seat and flicking her gaze off to check the readouts. She was here now, and she had a job to do. That was all that mattered. When they were done, she'd even spring for a round of drinks at Harv's back in Seattle. In less than an hour it would all be over.

Across the road and about half a kilometer from where PK had taken up her position, another camo-clad figure moved amid the underbrush, not paying too much attention to how much noise he made. It was a good thing, too, because he would have had a hard time *avoiding* making noise, given his three-meter frame and massive musculature.

The troll called Marko frightened everybody else on the team a little, and he liked it that way. He liked it especially that the breeders that made up the majority of the team usually gave him a wide berth, leaving it to Cutter to talk to him when things needed to be talked about. Cutter was a breeder too, of course, but he got the jobs that brought in the nuyen, so Marko was willing to look the other way as long as the money rolled in.

He was of mixed and indeterminate ethnicity, with dusty black hair, tiny intense black eyes, and a face that made PK's ugly mug look like a candidate for a Miss UCAS competition. The one misshapen horn that poked out from his equally misshapen head came straight out from the back, emerging from his long hair like a grotesque pointed nose; this forced him to have to sleep on his side, but it also meant that anyone who was in the way of one of his reverse head butts was in for a world of hurt. And since his personality was every bit as ugly as his face was, he wasn't spared opportunities to use his favorite form of attack.

It was probably a good thing that Marko wasn't too bright, because otherwise he might have had trouble reconciling why someone like himself—a raging bigot who hated anyone that wasn't a troll (or, occasionally when he was in just the right mood, an ork)—would allow himself to be a member of a team that consisted of only two trolls or orks out of six, with the other four being humans or elves. He was relentlessly aggressive in his bigotry, having dubbed himself "Humanis' Worst Nightmare" and spending most of the time when he was not working with the team prowling around whatever town they happened to be in and looking for people to hassle. Humans (*fuckin' breeders*, he called them) were his favorite targets, followed by elves (*fuckin' daisy-eaters*) and dwarfs (*fuckin' halfers*). Orks he only messed with when they seemed to be too buddy-buddy with any of the above undesirables, and any troll, from saint to serial killer, was his friend. Marko had a refreshingly uncomplicated view of life.

He had joined up eight months ago with his friend Burgie, an easygoing fellow troll with a penchant for mayhem and a talent for machine guns. He hadn't been happy about doing it, but one thing Burgie hadn't shared

was Marko's hatred of other races. "Hey, buddy, money's money," he'd said a couple hundred times. "What diff's it make where ya get it?" By the time Burgie had met his reward four months later by stepping on a large land mine and blowing himself into tiny troll pieces, Marko had gotten used to the idea of a steady income, so he'd stayed on. He kept what little remained of his mental consistency straight by designating Cutter as an honorary troll and refusing to listen to anybody else. Since nobody else really wanted to talk to him, the situation worked out just fine for everybody.

Marko's niche in the team hierarchy was heavy-weapons guy. There were others in the group who could handle the heavy stuff (Cutter himself was an expert) but nobody else could employ assault cannons and rocket-launchers with such ease. Marko was big enough that he didn't use things like tripods and gyro-mounts—he considered them sissy accessories. Instead, he fired his Panther assault cannon from his shoulder, counting on his prodigious strength and massive weight to take up most of the recoil. One of the big thrills in his life was firing heavy rounds into targets and watching them go boom.

He was looking forward to watching their current target go boom. He hadn't been lucky enough (that was how he put it in his own mind) to get to see the explosion that had killed Dunkelzahn in person, but he'd watched it many times on the trideo. When he'd found out that they were going to get to stage their own little dragon-dismemberment, he had been almost excited enough to forget that he was working with a bunch of breeders. Besides money and bigotry, Marko's other motivation was the desire to kill things in the most spectacular way possible. The more parts the target ended up in, the happier Marko was.

Right now, he could barely contain himself with excitement. He had checked his Panther, his spare rounds, his rocket launcher, and his extra rockets; then he had checked them again just to be sure. He was loaded up and ready to go. All he needed was the word, and that dragon was going to be history.

A short distance over a ridge on the same side of the road where Marko was currently salivating over thoughts of mass destruction, the team's other rigger was doing a final pre-flight check on his PRC-44 F Yellowjacket helicopter, which squatted patiently on another cleared area waiting to be called into service.

The thin, long-haired man moved around the 'copter's exterior with the familiarity of a lover, the long wire that snaked from its cockpit following behind him. Most of the checks were taking place inside his head, but he still liked the added certainty of the visual inspection, especially before something this important.

Pausing at the front of the helicopter, he ran his hands over the new acquisition, which his mechanic had just installed yesterday under his watchful eye. The Yellowjacket normally carried some pretty heavy weaponry—it was, in fact, currently equipped with two missile launchers—but this was something that he never thought he'd get his hands on. He couldn't wait to get the chance to put this baby through its paces.

An Ares Firelance Vehicle Laser. He had fantasized about being able to install one of these, to command the kind of firepower it possessed, but even at the rate at which the team was normally paid, something like this had previously been well out of his price range. Maybe if he'd been able to purchase one legitimately he might have been able to swing it, but that meant dealing with the

military. That was something he absolutely did not want to do.

His name was Slyde. That was the only name anybody knew him by now, but unlike his teammate PK it wasn't because he didn't like his real one. Up until a year or so ago, he had been Donnie Lynch, hotshot up-and-coming young pilot in the UCAS Army. Back then he'd been destined for great things; his aptitudes for flying the big 'copters had been so high that the Army had sprung for a top-of-the-line vehicle control rig and put him into a training course that, had he graduated, would have placed him in a small and highly select group of elite pilots. It had been just the sort of thing Donnie Lynch had been dreaming about his entire life.

Unfortunately for him, he had been dreaming about something else for most of his life as well, and those dreams tended to get in the way even when he tried to put them aside and get on with business. Usually it wasn't a problem, but one night around this same time last year, it had changed his life.

They had been on a training mission near Charleston. The base was only a few miles from town, so that evening after training he and several friends had gone into town to have a few drinks and see if they could get laid. As the night wore on and their prospects for the latter began to look dimmer, their alcohol consumption increased to the point where even their normal limited amounts of judgment were impaired beyond their control.

It was then that Donnie began to get ideas. If the slitches wouldn't come to them, he told his buddies, let's go find 'em. Since Donnie was the closest thing the group had to a leader, the others went along with him. They adjourned to their vehicle and began to cruise around looking for companionship. *Young* companionship, if Donnie had anything to say about it. Normally he

submerged his fantasies about making it with a young teen girl, but the alcohol had broken down his inhibitions to the point where he was thinking hard about indulging them.

In one of those instances of truly bad fortune for everyone concerned, Fate saw fit to place Donnie's downfall in his path in the persons of Penny Acosta and Millicent Harlow, two high-school freshmen walking home from a friend's house. When he saw them, Donnie smiled an unpleasant smile. "There we go, guys," he'd said, turning the Jeep toward the girls.

What happened next was a little different depending on who was telling the story, but the facts that the authorities were later able to piece together from the other squad members and the two girls told essentially the same tale: the men had surrounded the girls and attempted to hustle them into the Jeep. Millicent had managed to tear herself away and run, but Penny had not been so lucky. With Donnie in the lead, they had taken her out to a remote area on the edge of town. She was alive when they finished with her, but just barely. By that time some of the other guys were getting nervous, imploring Donnie to get back in the car and return to the base. As the effects of the alcohol wore off, most of them were having second thoughts about what they'd done.

Donnie wasn't having any twinges of conscience, but he *was* realizing that if he went back, he'd be court-martialed or worse. Pulling out the gun that he always kept in the Jeep, he had ordered the other guys out and taken off with the Jeep, disappearing into the night. They weren't going to catch him, he'd make sure of that.

And they hadn't. As soon as he could do so he had ditched the Jeep and stolen another car, somehow managing to get out of the area without being stopped by cops or military authorities. Always a streetwise kid (he'd

grown up in one of the worst parts of St. Louis), he'd quickly found his way into the shadow community, using his rigger abilities to pull off a few smuggling jobs and make enough cash to keep himself going and to purchase a new identity. When he'd met Cutter in a bar a few months ago he was tired of running solo and ready to sign on as a member of another team.

Slyde smiled again, giving the laser one last pat before climbing back into the cockpit of the Yellowjacket. He hadn't lost any of his appetites, but now he could afford to pay for them. You could get anything you wanted if you had the nuyen to pay for it. And this score—taking out this dragon and getting the other half of the million the weird elf had promised them—was going to assure that he could indulge whatever tastes he could come up with, no matter how bizarre.

Life was good, he thought, leaning back in the seat and lighting a cigarette. In less than half an hour he was going to get to pit his rigging abilities and his machine against one of the most powerful beings on the planet, and then, when they were done, he would go back to Seattle and...celebrate.

Up the road, on the leading edge of the group's perimeter, the final member of the team waited. Currently concealed high in the branches of a tall tree and without much that he needed to do in preparation, the man named Trent had plenty of time to consider the probable outcome of their endeavor. He didn't much like what he was considering.

Of all the team members Trent had the best reason for being concerned, because he was the only one among them who had any real comprehension of the magical danger they were in if their prey caught on to what they were doing. An Initiate shaman of the Wolf totem, Trent

felt bound, since he had agreed to (and respected) Cutter's leadership, to go along with the plan. Like the others, he was largely motivated by the nuyen signs dancing before his eyes, but unlike most of them, this was more than just a job for him. When Trent committed his loyalty to a leader, a group, or a cause, he did not go back on that commitment lightly. He might have justified doing it if the plan the team had come up with had been a flawed one, but he had grudgingly been forced to acknowledge that, even with the magic wielded by the great wyrm, their plan had a small chance of success. Maybe even a little bigger than small. As long as that was true, he could not come up with a rational reason for deserting his chosen pack, so here he was. Like his other teammates, he knew that they would have to get in the first shot to have a chance, but if the dragon was really as oblivious to the danger as their employer had implied, then the first shot was a distinct possibility.

That was another thing that disturbed Trent: their employer. Ever since earlier that day when the team had arrived at the site and began setting up their gear, Trent had been feeling somewhat uneasy. He had attributed it to nervousness about the upcoming operation, but then the unassuming elf had appeared and briefed them on the precise location where the initial attack was to take place. The elf had seemed extremely adamant that the attack was to happen *right there*, since that was a vital component in his being able to help them deal with the dragon's power. Trent hadn't said anything just then, but he had become more and more certain as the briefing went on that he was looking at the largest and most unusual ritual circle he had ever seen in all his years of practicing the magical arts. Every time he got anywhere near it, he got a vague uncomfortable twinge, sort of like a mild upset stomach. Then the elf had grinned at him,

made a few gestures, and suddenly the feeling had gone away like it had never been there. Trent had elected not to question the elf about it; he didn't really want to know.

His job in this operation was in more of a support capacity than he normally liked. Like his totem, Trent was a warrior who loved the heat of battle and the chance to pit his abilities against the enemies of the pack. He loved it when the madness washed over him, carrying away all his rational human foibles and replacing them with the undiluted voice of Wolf calling to him. He wasn't the sort of shaman who liked to sit up in a tree and cast masking spells, which was exactly what he was supposed to do in addition to his capacity as long-range lookout.

It didn't matter what he liked, though. He was a member of the pack, and as long as he accepted Cutter's leadership, he would do what was asked of him. There would be other jobs where he would be permitted to take a more active role, but first they had to finish this one. He settled himself back against the tree trunk and straightened out his long, armored deerskin coat.

Trent hoped that the other team members would take the same outlook about this job. Despite his loyalty to the team, he didn't completely trust all of them. Kresge was all right—he was a little unstable, but he did his job well and didn't let his personal problems interfere with his work. PK, too, wasn't anything to worry about in Trent's mind. The truth was that he rather liked the ugly ork woman because she was straightforward and spoke her mind, but had no malice in her. No, it was Marko and Slyde whom Trent didn't like to spend too much time around. He could sense the troll's enmity every time they got near each other, and Slyde was hiding something. Something unpleasant, from the impressions Trent got whenever he assented the rigger. The unspoken rule among the group was that you didn't ask about people's

pasts, but it was hard for someone like Trent, who saw so much more than the others, to be entirely comfortable with the things he didn't understand.

He sighed, looking down at his chrono. Twenty minutes. In half an hour, it would all be over for good or ill. Either the dragon would be dead or they would be. There was really no point in thinking too far ahead of that.

"Almost there," Bialosky said, swiveling around a bit to face the man in the back seat. "About fifteen more minutes."

"Good," the man said. "Thank you."

The dwarf nodded and turned back to the road.

The man smiled a bit to himself. He was glad that the dwarf wasn't the talkative type. Normally he would not have minded, but tonight he just wanted to be alone with his thoughts. He appreciated the fact that the dwarf seemed to understand this.

Perhaps this is why Gethelwain has retained his services, he thought. *Because he understands the value of silence.*

The trip had gone well so far; they had made it through the Salish-Shidhe checkpoint while barely having to stop, as Bialosky had flashed what had apparently been the right papers to get them through. The man was looking forward to seeing his young friend again, although he wondered what might be concerning Gethelwain to the point that he would call on his assistance. He had wondered briefly if the problem might have something to do with Sildarath, but had quickly dismissed that thought. Sildarath had sworn not to reveal the existence of the agreement he had made, and there had been no indication that the two had even spoken since the incident in Seattle six months ago.

No, it must be something else. Gethelwain was a highly self-reliant and intelligent youngster, but the fact remained that he had not been long in this new world. There were things he had yet to learn, and who better than his old teacher to approach for advice?

This was the first time he had ventured far from his lair in many months. Unlike Gethelwain, who seemed to enjoy it, he did not gain much from the company of humans and metahumans. It was not that he did not like them—on the contrary, he had met many individuals that he liked enough to consider them friends—but rather that given a choice he preferred to spend his time either in solitary contemplation or in dealings with his own kind. He did not like to take human form, and did it only when it was necessary to avoid revealing his true nature to prying eyes. The name, "Teller," was a necessity too; like most of his kind, he did not reveal his own name when moving among the small ones. He would be glad when he could shed this form and go back to being himself—Telanwyr.

It amused him to watch the way Gethelwain chose to deal with the world, especially when it was contrasted with that of his brother. While Sildarath had, upon awakening, immediately set about gaining power and influence by installing himself in a position of corporate authority, Gethelwain had been more interested in discovering all there was to discover about this strange new world into which he had been thrust. Telanwyr did not spend a great deal of time watching Gethelwain—it would have been a severe breach of etiquette to do so without being invited—but he did check in on the youngster occasionally to see how he was doing. He smiled a bit, reminiscing: Gethelwain had such promise, but he had a long time to realize it. It was satisfying to watch him exploring his world, sampling everything it

had to offer, and trying in his way to make a difference. Telanwyr found his attitude to be admirable if a bit naive, in much the same way as an adult might be amused by a child's desire to save the whales or protest the fur trade or bring about the end of a war. Still, though, children were meant to have grand dreams and unattainable goals. If Gethelwain could harness the power of his dreams as he grew older, Telanwyr had no doubt that he would stand among the greatest of their kind.

Until then, though, he had certainly gotten himself wrapped up with an interesting group of friends, a group over which he exhibited a fierce protectiveness. Telanwyr wondered if one of those friends—the woman, perhaps, the one who had saved his life—was the source of his concern. It disturbed Telanwyr a bit that Gethelwain had allowed himself to get so close to a group of humans and metahumans, but again he indulged it because it was another fact of youth. Besides, he supposed, he *was* looking forward to seeing Gethelwain. The reason for it was not terribly relevant. If it was because of his friends then he would attempt to counsel the youngster as he always did and that would be the end of it.

It suddenly caught his attention that the dwarf was slowing the car. "Is something wrong?"

Bialosky shook his head. "Nope. Just looking for the turnoff. It's up here some—there! Got it!" Expertly, he swung the wheel around and turned the Mercedes onto a smaller road off to the left.

Telanwyr nodded and settled back. He was in no way suspicious, and his astral scan of the dwarf had reinforced his lack of suspicion. Bialosky's aura was purposeful, cheerful, and utterly unconcerned.

"Sorry 'bout that," the dwarf said. "Turned a little sharp there."

"No need for concern," Telanwyr replied. Hands folded in his lap, he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. It wouldn't be long now.

"One, this is six." Trent's voice came over Cutter's radio. "Target sighted. Just entered the road."

"Roger that, six. Sit tight." Cutter stubbed out his third cigarette and swung himself into the rear of his MPUV. Flipping the switch that allowed him to speak to everyone at once, he said crisply, "Okay, people. They're on their way. Time to rock and roll."

Unseen, the thing watched from the astral plane as the blue car turned onto the small road and proceeded inexorably toward the trap that had been laid.

He still suspects nothing.

It was pleased. This one was something of an anomaly among his kind: a being with no enemies. In his position as wise counselor and mostly neutral observer, his tendency to avoid conflict and seek accord among those who approached him for advice meant that as far as he knew (and he did keep his ears open for such things—he had not lived this long by being a fool) none of his kind had any quarrel with him. Certainly not enough of a quarrel to warrant a call for his assassination. Though he might suspect his young protege's brother, that one was young too and did not have the power to do such a thing even if he wanted to.

Or did he? The thing smiled. Anyone, after all, could be an enemy if they had the right "friends" on their side. It wondered what the powerful one would think if he were allowed to know the reason for his destruction. It almost regretted that it would not be able to tell him.

But at least he would die thinking that his dear young friend had betrayed him. That was even better!

Its excitement grew as the car drew closer.

"Two?"

"Ready."

"Three?"

"Check."

"It's just up the road," Bialosky said. "Another five clicks or so."

Telanwyr nodded without opening his eyes.

"Four?"

"Ready to go, Boss."

"Five?"

"Yeah."

The thing wriggled with glee. Almost –

Just a little further –

Almost –

"Six?"

"Got the headlights on visual, boss. Ready."

"Okay, everybody: places. Go on my signal."

Bialosky hummed almost silently to himself, his hands relaxed on the wheel. He was happy. The trip had gone off without any problems more pressing than the snarled traffic out of Sea-Tac, and pretty soon he'd be on his way back to Seattle for a couple of beers and some trid. Grinning, he realized he was humming the theme song from *Lone Star Squadron*. He –

"Ready...and..."

The thing leaned closer in anticipation –

The car surged forward —

"...NOW!" Cutter jabbed his finger down on the detonator.

5.

The explosion ripped through the unarmored Mercedes as the radio detonator set off the ten kilos of C12 that had been hidden in both the roof and the undercarriage of the car.

Bialosky died instantly. Cut off in mid-hum, the dwarf didn't even have time to scream before he was vaporized.

Telanwyr's cry of agony when the explosion tore into him transformed into a deafening bellow at the same time his human form transformed into his true one, erupting up through the ruined roof of the car. Gravely injured, bleeding and disoriented, he nonetheless managed to propel himself upward on powerful wings, his only thoughts of escape and of betrayal. *Gethelwain, why have you done this?* his mind cried out through the pain.

Kresge was the closest to the blast, so he got the best view of the enormous blue-green form coming up out of the remains of the Mercedes. "Holy shit! Look at the *size* of that thing!" he breathed into the commlink.

"Can the chatter, Two," Cutter's voice snapped immediately. "Get ready with that designator!"

Already the twin Sentry-mounted Vindicators on either side of the road were doing their jobs, firing full-auto APDS rounds upward into the dragon, ripping great red stitches in his flanks before he got out of their arc of fire. Cutter quickly swung his vehicle-mounted ATGM (*the Great Dragon – how appropriate*, he thought randomly) around and waited for Kresge to get the target designator locked in. Down the road he could already hear Marko letting loose with his Panther cannon; the explosion hit the dragon on the far side, away from Cutter, so he couldn't see if it was effective.

"I'm in the air, Boss," came Slyde's confident voice. "I'll be on him in a sec."

"The drones are up," PK added. "Ordering them into position now."

"Okay—get ready to switch to ultrasound. Big boss said he might go invisible."

Affirmatives came back quickly from the five mercs.

On the astral plane, still well hidden, the thing watched in satisfaction as the plan played itself out. The pawns were performing as expected, and had done very well. The most important part of this had been done right—the explosion had gone off within the designated perimeter. As the dragon's blood rained down into the confines of the thing's ritual circle, it felt the power coursing through it. Speaking the words of a foul and ancient spell, it set about dismantling the dragon's magical defenses so as to leave him open to the pawns' continuing assaults.

Telanwyr was in trouble and he knew it. The pain from his wounds was incredible; it was making it hard for him to think, to plan a means of escape. Already their weapons were tearing into him, injuring him from all sides. Whipping around madly in midair, wings beating, he tried to get a bead on his assailants. He wasn't going to run away yet—he might be hurt, but he was still functional and well capable of dealing with the threat. The damage the explosion had done to his less-protected human form had been considerable, but now that he was in his true form with all his defenses up, it would be unlikely that they could hurt him this badly again.

In his mind, they had made a grave tactical error by not killing him with their first shot. Focusing his mind, he concentrated on calling in some backup of his own.

"Got him!" Kresge said into the radio. "On target! Nail 'im, Cutter!"

In the back of the MPUV, Cutter saw that Kresge had gotten the target designator locked on the huge but fast-moving form overhead. Taking careful aim with the Great Dragon, he squeezed the trigger and launched the armor-piercing warhead. Just as it was designed to do, the missile tracked the signal put out by the microwave designator, penetrating the dragon's armored hide behind his front legs and exploding there, tearing a meter-wide gash. The dragon bellowed again in rage and agony. Cutter hurried to load another warhead.

Well concealed in her Jeep nearly half a kilometer away, PK directed her four drones into their positions, giving them their instructions as they went. The dog-brains inside each drone were capable of following limited instructions and taking limited initiative; PK took full advantage of this while still keeping individual corners of her mind available to orchestrate each drone's activities should it become necessary.

The Wandjinas' instructions were very simple: fly an erratic pattern around the dragon, staying near the rear and away from the head, and fire their weapons (two machine guns and one Vanquisher minigun each). The actual firing part was where PK wanted to control things herself, of course. You didn't leave things like aim up to drones when it was this important.

The Sundowners' jobs were more important and more tricky, so PK spent more of her time personally making sure that they got where they needed to be. They were small (at least compared to the dragon—*damn*, that thing was big!) and would likely therefore be overlooked, but getting them into position was going to be a dangerous

business. If that thing spotted them and knocked them out of the air, the feedback could be enough to seriously impair PK's ability to function and control the other drones. Better to wait until the time was just right than to be impatient. The other guys were doing a good job already — she'd get her chance.

Slyde, meanwhile, was coming up over the ridge in his Yellowjacket, already bringing the twin missiles mounted on the 'copter to bear on the dragon. He flew the Yellowjacket in a fast and erratic manner, preventing the dragon from getting a fix on him. Not that it was trying at the moment, but he wasn't taking risks. He knew that his part was one of the most important in this operation, a fact which was a source of considerable pride to him. That dragon was going down, and he was going to be the one to take it down. "Take *that*, motherfucker!" he yelled, loosing the two missiles with a flick of his mind.

Unlike the warhead Cutter had fired from the Great Dragon ATGM, these missiles were not "smart," but that only meant that Slyde would have to make sure to get his aim right. Nothing to worry about — the thing was bigger than a fraggin' *house*! Sure it was fast, but so was Slyde. He grinned a manic grin as the two missiles hit the dragon, one in the side and one in the back of the neck, and exploded. "Whooooeeee!" he shrieked into the radio.

"Quiet out there!" Cutter ordered, but Slyde could hear the excitement in his voice as the dragon screamed again.

What was happening?

How were they hurting him so easily with their weapons? His magical barriers and his natural armor should have been sufficient to ward off all but the most powerful of them, but yet still they were getting through!

The pain was getting nearly unbearable—how many more missiles did they have? Even one such as he couldn't stand up to this kind of punishment indefinitely.

Telanwyr fought to put some more distance between himself and the attackers, but that wasn't easy to do when he didn't know where they were or how many of them were lurking in the forest below. He could see the heat-traces of several of them and their weapons—he would deal with them first. But they were continuing to hit him; if he went in any closer he would give them a better shot at him. If he tried to get away without identifying where all of them were hidden, they would continue to fire on him and could injure him even more severely. He didn't like the choices he had, but he knew that his best chance of getting through this would be to put distance between himself and the attackers and try to hit them from afar. If luck was with him, his elementals would take care of some of the threat.

From his vantage point in the tree where he was perceiving the astral plane, Trent spotted the elementals before any of the others did. "Boss!" he called in the radio. "Elementals! Earth heading your way, and fire coming in at ten o'clock toward my position! Big ones!"

"Got the earth-guy," Cutter's voice came back after a couple of seconds. "Look sharp, everybody—there might be more of 'em. Trent—can you take 'em?"

"Not both. I'll get fire, then go from there."

"Roger that, Six."

Trent was already conjuring, hoping that his biggest forest spirit would be sufficient to keep the huge fire elemental busy and off his teammates' backs. His eyes widened as the elemental came through the trees—that was the biggest one he'd ever seen! Over four meters tall and shaped vaguely like a semi-upright flaming lizard, it

shambled toward him, moving quickly. It was a good thing that the underbrush and trees were fairly damp from the prodigious rains they'd been getting lately, or they would have to deal with a forest fire in addition to the dragon.

Marko heard the information about the elementals over his radio, and realized that he would probably have to deal with one of them. He wasn't pleased about it—he would much prefer to continue to fire big bang-bangs into the side of the dragon—but as the biggest and strongest of the team, he'd have to take out big strong ground threats to keep them off the others. Aiming his Panther, he blew off one more shot at the darting dragon and grinned as it hit, then stomped off through the forest toward the elemental's last reported position.

Near the initial explosion site, Kresge continued to move around in the back of the truck, attempting to stay under cover while keeping the microwave designator locked in on the dragon's speeding form. His was one of the most vulnerable of the six positions: he had to be somewhat out in the open to allow the designator to do its job, but he didn't have the mobility of, for example, Slyde in his Yellowjacket. Like PK, he was stuck in his position and had to rely on the hope that the dragon would be too busy dealing with other threats to notice him. That might not be such a wild hope, he realized as he focused in again: the dragon's hide was ripped and bloody, and his grace seemed to be deserting him. Kresge recognized the behavior of a creature fighting for its life. The dragon was going to be, if anything, more dangerous now.

The thing grinned as it watched the show. *He still hasn't figured out that I've reduced his magical barriers!* it

thought, pleased. Subtlety *was* its specialty, but even it hadn't dared hope that things would work out quite this well.

Obviously the Master had blessed the plan. Perhaps it was even observing its servant now!

The Master was going to be very proud.

In the sky, Telanwyr continued to thrash around, looking for a means of escape or a target. At this point either of the two would have been equally desirable. Suddenly the air was full of little darting machines, but he couldn't get a shot at any of them. They were moving too fast—some of them faster than he did, others being careful to remain out of his line of sight. More explosives had ripped holes in his hide; he was starting to notice the beginnings of the effects of blood loss now. Where *were* they? How many of them were there? What—

There!

His shifting gaze fell upon the glowing form of one of the attackers down below. The figure appeared to be standing in the back of a vehicle, pointing some kind of weapon at him.

With a quickness that seemed incongruous with his enormous size, Telanwyr swung himself around, reared backward in the sky, and projected a great gout of flame downward, aimed straight at the figure in the vehicle.

Cutter saw instantly what he was doing. "*Kresge! Get out of there!*" he yelled over the radio. "It's—"

Kresge didn't even have time to move before the flames engulfed him and burned him, the Jeep, the designator, and several meters of surrounding forest to blackened cinders. His dying scream was abruptly cut off.

Cutter didn't give himself time to mourn his fallen comrade. Sweating, he brought the Great Dragon around and squeezed off one final shot as Kresge died, hoping that the designator had still been functional long enough to guide the warhead in to its target. Rewarded with the sight of the missile tearing into the dragon's shoulder and blowing another massive bloody crater, he did not cheer. That one had come at a high price. "Kresge's down," he said dispassionately, bending to grab his heavy machine gun. "Keep your eyes open out there."

Slyde hung back in the Yellowjacket and began powering up the Firelance. *Bastard likes fire?* he thought, his grin almost orgasmic in its delight. *I'll show him some fire, right down his fuckin' throat!*

"Okay," PK said. "I'm sendin' the Sundowners in now. Get yer masks on and get ready. Don't know quite what this is gonna do to 'im." With a small corner of her mind she directed the two Wandjinas to continue what they were doing, allowing them to fire their three weapons under their own power. The machine guns and Vanquishers were doing some small amount of damage, and more importantly they were keeping the dragon from orienting himself on any one place. Even if they didn't hit as well as they had been, they would still provide an annoyance. She considered Kresge's death to be partially her fault, because part of her job was to keep the dragon disoriented. Couldn't worry about that now, though—her most important duty was coming up now. Carefully, shifting her vision to see through the drones' "eyes," she guided the two sprayer drones in close to the dragon's head.

She hadn't had a chance to use these yet—they had been one of the new acquisitions provided by their

employer—but she'd made sure to look them over before putting them into service. The modifications were nice: Sundowners were normally employed as farm drones, to spray pesticides and nutrients over a large area, but these had been doctored to allow them to spray a much higher concentration of material over a smaller area. Instead of the normal 25 x 25 x 10 meter cloud of the stock Sundowner, these were set for 10 x 10 x 10. Additionally, their 50-liter spray tanks had been reduced to only 20 liters to allow for some engine modifications for increased speed and maneuverability. She would only get one or two shots each out of the things, but she didn't think there would be time for more anyway. She was looking forward to keeping these babies when this job was over.

Trent couldn't spare any attention for what was going on in the sky—he was too busy dealing with the fast-approaching fire elemental that was bearing down on him. He gasped as it drew closer: it was bigger than he thought! His forest spirit tried gamely to get in its way and intercept it before it could reach Trent, but the spirit was too small. Further, its wooden body was highly vulnerable to the searing flames coming off the elemental's form. As Trent feverishly tried to summon another spirit—earth, maybe, or rock—while at the same time scrambling to get out of the tree and put some distance between himself and the elemental, the massive fire creature shoved past the forest spirit and leaped into the tree, surrounding the shaman instantly and cutting through his magical protective barrier as if it wasn't there. Like Kresge, Trent screamed; the scream petered out into a gurgling cry and stopped.

"Trent?" Cutter barked. "Trent! *Report!*"

There was no report—only silence.

"*Shit!*" Enraged at losing yet another soldier under his command, he pointed the machine gun at the dragon and let fly on full auto. The satisfaction as he hit was not enough to counter the sinking feeling that this was all going to be for nothing.

Marko waded in to meet the earth elemental, slinging his Panther across his back as he went and substituting his favorite hand weapon—a two-meter-long Dikoted claymore. He grinned, tusks gleaming. Sure the thing was big, but so was he, and he had taken down elementals before. This thing was going to regret the day that it decided to come after him, that was for sure.

The Sundowners flitted into position. PK focused her mind, moving the two drones into place, one on each side of the dragon's head. She wouldn't have much time—right now it seemed to be looking down into the forest for more targets, but it would notice the drones any second now.

Easy...easy...lower the left one just a bit...right in front of its nose and mouth...orientation just right...

NOW!

With a mental command that carried through her vehicle control rig and into the minds of the two drones, she ordered them to fire.

The two drones had not been loaded with the same substance: on the suggestion of their employer, who admitted that even he wasn't entirely certain what would be effective, she had painstakingly filled one drone with a nasty cocktail consisting of DMSO and a drug known on the streets as "Hyper"—a direct neural stimulator that would serve to amplify any sensations, including pain, experienced by the victim in addition to causing severe disorientation. She'd had to be very careful with the stuff,

because the concentrations she knew she'd need to be effective against something as big as a dragon would have been enough to incapacitate her—maybe even kill her—in an instant.

The second drone, however, was loaded with something even more deadly—something that had given her even more nervous moments while she had been filling the tank with it. Although she was using remote means to do so, safely ensconced some distance away while other drones performed the dirty work, she knew that any mishaps could be fatal. Cyanide was like that, especially because, again, she had used higher than normal concentrations to ensure that the dragon would be affected. There was enough of the stuff in the drone's reservoir to take out a small town if it was delivered right. Of all the mercs, she was probably the most grateful that their employer had chosen this spot for them to do the deed, as she was afraid of what might happen to any other people who were unlucky enough to be in the area. She had no particular desire to kill innocents. At least not without getting paid for it.

Instantly at PK's order the Sundowners shifted into action, spraying their payloads at near point-blank range into the dragon's face. "Yeah!" she shouted, pumping her fist, as the dragon screamed in agony.

NO! Pain...Agony...Must...Make it stop!

Telanwyr screamed again as the concentrated mists engulfed his head, working their way into his mouth, his nostrils, his eyes. The pain was excruciating. Fighting disorientation, he struggled to stay in the air as suddenly he wasn't certain which way was up. He could feel himself bleeding from multiple places now, the pain from each of his wounds seeming to magnify as the mists were sucked deeper into his lungs. His legs, wings, and tail

thrashed madly as he tried to right himself—rational thought was being carried away by the agony and the confusion and the continued assaults.

He was afraid now. He could not remember any time during his multi-thousand-year lifespan when he was so in fear for his very existence. *Must...concentrate. Must...get... away...Fly...away...Escape...*

The pain...

He felt it in a vague peripheral sort of way when one of his flailing legs crashed into something, and out of the corner of one of his stinging eyes he could see one of the tiny machines careening downward, where it crashed and burned. Focusing on that for orientation, he caught sight of another heat-source. Enraged, he drew his mind together enough to fling a spell at the heat-source before the madness and the pain took him again.

Gethelwain! How could you do this...Have I so misjudged you all these years?

In the Jeep, PK fought to maintain control of the other three drones as the dragon knocked one of the Sundowners out of the sky with his writhing leg. The feedback came immediately back through her connection, overloading her brain for a moment before she was able to concentrate again. She ignored the resulting headache; it wasn't that bad, and she'd certainly had worse. As long as she could keep the other drones out of the dragon's way, she might even get another pass with the remaining Sundowner. At least he'd taken out the one with the Hyper; she wasn't sure what might have happened if the cyanide drone had gone down and spread its deadly cargo over the forest.

She did not even know the spell was coming. One moment she was sitting in the Jeep preparing to send the drones in for another run, and the next moment her body

was ripped limb from limb by an unseen arcane force that sent her individual parts spinning like gore-strewn missiles off in multiple directions. The Jeep, perversely, was untouched. Except for the bloody clumps that remained on its front seat and the shredded vestiges of the rigger control cable snaking down toward the floor, there was no evidence that anyone had ever been there.

Overhead, the drones flitted around, following their last instructions.

"Lost PK," Slyde said on the radio, grudgingly devoting a small amount of his attention to the alert that had popped up in the corner of his vision announcing that the connection to the ork had been severed. He was beyond caring about his fellow teammates now; all he was interested in was getting the laser locked on target so he could get the final shot on the dying dragon.

Cutter steeled himself at the latest announcement, refusing to allow the growing feeling that the operation was in jeopardy to affect his performance. That was three gone now: Trent, PK, and Kresge. Only himself, Slyde, and Marko were left, and Marko had the earth elemental to deal with. If this dragon was going down, he and Slyde were going to have to do it. At least the dragon hadn't gone invisible as they'd feared. He wondered if that had been more of their boss' doing, but didn't have time to dwell on it. Three of his people were dead and he had a job to do. Raising the machine gun again, he fired off another full-auto barrage at the twisting form.

Marko held his claymore ready and awaited the elemental's approach. "Come on, dirtball," he taunted through clenched teeth. "C'mere and see what I got for ya."

Big as the troll and even wider, the blocky creature shambled through the underbrush, pushing small trees aside to make room. Marko took a step back as he got a taste of the sheer size of the creature; like Trent, he had never fought one this big before. He didn't know much about magic (he looked on mages about the same way he looked on non-trolls) but he did know that if you weren't a spellslinger, you had to hit spirits hard to take them down. He raised the sword. "Come on...that's it. Just keep comin', you bastard."

The elemental, obligingly, waded in.

Half-blinded and more dead than alive now, Telanwyr continued to thrash madly in the air, unable to think clearly enough to form a plan of escape. The buzzing machines seemed to be everywhere, their guns firing more pain into his already wracked body. His mind was full of hurt and terror and bizarre images and floating mist; already he could feel the darkness beginning to descend on him. Was this how it was going to end? After countless thousands of years, after all he had seen and done and been, was he to be destroyed by a group of small ones with their tiny weapons?

He hardly thought that could be possible. They could not kill him so easily, not if they were working alone. There had to be something else.

Was Gethelwain involved? Was he here, hidden somehow and aiding in the destruction of his old friend and mentor? Even in his befogged state, Telanwyr had a difficult time believing that. The youngster loved him like a second father—what could he possibly have done to cause Gethelwain to turn on him now?

His eye caught another machine—a larger one this time—coming in from his right side...or was it his left? In his confusion he could barely tell up from down now.

Struggling to orient himself, he wheeled his torn and battered body around to face the new machine.

Below, Cutter lined up another shot with the heavy machine gun. The dragon was moving fast and more erratically than before in his pain-shrouded madness; Cutter had to be careful not to hit Slyde, coming in with the helicopter. "Slyde! Not too close!"

"I got him, Bossman," the rigger's voice came back.

"Back off a little!" Cutter ordered. "I don't want to hit you!"

"Negative on that, Boss," Slyde said. "I got me a shot lined up and I'm gonna take it!"

"Slyde—damn you, don't—" Cutter's voice abruptly turned into a cry of terror as the fire elemental, forgotten after it had engulfed Trent, leaped into the back of the truck. The last things Cutter experienced before he died were the sound of his machine gun ammunition cooking off and the smell of his own flesh roasting.

The earth elemental neatly ducked Marko's first claymore swing, getting inside his reach with a grace not normally expected from something so large and ponderous. Too late, Marko remembered the other thing he had forgotten about spirits—unlike trolls, the bigger they were, the smarter they were.

As the troll flailed ineffectually and tried to bring his sword around again, the earth elemental flowed around him, filling his mouth, nose, eyes, and ears with hard-packed earth. Mercifully, he was unconscious before the elemental ripped his head from his body.

Up in the Yellowjacket Slyde heard the dying cries of his remaining two teammates, but he felt no sympathy. He had never felt any particular bond or friendship with

any of his teammates—they were simply people with whom he worked. As long as they did their jobs, he did his. But he could always get new teammates. Right now, the business at hand was to finish off this dragon. *Maybe the big boss'll be so happy he'll give me everybody's share*, he thought greedily. *But first I gotta do this.*

Relying on his vehicle-control-rig-enhanced speed (he had the fastest one on the market, a fact of which he was very proud) he backed the helo off a bit and watched as the careening dragon spun around in midair and tried to get a bead on him. A calm settled over him; a slow smile spread across his thin face as he mentally pushed the button that activated the Firelance. "Rock and roll, mo-fo," he whispered as the dragon reared back to project flame again.

The powerful laser beam cut through the night sky, contacting the dragon's head. There was no recoil, no impression that there had been a hit, but as Slyde watched, the beam cut through the scaled hide and stopped the dragon in mid-breath.

Telanwyr shrieked as the laser split his head, his entire form stiffening for a moment, stopped there in the sky like a great unmoving statue. During the few seconds it took the great body to realize it was dead, the dragon's bellow of death-agony echoed far and wide over the forest and across the astral plane.

Then his body began to plummet earthward.

"YES! YES! YES!" Slyde screamed into the radio, oblivious to the fact that no one was around anymore to hear him.

Almost no one.

The thing on the astral plane couldn't spare any concentration on celebration now. As the dragon died, it wove the final part of the ritual it had begun hours ago.

Slyde backed the helicopter off a bit, hanging back so he could watch the dragon—*his* kill!—hit the ground. After that, he planned on landing the Yellowjacket and seeking out the elf. He wanted his payment now, and he wanted to get his ass the hell out of here, as far as he could. Maybe he could even get a piece of the beast to carry as a trophy. A claw, maybe, or a tooth.

Things didn't quite go as he planned, though.

As he watched out the front window of the Yellowjacket, the huge body continued to fall. Any second now it would hit; it would probably cause a small earthquake in the immediate area, he figured.

But the body did not hit.

When it had reached a spot only about ten meters above the forest, the dragon's form was suddenly wreathed in some kind of bizarre, roiling red energy field. Slyde stared wide-eyed as the field surrounded the dragon, slowing and then stopping his fall. "Wha' the fuck—?" he muttered, leaning forward to get a better look.

And then there were *things* in the energy. Moving things. Writhing things. Oozing things. Things that slithered around inside the redness, moving toward the dragon with their twisted and misshapen arms outstretched and their mouths open.

Slyde blinked, certain he was seeing things, but when he opened his eyes again, they were still there. Even someone like him, with more than a passing acquaintance with the dark side of life, could tell pure, unadulterated evil when he saw it. His stomach churned, his guts filling with icewater, but he couldn't stop staring. It was as if something compelled him to watch whatever the final act

of this grim little tableau was going to end up showing him.

The red energy field lit up the night sky, bathing the entire forest in a noisome glow that gave it a decidedly hellish aspect. As Slyde continued to gape, the writhing things moved in, surrounding the dead dragon, whose form was visible in silhouette inside the field. What were they – ?

No – no, it couldn't be –

They can't be –

Slyde's protesting stomach finally gave up its hold on his last meal, but even being violently ill all over the Yellowjacket's control panel didn't stop him from continuing to stare. His mind would not let him believe what he was seeing.

The things were *consuming* the dragon's body.

It didn't take long; the entire process was over in somewhat less than a minute. It was like a repulsive parody of a school of piranha devouring some unfortunate creature that had fallen into their pool, except that in this case, when the things finished there was nothing left. The dragon's body had completely and utterly disappeared. At the end, when the final bits were being consumed, the color of the energy field changed briefly from red to a kind of sickish purple hue, and then to an equally unhealthy gray-pink. Then the light flared brightly and was gone along with the dragon.

Also, apparently, along with the hold the view had had on Slyde. "Oh shit oh shit oh shit..." he mumbled incoherently, blinking his eyes again and again. With no further thought of money or his employer or dragons or his former teammates, he spun the Yellowjacket around and sent it streaking away into the night at as high a rate of speed as it could muster.

6.

From its vantage point on the astral plane, the thing completed the last part of its ritual. As the dragon died and fell from the sky, the magical forces the thing had set in place sprang into action, surging forward hungrily to snatch up the powerful creature's potent life energy and channel it—

—elsewhere.

So much power! The thing was a bit taken aback at the sheer amount of raw energy that washed over it as it was sucked into the conduit it had set up. Surely this must be enough energy to—

No.

Struggling to control the tide of power, it did something that was not easy for it to do: it exercised restraint. The time was not yet right. All must occur at its appointed moment.

The dragon was strong—even stronger than it had anticipated. It was remotely possible that the thing might have been able to complete its plan using this dragon's energy alone. But if it failed—if it was not enough power—

—then all would be lost. To lose something so precious because of a lack of restraint...the Master would not be pleased. The ritual had not been set up with that end in mind, and therefore it could not be trusted to perform the task that was yet to come.

So, in the end, the thing did exactly what it had intended to do. Carefully, carefully, taking utmost patience to conceal each move it made (it was easier now, with the dragon's energy boosting its own) it wove the threads of the next stage of its plan. This part would take quite some time to finish, but it was crucial that it be done

correctly. It would have time. And when it was finished, it would be sure to erase all indications of what had occurred here from the physical and the astral realms, so prying eyes would not be able to trace it. Doing that before would have been exceedingly difficult, but as the thing sat there with the dragon's power coursing through it, it had no doubt that now it would be a simple task.

After that, it would use whatever was left of the power to erase the memory of the ritual from the small one's mind (it would leave vestiges, just enough to give him nightmares and possibly drive him insane).

And finally, it would solidify its hold on the foolish one. His continued loyalty would be absolutely essential for the next stage of the plan.

7.

Something was wrong. Stefan could feel it.

He sat at his desk, the chair turned around so he could stare aimlessly out the tall window over the brightly-lit Boston skyline. He didn't see any of it.

His hand was inside his jacket pocket, rubbing the small stone dragon figurine that had not left his person since the elf had departed his presence three days ago. A few times he had tried to leave it somewhere—even as close as his desk drawer—and move away from it, but it always called him back, pulling at his mind until he reclaimed the statue and returned it to his pocket. He wanted to touch it. He wanted to feel its contours in his hand and feel its comfort in his mind. Most of the time that didn't concern him, but occasionally, late at night, he caught a corner of his consciousness wondering what he had done. It was at those times that the very fact that he almost always *wasn't* concerned disturbed him even more.

Tonight was the night when the operation was to reach its conclusion. He did not know the exact time, nor did he know the plan. Operating on a kind of foggy autopilot, he had made the arrangements the elf had directed him to make, impersonating his brother to hire the driver and to contact Telanwyr. His performance must have been good, because neither suspected anything. He would not have expected the dwarf to be suspicious—his illusions were powerful enough to fool even the most perceptive of the small ones, a category into which the dwarf did not fall—but Telanwyr had been a more dangerous proposition. Stefan had not known if he would be able to adequately impersonate his brother's mannerisms, his voice, his appearance, well enough to

deceive one who knew him better than any other living creature.

Fortune was with him, though, because Telanwyr was not by nature a suspicious being, especially where his young friend was concerned. It was almost as if the older one had expected at some point to hear from Gethelwain, and so when it occurred, he did not question it. Stefan had been very careful to say only what was necessary, and to inject just the right amount of mild distress into his tone. Too much might have caused Telanwyr to investigate further, while not enough might have cast doubt on the immediacy of the situation. The elf had said that the plan had to move ahead quickly, because even Telanwyr, given enough time to mull over the inevitable minor inconsistencies in Stefan's duplicity, would eventually contact Gethelwain to obtain answers to his questions.

Stefan leaned back in his chair, the statuette still cupped in his right hand, and wondered when it would be over. He tried to muster some enthusiasm over the fact that soon his way would be clear to destroy his hated brother at last, but he could not do it. Every time he pictured Gethelwain's destruction, his mind came back to Telanwyr's. He forced himself to think of the child's pack of friends who had helped to humiliate him in Seattle. He even tried to think of things that had occurred thousands of years ago, things that he did not often consider because they inevitably threw him into a rage that he could not easily control. Nothing helped. His hatred of his brother was each time overridden by the feeling that he had done something terribly wrong.

Flinging himself up from the chair, he began pacing around the office, his hand still in his pocket. His fingers moved almost feverishly over the statuette, but it did not register on his mind that they were doing so. He wished that the elf would give him some indication of what was

going on, but so far tonight communications had been stubbornly silent. Perhaps once he knew that it was over—

The statuette tingled in his hand.

He stopped, startled, his fingers tightening around it. Slowly, he pulled it from his pocket and stared at it.

It was glowing.

The veined red stone appeared to be pulsing with a strange inner light; in fact the whole figure was pulsing rhythmically, almost like some sort of bizarre heartbeat. The two ruby eyes, even though they were fixed in place, seemed to be staring back at him. There was something malevolent in their gaze.

It is done.

The words spoke inside Stefan's mind. It was somewhat like the manner in which dragons spoke while in their true forms, but subtly different. His brain protested the intrusion and he was filled with the feeling of something unclean being inside his head.

He is dead.

The voice in his head spoke one more time and then was silent. Slowly, the statuette ceased its pulsing and returned to its quiescent state. The eyes went dark last of all.

Stefan stood in the middle of his vast office, his breath coming in quick gasps.

What have I done?

He closed his eyes, his grip tightening around the statuette again. Suddenly angry, he flung the stone dragon across the room with all the strength he could muster—but before it hit the ground, he used a levitation spell to return it to his hand.

What have I done? he thought again. Fear was not an emotion that was familiar to him, but the edges of it were

creeping around his consciousness as he looked once more down at the thing in his hands.

Somewhere off in the distance, like a faraway echo, he heard the sound of laughter. Returning once more to his desk, he dropped into his tall leather chair, spun it around, and propped his elbows on the desk's smooth obsidian surface.

Your way is clear now, he thought despairingly, trying to summon the hatred, the envy, the rage. Anything to drive away this feeling that something had changed within him, something over which he now had no control.

He was already beginning to regret granting the unspecified favor to his visitor.

The dragon statue regarded him silently. In it, he could almost see the grinning face of the elf.

And something else.

What have I done?

8.

It was almost two minutes into the third quarter of the UCAS League playoff game, and the sold-out crowd at the Kingdome was in high spirits.

It had been a hard-fought first half, but coming out of halftime the Seahawks had managed to carve out a slim 17-10 lead over the heavily favored Patriots following a spectacular 75-yard touchdown pass from quarterback Chuck Strczynski to hotshot ork receiver Matt Low. Low was only in his first year with the Seahawks, but the team had high hopes for him. So far he was living up to his press releases, helping to lead the team to one of its best seasons ever.

The game was the hottest ticket in town. It had been five years since the Seahawks had even made the playoffs, let alone managed to survive the first two rounds of eliminations and sit poised on the brink of a Super Bowl berth. As a result, tickets were selling through legitimate ticket-broker outfits for as high as a thousand nuyen each, and fetching up to three times that amount on the street.

Nonetheless, it was probably safe to say that of the six current occupants of luxury box #7 high above the gridiron, at least four of them would not have been present had they been required to pay the astronomical prices needed to secure such a coveted spot. All of them could have easily afforded it, but they likely would not have thought of doing so under normal circumstances. Their interest in the game ranged from fairly strong attention through total indifference, but they weren't here entirely for the game.

As the Patriots called a time-out and the action ground to a halt, Ocelot spared another moment to be a bit amazed at the turns his life had been taking lately.

Before this he had never even been to a football game, let alone attended one surrounded by such splendor. The box had everything a football fan might want, and more: liquor, food (and more being continuously brought in at their beck and call), beer, large trideo screens overhead so you could follow the action up close, almost sinfully comfortable leather seats—*yeah, I could get to like this*, Ocelot thought, leaning back in his chair with a beer in one hand and a hot dog in the other. *None of that foo-foo food, of course, but the rest of it's not bad*. He had pointedly ignored the more upscale offerings on the menu in favor of traditional sports-type food: hot dogs, chips, popcorn, pizza, beer. *Nice to see somebody other than those fat corp bastards can get to enjoy this kind of stuff*, he thought.

He looked around at his friends, wondering what they were thinking about this whole thing. Joe, his huge troll bulk spread out over a leather couch in the second of the box's two rows, leaned forward in anticipation as the Seahawks set up once more for a play. He looked like he had settled in for the long haul—on the table in front of him was a pitcher of beer (what Joe considered a glass) and a plate of hot dogs, onto which he was sloshing condiments without taking his eyes off the game. Off to his left side was a tub of popcorn the size of a small trash can.

It was hard to tell what ShadoWraith was thinking—but then, it was *always* hard to tell what ShadoWraith was thinking. The elf sat, his face utterly impassive as usual, his gaze roving over the action on the field, the fans in the seats down below, the other occupants of their own box, the sidelines, and probably anything else there was to see. He apparently did not share Ocelot's dislike of "foo-foo food," because he had some sort of vegetarian-and-seafood plate in front of him, complemented by a glass of his favorite Anchor Steam beer.

Next to 'Wraith, Winterhawk was trying gamely not to look bored. Ocelot grinned, watching the mage perusing the overhead screen for clues as to exactly what was going on; when they had been invited to attend the game, 'Hawk had almost declined, citing total lack of interest in football. As a native Englishman he had not grown up with it like the others had, and on top of that he had never been a fan of team sports. There had been only two reasons he had come: Ocelot's urging and the fact that he had no desire to offend the host of this little party. "What are you thinkin' about, 'Hawk?" Ocelot couldn't resist asking. "You look confused."

The mage turned back around. He didn't have a plate in front of him, but he was holding a glass of Guinness — at least his third, if Ocelot's count was correct. "I am *not* confused," he protested. "I'm just having a bit of trouble following what's going on, that's all."

"You don't really want a lecture on the finer points of football, do you?" Ocelot asked innocently, taking a deep breath as if in preparation.

"No," 'Hawk quickly interrupted. "Thank you, but I'll just soldier on."

"It's not really that hard," Joe spoke up from the back row.

"Yes, well, remind me to describe cricket to you sometime," Winterhawk said, twisting around to face the troll. "*That's* not hard either, once you get used to it."

"No thanks," came a voice from the other side of the box. "From what little I know about the rules of cricket, we'll be here all night."

Ocelot grinned again, looking up. Kestrel was in the process of drawing another beer from the mini-bar. As he watched, she came back over and plopped down in her seat, shoving her baseball cap back on her short white-

blonde hair. "What do *you* know about cricket?" he asked teasingly.

"I've been to a cricket match," she said in mock offense through a mouthful of popcorn, her green eyes twinkling. "Nearly bored me right out of my skull. I think it was in India—trust me, there were a lot more interesting things to do in India than watch a bunch of guys in white outfits whack a ball with a funny stick."

"She's right," admitted the final member of their group. "We ended up leaving early. I think we might have offended some of the fans."

Ocelot nodded, sparing a quick glance down at the action on the field before returning his attention to the speaker. The Patriots had gotten the ball back on their own 38 yard line, and it was now 2nd and 14. It looked like they were setting up for a rushing play, moving their two troll running backs into position. "Uh...yeah."

If someone who didn't know the man sitting next to Kestrel were asked to identify his occupation, "fixer" would probably have been one of the last things they'd have picked. Sim star, maybe, or spokesmodel, or some other calling where looks and charisma and presence were the primary attributes. For one thing, he didn't look old enough to be a fixer. He didn't even look old enough to be drinking the beer in front of him. But despite his uncanny, almost androgynous beauty and his youthful appearance, there was something more in his bright violet eyes—something that even a moment's examination would reveal to be deeper, older, wiser.

Right now, however, he didn't look particularly deep or wise. Leaned back in his seat with his feet up on the edge of the box, he wore a leather Seahawks jacket, faded Levi's, and bulky high-topped basketball shoes. His gaze, flicking back and forth between Ocelot and the game,

seemed to miss nothing. Smiling, he added, "We tried to sneak out, but I'm afraid we didn't blend in too well."

Kestrel yanked off her baseball cap and dropped it on his head, pulling it down over his eyes. "Yeah, Gabriel. Sure. *You* trying to blend in anywhere. That's a laughier." She regarded him with great affection. "Tell them why we were in India in the first place, why don't you?"

"I don't think —"

"So why?" Joe spoke up.

Gabriel paused, then answered almost sheepishly, "I heard there was a restaurant in Bombay that served a truly incredible vindaloo."

Kestrel grinned, reclaiming her cap. "Most people just go for takeout. But *no-oo-o* — he hears about a good restaurant halfway around the world and off we go."

"I didn't hear you complaining," he said with an impish smile.

"So — was it worth it?" Winterhawk asked, glad for something else to pay attention to besides downs and yardage and blitzes.

Gabriel nodded. "Oh, yes. Every bit." He pulled the tub of popcorn from Kestrel's lap, put it in his own and, still smiling, focused his attention back on the game.

"Don't listen to him — he likes *everything*," Kestrel put in, wrinkling her nose in affected disapproval.

Ocelot looked back and forth between Gabriel and Kestrel. Six months ago, their easy familiarity would have awakened feelings of jealousy in him that he would have found hard to control. Even though he knew that Gabriel's and Kestrel's relationship was one of best friends rather than of lovers, it still caused twinges even after all this time and after all that had occurred.

He did think it was kind of funny, though, that none of the team showed the least amount of astonishment that Gabriel would dash off to Bombay with Kestrel just to try

an exotic dish at a recommended restaurant. He was like that, they had found out. Impulsive, eternally amused, always willing to try something new – when you coupled these traits with 'richer than Midas', you ended up with a 100% unpredictable combination.

Add that to the fact that he was not what he currently appeared to be, and that made the equation even harder to figure. Ocelot had encountered several Great Dragons in his shadowrunning career, but Gabriel had to be without doubt the strangest. Maybe it was because, by the standards of Great Dragonkind, he was still just a kid. But for whatever reason, life around him was never boring.

Ocelot thought back a little over six months ago when the team had first encountered Gabriel. Kestrel had been just back in town at that point, trying to pick up a relationship that she and Ocelot had broken off two years previously following her team's move from Seattle to somewhere back East. Ocelot—in fact, the whole team—had been suspicious of Gabriel upon first meeting him, but Ocelot had had more reason than the others. To him, it had appeared very much like Kestrel had taken up with a very handsome young man for whatever reason, which meant that he couldn't figure out why she was interested in getting back with him. Even after she'd assured him that there was nothing more between her and Gabriel than friendship and business, he had been uncomfortable with the whole thing.

Strangely, Gabriel's revelation of his true nature had both calmed and exacerbated his feelings of jealousy. Calmed because he was finally able to internalize the fact that Kestrel was *not* having a relationship with him, but exacerbated when, following a catastrophic fight with Gabriel's half-brother atop a Downtown skyscraper, she had admitted that she did, in fact, love him. They had all nearly died—even Gabriel himself—during that battle,

and it was at that point that Ocelot had gotten to see an unfiltered demonstration of Kestrel's feelings for the young dragon.

She and Ocelot still saw each other—in fact, they saw quite a bit of each other, and on the surface things had continued to go on about the same way as they had gone before. They still went out, and not too many weeks went by when one of them wasn't spending at least one night at the other's place. The change was something less obvious but more profound, as they had both realized that what they had felt was not love, but merely strong attraction. Ocelot was okay with that, since he had been uncomfortable with the idea that a guy like him, who didn't like any ties in his life, had actually managed to fall in love with someone. He was pretty sure Kestrel, who was as much a career shadowrunner as he was, felt the same. Neither of them would have admitted it without a gun to their heads, but in a way it had been a bit of a relief. It had taken away all those messy questions of commitment and permanency and left them free to just enjoy each other's company for as long as it was fun.

Suddenly the crowd was on its feet; Ocelot snapped back to the present to realize that the Patriots had just tried a long bomb (their quarterback, an ork with heavy mods, specialized in just such a thing) that was very nearly intercepted in the end zone by Seattle. The pass was ruled incomplete and the fans settled back down again.

"Great game, huh?" Joe said enthusiastically, guzzling beer.

"You bet," Kestrel agreed.

'Wraith got up to refill his glass without comment as Winterhawk watched the instant replay on the trid monitor. He had missed the initial play because he'd been

amusing himself by examining the bright flaring auras of the die-hard fans on the astral plane.

"Wonder if Harry's here," Joe commented. "Seems like the kinda thing he'd be interested in."

"Didn't ask us," Wraith said.

Winterhawk chuckled. "If he had, he probably would have tried to charge us for the tickets."

"Ain't *that* the truth," Ocelot agreed. Harry, their own fixer, got them the good jobs, but he certainly wasn't known for his generosity. "He's probably up in one of the other boxes with half a dozen bimbos, eating filet mignon and caviar and sipping wine out of their shoes."

"Bleah." Kestrel grinned. "Sounds pretty unsanitary to me."

"Yeah, that's Harry all right." Joe took another swig of beer and washed it down with a mouthful of corn chips.

"I can just hear him sayin' *You guys don't give me no respect*," Ocelot said, doing a fair imitation of the fixer's gruff tones.

"He's right, isn't he?" Winterhawk finally succumbed to hunger and leaned over to grab a slice from the remains of the huge pizza on the table in front of Ocelot.

"Well...yeah. But that's not the point."

Kestrel laughed. "You guys are terrible. What do you think, Gabriel—you think your team talks about you like this when you're not around?"

"I don't make a habit of drinking wine from women's shoes," he said mildly. "Besides, I think your combat boots might prove a bit daunting even for my constitution."

Kestrel swept her cap back off and thrashed him soundly about the head and shoulders. "*You* better show some respect, lizard-boy," she growled through a big grin.

"So," Winterhawk said, deftly trying to change the subject before things got out of hand and popcorn started flying, "how is this team of yours doing?"

"Yeah," Joe added. "And how come they didn't get to come to the game?" He glanced down at the field: the Patriots had just gotten nailed with some sort of penalty (illegal procedure, according to the ever-helpful trideo screens) and were now at second and 30 on Seattle's 42 yard line.

"They're on a run right now," Gabriel said. "Somewhere down in the California Free State. It wouldn't have been practical to invite them."

"Are we ever gonna get to meet 'em?" Joe asked. He finished the last of his plate of hot dogs and dragged over a bowl of chips.

Gabriel shrugged. "I never really thought about it. They were at the party at Lunar Dreamscape, but I don't suppose you had any reason to meet them then."

"We were a little busy," Ocelot said. That was when they had first encountered Gabriel, and he had given them more than a bit of a reason to be wary of him at the time.

"Just throw another party," Kestrel said wickedly. "Oh yeah, I forgot—you *hate* parties, don't you?"

Gabriel just smiled and swung back around to watch the game.

For the next few minutes, the rest of the group did the same, settling back into their seats. The action was heating up now: it looked like the Patriots were going to score when ork quarterback Gary "Grunt" Gronstein faded back for a long pass only to be taken down by a massive sack when his offensive line fell to a Seattle blitz. The *thunk* of Gronstein's head hitting the Astroturf was carried loud and clear over the trid, accompanied by the cheers of the Seattle fans. The game paused for a few moments while Grunt was carried off the field and second-string QB Billy Hunsaker hustled in to take his place. This changed the odds of the game considerably; while Grunt had been the

centerpiece of a punishing Patriot offense, Hunsaker was only in his third year and suffered from notoriously spotty performance. Suddenly it didn't look like quite such a certainty that the Patriots would pull this one out. All around, excitement began to build in the stands.

Ocelot moved over a seat so he was next to Kestrel. "So," he whispered with his best bad-movie-villain leer, "you want to come over after the game for a little – uh – post-game activity?"

"Hmm...depends on what you had in mind," she whispered back. "I don't think I could handle much more popcorn and beer."

"Popcorn and beer were the farthest things from my mind," he assured her. "I was thinking more of...I dunno...hitting the showers."

"Hey you two," Joe spoke up. "Don't'cha know it ain't polite to whisper?"

"Just jealous," Wraith commented, startling everyone.

"Jealous?" the troll demanded, grinning. "Of what? Them?" He hooked one huge thumb toward Ocelot and Kestrel.

"Can't whisper."

"Huh?"

Winterhawk turned in his chair. "He may be right," he said speculatively, his eyes showing his amusement. "You never told us your Native American name, Joe, but I'll wager it could be Whispers Like Foghorn."

"You wanna come over here and say that?" Joe demanded with his own grin. For emphasis, he grabbed a massive handful of popcorn.

Gabriel rose, heading over toward the bar with his empty glass. "Gentlemen, gentlemen," he admonished. "Take it outside, before you –" Suddenly he froze in mid-step, his sharp gasp clearly audible all around the box. Staggering, he fought to remain standing as his hand flew

to his head. The glass, ignored, slipped from his grasp and crashed to the floor.

Kestrel's eyes widened in fear. "Gabriel — ?"

He stood there a moment, swaying a bit from side to side. Then, after a second or two, he lost his balance and toppled.

Joe, closest to him, caught him before he fell and effortlessly laid him out on the couch he himself had just vacated.

Kestrel vaulted over her seat and came down next to Joe, kneeling by the couch. "Gabriel? What happened? What's wrong?"

As the other runners, football game forgotten, hurried over and surrounded him, Gabriel's eyes opened. His normally fair skin was more pale than usual, and beads of sweat stuck his ink-black hair to his forehead. His breathing was fast and shallow, like someone who had just had a bad fright. "No — " he whispered. "No..."

Kestrel took his hand, her features wreathed with worry. "Gabriel — what is it? What happened? Please tell us."

Taking a deep breath, he waved her off. He used his other hand to swipe his hair off his forehead. "I'm — all right," he said shakily.

As he started to rise, Kestrel put a gentle hand on his chest. "Stay down," she said. "Rest. You just fainted."

He shook his head, moving her hand aside and sitting up the rest of the way. "No. I'm — fine. Really. No harm done." Gradually color was coming back to him and his breathing was slowing.

"Are you sure?" Winterhawk asked. "P'raps you might let me examine you astrally, to see if —"

Again Gabriel shook his head. "There's no need for that. Besides, you wouldn't get anything useful anyway...not with my masking in place." He looked up at

them, meeting each of their gazes in turn, ending with Kestrel. "Please. I'm fine. There's no need for concern." Over Kestrel's protests, he stood. After testing his balance for a moment and determining that it had returned, he regarded them again. "I hope you'll excuse me," he said ruefully, "but I think I should go now. Please stay and enjoy the rest of the game."

"Wait a minute," Ocelot spoke up. "Is there something wrong? Something you're not tellin' us about?"

"No. No. Nothing you need to worry about." There was something odd and weary in Gabriel's eyes, but his expression was unreadable. "Please. I—I must go now."

He started to turn back around toward the door to the box, but Kestrel grabbed his arm. "Gabriel, wait. I'll go with you. You shouldn't drive like this. It could happen again."

Taking her upper arms in his hands, he shook his head. "No, Kestrel. Please. Let me go." For a moment he just stared at her, fixing his violet gaze on her face. It seemed to the other runners that some brief communication passed between them, and then she nodded.

"Okay," she whispered.

He squeezed her arms gently, then turned and was gone.

9.

The runners stared at each other as the door swung shut behind Gabriel. "What the hell was *that*?" Ocelot demanded to nobody in particular.

For a long moment, nobody answered. Then Winterhawk turned to Kestrel. "Have you any idea what might be wrong with him?"

"Maybe dragons get sick from too much popcorn and beer," Joe suggested.

Kestrel hadn't taken her eyes off the closed door. "Something's not right," she said. "He didn't tell me much, but—he's very upset about something."

"Obvious," Wraith said. "But what?"

"I don't know," Kestrel said with a sigh, shaking her head.

"Stefan?" Ocelot said quickly. The four team members exchanged worried glances.

Kestrel shook her head. "No. I don't think so. What I got from him was that he was—sad. Upset. Not afraid or angry."

"You don't just keel over like that from being sad," Joe said. "Especially not when you're as tough as he is. There must be more to it than that."

"Attacked?" Wraith asked. The runners looked around as if they expected to see something hovering around inside the box. Down below the game went on without interruption, but all five of them ignored it.

Winterhawk dropped back into the nearest chair. "I doubt it will do any good, but let me take a look at the astral and see if anything's amiss." Without waiting for a reply, he slumped, his chin dropping forward onto his chest.

Ocelot moved over next to Kestrel. "Is there anything he's been—upset about lately? Has he mentioned anything to you?"

"No. Nothing." She shook her head, looking lost and confused. "He's been the same as he always is. Didn't say a word about anything that's been bothering him."

"Would he tell you?" Joe asked. "I mean, if he had a problem?"

Kestrel shrugged. "If he told anyone, he'd probably tell me. But he doesn't tell me everything, of course."

Ocelot paused before speaking, pacing around the box. "Well," he finally said, "I guess if he doesn't want to tell us, we're not gonna find out. As long as he's okay and Stefan isn't coming after us, I guess it's none of our business."

"True," Wraith said somewhat reluctantly, nodding.

Winterhawk's head raised and his eyes opened. He didn't speak right away; he had an odd look on his face.

Ocelot grabbed his shoulder. "Find anything?"

"Not—sure," Hawk said uncertainly. "There was—something there, but it was fading so quickly that it was difficult to get a good look at it."

Kestrel immediately came around in front of the mage. "What kind of something?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "Again, I'm not certain. Some sort of—energy. I think it might have been quite strong at one point, but it was barely there now."

"Energy?" Wraith raised an eyebrow.

"That isn't quite the right term." The mage appeared to be struggling for the way to put it into words. "A—disturbance in the astral plane. The sort of thing that might be caused by strong negative emotions, or great suffering of some sort."

"You sure Gabriel didn't cause that himself?" Joe asked. "He could put out a pretty strong astral disturbance if he's upset, couldn't he?"

Winterhawk looked up at him. "Hadn't thought of that. It's possible, certainly. But from the look of things, I'd be more inclined to believe that he got hit fairly hard by something first. P'raps some sort of psychic feedback brought on by the disturbance."

"So why didn't it happen to us too?" Ocelot demanded. "Or at least to you? I didn't feel anything at all. Did any of the rest of you?"

All four of the others shook their heads. Winterhawk sighed. "The only thing I can surmise is that it was either aimed directly at him, or he's just so much more sensitive to it than any of us that it was able to affect him while the rest of us were simply oblivious to it." He paused. "As I said, it had already faded almost to nothing by the time I got a look at it. I'll wager that if I go back again now, there won't be any trace of it."

"So..." Kestrel said slowly, "If it is some sort of...disturbance...that hit him, will he be all right? Could it be something dangerous?"

"My guess—mind you, this is only a guess—would be no, it's not dangerous," Winterhawk told her. "Long-term exposure to strong negative astral energy like that could eventually prove harmful for magically-active individuals, but a brief flash like that—" he shook his head. "I doubt it. Of course, I'm speaking from a human and metahuman standpoint. I've no idea how things like that would affect—someone like Gabriel. But in general, I think it would be rather like what happens to deckers or riggers when they're involuntarily disconnected from their machines."

"Dump shock," Wraith supplied.

Kestrel nodded. Having worked with many deckers, she was quite familiar with the term. "Okay." She paused. "I hope you're right." Looking around, she took in the runners and the game, then sighed. "Guys, I hope you don't mind, but I'm really not in the mood to watch a football game right now. I don't think I could concentrate on it anymore. Why don't you go ahead and stay—we shouldn't all miss it. I think I'm going to go try to find Gabriel and see if he'll tell me any more about happened to him."

"You sure you don't want us to go with you?" Ocelot asked.

She shook her head. "No—I think it would be best if I talked to him alone. That's assuming I can find him, of course." She smiled faintly at Ocelot. "If I can't find him, I might call you later, okay?"

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah."

After she left, the runners looked at each other, at the game, and then back at each other. It was clear from their expressions that each of them couldn't shake the feeling that Gabriel's episode somehow boded ill for all of them, even though they had no tangible evidence to support such an idea. Suddenly the football game didn't look as exciting anymore.

Wordlessly, the runners gathered their gear and left the box.

10.

Master?

...

Master, can you hear me?

I am here.

Master! I have reached you! Your plan has been successful!

Yes. You have done well, my servant.

Oh, thank you, Master! All has gone well so far.

Tell me of what you have done.

I have been busy, Master, just as you have directed. As you can see, I have found a way to establish communication between us, so you can instruct me on what you wish me to do next.

You have destroyed a being of great power. One of the Enemy.

Yes, Master! Yes! I have found a situation that we might turn to our advantage. Fortune must indeed favor our plans, to have provided me with such a situation.

There are others involved.

Yes. Two others. I have already seen to it that one of them will become ours in time.

Well done, my servant. Normally I do not favor such initiative in my minions, but these are special circumstances. Your foresight will ease the way for what is to come.

Oh, thank you, Master! Thank you! You know that it is your praise for which I exist.

What of the other?

The other will come in time.

Will it? Are you so sure, servant?

I am sure that if Master decides that one is needed, then I will do whatever is necessary to do Master's will.

I want that one most of all, my servant. Even more than the one you have destroyed, that one's latent

potential, properly harnessed, could ensure victory for us.

What do you wish me to do, Master?

Continue as you have been. Consult me only if necessary—we cannot risk revealing the existence of this method of communication. There are forces here that could destroy it in an instant should they become aware of it.

Yes, Master. I will do as you order.

11.

Kestrel stood in the elevator alone, her hands pressed against its back wall. As it continued upward, taking her toward Gabriel's penthouse apartment in downtown Seattle, she closed her eyes and tried to come up with any rational explanation for what had happened.

He had not given her much information in the brief mental communication he had sent her while he'd looked into her eyes. *"I think something terrible has just happened,"* he'd said, his tone full of sadness and confusion.

"Terrible?" she had asked. *"Dangerous?"*

"I don't think so – not for any of us, at least. Please, Juliana – I must go and find out what has happened."

He didn't often call her by her real name; when he did, she knew he was very serious. Reluctantly she had let him go, but it had been against everything her heart had been telling her to do. Not, of course, that she could have stopped him should he have decided to go without her agreement.

She didn't have any idea if he was actually home or not. His black Dynamit was in its usual place in the garage, but that didn't mean anything. He could have just dropped the car off and gone anywhere from there. However, since she didn't know where else he might have gone, this was the best place to start.

The elevator door opened on the gray-carpeted hall. Slowly she made her way down to the large wooden door at the end and knocked on it. "Gabriel? It's me. Are you in there?"

There was a long pause, and then a soft voice spoke in her mind: *"It is open."*

Kestrel shoved open the door and entered the apartment, not sure what she expected to see. Ignoring the

high, sweeping windows, the huge columns, and the small inviting groups of furniture clustered around the enormous room, she stopped a few steps in and looked only at him.

He was in dragon form, crouched in the middle of the vast floor, his golden scales shimmering in the scant light. As she watched, he swiveled his head around so he could fix his gaze on her. "*I thought you might come,*" he said. His tone sounded ragged and weary.

"I was worried about you," she said. "The others were too. Will you tell me what's happened?"

The dragon sighed, dropping his head back down on his front legs. His long tail was curled tightly around him like a cat's; even in an apartment this size, it was hard for him to stretch out completely without knocking things over. "*It would not mean anything to you,*" he said sadly.

She came over to him, showing no fear at being so close to his sharp teeth and wicked-looking talons. "Gabriel—" She paused, and then: "Gethelwain. Please. If you don't want me to pry, just tell me. But something's obviously bothering you a lot. I want to help, if you'll let me."

He regarded her for a long moment without replying; she could feel his warm breath as she stood before him. Then, at long last, he shifted and changed form, becoming once more the handsome young man. This time, though, instead of the Seahawks jacket and jeans, he was dressed more in his usual style: pale gray tailored suit and purple silk tie. The look of sadness had not left his eyes. Turning, he went over to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared out over the lights of Seattle. "A dear friend has died," he said softly.

Kestrel came quickly over to stand next to him. "How—do you know?"

He lowered his head. "I felt it," he whispered. "He — cried out to me as he was — dying."

"Is that —" she began, picking her words with care. "Is that what happened to you at the stadium?"

He nodded without raising his head. "Yes."

"But — how? Who — who was it?" She watched his face intently as she spoke.

"Kestrel —" He brought his gaze up to meet hers for a moment, then dropped it. She didn't think it was possible for someone to display such profound grief with nothing but his eyes. "It —" Shaking his head, he sighed. "You wouldn't know him. I've never spoken of him to you before. But I've known him for a very long time."

Gently, she took his arm. "Are you — sure? I mean...with nothing but the astral energy —"

"I am sure," he whispered. "He is dead, and there was nothing I could have done to help him. He called for me, and I wasn't able to help."

Kestrel took a deep breath. She was at something of a loss as to what to do. What did one do to comfort a grief-stricken dragon? She didn't think offering him a drink would be the right approach. Finally she went for the direct method, asking quietly, "What can I do to help?"

Again he shook his head. "I don't know," he said. His voice was very quiet and very ragged. He looked up at her with haunted eyes. "I don't know what to do myself. I know he is dead, but I don't know where, or why, or who has killed him. I don't know where to start," he added in despair.

Kestrel was afraid, but she didn't want to show it. Gabriel was always in control of himself; with the single exception of his confrontation with his brother six months ago, she had never seen him show any sort of negative emotion. Now, though, he seemed to be coming unglued, and she had no idea how to deal with him in that state.

"Come and sit down with me," she said, keeping her tone soft and soothing.

Listlessly he allowed her to steer him over to one of the soft leather couches near a window. He dropped down into it and continued to stare straight ahead.

Kestrel sat down across from him, taking his hands in hers. "Tell me what you want, Gabriel," she said. "You know I would never pry into your business if you don't want me to, but I can't just leave you like this."

He took a deep breath, then let it out slowly as if centering himself. "I don't know what I want," he said. "I want to find out who did this, and why. But I can't even think straight right now."

For a long time she did not answer. The whole situation was overwhelming her a bit: as much as Gabriel currently looked like he was almost young enough to be her own son, he was still in reality an ancient creature, thousands of years old, with thought processes she could not hope to follow. When he was in his human form and acting like his normal self, she sometimes was able to forget that. Now, though, it was clearly obvious that she was in uncharted territory. Anything deep enough to mess up the mind of a Great Dragon wasn't going to be something she could easily cope with. To assume otherwise, she knew, would be highly presumptuous on her part.

Instead, she decided to approach him in the most honest possible way: from her own human perspective. If he needed more than that, she knew she could not give it to him and he would have to seek it elsewhere. "Remember," she said hesitantly, still holding his hands, "back when I found you in the cave on the island? I had just lost my team then. My family, almost. You — asked me to tell you about them. Told me that then they would live

in your memory too. I did that, and it helped me. Remember?"

Silently, he nodded.

She swallowed. "Maybe – maybe if you told me about your friend, it might help you."

He looked up at her, then back down at their clasped hands. "Kestrel –" he began, then paused. "I –" Again he paused, his hands tightening on hers. "I will tell you of him. But not now. I truly apologize for my – reluctance to discuss this right now, but –" he trailed off, his gaze coming back up. When he spoke again, it was in the manner of his true self, the words forming in her mind: *"Please, Juliana. This is not easy for me. But it is something that I must face alone. When the time is right and I have done what I must do, then I will tell you all you wish to know of him. He deserves such a memorial, and he will have it."*

Slowly she nodded, barely aware that he had not spoken aloud. "All right, Gabriel," she said. "Please, though – tell me one thing."

"If I am able," he said, speaking normally again.

Now it was her turn to speak in halting tones. "The – last time you left, saying that there was – something you had to face alone –"

"– was when we fought Stefan," he finished for her. At her nod, he shook his head. "I am not going to fight anyone," he said. "This has nothing to do with Stefan. I am merely – seeking truth."

Squeezing his hands gently, she asked, "And what will you do when you find it?"

"I don't know," he said. "That will depend on what I find." He looked up at her. "I must – go away for awhile, so please don't be concerned if you can't find me. I'll return when I've found the answers I seek."

She nodded. "Are you sure – you don't want me to go with you?"

"I am sure. I must do this alone." He rose, but did not pull his hands away from her. With a faint imitation of his usual smile, he said, "I'll come back, Kestrel. I promise."

"Yeah," she whispered. "I know you will." Pulling him in to her, she gave him a brief, hard hug. "I know you will." Before he could see the tears forming in her eyes, she turned and quickly left the apartment.

12.

Ocelot could barely hear himself think over the pounding beat of the thrash-metal band being pumped through the bar at ear-shattering volume.

He liked it that way.

It was two hours after the team had left the Kingdome and gone their separate ways. They had all walked out to the parking lot in silence, their footsteps echoing loudly in the empty corridors; when they got outside, they had made cursory attempts to organize a trip to one of their usual haunts for beers and conversation, but no one had been particularly forward about pushing the idea. 'Wraith and Joe had taken off first, the former on his Rapier and the latter on his big Harley; Winterhawk had asked Ocelot if he wanted to go find something useless to do, but Ocelot had declined the invitation. "I don't know what I want to do yet," he'd said, "but I'm gonna cruise around until I find it." 'Hawk had left too, and Ocelot, after spending a few more moments staring out over the silent parking lot and thinking about nothing, had done likewise. In retrospect it probably shouldn't have been surprising how easily he had gotten out of the lot, given that only five minutes remained to be played in a tied game. He'd wondered how it would end, but didn't really care.

The name of the bar was the Wharf Rat, and it lived up to its moniker splendidly. Located in one of the nastier areas of the Seattle docklands, it was a big, sprawling, lawless accumulation of the bottom end of Seattle society contained within a rotting, tumbledown structure that barely stayed one step ahead of the building inspectors (probably due to the impressive collection of bribes that changed hands weekly between the Wharf Rat's owners

and the more flexible representatives of the local government and law enforcement organizations). It served bad liquor and worse food, but the kind of people who frequented it didn't come for the food and didn't give a damn about the quality of the liquor as long as it was cheap and they could get drunk on it. It was, in short, a dive even among dives.

Its one claim to fame, however, and the reason why Ocelot usually chose it as a place to go when he was feeling in a particularly unpleasant sort of mood, was the action that took place in the back room. The Wharf Rat's "back room" was in actuality larger than its front room, and while ostensibly its existence was a secret to which only certain carefully screened individuals were privy, the reality of the matter was that anyone who could locate the correct door and grease the palm of the beefy troll bouncer with sufficient nuyen could easily gain entry. Once inside, the lucky (or unlucky, depending on one's inclinations) patron had access to the Wharf Rat's main draw: the large, enclosed ring in the center of the room where nightly gladiatorial combats were staged.

One could never be quite certain of the composition of the individual battles taking place on any given night, because the card was drawn from a pool consisting of anyone who showed up willing to fight and able to put up the "entry fee"—the amount of which varied depending on the combatants and their track records and abilities. In addition to the entry fees, the Wharf Rat collected a percentage of all bets placed by the spectators, and the winner of each fight was paid out of this fund. There weren't many rules, and the ones that did exist were not stringently enforced: no firearms, no magic (physads were allowed, but only against other physads or similar opponents), and no intentional killing. Generally

the fight organizers tried to match up opponents relatively equally, but they didn't always succeed.

Ocelot used the Wharf Rat's combat arena as a way to blow off steam. He was fairly well known around the place by now as a guy who could put on a good show and who could be counted on to give the customers what they wanted: flashy moves, lots of punishment, and, depending on his mood, a pretty decent scare. They didn't get a lot of guys with his level of cyberware or combat abilities around here, because most of those who had made it where Ocelot was wouldn't consider slumming anymore, or else they wouldn't think the money was worth it. Ocelot didn't care about the money. There were just times when he wanted to hit something hard, and this was a good way to get paid for it.

He sat now at a tiny table near the edge of the sawdust-covered floor, working on a beer, watching the fights, and listening to his body steadfastly refuse to get drunk. He had ended up here after cruising around aimlessly for an hour or so after leaving the rest of the team at the Kingdome; somehow he knew that this was where he would go, but it took his conscious mind awhile to realize it.

The thing was, he wasn't even sure why this whole thing had bugged him so much. He and Gabriel weren't close friends—in fact, as far as he knew, none of his teammates were any closer to the fixer (the *dragon*, he reminded himself again) than he was. So why was his mind so reluctant to let go of the little scene up in the luxury box?

He knew why, of course; he just didn't want to admit it.

He was scared.

Sometimes late at night when he thought about things that he didn't really like to think about, he caught himself

wondering if he would have allowed himself to get hooked back up with Kestrel if he had known that her new best friend was a Great Dragon. He had enough trouble in his life, what with all the enemies he'd collected over the years: the bugs, the corps, the...those *things* from out in astral space—the last thing he needed was to get too chummy with a dragon and pick up *his* collection of enemies as well. Even though in his rational mind he knew that he wasn't exactly "chummy" with Gabriel, the fact remained that the team had gotten together with him and Kestrel more than a few times in the past six months. Like Kestrel, he could put the thought out of his mind when he was having a beer or shooting a few baskets with a guy who looked like a pretty-boy kid, but every once in a while the image of the huge, golden-scaled, sharp-fanged creature they had seen that night six months ago popped up in his head while he was looking at Gabriel, and he couldn't shake it. Even though he hadn't seen the dragon in his true form since then, he still couldn't shake it.

He also couldn't shake the fact that the dragon had a brother—a bigger, stronger brother who could apparently carry multi-millennia-long grudges with no trouble at all—and that that brother was still alive. Still alive and almost certainly still holding a grudge against not only Gabriel, but against Ocelot, Winterhawk, 'Wraith, Joe, and Kestrel for helping to drive him away, half-blinded, before he was able to finish off his brother.

Ocelot was used to looking over his shoulder for things trying to nail him; he'd been doing it for nearly his whole life, to the point where it had become second nature to him. But this was different. How could you watch out for something so powerful that it could hit you without giving you any advance warning that it was coming? He knew that there were a lot of things that

could do that to him: magic, spirits, long-range snipers — all of them could hit him before he even knew they were around. But for some reason he couldn't quite articulate, it wasn't the same thing. The idea of being on the personal hit list of a being as powerful as Stefan had made itself known to Ocelot as a constant low-level anxiety that never seemed to go away no matter how hard he tried to forget about it.

It was the one reason why he sometimes regretted the fact that he thought so highly of Kestrel. She was a constant reminder that he had once again gotten himself up to his ears in things that were probably best left alone by people like him. Sure, she and Gabriel weren't joined at the hip or anything—he had seen her alone dozens of times in the past few months, many of them when Gabriel wasn't even in the same city—but the woman and the dragon spent so much time together that she could no more refrain from mentioning him than Ocelot could refrain from mentioning his own teammates. He had actually thought a couple of times about breaking it off with her for his own peace of mind, but both times he had reconsidered before he had gotten around to talking to her. Each time the same two things had changed his mind: first, the realization that he *did* care for Kestrel (even if he didn't love her) and did not want to remove her from his life; and second, the much more grim realization that regardless of his future affiliation with Gabriel, his *past* affiliation had already sealed his fate as far as Stefan was concerned. That fact acknowledged, it made more sense to him to be on at least *one* dragon's good side.

He sighed, staring down into the half-full glass of beer that he hadn't touched in the last ten minutes. The fights were continuing; right now, it looked like a smallish troll and an oversized ork going at it with fists and clubs. Ocelot had put his name in as a potential combatant, but

he hadn't been called yet; apparently there were quite a large number of would-be fighters tonight, and the place always liked to give the new blood a chance. From the sound of things, there was a lot of frustration to be worked off over the fact that the Seahawks had managed to throw a sure thing in the last fifteen seconds of play when, ahead by three points, they had fumbled the snap on a punt, resulting in a touchdown and victory for the Patriots. Ocelot had picked this up from snatches of conversation as various disgruntled-looking bar patrons had trickled by. It looked like there were going to be a lot of frustrations worked out tonight. Ocelot was just as glad he had missed it.

The ork-and-troll fight ended abruptly, with the unfortunate troll finding himself pitched unceremoniously into the front row of spectators. He landed there, unconscious, sprawled out over two of the small tables. One of the spectators, annoyed at having his beer mug overturned, promptly used it to smack the troll over the head, which prompted two of the troll's buddies to come stomping over with violence in their eyes. It was beginning to look like a real bar fight setting up. Ocelot stood; normally he would have enjoyed something like this (it was a fairly regular occurrence, happening at least once a week) but tonight he just wasn't in the mood. Leaving the rest of his beer, he headed for the door to the front part of the bar.

He'd almost reached it when his wristphone buzzed. *Great. Now what?* "Yeah?" he yelled, hitting the button. He had to yell to be heard over the cacophony behind him.

"Ocelot?" Kestrel's face appeared on the little screen.

"Yeah—hang on a minute. Let me get outta here." Moving more quickly, he made his way out of the bar and onto the street. The bite of the cold air was welcome after

the oppressive heat and smoke and stink inside. "Okay. Go ahead."

"Where *are* you?" she asked.

"Don't ask. You don't want to know."

That earned him a small smile. "Okay. You're at the Wharf Rat. Are you still in one piece?"

He smiled back, just a little. "Yeah. I didn't get on yet. I think I just forfeited my entry fee." He paused. "What's up?"

"You have some time to talk?"

He frowned. "Couldn't find Gabriel?"

"No, I found him," she said, shaking her head. "For awhile, anyway. I'd just like to talk to you. Can I come by?"

"Yeah. Sure. I can be home in about half an hour or so—meet you there?"

"Sounds good. I hope I didn't interrupt anything interesting." The little smile was there again.

He shook his head. "No—I was just leaving anyway. I'll see you in a few."

By the time he pulled up in front of his small house in Tacoma, she was already there. Her green Westwind was parked off to one side of the garage; she stood leaning against it. She was still wearing the same jeans, T-shirt, and black leather jacket she'd worn to the game, but she'd gotten rid of the cap somewhere. As he glided his Blitzen to a smooth stop in front of the garage, she pushed herself off the car and waited.

He didn't say much until they got inside. Sliding out of his armored coat and tossing it over a chair, he dropped into another one and ran his hand back through his long dusty-blond hair, pulling out the leather thong that held it into an unkempt ponytail. "So what's up?"

She didn't sit down right away. Instead, she paced around the room checking out his collection of hand

weapons that hung on the walls. This room, the largest of the three in the house, served multiple duty as a bedroom, kitchen, dining room, and sitting area. The other two rooms were a bathroom and the house's real bedroom, which Ocelot had converted to a workout room. "I'm not sure exactly," she said. "I just wanted somebody to talk to."

"You said you found him—was he okay?"

She sighed. "That depends on what you mean by *okay*." Pulling a sword from the wall, she hefted it experimentally and then returned it to its place. "Physically he seemed fine. No ill effects from what happened."

"Did you find out what happened?" Ocelot swiveled around on the chair so he could keep her in sight as she paced.

"Sort of. He said somebody's died. Someone very close to him."

That wasn't what he was expecting to hear. "Huh? Who?"

"He wouldn't tell me." She tired of pacing and came over to sit in another chair near him, where she leaned her elbows on her knees and stared down at her boots. "I don't know what to do—I can tell he's just devastated over it, but he says I can't help him. He has to go find out who did it and why."

Ocelot stiffened. "Did it? As in—killed whoever this was?"

She nodded. "Yeah. That was what he said."

There was still something that was confusing him. "So—how did he know? And what did somebody getting killed have to do with that thing that hit him at the game?"

"He said—whoever it was cried out to him as he died. That was part of why he was so upset. He seems to think

that if he could have somehow been able to get to his friend, he could have done something to help."

Ocelot thought that over for several moments before replying. "You mean...whoever this was, he—I dunno—beamed in some kind of SOS to Gabriel with enough power to knock him flat on his back?"

"That was what it sounded like." She sighed. "I've heard of people getting weird premonitions when their loved ones die, but never anything like this."

He leaned forward, staring hard at her. "Kestrel, he's not 'people.' He's a *dragon*. We got no idea how things affect them—at least *I* don't. But I do know, and you do too, that their minds are a hell of a lot tougher than ours are." He paused, as if feeling his thoughts out before voicing them. "For something to be able to nail him like that, through all the defenses he must have had up—" He trailed off.

Slowly she nodded. "It would have to have been...a pretty powerful signal."

"That's what I figure too. *Damn* powerful. And pretty uni-directional, too." Unable to sit still any longer, he got up and started to move around the room. "Remember—'Hawk checked the astral plane and found the residue of it, but he didn't get hit with anything when it happened. I don't think anybody else at the stadium did either. Whatever it was, it was aimed right at Gabriel."

"So—what are you trying to say?" Kestrel pulled herself upright and regarded him over the back of the chair.

He sighed. "I'm not sure exactly what the hell I'm tryin' to say. It just sounds to me like if he's right and somebody died, it must have been somebody pretty strong." A stray thought struck him, and he brought his gaze up to meet hers. "You said he told you this was an old friend?"

"Yeah. A dear friend, he said. Somebody he's known for a very long time."

He came back over and sat down again. "Does that suggest anything to you?"

She frowned. "Come on, Ocelot. I'm a little frazzled right now —"

"No, seriously. How long have you known Gabriel?"

"About a year and a half now."

"And how long was he—you know—awake before you met him?"

Light began to dawn as to what he was getting at. "Only a couple of months," she said, nodding. "I see what you mean. He hasn't been around here very long—but he was around a long time ago. So anybody he'd call an *old friend* —"

"—is probably another dragon. Or something on the same power scale." He blew air through clenched teeth. "Which brings up another question I'd really rather not think about."

"What's that?"

He looked back up at her. "Who killed him?"

Her eyes widened as once again she followed his line of reasoning. "Or—*what* killed him?"

Soberly he nodded. "That's what I'm getting at. Anything tough enough to take out a dragon—or whatever it is that's been around long enough for Gabriel to call it an old friend—is not something I want to get anywhere near." He paused. When he spoke again, it was in a whisper. "Oh...shit..."

"What?"

Another pause. "Stefan again?"

"No." She shook her head vigorously. "No, I asked him about that. He said it didn't have anything to do with Stefan."

"But how does he *know*?" Ocelot demanded, leaning toward her. "You said yourself he doesn't know who did it. What if this is another way to get to him?"

To his surprise, she shrugged, scrubbing at her face with her hands. "I don't know, Ocelot. I mean, he told me he had to go deal with it on his own, and he didn't seem to think Stefan had anything to do with it. I have to respect his wishes. If he doesn't want me involved, I won't get involved. I'm sure he'd tell us if he knew anything about Stefan."

"If he *knew*, sure he would," Ocelot said again. "But what if he doesn't know? What if Stefan's covered his tracks even better this time?" He was getting nervous, and as usual his nervousness was manifesting itself in rampant speculation that came tumbling out of his mouth faster than his brain could regulate it. Even though Kestrel's expression was clouding, he couldn't stop. "What if he's after Gabriel again — and maybe after us?"

"Ocelot. Slow down." She stood up and came over in front of him, grasping his shoulders firmly. "I just wanted to come talk to you. To tell you what I found out, and see what you thought. But Gabriel will do what he wants to do, and there's nothing you or I or anybody else can do about that. He's my friend, Ocelot. I won't stick my nose into his business if he doesn't want me to."

"Even if he's in trouble?" he asked, a trifle sullenly. "Even if *we* might be in trouble?"

She knelt down. More gently, she said, "Remember the night you first found out about him? When he wanted to go fight Stefan alone, and we talked him into letting us go along because it affected us too? Do you remember what he said?"

He didn't want to remember, but he couldn't forget. "Yeah," he said raggedly. "That we had free will, just like

he did, and if we wanted to go get ourselves killed, that was our business."

She nodded. "I have to let him do this on his own, if that's what he wants." Shrugging, she added, "I'm not sure I could stop him this time. He promised he'd come back and tell me about it once he got himself straightened out and figured out what was going on. That's all we can really ask for. I trust him enough to believe he'll let us know if he finds out this could affect us in any way." She reached up, cupping his face in her hands. "Okay?"

"Okay," he whispered, after a long moment.

"So—" She smiled a little. "Can I still stay?"

He returned it. "I was kind of hoping you would."

13.

He had lost track of the time he had spent here, wandering the astral plane, but it had been long enough that even his indomitable will was beginning to flag. His senses, in addition to his growing fatigue, were telling him that if he did not find something soon, he would be forced to return to his body to rest, only to try again later.

He was alone. He dared not seek help among any others of his kind, because he was not yet certain that one or more of them were not responsible for the atrocity that had been committed. Although he was a potent force among the small ones, when dealing with his own kind he knew he must take care, since to them he was only a youngster. If this *was* some sort of conspiracy among his elders, then he was certain that he would be dealt with should he tip his hand too early.

This did not have the feel of his own kind, though, and that was the thing that disturbed him the most. If not they, then who? And, more importantly, how had they managed to hide their handiwork so efficiently that less than twelve hours later he could not find any evidence of it? Violent deaths left massive amounts of astral energy – the violent death of something as ancient and powerful as a fully-mature Great Dragon should have lit up the astral plane with such strength that anyone with any sensitivity at all should not have been able to miss it. He had not yet been awake when one of the greatest of their kind, Dunkelzahn, had been savagely and senselessly murdered, but even now, nearly two years later, he was still able to visit the site of Dunkelzahn's death and find easily detectable (if extremely bizarre) astral energy. Telanwyr's power had not approached Dunkelzahn's, but

nonetheless with such a short time having passed, *something* should have been visible.

He had begun by concentrating his search on the areas Telanwyr had been known to frequent, beginning with his lair. At first, he had hoped that perhaps he had somehow been mistaken—that against all odds someone or something had been playing a cruel hoax on him, and Telanwyr was in fact still alive. But as he continued on, searching each place, calling for his friend, he was forced to admit that he had always known the hope had been in vain. Telanwyr was nowhere to be found. At each location his grief washed over him anew, many times requiring that he stop and gather himself before continuing. More than once he wanted to give up and yield to the grief, but he pushed himself on with the knowledge that he was possibly the only one who even knew something had happened. He would not leave the death of a being as close to him as his own father unavenged.

Now, though, several hours later, he was running out of ideas. Normally he would not have risked leaving his body virtually unguarded for this long, even behind the powerful wards he had constructed to protect it. Further, every hour he remained weakened him more, meaning that if he were to be attacked upon returning, his defenses would be severely depleted. He knew that it was not wise to do what he was doing, but he did not care. His grief at Telanwyr's death was so strong that it was overriding his normal judgment. If there was a price to pay for that, then so be it.

He stopped, pausing to collect himself one last time before returning. Was there anything he had forgotten? He was not at his mental peak now—it was possible that something simple had eluded him. He had checked Telanwyr's lair, as well as many of the places he knew his old friend liked to visit, and found nothing. Where else

might he have had occasion to go? Where could a Great Dragon be killed without anyone noticing? And why had Telanwyr called to *him*, specifically, as he died? He had not seen his old mentor in several months—what, then, would cause Telanwyr to think that he might respond to such a call?

If he believed me to be close by.

The thought came to him suddenly and hit him hard. Perhaps Telanwyr had called to him because he had expected that he was near! But why would he expect such a thing? The older dragon's lair was in northern Europe, thousands of kilometers away. Even when considering the much more irrelevant distances on the astral plane, that would not qualify as "near." Had Telanwyr somehow been expecting him to visit?

That still didn't make sense, however. His friend's call had been loud and strong and unmistakable. Even someone as powerful as Telanwyr would have been hard pressed to send out a signal like that across such a distance. Perhaps he might have been able to do it if he had aimed it at a human or metahuman—someone who did not have his own level of mental shielding in place. But to punch through that level of protection as if it were not there—

Telanwyr had been very close to him when he died.

Thoroughly confused now, he considered this new possibility. Had Telanwyr somehow been nearby? And if so, why? Had he come to visit him? It seemed odd that he would do that unannounced. Perhaps he had been in the area for some other reason entirely—business, possibly. That didn't make sense either, though, given what he knew of Telanwyr: he did not often interact with humans and metahumans, and he had no business interests other than an impressive and convoluted series of investments that practically managed themselves. Telanwyr had

always been the type who liked to keep to himself and confine himself to his own affairs.

He didn't have much longer now; if he didn't turn up something in the next hour or so, he would have to return later. By that time, any traces or clues that remained might be swept away. They might already be gone, but it was best not to wait. Gathering his exhausted mental energies, he flung himself through astral space back toward the Seattle area.

When he finally found what he was seeking, he almost missed it. He wasn't sure whether it was because he was tiring or because the energy itself was so faint, but for whatever reason, he had almost passed over the area in question before stopping, unsure as to whether anything had been there. When he returned, however, and took a moment to examine the area carefully, he could feel a definite *something*. He wasn't entirely certain what the *something* was, but it had the dim but unmistakable feel of Telanwyr to it. Something had happened here, and it had not been long ago.

Again he stopped. Mapping the astral precisely to the material plane was not an easy thing to do, but it seemed that the affected area was a short distance to the north of Seattle—he guessed perhaps fifty to two hundred kilometers. *In Salish-Shidhe territory*, he thought. *I wonder what he was doing there?*

Already beginning to feel the faint tuggings of his corporeal body trying to reclaim his astral form, he hurriedly began trying to orient himself so he could find this place again on the material plane. If this is where the murder occurred, then he would have to go there in person to investigate. The astral traces were too dissipated to be of any use.

He had almost finished when he became aware that he was being observed. Looking up, a bit startled, he

noticed a small form flitting away quickly. It radiated fear of a sort exhibited by a prey creature escaping a predator. *Wait*, he called. *Do not run away.*

The little thing nervously slowed, then stopped. It was a small spirit of some sort—perhaps an air elemental. *Do not destroy me*, it pleaded.

He crouched down, still watching it. *I have no wish to destroy you, or harm you*, he said, keeping his emotional tone soft and non-threatening. His astral form was masked so he could pass unnoticed as an unremarkable human mage; his true form would attract far more attention than he wished to attract at this point.

It didn't come any closer, but its fear quieted a bit. *Why are you here?*

I am seeking something.

Seeking what? The fear was coming back again.

He remained in his crouch, ignoring the increasingly strong pull of his material body. *I believe that a friend was killed here recently. I am looking for information about who was responsible.*

The large one, the spirit said. Then, as if afraid it had said too much, it made as if to run away again.

No—please do not go! He raised up a bit, but then forced himself back down. *You know of this?*

Reluctantly the little spirit radiated affirmative. *Gone now.*

Yes, but what happened to him? Who else was here?

The spirit paused. *Many others. All gone now.*

Many others? *Other—large ones?* Had he been wrong in his failure to suspect others of his kind?

This time the spirit's aura showed negative. *Small ones. All gone.*

All gone. Dead? This was going to be difficult. A spirit of this size would not have a great deal of intellect. Getting anything useful out of it would be like trying to

cross-examine a four-year-old child. He was, however, patient.

Almost. One ran away.

As much as he needed to continue this conversation, the pull was too strong for even him to ignore now. He was risking death by remaining any longer. Desperately, he said, *I must go away now. I will return later. I will come to this place. Will you speak with me again? I must learn the truth. Will you help me?* He put every ounce of his considerable persuasive powers into the entreaty, hoping that the tiny spirit would be able to overcome whatever had caused its fear.

I will try, the spirit said after a very long pause. It was very obvious from its aura and the emotional content of its tone that whatever had frightened it had had a profound effect. Overcoming it would not be easy.

I will return as soon as I am able, then, he said. Then, unable to maintain his connection any longer, he allowed to pull to take him back to his physical body.

In the penthouse apartment in downtown Seattle, Gabriel's eyes snapped open as his two halves were once more reunited. The dragon allowed himself a brief glance around the vast room to verify that everything was as he had left it, then his head dropped as he fell into an exhausted sleep.

14.

When Ocelot awoke late the next morning, there was an annoying sound in his ear and a weight on his chest. Full consciousness resolved the weight as Kestrel, draped over him and just now beginning to awaken herself, and the sound as his wristphone. Fumbling around on the floor amidst his discarded clothing, he grabbed it and hit the *audio-only* button. "Yeah?"

"Good morning." Winterhawk sounded considerably more awake than either Ocelot or Kestrel.

"Mmm?" Kestrel mumbled.

"And good morning to you too, Kestrel," the mage added, the amusement evident in his voice. "That *is* Kestrel, isn't it?"

"What do you want, 'Hawk?" Ocelot cut him off. "And why're you callin' so early?" He turned on the video so Winterhawk could get a good look at him.

"Early? Dear boy, even for someone like me, not known as an early riser, this wouldn't qualify as *early*. It's almost noon." In contrast to Ocelot's wild hair and unshaven face, 'Hawk looked like he'd been up for hours.

"So what do you want?" he asked again as Kestrel stirred and immediately burrowed further under the covers. He'd forgotten to turn up the heater last night, and even at almost noon it was still chilly.

"Harry called. He wants to set up a meet tonight. I've already called the others—who, I might add, were all awake—and they've agreed. So that just leaves you."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. "A meet? What for? We haven't told him we're looking for a job, have we?"

Winterhawk shrugged. "I don't know. He didn't say. P'raps he's got something he thinks we might be interested in—or p'raps he just wants to discuss

something with us." He looked as if he was going to say something else, but then decided not to.

Ocelot thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah, okay. Sure. When and where?"

"The Black Dog, tonight at nine. Back room, as usual."

"Right. Got it. Now go away and let me get up in peace."

"You two have a lovely morning." Winterhawk smiled maddeningly and broke the connection.

Kestrel came back up from beneath the covers. "What was that about?"

He frowned. "Harry's actin' kinda weird. He usually doesn't call us for jobs unless we've told him we're in the market." He shrugged, smiling. "Whatever. Doesn't really matter. That's biz, and I don't want to talk about biz right now, do you?" To punctuate his words, he pulled her down and yanked the covers up against the chill of the air.

When Ocelot arrived at the Black Dog Lounge at five to nine that night, he found his other three teammates sitting around a table in the front part of the bar. All three looked like they were dressed for business. "Hey, Ocelot," Joe greeted, motioning for him to sit down. "Harry's not here yet."

"Anybody got any idea what this is about?" Ocelot asked as he took a seat and motioned toward the bar for a beer.

"None," Wraith said.

"It is a bit odd," Winterhawk conceded. "But he has called us for jobs before."

"Not often," Joe said.

"Wouldn't mind a job right now," Ocelot said.

"Me neither," Joe agreed. "Hey, that reminds me — did you ever find out from Kestrel what happened to Gabriel last night?"

The others nodded, indicating that they were interested in the answer as well.

"Not much," Ocelot said, shrugging. "She went over to see him, and he's okay now. She says he was just upset about some stuff." He wasn't sure why, but he didn't want to go into details about what Kestrel had told him right now.

Joe nodded, picking up on that. "Just as long as he's doing okay," he said in an *I know there's more but it's none of my business* tone.

Winterhawk was looking at Ocelot oddly, as was 'Wraith, but neither of them spoke.

At that point, a tall elven waiter approached their table with Ocelot's beer. As he set it down on a coaster, he said quietly, "Your party is ready for you in the back room, gentlemen."

"Shoulda known he'd sneak in the back door," Joe said, grinning as he got up.

Harry was indeed waiting for them, seated in the place of honor at the single table in the Black Dog's small back room. As the team came in and took seats, he motioned for his two "retainers" to wait out in the bar. Harry rarely went anywhere without his bodyguards somewhere in evidence, but his association with the team had long ago progressed far enough that he didn't require them to stay in the same room during meets.

"So—what can we do for you, Harry?" Winterhawk asked, settling himself in a chair across from the fixer. He was the only member of the team who didn't worry about where he was sitting with respect to the room's doors, but he did like to be where he could look the meet's host in the eye.

Harry waited until everyone was settled before speaking. "I got a job I thought you guys might like," he said, shifting his unlit cigar to the left corner of his mouth.

"That's it?" Joe asked, a little surprised.

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes, Harry—you don't usually call us unless we've indicated we're looking. We thought this meet might be for some other purpose."

Harry looked a bit more serious. "Well...it kind of is. I *do* have a job for ya, if ya want it," he added hastily. "But there's somethin' else I wanted to talk about with ya."

Everyone waited for him to speak.

He held up his hand. "Now, hear me out before ya say anything, okay? I realize this is probably nothin', but it's somethin' I been meanin' to talk to ya 'bout for awhile now. This seemed like a good time." He paused, then said quietly, "Coupla my guys were at the playoff game last night. Said they saw you guys hangin' out in one o' the luxury boxes with that Gabriel kid." As all four runners drew breath to speak, Harry raised his hand again. "Now, listen. It ain't none o' my business what you guys do with yer own time, and nobody was spyin' on ya. It just happened that the guys were there and they saw ya, that's all."

"So what's your point, Harry?" Ocelot asked.

Harry looked at him and his tone changed, softened. "Listen. All's I wanted to do was do a little reality check and see where we stand. We been doin' biz a long time, but things change. I know that better'n anybody. I just want to make sure that you guys ain't gonna give me any surprises. It don't make no difference to me one way or the other. You guys are good enough now that you can pretty much write yer own ticket as far as jobs go. If the kid can do better by ya, then ya gotta do what ya gotta do. I just don't wanna get a job lined up, thinkin' you guys would be perfect for it, then find out that you ain't doin' this anymore and end up lookin' like a chump. Ya know?"

For a moment the runners just looked at each other. Even Winterhawk wasn't quite sure what to say. As usual,

though, he recovered his voice first. "Harry —" he started. He paused a moment, and then smiled. "I do believe you're jealous."

Surprisingly, the fixer didn't take the bait. "That ain't it, 'Hawk. What I feel or don't feel ain't important anyway. But I gotta know where I stand. I know you been spendin' a decent amount o' time with him, and I also know he's just got the one team right now. For all I know, maybe he's lookin' to expand."

"Not going anywhere, Harry," Wraith said.

Ocelot nodded. "Truth is, and I'm surprised you haven't figured this out yet, the only reason we hang out with him sometimes is because of Kestrel. You know — friend of a friend stuff." That wasn't the *whole* truth, but he couldn't tell Harry the whole truth. The entire team had given their word that they wouldn't reveal Gabriel's "secret."

"Besides, *you* didn't invite us to the playoffs," Joe added.

"Hey, *I* didn't even go," Harry protested. "You know how much those tickets were goin' for?"

"Sure, Harry — you couldn't afford it, right?"

"Of *course* I could afford it. But I'd much rather sit back and rake in the nuyen betting on the Patriots." Harry smiled, shifting his cigar again. "Hey — biz is biz, and money's money." Once again he became serious. "But let's get this settled, okay? I just wanna know — you ain't plannin' on jumpin' ship, right?"

Winterhawk shook his head, for once serious too. "No, Harry. I think I speak for all of my companions when I say that we're not planning on changing our situation in the foreseeable future."

Harry looked around at the others; all of them nodded. "Okay," he said briskly. "Good. Just what I was

hopin' you'd say. So now some *real* biz: I got a job for you guys, if yer interested."

"Why are you callin' us?" Ocelot asked. "This some kind of different job than usual?"

"No—just looked like somethin' you guys might like. I ain't set up the meet yet. I wanted to use the job as kind of a way to bring up that other business."

The four runners exchanged glances. Ocelot, for one, was glad to have a potential job; it was a reason to keep his teammates in town. He had not had much success in shaking the feeling that whatever had hit Gabriel wasn't over yet, and he wasn't crazy about the idea of the other three guys being in three different parts of the world when the bad stuff came down. "I'm up for it," he said.

"Me too," Joe agreed immediately.

Winterhawk shrugged. "Why not?"

"Wraith merely nodded.

"Great," Harry said. "I'll set it up for later tonight, then. In fact, if you go hang out in the bar for a few minutes, I might be able to do it right now. The guy's anxious to talk ta somebody soon."

Nobody said much while Harry made the arrangements. It was only about ten minutes before he showed up at their table. "Got it set," he said. "You're meetin' with Johnson in two hours, at the Biscayne. Don't be late." Once more secure in his team's loyalty, Harry had reverted to his usual irascible self. Without waiting for a reply, he motioned to his two bodyguards, who had been having a beer at a table on the other side of the bar, and the three of them left through the back door.

"That was weird," Joe said, watching them go.

"Yeah," Ocelot agreed. "Never thought Harry was the jealous type. But at least now we got something to keep us busy for awhile." He stood. "I'll meet you guys at the Biscayne in a couple hours."

15.

It was almost 21:00 and fully dark by the time the black Dynamit left the main highway and headed up the smaller two-lane road that led into the hills. The driver was not taking any particular care to keep to the speed limit, but then, he never did. He was quite confident in his ability to talk himself out of any citations he might attract. Additionally, in this case, he had extended his masking magic to his car to make sure that he didn't gather any unwanted attention.

He was following the mental map he had made while on the astral plane, and had been relieved to discover that there were actually roads that roughly corresponded to where he was attempting to go. He would have liked to have gotten an earlier start, but he knew it had been his own fault. He had remained astral too long and had succeeded in nearly depleting even his massive resources; he had slept the entire day and part of the evening to recover. It was unfortunate that he had been forced to lose all this time, but it couldn't be helped.

Steering the car up the narrow road, he slowed and briefly shifted his perceptions to the astral to orient himself. This was definitely the right direction, and he was getting closer. He couldn't risk more than a glance without stopping the car, though. He switched off the Dynamit's lights, using his own powerful senses for navigation. Better not to catch anyone's eyes too soon if they were up here.

About two kilometers up the road he pulled off the road, parked, and got out of the car, looking around. It was very quiet up here, heavily forested and a fair distance from human or metahuman habitation. It was unlikely that he would be noticed unless those

responsible for Telanwyr's death were still here; he doubted that they were.

He was dressed unassumingly in jeans, light shirt, leather jacket and heavy boots—at least if anyone *did* discover him, he would look the part of a wayward hiker without having to resort to magic. Aside from the normal, extremely well hidden masking spell he used to conceal his true form, he didn't want to employ other magic unless it was necessary. Sticking a small flashlight in his belt, he started into the forest.

It was easy to see where he was going; the moonlight coupled with his natural enhanced vision guaranteed that. The only problem was, he didn't know what he was looking for.

He moved slowly, slipping through the underbrush in utter silence. He would have been reluctant to admit it to anyone, but he was a bit fearful. Whatever was (or had been) here had killed a being far more powerful than he—he was not in any particular hurry to encounter it, alone here in the wilderness. He would do what must be done, but he would do it cautiously. He could not help Telanwyr by getting himself killed; especially since it seemed that he was the only one on Earth who knew that Telanwyr was dead.

After half an hour's searching, he had found nothing. No bodies, no empty ammo boxes, no tire tracks, no evidence of magic—nothing. This perplexed him: he had been so certain that this was the correct location, but as far as he knew it was not possible to hide the murder of a Great Dragon this effectively. There *had* to be some sort of trail.

Perhaps the spirit would know. In the exhaustion of his long sleep and his concentration on the search, he had almost forgotten the little air elemental he had discovered. It had been afraid, but it had promised him that it would

Speak with him. It might be the only link he had. Stopping, he projected his thoughts into the astral plane.

"Are you still here?"

"I am here," came the small, hesitant voice after a moment.

He sat down on a nearby fallen tree. "Will you allow me to bring you here?"

A long pause. "Why...?" It didn't sound happy about the prospect. If it allowed him to summon it to the material plane then it would be in his power, forced to do his bidding.

"I will not harm you," he assured it. "I give you my word." Shifting his masking a bit, he let it see a glimpse of his true self. Even a tiny little spirit such as this would know that to his kind, one's word was something not given lightly and never broken.

The spirit gasped a bit (or whatever passes for a gasp among spirits). "I will come..." it said. It still sounded fearful, but now there was awe mixed with it. Great Dragons did not often deign to speak with tiny spirits.

Raising his hand before it could change its mind, he made a complicated gesture in the air and the small insubstantial form shimmered into being in front of him. "There," he said, still seated on the tree. Fixing his comforting gaze on it, he continued in a low voice: "Do you remember earlier when we spoke, you told me that there were others here? A large one, and many small ones?"

The spirit flared affirmative.

"What happened to the large one?"

It is gone.

"Where has it gone?"

It has ceased to exist.

The grief rose again in his heart; he submerged it. "How — did it cease to exist?"

Many small ones.

"What did the small ones do?"

Attacked the large one. Then they ceased to exist too. All but one. It ran away.

Pause. "Did the small ones destroy the large one?"

Again, the spirit radiated affirmative, but it was not strong.

"Is there something else?"

Tentative affirmative.

"Did anyone assist the small ones in destroying the large one?"

I do not – know. I think so.

He looked hard at it. "Did you see – any others such as I?"

Large ones? Like the one that was destroyed?

"Yes."

This time the spirit radiated negative.

"But you know that there was someone else aiding them?"

I could not see. It was hidden.

Again he paused. "Then—how did you know it was there?"

I do not know. I sensed it. Something was hidden. It seemed to be becoming agitated; it shivered and flitted around in front of him.

"All right," he said softly, afraid he would frighten it out of whatever other information it might possess. Obviously something was blocking that part of the puzzle in the spirit's mind. "You said that there were many small ones. Do you know how many?"

Many.

Numbers were not this spirit's strong suit, apparently. He looked around at his feet, gathering up a handful of small stones. "I will count these. Stop me when I have reached the number of the small ones." Slowly, he counted out the stones one at a time into his other hand.

The spirit observed attentively until he had six stones in his hand. *That many. They had large machines. Much destruction.*

He considered that. "Large machines" and "much destruction" wrought by six individuals—enough to destroy a Great Dragon—would have made a great deal of noise, not to mention disturbing the astral plane for months afterward. "Are you certain? The small ones used their large machines to destroy the large one here?" He indicated the area around him.

Here. All around. Up high. Down low. The large one fought hard, but there were too many.

"How did the small ones cease to exist?"

The large one and his minions destroyed them.

"Minions?"

Others such as myself. Of earth and fire. Larger, though.

So Telanwyr had summoned elementals to help him deal with the threat. Larger, indeed. If he knew his friend, Telanwyr would have summoned elementals of enormous size and power. "Where are the others now?"

Gone.

"Where? Did they cease to exist too?"

Ran away. After the large one was destroyed.

"Could you find them?" Perhaps if he could talk with these elementals, which had to be much larger and more intelligent than this little one, he could get more information.

The spirit flared negative again, though. *Far away. Don't know where.* Its fear was returning.

He decided to try a different approach. Denizens of the astral plane, after all, were not limited to verbal speech. "Can you show me what happened here?" While undoubtedly the little spirit's impressions would be flawed and incomplete, at least it would be something to go on.

The spirit considered, then sent a cautious affirmative laced with fear.

Leaning back, he closed his eyes and opened his mind to the spirit's impressions. Slowly and then more quickly images flashed across his mind's eye: Telanwyr rising, already gravely injured, from the burning car. Shots fired from below. Helicopters and drones whizzing around him. More shots from below. His burst of flame, followed by the elementals. Screams. Pain. Fear.

Then—nothing.

His eyes flew open. He was breathing hard, shaking with rage at those who had done this thing. "Where—is the rest?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

There is no more.

He sat up a bit and fixed his gaze on the spirit, trying to bring his emotions under control. "You didn't show me what happened after he—died. Where is the body?"

I do not—know. The spirit appeared to be wrestling with something in its mind, but failing to grasp whatever it was.

"How can you not know? Did you not see it?"

I ran away. I cannot remember what happened after.

He sighed, his posture slumping. Then he got an idea. "Does this—lack of memory have anything to do with the being who was helping the small ones?"

Agitation. I do not know. Please do not hurt me.

"I gave you my word I would not hurt you," he reminded it, suddenly very tired. "But I need to know the truth. Are you keeping it from me, or do you truly not remember?"

I— It struggled. I do not remember. It is gone.

"All right," he said, standing. So close, and yet so far. He didn't doubt the spirit's words; it was far too weak to lie convincingly to him. He had one more thing to try. "The small one who ran away—did you see him?"

I saw him.

"Which of the small ones you showed me was he?"

He was in the flying machine.

The helicopter. That made sense. Someone in a helicopter could escape the area more quickly than someone in a ground vehicle. "Do you know where he has gone?"

Negative.

"Can you find him?"

I think so, it answered after a long pause.

"Will you do that for me? Will you show me where he is? I must speak with him." *Speak. Yes*, said his rage, *that is exactly what I will do with him.*

It will take some time. I did not watch to see where he went.

He nodded. "All right. Then I will hold you in my service until you find him or until you return to me and tell me that you cannot find him. Then, I give you my word I will release you."

The spirit radiated confusion. Obviously it was not accustomed to being treated with such respect, especially by such a lofty personage as this. *I will find him and return to you.*

"Thank you." He stood, stretching his legs. "I must go now. I have only one more question for you: what has become of all the bodies and equipment that should be here following such a battle?"

It was almost dejected now. *I do not know. They were here and then they were gone.*

"All right. Go, then. Find him and report back to me."

Immediately the little spirit blinked out.

He stood there for a moment looking out over the forest. He suspected that it would be useless to continue searching; he knew he would find nothing. Something very odd and very dangerous was going on here. For the next step, he would have to wait for the spirit to return. Until then, he would work to keep his grief at the loss of

his friend under control, and to harness his growing rage into useful pathways. He could not afford to allow it to take him over.

16.

The Biscayne Bar and Grill was not a runner bar per se, but everyone who was anyone knew that biz—especially discreet biz—went down there almost nightly anyway. Located in a middle class neighborhood near the Sound, the bar sported a barely tasteful Polynesian-nautical motif, with cargo nets and glass floats hung on the walls and rough plaswood tables designed to look like they were a hundred years old. Its layout was such that the occupants of any given booth could not be seen by the occupants of any of the other booths, which undoubtedly contributed to its success as a place to make deals.

Winterhawk, Ocelot, Joe, and ShadoWraith arrived about ten minutes early. Meeting up in the parking lot, they entered the bar together, stopping to look around for a moment as they got inside. "Lovely place," Winterhawk muttered. He glanced at Ocelot. "Reminds me of an upscale version of that dump we visited looking for Tommy years ago, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Almost forgot. *That* was a long time ago."

Joe headed off to the bar, coming back again a couple of minutes later. "The bartender says Mr. Johnson's not here yet, but we can wait for him back there at that booth." He pointed toward the back of the bar.

"Well, we *are* early," Ocelot said, heading in that direction. The others, after a moment, followed.

They had only been seated for about five minutes when a fiftyish, grizzled dwarf in a generic-looking overcoat approached their table. "You Harry's guys?" he asked under his breath.

"That depends on who's askin'," Ocelot said.

"Mr. Johnson," the dwarf said with a slight smile.

Wordlessly, 'Wraith got up from his spot at one end of the semicircular booth and motioned for the dwarf to

scoot in. When he had done so, the elf then resumed his seat.

"Okay," the dwarf said. "Harry described you guys to me, so I'll get started right away, okay?" He didn't seem to be the type who stood on social niceties; for a change even Winterhawk didn't appear to mind this.

"Pray continue," the mage said, indicating for Johnson to go on.

The dwarf nodded. His small, shrewd blue eyes took in the faces of the four runners, and then he spoke. "Okay," he said again in his no-nonsense tone. "First thing is, I'm not gonna give you guys any bullshit. None of this 'Mr. Johnson' stuff. You're gonna need to know who I am before you take this job, so I'll get that out on the table right up front." He slowly reached into the inner pocket of his coat and withdrew a leather wallet, which he dropped on the table so it fell open.

The runners all stared at it. Inside was a silver Lone Star badge. As one, they all brought their gazes back up to meet the dwarf's.

"Yeah, I'm Star," he said, gathering the wallet back up and returning it to its place. "Wanted to get that established so if you guys find out about it later it won't spook ya. But I'll also tell you that I'm not workin' in an — official capacity at the moment."

"What does that mean, exactly?" Winterhawk asked.

"What it means," the dwarf said, "is that the Star doesn't necessarily agree with my opinions about this job. They don't *disagree* with me, either, but they can't officially support it. That's where you guys come in."

"Why don't you give us the details?" Ocelot said, leaning forward. "So far you ain't makin' much sense."

The dwarf sighed. "Yeah. First thing is, I don't like this Johnson stuff. The name's Hennessy. Duke Hennessy.

Lieutenant. I work outta the 63rd Precinct in Redmond. Gang Affairs. That's why I'm here talkin' to you guys."

Joe's eyes narrowed. "We aren't in the business of bustin' gangs," he said in a low voice. As a member of a gang himself, he wanted to get that established.

Hennessy shook his head. "No, that's not what I'm after. Let me finish and you'll see." He took a deep breath. "See, there's somebody out there killin' gang members, and I want to do something about it before it gets ugly out there."

"Killing gang members?" Winterhawk repeated. "Aren't they rather adept at doing that to each other?"

"That's what the Star's official line is, too," Hennessy said. "But I don't believe it. The pattern's wrong. I think somethin's up, but officially the Star can't back me up on it since there's no proof."

"Go on..." Winterhawk said, leaning back in his seat.

"Yeah," Joe added. "What makes you think it isn't just gangs fightin' each other?"

"Let me start at the beginning," the dwarf said. He settled back like he was going to tell a long story. "About two months ago, we started hearin' about some kind of mysterious deaths in some of the gangs that control turf in our jurisdiction."

"Why mysterious?" Ocelot asked.

"Cause everything was just too pat," Hennessy said. "Too easy. The right people were gettin' killed, and it was happenin' when nobody else saw it. Gangs don't operate like that. When they make hits on rival gangs, they want everybody to know it. That's part o' why they do it—either in retaliation for somethin' that's been done to them, or because they want to assert their dominance over a particular bit of turf. In this case, the killings are quiet, and even though they're set up to look like gangs have been bumpin' each other off, I just don't buy it."

"What do you mean, 'set up to look like they're bumpin' each other off'?" Ocelot asked.

"You know—the methods have been consistent with what gangers might do: heavy pistol, SMG, coupla' guys strangled, one beaten to death—and in every case that I know of, the body had some kind o' gang symbol on it. Either a bit o' fabric with a rival gang's colors, or a gang symbol drawn on the body, or somethin' like that."

"How are you finding out about this?" Joe asked. "Gangers aren't exactly up front about going to the Star with their problems."

Hennessy nodded in agreement. "I got guys in some o' these gangs that trust me, at least enough to tell me when they think somethin's goin' down. I gotta tell ya—none of the gangs in this area are big-timers. We're not talkin' the Ancients or the Halloweeners here. These are just small-time neighborhood gangs, each one controllin' a few blocks o' turf. They make money by runnin' the typical gang stuff—protection, BTL, distribution for some of the organized crime in the area—we don't like 'em, and we'll run 'em in if we catch 'em, but on the great scale of things they're small potatoes. Mostly they just scuffle over borders among themselves—things don't heat up very often down there."

"So lay it out for us, Lieutenant," Winterhawk said. "What exactly do you want us to do?"

Hennessy looked at him for a moment. "What I want," he said, "is for you to figure out who or what is really behind the deaths. See, I don't think it's gangers—at least not *these* gangers—who are killin' each other, but they're all startin' to get antsy. I'm afraid if we don't figure this out soon, the whole area's gonna explode and a lot of innocent people are gonna die."

"You mean it's only a matter of time before the guys in the gangs start goin' after each other in retaliation for what they think is hits by rival gangs," Ocelot said.

"Exactly," the dwarf said, nodding. "We've already seen some of it—these guys are hotheads, and they ain't gonna stand for what they think is their rivals pickin' off their guys. There've been some drive-bys and such, but fortunately no deaths yet. But the rumblings are already starting that there's gonna be a war soon if something isn't done."

"How many deaths?" Wraith asked.

"Six so far," Hennessy said.

"And how many gangs are we talkin' about?" Ocelot asked.

"Five. If you take the job, I'll give you a list of the names and a map showing where each of their territories are."

"Well then," Winterhawk said, "I suppose there's only one other thing to discuss—our compensation."

"Right," Hennessy said. "I can offer you five thousand nuyen each—like I said, since I can't go through official channels, I can't offer as much as I'd like to, but I think that's a pretty fair price. I'm fairly convinced that once somebody actually takes a hard look at this it won't take long to figure out what's up. I'll give you three K now and the other two when the job's done."

The runners looked at each other. After a moment, each one nodded. "All right," Winterhawk said briskly. "Five thousand each. You've got yourself a team, Lieutenant."

Relief showed on the dwarf's face. "Good. Thanks." Reaching inside his coat, he pulled out four credsticks and a pocket secretary; he laid the former on the table. "Here's the first part o' your payment. You're gonna need to work fairly fast—it's lookin' like the killings are starting to

increase in frequency. We had one two months or so ago, then another one two weeks after that, another in a week, and then three within the last month. Whoever's doin' this, they're gettin' impatient, which means things are goin' to hell sooner than I expected." Indicating the pocket secretary, he said, "Here's the info about the gangs and their various turfs. We've got decent intelligence on most of 'em, but if there's anything else you need to know that's not in here, just call me. I don't guarantee I'll have the answer, but I might be able to find out. My private number's in there too—lemme send you this stuff."

Wordlessly 'Wraith pulled out his own pocket secretary, and the transfer of information was made.

"Okay," Hennessy said, rising. "That's it. Like I said, don't hesitate to call me if you have questions. I can't help you much since I'm not officially supposed to be doin' this, but I'll do what I can."

"One thing I'm curious about, Lieutenant," Winterhawk said.

"Yeah?" Hennessy sat back down again.

"Why *isn't* Lone Star officially involved in this? It seems to me that they might be interested in preventing a gang war that would likely cause a great lot of bloodshed. Isn't this correct?"

"I bet I know why," Ocelot said, disgust in his tone. "They ain't interested if a bunch of gangers kill each other. They're just street trash—if they kill each other, then there'll be less street trash they have to contend with."

"It's not quite that bad," Hennessy said with a sigh, "but almost. They're up to their ears in things that are a lot more important—at least to their reckoning. They won't get off their asses until innocent people—people with SINS, I mean—start getting hurt."

"And we all know how many people with SINS live in the Barrens," Joe said with a disgusted tone about like Ocelot's. "Just let 'em kill each other."

The dwarf sighed again. "Yeah. But I grew up in the Barrens, and I don't want to see that happen. I managed to talk my boss into letting me try this—that way if it gets screwed up all we're out is the nuyen, and we don't have to take responsibility for it. Nothin' but my ass hangin' out in the breeze, and the Star stays out of it."

"Great," Ocelot said, but his frustration clearly wasn't aimed at Hennessy.

"We'll do what we can, Lieutenant," Winterhawk said quietly.

Hennessy stood. "Yeah, I know. Harry recommends you guys highly—says you can get things done and keep yer mouths shut about it. That's what I need. I hope you can do it, and soon." Sliding over, he exited the booth as 'Wraith got up to let him out. "I better get outta here," he said. "Wouldn't do any of us any good to see us talkin'." Without further comment, he strode out of the bar.

'Wraith sat back down, and the four runners looked at each other across the table. "We *did* want a job," Ocelot commented, watching the door close behind the dwarf.

"Start tonight?" 'Wraith asked, holding up the pocket secretary.

"Might as well," Joe said. "Ain't got anything better to do."

Ocelot nodded. He definitely wanted to start the run right away—it was the only way he could think of to quiet the nervous thoughts in his head. At least with something to do, he couldn't spend all his time wondering which dragon was going to eat him.

17.

Slyde woke up in a cold sweat.

He sat bolt upright in bed, his breath coming fast and hard, his heart thudding in his chest.

The nightmares were back again.

He raised his hands to his face, scrubbing at it as if that would make the horrific images go away. His entire body was bathed in sweat, his long hair hanging down in clumps. Beneath him, the formerly crisp sheets were also limp and damp. Apparently he had been sweating for awhile before the images from the nightmare had finally awakened him.

This had been the third time in less than two days. He was dog-tired, but every time he lay down and tried to get some sleep, the images returned. He couldn't pin them down and had no idea where they had come from—when he awakened, they skated away from him like tiny fish in a pond.

Sighing, he ran his hand through his matted hair and looked around the room. From the look of the ebbing daylight coming in through the window, it was early evening; a glance at the chrono on the nightstand confirmed this. The room was just as he had left it, including the pile of his clothes on the floor by the side of the bed. Clad only in a pair of soggy shorts, he got up and padded across the big room to the bar, where he poured himself a large shot of scotch and threw it back in one motion. The scotch was good—some of the best he'd ever had, in fact—but he didn't even notice. He wasn't drinking it for the taste.

He had arrived in Hawai'i very early the previous morning, after having had a very busy night liquidating his gear, collecting the funds for it, and procuring himself

transportation. He hadn't gotten anything like what he'd wanted for the Yellowjacket or the Firelance, but beggars could not be choosers. Especially when the beggars were trying to sell the goods in less than an hour or two. He had finally ended up selling both the 'copter and the laser to a friend of his mechanic's, for less than half of what they were worth. Still though, half the street value of a rigged, missile-equipped (well, missile-*launcher*-equipped, anyway) helicopter and a mounted vehicle laser was nothing to sneeze at. Coupled with the 500K he'd gotten from the elf, he had enough nuyen to keep him in high style for quite some time, until he figured out what the hell he wanted to do.

What he did *not* want to do was do any more work for a long time, especially if it meant going back to Seattle. He had already decided that he was permanently out of the Seattle scene; if he did decide to find another group (in a year or so at least, he assured himself) and start looking for jobs again, it would be far from Seattle. Maybe it would even be far from the West Coast as a whole. The farther the better.

He'd hated to lose the Yellowjacket. He'd had it for awhile and had finally gotten it set up the way he liked it. He knew, though, that he couldn't hang on to anything connected with that job. Too much chance of being traced. He had briefly, once he had gotten several kilometers away from the scene, considered going back to ask the elf for the rest of his payment, but once again common sense had won out over greed. There was something—well, *weird*—about that elf. Slyde didn't know what it was, and he didn't want to. The nuyen he had would be enough to let him disappear for awhile and get his head together. If he never saw the elf again, it would be too soon for him.

In addition to taking his gear off his hands, the mechanic's friend had also put him in touch with another

rigger who happened to be heading to Hawai'i and didn't mind taking a passenger for the right price. The trip over had been quiet; Slyde had tried to sleep, but given up when the nightmares started. That had been the first time of the three, and the most frightening: as he tried to sort out what his brain had been trying to tell him, he had come to the realization that he had blacked out most of the end of the confrontation with the dragon. Try as he might, he could not remember what had happened after he'd hit the dragon with the laser. He was quite certain that the beast was dead; enough remained of his memory to be sure that was true. Beyond that, though, it was a maddening collection of half-formed pictures and half-forgotten thoughts, all of which amounted to nothing that made any sense. Eventually he had decided, for sanity's sake, to just let it go; if his mind was trying to block something out, there was probably a reason for it. Right now, his only real concern was getting out of Seattle and finding a nice peaceful place to let his thoughts stop racing around in his head.

He'd been lucky: he'd found exactly the sort of place he had been looking for, and quickly too. It was a small secluded bungalow in the middle of a large tract of verdant land near the beach—the sort of place designed to allow people who had a lot of money to get away from it all in the midst of tropical splendor. His fake SIN, combined with a substantial amount of nuyen over and above the cost of renting the place for a month, had assured him both privacy and the services of the resort's staff, the latter of which were available at his call to provide all the amenities of life. He decided that he could get to like this.

He could get to like it if the nightmares would quit, that was. He hadn't succeeded in sleeping for longer than an hour at a time since he'd taken off from the mainland,

and it was beginning to catch up with him. His plan had been to get settled in, sleep for awhile, and then go into town in his rented car and try to pick up some action — with his money, he had no doubt that he could convince two or three young girls to come back to his place with him for a night of drunken fun. Things hadn't worked out that way, though: right now he wasn't interested in sex in the slightest. He wasn't even interested in company, although part of him thought that maybe if somebody else was around to talk to, he could banish the demons from his mind long enough to get some rest.

The images were getting worse, too — that was the other thing. The first nightmare had been the scariest because of its novelty, but the other two had been building in his mind the increasingly hard-to-ignore belief that he was not long for this world. The formless pictures in his brain seemed to hint at something dark and indescribably ancient...something that was now interested in *him*. His rational mind tried its best to convince him that he was merely the victim of an overactive imagination, but it wasn't succeeding. Something was wrong, the images told him, and it was only a matter of time before it caught up with him. He could run away — maybe he could even hide for awhile — but eventually it would catch him. That day would not be a pleasant one.

Letting out a long breath, Slyde poured himself another Scotch and drained it. Grabbing a towel, he pulled off his sweaty shorts and padded naked into the bathroom. Maybe a shower would help his outlook. Maybe after he got cleaned up a bit, he might summon up the enthusiasm to try to find some action. A girl or two in his bed might be just the thing to take his mind off all the unpleasantness.

As he stood in the luxurious tiled shower, reveling as the warm water ran over his body and carried away the

stale sweat, his mind inevitably returned to yesterday's events. He thought about the others in the team: Cutter, PK, Trent, Marko, and Kresge. All dead now. He was a little surprised that he felt absolutely no grief or even sadness at the loss. He hadn't been close to any of them, and had, in fact, always been halfway convinced that they all somehow knew about his past and would, under the right circumstances, turn him in to the authorities. Again, his rational mind knew that was bullshit: merc teams didn't turn each other in—once you agreed to work with somebody, what they did in their off hours wasn't any of your business as long as they did their job. It was the trust that you built up with your team that allowed you to work together. But nonetheless he had never managed to develop any friendships with the others in the team, so he didn't miss them when they were gone. As far as he was concerned, they died because they weren't careful enough. It happened. It was nature's way of sorting out the guys who should keep getting jobs from the guys who shouldn't. He, Slyde, fell into the former category, and the rest of the team apparently fell into the latter. Nightmares notwithstanding, he was full of pride at the fact that he had participated in an operation that had brought down what was without doubt a member of the most powerful and fearsome species on earth, and he had survived it. They hadn't, but he had. He grinned. In a year or so, when he decided to get back into the biz again, he would command a significantly higher price than before. That was just the way these things worked. Slyde the Dragon-Slayer. Yeah—that had a nice ring to it.

He shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, wrapping his towel around his waist. Grabbing another one, he used it to scrub at his hair as he looked in the mirror. The image he saw there was not what most people would think of when given the term "dragon-slayer":

skinny, pale, pockmarked with the scars of old acne, with long stringy hair, crooked teeth, and small brown eyes, Slyde was surely not anyone's idea of a heroic figure; he didn't see it that way, though. In the manner of most individuals whose egos outstripped their common sense, Slyde was quite impressed with what he saw in the mirror. Yeah, the chicks would dig him when he got into town—money was, after all, the world's greatest aphrodisiac. Again he grinned. The hell with the nightmares! He was going to get dressed and head out looking for some action. That was why he was here, after all, wasn't it? To lose himself and forget about that whole run?

He swiped the towel through his hair one last time, then tossed it on the toilet seat and left the bathroom.

He was so intent on his fantasies about what he would do with the girls he brought back to the room that he almost didn't see the man seated in the chair by the window.

18.

Slyde stopped short when he saw the man. "Who the fuck are *you*?" he demanded, glaring. "And how did you get in here?"

The man remained calmly seated, watching Slyde. He smiled, just a bit, but there was something dangerous behind the smile. "I've come to—discuss something with you."

Slyde stared at him. Very young, too handsome, dressed in a fine suit, he looked completely at ease here, showing no fear at the fact that he had just been confronted by the room's rightful occupant. "I asked you a question," Slyde growled. "Who are you, and how'd you get in here?"

The smile disappeared. "My name is Gabriel," he said softly. "How I got in is irrelevant, since I am here now."

Slyde sneered. "Well, how you're gonna get *outta* here is relevant, asshole," he said. "I'll give you one chance to get up and get your ass out the door, or you're gonna be *real* sorry." He did not glance at the nightstand next to the bed; he knew there was a Predator there, and he was reasonably sure he could get to it before this guy, whoever he was, caught on.

The man did not move. "I'm not going anywhere," he said with just a hint of a chill in his voice. "Nor are you. You will answer my questions."

Slyde was already tiring of the game. He was frazzled enough without having some kid break into his room and try (ineffectively, so far) to intimidate him. "Okay," he said through his teeth. "Don't say I didn't give you a chance. I ain't in the mood for this crap." Moving quickly, he lunged toward the nightstand, which was only a couple of meters from where he had been standing.

—and stopped in mid-movement, frozen by some unseen force. "*Wha' the fuck — ?*" he yelled. He glared at Gabriel, who still hadn't moved, while trying desperately to get control of his arms or his legs. His entire body below the neck was paralyzed.

Gabriel rose and crossed the room to the nightstand. Opening the drawer, he withdrew the Predator. "You weren't thinking of using this on me, were you, Slyde?" he asked almost conversationally. "That would have been unwise." He returned to his chair, taking the gun with him. Idly he popped the clip, removed the bullets, and put them in his pocket, then tossed the gun aside.

Slyde was nearly hysterical in his sudden desire to move. "What the hell did you do to me?" he screamed. "How did you know my name? I ain't never seen you before in my life!"

Gabriel shrugged. "Simple, really. It could have been much worse. Now — if I let you go, will you sit down and answer my questions? Next time I could make it more unpleasant, if that's what you prefer."

Slyde continued to glare at him, but there was an overlay of panic to it now. Who *was* this guy? What did he want? Was he the evil that was coming for him? He met Gabriel's violet gaze, but did not catch the significance of it. If he had been Kestrel, he would have been very frightened by what he saw there. "Awright," he muttered, still fighting the paralysis. "Lemme go, and I'll talk to ya. I don't know what the hell you want with me, though. Like I said, I ain't never even seen you before."

Suddenly the hold on him dropped away. Surprised, he lost his balance and fell to the floor, landing hard on his butt. Still Gabriel had not moved; he merely sat watching Slyde as he frantically gathered his towel around him and leaped back to his feet. For a moment the rigger looked like he might rush Gabriel, but he decided

against it and dropped down on the bed. "Okay," he said sullenly. "Talk."

Gabriel nodded once as if satisfied, but the dangerous look had not yet left his eyes. "Tell me about the night before last, Slyde," he said, deceptively gentle.

Oh, shit...he does know. Who the hell is this guy? "I don't know what you're talkin' about, kid," he lied smoothly, while inside his stomach was doing flip-flops.

"I think you do," Gabriel said in the same soft tone. "It would be best for you, I think, if your memory returned to you of your own volition. If I have to help it—" He trailed off, leaving the rest ambiguous.

"Look, whoever the hell you are," Slyde said, his voice getting louder as he took the offensive, "I'm tellin' ya—I don't know nothin' about whatever you're talkin' about. I was here the whole time. Right here. Now you better get your ass outta here before I call security and have 'em come get ya." That was a bluff, of course—Slyde liked to have as little to do with any sort of security as possible—but he hoped that the young intruder wouldn't know it.

Gabriel's gaze stepped up its intensity a notch. When he spoke again it was still in the same tone, but now there was something else beneath it. "A very dear friend of mine died that night," he said.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit... Slyde tried and barely succeeded not to squirm on the bed. *Okay—this guy might know about the dragon, but he's just one guy, and he ain't that big. I think I can take him if I catch him by surprise.* "So?" he demanded. "What's that got to do with me?"

"Quite a lot, apparently," Gabriel said. "It appears that you are the only survivor of the attack that killed him."

Slyde shot to his feet. "Hey, asshole," he protested angrily. "You got a lotta balls to come in here and accuse me of killin' somebody! I said I been here. Don't you listen?"

"I listen," Gabriel said, unruffled. "But I hear more than your words." Suddenly his expression changed, grew colder. "I'm growing tired of this. The issue is not whether you killed him—I already know that. The issue is why. I want to know who hired you, and why he was killed."

"I ain't tellin' you nothin', kid." Slyde sneered. Alcohol and fear were making him more belligerent than usual.

Gabriel shrugged. "I think you're wrong about that, but I was hoping you would see reason." He made a brief gesture in the air.

Slyde gasped. Now he was not only paralyzed, but he could not get a breath. Sputtering, he tried to wrench his arms up to grip his throat, but they wouldn't move. "Ah—ah—" he stammered.

"I told you it could be more unpleasant," Gabriel said, seemingly oblivious to his struggle. "As you can see, the paralysis is selective. I can choose to immobilize only your limbs, or I can extend it to more of your body. Such as your lungs, in this case."

Slyde desperately fought for breath. Already he could feel dark tendrils around the outer fringes of his mind as he began to black out. "Okay!" he whispered explosively. "Okay! You win! Make it stop!"

Instantly the hold fell away. Slyde slumped, gasping in great lungfuls of air. "What—*are*—you?" he spat out between breaths.

"I told you," Gabriel said. "I was a close friend of the one you killed. I've come to seek the truth about why he was murdered."

Slyde looked at Gabriel, and his eyes narrowed. For a moment he was silent, weighing the relative advantages of lying versus telling the truth. "If I tell you," he said slyly, "will you promise not to kill me?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No."

Slyde looked startled. "No?" Was this kid really so clueless about the way these things worked that he wouldn't even *lie* about it to get the information he wanted? "Why not?"

"Because I cannot make that promise."

This guy was fraggin' *weird*. Slyde was starting to get nervous now. "Why should I tell you anything, then, if you're just gonna kill me?"

"Because," Gabriel said matter-of-factly, "I will certainly kill you if you *don't* tell me."

"But then you won't get your information," Slyde said, beginning to sound a bit frayed around the edges. He was dealing with a crazy man, and he wasn't sure how to proceed.

Something changed again in Gabriel's eyes, and it chilled Slyde's bones. "I will get my information," he said very quietly. "The question is simply whether you will give it to me voluntarily, or whether I will take it."

Slyde swallowed hard. He could feel the sweat breaking out on his body. Part of his mind started its argument that he could still take Gabriel if he caught him by surprise, but the part with sense reminded him of how easily the newcomer had incapacitated him with nothing more than a gesture. The guy might not look tough, but mages didn't have to look tough to *be* tough. He decided his best chance, however slim, of getting out of this alive would be to tell this madman what he wanted to know. "Okay," he muttered, still trying to think of a way out. "I'll answer."

Gabriel settled back in his chair, his eyes never leaving Slyde. "Who hired you to kill Telanwyr?"

"Who?" Slyde looked genuinely perplexed.

"You have committed murder without even knowing the name of your victim," Gabriel said in a tone dripping ice. "Who hired you to kill him?"

"Our boss set up the job," Slyde said. He was determined that he was going to play this just as if he was in court: answer only the question that was asked, and not volunteer any additional information.

"Who is that?"

"Cutter."

Gabriel sighed. "Who is Cutter? Was he one of the others involved in the ambush?"

"Yeah."

"So he is dead now."

"Yeah. That fragger killed him." *So much for no additional information*, Slyde thought disgustedly.

Gabriel's hands tightened on the arms of his chair. They were shaking, but his face remained completely impassive. "Understandable, given what you did to him," he said tightly. "Who contacted Cutter regarding the hit?"

"I don't know."

"You are lying," Gabriel said. He raised his hand again.

"No—wait!" Slyde said quickly, scrambling backward on the bed. "Don't hit me with that mojo again! I remember!" Puffing, he settled down again. "It was some weird-shit elf."

"What did this elf look like?"

Slyde tried to picture the elf, but his features kept blurring in his mind. "I—don't know." He glanced up fearfully. "That's the truth! I can't remember what he looked like!"

"Did you see him?"

Slyde thought about that for a moment. "Yeah—I saw him. But I can't—I can't get a picture of what he looks like. I don't know his name or nothin'. All I can remember is that he was an elf."

Gabriel regarded him coldly for several seconds, then nodded. "All right. Do you know why he hired you? Why did he want Telanwyr dead?"

"He didn't say," Slyde said, shaking his head. "He told us what to do and we did it. That was what he was payin' us for."

"How much did he pay you?"

Slyde paused. "Five hundred K up front. He was gonna pay us another 500K after the job was over."

"Was?" Gabriel leaned forward. "Why did he not pay you? You did complete the job, did you not?"

Again Slyde racked his brain for the answer, but it would not come. "I — can't remember. I left before I got the rest of the payment."

"But you don't remember why?" Gabriel appeared very interested in Slyde's answer. "You left five hundred thousand nuyen behind, but you can't even remember why?"

"Yeah," Slyde said miserably. "Five hundred fuckin' K. Right down the drain."

"Where is the payment you did get?"

"I spent it already." Slyde got a bit of his old defiance back as his gaze came up to meet Gabriel's.

"You're lying again, Slyde," Gabriel said, obvious warning in his tone.

Was this guy reading his mind or something? How could he be so sure — and so correct? "What do you care?" Slyde demanded. "You ain't here to talk about my money."

"Indirectly I am. Please get it. I know that you have it in this room somewhere. I strongly suggest that you don't try to retrieve any more weapons in the process." Gabriel leaned back in his chair and continued to watch Slyde.

Slowly, the rigger rose from the bed, pausing to re-fasten his towel around his waist. In the back of his mind,

a voice was telling him, *Give him the money. Maybe that's all he wants. Maybe he'll take the money and leave. And besides, he doesn't know about the money from the Yellowjacket and the laser. You can live good for a long time on that, even without the five hundred.* He had to admit that the voice was making sense.

Careful to make no sudden motions that might startle his insane visitor, Slyde crossed the room to the closet, where his armored coat was hung up. Acutely conscious of the young man's gaze, he reached into the pocket and pulled out the credstick containing the 500K. "Here it is," he said, turning back around. He tried not to think about just how much money he was giving up. If it saved his life, it was worth it. He could always get more money.

An invisible force plucked the credstick from Slyde's grasp; it floated across the room and into Gabriel's raised hand. He looked at it contemplatively for a moment. "They think this is the price of Telanwyr's life..." he murmured to himself, shaking his head in disgust. Then he raised the credstick again. As Slyde watched in horror, a puff of flame rose up around it, consuming it. In less than five seconds, nothing remained in Gabriel's hand.

"What the hell are you *doin'*, you idiot?" Slyde screamed, lunging forward. "You just blew up *five hundred thousand fuckin' nuyen!*"

In a split-second Gabriel was on his feet, his handsome features darkening with rage. With a negligent wave of his hand, he threw Slyde back across the bed. "Do not raise your voice to me again," he said coldly. "You continue to live only at my favor—don't forget that." He began pacing around the room like a caged cat. "You sicken me—all of you do. You kill in cold blood without even realizing the ramifications of what you have done." He rounded on Slyde, his violet eyes ablaze with hatred. "Do you know *anything* about the being you have

murdered? Do you know how ancient he was—how much of his vast knowledge has been lost to the world because of what you have done? He was not your enemy. I doubt that he had any knowledge of you or those like you. But yet, for this insignificant price—this bit of worthless currency—you have chosen to end his life. Your greed has led you to destroy someone with whom you are not fit to share this world." His eyes burned into Slyde's, challenging him to reply.

Slyde scrambled back to a sitting position on the bed, watching the pacing man with wide, frightened eyes. The guy was losing it, big-time. "Look," he said, his voice breaking with fear, "it was just a job. We didn't set it up. We just did what we were paid to do. If you want the guy behind this, you're gonna have to find that elf." He paused, the alcohol taking over his brain again. "What's the big deal to you anyway? What are you, some kind of dragon-lover or something?"

Gabriel stopped his pacing. For a moment he said nothing; then, very slowly, he moved over next to the bed. As Slyde stared up at him, gasping, his eyes changed. Shifted. When they had finished, instead of his human-looking eyes, normal looking in every respect except for their brilliant violet coloring, the eyes that regarded Slyde were solid violet with slitted pupils. Eyes like a—

Oh, shit...

Very softly, in what was almost a whisper, Gabriel said, "Didn't you know we could take human form, Donnie?"

Slyde froze. *Oh shit...it's another one! It's another dragon! And it's found me and it's after me...Oh my god oh my god oh my god...* His thoughts raced through his mind like speeding trains. He felt his bladder give way; warm urine trickled down his legs and soaked into the bedcovers.

"Sit up," Gabriel said contemptuously. "At least take responsibility for what you have done."

Slyde was beyond that now. Kneeling on the bed, he buried his face in his hands and blubbered. This whole situation had just gone right over the edge. It was bad enough that some nebulous evil was after him, but now here was a dragon, right here in front of him, looking for revenge for his friend's murder. Maybe the evil and the dragon were both the same thing. But whatever it was, it didn't matter. It was enough.

The invisible hand took hold of his chin and forced it upward. Slyde tried to fight it but it was too strong. "What—?" he mumbled through his tears. "What do you want?"

"I want to know about the elf," Gabriel said.

"I don't *remember!* I don't *remember!* Please!" Slyde collapsed into another bout of sobs. "Don't eat me!"

Gabriel considered. "Give me a reason why I shouldn't."

"*Please don't eat me! Please! I don't know about the elf! I don't know! Please!*" Slyde was turning into a wreck right there in the middle of the bed.

Gabriel shook his head. "I'm sorely tempted, but no doubt you would give me indigestion." There was no vestige of humor in his tone. "But I will have your knowledge of the elf who set this abomination in motion. If you will not tell me of him, then I will take the knowledge from you." Without waiting for permission, he reached out a hand and clamped it around Slyde's forehead.

Slyde tried to fight the intrusion in his mind, but the force was simply too strong. The dragon's mind probe broke through his mental barriers like they were not even there; desperately, he felt his memories and his thoughts being sifted through like so many random papers in a

desk drawer. He felt the dragon examine his memories of the battle, his pride at being the one to strike the final blow, his fear of –

– of what?

The probe pushed harder, but still those memories eluded it, just as they had eluded Slyde. It was as if there were great black spots – holes where memories should have been. He thought he heard himself scream, but he wasn't sure if it was aloud or just inside his own head.

Searching, the dragon's mind probe continued deeper into his brain, uncovering more memories in quest of those he thought were buried. As the probe moved in deeper, the pain in Slyde's head increased. He fought harder, trying to protect his most guarded secret, the story of his last night in the military, but the probe only pressed harder, believing these to be the memories it sought. When it finally finished sifting through his mind and withdrew, Slyde collapsed backward on the bed.

"You truly do not remember..." Gabriel was saying as if to himself. He sounded somewhat surprised. "How could such a block be so strong in such a short time period?"

"I told you I didn't remember," Slyde blubbered, rolling himself up into a ball on the bed, which was now soaked with new sweat to go with the urine that was already there.

Gabriel's gaze flicked upward as he noticed the rigger again. The rage still showed in his eyes. "You have no remorse for what you have done," he said. "You were proud as you watched my oldest friend die under your laser. You fancy yourself a 'dragon-slayer.'" He shook his head. "You are no dragon-slayer. You have not the power or the courage to do such a thing alone. I can see that the key to this problem is the elf. Someone has wiped your

memory of him, so I must find him. He will have the answer."

"So—" Slyde began hesitantly, "—what are you gonna do with me?"

"What am I going to do with you?" Gabriel thought about that a moment, standing over him. "You are a murderer. You are a child-rapist. You have no sense of honor. You are filled with greed and hatred and have loyalty toward no one but yourself. What do *you* think I should do with you?"

Slyde merely whimpered, rolling back in his little ball.

"Yes," Gabriel said, nodding. "Excellent idea." He turned away, making a small hand gesture toward Slyde as he did so. Without looking back, he left the room.

Death took Slyde quickly as the spell stopped his heart. He did not suffer, which perhaps, all things considered, was a shame.

19.

The thing watched the scene unfold before it with growing astonishment. It could not believe its good fortune!

It had expected the young one to find the trail leading to its last remaining minion – the youngster was both intelligent and persistent, and it was not possible to hide every aspect of the plan, even if it had wanted to. But to watch as this one – the incorruptible one – gave vent to his rage and his grief at the loss of his friend by torturing this minion –

It could barely contain its glee as it continued to observe.

Yes...this could work out to our advantage, Master. We had thought this one to be outside our reach, protected from our influence by his virtue, but even the most virtuous has weaknesses that can be exploited.

The Master will be pleased. Now what we had thought to be impossible has just entered the realm of the conceivable.

No, it would still not be easy. One break in the armor of one with such power was only a small thing – even a break such as this one. Before long the inherent virtue of the young one would reassert itself, the thing was sure, and the chance would be lost.

Lost for now, but not forever.

For even a small crack can bring down a mighty dam, if such a crack is carefully managed and cultivated.

The thing smiled its noxious smile as it began to alter its plans to take into account this new development.

20.

"Okay, what's up for tonight?" Ocelot climbed into the back seat of the team's Gaz-Willys Nomad and settled himself in.

It was early evening of the following day, and the runners had reconvened to do some more investigation for their current job. After a bit of discussion, they had decided to spend the previous night after Hennessy had left cruising around the neighborhoods comprising the turf of the gangs the dwarf had told them about, just to get a feeling for the size of the territory they were going to need to cover. To that end, they had taken a couple of hours to drive around so Joe and Ocelot could identify the various gang symbols spray-painted on the area's collection of broken-down buildings. While they were thus occupied, 'Wraith was learning the layout of the streets and Winterhawk was doing a bit of astral reconnaissance just to determine if anything looked more out of the ordinary than usual. They had agreed to meet again the next night to get started on some actual legwork.

Ocelot had slept most of the day, getting up in mid-afternoon to get in some exercise before heading out. He had thought about calling Kestrel, but had reluctantly decided not to; she seemed to have enough on her mind, and besides, it was better not to get her involved if they were going to be on a run for awhile. Slowly the feeling that something big was hanging over his head was beginning to diminish, although it had not disappeared entirely. He didn't think it would, either.

"Why don't we go try to talk to some of the gangers?" Joe suggested in response to Ocelot's question. He was in his customary spot, taking up more than half of the back

seat. "And talk to some of the people we know. I think if we split up, we can cover quite a bit of it tonight."

"Before we do that," Winterhawk spoke up from the shotgun seat, "do you mind if we go over the relevant players again? I can't keep track of them all without a scorecard."

Wordlessly, 'Wraith pulled the pocket secretary from his jacket and handed it over. Winterhawk took it and called up Hennessy's file describing the gangs who had lost members. "All right, then. We've got five gangs: the Blood Monkeys, the Axemen, the Gutterpunks, the Sin-Eaters, and the Twisted Grizzlies." He looked up from the list, raising an eyebrow. "Colorful bunch of names they've got there." When nobody answered him, he continued. "Six murders so far: Johnny Mayhem, second-in-command and brother of the leader of the Gutterpunks; Psycho Joe, lieutenant from the Axemen; Wolf, third-in-command of the Sin-Eaters; Kano, from the Blood Monkeys; Charlie Tuna, Twisted Grizzlies; and Shiv, also from the Blood Monkeys."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. Two from the Monkeys, but other than that, nothing in common. Psycho Joe's an ork, Kano's a dwarf, Charlie's a troll, and the other three are humans."

"No elves," Winterhawk pointed out.

"That's not an elven area," Joe said. "Mostly human, bordering on ork and dwarf neighborhoods. The gangs are all mixed race, mostly human, just like the area. The Grizzlies are more ork and troll than the others, but even they have humans."

Ocelot leaned forward and plucked the pocket secretary from Winterhawk's grip. "Nothing in common about the ways they died, either. We got three guys shot, one strangled, one knifed, and one beaten to death. Whoever's doin' this is damn versatile."

"Wraith shrugged. "Different people. Different specialties."

Ocelot nodded. "Don't know how many, either. Could be one person, a few, or a whole bunch."

"I don't think it's a whole bunch," Joe said. "Not unless they already belong in the neighborhoods. Gangs notice new people in their turf almost before anybody else does. If there were that many unfamiliar people around, somebody'd notice."

"Yeah," Ocelot added, "and it's probably a good bet that it ain't a rival gang, unless they've got some money together and hired some outside talent to do it."

"You mean a gang outside of these five?" Winterhawk took the pocket secretary back from Ocelot and glanced over it again, trying to memorize all the names and places.

"Right. If another gang was comin' in, tryin' to destabilize the area, somebody'd catch on. Gangers aren't idiots—at least the ones that have stayed alive awhile aren't. The one thing they're tuned in to is things that affect their turf."

"Need to talk to them," Wraith spoke up. "See what they know."

"Yeah," Joe said. "Maybe try to calm 'em down a bit if we can. They aren't gonna want a war any more than anybody else does, if we can convince them that it isn't their rivals who are killing their guys."

"Are we positive that it isn't?" Winterhawk asked. He shrugged. "I mean, it's possible, isn't it, that one or more of these gangs are doing this in such a way as to make it look like gangs would never have done it?"

Ocelot shook his head. "You don't understand gangs, 'Hawk."

"Well, *there's* a revelation," the mage said archly.

Ocelot ignored him. "When you're a ganger, doing stuff like this is out in the open. You *want* the other guy to

know you're doing it. It's a dominance thing: *I came onto your turf and messed up your guys, and you can't do a damn thing about it.* See? Gangs—especially small-time ones like this, which are probably not much more than a bunch of teenagers getting together to hassle each other and give some safety in numbers—would probably go for things more like drive-bys and in-your-face stuff like that. They wouldn't ambush somebody alone, kill 'em, and then leave 'em out with their colors on 'em. Maybe once or twice to make a statement, but not as a rule."

"But according to Hennessy, that's what the gang members seem to believe," Hawk reminded him. "That's why he's concerned about the area heating up."

"Yeah, well—kids hopped up on testosterone can get a little hotheaded sometimes too. Sometimes pride drowns out sense and they stop thinkin'." His expression as he spoke suggested that he might be speaking at least a little bit from experience. "But it's not the kids we want anyway—it's the leaders. Maybe they have a little more sense."

Joe nodded, leaning forward to get a look at the data in Winterhawk's hand. "I think we should split up, me and Wraith and you and Winterhawk. We can go talk to some of these guys and see if we can find out anything. I know a guy who knows somebody in the Grizzlies, so maybe they might talk to me."

"Yeah. Let's head over there, and you can drop Hawk and me off near Blood Monkey territory." Ocelot held up his wrist with his phone on it. "Just keep in touch. If we're lucky maybe we can get to all five of 'em tonight."

"So what's our plan, now that my attire has finally met with your approval?" Winterhawk looked himself up and down, clearly not pleased at having swapped, courtesy of a Fashion spell, his tailored suit for the grubby overcoat,

rumpled suit, and shapeless hat of a down-on-his luck private investigator. Both he and Ocelot had determined early on that there was no point in trying to pass him off as a ganger, so they had to settle for making him look like he might possibly belong in this end of town. The Fashion spell, coupled with a Mask spell to hide his armor and make him look more disheveled than usual, had finally resulted in Ocelot pronouncing him ready to go.

They were standing under a fizzling light on a street corner just inside Blood Monkeys turf, watching the occasional vehicle go by and for the moment trying to look nonchalant. Ocelot was succeeding. Winterhawk needed some more work.

"Slouch more, will you?" Ocelot took another look up and down the street. "And let me do the talking. I don't know any of these guys, but from what we've got from Hennessy, they aren't real big as gangs go. Maybe thirty guys total. That's big for around here, but not when you get into some of the real operations like the Cutters and the Ancients."

"So what does that mean?" Winterhawk put his hands in his pockets and tried to comply with Ocelot's instructions, leaning casually back against the streetlight pole.

"Means we're not likely to encounter any serious opposition. These guys remind me of the Predators when they were at their peak—they might have one SMG between the bunch of them, and more likely if they go after us it'll be with light pistols and hand weapons. Nothing we can't handle."

"Assuming they don't all ambush us at once," Hawk pointed out.

"They won't. Especially if we ain't a threat. And almost certainly they got no guys with any cyber."

"What about magic?"

Ocelot shrugged. "Maybe one. Maybe." He looked sideways at 'Hawk. "Nothin' you can't handle, I'm sure."

The mage didn't answer that; he didn't think it was worthy of an answer. "So we're just going to try to talk to them, then."

"Yeah. So far, at least according to that info Hennessy gave us, the Monkeys haven't lost any of their top people. Two deaths, but not top guys like the Gutterpunks and the Axemen did. I'm hopin' maybe we can talk some sense into the people runnin' the show around here."

"And how exactly do you propose that we find these people?" Winterhawk indicated the nearly deserted street with a quick head gesture.

"Oh, they'll find us. They're probably watching us right now. I would be, if I was in this gang." He pushed himself off the wall where he was leaning and started off, indicating for Winterhawk to come along. He walked confidently but not arrogantly—just giving the impression that he wasn't worried about what might befall him in this "bad" neighborhood. In truth, he wasn't terribly worried; the odds that the Blood Monkeys would be able to ambush him and 'Hawk were almost nonexistent, and he would put his money on himself and the mage against at least a third of the gang at once, should it come to that. Maybe it wasn't true—you could never know something like that for sure until it happened—but quiet confidence was something that went a long way toward keeping you from getting hassled in the Barrens.

Of course, it helped when you were built like a professional athlete, too. Over the years, Ocelot had carefully cultivated his "don't mess with me" demeanor, and most of the time it worked fairly well.

They walked for awhile in silence, both of them carefully observing the area around them with the aid of

the low-light and thermographic vision built into their cybereyes. The neighborhood was typical Barrens: broken-down, depressing, filled with decaying buildings and more than a few decaying people. Ocelot knew areas like this all too well: although he wasn't familiar with this particular part of the Barrens, he had grown up in another one very similar to it. As they walked, his eyes scanned over the overgrown vacant lots, the blasted husks of burned-out cars, the graffiti-strewn plaswood affixed to empty window-holes with duct tape. He sighed, thinking how sad it was that for a lot of kids who were born in areas like this, gang membership was one of the few ways to get a little self respect—with no education, no SIN, and limited prospects, there were precious few other ways to do it. Sometimes kids—like him, many years ago—made it out through lucky breaks, superior talent, or just plain chutzpah, but it was rare. The Barrens would chew up most of these kids and spit them out before their twenty-fifth birthdays. He wasn't romanticizing gang life—he had enough experience with it to know better than to believe it was anything but a dangerous and brutish existence for most of its participants—but he certainly understood it.

As they continued on, both Ocelot and Winterhawk gradually (Winterhawk more gradually than Ocelot) became aware that they were being watched. It was subtle at first—just a quick glimpse of a figure slipping into the shadows of an alleyway—but as they continued on, it became more blatant until they were passing groups of young men (and a few young women), usually in knots of two or three, all of them wearing the dark red synthleather jackets and stylized grinning monkey emblems of the Blood Monkeys. "Seems we've attracted some attention," Winterhawk murmured under his breath.

"Not surprising," Ocelot murmured back. "Just let me do the talking, okay?"

"Not a problem."

Ocelot glanced off toward a side street. "Let's take this off the main drag and see if anybody's interested in followin' us." Without waiting for an answer, he turned the corner and started off down a narrow street, barely more than an alley, lined with dumpsters and the corpses of rusting cars.

Immediately the three figures detached themselves from the shadows and trailed the two runners from about half a block back. "Stay cool," Ocelot whispered. "And keep a lookout up ahead."

"Oh, you mean for the three individuals of indeterminate gender who are hiding behind those cars about a block up?"

"Yeah."

Winterhawk nodded and continued walking nonchalantly on.

It wasn't long—only about another half a block—before their escort began moving in closer. The three gangers Winterhawk had spotted stepped out from their hiding places and casually blocked the sidewalk in front of the two runners, while the other three moved in behind them. They made no overt threatening moves; it appeared that they expected their mere presence to be enough of a threat.

One of the three in front, a tall young human male with a bright red Mohawk and about nine earrings (most of them in the same ear), stepped forward. "Hoi."

Ocelot nodded. "Evening."

"Nice night for a walk." The young man looked the two runners up and down, his sharp, uneven features showing contempt. "You guys must be new 'round here." Behind him, his two companions—a human woman about

his age in ripped jeans and a T-shirt that read *Kill 'em All* and an ork male who wore sunglasses despite the fact that it was dark—crossed their arms and regarded Hawk and Ocelot like they might be something good to eat.

"Why's that?" Ocelot's voice was utterly casual; he didn't even appear to be paying attention to the three other gangers behind him.

The guy shrugged. "Never seen you before. We usually recognize most of the folks around here."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. Funny you should mention that."

"Oh, yeah?" The ganger's eyes narrowed.

"Yeah. We want to talk to your boss." Ocelot met his eyes unflinchingly. He knew these guys would respect that, just as he knew they would jump on anything resembling fear or weakness. He could sense more than hear the three Blood Monkeys behind them moving in a little closer.

There was a low undercurrent of soft and mocking laughter coming from the gangers. "You want to see the boss," Mohawk Boy drawled, in a tone that suggested that Ocelot had just asked him to hand over all his worldly goods to the local Salvation Army.

"That's what I said." Ocelot held his ground. Next to him, Winterhawk remained still with his hands in his pockets. His gaze cruised over the three forward gangers, but in reality he was more tuned in to the ones behind him.

Mohawk Boy nudged open the front of his jacket, revealing a battered Colt America stuck in his belt. "Well," he said, "here's the way it is. The boss don't talk to no losers who just happen to wander on to our turf and ask ta see him. See, he's got things to *do*. That's why we make sure that he don't get bothered by nobody." He paused, then looked Ocelot right in the eyes. "What *I'd* like to see,

though, is yer credsticks. And anything else ya got on ya that ya think we might like. You do that, and we'll think about not pluggin' ya where ya stand and sellin' ya for spare parts. How's that sound instead?"

Ocelot appeared to consider that; he shook his head thoughtfully after a moment, a rueful expression on his face. "Sorry, but that ain't gonna work. See, we got some things we need to talk to your boss about—stuff he's gonna want to hear—and...well, I don't think he's gonna like it much if you try to stop us from doin' it."

Around them, Winterhawk heard the slight sounds of gangers shifting their weight and removing things from their pockets. He still wasn't worried, though. He remained silent, listening to Ocelot do his thing.

"Oh, you don't think so, huh?" Mohawk Boy grinned, showing uneven, stained teeth. "Well, ya know, that's why you don't make the rules around here, *so ka*?" He took a step backward and whipped the Colt from his belt—

—and gasped as Ocelot's steel-strong grip locked around his wrist. "Drop it," Ocelot ordered quietly.

The ganger struggled as the others moved forward, unsure of what to do without getting their friend killed. "Leggo my arm, you fraggin'—"

Ocelot popped his cyberspur with a *snik*. It ran harmlessly up the back of the ganger's arm, settling there like a gleaming metal snake.

"I'd drop it if I were you," Winterhawk said. "We've just come to talk, but he gets rather angry when chaps try to shoot him."

Mohawk Boy's eyes widened as he stared down at the spur. Obviously these guys were more than they seemed. The process of wheels turning in his head was almost visible. After a long pause, he dropped the gun.

"Smart man," Ocelot said, retracting the spur as Winterhawk casually used a levitation spell to pick up the gun and stow it in his pocket. The other gangers, seeing that things were even worse than they thought, backed up a couple of steps but still maintained their unconcerned expressions and casual postures – mostly.

Mohawk Boy recovered quickly, but did not make another threatening move toward the two runners. "So," he said, still trying his best to sound unconcerned, "what do ya want to talk to the boss about? You can tell me, and I'll take 'im the message. How's that?"

Again Ocelot shook his head. "Two for two. Sorry, try again. And why don't the rest of you come around here so we can see you, okay?"

There was a long moment during which everybody just stood where they were, looking at everybody else. Ocelot noticed that several of the gangers seemed to be looking more worriedly at Winterhawk than they were at him; that made sense – they knew that they had a decent chance of getting away from him if they ran, but mages could plug you from a distance – and they could find you where you hid. As long as Hawk didn't stick his foot in his mouth with his sarcastic comments, he'd prove to be a definite asset in this conversation. Slowly the three gangers behind them shuffled forward, just far enough to get into view. These three were all humans – two men and a woman. All three were dressed in the Monkeys' red jackets.

"So," Mohawk Boy said, with as much bravado as he could muster, "whadda you wanna talk to the boss about?"

Ocelot nodded. Finally, maybe, they could get down to biz. He still remembered all too well how to do the strutting and posturing and shows of dominance that were practically required during discussions with

gangers, but he didn't like them anymore. The whole thing seemed so much of a waste of time—why not just get down to it? He sighed. "You guys have lost some people lately, right?"

The gangers looked at each other warily. Mohawk Boy's eyes narrowed as he stood up straighter. "We ain't lost nobody. Where'd you hear somethin' like that?"

"Look." Ocelot's voice took on a bit of an edge. "That's bullshit, and we both know it. You lost two guys in the last couple months—Kano, and—" He glanced sideways at Winterhawk.

"Shiv," the mage supplied.

Ocelot nodded. "Shiv. One shot, one knifed. Nobody saw it happen, but Kano turned up with a Sin-Eaters emblem spray-painted on the back of his jacket, and Shiv had Axemen colors tied around his neck." He stared hard at Mohawk Boy, looking for reaction.

The ganger's eyes narrowed further, and he began to get brave again. "How do you know about that?" he demanded. Taking a step forward, he added, "You in on it?"

Ocelot shook his head. "You think we'd be dumb enough to show up around here if we were? Whoever's doin' this, they're good. Nobody ever sees 'em, right?"

"It was those fuckin' Sin-Eaters!" one of the other gangers piped up. "I'm tellin' ya, Bug, they're tryin' ta start somethin' with us!"

"Shut up, Jimmy!" Mohawk Boy (apparently his real name was Bug) snapped. He turned back to Ocelot. "So if you ain't in on it, whadda you care about it?"

Ocelot shrugged. "We got our reasons. It ain't just you guys—it's happenin' all over around here. We're tryin' to figure out why."

For a long moment Bug didn't say anything. He looked the two runners up and down. "The boss don't just see anybody. Like I said, he got things to do."

Ocelot smiled a bit to himself. Their show of force had worked, and now things were starting to turn. "How about if we make it worth your while—you know—to fit us into his schedule." He glanced over at Winterhawk, who silently withdrew the Colt from his pocket and offered it, grip-first, to Ocelot.

Ocelot paired it with a fifty-nuyen scrip note and held them out to Bug. "Deal?"

Bug grabbed the gun and the money, stowing both in his jacket. "Okay," he said grudgingly. "You wait here and we'll set up a meet."

"No go." Ocelot shook his head. "We ain't gonna stand out here in the open so you can plug us from some building. You take us to the spot and bring him there. You can leave some of your guys to keep an eye on us if you don't trust us."

The reluctant respect in the ganger's eyes stepped up a tiny bit. "Okay. Come on."

He was just turning to go when the sound of pounding feet could be heard in the distance, getting closer. Bug drew the Colt and the other gangers (as well as Winterhawk and Ocelot) moved into defensive positions as two figures came hurtling around the corner. "Bug! Bug! Where the hell are you?" one of them—a young kid who couldn't have been more than fifteen—was screaming. The kid and his companion, who was even younger than he was, were both clad in the Blood Monkeys' colors and looked like they had been running for all they were worth.

Bug kept the gun trained on the space beyond the kids. If something was chasing them, he wanted a good shot at it. "Over here!"

The kids barrelled up to Bug without even seeming to notice the presence of the two runners. They skidded to a stop, leaning over with hands on knees and panting so hard they couldn't stand up straight.

"What's goin' on?" Bug demanded. "Somebody chasin' you?" His eyes were on the kids, but his gun was still aimed and ready. The other gangers kept their eyes on the area behind the kids as well.

"No—no—" the kid pushed out between puffs. "Bug—"

"Spaz is dead!" the other one blurted out.

Bug stiffened, lowering the gun. "*What?*"

"Found him—alley—84th St.—behind Sully's," the first kid panted.

"Came back—to find you—or Ripper." The two kids were tag-teaming their story as they recovered their breath.

Bug looked at the two runners suspiciously. "You guys know anything about this?"

Ocelot shook his head. "No. But if it happened recently, maybe we can get some idea who did it if you let us go along."

The ganger was obviously shaken. There was a low murmur around the remaining five Blood Monkeys in his group, but nothing loud enough to make out. Some of it sounded scared, and some of it sounded angry. "Okay," Bug finally said. He was unable to keep the edge of fear out of his voice.

"Then after that," Winterhawk said grimly, "p'raps you'll set up the meet with your leader?"

Bug's gaze came up to meet 'Hawk's. "Spaz *was* our leader."

'Wraith and Joe were not having much luck getting anything useful out of the Twisted Grizzlies, although

they were having a much easier time of determining this than Winterhawk and Ocelot had with the Blood Monkeys.

Joe's friend did in fact know one of the Grizzlies indirectly — his sister's friend's boyfriend was a member — so instead of having a meet standing in an alleyway surrounded by hostile gangers, 'Wraith and Joe had been escorted into a ramshackle apartment on the bottom floor of a condemned building, where they had had the ear not only of the aforementioned friend, but also of the Grizzlies' second-in-command, a medium-height troll named Blaster. Joe, as an active ganger himself (and, more importantly, a member of a gang that had absolutely no rivalry with the Twisted Grizzlies), had been able to develop an almost instant rapport with Blaster, to the point where after half an hour the two of them were chatting away like long-time buddies. 'Wraith, meanwhile, was ignoring the scrutiny of some of the other Grizzlies (elves were apparently a bit of an odd sight around here) and concentrating on listening to the conversation, picking up any subtle vocal nuances or expression changes from the group as Joe explained the situation.

As they had agreed beforehand, Joe hadn't mentioned the fact that Hennessy had hired them to investigate the mysterious murders. All he had said was that "someone" was interested in ending the deaths, and that he, 'Wraith, and their compatriots believed that other gangs were not behind the killings.

Opinions in the Twisted Grizzlies were split almost equally between those who believed that the killing of Charlie Tuna was a setup and those who believed that it was all a plot by the Axemen, who had a long-running and occasionally bloody rivalry against the Grizzlies, to provoke the Grizzlies into a costly war. Some of the

younger members believed that it was a matter of honor to avenge Charlie's death (he had been quite a popular member of the gang with many friends), but cooler heads were reserving judgment until they had had a chance to investigate further. For one thing, the Axemen emblem had been carved into Charlie's chest—nobody in the Grizzlies had ever known an Axeman to do something like that. Usually they marked their occasional kill by leaving one of their trademark weapons lying next to the victim.

Fortunately for Joe and 'Wraith, Blaster—not to mention the Grizzlies' leader, a troll woman named Slash—were among the cooler heads, and had so far been able to prevent the younger Grizzlies from going on a rampage of death and destruction that would probably have resulted in at least as many Grizzly deaths as Axemen deaths. However, as Blaster told the two runners, they weren't sure how long they were going to be able to keep a lid on things.

"You do know they lost somebody too, right?" Joe asked.

Blaster nodded. "Yeah. Psycho Joe, one o' their big guys. But they're sayin' the Gutterpunks did that. We sure's hell didn't."

"Gutterpunks say they didn't?" 'Wraith spoke up.

The other ganger, Horse, nodded. "That's what they say. Axemen don't b'lieve 'em, though."

Blaster nodded. "Yeah. Nobody believes nobody. Ain't gonna be long 'fore things get outta hand. Can't keep these kids under wraps f'rever. They think we're just shittin' 'em to keep 'em from goin' after the Axemen."

Joe was about to answer when his wristphone rang. "Hang on a second," he said, stepping away, and hit the button. "Yeah?" He listened for a moment and then came back over to the group. "We gotta go," he said to 'Wraith.

"That was Ocelot. They've got a fresh murder over in Blood Monkey turf." Turning to Blaster and Horse, he said, "We'll come back. But we think this might be connected, and maybe we can figure something out."

Blaster nodded. "Yeah. I hope so. We go to war, we're gonna lose a lot of guys. If that happens, I want it to be for our reasons, not 'cuz somebody's fraggin' with us."

When Joe and 'Wraith arrived, Winterhawk, Ocelot, and the entire contingent of their Blood Monkey escorts had already arrived at the alley behind Sully's, which turned out to be an abandoned delicatessen. The alley behind it was narrow, dark, and strewn with months' accumulation of trash; when the runners and the Blood Monkeys had arrived, they had almost missed the remaining young ganger who had been left behind to guard the body. This individual was clearly very frightened and happy to have company again—he was a young troll, big and burly but not more than ten years old.

The gangers had been told to expect an elf and a troll arriving shortly, but even then they got a little nervous about the Nomad pulling into the alleyway with its bright lights blazing until the expected individuals stepped out and immediately came over.

Winterhawk was knelt down next to the body as the Blood Monkeys stood back and Ocelot watched over his shoulder. Spaz had been a human male in his early twenties; his dark hair, light brown skin and facial features suggesting Amerind or Aztlaner heritage. He wore a Blood Monkey jacket, white T-shirt, and blue jeans; all three were soaked with blood from the numerous gunshot wounds throughout his body.

'Wraith came forward and joined Winterhawk in his scrutiny. "Move the body?"

The mage shook his head. "No, not yet. I was trying to get some astral impressions, but aside from fear and surprise, there's nothing else."

"I'm tellin' you it was those fuckin' Sin-Eaters!" one of the gangers yelled. "They killed Spaz, and they're gonna die for it!"

"Listen!" Ocelot snapped. "You guys wanna be chumps? You wanna get yourselves killed just like whoever's doin' this wants you to? I thought you were smarter than that."

"What're you talkin' about?" Bug demanded.

"That's what they want you to believe," Joe said. "They're tryin' to set your gangs against each other. If you go off and fight each other, you're just doing exactly what they're manipulating you into. Is that what you want?"

There was another low murmur among the gangers. "But they killed Spaz," one of the younger ones said. "You just don't let anybody get away with offin' your boss, do you?"

"We aren't gonna let anybody get away with anything," Ocelot said. "But let's figure out who's really behind this before you go runnin' off over the wrong thing. Don't play into their hands."

The rumble got a little lower as the gangers quietly discussed this, taking frequent glances over toward their fallen leader. Ocelot and Joe took it upon themselves to try to keep order among them.

While Winterhawk continued his astral examination of the area, 'Wraith concentrated on Spaz' wounds. There were five of them in all. "Interesting..." he murmured to himself.

"What?" Winterhawk glanced up and shifted his perceptions fully to the material plane.

"Wraith pointed. "Wounds. Pattern. Notice?"

Winterhawk looked, frowning. "No — should I?"

"All haphazard. Not fatal. Except this one." 'Again, the elf pointed out the five wounds, one at a time. One was in Spaz' arm, one in his shoulder, one in his leg, and one in his hand. The fifth, however, had hit a perfect target in the ganger's heart.

"Lucky shot?" 'Hawk asked, glancing around.

"Doubtful." 'Wraith stood, carefully examining orientation of the body, the entry patterns of the wounds, and the surrounding area.

Ocelot was getting interested in the proceedings now. "What?"

The elf didn't answer, Winterhawk pointed out 'Wraith's findings. Ocelot too frowned. "So—the four are covering up the other one? Assassination?"

"Likely," 'Wraith said, returning his attention to his friends.

"What I want to know is what he was doing out alone," Joe spoke up. "That isn't normal, is it?"

Bug stepped forward and shook his head. "No. Nobody goes alone, especially now that people are gettin' killed."

'Wraith nodded. He looked over at Ocelot. "Let's find the spot."

"Yeah." The two of them headed off.

Bug looked perplexedly at the remaining two runners. "Huh?"

"They're looking for where the shooter shot from," Joe told him. "'Wraith's an expert at that kind of thing, and Ocelot likes to climb around on the tops of buildings."

Winterhawk, meanwhile, was still looking at the body. "He's not been dead for long," he said to Joe. "No more than an hour." Then, to the assembled gangers: "Where are the ones who found him?"

The three kids stepped forward, trying to hide their nervousness under masks of toughness. "Yeah?" said the oldest.

Winterhawk had given up any pretense of trying to pretend to be a Barrens denizen. "When you found him, did you see anything suspicious? Hear anything?"

The two human kids shook their heads. The troll did too, but there was something strange in his eyes.

Winterhawk noticed that immediately and moved over toward the troll. Despite his youth, the kid was taller than the mage and outweighed him by at least fifty kilos. "What's your name?" he asked gently.

The troll kid tried to glare at him, but it came out looking more scared than menacing. "Rocko." He sounded proud of the name—he had a real gang name, not just his own boring one.

"Rocko." Winterhawk repeated, nodding. "Well, Rocko, I sense that you saw or heard something that you'd rather not talk about. Am I right?"

Rocko's lower lip twitched a bit, but he didn't answer.

Joe stepped forward and glanced at Winterhawk, clearly asking permission to take up the questioning. 'Hawk nodded and backed off.

Joe smiled at Rocko, ducking down a bit so their eyes were at the same level. "Hey, Rocko. I'm Joe."

"Hey." The kid seemed a bit more at ease with another troll than he had with Winterhawk.

Bug, who apparently had decided that these new guys were worth trusting at least for awhile, leaned in toward 'Hawk. "Rocko's a good kid, but he ain't quite right in the head, y'know?"

'Hawk nodded wordlessly, watching Joe.

"Did you see something, Rocko?" the troll was asking. "Maybe hear something? You can help us out, you know. Help us find who killed Spaz."

Rocko's eyes got a little wider and his lip trembled a little more, but otherwise he was silent.

Joe smiled encouragingly. "Come on, Rocko. You're the only one who can help us. You can help us find who did this. Don't you want to do that?"

The troll child glanced over at Bug, who nodded. Then Rocko himself nodded, looking back at Joe.

"Good," Joe said, still maintaining the smile. "What did you see or hear?"

"Ghost," said Rocko. His eyes darted around as if he expected somebody to jump out at him.

Joe frowned, unsure of whether the kid was talking about someone named Ghost or a real ghost.

"Is there someone named Ghost that he might know?" Winterhawk asked Bug under his breath.

The ganger shook his head. "Don't know anybody named Ghost."

Rocko shook his head emphatically. "Ghost. Dark. Glowing red eyes."

That set off the murmuring again. Joe and Winterhawk remained calm. "That's good, Rocko," Joe said, keeping his tone calm. "Where did you see the ghost?"

Rocko pointed upward, toward the top of a building across the street at the end of the alley. "Up there. Looked at me. Then went away. No sound."

Winterhawk got into the act again. "What sort of person did it look like a ghost *of*? A troll like you? A human? Dwarf?"

Rocko's gaze shifted to the mage. "Human, maybe. Or ork. Or—something else." He was shaking now.

"Did he see you?"

"Yeah." The shaking increased. "Is he gonna come after me too?"

Joe sighed. "I don't think so, Rocko." He looked up at the gangers. "Maybe somebody ought to take him home, huh? He looks like he had quite a scare, and I think he's told us all he can."

"I'm not scared!" Rocko protested, but nonetheless did not struggle when one of the other troll gangers took him by the shoulder and led him away.

Winterhawk was already on the wristphone, relaying the message about the "ghost's" location to 'Wraith and Ocelot. "I'm going to head up there myself and see if I can get any traces on the astral."

Joe volunteered to remain down with the gangers, so 'Hawk, Ocelot, and 'Wraith converged on the roof of the building. It was a four-story, mostly abandoned apartment building, its roof ramshackle and unsafe. 'Hawk remained levitating to avoid disturbing any evidence as 'Wraith examined the area. Ocelot kept a lookout to make sure no one was sneaking up on them.

"No ghost," 'Wraith stated after several minutes of scrutiny.

"Why not?" Winterhawk floated down to get a better look.

'Wraith pointed. "Gun here. Rifle."

Sure enough, there was a disturbed spot in the dust at the lip of the building—a spot just large enough for something narrow, like the barrel of a gun. Below it, more disturbed dust could be seen, along with some dark footprints that had already almost washed away in Seattle's incessant drizzle. 'Hawk nodded. "So whoever was up here, he was as real as you or me. But the questions remain—who was it, and was he or she acting alone?" Without waiting for an answer, he found a reasonably clean spot to sit and slumped, sending his spirit out to the astral.

Ocelot came over to view the evidence. "So you think this guy was some kind of assassin, huh?"

"Yes."

"But why? Where's the money in assassinating a bunch of gangers? And why didn't he kill the kid, if the kid saw him?"

"Unknown. Not in contract?"

Ocelot sighed. "I'm just glad to know he's not a ghost. Maybe 'Hawk likes that kind of stuff, but it gives me the creeps."

Winterhawk chose that moment to return from his astral foray. He had a contemplative look on his face.

"What?" Ocelot turned to face him.

"Interesting...there was some residue there. More than I would have expected after an hour. Whoever our shooter was, he obviously had some quite strong feelings about what he was doing. I got a sense of anger, determination, singlemindedness, and—" he paused a moment, considering "—vengefulness. Also satisfaction—presumably because he accomplished his mission."

"Find him?" 'Wraith asked, raising an eyebrow.

'Hawk shook his head. "Not after all this time. Not without something to use in a ritual. Doesn't look like he left anything behind."

Ocelot and 'Wraith searched again, but found nothing. Even the footprints had drifted away by this time.

"Glowing red eyes..." Ocelot mused. He met Winterhawk's eyes a little fearfully. "You don't suppose it's a vampire, do you?"

Winterhawk shrugged. "I've no idea. That would make things more interesting, wouldn't it?"

"You got a damn weird definition of *interesting*," Ocelot said sourly.

21.

There was nothing that approached grocery shopping for helping to get one's mind off the distressing things in life.

Kestrel guided her green Westwind through the snarled mid-day Seattle traffic, mindful of the precariously balanced bags in the car's laughably misnamed back seat. She had just returned from spending nearly an hour aimlessly wandering the aisles of the local Allenson's Grocery, shopping in her usual haphazard style: essentially, 'See something I like and put it in the cart. Repeat until all aisles traversed.' This usually resulted in a cart full of nuke-and-eat convenience foods, snacks, and other similar marginally healthful items whose primary allure to her, aside from the fact that they were easy to prepare, was that they kept forever. She rarely ate at home even if all she had to do was shove something in the microwave, so it was nice to know that the contents of her larder would in all likelihood outlive her. It gave her sort of a subliminal feeling of security.

Surprisingly, although she hated grocery shopping almost as much as she hated cooking, the trip to the store had succeeded in calming her thoughts a bit and helping her get her mind off worrying about Gabriel.

She had tried a different tack last night: accepting an invitation from three of her female friends to go out with them for a "girls' night on the town." Since she had had nothing better to do and since it had been a long time since she had spent time with Beth, Zip, and Marta, she had taken them up on their invitation. She was hoping that maybe hanging out with her old non-runner friends, getting a little drunk, and club-hopping might take her mind off her problems.

It hadn't worked out that way. Although she'd given it her best try, she had been completely unable to join in with their cheerful conversations and blatant flirting with any male bar patron who'd been reasonably good looking. She had also been unable to get drunk. The end result had been that she'd sat there at the table, practically-untouched drink in front of her, and been lost in thought for the entire evening. She had even briefly reconsidered her decision not to call Ocelot, but eventually came to the conclusion that spending the evening with him would have been worse, because he would have undoubtedly asked her questions that she did not want to (and in most cases, could not) answer.

Eventually she had begged off the remainder of the evening, telling her friends that she wasn't feeling well and thought she might be coming down with something. They had been suitably sympathetic, and she'd left amid their injunctions to go home, get into a warm bed, and get some sleep. She'd felt bad about lying to them, but she would have felt worse if she'd stayed. She would make it up to them some other time, she reasoned.

She had gotten up early today, spent some time tidying up her small townhouse (an activity in which she engaged with a regularity approximating that of the inauguration of a new President), reading her email, and catching up on the news. Although she had paid particular attention to the stories involving someone's violent death and to the obituaries, she had been unsuccessful in coming any closer to determining who this mysterious friend of Gabriel's might have been. Finally, tired of looking at her walls, she had fired up the Westwind and headed out to do some shopping. At least if she was going to have a bad day, she might as well use it to get some drudgery done.

She turned the last corner on to her street, wincing as two of the bags, no match for her aggressive driving style, keeled over and spilled their contents out all over the back seat. Fortunately there was nothing breakable back there, but it was still going to be hard on the back to weasel into the small space and put everything right again before she could get it out of the car. She cursed under her breath, glanced back at the scattered groceries, then turned her attention back to the road and her house up ahead.

There was a black Dynamit parked in her driveway.

For a moment, it didn't register on her mind what that meant. She stared at it for several seconds before light dawned. Groceries forgotten, she stomped the gas pedal and hurried down the street, whipping the Westwind in behind the Dynamit and leaping out almost before it had stopped.

He was sitting on her porch step, watching her as she came up the walk. "You shouldn't drive so fast," he said softly. "You'll get a ticket."

For a moment it was like old times. "You should talk," she said, grinning. "The original Mr. Leadfoot Lizard himself." She paused, and then: "How long have you been sitting here?"

He shrugged. "Half an hour or so. I haven't really kept track." He was dressed simply: sweater, jeans, and overcoat, all in black. The only color on him was his violet eyes, which looked troubled.

"You could have let yourself in, you know. That's why I gave you a key."

Again he shrugged. "I didn't mind waiting for you."

She took a closer look at him. "Something's wrong, isn't it?" she asked, frowning in concern.

He looked past her. "You've left your car door open."

Her look of concern deepened. "Gabriel —"

"Come on," he said, gracefully rising. "Let's bring in whatever you've got in the car, and then we'll talk." Without waiting for her to answer, he started down the walk back toward the car.

Kestrel sighed. There was no arguing with him when he was like this, so she wouldn't try.

By the time she'd reached the car, he'd already gotten almost all of the wayward groceries back in their appointed places. "You're aware that's cheating, aren't you?" she asked teasingly, watching as the last of the cans and boxes floated neatly into the bags.

"You're just jealous because you can't do it," he said in the manner of their old banter, but there was a certain strain to his voice that Kestrel could only pick up because she knew him so well. With a slight bow, he handed her an armload of bags and grabbed another.

Deciding that it would do her no good to inform him that he shouldn't be carrying her groceries for her, she sighed again and followed him back toward the house.

"I see you've been on your semi-annual shopping trip," he commented, standing aside to let her open the door.

"I guess you wouldn't believe me if I said I knew you were coming and wanted to make you a home-cooked meal, huh?" she asked.

"I might...but whose home?" Following her into the kitchen, he read off names from the packages in the bags he carried. "Mrs. Polsifer's Nuke 'em Quick Fish Sticks? Aunt Suzy's Creme Pie? Dr. Soy's Noodle Sensations?"

"Give me those!" She grinned, snatching the bags away from him. "You knew I wasn't a cook when you met me. It's a little late to complain now." Growing serious once again, she motioned toward the breakfast bar, which looked into the kitchen through a cutaway. "Please—sit

down while I put this stuff away. Tell me what's been going on."

He did as he was told, handing over the remaining bags and taking a seat on one of the barstools at the breakfast bar.

When he didn't speak, Kestrel turned around from where she had begun stashing frozen items in her freezer. He was sitting there with a faraway, troubled look in his eyes. Although he appeared to be watching her, she could tell that his thoughts were somewhere else. "Gabriel? Are you all right?"

"I don't know," he said slowly. "I'm not even sure why I've come, except that I wanted to talk to someone, and you seemed the logical choice." He closed his eyes briefly and sighed. "Please—finish with what you're doing. I'm not going anywhere."

She watched him for a moment longer, then nodded. "Okay. This'll only take a few minutes, and then maybe you'll tell me what's going on." She returned to the task of unloading the bags and putting away groceries, her mind now as distracted as his seemed to be. She moved mechanically, relying on her instinctive knowledge of where each item should go, because the conscious part of her mind was elsewhere.

"Kestrel?" he asked when she had started on the last bag.

"What?" She turned to see him watching her with a tiny shadow of his old mischievous smile. "What is it?"

"Did you intend to put the ice cream in the breadbox?" Without waiting for her to answer, he nodded toward the item in question. It rose smoothly up from the open breadbox and floated into the freezer.

"Thanks," she mumbled. "I guess I'm a little wound up too." Gathering the bags together, she stuffed them in the recycling bin and once again turned back to him. Right

now, the absurdity of having a Great Dragon helping her put away her groceries was completely lost on her. "Want to talk?" She motioned for him to join her in the living room, where she sat down on one end of the couch.

After a moment, he came over and sat down on the other end. He did not look at her, but instead stared out the window into her tiny back yard. "I've done something I'm not very proud of," he said at last, quietly.

She frowned. "What do you mean?" She paused, and then, in a gentle tone: "Does this have something to do with looking for whoever — killed your friend?"

He sighed, still staring out the window. "Yes."

"Did you — find who did it?" She scooted down on the couch a bit closer to him. She didn't like to see him like this, looking so lost and despairing. It was times like this that she found it easier to forget that he was a millennia-old dragon and see him only as what he appeared to be: a young man with some deeply troubling things on his mind.

This time he did turn to look at her. "Yes. No." He shook his head. "I killed a man, Juliana. And I enjoyed it."

Her eyes widened. In all the time she had known Gabriel, she had never seen him kill — or even injure — anyone, with the exception of his brother Stefan during their battle six months previously. She knew how much he valued life and how important it was to him to treat humans and metahumans with respect. For him to have killed someone, the circumstances must have been extraordinary. "Why — why did you kill him? You must have had a reason."

He nodded. "I had a reason. That doesn't make me any more comfortable with it."

She reached out and gently took his hand. It felt cold. "Was it the person who killed your friend?"

"One of them."

"There were more than one? Where are the others?"

"Dead."

She considered that. "But you didn't kill them."

"No." He paused, and then his gaze came up to meet hers. "And one yet lives."

That confused her. "I thought you said the others were all dead."

It was several seconds before he answered. "It is a— strange situation. I don't have all the details yet." He looked down at his lap, shaking his head. "I don't know that I ever will."

Kestrel took a deep breath. She was getting into uncharted territory again; he seemed worse now than he had been before he left. "Can you tell me— what you've been doing?"

Gabriel gently extricated his hand from her grip, then rose and began aimlessly wandering around the living room. He stopped occasionally to look at an item or at the view out the window, and did not speak for almost a minute. When he did speak, his voice was very quiet. "After you left, I went to the astral plane to try to find out where the murder occurred."

"Did you find out?" she asked in the same tone.

He nodded. "Yes. It—wasn't far from here. I had to remain on the astral plane for a very long time before I discovered it, though, so when I finally found the place, I could not stay long."

Kestrel had worked with mages before, so she knew what he meant. "You stayed too long and had to go back to your body?"

"Yes. I had to recover my strength before I could return. I had found a spirit there—a very small and weak one—who had seen the murder."

A spirit murder witness. Kestrel couldn't help being a little weirded out by that. *Just life with my best bud the Great*

Dragon, she reminded herself wryly. *Weird goes with the territory*. "Were you able to find out anything from it?" she asked, leaning forward.

Again it was awhile before he spoke. "It—could not remember everything. It was as if something was blocking its memory, or else it was so frightened that it had blocked it itself. But it was able to locate the one surviving member of the group that had committed the murder."

Kestrel remembered something from her conversation with Ocelot a couple of nights ago. "Gabriel?"

He stopped his pacing and turned to her. "Yes?"

"Your friend—was he—" she paused. "—was he another dragon?"

Gabriel nodded, his eyes full of sadness. "Yes."

She looked hard at him, taking that in. "And—these people who killed him—"

"Please, Kestrel," he said softly. "This is not easy for me. Let me tell you in my own way."

"I'm sorry," she whispered, looking away. She wasn't handling this well at all, and the last thing he needed was to have to worry about *her* problems right now. "I just want to help you."

Swiftly he came over and sat down next to her on the couch. Putting a gentle hand on her shoulder, he said, "Juliana. Forgive me—I don't want to hurt you. That is the last thing I want to do. But—I've never dealt with a situation like this before. I'm trying to make sense of it, but I haven't done that yet. I know you want to help—you *are* helping, just by listening. I'm very grateful to you for that, because I don't know what to do."

She brought her eyes up to meet his. This was the first time he had ever admitted to her that he was at a loss for what to do. It still scared her, but she was determined not to let him see that. If she could help by listening, then she would listen. She would worry some other time about the

fact that there was someone out there capable of killing a dragon and hiding the evidence well enough that another dragon couldn't find it. "Okay," she said. "You know I'll listen." He was sitting so close to her that she could feel the heat of his body; she could also see that he was shaking a bit.

He nodded, but did not move. Taking a deep breath, he continued: "The spirit showed me where the last member of the team had gone—he was in Hawai'i. Apparently he had decided to remove himself far away from the murder scene and use the money he had received to drop out of sight for awhile."

Kestrel started to say something, but decided not to. She would listen until he was finished, but it was not easy to hold her questions.

"I went to Hawai'i to find him," Gabriel went on, again not looking at her. "His name was Donnie Lynch—Slyde. He was a rigger. A helicopter pilot." His voice lowered. "The one who fired the laser that was the final deathblow."

"Was..." she said involuntarily.

"Was," he repeated. "I killed him, Juliana. Something—took hold of me. I *wanted* to kill him. I wanted to rip the information from his mind. I wanted him to suffer as Telanwyr had suffered." He shook his head. "I lost control. And—" a slight shudder passed through his body "—I enjoyed it."

She closed her eyes briefly. "Gabriel—" she whispered. She knew how much the admission had cost him. Almost before she realized it, she had put her arms around him and drawn him in close to her. "I'm sorry..."

He did not return the embrace, but neither did he pull away. She could feel him shaking. "So am I," he said. "I have in the past criticized my brother for behavior just

like this, and now look at me. Given the right provocation, I can be every bit as cruel and merciless as he can."

"That's not true," she murmured. "You're nothing like him and you know it."

"You didn't see me." He looked up, meeting her eyes with only a few inches separating their faces. "You didn't see me, Kestrel," he repeated. "You would not have recognized me."

She nodded, slowly letting him go. "Maybe you're right," she said. "But you certainly had cause. Sometimes it's justified. You know that. You just don't want to let yourself believe that sometimes it just needs to be done."

"Juliana," he said raggedly, "I threatened to eat him."

That shocked her a bit. Her eyes widened. "You're kidding." Then, quieter: "No, you're not." It was one of those realities of life that she just tried not to think about: Gabriel, in his true form, was the a member of the most fearsome race of predatory carnivores on the face of the Earth. He shielded her from that as much as he could, but it was nonetheless true. She had no doubt that if he were sufficiently enraged, he would have no trouble, physiologically, making an hors-d'oeuvre out of the offender. Psychologically, however, was another thing entirely. "You — uh — didn't, did you?"

"Of course not," he said, in a tone indicating that he was surprised that she would ask. He sighed. "But I did things I swore to myself I would never do. I forced myself into his mind and took the information I wanted from him. I frightened him intentionally, just so he would tell me what I wanted to know. I showed him what I was — there was no need for me to do that. But —" he trailed off, shaking his head. "It felt good. What am I becoming?" he finished in almost a whisper.

She gripped his shoulder. "Gabriel, please. Let me try to help you. I can't do that if you won't tell me what happened."

He regarded her for a moment as if considering whether he wanted to do that, and finally nodded. "All right. I will tell you what happened. And I won't blame you if you are as ashamed of me as I am of myself when I am finished." Leaning back wearily on the couch, he switched to his natural form of communication, sharing with her not only the verbal description of his encounter with Slyde, but the visual and emotional impressions as well.

Kestrel closed her eyes and "listened" to his voice in her mind, making no interruption until he was finished. She felt his rage and his despair wash over her, then slowly fade as he reached the end of the story. "*After I left his room,*" he said, "*I spent an hour or two just wandering, becoming more and more ashamed of what I had done. Then I returned here. You were the only person I could think of to discuss this with.*"

She took his hand again, opening her eyes. She didn't speak for several seconds. Finally, quietly, she said, "I'm not ashamed of you, Gabriel. Not at all." Her expression hardened. "If it had been me, I would have done a lot worse to him than you did."

He shook his head. "Forgive me, but that isn't very comforting."

"I know that," she said. Very seriously, she added, "I'm not as—noble—as you are, Gabriel. I know that sounds sarcastic, but you know it isn't. I mean it. I know the kinds of standards you hold yourself to. But there's no shame in snapping when something like this happens. From what you've told me, this guy was *proud* of killing your friend. He sounds like one of the biggest scumbags to ever walk the planet—I can't even think about how that

poor girl must have felt when he—" she let that trail off, anger blazing in her eyes. "If it'd been me and I'd known what you knew, I'd have ripped his balls off and made him eat 'em before I killed him. And it wouldn't have been fast like you did it. He would have been begging to die." Her eyes came up to meet his. "There. Now are you ashamed of *me*?"

"No," he said softly. "We all must deal with such things in our own way."

She gripped his other shoulder, staring hard at him. "You know he had to die, right?"

Gabriel nodded reluctantly.

"And you needed to get the information from him. You knew he was a murderer when you got it, right?"

Again he nodded.

"Then—" she paused "—I'm not sure I see what the problem is."

He pulled back from her, standing up again. "It isn't the fact that I killed him, Juliana. I wish there could have been another way, but I know it was necessary. It's the fact that I enjoyed it that disturbs me." He sighed and shook his head. "I can't help wondering how much easier it will be for me to lose control again, in the future." Moving back over to the window, he looked out over the tangled back yard.

"You know," she said speculatively, "I think you might actually be *less* likely to lose control next time. If this really bothered you as much as it seems to, then wouldn't it make sense that you'd try to avoid it if it comes up again?" It sounded plausible, if a bit too pop-psychology, to her ears.

"I don't know," he said. "You may be right. I hope I won't have the chance to find out one way or the other."

She decided to try to change the subject. Maybe if she got him talking about something he could actually affect,

she would bring him out of this mood he had sunken into. "You didn't tell me what you found out. Was that on purpose?"

"No," he said without turning. "I didn't tell you because I didn't find out very much. Apparently there is an elf involved, but I wasn't able to get anything about him from Slyde's mind. It was as if something had blocked the information off."

She got up and came over to stand next to him. "Doesn't that strike you as a bit odd?"

He nodded. "Very odd. I don't make a habit of probing minds, but I do know how strong mine is. He should not have been able to keep anything from me, but yet he did." He paused. "He tried as hard as he could to hide the information about what he did to the girl. His mental defenses barely slowed me down." Apparently he had decided that if he had already done the deed, he might as well discuss it with her, because his voice sounded more like his normal self than it had.

"Did you find out anything else about this elf?" she asked. "Could he have somehow done it?"

"I don't see any other explanation," he said, but didn't sound like he was very sure of that. "The spirit told me that it was afraid of something, but it didn't know what. And when I went out to the place where the murder occurred, I couldn't find any evidence of it."

Kestrel stared at him. "You went to the place where the murder happened?"

"Yes. After I returned from searching the astral plane, I drove up to the place I found. There was nothing there." He looked away, and his voice lowered. "The spirit showed me what it had seen—he was—killed—by a six-member team with helicopters, ground vehicles, heavy weapons—but I found no evidence of any of them."

She continued to stare. "You're saying that you were right there where it happened, and you didn't find *anything*? How could that be possible? You can't just hide something like that. Especially not from someone like you, right?"

"It would have been difficult," he agreed, nodding. "To completely erase the astral traces of a murder of that magnitude would have taken a magician—or a group of them—that would make me look like a first-year thaumaturgy student. And to erase the physical traces—the bodies, the tire tracks, the burned and broken trees—he trailed off, shaking his head. "I just don't see how it could have been done, especially not so quickly."

Something dawned on her, but she wasn't sure if she wanted to bring it up. Finally, hesitantly, she said, "Gabriel...?"

He turned his gaze back on her. "Yes?"

"What about—the body?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again. "You mean Telanwyr's body," he said softly.

"Yeah. I'm sorry to bring it up—"

"No. It's all right. That's—another piece of the puzzle. It was nowhere to be found."

Kestrel considered that. "No body. No traces on the astral plane. No traces here." She looked up. "Are you—I mean—are you certain that you were in the right place?"

"That was what I thought at first as well. I wondered if somehow I was being misled. But the spirit described the place to me sufficiently that I could be sure that the murder had occurred there, even though I could find no evidence of it. And the spirit did show me where to find Slyde. In order to do that, it must have seen something."

"But how?" she asked. "I don't understand. Please—forgive me for saying this, because I don't mean to hurt you—but I just don't understand how somebody could

hide the body of a Great Dragon without *somebody* catching on. I mean—don't you guys know when one of your own dies? I remember back when Dunkelzahn was assassinated, there were dozens of dragons that flew over the spot where he died. They—" she stopped in mid-sentence. "Wait a minute."

"What?"

"Could it—could they have done it like that? With explosives?"

He shook his head. "Perhaps at the beginning, but the explosives didn't kill him. I saw him in the spirit's vision. And contrary to what you might believe, we dragons don't have some sort of constant connection with each other. In fact, Telanwyr was there with the others to honor Dunkelzahn. He told me he heard about the assassination on the news."

Kestrel looked at him oddly. Just when she thought she had him figured out, he threw her another curveball. "The news."

"You sound surprised," he said with a ghost of a smile.

"I guess I shouldn't be," she admitted. Gabriel, after all, paid close attention to the various news media, as well as having an insatiable appetite for everything from lowbrow sporting events to B horror movies. It was just the thought of dragon news junkies that struck her as a bit strange. "So—what will you do now?"

He sighed. "I'll keep looking. There has to be an explanation for this, and I intend to find it. I'll continue on my own for awhile, but if I'm not successful, I might be forced to bring others in."

"Others?"

"I'm actually a bit surprised that none of the others have noticed anything wrong," he said, nodding.

"Telanwyr was somewhat reclusive, but still – someone is bound to miss him eventually."

"You mean other dragons," she said quietly.

"Yes. I know my abilities, but there are others – far older and wiser than I – who would certainly be interested in this murder."

Her brow furrowed. "Why don't you call them now, then? Why wait?"

He turned away, heading back for the couch, where he sank down. "It isn't that easy, Kestrel. Dragon relationships are – complicated. The only two dragons from whom I would feel fully comfortable seeking help are both – gone. The others –" he shook his head. "I will do it if I must, but not yet. I still think I can do this on my own."

"Who's the other one?" she asked, unable to contain her curiosity.

"What?"

"The other dragon you could have gone to for help. Who was he or she, if you don't mind my asking?"

His eyes came up to meet hers. "Dunkelzahn."

She couldn't keep the surprise from her face. "You *knew* Dunkelzahn? I thought he – you know – before you woke up."

Gabriel nodded. "I knew him a long time ago – or rather, he knew me. I was barely more than a hatchling at the time. He had dealings with my father for awhile, but he took a liking to me. I remember him in the way a human child might remember a beloved uncle." He sighed. "I was quite saddened to hear of his death when I awoke, as you recall. He was, at least in my opinion, the best among us."

Kestrel came over and sat down next to him. "I wish there was something I could do to help you," she said,

hoping she could intercept his mood before it took hold of him again.

He smiled at her, just a bit. "Kestrel, you *have* helped. Believe me. Just having the chance to talk about this has helped me consider my options. As you might imagine, I'm a bit—distracted right now. Not thinking clearly. Having you here to listen and make suggestions has been invaluable."

She looked away, suddenly overcome with emotion. Kestrel was not normally an emotional person—in fact, she tended to avoid people who were, because they made her uncomfortable—but right now she could feel the force of the young dragon's grief and his love for her coming over her almost like a tangible thing. "Gabriel—" she began.

Now it was his turn to grip her shoulders and pull her in close. "Shh, Juliana," he whispered. "Everything will be all right."

She embraced him, feeling the strength in his deceptively slender body more with her psyche than with her arms. "I know it will," she said. "I know it's silly for me to worry about you, but I do." Attempting a smile, she added, "I've gotten sort of attached to you in the past year or so. I just don't want to lose you, that's all."

He nodded. "I'll be back," he said quietly. "I'm not going anywhere for long. But I have to do this."

"I know you do." She pushed back, keeping hold of his hand. "Before you go again, though—"

"Yes?"

"Will you tell me about him? About Telanwyr?"

For a long time, he did not speak. Very gently he pulled his hand from hers, staring down at it as if it held the secrets of the universe. Kestrel was just about to apologize for being too presumptuous and tell him it wasn't necessary when he looked back up at her. "He was

my teacher," he said, the grief clearly evident in his soft voice. "My mentor. My oldest and dearest friend." He paused, searching for the right words. "I think the closest word for our relationship in human terms would be 'godfather,' although that isn't quite correct since there was no religious connotation to it. He was a close friend of my father's, and he knew me from the beginning of my existence. Throughout my life he was always there, in some ways more of a father to me than my true father was. Telanwyr was there to answer my questions, to guide me, to teach me what I needed to know. And when I awoke in this world, he helped me to adjust in ways that you could not." He sighed. "Although we did not see each other as often recently as we had before, I knew he was always willing to listen if I had something to discuss. And lately our relationship had begun to evolve into one of equals, rather than one of teacher and student." Looking away again, he added, "I never expected him to die. Dragons are for all intents and purposes immortal, barring grievous injury. For something like this to happen—" he broke off for a moment, composing himself—"it was nearly inconceivable."

Kestrel regarded him, wide-eyed, utterly unable to think of anything to say that wouldn't sound trite or maudlin or completely inadequate. She thought of the depth of her grief when she had lost her team, who had been like a family to her, a time ago—and she had only known them for six years. To lose someone you had known and loved for millennia—"I'm so sorry," she whispered, taking refuge in simplicity.

He nodded. "So am I." Surprisingly, his face was unreadable, his eyes quiet. "That's why I must find out what has happened, and why I must avenge his death. After that is done, then I'll allow myself to fully mourn him. But until then I can't let myself be distracted. It

appears that I am the only one who can do anything about this at the moment, so I must do it."

"I'll help you," Kestrel said. "I'll do whatever you want me to do. And the others—Ocelot, Winterhawk—"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. I'd rather not get them—or you—involved in this. I've already nearly gotten all of you killed with my problems. This time there's no reason for any of you to be involved."

She thought about the fight with Stefan. "You know we all volunteered, Gabriel," she reminded him. "And I'll do it again."

"No." He smiled at her, just a little. "Not yet, anyway. Please. Let me do this. I have to do this."

Kestrel nodded after a long moment. "Okay," she said. "But remember—you promised to come back. That means if you need help, you'll ask for it. Right?"

"I promise," he said solemnly.

"Good." She nodded again, briskly. Only half-kidding, she added, "So—have you got time for a home-cooked—in the sense of 'this is home, and it's getting sort of cooked here'—meal before you go off again?"

He rose. "How can I refuse when you put it so persuasively?"

22.

Stefan had not slept for a week. He was beginning to wonder if he would ever sleep again.

He often lost track of the passage of the hours over the past few days, although he knew with full certainty that it had been a week since the night Telanwyr had died. That date would be forever etched in his brain until he was no more.

He was no longer in his office in Boston, and he was no longer in human form. He had left the office three days ago, offering no explanation to his underlings for his absence. He did not need to explain anything to underlings. The business could survive for a few days without him, surely.

His lair in upstate New York was large and well concealed; he had long ago purchased vast tracts of mountainous land under a variety of pseudonyms and then proceeded to snarl up the legal proceedings to the point where no one short of another very determined dragon would be able to trace any of the so-called 'owners'. Once he had constructed his lair there, he had, by means of powerful illusion spells, wards, and mundane defenses, made sure that his privacy would be completely preserved. As far as his far-flung neighbors knew, the land was owned by a corporation that did not take kindly to trespassers. A couple of unfortunate near-fatal encounters involving snooping hikers had ensured that no one bothered him here anymore.

It was just the place for him to go to be alone with his thoughts, and to try to sort out what was happening to him.

He lay stretched out languidly on a huge ridge overlooking an even larger cavern, his sinuous, green-

scaled tail flicking back and forth over the edge like a cat's. To a casual observer, he might have looked relaxed; to anyone who knew him well, the tension and exhaustion were clearly evident in his slumped posture and in the way his head rested limply on his forelegs.

Anyone who knew him well might have also been alarmed at the fact that, clutched in his talons, he still held tightly to the red-veined dragon statuette. His claws jerked slightly, spasmodically around the thing, but did not let it go.

It would not allow him to let it go.

He had tried many more times in the past week, as he became more and more aware of the hold it was exerting over him. Each time, though, he had not been able to move more than a few meters away from it before it began calling to him, compelling him to retrieve it. Once, using every ounce of his considerable willpower, he had managed to separate himself from it for a full half hour before the pull had become so strong that he could no longer bear it. After that time he had hurried back to it, grabbing for it like an addict grabs for a needle after a long dry spell. He had clutched it in his hands, rubbing it, feeling its comforting tendrils insinuating themselves back into his mind, assuring him that everything would be all right now that he had it back in his possession.

It had been then that he had decided to leave the office.

The statuette didn't seem to have any opinion about where he traveled; it remained quiet and unmoving in his pocket as he caught the flight for New York and drove up, still in human form, to his lair. It did not object when he changed to his true form; in fact, it had seemed somehow pleased. Stefan had been pleased too, for awhile. He knew of the necessity of maintaining human form most of the time to hide his true nature from the small ones, but he

always felt more at ease when allowed to assume his rightful body. He had hoped that in dragon form, he might be better able to resist the statuette's call.

It had not been so.

The hold of the thing had been stronger than ever, and the nightmares that had plagued him since the night of Telanwyr's death had grown worse to the point where he did not even attempt to sleep anymore.

Worst of all, he could feel the elf watching him.

Not all the time—in fact, not even most of the time. But every once in awhile, when he had finally achieved a bit of respite or managed to temporarily forget about what he had done, about the statuette, about the elf—that was when the feeling came. It was as if a pair of malevolent eyes were looking down at him, mocking him, forcing their dark stare into the deepest corners of his mind. Every time he thought it had finally lost interest in him, it was then that it came back stronger than ever. He could feel its hold on him, similar to that of the statuette but subtly different, begin to solidify.

Stefan was afraid.

It had taken him several days to admit that to himself. It was not in Stefan's nature to be afraid. He was a *producer* of fear, not a victim of it. With the exception, perhaps, of a larger and stronger dragon, there was nothing else on Earth that Stefan feared, or so he thought. There was nothing else that could even be a threat to him, as long as he was on his guard and did not make foolish mistakes of trust like Telanwyr had. What else, he reasoned, could threaten him?

The small ones? Out of the question. They were for him to manipulate, and no real danger to him with their small weapons and ill-conceived plans.

The invae? They were only strong when they were organized, and this did not have the feel of their ways.

The immortals? They were too busy fighting their petty battles among themselves to mobilize sufficiently to do something like this, and again, this did not have the stamp of their handiwork, even though the agent had been an elf.

The other dragons? It seemed unlikely. For it to have been the other dragons, it would have to have been a setup. Stefan knew no dragons who hated him sufficiently to lay such a plan—not to mention to kill Telanwyr—just to snare him. Most of the other dragons did not pay him much attention, since he was young and not part of their machinations.

Stefan closed his eyes in despair. If none of them, then who? Something was very wrong with him, and someone had been responsible for it. Someone who had not only wanted Telanwyr dead, but apparently someone who wanted a hold over Stefan himself. Someone who had manipulated him with the same level of skill that he routinely used to manipulate the small ones, and with equal ease.

If he did not know better, he would have sworn that this had the taint of—

His eyes flew open.

No.

It could not be!

They were not here yet!

He shook his head quickly, trying to clear the thought from it. That was not something to consider. It had to be something else. If it was not, then the implications were—

No.

The little dragon statuette thrummed in his claws. It seemed to be mocking him.

Confirming his fear? Or was it merely his exhausted, overactive imagination that was making him think that it was?

What did the elf want with him? He had done what he had promised—why was the statuette still haunting him? What did it want?

He remembered the other promise he had made, and his fear increased. The favor. He had promised an unspecified favor to the elf. He had done it thinking that he would have no trouble destroying the recipient before the favor was granted, but now he was not so sure that that would be possible.

And if the elf was not an elf, but rather—

His eyes widened, the fear sinking down deeper into his bones.

His desperation grew. He would have to do something. He could not merely remain here, allowing fatigue to sap his strength, his will, his very being. The longer he did nothing, the stronger the hold of the statuette and the elf (the *thing*) would grow over him. Soon, he feared, if he did nothing then there would be nothing he *could* do. Perhaps even nothing he would desire to do. Would the hold continue to increase until he was completely in the thing's power?

Something at the core of his mind rebelled against that thought. *It will not claim me*, he thought arrogantly. *I am a Great Dragon. I am stronger than this puny artifact's power.*

The little statue throbbed. Almost as if it was laughing at him.

And he knew that he was wrong. He was *not* stronger.

He had to do something, he knew, and he had to do it soon. This was too strong for him. He had to seek help.

But where? Who was powerful enough to help him, to break the grip this thing had on him? It would have to be someone stronger than he.

Telanwyr would have been the logical choice, but Telanwyr was dead. Dead because of what *he* had done. Shame gripped him as he thought about his part in the

murder. What had he done? How had he allowed the elf to manipulate him so? He could see it now, but he knew he had not seen it then.

He could not go to any of the other dragons, for the same reason. Telanwyr had not been universally beloved among the other Great Dragons, but he had certainly enjoyed a position of respected counselor and advisor—Stefan did not think that he had even had an enemy among his kind. For him, Stefan, to go to them and tell them that he had participated in Telanwyr's murder—especially after what had occurred all those thousands of years ago—

—he would have been lucky to escape with his life. If he wanted to die, there would have been simpler ways to commit suicide.

Who, then? The immortals would not help him. As the elf had said at their meeting, there was no love lost between the Dragons and the immortal Elves, and undoubtedly any of them to whom he took this problem would look at it as a weakness they could exploit to their own advantage. Stefan looked at being exploited by those accursed elves to be only slightly higher on his list of desires than the problem he already possessed—it was simply trading in one bad situation for another one. Again, he would rather be dead, and there were easier ways to do it.

But that left no one. Aside from the Dragons and the immortals, there was no other group or individual on Earth with the level of power he knew would be needed to break this hold. Even a group of strong human or metahuman mages would probably be unable to do it, were he inclined to trust them far enough.

No, that would not work. He needed an extremely powerful magician. Someone who would not exploit his weakness, or take advantage of him. Someone he could

trust implicitly. Someone who would not kill him for his transgression.

When the answer came to him, he almost jerked upward, he was so startled. At first he thought his mind was playing tricks on him, or perhaps the elf was planting thoughts in his mind. Gradually, though, through the fog of fatigue, he realized that this thought was one of the first in days that felt as if it had actually originated inside his own brain, instead of being manufactured by the elf, the statuette, fear, worry, or lack of sleep.

He resisted. It was absurd. That was the last place he wanted to go. It had been the start of this whole thing. How could his mind even come up with such a ridiculous idea?

But it was not a ridiculous idea, and somewhere deep inside he knew it. All the criteria had been met: Extremely powerful magician. Would, more likely than anyone else, not exploit him or take advantage of his weakness. Someone, though he had no idea why, that he felt he could trust. Someone who might be counted on to at least listen to his story before trying to kill him.

Someone he had hated for thousands of years.

How ironic that it would work out this way, he thought, even as he knew that it was the only answer – perhaps his only hope.

He would have to go to Gethelwain.

And he would have to do it soon.

23.

"Everybody in position?" Ocelot's hushed voice came over the commlink.

"Ready," Winterhawk said immediately. "Got the astral covered."

"Watching the building," Wraith said.

"Check," Joe said.

"Our friends will be here soon. Now all we have to do is wait and see if our killer shows," Winterhawk said, his tone grim.

Six days had passed since they had begun their investigation, and during that time they had not been idle. Ocelot sat in his position at the top of the building across the street from the abandoned warehouse where the meet would go down in less than half an hour and thought about the events of the previous few days.

After the death of Spaz of the Blood Monkeys, the killer or killers had apparently decided to step up operations a bit. Three days later, Bowie of the Axemen had turned up at mid-day with an arrow through his neck, and the arrow had borne the colors of the Sin-Eaters on its fletchings. Once again tempers began to simmer, and it was due largely to the efforts of the runner team that the whole thing hadn't exploded that same night.

One thing the murder of Bowie had managed to confirm in the runners' minds, though (at least as much as it could be confirmed by Winterhawk's magical sleuthing)—the murders were probably being committed by one person. When he checked the astral plane in the area where Bowie had been killed, he had found the same anger, sense of singleminded purpose, and vengefulness as he'd found at the site of Spaz' demise. Someone

definitely had it in for the gangs in this area. The problem was, they weren't any closer to who that someone was. At least they were reasonably sure that if it was the same person committing all the murders, it wasn't a vampire. That had made Ocelot breathe a little easier.

A call to Hennessy had followed later that day, asking the dwarf if he knew of anyone matching their sketchy description (human or ork, dressed all in dark or black clothes, glowing red eyes) who might have a vendetta against one or more of the gangs in the area. He had promised to check into it and get back to them.

Meanwhile, the runners had each been doing what they did best: 'Wraith had plugged the relevant information into his computer and begun running searches on various parameters, looking for any clues from that avenue; Winterhawk had summoned up a couple of elementals and set them on a search pattern around the area in question, as well as performing his own astral inspections of the neighborhoods; Ocelot and Joe had taken to the streets to talk to as many gangers as they could, in addition to tapping their remaining street contacts for any useful information. They had come up with various bits of data, none of it terribly useful except to exclude people and entities from their list of subjects. For example, Joe's and Ocelot's discussions with various gangers from both the five gangs in question and those in outlying neighborhoods had led to the determination that none of the other nearby gangs had any particular vendetta against the five under the runners' scrutiny; in fact, the only feeling Ocelot and Joe had been able to get from the other gangs was a vague sense of concern that the problem would begin migrating outward and start affecting them as well. Further, none of the gangers they had talked with had been able to come up with any ill-feeling sufficient to spark the sort of retaliation that had

been occurring. With the fact that the murders had been happening off and on for two months, it just didn't make sense that gangs were involved.

Their next avenue of investigation had been corp or organized crime involvement. Another call to Hennessy the day after Bowie's murder had netted them not only the information that the dwarf had not found anyone in Lone Star's databases matching their description, but also, regarding the new question, that the five gangs were not large enough to attract any particular notice from any corps. As for the organized crime angle, Hennessy told them that all five gangs did some minor work for the local Yakuza, but that the Yak connection didn't pan out either. Everything seemed relatively peaceful, both between the gangs and the Yak and between the Yak and other Yak groups in the area. When the runners told him that they thought that the murders were the work of one person, he had said, "Maybe so. I'll keep checking, but my gut tells me that the Yak and corp angle is a dead end."

When what looked very much like the key to the puzzle had finally fallen into place the next day, it had been 'Wraith who had found it. He had called the other runners that evening, and the four of them had met at Winterhawk's place—which was only five minutes away from 'Wraith's and actually had furniture. The elf had brought his computer in, hooked it up to the Matrix, and waited until his teammates had arrayed themselves around the screen. "Did some checking," he'd said. "Gang names, individuals, neighborhoods, so on. Filtered out useless information." He hit a key and screenfuls of information began popping up. He watched them flash by and hit another key at the appropriate point.

The runners, leaning over his shoulder, read the article with growing interest. "This is dated four years

ago," Ocelot said. "There was another gang war then? With these same gangs?"

"Wraith nodded. "Same. Very bloody. Severe casualties."

"Severe *civilian* casualties, it looks like," Hawk said, skimming ahead in the article. He looked at Wraith as light dawned. "You think this could be one of those civilians?"

"Or a friend, or a relative," Joe added. "Makes sense..."

"Wait," Wraith said, hitting another key. "Gets better. Think I found it."

Another news story popped up; this one was dated two weeks after the one describing the gang war. The headline read: "Lone Star Sergeant to Leave Force after Wife, Children Killed in Gang Crossfire." It was accompanied by a holopic of a handsome black human male, approximately 30 years old. Smaller pictures below the man's showed a pretty Asian woman about the same age and two young children, a boy and a girl.

Winterhawk leaned in closer to read the small type. "Sgt. James Hudson of Lone Star has made the decision to resign from the force following the tragic deaths of his wife Louanne and his two children, Jimmy, age 4, and Vivian, age 2."

Ocelot sighed, also reading. "Looks like they didn't have a chance. Plugged on their way to the park."

"Look at the gangs," Wraith said quietly, and pointed.

The three others looked and their eyes widened. "The Blood Monkeys hitting the Axemen," Joe said.

"And Hudson worked out of the same precinct as Hennessy does," Ocelot added. "Redmond, 63rd. That woulda been his area."

Winterhawk already had his phone out. He looked questioningly at the others, who nodded. Quickly he punched in Hennessy's number.

The dwarf was caught flatfooted by the new development. "Jimmy Hudson? You guys are kidding, right? No way it could be him. Jimmy was the kindest guy you'd ever want to know. He ain't no murderer."

"Can you be sure, Lieutenant? Do you know where he is now? Where he went after he resigned?"

The dwarf sounded somewhat flustered. "Uh—yeah. He said he was gonna go off and start a store somewhere. Florida, I think he said. He never told anybody exactly where, though. I think he just wanted to put this whole part of his life behind him."

"Do you know how to reach him?"

Hennessy shook his head. "No. Ain't heard from him since he left. I don't think anybody has." A pause, and then: "But listen—I just don't see how it could be Jimmy. Like I said, he was the sweetest guy around. He didn't even want to carry a gun, and he only learned how to fire it 'cuz the job required it. He was a desk jockey. How could somebody like that commit those kinds of murders? It just don't scan."

"Shock can have profound effects on people," Wraith said flatly. "Can change personality."

The dwarf still looked unbelieving. "Listen—you guys gotta follow up on this if you think it's possible. I'll do what I can do from here—see if I can find out from Personnel where he ended up, stuff like that. But I sure as hell hope you're wrong. I just don't see how it could be him..." He trailed off, shaking his head. Then he looked up hopefully. "You got any other leads?"

"Not really," Ocelot said. "This one's the best one yet, unfortunately."

Hennessy sighed. "I remember that war. Nasty business. Those gangs were a lot nastier back then—things have toned down a lot since they lost quite a few of their real hotheads. Don't even remember what it was

over...distribution of low-level BTLs or somethin', I think. But I remember clearly when Jimmy's wife and kids got it." He sighed again. "I sure as hell hope you're wrong."

When the dwarf had called back several hours later, the news was no more encouraging. "Nobody has any idea where he went," he'd told them. "I did a little checking in Personnel—I got a friend down there—and found out that the last address they got for Jimmy is somewhere in Miami, but he moved a couple months later and didn't leave a forwarding address." He sighed. "I still don't get it, though. Why wait four years to get revenge? Most people get over things like that after that long."

"Maybe something happened that reminded him," Ocelot said. "Thanks."

Winterhawk grabbed his arm before he hung up. "Lieutenant, if you could send us over a good picture of Sergeant Hudson, along with any other information you think we might find helpful, we'd appreciate it. They don't happen to still have a ritual sample on him, do they?"

"Nope—they destroyed it when he quit. Once they check you out and make sure there's nothin' they need to keep tabs on you for, it's standard procedure. Sorry."

After Hennessy had hung up, the runners had had another conference. "So what now?" Ocelot said. "It sounds like we know who our guy is, but that doesn't put us any closer to catchin' him. He can't just be some desk jockey—somebody woulda found him by now. Somethin' must have happened in those four years."

"Need to set a trap," Wraith said.

"Yeah, but how?" Ocelot got up and began pacing. "He strikes at random, and we never know which gang he's gonna blow away somebody from. How are we supposed to know where he turns up?"

"He's trying to start a war between the gangs, right?" Joe spoke up. "Maybe if we can do something to convince him that they're gonna get together and make peace, he might get desperate and strike at somebody then."

"Wraith looked at Joe with approval. "Good idea."

Winterhawk was thinking. "There's one thing that doesn't make sense to me," he said, half to himself.

"Only one?" Ocelot threw himself back down in his chair.

The mage ignored the sarcasm. "If it is, in fact, Sgt. Hudson who's behind these murders, then why would he be trying to start a gang war? If a gang war four years ago is the very thing that killed his family, why would he possibly want to provoke another one which will certainly result in more dead civilians?"

"That's a damn good question. I guess we're gonna have to catch him to find out."

Convincing the remaining leadership of the five gangs to come together in neutral territory for a summit was easier than the runners had thought it would be, once they explained the situation. They hadn't given the gangsters any specifics about who they thought the murderer was, but they did reveal that the problems had probably stemmed from the bloody war that had occurred four years ago. Since none of those who remembered that war wanted to see another one, they had agreed to meet at the abandoned Allied National Fabrication warehouse, long considered a neutral negotiating place, the following night. "We're the bait. We know that," the Gutterpunks' leader had said. "But this bastard killed my brother, and I want to nail him. I'll do it." Other responses had been similar—willingness to take a risk for the potential payoff of stopping the murders.

The runners told the gangers to spread the word that the meeting would occur the following night at 21:00. They would stake out the place before that and keep their eyes open; if Hudson (or whoever else the killer was, if they were wrong and it wasn't Hudson) showed up, the entire area around the warehouse would be covered on both the mundane and astral realms. It was the best they could do; they hoped it would work.

"Getting close now," Ocelot said over the commlink. "Keep your eyes open."

"Nothing here," 'Wraith said. He was stationed in an abandoned vehicle near the south corner of the warehouse, where he could watch the convergence of two streets and the tops of the buildings across the street. With his mag vision active, it was unlikely that he would miss anything coming in from his quadrant.

"Nor here," Winterhawk reported from his position on the roof of another building across from the north side of the warehouse. From where he was, he could see in through the large empty spaces where windows used to be; he could also see—barely—the car where 'Wraith was hidden. His two air elementals were roving around the area, instructed to report the approach of anyone other than the team. Unlike watcher spirits, the elementals were intelligent enough to take a bit of initiative on their own; 'Hawk was relying on them to augment his own astral vision.

"I got somebody coming," Joe said. "Looks like the Sin-Eaters."

Winterhawk shifted his scrutiny over to Joe's area at the east side of the warehouse, immediately noticing the three figures warily approaching the warehouse.

"And here come two more groups from my side," Ocelot added. "The—Gutterpunks and the Axemen, it

looks like. They're comin' in from two sides and headin' for the door."

"Blood Monkeys approaching," 'Wraith spoke up. "Still about half a kilometer away."

"And here come the Twisted Grizzlies," Winterhawk said after a few moments, spotting the two burly trolls approaching his vantage point.

"Okay, heads up, everybody," Ocelot said.

"Once they get close I'll go inside," Joe said. "Winterhawk—will you take a look inside and make sure he's not already there?"

"On it," the mage said, and slipped into the astral plane. He returned after two minutes. "Nothing in there," he said over the commlink. "It's empty except for a few specimens of the local wildlife—bats and devil rats and such."

The gangers were approaching now, moving warily but confidently. They converged on the warehouse from five sides while keeping up careful but unobtrusive scrutiny. 'Wraith and Winterhawk continued their sweeps of the area around the warehouse while Joe and Ocelot watched the immediate vicinity of the gangers. As they got closer, Joe came out from his hiding place and began drifting over toward them; as the runners had prearranged with the gangers, he was wearing a Twisted Grizzlies jacket.

Ocelot was getting nervous. There should have been some sign of their quarry by now. "Where is he?" he muttered into the commlink. "He can't pass this up—"

"I just hope we're right," Joe's soft voice came in. "If it's more than one guy, we might be in trouble."

"Don't think it is," 'Wraith said. "Everything makes sense. It—" He stopped short. When he spoke again, his whisper was much sharper and more urgent. "'Hawk! Below you!"

Winterhawk, startled, nonetheless acted quickly, silently moving to the edge of the building and inching his way forward so he could get a look over the edge.

He got a quick impression of a long-rifle barrel sticking out through one of the apartment building's ruined windows before two things happened simultaneously: a bullet from 'Wraith's own rifle shattered the remains of the window, and the rifle's owner, apparently possessed of extremely acute senses, withdrew the barrel of his gun a split-second earlier. Winterhawk got a brief impression of dark-clad arms pulling inward. "I think that's our man!" he called, already activating his levitation spell lock and zipping over toward the roof access door and mentally ordering his two elementals to secure the building's exits. "Somebody watch those gangers in case there's more of them!"

"I'm coming," came Ocelot's quick reply. "Careful, 'Hawk.'

"Coming too," 'Wraith said, already leaping out of the car and moving at frightening speed down the street.

"I'll take care of the gangers," Joe said. "And watch the front door." He knew he was too slow to get up there in time to be of any aid in catching the shooter—he would be best served by making sure that if the guy had any accomplices, they weren't setting up to blow the gangers away. Hurriedly he began encouraging them toward the door to the warehouse.

Winterhawk zipped down the roof-access stairs and into the top floor of the apartment building. The place was officially condemned, but even moving as fast as he was, he could see that there were signs of habitation. *Squatters*, he thought as he flew by a beat-up tricycle in a hallway. *Need to find him soon before he does something we'll all regret.*

The window at which 'Wraith had spotted him was two floors down, so 'Hawk headed for the stairs, ignoring

the petrified look he got from the drunken ork shuffling his way down the side of the corridor. Everywhere there were signs of decay—rotted floorboards, moldy remains of carpeting, piles of trash. The smell was appalling. 'Hawk ignored it.

'Wraith reached the first floor of the building before Ocelot did, and didn't wait. Flinging open the door, he ducked off to the side, sniper rifle ready, gaze darting around. "'Hawk?"

"Third floor. Haven't found him yet."

"Kill?"

Winterhawk paused. "I wouldn't," he finally said. "Let's let Hennessy have him."

"Agreed." 'Wraith stowed his Walther and drew his Narcoject pistol, then stepped carefully into the lobby.

"I've got the third. Check the first and second," the mage's voice came through again.

"Check."

About this time, Ocelot came pounding up. "What?"

'Wraith pointed up. "Second floor?"

"Right." Ocelot turned back around and ran back out of the building, drawing his grapple gun.

"Where are you...?" Winterhawk muttered to himself. He could hear the sound of running feet echoing through the building, but he couldn't tell if they were the shooter's or if they were being made by some squatter kids somewhere. *With the elementals and Joe watching the exits, he won't get far. He has to be in here somewhere. Only a few ways out—*

Down the hall, a door slammed. Then the running feet again.

'Hawk started, but quickly got his bearings and jetted down the hall in pursuit. "I think he's up here," he reported. He couldn't risk going astral now—instead, he shot off a quick Clairvoyance spell and was rewarded by

the sight of a black-clad figure disappearing around a corner up ahead.

"We're on our way," Ocelot's voice came through. "Sit tight."

"Can't. He'll get away. End of the hall. Meet me there." Hawk flung open the ruined safety doors and continued down the hallway. He was heading toward the stairway leading downward. *They'll get him if he goes that way. Time to be a bit more careful.*

He dropped the Levitation spell, landing carefully next to the wall, and tiptoed down the hallway. There was one apartment between him and the stairs, and the door was open. Very quietly he crept forward and prepared to cross the open area toward the stairs, planning to meet up with Ocelot and Wraith on the lower floor.

And stopped.

"Don't move," said a soft voice from inside the room. "You do, and they're dead."

Winterhawk didn't move.

Inside the apartment, clearly visible through the open door, were five figures. One of them—the one who had spoken—wore a one-piece black formfitting suit that almost blended in with the shadows of the darkened room. Two pinpoints of red light shown from his eyes. The suit had a hood, and the man's face was painted with nonreflective black so it blended in with the rest of the outfit. A sniper rifle was slung over his shoulder; in his hand he held an HK-227, which was currently trained on one of the room's other occupants.

Clustered together, arms around each other, were three children, none of them older than six years old. All three were moaning and whimpering, staring up at a unkempt-looking squatter woman of about thirty who had to be their mother. The SMG was aimed directly at her head.

Very softly into the commlink, he whispered. "Trouble. No sudden moves. Hostages." Out loud, he said very gently, "Sergeant Hudson, I presume."

The pinprick eyes widened a bit. "How'd you know my—never mind! Drop your weapons now or I blow them away!"

"I don't have any weapons, Sergeant Hudson." Winterhawk held up his hands, palms up, showing that he did not in fact have a gun. "Is this really what you want to do?" He kept his voice low, soothing, calm. Behind him he could hear the nearly nonexistent sounds of his two teammates coming up the stairs.

"Come in here!" Hudson barked.

"We need to talk, James," Winterhawk said, moving slowly into the room. "Your friend Hennessy sent us. To help you. Please. Put the gun down. You don't want to kill these people."

"Don't you tell me what I want!" Hudson's voice pitched up a bit; there was no mistaking the madness in it. "I want to make 'em pay, that's what I want. I want 'em to die just like my Louanne did. Just like my kids did."

The woman whimpered a bit, which started the children crying in earnest. There were two boys and a girl, all of them dressed in ragged, ill-fitting clothing.

Winterhawk took a deep breath. "James, you don't want to kill these people. Look at them. They're not gangers. They're not responsible for your wife's and children's deaths. This is a mother and her children too. Do you want to take these children's mother from them?"

Hudson hesitated, then his eyes narrowed. "It was you. You and your friends were trying to stop me from doin' what I had to do. Maybe I should kill *you*." The gun didn't move from the woman's head.

Behind him, Winterhawk heard 'Wraith and Ocelot approaching. "Stay out of sight," he murmured under his

breath. Again he spoke aloud to Hudson. "James, please. None of this is solving anything. You need help. We want to help you. But first you'll be needing to put the gun down. Then we can call Duke. Don't you want to see your old friend?"

The gun wavered, just a bit. "D – Duke?"

Winterhawk nodded. "He's waiting to hear from us. He'd like to see you again. He can help you. You've got some problems, James, but he can help you. We can. But you have to let us."

The woman, still shaking so hard she could barely speak, gazed up at Hudson entreatingly. "Please don't kill me, mister. My kids – they ain't got nobody else."

Hudson's strange eyes shifted back and forth between her, the kids, and Winterhawk. "Go away," he finally said. "Go away and let me go. That's all I want."

"I can't do that, James," Hawk said ruefully. "You know that. Duke asked us to find you, and we can't just go away and leave you in such a state."

Over the commlink, Ocelot's voice came very quietly. "Can you hold him a few more, Hawk? If we can get down a level, we can climb up and get him through the window."

"Hurry up," the mage said without moving his mouth. "I think we've got a class-A nutter here." He didn't look sideways, but he sensed Wraith and Ocelot moving off.

"Guys, we got another problem," Joe's voice broke in. "These guys have figured out you got somebody over there. I don't know how much longer I can keep 'em here. They want blood."

Winterhawk didn't answer that. He knew that Wraith and Ocelot would deal with that problem if it came up. Right now, his only problem was this one. "James," he said softly, "Please put the gun down. You don't want to kill this nice woman here, do you?"

Hudson glanced down at her again. "I — " The gun was noticeably shaking now.

"Come on...there's a good chap. Come on, James...let these good people go. They're not part of the problem. They're innocents, just like Louanne and Vivian and Jimmy were."

The names hit Hudson like a hot wire. "You — know? About Jimmy and Viv?"

Winterhawk nodded. "I know, James. It's a terrible tragedy. It's no wonder it made you a bit unwell. It would have done the same to anyone. But don't make it worse by killing more innocents. That won't save anyone. Please. Just put the gun down and let's go see Duke, shall we?"

"Duke..." Hudson's grip tightened on the woman until she moaned at the pain.

"Shall we call him? He'll come here if we call him. But you have to put the gun down first."

"Duke..." he said again. Tears began running down his face, looking very strange with the facepaint and the solid black eyes with red lights in the middle. "Louanne...help me...I tried, but I can't—" He started to sob—great wracking sobs of four years of pent-up grief. "Louanne...Jimmy... Viv..."

He pulled back the gun, and before Winterhawk could react, he pointed the barrel at his own face —

—and fell over in a heap, the gun clattering to the floor unfired.

'Wraith appeared in the window, followed a moment later by Ocelot. The woman, released from Hudson's grip, collapsed into her own heap, her three children piling on top of her like puppies. 'Wraith stowed his Narcoject pistol and looked down at Hudson's crumpled form. Ocelot, who was looking at him at that exact moment, was surprised to see an expression quite like sympathy and understanding cross the elf's face.

It was another two hours before everything got wrapped up. Hennessy, whom Joe had called, had showed up shortly after the hostage situation had been defused, shocked and saddened to see what had become of his friend James. Close examination (after they had gotten out of the immediate area, for fear of starting their own gang war as the five gangs vied for who would be the one to kill the murderer) revealed that James had been busy in the four years since he'd been gone: the guy had barely any of his own body left, most of it having been replaced by cyberware, muscle replacements, smartgun link, cybereyes, and various other modifications that would have most likely driven him mad if he hadn't already been there to start with. Winterhawk's astral examination had revealed more cyberware than it should have been possible to fit into a human body, indicating that Hudson must have had connections to some very good cyber-clinics. "Has to be at least beta-grade," Hennessy had commented. "And he's been workin' out, too. I don't know who he hooked up with, but it's pretty obvious that he was a man on a mission."

"So what's gonna happen to him?" Joe asked as the ambulance carrying the heavily-sedated and restrained Hudson had rolled off, leaving the five of them standing next to Hennessy's beat-up plainclothes unit in the parking lot of the closed store where they had met up.

Hennessy sighed, handing over the credsticks containing the remainder of their payment. "I don't know. He's got some problems, but he did commit eight murders, plus attempted murder on that woman. I hope we can get him some help, but I think he's gonna do time. Maybe the courts'll cut him some slack, though, especially if we can get his head straightened out." He looked down. "Man, this is not what I expected to find. I'm glad it's over,

but why did it have to be Jimmy? I sure wouldn't want to see what was runnin' around in his mind for the past four years."

"No," 'Wraith said in an odd tone. "You probably wouldn't." He motioned toward the truck. "Gentlemen?"

Ocelot nodded, running his hand through his hair. "Yeah. I think it's time to go home and get some sleep."

24.

It was early evening, and Gabriel was exhausted.

It had already been a week since Telanwyr had died, and yet he was no closer to the answer than he had been the night he had killed Slyde.

He had just returned from another of his seemingly endless series of forays onto the astral plane in search of information about the mysterious elf who seemed not to exist. With so little to go on—no description, no name, not even any more astral traces to follow—he knew that his chances of discovering anything that would help him were extremely slim, but still he had to continue trying. Someone had engineered the death of Telanwyr, and that someone could not elude him forever.

He hoped.

In addition to his own astral searching, he had also put out discreet feelers to his large and varied group of contacts, some of whom had dealings with some very unusual people and beings. So far they had come up with nothing. That, unfortunately, did not surprise him—he had not given them all the information, but merely told them that he was looking for a strange elf, probably an immortal, who had been in Seattle during the past week. He had given no indication as to why he was looking for this elf. With sketchy detail like that it seemed unlikely that any of his people would turn up anything, but he was not yet ready to bring anyone else fully into the investigation.

He knew he would have to do so soon, or risk letting it get away from him to the point where neither he nor anyone else would be able to find anything. It may have already progressed to that point. Already he was beginning to mentally sift through the other Great

Dragons he knew or had at one time or another met, deciding whom he would go to first if it came to that. Lofwyr was an obvious choice—the most powerful of their kind on Earth, especially now that Dunkelzahn was dead—but Gabriel would not seek him out. He had only met Lofwyr once, a very long time ago, and although he was not completely certain why, he had not felt comfortable around him. That one was always looking for ways to twist things to his advantage, and his mind was so keen and so convoluted that Gabriel—intelligent even by Great Dragon standards but still plagued by the inexperience of youth—did not feel confident in his ability to keep up with him. Making a deal with Lofwyr wasn't a wise thing even for another dragon to do.

He continued to tick off names, but each one had some reason why he did not wish to ally himself with him or her—at least not yet. He felt very much like a human child who had somehow stumbled upon a very important secret, and who was trying to determine which adult to approach with it. Like that human child, he was becoming increasingly certain that he could not handle this on his own, but to trust the wrong adult would be to have the situation removed from his control and perhaps abandoned for lack of evidence, discounted as a mere childish notion.

No, he would continue as he had been for a few more days, and then, perhaps when he had rested and removed the fog of fatigue from his mind, he would consider his options further. Until then, he had to press on.

He had spent the past couple of days searching the astral for the two elementals—earth and fire, the little spirit had said—that Telanwyr had summoned to aid him in his battle with his assassins. So far he had found no trace of them, and he was beginning to believe that they had been destroyed, probably by the same forces that had

eliminated all the other evidence from the scene. The little air elemental continued to aid him, but its help was by its very nature limited. He had, as he had promised, released it from his service when it had returned with news of Slyde's whereabouts; however, it had continued to hang around him, seeming to take a liking to him. Although had enlisted its willing help in his search, it had been unable to turn up anything further. If nothing else, he had begun to enjoy its company on his searches; when it wasn't off looking for evidence on its own, it followed him around like a faithful puppy. He did not know its name and at this point would not presume to try to discover it, so he began thinking of it as Whisper. It appeared pleased with the name and responded readily to it.

Right now, though, he was alone. Slumped across his soft leather couch in human form (it was easier to slump in human form; in dragon form he always had to worry about knocking over the furniture), he closed his eyes and listened to the pounding of his head. He had been out a long time on this search; not as long as he had been during his initial hunt for evidence, but almost. And this had not been by any means the first such trip this week. Even Whisper was starting to worry about him, gently encouraging him to return to his body and allow himself to rest before he did himself real harm.

He had one more avenue to try before he planned to concede that he needed help. It would take some preparation, but it was always possible that an answer might be found on the metaplanes that could not be found on the astral. Sometimes one did not have to know what one was looking for in the Netherworld — *it* knew, and if you were sufficiently adept in interpreting its clues, you might find insights that had previously eluded you. The Netherworld was a dangerous place, though, even for a Great Dragon, and therefore Gabriel would wait until he

had regained his strength before beginning the ritual that would take him there. He did not want to admit it, but he was nonetheless becoming certain that he would not find what he sought on the astral. The elementals were surely destroyed, and any other clues that might remain must have long since dissipated.

His head continued to pound, becoming more and more distracting. He knew he was risking serious harm if he kept up this pace; he'd been forcing himself to remain awake and continue with the quest, fearing that if he spent too much time sleeping off the effects of his astral jaunts, he would let vital information pass him by. Now, though, it was finally catching up with him. His constitution was strong and his will considerably stronger, but everyone had limits and Gabriel was afraid that he was nearing his.

He didn't realize he had fallen asleep until he felt a strange buzzing in his head and, fighting to consciousness, heard a persistent knocking on his door. His innate time-sense told him that he had been asleep for almost two hours; he didn't feel much better than he had before he had dropped off. His head was still foggy and his thoughts nebulous and indistinct.

The knocking sounded again. It was louder this time, as the caller sounded more urgent. Who could it be? Few knew the way up here uninvited; the elevator was rigged so it needed a code before the visitor was even allowed to know that this floor existed, let alone given permission to reach it. Fuzzily he dredged up the list of people who knew how to get here: Kestrel did, of course. Possibly one of the four runners—Winterhawk, Ocelot, ShadoWraith, or Joe—if they had been paying attention, but that had been a long time ago. Had he changed the code since then? He shook his head rapidly, trying to clear it. There was only one way to find out who was there: take a look.

Shifting his perceptions (even as exhausted as he was, this tiny astral effort didn't tire him) he reached out to look at the other side of the door. He was already sure he knew who it was: Kestrel, coming up to see how he was doing, since he hadn't communicated with her since he had left her townhouse a few days ago. Almost casually he glanced outside the door.

It was not Kestrel.

He stiffened, drawing a sharp breath. His eyes widened. Adrenaline forced awareness back into his tired mind as all his senses heightened. Fatigue dropped away.

No.

Not now.

Not Stefan.

But it was Stefan. The figure standing outside his door could not be anyone else: tall, powerfully built, dressed in a fine suit, he waited like an impatient businessman to be admitted. Like Gabriel's, his masking was flawless, meaning that his true nature did not show through, but it did not need to.

Gabriel knew his own brother when he saw him.

How had he gotten up here? How had he made his way past the wards without alerting Gabriel to his presence?

The buzzing went off in his head again. Perhaps Stefan had not gotten past the wards unannounced after all, Gabriel realized. Perhaps the warning had simply been ignored by a mind too tired to process it.

Whisper had been right. He had pushed himself too hard and now he was going to pay for it. He was in no shape to fight Stefan now. If there was a fight, he would lose.

He would die.

He thought of escape, but rejected it immediately. He would not flee. He would not show fear. If he was to die

for his mistake, then so be it. He would at least die fighting.

Stefan knocked again. Pounded, actually. "Gethelwain!" His voice carried effortlessly through the closed door. "I know you are in there."

Why was he knocking? There were no wards on the door. If he wanted to come in, he could have broken it down with ease. What did he want? Gabriel shifted to his preferred method of communication, projecting his thoughts through the door. *"What do you want, Sildarath? Why have you come here?"*

Stefan likewise shifted to mind-speech. *"Let me in, Gethelwain. I have something I would – discuss – with you."* There was an odd inflection in his tone, but Gabriel could not identify it.

"You must think me quite a fool, Sildarath, if you think that I will admit you to my home." Gabriel forced a strength he was not feeling into his voice. He knew that showing weakness to Stefan could be a fatal misstep.

There was a short pause – almost as if the man on the other side of the door was biting back the desire to make a sarcastic remark. Then, slowly, in a tone that sounded as if it were not at all accustomed to such words: *"Please. Gethelwain, it is...very important that I speak with you."* There was another pause, and even more slowly: *"I...give you my word that I will not harm, attack, or threaten you in any way for the duration of my visit."*

Gabriel stared at the door, simultaneously watching both the inside and the outside. Stefan sounded stranger than he had ever heard him sound. The confident arrogance was gone from his voice; the mocking that was so much a part of him when he was speaking to his hated younger brother was nowhere in evidence. Was this a trick? Did Stefan have something planned, only waiting for Gabriel to naively give him entrance to his home?

He hesitated. He knew he was too tired to fight Stefan right now; the adrenaline that coursed through him would fade long before he would be able to make an effective offense. He also feared that fatigue had slowed his mind—was he missing something obvious? Swiftly but carefully he ran through possible scenarios, but he could think of no reason why Stefan would come to him in his own home. Aside from his lair, this was the place where his power was strongest. For a dragon to seek to attack another dragon in his home—even a dragon as depleted as Gabriel was—was folly at best and madness at worst.

"*Gethelwain! Please.*" Stefan's mind-voice was taking on an edge of desperation; either he was a very good actor or something was wrong. Unfortunately for Gabriel, he knew that Stefan *was* in fact a consummate actor. Again he hesitated, his mind warring between curiosity about Stefan's reasons for being here and apprehension about letting him in. His mind flew back to the time six months ago when he had last seen his brother—he remembered the pain and the blood and the horrible sensation of his life-force slipping away from him while he was powerless to stop it. He remembered Kestrel, battered and bloody at Stefan's hands. He remembered how his brother had murdered and manipulated innocent people for the purpose of luring him into a trap. No, he decided. If Stefan wanted to talk to him, it would have to be on his, Gabriel's, terms. And it would have to be some other time, when he was rested. He looked at the door, preparing to send that thought through it to the man on the other side.

At that moment, though, Stefan said something that immediately settled the issue. "*Gethelwain—I know about Telanwyr.*"

Gabriel froze. For several seconds, he did not speak, continuing to stare hard at the door as if it might hold the

answer. Then, carefully, he said, "*What do you know about Telanwyr?*"

"*Let me in, and I will tell you. Please. I have given you my word.*" Stefan knocked again on the door.

On the other side, Gabriel listened to his brother. Did Stefan sound—frightened? The urgency was back in his voice, as if he feared that something would catch up with him if he didn't get inside. One final time, Gabriel considered. Stefan would not lightly go back on his word, he knew. Trust and honor were powerful things among his kind, and any dragon whose word could not be trusted was looked upon with great suspicion—or worse. And if Stefan *did* know something of Telanwyr's death—

Suspecting that he was making a grave mistake, Gabriel opened the door.

For a moment, the two just stared at each other, each one sizing the other up like a pair of predatory cats in disputed territory. Then, as if concerned that Gabriel would change his mind, Stefan stepped swiftly into the room.

There was something wrong with him; Gabriel could tell this immediately, although he had no idea *how* he could tell. Stefan looked the same as he had last time Gabriel had seen him in human form, right before their battle: a few centimeters taller than Gabriel, dark-haired, fair-skinned, with piercing black eyes like an eagle's. Unlike his brother, though, who didn't look a day over twenty years old, Stefan appeared to be in his middle to late thirties—he had the look of a human male in his prime, at the height of power and strength. Dressed in a dark tailored suit in the current cutting edge of corporate fashion, he effectively projected the image of a ruthless CEO for whom nothing important escaped his knowledge.

Until you looked at his eyes. That was where the problem was. There was something very strange in his gaze.

Gabriel backed off a few steps, warily. He was not *afraid* of Stefan per se; however, he did have a healthy respect for the fact that his brother was both larger and stronger than he was. As he looked at Stefan, though, it appeared now that fighting was the last thing on his mind. Of course he could make his human form look like anything he wanted it to, but even with that the fatigue was showing through. Gabriel realized with some surprise that Stefan looked as tired as he himself was.

What was going on?

"All right," Gabriel said softly, evenly, speaking aloud rather than with his mind. "What do you know of Telanwyr?"

Stefan did not answer right away. He began pacing around the end of the huge room in which he was standing, never wandering more than five meters or so away from Gabriel. Approaching the window, he put his palms against it and stared out, looking down at the other buildings and the street far below. He moved with a stiffness that was at odds with his usual graceful motion; every few seconds, his right hand strayed to the pocket of his suit for a moment before returning to whatever it had been doing.

Cautiously Gabriel moved toward him. His defenses were at full alert, his magical and physical barriers prepared to intercept any surprise attacks that Stefan might throw at him. With a flick of his mind, he summoned a small group of watcher spirits and silently ordered them to patrol the area seeking anything out of the ordinary; Stefan was tricky, and perhaps his promise not to attack had not included allies he might have enlisted. Even with all those precautions, though, Gabriel

somehow knew that Stefan was not currently a threat to him. Something was very wrong. "Stefan?"

Stefan turned back around to face Gabriel, his back now pressed against the thick armored glass of the window. He took a deep breath, paused, then took another deep breath. He looked like a man who was steeling himself for a very difficult task. When he did speak, it was in a ragged, wasted tone. "I—have much to say to you, little brother," he said. "But before I do—I would ask that you promise to listen to me before you take action. Hear me out. After that I will leave it up to you what to do." His eyes, somehow haunted, came up to meet Gabriel's. "Do you promise?"

Gabriel looked hard at the man standing before him. This was the brother who had tried to kill him twice, and nearly succeeded both times. This was the brother who hated him more than anything else on Earth, who could not let go of the events of the past and put his animosity behind him as vestiges of a bygone age. This was the brother who had captured and tortured him when he had first awakened in the Sixth World, and from whom he had barely escaped with the help of Kestrel. This brother was now standing before him, his eyes full of fear and his tone full of pleading, asking for him to listen and to reserve judgment and action until he had finished. This was not the Stefan he knew.

"All right, Stefan," he said quietly. "I will listen."

Something (relief?) flickered across Stefan's features. "I know this looks odd to you, Gethelwain," he said in the same tired tone. "It is the last thing I would have desired to do as well, but when you hear me, you will see why it was necessary. When one is out of choices, one must make decisions that are not as one might wish to make."

"You're speaking in riddles, Sildarath," Gabriel said. He had not yet sat down, and he did not intend to. Even

with promises in place, he did not intend to relax his vigilance. "You said you knew something of Telanwyr."

Stefan nodded. "I know how he died."

That was not what Gabriel had been expecting to hear. He leaned forward, eyes narrowing dangerously. "How do you know such a thing?"

"Because —" Stefan said, unable to meet Gabriel's gaze, "— I helped to kill him."

A long silence hung in the air as Gabriel, shocked temporarily beyond the ability to speak, simply stared at Stefan. "You...did...*what*?" he whispered at last, measuring each word carefully in shaking tones.

Either Stefan was a better actor than even Gabriel would have given him credit for or else he was utterly miserable. Still not meeting his brother's eyes, he murmured, "I helped to kill him, Gethelwain. But there is more. You agreed to hear me out."

Gabriel was not listening. Standing rooted to the spot where he had heard Stefan's pronouncement, he closed his eyes, clenching his fists so hard that his arms trembled. Rage and grief and hatred welled up inside him from where they had been waiting patiently for an outlet; he felt the tide growing within his mind, threatening to wash away any semblance of rational thought, and he fought against it. He could not lose control now. If he did, then Stefan was almost certainly dead, and he was as well. If he attacked Stefan now, as every impulse in his being was urging him to do, then regardless of whether he was able to kill his brother, he would certainly succeed in destroying himself. A tiny corner of his mind reminded him of the incident with Slyde, of how he had told Kestrel how much he feared another such loss of control.

Slowly, with deep breaths and sheer force of will, he centered away the rage, feeling it melt away from him like water rolling down a hillside. It was not gone; it pooled

up in the foothills and patiently waited to rise again, but for now he could function with it. He opened his eyes and relaxed his clenched fists, allowing his hands to fall to his sides. He looked up.

Stefan stood there where he had left him, watching. Oddly, there was no sign of mocking or ridicule on his face; it appeared that he had not moved while Gabriel had been attempting to master his anger. He did not speak.

"Tell me the rest, Sildarath," Gabriel said harshly, "so that I might be released from my promise not to take action."

Stefan did not react to the implied threat. He sighed, looking like a man who had seen and done far too much and who was now relieved to be sharing his burden with another—even if the other was his worst enemy. He pushed himself off the window and began pacing again, his hand once more straying into his pocket without his notice. "I know how strange this must sound to you, brother, after what I have told you—but I have come to ask for your help."

Gabriel's gaze was cold as ice. "My help? In what way could I possibly help you?"

"Let me begin at the beginning," Stefan said. He had not yet looked at Gabriel.

"Then do so." There was no hint of compassion in the younger man's voice. It was all Gabriel could do to speak to Stefan at this point, and it was all he would ask of himself.

Stefan paused to gather his thoughts for a moment before continuing. "Perhaps," he began, "you were curious about why I did not seek to contact you in any way after our—last meeting."

"Why you did not attempt to harm me or my friends again, you mean?" Gabriel asked. He shrugged, ignoring the way Stefan stiffened at the word *friends*. "I assumed

you had tired of the game and planned to resume it again at some later date."

"No," Stefan said. "I was—encouraged to distance myself from your affairs."

"Encouraged?"

"Yes. By a—friend of yours. A powerful friend."

"Telanwyr," Gabriel said emotionlessly. Of course. Somehow Telanwyr had heard of their current conflict and had attempted to put an end to it. How very like him, to have wanted to protect his friend and student. But—"And so you killed him for that?" He felt the rage returning, but once more managed to direct it away before it took hold of him. There would be time for that later.

Stefan shook his head. "No. Not—directly. Shortly after our battle, he came to me and—convinced me that it would be in my best interests if I left you alone. I gave him my word, reluctantly of course, that I would do so. But I kept it. That is why you and your—friends—" he bit out the word distastefully—"did not feel my revenge for what you did to me." As Gabriel's expression hardened further, he raised his hand. "No, Gethelwain. Please. I have not come to quarrel with you now. It is far beyond that." His right hand went to his pocket; when he spoke again, his voice was halting and unsure. "I kept my word, but I resented the necessity to do so. For the last six months, it has eaten away at me—the fact that I could not even approach you without breaking my promise to Telanwyr. I began to search for a way out."

"Then," Gabriel said, "you killed him to release yourself from your promise?" His tone was barely controlled now.

Again Stefan shook his head. "It is far more complicated than that." He sighed, running a hand back through his dark hair. Beads of sweat stood out on his

forehead. Almost convulsively, he pulled off his jacket and threw it over a nearby couch. "A—few days ago, someone came to me in my office. An elf."

Gabriel took notice at that, his eyes sharp and intent. "Go on..."

"Yes. I had never seen him before. I did not know how he had gained entry to my office—it should not have been an easy thing for him to do. He convinced me that he had something to say that he thought I wished to hear, so I agreed to listen to him." He paused, looking at his brother. "He led me to believe that he was one of the Immortals—one with a vendetta against Telanwyr that was older than we are."

Gabriel leaned forward. He thought was beginning to grasp where Stefan was leading, but he said nothing.

Stefan continued: "As he spoke, he became more and more persuasive. I did not wish to listen to him when he began to talk of murder, but I could not help myself. His words spoke to something deep within me. As he casually talked about killing Telanwyr, I saw how my way could at last be cleared to seek a final confrontation with you, free of his influence and the promise he held."

"You could not help yourself?" Gabriel asked contemptuously. "Are you not more powerful than an elf, Stefan?"

Stefan did not take the bait. "I will explain," he said quietly. His voice was shaking. "As he continued, the idea began to look more and more appealing to me. I would help him to kill Telanwyr, and then both of us would have what we wanted. It would be simple."

Gabriel remained silent. He was struggling with his anger again and did not wish to dislodge his fragile control by speaking.

"As if watching myself from a great distance," Stefan said, taking Gabriel's silence for continued attention, "I

agreed to help the elf. It was then that he began to employ even more insidious persuasion on me. Before he was finished, he had convinced me that he was actually helping *me*, and that I should therefore owe him something for his trouble."

Gabriel looked up again. "Owe him – what?"

Stefan sighed. "When it was over and he had left me alone, I could not conceive of how I could have been such a fool, but nonetheless I was. He asked for an unspecified favor, to be delivered at his – request at some later date."

Gabriel's eyes widened. "And you *agreed* to that?" For a dragon, the concept was practically unthinkable.

Stefan nodded miserably. "I told myself that after Telanwyr was dead, I would seek out the elf and kill him before he was able to claim the favor. I was certain that I was more than a match for him, despite his persuasive words."

"But—now that the deed has been done, you have been unable to find him," Gabriel said. His eyes, still chilled, met Stefan's. "If you have come to seek my help in releasing you from your promise, then you have come to the wrong place. I too am seeking this elf, and when I find him he will die. If that serves to release you from the promise, then that is of no interest to me."

"Gethelwain—" Stefan started to say something, then trailed off. After a pause, he asked, "Have you had any success in locating him?"

"No. Not yet."

The older man looked him over. "You look tired, brother. You have been seeking him all these days since Telanwyr's death?"

Reluctantly, Gabriel nodded. Then he glared at Stefan. "Perhaps, though, one murderer is as good as another. Have you finished your story yet?"

As before, Stefan steadfastly refused to rise to his brother's challenge. "No. I have not reached the part that has brought me here to you."

"How did you do it?" Gabriel said suddenly.

"Do—it?"

"How did you kill him? Were you there, that night? Did I somehow miss your presence?"

Stefan shook his head. "No. I was not there. I did not participate in the murder. My—task was to lure him to the place the elf had prepared."

"And how did you do that? I did not think that Telanwyr trusted you so much that he would travel so far at your request."

"He—did not." Stefan turned away, going back over to the window. His hand was in his pocket constantly now. It seemed to be growing more difficult for him to speak. "Even—even after all our history together, and knowing how I have hated you—it shames me to admit what I have done."

"Tell me, Sildarath," Gabriel said coldly. "What have you done?"

Stefan continued to gaze out the window, unable to look at his brother. "He—would not come for me. But he would come for you."

There was silence for several seconds. Then, very slowly, as if fearing that if he spoke too fast he would upset his tenuous balance again: "You...led him to believe that it was *I* who called him here?"

Stefan nodded without turning. One hand pressed against the glass of the window, while the other one remained in his pocket.

Gabriel took a step forward, his fists knotting involuntarily. "Then..." he said through clenched teeth, "he very likely went to his death believing that I had betrayed him?"

"Gethelwain—"

"No!" Gabriel spoke sharply, though he did not raise his voice. "Be quiet. You have—done enough." His words came only with effort, shaking with his struggle to contain the rage that threatened to become a flood that would submerge him. His mind raced, examining and discarding thoughts faster than he could process them. Had Telanwyr indeed believed that his friend had betrayed him—had set him up to be executed with missiles and machine guns and lasers? The confusion he must have felt—the disappointment, the fear, the hurt... Had his last thoughts been occupied with wondering why such a thing could occur? With examining his past to determine what he could possibly have done that could have resulted in such a traitorous action on the part of his beloved student? Had the cry of agony that had felled Gabriel at the football stadium been not a plea for help, but a final, enraged attempt to lash out at the one who had destroyed him?

Gabriel's fists clenched more tightly. Behind him, a stone sculpture on a pedestal exploded, shooting shards violently out into the middle of the room. Barely a second later, another sculpture on the other side of the room did likewise, cracking apart with a sound like gunfire. Pieces clattered to the floor around them.

Stefan turned back around. "Gethelwain—"

"Are you finished?" Gabriel whispered harshly, his eyes still closed. When he opened them, they were no longer the eyes of the young man, but those of the dragon. They fixed on Stefan with laserlike intensity. "Tell me that you are finished so I can have my chance to avenge Telanwyr."

For a moment Stefan met his gaze. "I wish I was, brother," he said. "If that were all that there was, do you think that I would have come to you?" Turning, unable to

stand up under his brother's scrutiny any longer, he began once again to pace, the shards of the exploded sculpture crunching beneath his feet.

Gabriel did not move. His eyes followed Stefan's movements, but otherwise he could have been another of the sculptures.

Stefan spent several minutes pacing around in tense silence while his brother remained motionless. His hand in his pocket rubbed the statuette, but it did not bring him comfort. He could feel it sapping his strength, but like a drug addict who did not have the will to break off his addiction even despite the knowledge that it was killing him, he could not stop. He could feel the elf's voice whispering to him; however, he could not make out distinct words. Savagely he yanked his hand from his pocket. "Gethelwain, I am afraid!" he said desperately.

That was not what Gabriel had been expecting to hear. He watched Stefan, his eyes returning to their normal human appearance but his expression not softening in the slightest. "You, Stefan? Afraid? I did not think it was possible." He knew that the contempt in his voice was not necessary, but he did not care. At this moment all he wanted was for Stefan to finish what he had come here to say, because then he would die.

Or Gabriel would. At this moment, either would have been acceptable. His grief was nearly paralyzing—and here was the cause of it, standing right here before him. There was no more that needed to be debated.

Stefan looked down. It was as if he did not even hear the mocking in his brother's voice—or else he felt that it was deserved and therefore not worthy of comment. "I am afraid," he repeated in a whisper. After a pause he looked up. "You asked me if my mind was stronger than an elf's. You know that it is. *I* know that it is." Again he paused. "I think, brother, that—the elf was not in fact an elf at all.

That is why I have come to you — you were the only hope that remained. I hope that it is not too late for me already."

"Too late?" Gabriel's anger stepped down a notch as his curiosity rose involuntarily. "Stefan, you speak in riddles again. Too late for what? If the elf is not an elf, then — what?"

In answer, Stefan wordlessly pulled the tiny dragon statuette from his pocket and held it out in his open palm.

Gabriel reacted as if he had been struck. Taking two quick, staggering steps backward, he stared at the thing in Stefan's hand as if it were a poisonous snake. "Where did you get that?" he rasped.

"The — elf — gave it to me," Stefan said. His arm shook as he resisted the urge to close his fingers around the statuette. "You — see something in it?"

"You do *not*?" Gabriel demanded, incredulous.

"I think," Stefan said slowly, finally succumbing to the thing's pull and gripping it tightly, "that I have come too far for that. He — it — concealed its true nature well." His eyes, haunted and fearful, came up to meet his brother's. "It is — the Enemy, isn't it?" He whispered the words as if afraid something would hear him if he spoke too loudly.

Gabriel nodded very slowly. He was not paying any attention to Stefan at this moment; all the rage that had been pooling up in his psyche drained away, to be replaced by cold, black, primal fear. No...it could not be. The Enemy — here? Already? But they were supposed to have been locked away, imprisoned on their own foul side of the Chasm for millennia to come. How could it be that they were here, and no one was aware of it? The fear gripped him more tightly than the rage had, holding him silent and immobile before Stefan.

Stefan, for his part, was paying as little attention to Gabriel as Gabriel was to him. With that simple nod from

his brother, the confirmation of what he come to fear more and more over the past few days, he felt his entire world crashing around him. He was lost. He, the master manipulator, had been played for a fool by –

By the Enemy.

Would it never end?

He gripped the dragon statue, feeling it humming, writhing in his hand. It seemed – pleased.

It was the fear. It was eating the fear. It was using the energy of his own emotions to bury its tendrils deeper –

He summoned up his will and fought to speak. "Gethelwain – help me. Please. Do not let them have me. You are my only hope. I could not go to the others – you know that I could not. They would kill me for what I have done – they would kill me as they killed my father." That last was pushed out through a thick layer of resistance.

"How do you know that I will not kill you?" Gabriel whispered, but there was no force behind it. He looked like a man who had just witnessed a horrendous accident.

"Because you are not a killer, brother," Stefan said, still struggling. "You may hate me as I hate you, but if you look, you will see that I have not killed Telanwyr. My hatred for you has made it possible for the Enemy to hold me, but I did not murder."

Gabriel dropped down onto his black leather couch as all the strength left his body. He sighed, resting his elbows on his knees and burying his hands in his inky hair. "I don't know what you expect me to do, Stefan," he said. "I have no more power against the Enemy than you do."

"But they have killed Telanwyr," Stefan reminded him. "You know as I do that they do not act without purpose. They have used me – my hatred – for their purpose. But we do not know what that purpose might be." He paused, holding out the statuette again. "This

item—I cannot separate myself from it. I have tried, but always I am drawn back to it. It—seems to be a way for the elf—the Enemy—to maintain awareness of my activities."

"And so you have brought it here," Gabriel said wearily, without looking up.

Stefan's voice took on an edge of desperation. "Gethelwain, I had no other choice." He dropped to his knees in front of Gabriel. "I know we have had our—differences—in the past, but if the Enemy is here—" he broke off, his meaning obvious. "I do not want to die," he whispered. "Even more, I do not want to become a pawn of the Enemy. My father's legacy must not continue through me." Again he stopped, attempting without much success to compose himself. "Please, Gethelwain. I am begging this of you. If you will not help me, then tell me where I might go. I don't think there is much time remaining."

Gabriel did not answer immediately. He remained in the same position, leaned over with his hands in his hair like a man who was too tired even to sit up. At last he sighed again. "You know I will help you, Stefan. The threat of the Enemy is far greater than our insignificant feud over things that should have been forgotten long before we slept." He raised his head and met Stefan's gaze, his eyes cold and purposeful. "But I will have a price for my help."

Stefan nodded. He expected that. Everyone had some requirement for rendering aid. It was the way of the world, even apparently for one such as his brother. "Name your price, then."

Gabriel continued to look straight into Stefan's eyes. "You will give me your word that you will neither attack, harass, harm, nor otherwise interfere with me or any of

my friends in any way. Ever again. Nor will you make arrangements with anyone else to do any of those things."

"You have my word," Stefan said immediately.

Gabriel looked surprised, but Stefan's quick agreement went a long way toward convincing him that his brother was indeed as frightened as he appeared to be. He lowered his eyes again, nodding. "Later, when this is over," he said softly, "we will deal with your involvement in Telanwyr's murder."

Stefan did not answer. Rising to his feet, he began nervously pacing again. "I do not know where to begin," he said.

Gabriel rose as well. "Sit down," he said. There was something subtly different in his tone now, as if his agreement to help Stefan had changed his attitude. Although he was the younger of the two, he now took charge of the situation. He had no more ideas than Stefan did, but something had to be done. "Drop your masking. I want to get a look at your aura and see what I can find there."

"What are you looking for?" Stefan asked warily.

"I don't know. Perhaps nothing. But I want a look at that statue on the astral, at least."

Stefan, apparently beginning to realize that he would have to trust Gabriel more than he had hoped, lowered himself into a nearby chair. "Are you certain this is necessary?" he asked, a bit suspicious.

Gabriel's gaze grew hard. "Stefan, if you wish me to try to help you, you must trust me. Remember, it is not I who have attempted to harm you in the past, but rather the opposite."

Stefan nodded. "Do it, then," he said.

Resuming his seat on the couch, Gabriel slumped as his astral form once more separated from his body. He

would not be able to be gone long; he was still tired from his last trip out, and he had not rested in between.

When he returned only a few minutes had passed, but that was all that had been necessary for him to find out what he needed to know. Stefan remained in the position he was in before, seated in the chair and watching Gabriel. "Well?" he asked. "What did you find?"

Gabriel took a deep breath, keeping his expression carefully neutral. "We must destroy that statuette."

An irrational sense of terror gripped Stefan as he closed his fist tightly around the object in question. "Destroy...it? Why?"

"Because," Gabriel said, "it already has a hold on you, and I can see it growing stronger. We might be able to break it if we destroy its focus—I don't know yet. But it will certainly continue to exert influence over you if we don't destroy it."

"I—do not think it will let you take it." Subconsciously Stefan moved away on the big chair.

"You will give it to me, then," Gabriel said. "Much of its power over you seems to be psychological. It does not appear to be a powerful item, but its enchantment seems to be concentrated in the area of suggestion and influence—I think that it is convincing you that it is stronger than it actually is. If you will give it to me, I think I can destroy it. It might be enough. The taint of the Enemy is strong on it—perhaps if we can eliminate it, then the Enemy's influence on you will be eliminated as well."

"How is it, then, that I did not notice?" Stefan asked. "I know you are stronger in the ways of magic than I, but for me to miss something such as that—"

"It is simple." Gabriel shrugged. "Its influence hid from you what it did not wish you to see—in much the same way as you employ illusions to deceive others. As

for anyone else—your masking is powerful enough that it would have taken another dragon, and one more powerful than you or I, to penetrate it. If you had not let me see through your barriers, I would have missed it as well."

"Any other time," Stefan said in a fair imitation of his old sarcasm, "I would have been pleased to find that there is something you admit that you cannot do, little brother. Now, though—ironic, is it not? I am forced to rely on your powers, so I must hope that they are adequate to the task."

Gabriel ignored that. "When you have given the item to me and I have destroyed it, then we will determine the extent of the Enemy's hold on you. After that, we will discuss the next step."

"We must find the elf," Stefan said immediately. "We must destroy him. Perhaps he is the only one."

"I hope so," Gabriel said. "If there are others, then—" he shook his head. After a moment he stood, his exhaustion evident in the slowness of his movements. Approaching Stefan, he held out his hand. "Give it to me."

Stefan's grip tightened involuntarily around the statuette. Deep in his mind, he felt the Enemy's hold on him tighten as well. *You will die if you relinquish it*, a voice that was not a voice said. *He will kill you. You must not trust him. He hates you. He wants you to hand over your power so he can destroy you...*

"Stefan..."

Stefan clamped his eyes shut. "No..."

"Give it to me, Stefan."

"No..." Stefan could feel Gabriel's presence in front of him even despite his closed eyes. "I—cannot." *He will kill you. He wants you to die. Just like your father died...Just like his father killed your father...*

"Sildarath." Gabriel spoke sharply, with an authority he did not often employ. "Give me the statue. The longer

you hold it, the more difficult this will be for you. Do not give in to the Enemy."

Stefan sat there, fists clenched, eyes closed, his entire body shaking with the effort of his will to overcome the voice of the Enemy. It continued, insinuating itself into the corners of his consciousness, reminding him of all the things that had been, all the reasons for his all-consuming hatred of his brother. The anger, the jealousy, the envy all rose up, fueled by the sibilant voice that spoke within the deep reaches of his mind. Dimly he heard Gethelwain saying something, but his brother's words did not penetrate the veil woven by the voice. "No..." he whispered. Unaware of what he was doing, he drew the statuette in closer to himself, clutching it to his chest like a life preserver in a storm-tossed sea. He would not allow his brother to take his power. It was what he had wanted all along. It was —

All at once, anger rose within him. Different anger. Anger not directed at his brother, or inward toward himself, but rather at the thing that had taken over his mind. At the thing that presumed to try to control him. "No..." he said again, but with a different inflection. He would *not* repeat the mistakes his father had made. He would not! He would —

Convulsively, he jerked up from his crouched position and lunged forward. With every shred of strength in his body and his will, he flung the statuette away from him toward Gabriel. It flew through the air and crashed into the wall on the other side of the room. Stefan had thrown it so hard that as it dropped to the floor, it left a dent in the wall where it had hit.

Immediately Stefan knew he had made a mistake. Leaping from the chair, he started after the statue, moving swiftly toward its call. Why had he thrown it away? He

had just signed his death warrant! He just had to get it back, and then —

A figure intercepted him, diving for the tiny item. An instant before Stefan reached it, Gabriel snatched it up, closing his own hand around it. The look in his eyes was one of single-minded purpose. When he touched it, his face paled.

"Give it to me!" Stefan cried, hurling himself forward onto his brother's back. He could feel the statue calling to him, demanding that he reclaim it. With the strength of a madman he rained crushing blows down upon Gabriel, trying to pull his arms up and rip the statue from him.

Gabriel bore the barrage stoically, fighting to ignore the pain his larger and stronger brother was inflicting on him as the blows rocked his body back and forth. Clutching the statuette, he curled into a tight ball with the item at its center. It was a foul thing; it made him feel sick just to handle it, and already he could sense it pulling at his fading strength. The voice tried to whisper to him, but he ignored it easily. It held no allure for him. All he wanted to do was be rid of the loathsome thing, and for that he had to keep it away from Stefan. He focused his mind, concentrating fully on what he had to do. The pain did not matter. Pain was not an issue when dealing with something such as this, except as it served to remind you that you were not yet dead.

Stefan continued to claw at him, gripping his arms, digging strong fingers into his neck. "It is *mine*," he growled. "*It is mine!*" He grabbed Gabriel around the shoulders and threw him into the nearest wall with a great *crash*, then leaped to his feet and thundered after him.

Gabriel landed hard, the strength of the blow causing him to come up from his drawn-in position. He glared at Stefan and waved the hand that did not hold the statue. A

bolt of mystical energy flung Stefan back several paces, over the back of the couch. The statue felt like a clump of writhing worms in Gabriel's hand, oozing between his fingers like maggots. Summoning the last of his power, he directed it at the tiny stone dragon. The last things he saw before the blackness took him were a massive flash of light and the madness-choked face of his brother as he came back up over the toppled couch.

When he opened his eyes, Stefan was standing over him. He was still in the same position, stretched half-lying, half-sitting against the wall, but although he was even more shattered with fatigue than he had been, he did not feel the pain from Stefan's beating. He looked down: clutched in his right hand was a small pile of red-black ashes that looked like dried blood. They trickled through his fingers and spread across the floor beneath his hand, where they disappeared.

Once more he looked up at Stefan. His brother's expression was neutral and unfathomable. He did not speak.

Gabriel gathered himself, rising slowly to his feet. "How long?"

"About fifteen minutes," Stefan said evenly. "I healed your wounds, since I have broken my word in inflicting them."

The younger man shook his head. "I—expected that. The grip of that thing was very strong on you." Still, he was surprised. Stefan had had an opportunity he would likely never have again—his hated brother helpless before him, unconscious, defenses down, ready to be killed at his leisure—and yet he had not taken it. Gabriel sighed, leaning against the wall for support.

"You have destroyed it," Stefan said. It was not a question.

Gabriel nodded. Aside from Stefan's interference, it had been easier than he had expected it to be. The item had been a minor one, its only powers lying in its ability to suggest and insinuate and deceive.

"I—could feel it," Stefan said, looking down at his hands. "It—screamed as you destroyed it, and then the compulsions left me."

Again Gabriel merely nodded. He was so tired he could barely stand up, but the night was not yet over.

"We must find the elf now," Stefan said, his face cold with anger. "We must find him and destroy him. If there are others we must destroy them as well."

"Not yet," Gabriel said. He stood up a little straighter, his gaze meeting his brother's. "There is something yet to be done first."

Stefan took a step back. "I know that there is the matter of Telanwyr—"

"No," Gabriel cut him off. "We must verify—that its presence is gone from you."

"But—you have destroyed the item—" Stefan began.

Gabriel motioned him back toward the chair he had vacated earlier. "This must be done," he said.

Stefan nodded reluctantly. Although he could no longer feel the statue's influence on him, he was still afraid, in the way that a cancer patient in remission always fears that the disease will make an unexpected reappearance. Slowly he dropped down into the chair.

Gabriel righted the couch with a gesture and sat down on it. When he returned from the astral plane after a few moments, his face was grim.

"Gethelwain—?" Stefan leaned forward. "Is it—?"

"The taint is still there," he said, his tone full of weariness. "It is as I suspected. The influence of the item is gone, but there is still the promise you have given." He looked up. "It has—marked you, I think."

Stefan gasped aloud. "No—it cannot be—" He had done what he had to do. He had brought the statuette to the one being who could—and would be willing to—help him, despite all his reasons for why he should not do so. His brother had agreed to help. He had destroyed the Enemy's conduit to him. But now—this? To be marked by the Enemy, he knew, was a grave thing indeed. Scarcely daring to hope, he met his brother's eyes. "Can you—?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I cannot remove it. That isn't within my power here, now. You know that." He sighed, getting up to pace. "It does not appear that the mark is strong enough to influence your actions now, but I think it will hold you as long as that promise remains. Either it will claim its favor, or we will find it and destroy it. I think those are our only options."

"The—others—?"

"—will kill you. Do you wish to take this to Lofwyr? To Ryumyo? Any who possess sufficient power to remove the taint will sense it and kill you rather than risk what might occur."

Stefan, miserable, knew that his brother was right. "So we are on our own, then."

"It appears so," Gabriel said softly. "Now, though, you must go. If I am to help you, I must rest. I think you must as well. We have little chance of success even at full strength."

Stefan lifted himself heavily from the chair. "And if it comes for me before we have rested?"

"Then we will do what we can do," Gabriel said. "Go now, Stefan. I am very tired, and I have a great deal to think about. I will do as I promised, but for now I ask that you leave me to my thoughts."

"And I to mine," Stefan said. He did not sound as if he was happy with the prospect. Turning, he started for the door. After a moment he turned back around; Gabriel

stood in the middle of the floor amid the broken shards of sculpture, staring out the massive floor-to-ceiling window over the lights and the rain-soaked skyline of Seattle. His shoulders were slumped, and he appeared to have forgotten Stefan's presence.

Silently Stefan opened the door and left his brother's home, wondering if either of them would be able to sleep tonight.

25.

The thing's anger rose as it felt its main connection to the foolish one severed. There was no pain – the connection was not of that type, and the thing would not have risked such a deep bond between itself and the object in any case.

It did not need such a bond. It had another bond – one much stronger and more enduring – that could not be severed by anything short of the Master's order.

It did not think that the Master would give such an order.

The foolish one was showing more initiative than the thing had originally thought possible, and that disturbed and angered it. This was not supposed to have happened, and especially not so soon. According to its plan, the foolish one was to keep the statue, allowing its influence over him to grow with each passing day, until such time as no more will or volition was left except the desire to rid himself of the pain. A few more days and the foolish one would have done anything to avoid it.

Instead, that one had taken an unexpected turn from the path that had been laid out for him. The thing had never even considered the possibility that the foolish one might have taken his problem to the one being on earth who had been responsible for his succumbing to temptation in the first place – the object of his hatred.

Still, though, the thing considered – this new and unanticipated development was not without its possibilities. It merely had to adjust its thought processes a bit to cope with new variables. The inclusion of the young one in the equation opened up new opportunities that had not existed previously –

New opportunities with great promise.

Yes...

Yes, this could even work out for the better, if the right precautions were taken against things getting out of hand. That the foolish one would lower himself sufficiently to bring the object to the young one – and that the young one would agree to

provide aid – meant that now the young one had been brought into the web with no effort having been expended by the thing at all. That meant that, although they now had a clearer idea of the nature of the enemy they were facing, they were still children stumbling in the dark with regard to the totality of the Master's plan.

Come to me, little one. If you come to the Master of your own free will, then perhaps you will be of use to us after all.

All things considered, the thing decided, events were working out better than it had dared to hope. And as long as it held the foolish one's promise, the young one's cooperation was merely an additional advantage.

26.

Ocelot regarded Kestrel across the table. "Something wrong?"

It was a little after eight; the two of them were ensconced in a dimly-lit booth near the back of Izzy's, the dark, hole-in-the wall Redmond pizza joint they had discovered several months ago and still returned to fairly regularly, mostly because it had three things both of them valued highly: good pizza, good beer, and lots of anonymity. At Izzy's, nobody cared what you did as long as you didn't cause trouble. Its rough wooden booths, tables made from ancient cable spools, wood-panel-and-sports-motif decor, and clientele consisting of members of every metahuman race were just the thing for a couple of people who didn't like things pretentious and trendy.

Ocelot had given Kestrel a call the day after the team had completed their run and straightened out all the loose ends with Hennessy, asking her if she just wanted to go out, have some dinner, and maybe shoot a few baskets or go see a trid show. She had accepted, but there had been something a bit odd in her voice. Ocelot had let it go, assuming if there was something on her mind, she'd come out with it eventually. He figured a night out together might do them both good.

Now, though, as she sat across from him munching pizza, drinking beer, and keeping one eye on the sports scores on the trid screen across from their table, it became more clear that her mind was definitely elsewhere. She had responded to his attempts at conversation with pleasant enough replies, but the animation that normally characterized her interactions with him had somehow gone missing. "Hey," he said when she didn't answer his query.

She looked up, startled, from where she had been intently examining a pepperoni on her pizza slice. "What?"

"I asked if there was something wrong," Ocelot repeated. "I hate to think that pepperoni is more interesting than I am. That's a hell of a blow to the male ego, you know."

She chuckled. Pointedly holding his gaze, she plucked the pepperoni from the slice between the tips of her thumb and forefinger and popped it in her mouth. She then made a show of slowly and sensuously chewing and swallowing it. "Does that answer your question? About the pepperoni, I mean."

Ocelot smiled in spite of himself, but he wasn't going to be diverted from his main question. "Are you okay? You seem kind of — distracted tonight."

She sighed, dropping her eyes back down to the table. "I was hoping it didn't show."

"Hey," he said quietly, "if there's something wrong, why don't you tell me about it? Maybe I can help."

"I don't think you can," she said, shaking her head. She looked back up at him. "It's just Gabriel. I can't get my mind off him."

Six months ago that statement would have evoked immediate jealousy in Ocelot. Now, though, especially in light of recent events, he just nodded. "I thought it might be something like that. What about him?"

"I don't *know*," she said, spreading her arms in a gesture of futility. "I haven't seen him for days. He told me there were some things he had to do, and that there wasn't anything I could do to help him. I keep expecting he'll call, or come by, or get in touch with me somehow, but he hasn't. I'm getting nervous that something's happened to him."

Ocelot thought about that for a moment. "Have you tried to contact him?"

She shook her head. "No—not yet. I figured if he wanted to be alone, I wouldn't bother him. But it's getting harder to do." Picking up another pizza slice, she absently took a bite and dropped the rest on her plate.

"Can you tell me what's been going on?" he asked. Across the booth, someone switched the trid channel from a basketball game to an Urban Brawl contest; he glanced up at it and then back at Kestrel.

For several seconds she didn't answer. She appeared to be weighing things in her mind. Finally she shrugged. "I saw him a few days ago. After I was over at your place. He came by to tell me a little about what was going on, and that he'd be out of touch for awhile. That was the last I heard from him."

"Can you tell me anything more about it?" He leaned forward.

"I don't know if I should," she said with a sigh. "He didn't tell me not to, but I don't know how much he wants known." She smiled just a bit, but it didn't reach her eyes. "That's the problem with dragons—they never tell you what's on their minds, at least not so you can make any sense out of it."

"Was it another dragon?" he asked abruptly.

She nodded. "Yeah..." She paused, and then: "An old friend of his. Kind of like a godfather, he said. A mentor." Looking up at him, her face full of sadness, she added, "I really felt terrible for him, Ocelot. I know for a dragon he's just a kid, but I never think of him that way. That night he really looked like a kid who didn't know what to do next."

Ocelot didn't answer right away; he wasn't sure what to say. "Does he have any better idea who did it?"

"No, not really—not who's behind it, anyway. He said he had a couple of leads, but they were slim ones. I don't

know if he's found out anything else since I last saw him. I just hope he didn't get into something over his head." She closed her eyes briefly. "If whatever this was could kill a dragon as old and powerful as his friend was, then he wouldn't even be a challenge for it. That's what I'm afraid of."

Under cover of taking a long swig of beer, Ocelot looked her over. Her face showed sadness, fear, loss. His mind traveled back to the aftermath of the fight with Stefan atop the Messina Building six months ago, when she had refused to leave the unconscious and bleeding dragon even after explosives had begun to go off in the building's basement. He remembered the way she had looked at Gabriel when he had lain near death in human form after they had escaped the building. He remembered how she had admitted to him for the first time then that she loved the dragon. That had been the beginning of the subtle change in Ocelot's feelings toward Kestrel, and the weird thing was, it had somehow made their relationship stronger. He cared for her now more than ever, enough that he did not want her to go through the pain of losing her dearest friend. "Hey," he said, a bit awkwardly, "he's tougher than he looks. He'll be back. You know that."

She didn't look convinced. "I hope you're right," she said, taking another bite of pizza and washing it down with a long pull from her beer glass. "Ocelot?"

"Yeah?"

"You're okay with this, right? I mean—I know sometimes this whole relationship seems a little weird, what with us and Gabriel and all—you never really talk about it, so I'm never quite sure where you stand."

He shrugged, pausing to mull over her words before speaking. "Doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, I know you're not seeing him —"

"Would it matter if I was?" she broke in.

Ocelot started to answer, then stopped. "I'm not sure," he said, retreating to honesty. Then, a little more suspiciously: "You aren't, are you?"

She shook her head. "No."

He looked at her hard. "Why not?"

"What?"

"Why not?" he repeated.

Her eyes narrowed. "I'm not sure I understand what you're asking, Ocelot."

"I think you do," he said. "I've always been curious about that. You said he isn't your type, but —"

She sighed. "Ocelot —"

"No, never mind. It's okay," he said quickly, putting up his hands. He was suddenly a little ashamed to have brought it up at all tonight, when Kestrel was obviously not in the mood to be discussing such things. "Forget I said it."

Kestrel reached across the table and took his hand in hers. "No. You have a right to know. I guess I've been trying not to think too hard about it myself." She paused a long time, suddenly very interested in the latest ice hockey scores flashing across the trid screen. "The truth is," she said finally, quietly, "I would be if I could."

Now it was his turn to look confused. "You would be what?"

"Seeing Gabriel."

"Huh?" That was really no surprise, but he sensed there was more to it than that. "Well, then — why aren't you?"

She mumbled something, but Ocelot could not make it out over the crowd noise. "What?"

"I said," she repeated more distinctly, "that he doesn't want to."

He looked sideways at her. "You mean — you're not *his* type?" It seemed absurd, somehow. Maybe Kestrel wasn't

as drop-dead gorgeous as her dragon companion, but she was certainly very attractive by almost any standard.

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

Kestrel nodded. "We talked about it shortly after we met. A couple of weeks after I first saw him in his human form." She smiled in a self-deprecating sort of way. "I wanted him. Bad. But I didn't know quite how to tell him. Looking back on it, it was all kind of embarrassing. But he was very nice about it."

"He—was." Ocelot didn't quite know where he should be going with this. He was pretty sure that there was nothing in any of the self-help books that covered talking to your girlfriend about her unrequited lust for a Great Dragon who happened to look like a cover model for *GQ*.

She nodded, either missing or ignoring his tone. "Yeah." Her expression softened as she remembered. "I never did tell you about our first few months together, did I?"

"Uh—no." This was getting more and more out of his areas of expertise. He took another long swig of beer. "Are you sure that's something you *want* to be telling me?"

Again she chose to ignore his tone and respond only to his words. "Sure," she said. At least she was smiling again. "It was pretty incredible, looking back on it. He's come such a long way since then. Longer than I ever would have expected."

"A long way from what?" Ocelot asked, interested in spite of himself. He leaned forward, pausing to fill up his glass from the pitcher on the table and grab another slice of pizza.

Kestrel settled back, her smile getting a little bigger. She had the look of someone who was recalling a very pleasant and memorable time, a look such as some people get when discussing their college days or their childhood.

"From how he was when I met him. Did you know that he'd only been awake for a couple of months, and had almost no contact with people?" Without waiting for him to answer, she continued: "He was such a strange combination —he could tell me about things that happened thousands of years ago, but he didn't know about cars or skyscrapers or computers or any of the other things that we take for granted every day. You should have seen him, Ocelot—it was the most wonderful thing, watching him learn about the world. Picture somebody with a mind sharper than the smartest human or metahuman around, but with the perceptions of a child. Everything was new to him. And I got to be there with him while he discovered it."

Ocelot remained silent, not sure how to respond. He felt a little twinge of the jealousy returning, but this time it had nothing to do with romantic rivalry. How many people in the history of the world ever got an opportunity like Kestrel had had? Still, though, he was pleased that she seemed to be coming out of her funk, so he waited with anticipation for her to continue.

She did not seem to mind the fact that he wasn't talking. "I wish you could have seen him back then. Every day was an adventure. He wanted to learn everything at once. Even with the stuff I learned in college I couldn't keep up with him on the academics, so he ended up holing up in a room with a stack of chips and a reader for a few weeks—when he came out he knew more than I did about most of it. But the real fun was in the culture stuff. He was fascinated by the simplest things, like pizza and ice cream—and you should have seen him when he first discovered the trideo! I was afraid he was going to become the world's first dragon couch potato!" She smiled fondly. "His taste was atrocious, too. For some reason he was intrigued by Urban Brawl and bad movies and

Japanese B monster films. He spent days watching every one of those he could get his hands on. He still likes them—we used to spend a lot of evenings at his place with a big bucket of popcorn while he caught up on the latest. I tease him about liking them because he harbors secret fantasies about stomping through Tokyo committing acts of mass destruction."

Ocelot chuckled, shaking his head. "He's one weird dude."

"You don't know the half of it," she said, warming to her subject. "He also hates movies with dragons in them, unless the dragons are portrayed sympathetically. He *really* gets annoyed by those old cartoons where the dragon is the comic relief. I'm not sure if he's serious or not, but he says that the dragons' publicity agents weren't doing their jobs while their clients were asleep all those thousands of years."

"I guess we all have our pet peeves," Ocelot murmured. It seemed a good time for another swig of beer.

She nodded. "It didn't take him too long once he got going to get used to things—it took me awhile to comprehend just how quick he is to pick things up. Just as an example, not too long after we got together, he saw some fast cars on the trid and decided he wanted to learn how to drive so he could get one too. It only took me a day to teach him, and he'd never even been in a car before." Grinning, she added, "After that he immediately went out and bought that Dynamit of his, and he's been charming his way out of tickets ever since. The guy's a speed demon."

"I guess this wouldn't be the time for me to make the 'dragon racing' pun, huh?" Ocelot asked innocently, getting ready to duck.

She pretended to be preparing to throw her pizza at him. "I'm just afraid he'll decide he wants a motorcycle."

"Hey, at least he isn't taking up skydiving or something," he said, trying to be helpful. In truth, he didn't think Gabriel had anything to worry about if he decided to take up motorcycling, either, since the guy could probably walk away from a 100-kph face-plant, but he didn't think that was the right thing to say at the moment.

She chuckled. "He can *fly*. I don't think skydiving would be much of a danger to him."

Ocelot nodded. "I guess you're right. So," he added a bit tentatively after a pause and a bite of pizza, "You never did tell me exactly—how come you guys didn't—uh—you know. What's his excuse for passing up a find like you? Maybe he ain't as smart as he's supposed to be." He kept his words light, but there was an undercurrent beneath them. He wanted to know the answer, if she'd be willing to tell him.

She looked down. "I guess I should have told you a long time ago." For a long moment, she didn't say anything. Then, quietly: "He—uh—doesn't date outside his species."

Ocelot's eyes widened. "Huh?"

"Yeah," she said, bringing her gaze back up. She was smiling, but in a somewhat embarrassed way. "He didn't say so in so many words, but that's basically what he told me. I came on to him pretty hard one night. I think I made him uncomfortable. He gave me the 'can't we just be friends?' talk. Believe me, *that* was surreal."

"I'll bet." Ocelot allowed himself a small smile of his own, seeing that she seemed to be okay with this. "So that's why you told me you hadn't ever—"

"Yeah. And we probably never will. I've accepted it. To be honest, I'd still like to, but it isn't going to happen.

He said aside from that, even as a *dragon* he's too young to be thinking about that sort of thing. He says he has millennia before he's even going to start thinking about settling down with home and hatchlings."

"I guess none of us have to worry about getting stuck babysitting, huh?" Ocelot said jokingly, covering up the fact that it was still weirding him out to have a friend who spoke of millennia the way most people spoke of years.

"Guess not." She finished the last of her pizza slice and glanced at the remainder of the pizza as if trying to decide if she had room for one more. She frowned, looking upset again. "I just wish I knew where he was — if he's okay."

He sighed. "Yeah...I know. I wish I could do something to help you find out...did he say anything else about what's going on that might help you figure out where he went or when he might be back?"

"No...not really. Not much." She looked up at him. "Hey...do you mind if I bug out on you for awhile? I just want to go by his place and see if he's there. He probably won't answer his phone — but if he's home he might let me in."

Ocelot shrugged. "Sure. We can take a rain check on the rest of the night. Sure you don't want me to come with you?"

"No..." She stood up, brushing stray pizza crumbs from the front of her jacket. "I think I'd better do this alone. If you want, I'll call you later."

"Yeah, if you want. Just come by. I should be home. Or give me a call if I'm not." He stood too, finishing the last of his beer and putting the glass back down on the table. Leaning over, he kissed her gently on the forehead and grinned. "You do what you got to do. Just remember — *I'm* the same species as you, and I'll be happy to do whatever your twisted little mind can come up with."

"I might just take you up on that," she said, nodding as she turned to leave. "Hold that thought."

27.

Kestrel took a circuitous route back toward Gabriel's place. She wasn't sure why, exactly, but as she drove through city streets after leaving Izzy's, she found that she wasn't in an enormous hurry to reach her destination. Was she afraid that he would be home, she wondered, or that he wouldn't?

She wouldn't have given it up for the world now, but her friendship with Gabriel had certainly complicated her life. Complication wasn't a bad thing—especially after her team had been killed and her entire life thrown into turmoil, it had been good to have something to concentrate on and to keep her too busy to think too hard about her grief—but it did make for quite a few experiences that she had never expected to have.

One of those was her confusion about her feelings for Gabriel. Sometimes, especially when they were out somewhere together and other people—especially but not exclusively women—were staring at him in open admiration, she felt desire for him so strong that it was hard to ignore. Other times, when they were doing any of the "buddy" activities he liked so much, such as going to sporting events or jetting around the world in search of good restaurants, she felt like he was the best friend anyone could ever hope to have—funny, amused, wise, entertaining, and always ready to try something just because it looked like fun. Still other times, especially when they were alone together, her tiny and unformed maternal instinct poked its head up, causing her to feel a little bit like she should be taking care of this young man who seemed too fragile and unreal to exist in a world full of corruption and crime and hatred. Occasionally she even wondered why someone like him would want to

spend as much time as he did with someone like her; after all, he was a magical creature, a multi-thousand-year-old being who remembered things that had occurred before the dawn of recorded history, while she was just a kid from Boston, a former corp brat-turned-samurai with nothing particularly remarkable about her.

Except that she had saved a dragon's life, and in the process changed hers forever.

She sighed, stepping a little harder on the accelerator. She didn't know what she was afraid of, but she was afraid nonetheless. Part of it, she was sure, was that she was used to situations she could affect. With her cyber-enhanced speed and weapons prowess, not to mention her years of experience in the shadows and her sharp mind, she usually found that problems were things that she could analyze and, either alone or with the help of her fellow trained team members, deal with satisfactorily. Now, with Gabriel's problem, she felt like a first-grader who had suddenly been elevated to a college level calculus class and been expected to perform adequately there when she didn't even understand what it was they wanted her to do.

In all fairness to Gabriel, he had not *asked* her to try to help him. In fact, he had asked her *not* to try to help him. She knew he was trying to protect her, but she also suspected that it was his diplomatic way of telling her that regardless of her desire to help, there was simply nothing in this situation for which her capabilities would be useful. He never talked down to her or brought the vast gulf between their levels of experience and power out in the open, but sometimes he just had to gently remind her that there were things that she couldn't solve no matter how hard she tried or no matter how much she wanted to.

She wasn't heading over there because she wanted to try to help him solve his problem, though. If that had been all she'd wanted, she wouldn't have bothered. No, there was more to it than that. She would have done the same thing for Ocelot, or for any of her team members if they'd still been alive. Sometimes being someone's friend just meant that you had to check up on them and make sure they were okay when they were going through a tough time. It didn't matter if the friend was a teammate or a Great Dragon—the philosophy was the same. She didn't think grief was in any significant way different for a dragon than it was for a human: it hurt just as bad either way.

She reached his floor in a kind of autopilot, realizing that she had not even checked to see if his car was there. Chances were pretty good that *he* wouldn't be there either; he was probably off somewhere searching for clues to the identity of his friend's murderer. *Oh, well, she thought, if he isn't home I'll just call Ocelot and we'll pretend this whole thing never happened. Gabriel never even has to find out I was here.*

She knocked on the door.

There was no answer.

Waiting a few seconds, she knocked again a little harder. "Gabriel? You in there?" she called, sure at this point that she wouldn't get an answer. If he was home he would have responded by now. She sighed, turning around to head back down the hall toward the elevator. She was feeling a little silly for her actions now, and hoping that Ocelot still wanted to see her that night. She didn't think she'd enjoy spending the night alone with her thoughts right now.

"...Kestrel...?"

The voice in her head sounded foggy, like it belonged to someone who had just awakened from a deep sleep.

She stopped, surprised, and turned back around. "Is that you? Are you in there?"

"...*What are you doing here? Is there.... something you want?*" The fog did not seem to be lifting.

Now she was getting a little worried. "No...I just came to see if you were home. Are you okay? Can I come in?"

Silently the door swung open. Kestrel paused a moment, looking at it, and then stepped inside.

The huge golden dragon was sprawled out across the floor of the room, taking up most of the available space. Unlike most of the times she had seen him in this form, he did not appear to be worrying about knocking furniture around; in fact she noticed immediately that he seemed to have broken at least two sculptures, the pieces of which lay scattered across the floor near him.

Kestrel hurried over to him. His head rested on the floor, his eyes half-closed. "Are you – uh – okay?"

"Yes...*just tired. It has been...a long night.*"

She glanced down at her chrono; it was barely 9:30. "Is there anything I can do? Or would you just rather I went away and left you alone?" Now she was *really* sorry that she had come up here, since he obviously needed his sleep. Maybe if she just waited until he dropped off again, and sneaked out...

No such luck. His eyes opened the rest of the way, their slightly luminescent purple depths regarding her with a combination of fondness and fatigue. "*No – you needn't leave. You can – stay if you like. I warn you, though: I don't think that I will be much company.*"

"What have you been doing?" she asked, squatting down next to his head. "How did you tire yourself out so much? Still hanging around on the astral plane?"

"*For awhile. I don't think I will need to continue, though.*"

"You've got a lead?" she asked hopefully.

"Yes." His tone sounded unutterably weary.

"Anything I can help with?" Aware that she was still squatted down and that her knees were not pleased with the position, she sat down next to him where he could watch her with one eye.

"No. *There have been...new developments.*"

She thought that over. "Dangerous ones?"

There was a long pause. "Yes."

He never could lie to her, she knew. "Can you tell me anything else about it? Are you in danger now?"

"No. *But I might be before this is over.*"

She realized that while he wouldn't lie to her, he probably wouldn't be telling her this much if he wasn't as tired as he was. "From – whoever killed your friend?"

"Yes."

"Do you know – who did it now?"

He shifted position a bit, turning his head so he could view her with both eyes. "*Not specifically. But I have a better idea than I did earlier this week.*"

"But you won't tell me who it is." It was a statement of fact, not a question. She knew him that well: if he had planned to tell her, he would have done so already.

"No." Gently, he added, "*This does not concern you, Juliana.*"

"Then...it isn't anybody I know?"

"No. *Not...the killer.*"

"What does that mean?" she asked, immediately catching the odd turn of phrase.

"*Nothing. I merely meant that you do not know the killer. I am certain of that. So you need not be concerned.*"

"But I *am* concerned, Gabriel," she protested. "If you're in danger, I'm concerned. You'd be if I was, so why should it be any different just because you're a dragon and I'm a human?"

"*There is nothing you can do. In truth, I think that it would be best if we did not see each other anymore until after this has*

been dealt with. I do not want to put you at risk by involving you, even tangentially." His eyes were gentle and comforting, but nonetheless adamant.

She stared at him, then sighed, dropping her gaze. She wanted to protest, but she knew he was right. This time the situation did not involve her as it had the last time he had made a similar request. No one was bothering her; no one had murdered her oldest friend. She realized that this was not a normal situation—there was nothing she could do to help him, and if she insisted on remaining involved, she might succeed only in bringing more grief on him. "Okay, Gabriel. If that's what you want. But don't forget your promise. I'm holding you to that. If you need help, you'll ask for it, right?"

He nodded; his eyelids were starting to droop a bit. "*I have not forgotten.*"

She looked at him for a long time, then rose and came over next to him. Reaching out hesitantly, she put her hand on his head, rubbing the ridge above his eye. "Do you mind if I—just stay for awhile now? I won't keep you awake...I just want to hang out here for awhile." She wasn't sure exactly why she didn't want to go, except that she was afraid if she did, she would never see him again. Right now that thought was more than she could deal with.

There was a rumble deep in his throat as he turned his head slightly to let her get a better angle. "*You can stay if you keep doing that...*" he said sleepily.

She smiled, continuing. "I didn't know dragons purred."

The soft rumbling did not cease. "*It is said by some that cats are merely dragons in immature form.*"

"I believe it," she agreed. "You're both too curious for your own good." Cocking her head sideways, she added, "You guys don't get hairballs, though, do you?"

The rumble turned to a chuckle, mostly in her mind. "*That is a very personal question.*"

"Shall I take that as a 'yes', then?" she asked, grinning. She was happy to see that he at least for a moment seemed to have put aside his vast grief. Maybe it was only because he was half asleep (*I guess dragons get silly when they're half asleep too*, she noted with amusement), but it had to be good for him. "Maybe that's what you need — a couple of cats to hang around here with you. You can —"

There was a knock at the door.

Kestrel stopped, stiffening, as her gaze shot up toward the other side of the room. At the same time Gabriel's eyes flew open, all thoughts of sleep or playfulness dropping away immediately. "Who's that?" Kestrel asked. "Are you expecting anyone?" If she had been thinking she probably wouldn't have asked the question since it was really none of her business, but she was keyed up with his talk of danger and murderers.

"*Not...now*," he said. Kestrel's hand dropped away from his head as he shifted form. For a moment his attention redirected as he stared at nothing, and then his eyes widened.

"What is it?" she asked quickly. "Something dangerous?"

"Dangerous? No—I don't think so," he murmured, sounding distracted. Without looking at her, he headed for the door. His expression was one of confusion, but not of fear.

Curiously Kestrel followed, trying to stay out of the way. Who would be visiting Gabriel now, at this time of night? She hung back against the wall, watching as he opened the door.

"Hi, kid," said the visitor. "Long time no see. How's it going?"

Kestrel stared. Standing in Gabriel's doorway was possibly the strangest looking individual she had ever seen.

He was an elf; that was pretty clear. Medium height, slender, with long auburn hair drawn back in a ponytail, he lounged indolently in the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, regarding Gabriel with an air of longtime familiarity. It was his face, though, that had drawn Kestrel's immediate attention: it was painted stark white, with two garish red diamonds surrounding his brilliant green eyes and a green triangle below his bright red lips. As she continued to watch, he pushed himself off the doorframe and uncrossed his arms; he was dressed in a long brown leather coat, faded jeans, and a black T-shirt with a British flag and the legend "The Who: The Kids are Alright—Tour '89" emblazoned across the front.

Gabriel did not seem taken aback by this visitor's appearance, although he did look surprised at the fact that he was here. "A long time indeed," he said softly. "You are far from home."

The strange elf shrugged. "Things to see, people to do. You know how it is. Work's never done. Are you going to let me in, or shall we stand here having our conversation in the hallway?"

Kestrel chose that moment to step out of the shadows. "Gabriel?" she said, coming up behind him.

The elf appeared a bit surprised to see her. "I didn't know you had company," he said to Gabriel. Then he smiled at Kestrel (it was a very weird smile, through all that facepaint) and made an exaggerated bow, sweeping off a nonexistent hat. "I can come back later if I'm interrupting anything," he added in a tone that suggested that he was going to do anything but.

Gabriel shook his head, looking as if he had for a moment forgotten Kestrel's presence as well. Making no

attempt to introduce his visitor, he turned to her and said softly in her mind, *"Juliana, please forgive me, but I must ask you to leave now. I must speak with this elf alone."*

Her eyes narrowed. "This has something to do with — you know what, doesn't it?" she whispered, glancing back over her shoulder at the painted elf.

"I do not know. But I suspect that it does. Please don't ask questions now. If I am able, I will explain it to you later. Will you trust me?"

She paused before replying, looking him up and down. He was dressed in his usual light gray suit and purple tie, but she could see the exhaustion showing through in his expression and in the way he carried himself. "Of course I trust you," she said, still whispering. "But you said — before — that there was an elf —"

He shook his head. *"I do not think that this is the same elf."*

"But you don't know for sure?"

"No. *Not entirely.*" He looked into her face, the deep violet depths of his eyes full of sadness. *"But I do not think so. Please, Juliana. You must go now. I am sorry."*

Kestrel looked at him, then nodded. "Okay," she said. There really wasn't much else she *could* say. Gripping his shoulder quickly, she turned and swept past the elf, who was back to leaning in the doorway.

"Don't worry," the elf said, sounding surprisingly comforting given his earlier flippant tone. "The kid's safe with me."

She did not reply. Somehow his words weren't much consolation.

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"So that's the girl who pulled the thorn from the dragon's paw—or whatever," the elf said, watching as the elevator doors closed behind Kestrel. "You two make a cute couple."

Gabriel sighed. "Caimbeul. You obviously didn't come here to discuss Kestrel. If you did, then I suggest that you find more to occupy your time."

The elf shook his head vigorously. "No, I didn't. And would you please stop calling me that? Just Harlequin serves for now." He grinned, showing off his painted face in its full glory.

"Harlequin, then," Gabriel conceded, moving back into the room. "Why *have* you come?"

Harlequin followed him, taking in the huge room, the blasted sculptures, the high windows. Then his green eyes settled critically on Gabriel himself. "You look like crap, my young friend. What have you been doing with yourself?"

Gabriel shook his head, dropping down onto the couch with an air of total weariness. He didn't answer Harlequin's question, but looked up at him as if he expected the elf to say something else.

"Okay, no games," Harlequin agreed. "I'm here because some pretty weird shit is going on, and I'm trying to make sense out of it. Some things I've heard have led me to believe that you might be able to do that."

Gabriel waited.

The elf began pacing around the room, moving not as someone who was uncertain of what to say next, but rather as someone who had to find an outlet for his pent-up energy. He stopped for a moment before one of the piles of shards from the sculpture Gabriel had destroyed,

but did not comment. "I take it you know Telanwyr's disappeared," he said at last, carefully.

"He is dead," Gabriel stated.

Harlequin nodded as if he already knew that. "I suspected so, but I didn't want to say anything yet if you didn't know." He turned, fixing his eyes once again on the young man. "What do you know about it?"

"What do *you* know?" Gabriel countered, his intense violet gaze coming up to meet Harlequin's eyes. There was an odd undercurrent in his tone.

The elf raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "Hold on, kid," he said. "Calm down. I didn't have anything to do with it, if that's what you're worried about. I always thought he was a pleasant enough old wurm, though I never had too many dealings with him."

Gabriel dropped his gaze with another sigh. "No. I know that. I didn't mean to imply that you —"

Harlequin settled himself on the arm of the couch at the opposite end from where Gabriel sat. "I've been hearing rumors that somebody's been investigating his disappearance for a few days now — things have a habit of getting back to me, especially about situations as weird as this one. Is it you?"

The young man nodded without looking up.

"Found anything yet?" Harlequin asked, his gaze sharpening but his tone deceptively casual.

Gabriel did not seem to notice the slight change in the elf's tone. "What is your interest in this?" he asked.

Harlequin sighed. "Listen, kid. I know you're supposed to be some kind of dragon child prodigy or something, but there are a lot of things you don't know yet. I don't want to be here. I don't want to get anywhere near this whole fucking thing. But it's one of my weaknesses, you know? I can't pass up hopeless causes. And I think that if you don't spill what you know on this

damned soon, it's going to be a hell of a lot more hopeless than it is now."

Gabriel looked up, startled by the harshness of Harlequin's words. "You know more than you are admitting to," he said softly.

Harlequin rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Of course I do. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I'll cut you some slack because you're obviously about to keel over, but you need to listen to me. And you need to talk to me. The first thing you need to talk to me about is what the hell your brother was doing here a little while ago. Somehow I don't think you two kissed and made up and forgot to send out announcements. Very gauche."

"How—did you know Stefan was here?" Gabriel couldn't keep the surprise from his face.

"How could you *miss* him?" Harlequin demanded. "He was lighting up the astral like a beacon, even past the wards you keep up around this place. That was the first thing that set off warning bells—you're usually a lot more careful than that—and so is he." At Gabriel's look of alarm, he shook his head. "Don't worry—I don't think anybody else noticed. It just happened that I was at the right place at the right time, and you forget, I'm not without a few tricks up my sleeve that the average magical shmoe wouldn't be able to match." He paused, his expression growing serious. His grim visage looked very strange superimposed with the laughing clown makeup. "That's not the thing that caught my attention, though. If you want to make nice with your brother and throw a family reunion, that's none of my business. But there was something else—and that's why I'm here." He looked at the young man challengingly, as if daring him to come out with what they both already knew.

Gabriel looked down again, nodded. "Then..." he said slowly in a whisper, "you know about the Enemy."

Harlequin nodded in satisfaction. "Good. It's out in the open. Now that we've stopped doing the conversational tango, maybe we can get somewhere." Shaking his head he added with the tiniest hint of a crooked smile, "You dragons never could just come out and *say* anything. Always have to keep your secrets until somebody drags them out of you. Even kids like you are impossible."

"And you're any better?" Gabriel asked with a tiny smile of his own.

"Didn't say I was," the elf admitted, "But I've had a hell of a lot longer to accumulate secrets than you have, after all—especially since you slept through the last six thousand years. Besides, didn't anybody ever teach you that you shouldn't talk back to your elders, sonny?"

Gabriel thought about that. "No..." he finally said. "No, I don't think they ever did."

"Kids these days," Harlequin said in mock disgust. Then his face changed again, back to serious. "We need to talk, and we need to do it soon. Tell me what you know about this, and maybe between the two of us we can deal with it before it gets too big for us all." He reclined against the couch back, hooked his hands around his raised knee, and watched Gabriel, waiting.

For a moment Gabriel did not speak. He stared at nothing for awhile; however, it was obvious (at least to someone of Harlequin's experience) that he was not perceiving the astral plane, but rather seemed to merely be gathering his thoughts. Speaking slowly and carefully, he told Harlequin the entire story, beginning with the football game and ending with Stefan's visit earlier that evening. He left nothing out; he even reluctantly told the elf of his behavior with Slyde. When he finished, he regarded Harlequin with the look of someone lost and waited for the elf to respond.

Halfway through Gabriel's story, Harlequin had gotten up, unable to remain still any longer, and begun pacing around again. His face grew more and more grim as the young dragon continued; he seemed especially concerned about the account of the tiny air elemental, Whisper, regarding Telanwyr's death and disappearance, and also about the red-veined statuette Gabriel had destroyed. By the time Gabriel had finished, he looked disturbed indeed. He sighed. "Well, I won't tell you that your brother's an idiot, because you both probably already know that. If he hadn't kept up this ridiculous vendetta against you for all these years, none of this would have happened."

"He knows that," Gabriel said softly. "It is done now, though. We must deal with what is."

Harlequin looked at him sideways. "Lay off the fortune cookies, Grasshopper. It ain't that easy. I still don't know everything that's going on here, but the fact is, the Enemy's here. I don't know how many or how strong, but they're here, even though they're not supposed to be. And they've got their hooks into your brother, which means they've got 'em into you too. And probably me, since I'm fool enough to come over here and get in the middle of this. One of these days I'm going to learn to keep my head down and my mouth shut. It's a hell of a lot safer that way."

Gabriel listened in silence to the elf's ranting.

Harlequin paused for breath, then continued pacing. "Remember a year or so ago, when I told you about the Bridge, and how I and a group of runners—your friends—were able to restore Thayla's Voice and stave off the Enemy?"

Gabriel nodded. "I remember."

"Well," the elf continued, "that turned out to be nothing but a short-term solution. Dunkelzahn and I had

this one out a number of times, disagreeing over methods, and—well, it turned out that he was right." A cloud of sadness passed over his face. "It was a shame that it took his death to prove that to me, but it did, and by that time it was too late."

Gabriel's attention was riveted on Harlequin now. "What do you mean by that? How could his death have convinced you of your error?"

"Because he killed himself to prove his point," Harlequin said soberly. "It's not common knowledge, of course—the world was having a hard enough time coming to terms with the death of somebody like Dunkelzahn, without adding the Enemy into the mix—but that's what happened. Thayla had fallen to the Enemy. He had to do something. What he did was to create an immensely powerful magical item that could be used to destroy the Bridge, and then sacrificed himself to provide the power it would need.[\(1\)](#) Otherwise, there was no way something that potent could exist with magic at the level it's at now. It was the only way, and he knew it." He sighed. "And now it looks like the whole thing's already starting to come unraveled, and it's only been a couple of years."

Gabriel was still staring at Harlequin. "Dunkelzahn—killed himself?" he asked, astonished.

Harlequin nodded. "Like I said, it's not common knowledge, but it's the truth. Trust me. I know. Sorry I had to be the one to tell you, but if we're going to deal with this, you need to have all the information I can give you."

The young dragon nodded. He had had so many shocks in the past week that one more did not add significantly to his burden. He merely accepted what Harlequin had told him and filed it away to consider later.

If there *was* a later. "What—do you suggest we do, then?" he asked numbly.

"I think we'll need to go to the Netherworlds," Harlequin said. "I have a theory, but there's no way to test it without actually going there to see if it's right."

"What sort of theory?"

The elf dropped back down on the couch with a sigh, then looked sharply at Gabriel. "I don't want you to freak out over this, okay? As I said, it's just a theory. I have nothing to back it up but my experience and the fact that it fits with the few things we actually know about this. Some of the stuff you told me falls in, though, which makes me more nervous than you know." He paused, and his expression softened just a bit. "Why kill a Great Dragon?" he asked abruptly.

Gabriel looked uncertain, and shook his head.

"Why not an elf, or a strong human mage, or something like that?" Harlequin pressed.

"Power," Gabriel said.

"Gold star for the kid with the golden scales." Harlequin nodded approvingly. "Exactly. Loath as I am to admit it, you dragons are the most powerful beings on the planet. Sure, some of the eldest of the immortal elves might be better with the mojo than some of the dragons, but by and large you guys have us beat all to hell. So if you were one of the Enemy—or maybe a group of them—and you wanted to kill off something with a lot of power, wouldn't it seem logical to go after a dragon?"

"Yes, but why?" Gabriel asked. "Other than sheer love of destruction, what had they to gain by killing Telanwyr? And if that is all they seek, then why stop with him?"

"Okay, here's where it gets a little weird," Harlequin said, "but bear with me and see if this doesn't make sense. First Dunkelzahn kills himself to provide the power to charge up this immensely potent item of his. Maybe the

Enemy catches wind of that—and maybe they think that they could do something similar."

"But how?" Gabriel leaned forward, his eyes locked on the elf's face. "If Dunkelzahn did what you claim, he must have made preparations, cast rituals —"

"Sure," Harlequin acknowledged. "To get it to work the way he did, he would have to have prepared the whole thing well in advance—or at least thought it out so he could be ready when he needed to do it. But maybe the Enemy did the same thing: prepared carefully until they found a suitable dragon for their purposes."

"Why Telanwyr, then?"

"I wondered about that," Harlequin admitted, "until you gave me the last piece of the puzzle: Telanwyr's agreement with Stefan. That put Stefan in the position of resenting Telanwyr's interference —it must have eaten away at him that he had to let you go after what had happened. So the Enemy—it must have been one of those who got through right before the Dragon Heart destroyed the Bridge, and then just hidden itself away—sat there and waited until it picked up on Stefan's hatred and resentment. They thrive on that, as you know. My guess is that it approached him and used its powers to move him in the direction he was already moving—just a little faster. By the time he figured out what was up, it was too late."

"Do you think he can be saved?" Gabriel asked quietly.

"Don't know." Harlequin shook his head. "I definitely saw the Enemy's taint on him, but if we can get to the source and eliminate it, then it might be enough. It won't be easy for him, though. It won't be easy for any of us." He sighed. "Why *do* I let myself get dragged into these things, anyway?"

"Then—you will help us?"

The elf sighed dramatically. "You don't think I'd have come if I wouldn't, do you? Like I said, I'm a sucker for lost causes—and besides," he added, his voice dropping and taking on a bit of emotion, "Dunkelzahn was quite fond of you when you were just a sprout. I think he had high hopes for you. I guess I'm still feeling a bit like I failed him by not listening to him, so maybe this is my way of trying to make up for it."

Gabriel watched him with quiet eyes. "Thank you, Harlequin. I think that we will need all the help we can get."

"Oh, you will," the elf said, his voice back to its normal flippant lilt. "No doubt about that. I haven't told you the whole story yet. There's still the matter of where Telanwyr went."

The young dragon's eyes widened. "What?"

"Why there was no body," Harlequin clarified. "That's the really weird-ass part of my theory, and I hope like hell that I'm wrong about this." He paused a moment, putting his thoughts together in coherent order, then continued: "Like I said, I wondered if the Enemy didn't get ideas from Dunkelzahn's death about powering things using the energy of powerful beings like dragons. If that's the case, then maybe—just maybe—they killed Telanwyr in order to use the energy from his death to power—something." The elf looked nervously around the room.

"Power—what?" Gabriel asked softly, leaning forward.

Harlequin shrugged. "That's the part I haven't a clue about, and that's the part that makes me nervous. For a Great Dragon to disappear without a trace..." He shivered involuntarily. "This is big stuff, kid. We'd better get started as soon as possible, while there's still time. Is your fool of a brother going to help us?"

Gabriel nodded very slowly, his mind still trying to make sense of all that Harlequin had told him. "I—Yes. He will help. He has gone off to rest, but he is very frightened. He has strong motivation to aid us in this."

"Good. He may be an idiot, but he's a powerful idiot, and we'll need all the power we can get." Harlequin looked distracted for a moment, then directed his gaze back at Gabriel. "Rest—I think you'd better do the same. We can't have you passing out from exhaustion in the middle of the ritual, and you'll need to be at your best when we get there." Standing, he made a show of straightening his coat. "I need to go look into a few things, make a few arrangements. I'll be back in the morning. Once the three of us are here, we'll figure out where to go from there." For a moment he looked at Gabriel, all the mocking and sarcasm gone from his painted face. "We'll do this, kid. Don't worry. If nothing else, we'll do it for Dunkelzahn. See you tomorrow." Without further comment, he turned and swept out of the room.

Gabriel watched him go, his tired mind shooting thoughts through so fast that he could not make sense of them. As the door closed behind the elf he shifted to dragon form again and slowly lay back down on the cool floor, trying to ignore the thoughts so he could sleep. The relief he felt at having someone as old and experienced as Harlequin involved was unfortunately almost completely offset by the dread brought on by the elf's dark theories.

1 The complete story is told in the three-part *Dragon Heart Saga*, written by Jak Koke and published by FASA.

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Kestrel spent almost an hour just driving around aimlessly before she finally called Ocelot. Several times during that time she had pulled out her phone and poised her finger over the speed-dial button that would connect her with him, but each time she had stopped. She didn't want to talk to anyone yet, she decided. She needed some time to sort her thoughts out.

The problem was, even after forty-five minutes of driving around Seattle, she still hadn't gotten them very sorted out. It seemed like every time she turned around lately, some weird piece of Gabriel's past was popping up to confound her and to remind her graphically that despite the fact that he was her friend, she was never going to comprehend more than the tiniest corner of his complex history and personality. In the past year and a half that she had known him, she had not had to deal with that much; except for the business with Stefan, he had kept the more "dragonish" side of his life away from her. He had often gone off by himself to take care of some task or business, occasionally being gone as long as a month, but she had never questioned him. It was just the way he was. They spent a lot of time together, but each had his or her own life as well. It was part of the reason they got along so well — they knew when to leave each other alone.

The only thing different about this situation was the danger involved. Before, when he had gone off who knew where, she had never had the impression that there was anything dangerous or potentially harmful in his errands. Now, though, she was scared. Scared for him and, maybe based on some sixth sense that she would never believe that she possessed, also scared for herself and for Ocelot and his team. She was not convinced that this situation

wasn't going to eventually spill over into their lives as well, and she wanted to be ready when it did.

Then there was the matter of the garishly painted elf. There was something about him that seemed familiar, but no matter how hard she tried, she could not place the association. She was sure she had not met him anywhere before; she would definitely have remembered such a face. But then where might she have encountered him? Seen him on the trid, maybe? She shook her head, sighing. It wasn't going to come if she tried to force it. That was the first rule of trying to recall something: just forget about it and it will usually just grind its way through your brain cells and surface with an answer eventually. Trying to coerce the thought to the top would do nothing but drive it deeper down.

Gabriel had said that he wasn't entirely sure that this elf was not the one who had killed his friend, but that he didn't think so. She hoped he was right. Even though she could not have done anything to prevent the elf from trying to kill Gabriel as well, it still would have caused her immense pain to discover that she had gone off and left him to die. As a samurai and a leader, she wasn't accustomed to doing that.

She sighed, pulling up her phone again. She wasn't going to get anywhere driving around in circles. If nothing else, maybe spending the night with Ocelot might take her mind off the situation. He had a talent for taking her mind off things.

He answered after the second ring. "Yeah?" In the background, she could hear the sounds of people; he wasn't home, then. As usual, there was no video.

She flipped on the video from her end. "Hi."

After a moment, his came on too. "Hey. I was wondering if you were gonna call. Everything okay?"

"Uh...yeah. I guess so." She paused, glancing up to make sure that the Westwind's autopilot was still doing what it was supposed to be doing. "Still want to get together?"

Ocelot looked at something off screen, then nodded. "Yeah, sure. 'Hawk and I are just havin' a couple beers over here at the Spider. Want to come by, and then you and I can ditch 'Hawk and take off in awhile?" He grinned toward the place where the mage was apparently sitting; Winterhawk replied, but his words didn't carry over the phone.

She thought about that for a moment. She really wanted to see Ocelot alone, but maybe Winterhawk might be able to shed some light on this thing too. A fresh perspective couldn't hurt. "Okay," she said at last. "I'm about twenty minutes away. I'll see you then."

Arriving at the Glass Spider, a Downtown bar that was a favorite hangout of Ocelot and the rest of his team, Kestrel saw that the parking lot was only about half full. She spotted Ocelot's BMW Blitzen motorcycle parked near the door, and after a moment saw Winterhawk's little black Honda-GM 3220 across from it. She pulled the Westwind in next to the Blitzen, set the alarm, and went inside.

Ocelot had apparently been watching for her, because he waved as she came in. He was seated at a booth near the back. Winterhawk, sitting on the other side, nodded as she came up. As usual, the mage was dressed in a stylish suit; a wool overcoat lay across the seat next to him. "Evening," he said pleasantly.

Kestrel smiled, sliding in next to Ocelot, who had already ordered her a beer. Teasingly, she said, "What's this? I go away for an hour or two and you get another date?"

Ocelot shrugged, grinning. "What can I say? I got lonely."

"—and I was the only one he could find willing to play second fiddle," Winterhawk added.

"So," Ocelot said. "Did you find him?"

She nodded, pausing for a drink of beer before speaking. "Yeah. He was home after all. Zonked out, but there."

"Zonked out?"

"Yeah. Asleep. He's been spending a lot of time on the astral plane, trying to find clues about who killed his friend. I think he'd been overdoing it, and it finally caught up with him." Kestrel decided that she wasn't going to keep secret the pieces of the situation that Gabriel had already shared with her, with the exception of the part about Slyde. Gabriel hadn't seemed particularly worried about her sharing them with the team, and she was growing weary of keeping all this to herself.

"Hmm," Winterhawk said speculatively. "That must have been a lot of time indeed. I know how long I can remain there, and his power is on another level entirely." His electric blue eyes fixed on her. "So, has he found anything yet?"

"He says he's got a good lead," she told him. "He wouldn't tell me anything else about it, though, except that it isn't anybody I'd know about."

"So I guess this really *doesn't* have anything to do with Stefan, then," Ocelot said, unable to keep some relief out of his voice. "Unless he's lying to you, of course."

She shook her head. "He doesn't lie to me. He said he doesn't know exactly who the killer is, but he's got some pretty good ideas, and that he's sure it isn't anybody I know." She sighed. "I wish he'd tell me the rest, but I guess he has a right to his privacy. He says there's nothing

I can do to help, and that we should probably not see each other anymore until he gets it straightened out."

"Isn't he a bit worried about going into this alone?" Winterhawk asked. "If this—whatever it is—has killed someone stronger than he is, then p'raps he might do with a bit of backup."

"That was what I thought too," she admitted, "but realistically I guess that's not us. What are *we* gonna do to help out against something that eats Great Dragons for lunch?" Again she sighed. "It just chafes not being able to do anything."

Ocelot nodded. He understood that feeling as well as Kestrel did. Still, though, he knew she was right, and he wasn't in any particular hurry to get involved in a Great Dragon's personal problems if they didn't involve him. "Maybe you should try to get your mind off it," he said. "I know it ain't easy, but we'll have a few drinks, and then you and I can go back to my place." He smiled a little. "I'll try to help you forget..."

Winterhawk half-jokingly started to rise. "I think that's my cue to be off," he said.

"No, no, sit down," Kestrel said with a little laugh. "I think I'd just like to sit here with you guys for awhile. The weird quotient over at Gabriel's was getting a little high for me. That was part of why I left."

Ocelot frowned. "Weird quotient?" After a pause he added, "I guess I was kind of wondering why you left if he was there. Did he kick you out?"

She nodded. "Someone came by—someone he wanted to talk to alone." Shaking her head, she frowned. "I know I've seen this guy before—or at least heard of him—but I can't place where. I mean, you'd think an elf with a face painted up like a clown would ring *some* bells, wouldn't you—What?" she said quickly, as she looked up to notice that she had lost her audience.

Winterhawk and Ocelot were staring at each other with expressions of shocked horror. Very slowly, both of them turned back to face her. "Did you say an elf—" Ocelot began.

"—with a face painted like a clown's?" Winterhawk finished. Both his voice and Ocelot's sounded strained.

"Yeah, that's what I said." She looked at them with suspicion. "What's going on? Do you guys know this elf or something?"

"Or something," Ocelot agreed lamely.

"Wait a second..." Kestrel began as if talking to herself. She looked up at the two men. "Now I remember. You guys mentioned somebody like this back when we were dealing with Stefan. You asked me if I'd ever seen an elf with a painted face. This is who you were talking about, wasn't it?"

"It appears so," Winterhawk said. "Reddish-brown hair? Strange clothes? Smart-aleck behavior?"

She nodded. "That's him all right. He was wearing what looked some kind of weird concert T-shirt from the last century. But he acted like he knew Gabriel." Again light dawned. "Yeah. Somebody said so when we were riding over to Stefan's building in the Rolls. You guys seemed surprised that Gabriel knew him. I can't remember what you called him, though."

"Harlequin," Ocelot said in a dull tone.

"Gabriel called him something else," Winterhawk said, "but I can't remember what. Yes, that certainly sounds like him."

"Is he dangerous?" Kestrel asked quickly. "I mean, I know Gabriel's tough, but he's so wiped out right now —"

"No doubt he's quite dangerous," Winterhawk said, "but I'd be surprised if he's any threat to our young dragon, if that's what you're worried about. From the way

he talked before, they're friends, or at least friendly acquaintances."

"I just want to know what the hell he's *doing* there," Ocelot said. "I didn't think he just paid social calls, even to dragons."

"Maybe he's come to help Gabriel find who killed his friend," Kestrel suggested, shrugging.

"Could Gabriel have called him?" Winterhawk asked. "That would explain his presence..."

Kestrel shook her head. "I don't think so. He seemed surprised to see him when he showed up, like he wasn't expecting him."

"Hmmm..." Ocelot muttered. This was really making him nervous now. Trouble seemed to follow Harlequin around, and it had the habit of overflowing to engulf everyone around him. If he was here, now —

He turned to Kestrel. "Did he say anything else that might explain this? Anything at all?"

Kestrel was a bit startled by the intensity of his stare, but she nonetheless tried to recall the conversation she'd had. "He said...that he didn't know who had done it, but he had some idea. That...there were new developments, and that he might be in danger before this is over."

Winterhawk and Ocelot looked at each other again. "I'm getting a bad feeling about this..." Ocelot said under his breath.

"As am I," Winterhawk agreed soberly. "Somebody's killed a Great Dragon, but no one can find any evidence that it's happened, nor any trace of either the body or the killer. And now Harlequin's made an appearance. This is very much beginning to look like it might have some connection with —"

"Don't say it!" Ocelot snapped, cutting him off. Then, quieter, "Oh, holy shit, 'Hawk...if you're right..."

Kestrel looked at them with a combination of angry glare and confused frown. "What the hell are you guys talking about? We went through this before. You know something, don't you?"

Ocelot stood so fast he almost knocked over the table. "We have to get over there," he said urgently. "Now. We need to talk to him."

Winterhawk was already rising and gathering up his overcoat.

"Wait a minute!" Kestrel protested as Ocelot shoved past her out of the booth. "What the hell is going on? What do you guys know about this?" Grabbing Ocelot's arm, she spun him back around as he tried to move out. "Ocelot—tell me! I think I deserve not to be kept in the dark on this anymore."

"We gotta get over there," Ocelot repeated, shaking free of her grip. "And we gotta call the guys!" His breath was coming faster, and a thin sheen of sweat had broken out on his forehead. "Come on. If it's what we're afraid of, you'll hear about it soon enough. But I don't wanna miss Harlequin." Heedless of Kestrel's continued protests, he practically ran out of the bar, yelling, "I'll make the call and meet you over there!" over his shoulder as he left.

Kestrel looked at Winterhawk, who looked marginally less agitated than Ocelot had. "What's going on?" she asked again, like a kid who was tired of getting the brush-off by all the adults around her.

Winterhawk continued shrugging into his overcoat. "I think Ocelot is right," he said. "If we can talk to Harlequin, we can find out. What we're afraid of is that something very dangerous is involved. Something we've dealt with before, but that we thought was safely tucked away where it couldn't do any more harm." He motioned for her to follow him.

"Dangerous enough to murder a Great Dragon without a trace?" she demanded incredulously, catching up with him with ease.

"Quite so," he said. "In fact, about the only things I can think of that might have the ability to do just that."

"And you guys have *fought* these things?" Her voice was rising, picking up fear and disbelief.

"Not any that big," Winterhawk said. "Not anything like that big. But yes." They were outside now; as they headed for the parking lot, they saw Ocelot astride his Blitzen, roaring out of the lot at far too high a rate of speed. As they reached their cars he receded into the distance and disappeared around a corner.

Winterhawk indicated his car. "I'll meet you over at Gabriel's place. I hope that Ocelot has the good sense to wait for us before he tries to barge in there on his own."

Kestrel was the last of the three to arrive at the downtown high-rise that housed Gabriel's penthouse apartment. As she pulled up next to the gate leading into the underground garage, she saw Ocelot and Winterhawk waiting, the former pacing around looking like he was seriously considering trying to rip the gate from its moorings in order to gain entry. As she drew up he hurried over to her passenger window. "What *took* you so long?" he demanded. His agitation was clear. Winterhawk came up behind him.

Kestrel was beginning to pick up some of their urgency now, if for no other reason than fear that Gabriel was in danger. "Get in," she ordered, unlocking the passenger door.

"Wait," Winterhawk said, looking off to one side. "Looks like 'Wraith and Joe didn't waste any time getting here," he added as the team's Gaz-Willys Nomad came rolling up behind Kestrel's Westwind. ShadoWraith, at

the wheel, had an expression of single-minded purpose on his face; Joe had his massive arms draped over the front seats as if he had been urging 'Wraith to go faster.

The runners quickly sorted themselves out and piled into the two vehicles, after which Kestrel opened the gate to let them into the garage. Once parked, the five of them convened behind the Nomad.

"What's going on?" Joe demanded. "You said something about Harlequin, but I could barely make out what you were saying on the phone with all the wind noise."

"Come on," Ocelot urged. "He's here. We gotta talk to him. It sounds like they're back."

Nobody had to ask who *they* were except for Kestrel, and she decided to let it rest for now. Ocelot looked like he was about to go mad if he didn't get where he wanted to go. She hurried after him, heading toward the elevator.

"Wraith fell into step next to Winterhawk. "Horrors?"

The mage shrugged. "Looks like it might be. I hope we're wrong, but—" he spread his arms.

"Why here?"

"I think that's what we're about to find out, if we can catch our painted friend before he leaves."

Kestrel stopped before she reached the elevator, looking back at the crew that was following her and doing a sudden sanity check. Four intense sets of eyes met her gaze as she paused: Ocelot looked manic, 'Wraith driven, Winterhawk sober, and Joe anxious. "Guys," she said, holding up her hands, "wait a minute. This is crazy. We can't just go up there and barge in on him. He told me he didn't want us to get together anymore until he took care of this—I don't think he's gonna be too happy about me bringing all of you up there uninvited."

Ocelot was about to snap. "Kestrel, listen," he said, his voice rising higher with the bright edge of panic. "You

don't know what this is about! If they're back we need to know about it!"

"If *who* are back?" she demanded angrily. "I'm tired of being kept in the dark, Ocelot. This involves me too. We're not going anywhere until you give me some more information." She crossed her arms and planted her feet resolutely apart, challenging anyone to oppose her.

Winterhawk stepped forward. "Kestrel, we can't explain it all now. It's far too complicated for a twenty-five-words-or-fewer sort of explanation. But the short and simple version is that there is a threat—an enormous threat—from out beyond astral space that's been trying to reach us here on Earth. Last time they made the attempt, Harlequin and our team managed to successfully prevent them from doing it. But from the sound of things, they're trying again."

"And are successful," Wraith added with a glance toward the elevator.

"So what's this got to do with Gabriel?" Kestrel asked, lowering her voice as some of Hawk's words sunk in.

"We don't know yet," Winterhawk said. "That's what we're trying to find out. But it certainly appears that this might have to do with the murderer of his friend."

"If the ones that have got through are strong enough to kill dragons—" Joe spoke up, letting that trail off.

Kestrel considered for only a moment, then made a swift decision. Turning, she punched a code into the elevator. "Okay," she said. "Let's go. You can tell me the rest later."

When the elevator door opened on the top floor of the building, Ocelot was the first one out, moving down the hallway at full jacked speed. Before Kestrel could stop him, he knocked hard on the door.

The others caught up quickly; Kestrel grabbed Ocelot's arm. "Wait!" she said.

"What?" He glared at her, then knocked again. "Gabriel! Open up! We need to talk!" he called through the closed door.

Winterhawk drew breath to say something, then decided not to. It wouldn't have done any good anyway, he knew. He was well aware of his friend's neurosis when it came to the Horrors—his simultaneous abject fear and need to know everything he could about a potential Horror appearance in order to somehow have a chance of arming himself, as absurd as they all knew that was. Winterhawk hung back and did not comment.

Ocelot pounded again. "Gabriel! We know you're in there! Open the door!"

Kestrel closed her eyes for a moment, then shook her head. "He doesn't want to see us now," she said quietly.

Four pairs of eyes turned on her immediately. "Huh?" Ocelot demanded.

"He says he doesn't want to see us," she repeated. "He asked me to ask you to leave. He says he'll talk to you in a few days if he can."

"Can't," Wraith stated. "Need to talk now."

"Damn straight," Ocelot agreed. "Tell him it's important. Tell him we gotta talk to him now."

Again Kestrel closed her eyes. Her expression clouded as she frowned, then she nodded as if in reply to something unseen. Sighing, she opened her eyes. "He says he apologizes, but he can't see you right now. He says he's very tired and needs to rest."

Ocelot fought to contain his anger and frustration, which weren't directed at anyone in particular—it was not even Gabriel that he was angry with, but just the situation. Around him, his three teammates looked grim, though perhaps for differing reasons. "We can't wait," he

mumbled. Suddenly he reached out and pounded on the door again. "Gabriel, we know about Harlequin!" he yelled. "We know he's here! We need to talk to him!" His voice was rising higher as he punctuated each statement with another pound of his fist.

"Ocelot — " Kestrel began angrily.

The door clicked.

Ignoring Kestrel, Ocelot shoved it open and stormed into the room. The others swiftly followed. After a moment, Kestrel did likewise, sighing.

Gabriel was changing form as they entered, the dragon decreasing and shifting into the young man who came striding across the floor toward them with fire in his eyes. He was dressed in simple black pants, pullover shirt, and soft boots. "I asked you not to come," he said quietly, his voice tightly controlled.

"We had to," Ocelot said obstinately. He looked around as if expecting to see something that wasn't there. "Where is he?"

"Where is who?" Gabriel stopped, regarding the four runners with an expression that was chillier than any of them had ever seen him direct at them.

"Harlequin!" Ocelot almost yelled. There was sweat on his face and he was shaking slightly. "Where is he? I know he's here somewhere. We need to talk to him."

"Ocelot — " Winterhawk started, but stopped when he was ignored.

"He isn't here," Gabriel said.

Ocelot glared at him. "Then where is he? He *was* here."

"He has gone. I don't know where." He started to turn.

"If you'll excuse me now — "

Ocelot grabbed his shoulder and spun him back around. "This is about the Horrors, isn't it? Tell us!" His voice was now almost devoid of sanity. He was not

getting the information he wanted, which was driving him further over the edge.

Kestrel gasped as Gabriel's smoldering gaze fell on Ocelot, and again as the young dragon pointed his hand and sent the other man sliding across the floor in a none-too-gentle manner. "You presume much," he said through gritted teeth. "I—cannot deal with this now. This is no concern of yours. You will go."

Ocelot's three teammates hurried over to him as he tried to scramble to his feet and attack Gabriel. In his mind he knew that what he was doing was sheer lunacy, but irrational terror of the Horrors drove him back up. He would have lunged at Gabriel again if Joe's huge hands had not clamped themselves on his upper arms and held him immobile. "Ocelot," the troll urged, "settle down. This isn't getting us anywhere." Looking up at Gabriel, he added apologetically, "Sorry. He gets pretty wound up about anything he thinks involves the Horrors."

Gabriel was not looking at the runners. He stood, his hands hanging at his sides, his head bowed. His breathing was fast and irregular. "Forgive me," he said raggedly. "There was—no need for me to do that." His gaze came up, and for the first time the runners could get a good look at just how wasted he appeared.

"Gabriel," Winterhawk said, measuring his words carefully, "please forgive our intrusion. We were—understandably concerned when Kestrel told us you'd had a visitor who was a clown-painted elf."

Gabriel looked at Kestrel, something unidentifiable in his eyes. "That was my fault," he said, still speaking in the same soft tone. "I had forgotten that I had mentioned him to you before."

"Was he here?" 'Wraith asked.

The young dragon nodded with a sigh.

"Why?"

Ocelot struggled in Joe's hold. "Let go," he growled. "I'm okay now."

Joe regarded him for a moment, then slowly relaxed his hold. Ocelot remained where he was standing, but he was still shaking.

"Why?" Gabriel asked, looking at 'Wraith. "He is an old friend."

"That ain't why he came," Ocelot said. "This whole thing is about the Horrors, isn't it? Don't keep it a secret — they're back, aren't they?"

Gabriel stood there, unmoving except for his eyes. His gaze moved over each runner, taking in the four (*five, counting Kestrel. She is curious too*) pairs of eyes that were fixed on him, waiting for his answer. For almost a full minute he said nothing. Then, finally, reluctantly: "Yes — I think they are."

"I knew it!" Ocelot said, a little too loudly. "I knew it. Oh, shit...this is bad. What the hell do we —"

He stopped.

'Wraith was no longer looking at him. Instead, the elf was staring at something past Gabriel. Like his fellow runners, he was standing facing Gabriel's door, while the young dragon had his back to it. When they had made their stampede into the room, they had failed to close the door, and Gabriel had not done so either. Now the door was moving. Someone was coming in. "Company," 'Wraith said dispassionately, though his eyes had hardened and his entire posture had gone stiff.

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Ocelot's face contorted into a dark mask comprised of equal parts terror and rage as he recognized the newcomer. One by one the runners looked toward the door, and one by one each of them stiffened, eyes widening. They all remained in those positions as the newcomer entered the room.

Without turning, Gabriel sighed. "Stefan. This is not a good time."

Several long, tension-filled moments passed as the five shadowrunners and Stefan faced each other across the expanse of floor. On each face was an expression of undisguised hatred. Slowly, the runners began spreading out across the floor.

Kestrel moved forward, drawing up next to Gabriel. She was watching Stefan warily, but she was also watching Gabriel, her questions clearly visible in her eyes.

For several moments, no one spoke.

Finally Ocelot broke the silence. "What...the hell...is *he* doing here?" he asked, keeping his voice very quiet, very controlled, as if he was afraid if he raised it something terrible would happen. Still, every ounce of hatred he was feeling was injected into the single query.

Stefan ignored him. "I see your —*friends*— are as well-mannered as ever, brother," he said in a fair imitation of his usual tone. "I wish to speak with you. Alone," he added almost as an afterthought, raking a glance over the runners.

"We're not goin' anywhere, asshole," Ocelot snapped. His hand hovered near his jacket; if Stefan tried anything, he was going to get a face full of throwing knives for his trouble. A futile gesture, he knew, but he didn't care.

Gabriel ignored Ocelot's outburst and turned to address his brother. "Later, Stefan. I thought you were going to return in the morning."

"He was here *before*?" Ocelot demanded, taking a step forward. "And you didn't *tell* us? What the hell is going *on* here?"

Kestrel looked at Stefan, then at Gabriel, her expression growing less angry and more confused, with the barest tinge of suspicion around the edges. "Gabriel?"

Again Gabriel ignored them. "Stefan—?"

Stefan glared at the runners, then returned his gaze to Gabriel. "Must we discuss our business in front of *them*?"

Ocelot was having a hard time controlling himself. "Listen up, shithead," he growled. "You don't hear so well, do you? We *ain't* goin' *anywhere*. Why don't you get your scaly ass outta here before we hand it to you?"

"Ocelot..." Winterhawk warned, coming forward and putting a hand on his teammate's arm. His eyes never left Stefan.

Stefan moved toward Gabriel. "Come, brother," he said. "We have much to discuss, and it does not concern them."

"*What* doesn't concern us?" Joe demanded.

"Gabriel, what's going on?" Kestrel asked, still watching the other dragon. "What is he doing here?"

"Yes," Wraith said flatly. His expression was as usual unreadable, but there was something in his eyes that suggested hatred.

"This *does* look a bit odd," Winterhawk said, nodding.

"Damn fucking *right* it looks odd," Ocelot agreed, his voice still coming out as a feral snarl. To Stefan, he said, "Are you gonna get the hell outta here, or are we gonna have a rematch?" Some part of his mind was telling him that he was a fool to goad the dragon so, but his mouth wasn't listening to the rational part of his mind right now.

And what the hell was up with Gabriel? Why was he just standing there? Why was he acting like he was expecting Stefan — like he had been here before, earlier?

Gabriel looked back and forth between Stefan and the runners. He continued to stand in the same place, halfway between them. "Gentlemen...Kestrel...please — " He sighed. "You must go now. Stefan is right, that it doesn't concern you. I know how this must look to you, but I assure you — he represents no immediate danger to any of us at this time."

Ocelot laughed, but there was no mirth in it — it was a sarcastic, nasty bark of a sound. "No danger? Are you out of your mind? Did you hit your head or somethin'? This is the scumbag that nearly killed us all, and you're sayin' he's *no danger*?"

"If I were a threat to you now, impertinent one," Stefan said coldly, "you would be a smoldering pile of ashes on the floor."

"Yeah?" Ocelot demanded, voice rising. "Yeah?" He made mocking 'come-here' gestures with both hands. "Why don't you come over here and say that? Oh, and how's your eye doin' these days, huh?"

"Not now," Wraith said quietly to Ocelot, with a contemptuous glance toward Stefan. "Not worth it."

"He's right," Winterhawk muttered. "Don't waste your breath on him."

Stefan glared at them. "You will not speak to me in this manner," he snapped, stepping forward. "I will —"

"ENOUGH!"

Everyone stopped in their tracks, staring. It took them a moment to realize the source of the booming command that echoed through the huge room.

Gabriel's violet eyes were blazing, his normally smooth and handsome features clouded by rage. "Stop! All of you!" he ordered, his gaze flicking back and forth

between the runners and his brother. "We have neither the time nor the energy to spare for such petty bickering!" He wheeled on Stefan, a lock of dark hair falling down over his forehead. "Or have you forgotten so soon, Stefan, the gravity of the situation that brings you here?"

For a moment longer, everyone merely stared. None of them, including Stefan, had ever heard Gabriel raise his voice, let alone issue such commands. The young dragon continued to divide his attention between the two sides, as if daring someone to challenge him. Only Kestrel, who was standing right next to him, noticed that he was shaking.

Surprisingly (to the runners, at least), Gabriel's words seemed to have some effect on Stefan. "I have not forgotten," he said quietly. "I simply—did not expect to find you with—visitors." Even then he managed to infuse the last word with contempt, but the contempt sounded tired, forced.

"Does somebody want to let us in on what's going on here?" Joe demanded.

Gabriel's shoulders slumped as he stood; he looked as if he wanted nothing more than to sit down, but he knew that he could not do that. All the rage had drained from his face, leaving him looking more tired and despairing than ever.

Kestrel regarded him with concern. "Are you all right, Gabriel?"

"No," he said softly. "No. I'm not all right." Taking a deep breath, he visibly pulled himself together and looked up, taking in all his visitors. Stefan stood off by himself near the door, his imperious demeanor beginning to slip ever so imperceptibly. The four runners had moved in closer to each other again, the other three forming a subtle ring around Ocelot, who looked sullen and uncooperative but did not speak. Winterhawk was grim

as well, while 'Wraith's eyes never left Stefan's face. Joe was watching Gabriel, still waiting for an answer to his question.

Gabriel spoke softly and evenly, taking in each gaze as he did so. "We do not have the time for this behavior, and I haven't the energy or the desire to serve as referee between you. If you cannot conduct yourselves civilly in my home, then I must ask you to leave." His eyes swept the group again, looking for takers. Kestrel stood next to him, trying to provide both strength and comfort. It was clear from her expression that she was still confused and unsure of what was going on, but that she was willing to give Gabriel the benefit of the doubt until further notice.

"Explanation," 'Wraith said quietly.

"Yeah," Joe added. "This guy tried to kill you —"

"—tried to kill *all* of us," Ocelot muttered under his breath.

"—and now it looks like you've patched it up," Joe continued, ignoring Ocelot. "What gives? Did we miss something?"

"No doubt," Stefan said acidly.

"Stefan..." Gabriel warned, casting a cautionary glance back toward Ocelot. "Enough. I will not say it again." To the runners, he continued: "Please. This does not concern you. I know you are curious, and I wish I could satisfy your curiosity now, but I cannot. Time is short, and Stefan, as long as you are here, we had best begin discussing what we must do."

"No way," Ocelot said, shaking his head for emphasis. "There is no way we're leavin' here until you tell us what's goin' on." He gestured toward Stefan with a quick jerk of his head. "After what happened to us, you damn straight owe us some explanation for why you and Chuckles here seem to be all nicey-nicey all of a sudden." Glaring first at Stefan, then at Gabriel, he added, "You can make us leave,

but I don't think you'll do it. You got us sucked into this whole thing, and now we ain't bein' run off like a bunch of kids at a party."

"I'll be most pleased to remove them, brother, if you won't do it," Stefan said with an oily smile and a glance toward the massive windows that enclosed the penthouse.

"Remove *this*," Ocelot snapped, with an appropriate gesture.

Winterhawk, catching the look in Gabriel's eyes, raised his hands placatingly. "Gentlemen, please." To the young dragon, he said in a half-apologetic tone, "Gabriel, you can hardly blame us for our suspicions. Ocelot tends not to have the best self-control among us, but I think nonetheless that he expresses—crudely, yes, but accurately—the feelings of our team toward your—visitor. I think, considering the circumstances and the fact that something has apparently changed in your relationship with your brother, that you do owe us at least the courtesy of an explanation before you ask us to leave."

"Yeah," Joe added. "This whole thing looks pretty weird from this side of the world. Can't you tell us what's going on?"

Gabriel regarded them for a moment, the nascent anger draining once again from his features. He sighed. "All right," he said quietly. "I realize how this must look to you, and apparently my assurances are doing nothing to ease your minds." His posture slumped a bit more as he looked away. "Nor will your minds be any more eased, I fear, were I to satisfy your curiosity, but it must be done regardless."

"Gabriel, why are you—?" Stefan began sharply.

"Stefan." Gabriel silenced him with the single word. "Remember why you are here. It is not for you to question my methods or my decisions."

Stefan's eyes narrowed, but he did not speak further.

The runners looked at each other, all of them still trying to puzzle out this new development. Stefan was actually *listening* to his younger brother? He certainly didn't look happy about it, but he was doing it. What had occurred?

Gabriel moved slowly across the room to a group of couches and chairs arranged near the window. "Come," he said grimly. "Sit down, and I will tell you what I can. But then you must go."

Ocelot grumbled something under his breath that no one heard, and Joe moved in to cover him again. This time, though, Ocelot did no more than glare at Stefan with a look full of daggers as the group moved over to the indicated place.

Warily everyone arrayed themselves. Except for Gabriel, they consciously tried to be as far from Stefan as possible, to the extent that both Ocelot and Joe pointedly moved their chairs away. When they had finished settling themselves, they looked rather like a stern jury facing a defendant, with Stefan seated with his back to the window and the others lined up facing him. Gabriel sat at the end of the two groups, with Kestrel perched in her customary spot on the overstuffed arm of his chair. Stefan did not seem bothered by the arrangements.

As the two groups once again set up a glaring contest, Gabriel spoke softly. "I want to make something clear before I continue. I am very weary now, and unfortunately that means, among other things, that my self-control is not at its highest. I am not pleased with the situation as it stands—part of what *that* means is that I have no remaining energy to devote to keeping order among you. If I must then I will do so ruthlessly, so please do not force me to do this. Much of what I have to say will anger you. It has angered me. But as you will see when I

have finished, anger is inappropriate at this time. The events that have occurred are far too grave to permit such a diversion." He looked around at the assembled group, his gaze lighting a bit longer on Ocelot than on the others.

"May I count on your cooperation?"

"Ask *him*," Ocelot growled, hooking a thumb at Stefan.

"Stefan," Gabriel said with a hint of danger in his tone, "has given me his word that he will not harm or otherwise harass any of you."

"And you believe that?" Ocelot asked incredulously. He had always thought Gabriel somewhat naive about the realities of the world, but this won the prize.

Stefan started to say something, but Gabriel cut him off without looking at him. "Dragons do not give their word lightly," he said, the hint of danger growing a bit, "and they do not break it once given." His expression grew cold, although Kestrel could see the strain beneath it. "May I count on your cooperation?" he asked again, this time looking pointedly at Ocelot even though the question was directed at all of the runners. Kestrel put a hand on his shoulder and felt it shaking slightly.

"You can count on me not to initiate anything," Winterhawk said with a sideways glance at Stefan. "If your brother behaves himself, then there won't be a problem."

"Yes," Wraith said, nodding. He too was looking at Stefan.

Joe nodded. "Yeah."

Ocelot was silent for a long time, scowling, but finally nodded grudgingly after looking at Kestrel. He knew he was making a mistake, but he didn't have much of a choice. He just hoped that Gabriel's fatigue hadn't made him take leave of his senses, or they were all in trouble. He still wanted to kill Stefan, and wasn't sure that if he

got the opportunity he wouldn't take it despite what he had told Gabriel.

Gabriel's posture slumped slightly, but it was difficult to tell if it was from relief or just more fatigue. "All right," he said, and paused a moment to gather his thoughts.

Winterhawk looked back and forth between Gabriel and Stefan. The short time he had had to sit down and consider matters had brought some revelations—ones which he was not sure he should voice. "Gabriel..." he said at last in a strange tone, "it was no coincidence that Harlequin was here tonight, was it?"

Before Gabriel could answer, Stefan fixed Winterhawk with sharp gaze which he immediately transferred to his brother. "Harlequin was here?"

Gabriel shot a look at Winterhawk that clearly indicated that he had wanted to reveal that bit of information in his own time, but did not linger with it. "Yes, Stefan," he said in a near-whisper. "He was here. He is returning tomorrow morning."

"How did he know of our business?" Stefan demanded, eyes narrowing. "Did you contact him, brother?"

"No, I did not," Gabriel snapped. "He is not a fool, Stefan. He has had far more experience making these sorts of connections than we have. Given—what has occurred, I am surprised that he did not appear sooner than he did." He paused, then sighed. "With circumstances as they are, I am grateful that he has decided to offer us his assistance. Perhaps," he added in a colder tone, "he might increase our chances of success."

The runners were getting tired of being forgotten and ignored. "Chances of success for *what*?" Joe asked, leaning forward.

Gabriel didn't answer the question directly. Instead he leaned back in his chair and looked away for a moment.

"You asked before if the Enemy had returned," he said. "I told you that they had." A pause, and then: "What I did not tell you was why. Or how."

The runners all riveted their attention on him and waited for him to continue. Stefan stared impassively off at nothing.

"It seems," the young dragon continued, "that the Enemy has used the murder of my friend Telanwyr to provide the power for—something." He appeared to take it for granted that the runners had already heard the story of Telanwyr's death from Kestrel, and thus did not offer further explanation.

"Something?" Winterhawk ventured warily. "What—sort of something?"

"We don't know yet," Gabriel said. "That is what we must find out."

"But—the Bridge—?" 'Wraith said. "Thayla—?" He seemed too interested in Gabriel's response. So, in fact, did Joe.

"Thayla is no more," Gabriel said sadly. "She has fallen to the Enemy."

The runners stared at him. All of them, in one way or another, were thinking about the quest they had performed with Harlequin to ensure her safety and her ability to continue the song that kept the Enemy at bay. All of them had been forever touched by her beauty, her purity, her goodness. And now she was gone. The shock drove them to silence.

"I am sorry," Gabriel said, his voice soft. "I am aware of your involvement."

"But—" Joe began, struggling for words. "If Thayla's dead, then—who's guarding the Bridge?"

"How?" 'Wraith put in, paying no attention to Joe. "When?"

Gabriel raised his hands for quiet, shaking his head. "I do not know the answers to your questions," he said. "Harlequin did not tell me the details—all he said was that Thayla had fallen. I do know," he added, his eyes coming up to meet the runners' in a way that he hoped was encouraging but ended up looking sad, "that the Bridge has been destroyed. I'm not permitted to say more about that, but you can be assured that it is true. I have it directly from Harlequin, and he would not lie about such a thing."

"Then how are the Hor—the Enemy here?" Winterhawk asked.

Gabriel sighed. "I do not know. Perhaps some of them made it across before the Bridge was destroyed. But the fact remains that at least one of them is here, and must be dealt with."

"Query," Wraith spoke up, looking troubled.

Gabriel swiveled around to face him.

"Your friend—sacrificed?" He frowned. "To bring over the Enemy?"

The young dragon shook his head, his eyes clouded with grief. "Not originally. Some of them must have been here previously, to set up whatever ritual they set up. This much we know. What we do *not* know yet is what the ritual was used to power. I am certain there is more to it than simply bringing over more of the Enemy, though."

"Why?" Joe asked.

Winterhawk looked suspiciously across at Stefan. "Yes, why?" he repeated. "And you still have not told us why your brother is involved in this—and why you two are not at each other's throats."

Gabriel sighed, looking down. It was very clear that he had been attempting to avoid that particular question as long as he could, but now here it was. Kestrel put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed slightly; he brought

his hand up and covered hers with it. A brief communication seemed to pass between them, and then he looked up again.

To his credit, Stefan did not speak. In fact, he seemed very interested in the view out the window. The imperious expression still covered his features, but there was something beneath it that was so obvious that everyone in the room could see it.

"Stefan has made a grave mistake," Gabriel said. "He has come here of his own free will to seek my help in rectifying it. I have agreed to aid him in this."

"You're — helping — *him*?" Ocelot sputtered, his rage rising again. "After all he's done to you? To us? To Kestrel?"

Gabriel glared at Ocelot, visibly trying to bring himself under control before speaking. He took a long deep breath; when he finally did speak, his voice was soft and carefully measured. "I had no choice," he said, and with those words the anger left him, replaced by despair. "I had no choice," he repeated in a whisper.

For a moment the silence hung in the air like an oppressive fog. Even Ocelot was not sure what to say: the young dragon looked like he was at the end of his tether, so that even the slightest push would dislodge his fragile control. Ocelot knew that feeling well; it was a fairly common occurrence with him, especially now. To see it in calm, unruffled Gabriel, though, was a little unsettling.

Finally "Wraith broke the silence. "Why?"

"And why would he come to you, of all people, for help?" Winterhawk asked quietly.

Gabriel got up, shrugging off Kestrel's hand, and began pacing around. Reaching the window, he leaned against it and looked out over Downtown. The others, including Stefan, watched him and did not speak. After

several moments, he turned back around and faced them. "Stefan was deceived by the Enemy," he said.

Five gazes sharpened on him; one—Stefan's—lowered.

"What's—that mean?" Ocelot asked, an odd strained undertone in his voice. He could feel his muscles stiffening, coiling up to prepare for—what?

Stefan started to say something, then looked off at nothing again as if realizing that anything he said would only make him look like a fool.

Gabriel had apparently decided that the direct approach was the best way to get this over with. "The Enemy used Stefan's hatred of me to influence him," he said in a tone devoid of inflection or emotion. "Unknown to me, following the incident six months ago, Telanwyr had taken his oath that he would not attempt harm on me or my friends. The Enemy convinced him that if Telanwyr were no more, then he would be free to continue his vendetta against me."

It took a few seconds for this to sink in. Ocelot's eyes widened as he grasped the implications of Gabriel's words and his rage and irrational terror welled up. "You mean—he's workin' with the fuckin' *Horrors*?" he yelled. "And you're *helpin'* him?" That did it for the remainder of his sanity. Screaming something inarticulate, he launched himself out of his chair, hands out in front of him, and lunged at Stefan. Any promise he had made to Gabriel not to do so was swept away with the last of his rational thoughts.

His friends tried to grab him, but even 'Wraith wasn't fast enough to get to him before he was out of his chair. Pandemonium ensued for a second or two as the runners, including Kestrel, tried to head Ocelot off while Stefan rose from his chair.

Suddenly Ocelot lifted from the floor, his legs pumping like some crazed cartoon character, his arms flailing as he tried to reach Stefan. He continued to scream inarticulately at the top of his lungs; the only word anyone could make out was "Die! Die!" repeated over and over. This continued for a couple of seconds, and then he slumped in the air as if someone had removed all his bones.

The runners stared at him, then as one they wheeled around to face Stefan. The older dragon had returned to his chair, watching Ocelot with a look of contemptuous amusement. As Ocelot's body lowered gently down to the couch, his attention turned to his brother.

Gabriel stood in front of his chair, breathing hard, gaze cold, teeth clenched tightly together. He lowered his hand from where it had been raised toward the position Ocelot had last occupied. "Understand this!" he ordered as Ocelot's three teammates and Kestrel gathered around to check their fallen friend. "This is the last time that I will say it!" He lowered his voice a bit as if just realizing that he was shouting; the next words came out between breaths. "You will—control yourselves. If you cannot—then you will leave now." His gaze, which hadn't warmed at all, swept over them. "I have far greater cause to behave as you have toward Stefan, as you will see, but I have accepted the fact that there is more at stake here than my private grievances. When I explain the rest of it to you, you will see that. Until then, if you want to know, I expect that you will *listen*. Do you understand?"

"What did you do to him, Gabriel?" Kestrel asked quietly, grim-faced. She crouched next to Ocelot's head as the others laid him out and straightened his limbs.

Gabriel caught something in her tone and his expression immediately softened. "Merely a sleep spell,"

he said in the same tone. "He will be unconscious for some time, but other than that he'll suffer no ill effects."

Kestrel held his gaze for a few more seconds, then nodded and rose.

After a moment the other runners did as well. "We're listening," Winterhawk said. "Ocelot is—a bit unstable when it comes to both Stefan and the—Enemy. I don't think he was in control of himself."

Gabriel sighed. "I am sorry that was necessary."

"Better than letting Stefan have him," Joe muttered.

"Stefan gave his word," Gabriel said. "He did not attack even though he was surely provoked to do so." He paused a moment, then added: "He had the chance to kill *me* earlier this evening and he did not take it. A dragon does not break his word."

"You did say," Winterhawk said, returning to his seat with one last glance back at Ocelot, "that he conspired with the Horrors to kill your friend. Does that not count as breaking his word?"

The young dragon looked troubled and a little angry, but it was clearly not directed at the runners now. "Not—technically. He gave his word to Telanwyr that he would not harm me. Telanwyr's death would release him from that obligation." He looked down, sadness passing across his face as he remembered his old friend once more. Kestrel sat down next to him and put her hand back on his shoulder.

"Details," Wraith said. As an afterthought, he added, "Please."

Gabriel took a moment to compose himself before answering. "Yes," he said at last, and sighed. "Details." Slowly he told the runners of all that had occurred during the past week, as he had told Harlequin. Although he paused often, no one interrupted him. On the couch, Ocelot showed no signs of waking.

When he finished the story, Gabriel got up again and began pacing. He looked like someone had wrung him out. "So," he said, not looking at them, "now you know. Stefan has caused this with his hatred, and now he seeks to right it and in the process remove the Enemy's taint from himself. I have agreed to help him, as has Harlequin. He will return in the morning, and we will discuss our plans from there."

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Winterhawk looked skeptical. ""Your plans? Do you even *have* any plans? How are you going to deal with this?"

"Brother," Stefan spoke up for the first time in a while, "surely you have told them enough now. As you said – but as they refused to hear – they are not involved."

"Oh, we're involved, all right," Joe said. "We're right up to our asses in this thing."

"Colorful, but accurate," Winterhawk agreed. He spoke to Gabriel, not to Stefan. "You'll have to travel to the metaplanes, I trust?"

Gabriel nodded. "We don't know the details yet. That is what Harlequin came to discuss with me earlier. He will, as I said, return in the morning." From his place near the darkened window, he regarded them. "But that is not your concern. Please—I have told you what you wanted to know, but now I must ask you to leave us to our plans. This has nothing to do with you. There is no reason for you to be involved." With a glance at Joe, he added, "The mere fact that you have had dealings with the Enemy before does not mean that your involvement extends to this situation."

"Incorrect," Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded. "I too beg to differ with that. The Horrors—the Enemy—know us. They can find us. This is far worse than the Stefan situation from before. At least then, all we could expect was to become some dragon's midnight snack." He cast a sour look at Stefan as he said this. "With the Enemy—" He shivered a bit, involuntarily. "If there's a chance for us to make a difference in keeping them from getting here, then I think we'll be wanting to take it."

"Yeah," Joe said. "We did it once—it sounds like you can use all the help you can get."

"Out of the question," Stefan said flatly.

All three runners bit back retorts as Gabriel spoke. "I fear I must agree with Stefan this time," he said ruefully. "It simply isn't possible."

"*What* simply isn't possible?" came a weak voice from the couch. Everyone except Stefan turned to see Ocelot slowly rising to a seated position, rubbing his head. He looked like he had barely begun to shake off the effects of the sleep spell, but he was awake. "Shoving a two-by-four up Chuckles' ass sideways? I bet we could do it if we tried hard."

"Ocelot," Kestrel said warningly, coming over to him. "Stop it. You're just making a fool of yourself now."

He raised up a little more. "Oh, so you're all on his side now too, huh?" he growled. At least his voice didn't carry the edge of insanity as it had before.

Gabriel ignored them and addressed Joe, Wraith, and Winterhawk. "I'm sorry," he said, and shook his head. He sounded like he meant it.

"Sorry about what?" Ocelot demanded.

"They're going to the metaplanes to try to stop the Horrors," Joe said. "And they won't let us go along."

"Gabriel says it's none of our concern," Winterhawk added as if that was the most absurd thing in the world.

"Then he's as crazy as his brother," Ocelot said, shooting to his feet. Immediately he swayed as the sleep spell's effects caught up with him; Kestrel grabbed his arm to prevent him from falling and lowered him back to a seated position. From the edge of the couch he looked up at Gabriel. "You know what we did before. You said Harlequin told you. *Fate* picked us for that mission. You gonna argue with Fate?"

"This is not the same mission," Gabriel said.

"And you ain't Fate," Ocelot said stubbornly.

Winterhawk stepped forward. "We've been involved in this since Harlequin first took us off to the metaplanes to battle the Horrors years ago. If there's a chance that they're going to be making a return engagement, I think we've earned a chance to be involved."

Joe nodded. "Yeah. Harlequin can get us there. He's done it before."

Gabriel shook his head as if that was of no consequence. "I can get you there. That isn't the problem."

"What is?" Wraith asked.

The young dragon sighed. "Many things. Attitude, for one. I have made my truce—at least temporarily—with Stefan, and for the duration I can work effectively with him to achieve our mutual goal. Afterward, I do not know what will happen, but for now that is behind us. I don't see that you can do the same." Again he looked pointedly at Ocelot as he spoke. "If I agree to allow you to accompany us to the Netherworlds and you are unable to keep your—perspective—on the situation, it could endanger the entire quest. It could endanger the entire world."

"So," Winterhawk said slowly, "you're saying that if we can manage to keep our feelings about Stefan from interfering with our objectivity, then you would consider allowing us along?"

Gabriel didn't answer for a long time. "I—would have to give it serious thought," he finally said.

"In other words, you don't want us along," Joe said.

"No," Gabriel agreed. "I do not want you along. This is not a situation like the one involving Stefan. The Enemy has not sought you out. There is no reason for you to go."

"Gabriel," Winterhawk said, choosing his words with care, "You have admitted that you are very tired and that your judgment might be—impaired at the moment. You

said that Harlequin will return in the morning. Will you hold off on making a decision about it until then?"

"He has *made* a decision," Stefan said.

Winterhawk looked at Gabriel as if Stefan had not spoken, waiting.

The young dragon considered, then nodded. "That seems reasonable," he said, almost reluctantly. "But I will tell you here and now that some among you — " he did not look at Ocelot this time, but it was clear who he meant " — will put the entire quest in jeopardy with their inability to control their impulses. I cannot in good conscience put anyone at risk for such individuals." He looked down for a moment, then back up.

"A moment," Wraith said, coming up next to Ocelot. "Speak with you?" He indicated a far corner of the apartment.

As Ocelot nodded, Gabriel regarded them with something that resembled approval. As the two moved off to a corner where two massive windows met, he finally allowed himself to sink down on the couch.

"What do you want?" Ocelot asked under his breath, casting glances back toward Stefan as if he was afraid the older dragon would jump him when his back was turned.

"Not worth it," the elf said.

"What's not worth it?"

"Stefan."

Ocelot blew air through his teeth. "English, Wraith. Complete sentences. I ain't in any mood to play word games. Kid Lizard over there gave me a whopper of a headache." He rubbed his head to punctuate his words.

Wraith paused a moment to compose a sentence. "Stefan — not worth your effort. Horrors more important."

"What are you tellin' me, 'Wraith?" Ocelot demanded suspiciously. "What the hell did Gabriel *say* while I was out on my ass?"

"Told us about what happened. Must stop Horrors." He looked back toward the group, which had broken up into smaller sub-groups: Gabriel and Kestrel on the couch talking to each other; Stefan in his chair, looking out the window; Winterhawk and Joe drifted off somewhat to the other side of the room.

"So what *did* happen?"

"Ask 'Hawk. Ask Joe. Important thing—must stop Horrors. Can't do it if we're not there."

Ocelot sighed, leaning on his arm which was propped against the window. "So you're sayin' I should play nice with Stefan?"

"No." The elf's voice was impassive. "Not nice. Must play, though. Professional."

"You trust him?"

"No," 'Wraith said again. "Believe he wants to do this, though."

"So you don't think he'll jump us first chance he gets?"

'Wraith considered that. "Gabriel said he had the chance to kill him tonight. Didn't."

Ocelot snorted. "That don't mean anything. He's a fuckin' *dragon*. They can bide their time forever if they have to. He's lookin' for an angle."

"Still —"

"Yeah, yeah. Still. Either I suck up to the big lizard or we don't get to go along." He clenched his fist. "I don't know if I can, 'Wraith. He's hittin' all my buttons. I can look at it a little bit objectively now, standin' over here, but as soon as he opens his mouth —"

"Not worth it," 'Wraith stated again. "Don't waste effort on him. Think of Horrors. Much more important."

But after..." He let that trail off as he glanced back toward Stefan.

Ocelot sighed again. He was trying his best not to admit it to himself, but he knew that 'Wraith was right. He also knew that the elf was the only one of the team who could have convinced him. Winterhawk, his normal confidant and erstwhile therapist, didn't seem to have the proper respect for the gravity of the situation. Neither did Joe. Gabriel might be intelligent and powerful, but Ocelot was still convinced that he was being hopelessly naive to trust his brother after all they had been through. Kestrel didn't know enough about the situation to offer an objective opinion, and besides, it was clear whose side of the fence she fell on when forced to make a choice. That left 'Wraith—paranoid, suspicious, stoical 'Wraith, the guy who didn't trust *anybody*. If he could put aside his natural inclinations to kill Stefan where he sat in order to serve a higher cause, then Ocelot had to allow that there must be some merit in the idea. But as 'Wraith had alluded, *after* the Horrors had been dealt with, all bets were off. "Okay," he said grudgingly. "Guess I ain't got much choice. It's either play nice with the eight-hundred-kilo gorillas or they take their toys and go home. And damn it, we can't afford to have 'em do that right now."

"Yes," Wraith said, with a raised eyebrow indicating approval. "Too important. Bigger than Stefan."

That was the understatement of the year, but Ocelot kept that thought to himself.

Kestrel, meanwhile, sat down next to Gabriel, glad for a chance to have a moment alone with him. "You okay?" she asked gently.

He shook his head without looking at her.

"Is there anything I can do? I'm sorry about Ocelot. He's—"

"It isn't just Ocelot," he said, and then switched to mind-speech so they could not be overheard. *"It is this entire situation. I fear that I may have gotten in over my head."*

Kestrel stared at him. She had never heard him admit that about anything. "Why do you say that?"

"Everything is happening so quickly, and all of it is too important for me to risk making the wrong decision. Perhaps if I had gone to the other dragons –"

"You said you couldn't do that. You said they wouldn't listen."

"Oh, they would listen. Whether they would believe –" he shrugged, sighed. *"Regardless, it is too late for that now. I wish that Telanwyr were alive. Or Dunkelzahn. Juliana, we are children. All of us are children. To have something of such moment thrust upon us –"* Shaking his head, he brought his gaze up to meet hers. His eyes were full of despair. *"I do not know if I can do this."*

She gripped his shoulder, speaking in a whisper so Stefan could not hear. The other dragon did not appear to be listening, but she was unsure how to tell. "Gabriel, you can. We can. You're not alone. You have all of us. You have this Harlequin guy – you seem to have confidence in his abilities. You even have Stefan, if he's really serious about doing this." She paused, again trying to reconcile Gabriel's current form and his true one with that of a child desperately in need of guidance. Finally, unable to do it, she said: "I know your teachers are gone. I know you can barely stand to look at Stefan, let alone trust him on something this important. I know you feel like you've got nowhere to turn. But it's not true. You're tired – you look like you're ready to drop. There's no way you can think things through when you're in that state. I think Winterhawk was right – wait until the morning. Tell everybody to go away and come back tomorrow. Sleep. Then maybe things will look clearer in the morning."

He leaned back on the couch, his head resting on the soft black leather, his eyes fixed on the ceiling ten meters above. *"You are probably right. I can barely think straight right now. I apologize for my rude behavior. There was no reason for me to lose control like that. I am sorry you had to see it."*

She shook her head. "Don't apologize. You were a hell of a lot calmer than I would have been. If I were you tonight, I would have been biting off heads and spitting them at windows. I don't know how you're holding together as well as you are."

He smiled, a faint, faraway thing. *"Dragons are supposed to be tough, remember?"*

"Yeah, right," she said, squeezing his shoulder a little harder. Then she grew serious again. "I do have to ask you one thing, though. This whole thing is still a little confusing to me, but there's one question you have to answer."

"If I am able."

She frowned. "You told me before that Stefan wasn't involved. Did you lie to me then? I don't think you've ever lied to me before." Her eyes searched his face; obviously his answer to this question was very important to her.

He shook his head. *"Originally, when I told you the situation had nothing to do with Stefan, I did not have all the facts. Later, I told you that you did not know the killer. You do not."*

Slowly she nodded. "Okay. Stefan didn't *kill* him—he just set him up to be killed. So technically you didn't lie to me." Glancing over at Stefan again, she noticed that he wore an odd expression—fatigue mixed with contempt mixed with fear. Apparently he did not think anyone was looking at him; when he noticed Kestrel, the fatigue and fear dropped away, leaving only the contempt.

"I told you the selective truth. At the time I did not think that you would be involved." Gabriel's eyes were closed now; Kestrel still found it a little odd to be communicating telepathically with a guy who looked like he was asleep.

"Neither did I," she admitted. "I didn't realize how important this was to these guys. Ocelot never talks about it."

"He has great fear of the Enemy. I can see that. He uses anger to cover it. I do not know if he will be able to overcome it sufficiently that I can risk taking him along."

"Then you're considering letting us go?"

He opened his eyes when she said "us." They showed sadness. "Will you do this to me, Juliana? Will you force me to put you at risk as well?"

She sighed. "If they go, I go. I'm going to see this through. And I respect you more than to think that you'll refuse to let them go just to keep me here."

Gabriel nodded wearily. "I have not yet decided. Perhaps I will consult with Harlequin in the morning. He has greater experience with this sort of thing – and with this team in such situations – than I. He might have some insights that have eluded me." Rising to a fully seated position, he resumed normal spoken communication. "I think that I will take your advice, though. I will be of no use to anyone if I do not rest." He stood the rest of the way up and faced the group of people spread out around the room.

Before he could say anything, though, Ocelot approached him. He looked a little subdued, but there was still some defiance in his eyes. For a moment the two of them regarded each other without comment, then Ocelot spoke. "I'm—sorry I got crazy. I'll do what I gotta do. But we have to go along tomorrow."

Gabriel nodded. "It is done," he said. "As for tomorrow, we will discuss that tomorrow." Raising his voice a bit to carry to everyone, he said, "Please. I must

ask you all to go now, and come back tomorrow morning. The decision will be made then, after I've had a chance to get Harlequin's opinion on the matter."

Four pairs of suspicious eyes (all but Kestrel and Stefan) immediately met Gabriel's. Ocelot, standing in front of him, said evenly, "How do we know that you after we're gone, you won't go without us?"

There was disappointment in Gabriel's expression as he looked at Ocelot, but he looked too tired to deal with it. Sighing, he closed his eyes briefly and then opened them again. "All right, Ocelot," he said quietly, "if you do not trust me, then I will give you my word: We will not leave without you tomorrow morning before we've discussed the situation with Harlequin."

Ocelot hesitated a moment as if trying to decide whether to pursue it further, but finally nodded. "Okay. We'll be back first thing tomorrow morning."

The other runners also nodded. Somehow any kind of farewell seemed incongruous, so they merely filed out of the penthouse through the door that had still not been closed. None of them spoke, each alone with his thoughts about the evening, the Horrors, Stefan, and everything else that had happened in this long and eventful day. All of them suspected that tomorrow would likely be far more eventful.

Alone now in the apartment, Kestrel, Gabriel, and Stefan watched them go. Stefan watched his brother for several long moments, then rose from his chair. "I will return tomorrow, then," he said. "I hope that you have not made a mistake, brother, in considering bringing them along. Nor in involving that painted elf in the situation."

"That is not for you to decide, Stefan," Gabriel said almost mechanically.

Stefan nodded, a brief, harsh movement, and swept out of the room.

Kestrel looked at Gabriel. "Can I stay here tonight? I won't disturb your sleep—I'll just crash on the couch here." Her voice took on edges of fear. "I don't think I want to go home to an empty house tonight, if that's okay with you."

"Of course, Juliana," he murmured, shifting and growing, his huge golden dragon form taking up most of the floorspace in the living room. He was already drifting off. She could see that, now that he was finally going to allow himself to sleep, there would be no waking him until the morning.

Quietly, she moved over and closed and locked the door, hoping that whatever wards Gabriel had constructed were still intact. Even here, comforted by the low rumble of his soft, rhythmic breathing, it took her nearly an hour before she was able to fall into a fitful sleep.

32.

When the runners arrived back at Gabriel's place early the next morning, Harlequin had not yet arrived. Neither had Stefan.

None of them had gotten much sleep the previous night. They had returned to their respective homes without much conversation; there wasn't much they could say, really. All of them were consumed by thoughts of what had occurred. When Ocelot picked them up in the truck shortly after sunrise, he noticed that all of them were as subdued as he was. They climbed in without comment, taking their accustomed places as if they were preparing to head out on an everyday run. He noticed that they had even dressed for business. Each one had been waiting and ready to go when he'd pulled up. They'd stopped very briefly at a drive-thru fast food joint to grab some breakfast—they hadn't wanted to take the time, but they suspected that nobody at their destination was going to be fixing breakfast and it might be the last food they got in quite some while.

Gabriel's door was answered by Kestrel, who let them in with a brief greeting. She was dressed in the same clothes she had been wearing last night, but her wet hair showed that she'd had a recent shower.

Gabriel himself was pacing around the room restlessly. He nodded polite acknowledgment to them as they came in, but it was clear that his attention was somewhere far away. Still, though, he looked significantly better than he had last time they had seen him: his posture no longer had the exhausted slump, and the haunted look in his eyes had faded in intensity somewhat. Clad in faded jeans and a long-sleeved white knit shirt with the

sleeves pushed halfway up his arms, he looked more like a nervous college student than an ancient dragon.

"Sleep well?" Kestrel asked, pitching her voice low to avoid disturbing Gabriel's pacing.

"Like shit," Ocelot admitted. "You?"

"Not much better." She watched Gabriel as she spoke. "He, on the other hand, slept like a baby, which I guess is good."

"How long you guys been up? And when's Harlequin and Butt-head gonna show?" It didn't even occur to Ocelot to be jealous of the fact that she had spent the night at Gabriel's; *Guess I've come a long way. Or else I just got more important things to worry about than whether my girlfriend's boinking a dragon.*

"He said they should be here soon, but there's a lot of morning left. Guess you guys were a little anxious, huh?"

Ocelot shrugged. "Might as well get it over with."

"It appears that dread and sleep don't mix well," Winterhawk added.

There was another knock on the door. Kestrel moved to answer it, but at that moment Gabriel came up from his reverie and held up his hand, heading for the door himself.

Apparently Stefan had managed to get some small amount of sleep himself, because like his brother he looked more rested than he had the previous night; he did not, however, look more relaxed. Sweeping into the room without a word to the runners, he addressed Gabriel. "I see your painted elf is not yet here."

"Give him time," Gabriel murmured, and resumed his pacing. Stefan immediately moved off to the other side of the room, ignoring the runners' glares, and set up a pacing pattern of his own, punctuating it with long pauses to look out over the Seattle morning.

The final member of their party did not arrive for another half hour, and when he did, he was not alone. Harlequin grinned as Gabriel opened the door. "You're still here. That's a good sign. Not *sensible*, maybe, but good." He was dressed in much the same manner as he'd been yesterday, except today his T-shirt sported a huge pair of red lips with a protruding tongue and "Rolling Stones 1982" across the front.

The woman with him looked to be somewhere indeterminately between early and late twenties; she was quite tall and very striking, with stark white hair and blue eyes. She wore jeans, a loose-fitting sweatshirt, and athletic shoes; her expression suggested that she was not entirely sure what she and Harlequin were doing here.

The clown-faced elf's sharp eyes took in the room; one eyebrow quirked upward when he saw the runner team. "Well," he said casually. "Thought I might find you guys here."

Gabriel approached, while Stefan remained where he was on the other side of the room. The young dragon regarded Harlequin's companion questioningly. "Harlequin," he said in greeting, his eyes grave. "I wasn't aware that you were bringing—colleagues."

"Frosty's not a colleague," the elf said. "She's my student. And she's not going with us. She's going to guard our bodies while we're off gallivanting in the Netherworlds." Motioning her forward, he said, "Frosty, this is Gabriel. I told you about him before, remember?"

Frosty stepped up next to Harlequin, nodded. "I remember. Somehow I thought you'd be—taller." A small smile hovered around the corners of her mouth as she first glanced upward at where he would presumably stand in his true form, then looked him over appraisingly. "Not bad, though. What is it about dragons and looking young and gorgeous, anyway?"

Gabriel had to smile a bit in spite of himself. "Because we can?" he offered innocently.

Harlequin grinned. "Hey, at least he's honest." Indicating the room, he added, "Come on. Looks like our little party's all here, so we'd better get this show on the road before somebody chickens out. Like me, for instance." Everyone in the room could see the strain lurking beneath his almost maniacally cheerful demeanor.

Ocelot came forward, as did Winterhawk. "We're going along," the former said flatly, in a tone that suggested that no argument would be accepted.

"Oh, really?" Harlequin asked with a raised eyebrow. "Haven't had quite enough of the stuff of madmen's nightmares, eh? Last time didn't do it for you? Want some more to tide you over for awhile?"

"Gabriel told us about Thayla," Joe said from where he was standing back with 'Wraith.

"Yeah, as soon as I saw you here, I thought that might be it," the elf admitted, brief sadness crossing his painted features.

"This is not their fight," Gabriel said quietly. "But I have promised them, given their previous involvement with the Enemy, that I would consult you before making a decision."

From the other side of the room, Stefan watched the proceedings intently, but he still did not approach.

Harlequin's sharp green eyes fixed on the young dragon. "So you're leaving it up to me. Is that what you're saying?"

Gabriel nodded once, his eyes never leaving Harlequin's.

The elf thought about it for several moments, pacing around and making exaggerated "thinking" gestures — putting his finger to his forehead, cupping his chin in his hand, pursing his lips as if deep in rumination. The four

runners, Kestrel, and Gabriel watched him but didn't speak.

Finally, Harlequin stopped, his head coming up quickly to face the assembled group. Shrugging casually as if making a decision regarding what sort of ice cream to order, he said in an offhand tone, "Sure, why not? Bring 'em along."

"Are you sure?" Gabriel asked. He looked at Harlequin as if he didn't believe that the elf had put the proper amount of thought into the situation. "As I said, I will accept your advice, but —"

"Listen," Harlequin cut him off, stopping in front of him. His voice wasn't flippant now. "These guys are in the middle of all kinds of shit there's no reason for them to be in the middle of. Things happen when they're around. I'll tell you this, kid — Fate's one bitch I don't argue with. And if you know what's good for you, you won't either. She does what she does, and we just follow along and try to keep our heads on straight while we're getting screwed."

Gabriel didn't speak for awhile. Then at last he sighed. "All right, Harlequin." Bringing his gaze around to meet the runners' he nodded. "I'll accede to your greater experience."

"See?" Harlequin said, shooting a glance at Frosty. "At least *somebody* around here respects my experience. Feels good for a change."

Stefan had had about enough of this. "Brother," he protested, crossing the room with quick steps, "do not be a fool! There is no reason for them to accompany us!"

"Shut up, Stefan," Harlequin said conversationally. "You've already made your contribution to this show. For once try listening to somebody who's got more sense than you do. You might learn something that way."

Gabriel quickly moved to defuse a potentially heated situation. "Please," he said, raising his hands.

"Harlequin—Stefan—there is no time for this. We have to begin."

"Do they always bicker like that?" Frosty asked Winterhawk under her breath as the two dragons exchanged glares.

"No," the mage whispered back. "Usually they're trying to kill each other."

"Oh," she said as if that answered everything.

"Do we have to go to the site of the Great Ghost Dance again?" Joe asked.

Harlequin shook his head. "Nope. That's one silver lining in this sick little cloud: with firepower like these two are slinging in addition to my own, we can do it from here if you want. Unless," he added with a glance toward the two dragons, "you've got somewhere you'd rather do it."

"I don't understand," Winterhawk spoke up. "I thought last time you said that the mana level wasn't sufficient to perform the ritual unless you were at a site of power."

"Yeah, that's true, but I didn't have two fraggin' Great Dragons helping me last time, either. That should be more than enough juice to get us all over. I hope," he added, glancing around nervously. To Gabriel and Stefan, he said, "Don't just stand there, kids. Let's get going. Frosty, can you go down to the car and bring up the big bag I put in the trunk?"

"Yes, Sahib," Frosty said sarcastically, but she moved toward the door, muttering something about "...treats me like a slave..." and "...one of these days..."

Harlequin ignored her. Instead, he began stalking around the perimeter of the enormous room, occasionally glancing off as if trying to gauge something. He looked up, examining the high glass-enclosed ceiling, then raised his hands like an artist framing a painting. "We'll need all

this furniture out of the way," he commented in the offhand tone of an employer giving orders to servants, then continued his wanderings.

Surprisingly, Gabriel immediately moved to do as the elf ordered, telekinetically picking up couches and chairs and lining them up along one wall of the room. After a moment Joe and Ocelot joined in (in their own more mundane way). 'Wraith and Winterhawk stood aside and watched, figuring (probably rightly) that the job was sufficiently covered, while Stefan ignored them completely. In less than five minutes, all the furniture in the vicinity had been stowed away. Winterhawk finished the job by magically gathering the shards of broken statue and depositing them in a heap in a corner.

By the time Frosty returned ten minutes after that, stumbling in with a large and apparently quite heavy duffel bag clutched with both hands in front of her, Harlequin had already begun his circle-casting—there were numerous strange chalk-marks located in strategic places around the marble floor. "About time," he said without turning. "Did you go get lunch too?"

"Next time carry your own bag, Your Highness," she snapped back. "What have you got in this thing—lead?"

Harlequin's only answer was to take the bag from her, drop it on the floor, and open it, pulling out candles, crystals, and other assorted magical items. These he arrayed haphazardly around the bag. Rising, he motioned for Gabriel and Stefan to come over, and soon the three of them were deep in conversation, muttering quietly to each other like a group of grim-faced college professors discussing a particularly knotty problem.

Winterhawk, standing a little away from the rest of the team, watched them with a series of emotions ranging from great curiosity to mild envy. As a magician himself, and one who hated allowing any aspect of his craft to

escape his notice, 'Hawk nonetheless knew that these three were so far out of his league that he probably wouldn't have understood them even if he'd been included in their conversation. They were an unlikely threesome of world-savers: Harlequin was his usual insane-scruffy self, looking more like a street performer than one of the most powerful magicians on the planet; Gabriel, jeans-clad and smooth-faced, with one errant lock of inky hair falling over his forehead, didn't seem old enough to be involved in something of such import; Stefan, elegant and tailored even at this hour of the morning, his features actually beginning to show some interest now that he was doing something, should from the look of him have been on his way to catch the train into town and an elevator to his corner office. 'Hawk sighed; he wasn't used to being a member of the B-level team in this or any other operation.

"Full of themselves, aren't they?"

Winterhawk turned to notice Frosty standing next to him. "What?"

She hooked a thumb toward the threesome. "I know how stuck-up His Nibs can be, and now we've got two Great Dragons to go with him. Good thing this is a big place, or we wouldn't fit in here with all the egos." She smiled a little bit to take the edge off the words. "So — how'd you guys meet, anyway? You didn't mention anything about hanging out with dragons last time we got together."

Winterhawk's mind flashed quickly back to their last foray into the metaplanes, accompanied by Frosty (they had known her as Jane Foster back then). "It's a long story," he finally said. "Remind me to tell you sometime."

"Oh, we'll have plenty of time," she assured him. "From what I understand, this circle they're discussing is gonna take hours to put together. I was thinking about

heading out for awhile, since all we'll be able to do until they're done is sit around and count our toes."

Almost as if he had heard them, Harlequin came momentarily up for air. "You guys can go grab something to eat if you want," he said. "We'll be at this for a long time, and there isn't much else you can do until we're done."

Ocelot came back over, eyeing the three suspiciously. "Yeah?"

"Oh, don't worry," Harlequin admonished, shaking his finger. "We won't go anywhere without you. Go on — you'll be bored out of your skulls watching this. Trust me."

The five runners exchanged glances, each of them clearly reluctant to leave the room, but the thought of sitting around watching the two dragons and Harlequin construct a huge ritual circle didn't sound very appealing either — at least not to anyone but Winterhawk.

Kestrel looked at Gabriel questioningly.

"Go on," he said, sounding encouraging but distracted.

"Come back in about four hours," Harlequin added. "We won't be done by then, but we should be close. Something like this would normally take most of the day, but I'm hoping that with the three of us working on it, we can get done faster."

Again the runners exchanged glances, debating whether to stay or go. Finally, Joe broke the silence by saying, "Come on, guys. Harlequin knows what he's doing, right?"

Winterhawk, Ocelot, and 'Wraith nodded, while Kestrel looked dubious but willing to go along with the consensus. "We'll be back," Ocelot said unnecessarily in a tone that sounded vaguely like a threat, and the five of them, along with Frosty, filed out of the apartment.

When they returned a little less than four hours later, they were surprised at how the place had been transformed.

They had spent the intervening time sitting in a downtown bar, alternating between catching up on old times with Frosty and casting nervous glances around the room as if expecting something to jump out at them. Nobody paid much attention to the fact that the runners and Kestrel were doing most of the talking, while Frosty was content to ask questions and not volunteer much information of her own. Nobody pressed her; whether it was because they didn't really *want* to know too much about what Harlequin had been doing since they'd last seen him or because they were being polite was irrelevant—the result was the same.

She seemed particularly interested in the story of how Kestrel had met Gabriel—in fact, the two women hit it off immediately and appeared to be on their way to becoming friends, judging by the ease at which they conversed. "Lucky you," Frosty said half-sarcastically at one point. "Both of us get to meet up with fantastically powerful beings left over from another time, but you get the gorgeous young hunk of a dragon, while I get Mr. Conceited Elf himself." Something in her eyes, however, suggested that she wouldn't have had it any other way. Kestrel just smiled. Ocelot knew her well enough to tell that she was feeling a bit overwhelmed by all this, but she was hiding it very well. She had more bravado than most guys he knew; she'd be all right.

The other thing they had done, carefully, was fill Ocelot in on what Gabriel had told them while he was under the sleep spell. He had listened with growing anger as they described Stefan's deal with the elf/Horror; when they had finished he had stood, telling them that he had

to go blow off some steam and would be back shortly. When he'd returned somewhat less than an hour later, he'd been more than a bit sweaty and disheveled, but looked calmer. Everyone had regarded him oddly, but nobody asked him where he'd been or what he had done.

The one thing they *hadn't* done, by unspoken agreement, during their time at the bar was drink alcohol. Instead, they had whiled away the four hours nibbling at bar food and tossing back sodas, mineral waters, iced teas, and whatever else they could find that wouldn't get them drunk. None of them wanted to be drunk for this. They were eating and drinking more to kill time than anything else.

Gabriel's penthouse looked quite different when they arrived back. The circle that Harlequin had begun constructing had been fully chalked in and marked off by the crystals, candles, powders, and wax-tracings. The candles were not yet lit, but they stood at several places around the circle, which itself had to be at least fifteen meters across. Harlequin stood at the center, arranging a group of eight candles around in a smaller circle, while Gabriel and Stefan worked on opposite sides of the large circle, carefully placing and aligning crystals. Around the outside of the perimeter were chalked symbols that Winterhawk recognized as extremely complex magical sigils, although he could not identify their exact nature. There were more of these symbols carefully drawn inside the circle.

Harlequin and Gabriel looked up as the runners entered; Stefan did not. All three of them looked like they had been working much harder than their task suggested: Harlequin's white facepaint was running a bit, and Gabriel's hair stood up in dark damp spikes from where he'd apparently been pushing it back off his forehead. Stefan had removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves,

so he now looked like a CEO ready to get down in the trenches. "Are you guys done yet?" Frosty inquired, moving over to the edge of the circle without touching its boundary.

"Almost," Harlequin told her. "You'll all want to do whatever you do to prepare yourselves—it'll be less than half an hour before we're through here."

The runners looked at each other and shrugged. There really wasn't much they *could* do to prepare themselves. Weapons would be useless, they knew; since only their astral forms would be taken to the metaplanes, any physical possessions they tried to take along would just be left behind. If they were meant to have something, they would have some representation of it once they got there, regardless of whether they actually carried it on their physical forms.

"Do you know where we're going, precisely?" Winterhawk asked, "or is this likely to be another metaphorical jaunt through the cobwebs of your—or Gabriel's or Stefan's—minds?"

Harlequin shrugged. "Who can tell? I know where we're *trying* to go, but with the Netherworlds, you never know exactly what'll happen. Once we pass the Dweller, we'll just have to see what the Universe throws at us."

"The Dweller?" Kestrel asked, looking back and forth between Harlequin and Winterhawk with a quizzical expression.

"You'll see," Harlequin said cheerfully. "Hope you don't have any deep dark secrets."

Stefan looked up from what he was doing and scowled, but didn't speak. After a moment he returned to his task.

The runners and Frosty moved off in various directions, wandering aimlessly around the room and watching the final construction of the circle. Winterhawk,

especially, seemed interested in what the elf and the two dragons were doing. Ocelot drifted toward the window some distance away, and after a moment Kestrel followed him. "What's wrong?" she asked. "Besides the obvious, I mean."

Ocelot sighed, looking out over Seattle. The view really *was* breathtaking from up here, but he barely noticed it. "I don't like it," he said.

"Don't like what?"

"Stefan. I don't trust him. I don't care what Gabriel said about a dragon's word. That might be true for Gabriel, but Stefan's just treacherous enough to get us to trust him and then screw us over. Especially when you add in that promise he made to the Horror."

Kestrel mirrored his sigh. "If you're worried, you don't have to go."

"Yeah I do." He turned so he was facing her. "I have to go. I don't want to—hell, I'd give anything to be home in bed right now. But it's something I gotta do. I just don't like it."

She looked him over, noting the slight unhealthy pallor under his tan, the thin sheen of sweat coating his forehead, and the way his hands were never still. "You sure *you'll* be okay?"

Ocelot thought about that for awhile before answering. "I'm gonna try," he said at last. "I said I would, and I will. But I know what these things do to me." He shivered. "I wish we could get the hell *on* with it. This waiting's makin' it worse than if we just got going."

She gripped his shoulder and squeezed encouragingly. "Soon. I guess I don't know enough about this to be as scared as you are. Gabriel's talked about the Netherworlds before, but I never knew he could take other people—mundanes—with him."

"Maybe he can't," Ocelot said. "Maybe he needs Harlequin to do it."

She shrugged. "I don't know. I never asked." Smiling a little to try to calm him down, she added, "It just never came up as a good potential vacation spot, I guess."

"That's the understatement of the year." He ran his hands through his hair, smoothing back the strands that had escaped from his long ponytail. Turning so his back was against the window, he idly watched the remainder of his team. Winterhawk stood near the circle, his restless gaze taking everything in with professional curiosity. Ocelot could almost see the keys clicking in his head as he took mental notes. 'Wraith was a little further away, standing still and appearing calm, though one could never be sure what he was thinking. Joe was pacing around; like Winterhawk he was watching the final construction of the circle, but his attention was divided between that and keeping an eye on everything else in the room and out the window. Frosty was the only one seated, sprawled back in one of the soft leather chairs against the wall. Her eyes were closed; she might have been taking a catnap. Her job would not be exciting, but it would be very important: she was the one who had to remain behind and watch over their unconscious bodies while their spirits were off roaming the metaplanes. Ocelot didn't envy her.

He and Kestrel were still standing there several minutes later, silently sending each other mutual comfort, when Harlequin rose up from his crouch in the center of the circle. "Okay, boys and girls," he announced, his voice carrying effortlessly through the huge room. "Showtime."

33.

The thing watched the ritual preparations with growing concern. This was not in the plan! It had expected that the young one and the foolish one would attempt to travel to the Netherworlds and seek out the source of the disturbance – in fact, it had counted on that very action. However, what it had not counted on was that they would seek the aid of the painted elf.

It had not personally had dealings with this elf, but it had heard of him. Most of its kind had heard of him, as he had a long and successful history opposing their efforts to get a foothold on this plane. If he were allowed to continue his involvement in the endeavor – not to mention the motley collection of humans and metahumans he had allowed to accompany them – then the chance that something could go awry and the entire plan thus be upset increased by a significant margin.

There was even a chance – admittedly a small one, but still considerable enough that the thing was not willing to take the risk of it – that the painted elf could not only upset the Master's plan, but destroy the thing, the Master's servant, itself. The elf's power was too strong, his experience too great, to be allowed to continue as the guide to these young ones.

Something must be done.

And quickly.

The thing began considering its options, examining and discarding plans until it arrived at one with a reasonable probability of success. When at last it settled on a strategy, it smiled to itself.

Yes. It could work. And there was certainly no shortage of the mindless ones with which it would implement its vision.

It did not think that it could do anything about the others; they were far too determined that it was their destiny to participate in this, and they would not easily give up their dreams, even though they knew not what they were entering

into. Even the last time, with the selfsame painted elf, had not prepared them for this.

But that did not matter. They were, in the greater scheme of things, irrelevant. The thing could deal with them with a mere flick of its power, if it so chose. For now, they were more amusing alive – not even considering the fact that they might at some point prove useful as pawns against the young one. It was the painted elf who must be prevented from joining the quest.

The thing began making its preparations. It did not have much time, and so it was forced to make haste. There was no time to consult the Master.

34.

"All right," Harlequin said. He was all business now, at least for the moment, even though with his makeup streaked and his hair awry he looked more insane than ever. "I've never done this before with so many people, so this will be a new experience for all of us. You two," he added, addressing the grim-faced Gabriel and Stefan, "are going to provide most of the power. I'll provide the navigation." He grinned. "You're the fire hydrant, and I'm the hose. If anything goes wrong, though, you'll have to be prepared to help me take control of the ritual." Turning, he now spoke to the runners. "If this works right, we'll end up very near the Bridge – or where it used to be. It's an easy place for me to get to, though probably not the best one. From there –" he shrugged – "we'll just have to play it by ear." His gaze raked over the assembled group. "Last chance to chicken out."

No one spoke.

"Okay," he said briskly. "Then let's rock and roll." Stepping into the circle, he pulled out a disposable lighter from his jeans pocket and one by one lit the eight candles in the center. Each candle was blue in color, veined with intricate silver tracings. The circle itself was full of patterns made with the tracings from similar candles, which now resided, unlit, around the outer edges. Harlequin walked to the edge of the circle and picked up one of the candles, which he also lit. "Are you sure you can handle this alone?" he asked Frosty.

"What's to handle?" she asked with a nonchalance she clearly didn't feel. "If you can't be safe in a Great Dragon's lair, where *can* you be safe?"

Harlequin didn't answer that, but everybody in the room noticed the drawn look on his face. Raising the

candle, he motioned to the five runners. "Please step inside the circle," he said, "but be careful not to smudge anything. Stand in the center, facing inward."

Carefully the runners complied with the elf's instructions. Joe, especially, had to step precisely to avoid smearing the complex sigils. When they were in their appointed places, Harlequin turned back to the two dragons. "Gabriel, you stand on that side, facing inward," he said, indicating a spot just inside the circle. "Stefan, you exactly opposite him on the other side." After they complied, the elf paced around (he never seemed to worry about touching the symbols, but somehow still managed to avoid them effortlessly), lighting the remaining candles around the perimeter with the one he held in his hand. A musky scent like burning incense began filling the area, though it dissipated quickly as the smoke wended its way upward.

Harlequin dripped wax from the candle into his other hand and moved around the inner circle, quickly touching each of the runners' foreheads with the wax. Repeating the procedure he did the same for Gabriel and Stefan, and then for himself. "Okay," he said to the dragons, "just like we discussed. Let's go."

With that he began slowly pacing around the interior of the circle, about halfway between the runners and the dragons. Gabriel and Stefan moved in the opposite direction from Harlequin, mimicking his steps perfectly. All three were murmuring something quietly, but none of the runners could tell what it was. The five of them looked at each other, their eyes showing controlled fear and some anticipation. This had not been the way they had done it the last time; they wondered how long the process would take.

The world began to swirl around them—
Their vision began to shift—

"Harlequin!"

Frosty's panicked cry cut through the room as she leaped from her chair and pointed at something above their heads. All eight participants in the ritual immediately redirected their attention to the place where she pointed.

Something was coming through.

"Shit! Keep going!" Harlequin barked, stepping quickly out of the pattern. Whatever was pushing its way through the doorway they had opened was large, furred, multi-legged; it didn't look to be the only one. *"Gabriel! Stefan! Keep it going – I'll handle this!"*

"Harlequin—" Gabriel began, his face lined with the strain of generating the magical power to fuel the ritual.

"No!" the elf snarled. *"Don't argue! Get everyone across! Quickly, before it's too late! GO!"* Jumping out of the circle, he raised his hand and a sword appeared in it.

The runners stared, but they were powerless to help now. Frozen in their positions, they watched and waited.

Gabriel and Stefan, realizing that Harlequin was right and they probably wouldn't get another chance, immediately shifted roles, with Stefan taking up the task of providing the raw power while Gabriel directed both that and his own power toward carrying the seven of them across to the metaplanes.

Frosty hurried to join Harlequin as the first of the creatures dropped through the portal in a grotesque parody of childbirth. It landed on the marble floor with a squish and immediately headed for the circle. Two more quickly joined it, dropping down on either side.

Harlequin gathered himself and unleashed potent magic against the creatures, frying them to sizzling piles where they stood. In the meantime, two more had come through, and more were following. The things were frighteningly fast.

The elf cast a quick glance toward the portal; the Enemy had been waiting. They had known of the ritual. They were there, prepared, when the doorway between the planes had been opened. The only way to stop them now was to close the portal, but he couldn't do that until the others had gotten through. It wouldn't make any difference if they stopped the ritual now and did it over again—most likely it would be worse, for the Enemy would have had more time to prepare and to summon its minions to the place. No, it was now or never. Grimly he cut down another gibbering monster as still more dropped through the hole. Beside him, Frosty cast her own magic, nowhere near as powerful as his own, but at this point every bit helped. "Hurry up!" he called desperately to the dragons. "I can't hold them off forever!"

Gabriel's only answer was a curt nod. His eyes were closed, his face, like Stefan's, set and streaked with sweat. Both dragons looked like they were engaged in a tug-of-war with the fate of the world at stake; perhaps that was not so far from correct.

Harlequin and Frosty were nearly surrounded now. Harlequin's hastily-erected barrier spell was keeping the Enemy away from the circle, but he didn't know how much longer it would hold, or how long it would take the fiends to realize that they could climb over the top of it. He slashed with his sword and continued casting spells, but he knew that if the team didn't do something soon all would be lost. Frosty was bleeding from a gash in her arm where one of the Horrors had slashed at her, and Harlequin himself had barely escaped the same fate by using his phenomenal dexterity to dance just out of reach. "Come on, kid..." he muttered. "Do it. I know you have it in you. Do it..."

Inside the circle, there was a soft *whump* sound and the doorway abruptly slammed shut, snapping one

unfortunate Horror in two. With an earsplitting shriek the thing died, half of it dropping through and landing with a wet gory thud on the floor while the other half presumably remained on the other side. Quickly Harlequin and Frosty made short work of the remaining Horrors, then stopped to take stock of their situation.

The floor around the circle was littered with blasted and bleeding bodies: bodies with hairy legs, bodies with tentacles, bodies with claws and stingers and mandibles. All of them were dead; the stench of death hung in the air. Inside the circle, the seven travelers had dropped like boneless dolls where they had stood; the runners were sprawled over each other while the two dragons lay on their opposite sides of the circle. A quick glance at the astral plane indicated that the dragons' auras were not masked now — each one glowed like a tiny sun inside the fading light of the now-inert circle.

"Well," Harlequin said with a sigh, allowing himself to slump as his sword disappeared. "They made it somewhere, at least."

"I hope they're all right," Frosty said, sliding up her sleeve to view the wound on her arm in preparation for healing it. "Are you going to go after them?"

The elf shook his head ruefully. Sweat ran down his face, streaking his makeup and making little red runnels down the white of his cheeks from the diamonds around his eyes. "Can't. I can't do another ritual now — I'm too wiped out. Besides, I'd never find them anyway. This one is all up to them now."

"You think they can handle it?" Frosty looked at the mangled bodies of the dead Horrors and shivered. She had faced these before, but she never got used to it.

Harlequin didn't answer for a long time. Instead he began pacing, nudging Horrors distastefully with the toe of his cowboy boot. Then he crossed the room and

gathered up a handful of couch-pillows. Returning to the circle, he straightened out first the two dragons and then the five runners, laying them out on their backs and putting pillows under their heads. "Do I think they can handle it?" he repeated at last. He sighed. "Two underage Great Dragons who can't stand the sight of each other, and five runners who've caught the eye of Fate." Shrugging, he completed his task and dropped wearily into one of the leather chairs. "I damn sure hope so," he said. "'Cause if they can't, we're all fucked."

35.

They appeared in the midst of Hell.

All around them the blackened landscape rose up, full of jutting rocks and unforgiving terrain and oppressive heat. The sky was blood red, the ground a treacherous sea of shifting slate in stark black.

When their vision cleared, they saw immediately that there were surrounded. Everywhere they looked, the leaping and shambling things were coming toward them, shrieking and chittering with the anticipation of what was to come. The only place from which the creatures were not coming was from directly behind them, where the ground sloped upward and eventually became a sheer cliff wall rising hundreds of meters above them.

"Spread out!" Gabriel ordered, immediately assessing the situation and taking command. "We can defeat these creatures! They are many, but they are weak." Suiting action to words, he backed up toward the cliff wall. Stefan joined him, moving off several meters to his left.

The runners, all but Kestrel accustomed for years to fighting alongside each other, set up a half-circle pattern arrayed around the two dragons. Joe took the point, with Ocelot on his left side. Kestrel wasted no time in taking up the opposite position to Joe's right. That left Winterhawk and 'Wraith, who fell in behind the front line—Winterhawk because he could cast magic from anywhere, and 'Wraith, since he was not as physically tough as most of the others, to serve as a backup position to pick off any Horrors that got past the front.

None of the four teammates were surprised to discover that they possessed weapons that they had not brought with them; once again the metaplanes had provided them with what they needed. Joe pulled his

massive axe from its familiar place on his back, while Ocelot drew his spear and 'Wraith his katana. Winterhawk, the only one of the team who *had* brought a weapon (since it had its own astral presence) already had his black mageblade out. Kestrel, confused but possessed of every bit as much savvy and experience as the others, quickly discovered and drew the katana at her side.

Gabriel and Stefan were already in action. For two beings who could not stand each other, they made a surprisingly effective fighting team. With the exception of a few spells thrown during the battle at Messina Tower, none of the runners had ever seen the two dragons let loose with the full power of their magic. It was a frightening thing to behold: each of them held both hands out before him, arcs of pure magical energy spreading out above the runners' heads and contacting the approaching Horrors.

The things screamed as they were cut down, falling only to have others take their places. The ones behind scrambled over the smoking entrails of their fellows without a backward glance, their entire minds devoted to the destruction of the seven on the rise in front of them.

Joe stepped up to meet them as they came forward, swinging his axe like a controlled mad thing and bowling them down two and three at a time with his massive strength. Ocelot and Kestrel, almost evenly matched in speed and prowess, used spear and katana to slice up more of the creatures, while Winterhawk, his mageblade in hand, concentrated on whittling down the small groups of those who hadn't quite reached them yet. 'Wraith, katana ready and moving at blurlike speed, covered the area between the front line and the two dragons, felling the creatures with quick precise cuts. All the time, Gabriel and Stefan laid down punishing magical covering fire, continuing to take down dozens of the things in a single

shot. All around the team, the thick stench of blood and guts and sweat and fear clawed at their senses.

Still the monsters kept coming. The battle seemed interminable, and it soon became clear that they were losing. The things were coming in thicker than ever, scrambling over the bodies and pieces of bodies, some getting cut down and some getting through. The air was full of the shrieks of the Horrors and the cries of the team as the tide of the battle began to turn and more and more of the creatures were getting through. Even the dragons were not immune: Gabriel's white shirt was stained with blood from a slice to his side, and Stefan's left leg had taken a wicked claw-slash. The runners in the front line were faring far worse: Joe continued his assault on sheer drive despite multiple bleeding wounds, Ocelot and Kestrel were barely standing, and Winterhawk and 'Wraith were being overrun. The Horrors seemed to be focusing their primary attention on getting to Gabriel and Stefan, which meant that whenever possible they attempted to get *around* the front line rather than fight through it. Even attempts at levitation didn't help: some of the Horrors could leap vast distances, and others could fly. Levitation risked a plummeting death if the creatures managed to neutralize an airborne combatant, so they quickly abandoned it. Worse, the footing was uncertain and dangerous, the dark shale under their feet shifting and threatening to rob them of their balance at every opportunity.

"Can't—hold out—much longer!" Ocelot pushed out between breaths, impaling a Horror coming in from his right.

"They're—overrunning—us!" Kestrel agreed, panting as she sliced the head off another.

Winterhawk slashed at a spider-creature that had gotten too close to him. "Can't you two—change form?"

"No," came Gabriel's discouraging reply. "Already tried. Stefan?"

"No," Stefan answered grimly as he sent another wave of magic out to sizzle a clump of Horrors.

"Can you—send us—back?" 'Wraith gasped. He was reluctant to bring up that option for it would amount to admitting that they had failed, but failure now might mean success later, while death now meant nothing but death.

"Not—quickly enough." Gabriel wheeled around to zap a threesome that was speeding up on his right side, effectively ending the conversation.

The creatures were getting smarter now—or at least as smart as mindless things like this could get. They began to attack in groups, with some of them engaging the front line while the remainder poured through. And it was working: more and more of the Horrors were making it past the tiring runners to snap at the two dragons. The ones that remained behind were finding more success than before with their attacks, too—all five runners and both dragons were slicked with blood, both their own and the Horrors'.

Still, though, they fought on. They could do nothing else. None of them would surrender, and there was no way out. They would go down fighting if they had to go down. There were too many of the things—however, everyone on the team was determined to take down as many as he or she could before succumbing. Maybe it wouldn't make a difference to the Universe, but it would make a difference to them. They would either die here and awaken in their bodies on the floor of Gabriel's penthouse, or they would die for good, but either way they would go out knowing they had done what they could do.

The Horrors surged forward with renewed vigor, twenty or so at a time, clambering over each other, leaping forward, slashing and snapping with their claws and their teeth. Joe went down first under their onslaught, followed quickly by Ocelot and Kestrel. Winterhawk and 'Wraith, a bit further back, held out for a few more seconds before the tide of dark things washed over them. The runners' screams indicated that they were, at least for the moment, still alive, but that state did not seem likely to continue for long.

Gabriel and Stefan, exhausted, retreated backward until their backs were pressed against the edge of the sheer black cliff. They managed to take down a few more with their magic before the wave engulfed them as well.

And then the creatures stopped.

Almost as one entity, the mindless things halted their attack and stood still as if listening to something. They seemed to resist for a moment, and then, again as one, they changed direction and retreated, leaving the party bleeding and barely conscious—but alive—on the black shale ground.

In less than ten seconds, no living Horror remained in the vicinity.

36.

Fool! Fool! Fool!

The Master will flay you alive, and you will deserve it!

The thing sat watching from its vantage point and continued to berate itself mercilessly for its stupidity. It had nearly lost the very purpose for all of its carefully laid plans, and for what?

Because in its haste to send the mindless ones through the gateway to attack the ritual and prevent the elf from accompanying the rest, it had neglected to realize that the others, with the ritual disrupted, had crossed over in a place other than the one where they had expected to arrive.

This would not have been a difficulty – in fact, it might have been beneficial, from the thing's viewpoint – except that they had appeared in the midst of the horde of mindless ones it had gathered to send across the gateway.

By the time the thing had realized its mistake and located the group, they had been beset by the creatures, whose only thoughts centered around destruction and killing. It had very nearly lost some of them, and that would have been a mistake the Master would not have forgiven.

It had almost lost the sacrifice.

Worse, it had almost lost the young one.

To lose them both would have meant not only an end to the Master's plan, but also an end to the chance to try again. There were no others in existence that fit all the necessary requirements – the others were either too powerful, not powerful enough, or not possessed of any weaknesses by which the thing might hope to lure them into cooperation.

No, if the mindless ones had destroyed these beings, the thing might as well have pitched itself into the Chasm. It would have been a more pleasant punishment than the one that would befall it when the Master at last was able to cross over and exact revenge on its cretinous servant.

A great relief flowed over it when it at last reached the place where they had crossed over, and realized that there was still time for it to rectify its mistake. Sending the mindless ones away had not been difficult for it – they were persistent, but their power when compared even with one such as the thing's was insignificant.

You are a fool, it thought, but you have been given another chance to redeem yourself. Do not fail again. The Master is depending on you.

It smiled to itself in a most unwholesome way as it began once more indulging fantasies of what its existence would be when the Master had taken his rightful place among them.

What a glorious day it would be!

37.

For several minutes there was silence. The dust settled, but the noisome odor of death and steaming entrails and blood still remained stubbornly in the air, already beginning to mingle with the putrid stink of decay.

Slowly, one by one, the party members staggered to their feet and regrouped near the cliff face where there were fewer bodies. "Condition?" Gabriel asked. His bright violet eyes looked strange in his blood- and grime-streaked face; he held his right arm at his side over a bloody slash wound. Like all the others, he had many more.

Everyone looked at everyone else. Kestrel and Ocelot were leaning on each other, and Joe held up both Winterhawk and Wraith despite grievous wounds of his own. Stefan supported himself by leaning against the cliff; he looked like he wouldn't be standing if he didn't do so.

"Why did they stop?" Winterhawk rasped, his gaze taking in the blasted, now-still battlefield. "They had us."

"Yeah," Ocelot added. His heart was beating so fast he thought it would never quiet, most of it from fear rather than exertion. They had been every bit as bad as he'd remembered them. *And these are only the little ones.* "Why the hell did they turn and run like that?"

"I don't know," Gabriel said. "They could have killed us — and yet they did not."

"Perhaps they wanted us alive," Stefan said.

"Then why attack us in the first place?" Gabriel turned slowly to face his brother.

Stefan did not answer.

"Maybe they just wanted to scare us," Joe said, then clamped his teeth together again against the pain of his numerous wounds.

Gabriel considered. "Possibly..." he murmured, then looked up. "At any rate, they were waiting for us. And they've deprived us of some very valuable assistance."

The runners looked at each other in fear as the realization sunk in that they were missing someone. "Harlequin," Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded. "He remained behind to fight the ones that got through."

"He's—uh—not likely to be coming along later, is he?" Ocelot asked. In his mind, the odds had just shifted decidedly away from success without the painted elf's experience and power in the group.

Gabriel shook his head ruefully. "No. The ritual is highly complicated. Even for Harlequin, it would take hours to reconstruct it, and doubtless he will be weary from his battle with the Enemy."

"If he survived," Joe said, sounding like he hadn't wanted to say it.

"There is that too," Gabriel said. He looked very serious.

"Uh—" Kestrel spoke up, "before we go too much further, can you magical types do some healing?" She looked like she was about to drop, her tanned skin pale under a coating of blood and dirt.

Everyone looked at Gabriel. "Are you up to it?" Ocelot asked.

The young dragon nodded. "Most magic seems to work properly here, so I hope that healing magic will as well." Turning to Kestrel, he reached out and grasped her shoulder, and the familiar golden nimbus surrounded her. In less than a minute, her wounds had disappeared.

Stefan, not surprisingly, moved off to heal himself as Gabriel finished with the others. Winterhawk volunteered to help with healing, but the drain from the spells he had cast was affecting him almost as badly as his wounds; Gabriel told him to rest after he was healed and not worry about doing any more magic right now.

Ocelot moved over to Kestrel after his injuries had been dealt with, experiencing a little bit of wonder. He had never had the benefit of a dragon's healing before; he was struck by just how complete it was—and how comforting. With Winterhawk—in fact, with any mage or shaman by whom he had ever been healed—the feeling was somehow different. He couldn't describe how, exactly, but Gabriel's touch had brought him not only relief from his wounds, but a small measure of relief to his psyche as well. Standing here in the afterglow of it, relishing the lack of pain in his body and his mind, he didn't feel quite so afraid anymore. He knew that would pass quickly, but for now he stood back with Kestrel and let it do its work.

Gabriel finished with Joe, 'Wraith, and Winterhawk, and then lastly healed himself. By the time he had finished he looked tired, but not nearly as much as one would expect after casting so many offensive spells followed by so many healing spells. Stefan stood off alone, eyeing his brother with a strange look, but still didn't say anything.

"All right," Gabriel said, surveying the territory. The smell from the dead Horrors was getting truly appalling now in the oppressive heat; almost everyone was wondering why they had eaten so much at the bar before leaving. "We need to move on."

"Which way?" Ocelot asked. "Looks like we're gonna be sloggin' through dead bodies whichever way we pick." He didn't look pleased by the prospect of squishing

through Horror guts to get anywhere, but he knew they had to go somewhere.

"The Netherworlds are rarely the same place twice," Gabriel said, half to himself. "Sometimes a way appears when there was none before. Perhaps we should look for it."

Immediately the runners began scanning the horizon, glad for something to do to take their minds off the carnage around them and their near-death experience. After a few moments Winterhawk rose up above the group and continued his scrutiny from there. "What are we looking for, exactly?" Kestrel asked Ocelot. She was trying hard not to show the fact that she was feeling very much out of her element here; even the other runners, including Ocelot with his deep-seated fear of these things, seemed to be dealing with the situation adequately. She wondered if they were as frightened as she was, and just doing the same thing. As long as they could take it, she could too—there was no way she was going to let Gabriel see that she was afraid, not after she had practically bullied him into bringing her along.

Before Ocelot could answer her, 'Wraith's quiet voice split the silence. "There," he said, pointing.

Sure enough, beyond the legions of smoking dead Horror corpses, a narrow path snaked off and disappeared over a hill. Everyone present would have put a large amount of money on the fact that the path had not been there before.

"How bloody convenient," Winterhawk said.

"Moo," Wraith said.

"You got *that* right," Ocelot muttered under his breath.

Gabriel did not reply; instead, he came down from the rise where he had been standing and started toward the path. "Come," he said, motioning for them to follow.

The runners hesitated, mentally preparing themselves to slog through the Horrors, when they realized they did not need to do so. Gabriel stopped before the bodies, looked at them a moment, then pointed his hand at them. A huge gout of flame shot out from it, incinerating the bodies into ash in a stripe two meters wide by about three meters out. "Stefan?" he said without looking back.

Stefan joined him and began doing the same thing; apparently he wasn't any more enamored of the idea of dirtying his feet with these foul creatures than the runners were. It looked as if they were taking energy from the act of destroying the things – possibly the reason why Gabriel had chosen not to simply levitate the party to their destination.

With the two of them working together and the runners following up behind them, it only took a few minutes to plow through the bodies enough to reach the path. Winterhawk watched them work, noting idly again how well they functioned together when they weren't trying to kill each other. From the back they looked more like father and son than brothers, Gabriel's casual clothes, slender build, and short spiky hair contrasting with Stefan's *corp-chic* suit and powerful physique. He wondered if dragons could choose their primary human forms or if they were the manifestation of something in the individual dragon's personality, and made a mental note to ask Gabriel about that when they got out of this hellish situation.

Of all the runners, Hawk was the one who harbored the least amount of hatred for Stefan based on what he had done. He did not, of course, like to be manipulated any more than any of his teammates did – in fact, all four of them had a serious problem with it – but he had been manipulated before by many other people, things, and beings: by Fate, by the Horrors, by the insect spirits, by

the various Mr. Johnsons for whom the team had worked over the years. One more Great Dragon wasn't going to significantly push him over the edge. The fact was, some of the things their employers had maneuvered them into doing and some of the situations into which they had been put by those same employers awakened far more anger in 'Hawk's mind than Stefan's duplicity had. That was not to say that he *liked* the dragon—far from it. But he was fairly sure that of the four he was the most likely to put the situation behind him and move on.

He glanced back at Ocelot; his friend was bringing up the rear of the party along with Kestrel. The two of them were talking quietly as Ocelot wiped his spear-blade off on his pants and stowed it in its holder, then set about re-tying the leather cord that held his ponytail together. In front of them, Joe took an unaccustomed spot in the middle, while 'Wraith moved along quietly next to 'Hawk himself. "Thinking?" the elf asked, turning to look at him. 'Wraith's white eyes with their pinprick black pupils showed little expression; it was difficult for anyone who didn't know him well to discern what was on his mind.

"Can't *stop* thinking," the mage admitted, pitching his voice low to at least attempt to avoid being heard by the two dragons. "Or do you mean, what am I thinking *about*?"

"Yes."

'Hawk shrugged. "Never expected to be back here, I guess. I thought we were quite finished with this particular unpleasantness."

"As did I," 'Wraith agreed. A measurable troubled expression appeared on his face. "Wanted to ask Harlequin—the Bridge. Gone? And Thayla?"

Winterhawk nodded soberly. "Yes, I'd very much like to know how that little trick was accomplished as well. And if the Bridge is destroyed, where did all of these—"

he indicated the dead Horrors on either side of him with distaste "—come from?"

"Sacrifices."

Winterhawk looked up, his surprise evident. To the best of his recollection, this was the first time Stefan had ever spoken directly to any of them except Gabriel.

"Sacrifices?" Winterhawk repeated, trying to keep his voice neutral so as not to set the dragon off. He wanted the answer to this question, regardless of who was providing it.

"Blood sacrifices."

"What—sort of blood sacrifices?"

Stefan had apparently tired of talking to him, because he didn't answer. Gabriel, however, did. "Humans," he said soberly. "And metahumans. The Enemy can use them to create these weak minions in large numbers."

"You mean," Joe asked slowly, moving up a little to get into the conversation, "every one of these things used to be a person?" His features took on a look of dismay mixed with queasiness and resolve.

"Not precisely," Gabriel said, still not turning to face them as he continued to incinerate Horror bodies. "It would be more correct to say that the sacrifice of their spirits was used to power the ritual that created these creatures."

"So they don't—remember?" Joe asked with another sideways glance at the piles of bodies on either side of them.

"I don't know," Gabriel said honestly. They couldn't see his face, but his voice suggested that he was very serious. "I've never examined one that closely. I hope for their sakes that they do not."

Winterhawk, listening, shivered slightly. The thought of having one's spirit stuck inside of one of these fell things was worse than his former greatest fear—that of

being taken over by an insect spirit. The thought of being stuck in one of these things and *knowing* about it was far too horrifying to even contemplate. He remembered the children slaughtered during the end of their last battle with the Horrors, and wondered if these creatures were created in the same way.

"So many of them..." Joe said, and trailed off.

They walked along in silence for the remainder of the time it took to burn through the bodies, and at last they stood on top of the hill where the path began.

The two dragons stopped, breathing hard from their exertions, as the runners fanned out alongside them. All of them looked at the path.

It led down a gently sloping hill, still made of the shifting slate, to a wide flat area bounded by a wider river. In the river was a boat, and next to the boat was a shadowy, hooded figure. "The Dweller at the Threshold," Winterhawk said, somewhat unnecessarily. He had not yet become an Initiate the last time he had been here with Harlequin nearly three years ago, so he had not recognized the same figure when it had blocked their path then. Now, a veteran of several of his own metaplanar travels, he was well acquainted with its nature at least, if not its full purpose. It had appeared to them in this aspect on their last quest with Harlequin, but Hawk knew that the way in which it manifested could vary infinitely depending upon the situation. He wondered if there was any significance to the fact that it had duplicated the same form for this quest.

"The what?" Kestrel asked, coming over to stand next to the mage. "That's the second time somebody's talked about the Dweller. What is it, some kind of weird ferryman?"

"Essentially," Winterhawk said, nodding. "It guards the entrance to the metaplanes. You don't pass it without passing some sort of test first."

"I guess you're not talking true or false, huh?" she asked sarcastically.

"In a way he is," Gabriel said. Kestrel gave him a very strange look, but didn't pursue it.

"Well, hey," Ocelot said, forcing his voice into a flippant tone that was nothing like what he was really feeling, "let's not keep the guy waiting, eh?" Without waiting for an answer, he started down the path toward the place where the Dweller stood. After a moment, the others followed.

The robed and hooded figure did not move or speak until everyone had reached it. "Welcome," it said, its voice sounding like it resonated from a very deep place, "to the Place Beyond." Although its face was hidden in the shadows of the dark hood, it appeared to regard each of them individually for a moment, speaking to each in turn. "Welcome, Tatan'ka Wanji'la," it began as it faced Joe.

It turned to Winterhawk. "Alastair Stone."

To ShadoWraith: "Johnathan Andrews."

To Ocelot: "Terry Symonz."

To Kestrel: "Juliana Harvath."

It paused a moment after that, stopping to settle its silent scrutiny on the two remaining members of the party before speaking again.

"And welcome to you, Sildarath, son of Kinsatar, and young Gethelwain, son of Gilvirian."

The runners exchanged glances—all except Kestrel, who reacted to the use of Gabriel's true name with a surprised start that had not accompanied the use of her own.

When the Dweller spoke again, it stood directly before the two dragons. "You seek to pass this place," it intoned,

"but first you and your companions must prove yourselves worthy of the privilege." Taking two steps back, it shimmered and split, becoming seven different Dwellers. Each one took up a position in front of one of the party members and lowered its hood.

38.

They were standing in a room. The walls were a flat, unrelenting black; a persistent shifting mist filled the air.

The runners could see only a short distance; it appeared that they were somehow arrayed in a circle, with each person only able to see dim outlines of the others. Only five outlines. Who was missing? "Is everyone here?" Winterhawk spoke up urgently.

"I'm here, Dad."

Winterhawk's eyes widened as the figure stepped out of the mists. Small, slim, dark-haired, dressed in a neat school-uniform blazer and pressed gray pants. "N – Nigel?" the mage whispered.

The child's eyes showed pain and sadness displayed on a face so very reminiscent of Winterhawk's own more than twenty years ago. "Why did it take you so long to find me, Dad? Didn't you look?"

Winterhawk stared at the boy. Something in the back of his mind told him that this was just a trick – an illusion. But it looked so real, so tangible. So alive. "You're – not real," he said raggedly. "You're nothing but a phantasm. Just a trick of the mind."

"You never wanted me around, Dad. I knew that. I can see why you still don't want to think about me." Still the boy's eyes were sad and disappointed.

"That isn't true," he protested in spite of himself.

"Yes, it is." The child nodded, his eyes never leaving Winterhawk's face. "You know it is. If you'd have really wanted me around, you'd have tried harder to save me. You wouldn't have killed me."

Winterhawk stared at him, unable to speak for a moment. Then, finally: "There – was no hope. You were dying. The pain – you were in terrible pain. It was what you asked for."

Nigel laughed cynically, with a very unchildlike sound. "That's what you wanted to believe, isn't it? You wanted to believe that it was what I wanted, so you could get rid of your guilt about being relieved that you were gonna be rid of me."

"No!" The mage stepped forward, but Nigel stepped back out of reach. "No! That isn't what happened. You're just an illusion trying to get into my mind! I won't let you do it." He straightened up, staring resolutely at the boy with cold blue eyes.

Nigel shrugged. "You can believe whatever you want." Again his expression saddened. "But what else am I supposed to think? I've been here, waiting for you. It's so cold here, and there's never anybody to talk to. If you didn't want to get rid of me, why didn't you come to find me?"

'Hawk closed his eyes briefly, thinking of the little grave in the tiny cemetery on the outer edge of his land in England. "I –"

"I know you didn't want me around," Nigel continued. "If you did, you wouldn't have killed Mum." Tears formed in his expressive gray eyes. "First Mum, then me. Why didn't you love me, Dad? All I wanted was for you to love me."

Winterhawk looked away, fighting unbidden emotions that were coming crashing back far too fast. He had thought he had successfully dealt with those feelings, but now – "Nigel – what do you want me to say to you?" His gaze darted back and forth, but his companions had faded to the vaguest of shadows.

The boy grinned, again in an unchildlike manner. "You won't get off that easy, Dad. You're just feeling bad because you think you're supposed to. Aubrey loved me – he accepted me right away. But you were suspicious. You're always suspicious. You don't trust anybody. The only reason you're upset is because you're a good actor, right? You think that

pretending to be upset will make you really feel it. But it doesn't, does it, Dad?" He emphasized the title.

"No!" Winterhawk spoke too loudly. "I—I didn't believe you at first, but once I realized who you were—" He broke off, trying to get his voice under control before continuing. "I didn't want you to die, Nigel," he finished in a near-whisper. "I would have done anything to save you, if I could. You know that. I know you do."

Nigel eyes showed interest, and something else behind it. "Anything?" He thought about that a moment, then smiled. "But you can bring me back, Dad. You can. I thought you knew that. I've been here all along, just waiting for you to come and fetch me." He extended his hand toward Winterhawk. "Just take my hand, Dad. Take my hand and I'll come back to you. Then we can go home to Aubrey and catch up on all the stuff we've missed. Come on." Wiggling his fingers invitingly, he smiled a little wider. "It's all you have to do. Prove to me that you really do love me, Dad. 'Cause I still love you."

"So there ya are, ya two-timin' coward."

Ocelot's head snapped up as the figure before him took form.

"'Bout time you came back so I can finally get a chance to kick yer turnie ass."

For a moment Ocelot didn't recognize the young man—barely more than a boy—who stood before him. Hulking, shaven-headed, festooned with tattoos and earrings and dangling chains: a boy's eyes looking out of a man's body. "Hugo?" A little louder: "Hugo? Is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me, Ocelot." Hugo spat out the name like an insult. "Maybe I shouldn't call you that, though, huh? You ain't a Predator anymore. You skipped out. You betrayed us all."

Ocelot shifted position. Suddenly he was too hot, his heart racing. The metaplanes were a weird place, he knew that. Hugo was dead. He'd been dead for more than ten years. Could this

place bring him back? He didn't know. "What are you doin' here, Hugo?" he demanded, slipping into his familiar gangleader tone of authority. "What do you want with me?"

Hugo snorted. "I told ya, man – I wanna kick yer fuckin' ass. I wanna pay you back for gettin' us killed and skippin' out with the nuyen." He paused, swaggering forward a bit. "We all know you planned it that way. You took us in there knowin' we'd get killed and then you took all the money for yerself."

"No!" Ocelot protested angrily. Somehow convincing this young man – a young man who had once trusted him with his life – that this was not the truth was very important to him. "No! It wasn't like that at all! It was a setup! The guy who hired us set us up. You know that. I know you do!"

"How do I know that?" Hugo sneered. "You never came back. You just took the money and ran. What did you do with it, Ocelot? Spend it on those cheap women you always liked so much? Booze? A new bike?" Again he swaggered forward, still just out of Ocelot's reach. He stood a good ten centimeters taller than Ocelot, chains jingling across his broad shoulders. "That money was ours, man. The Predators'. The Predators got hired to do the job, so the money was for all of us. If you didn't set us up, how come you didn't bring it back?" His expression clouded over even more. "Some of us got families, you know. Brothers an' sisters and mamas who coulda used some o' that. Just 'cause your ol' lady skipped out on ya don't mean the rest of ours did. We coulda got some better weapons so we didn't get killed so easy. We coulda been somebody with all that cash. You know? But you didn't think o' that, did ya? You just thought about yourself."

Ocelot stood silently under Hugo's onslaught, growing more and more agitated with each word. His mind raced as he fought to get his thoughts under control. "It wasn't like that!" he finally said desperately.

But it was like that. As he looked into Hugo's angry brown eyes, he knew it. He hadn't set his fellow gangers up – in fact, he had fought like a madman until he knew the situation was

hopeless. He'd tried to get them out, but everything had happened too fast. They'd been dead before he could get to them. All he could do was run. But when the guy with the credstick had shown up – when the sniper had blown him away right there in his car – Ocelot had acted on pure adrenaline and instinct. Grab the credstick and run.

Run away.

Even at eighteen, he had known this was the only break he was going to get. Either take the money and get the hell out of this life, or spend the rest of his days – which probably wouldn't be many – as the boss of a small-time gang. It was what he'd dreamed about: the chance to get out and make something of himself. It's my money now, he had thought. The other guys who worked for it are gone. I don't have to share it with anybody who didn't work for it. That rationalization had gotten him through many years, but there had always been the questions around the edges. Always the guilt.

Hugo sneered again. "You're nothin' but a traitor to your gang brothers. You don't even deserve the name Ocelot. You ain't a Predator. I lived for the Predators. I died for the Predators! What did you do? You ran away! Fuckin' coward is what you are!" Hugo's voice carried an inflection Ocelot was all too familiar with: the high-pitched sound of a young man trying desperately to cover imminent sobs with yelling.

Ocelot struggled to keep his voice level, which was difficult with his growing anger. "What do you want, Hugo? I can't go back and change things now."

Would I even want to? Quickly he submerged the thought. He didn't know how things worked here – did Hugo know what he was thinking?

Hugo made a "come-here" gesture with both hands, weaving around like a drunken boxer. "Come on, Ocelot. Come on, man. Gang rules. You the leader – you gotta fight anybody who challenges you. I'm challenging you! Or are you too yellow to fight me? C'mere and let me whip yer ass, you coward!"

"My child, what are you doing here?"

The voice insinuated itself into Joe's brain and into his bones: deep, resonant, somehow so much more than merely a voice. Although the speaker had never addressed him using words before, only images, Joe still knew without question who stood before him.

From the mists, the dim outline drew closer, filled out, grew shorter and wider. The massive furred form held a wisdom in its eyes that seemed to comprehend every mystery of the Universe.

Bear.

Joe immediately dropped down into the cross-legged, seated position he always assumed when attempting to communicate with Bear. Although the method was unlike any he had seen before, Joe did not think it odd that Bear would be here to test him. Who better to do so, after all, than the totem to whom he had given his service? "I am here to help my friends," he said. "To defeat the Enemy."

"You do not belong here, child," the deep voice said gently. "This is not your battle."

Confusion settled over Joe's features. "Why is it not my battle? I don't understand. The Horrors –"

"You have been deceived, young warrior. You and your companions have all been deceived." Bear lowered down to a half-sitting, half-reclining position, its wise brown eyes never leaving Joe's face.

"Deceived? How?" The troll leaned forward slightly.

"The great wyrms use you for their purposes. They care not about whether you or your companions survive. They care only for their feud with each other."

Joe stared at Bear. This did not sound right at all. "But – how can that be true? Gabriel hasn't lied to us. And Harlequin trusts him."

"Gethelwain is more honorable than most, but he is still a member of his race. All of them are deceivers who care only for their own affairs. When you are no longer useful to them, they

will turn on you. It is the way of their kind. Believe me, young one – I will not lead you astray as they will."

Joe sat there, silently turning Bear's words over in his mind for several moments before speaking again. "I want to help fight the Horrors. I want to help my friends to make sure that those things don't get across the Chasm again. I can't leave them now."

"You and your friends must all abandon this quest," Bear said solemnly. "Before it is too late for you, you must return to your homes. The wyrms are already plotting with each other to use you as their pawns – to sacrifice all of you so that they might succeed in their own purposes. They care nothing for you, save for your value as playing pieces in their game. It is the way of their kind, and has been for eons." Bear's voice softened, filling Joe with a sense of belonging to something larger than himself. "It will take courage, young one, but courage is something you have in abundance. You have followed me since your last time here – have I ever deceived you?"

"No..." Joe said slowly.

"Then you must listen to me now. Your life depends on it. You are of my people, Tatan'ka Wanji'la. I will protect you. But you must heed my warnings. You are not safe here."

Again, Joe thought Bear's words over before replying. Something was scratching at the back of his mind, trying to get him to notice it, but he couldn't determine what it was. "I..." he said, still speaking slowly and deliberately as if considering every word before allowing it to exit his lips. He shook his head. "I can't betray my friends. I knew I might die when I agreed to go along."

Bear's head lowered a bit. The huge creature looked disappointed. "I am sorry to hear you say that, young one, because I did not want to force you to make a choice. I had hoped that you would follow me of your own free will."

Joe's gaze came up. "A choice?"

"I advised you against this. I am not accustomed to having my children defy me, since I seek only their well-being. But you

must make your own choice. If you choose to accompany the wyrms on their ill-advised errand, then I can do nothing but move on and seek others who are more receptive to my teachings."

Joe stared, fear rushing through his body like an electric shock. Was Bear saying what he thought it was saying? "You'd – leave me if I don't give this up?" No! It couldn't be – anything but that! Ever since Joe and Bear had found each other, the young troll had felt as if he had found his purpose in life. Bear had filled a void that he hadn't even know he had. To lose that – it would be like losing a part of his own body! To have to make such a choice here – it was unthinkable. "I – can't – "

Bear watched him serenely. "Make your choice, young warrior. There is no turning back."

"Well...look who's back."

The voice, the familiar grace of movement, the grin – Kestrel recognized the person who came out of the mist the moment he spoke. It had, after all, been only a year and half since she'd last seen him.

Since she'd last seen him alive.

"Raptor," she said, eyes wide with fear and confusion. Alone among all the runners, Kestrel had never before dealt with the metaplanes. Seeing him again, here – it couldn't be!

The handsome, auburn-haired elf grinned a little wider, but there was something nasty in his eyes that had never been there in life. "Long time no see. Looks like you're doing fine."

"How – are you here?" she asked. Was he a ghost? An illusion? Some kind of waking dream?

"You mean how am I here, since I'm dead?" Raptor continued to grin. "Oh, you'll figure it out eventually. This place is pretty strange – lots of things can happen. Didn't you know that nobody's ever really dead? Big or small, you never really disappear completely. Hell, I bet even Dunkelzahn himself is wandering around here somewhere." He chuckled as at an

absurd thought. "When you die your spirit hangs out here for eternity. Boring as hell, that's for sure."

"Then – you're not really dead? Indy? Cabal? Geist? Are they here too?"

The elf shrugged. "Probably. We kinda lost touch with each other after the big blowup, you know. Kinda lost touch with a lot of things, come to think of it. Our arms, our legs, our heads – " he clucked in mock shame. "Very messy. But I guess you weren't there to see it, were you?" he added as his eyes fixed on hers. "You were off saving wounded lizards or something."

"You knew I would have been there if I could!" she said, a little too loudly. "I told you to go without me! Why did you wait so long? You could have made it if you hadn't waited!"

Raptor shook his head and sighed through his teeth in the manner of a disapproving father whose child had just given him the wrong answer. "See, babe, we couldn't do that. We were a team. We all understood the idea of teamwork. You work with somebody, you put your butt on the line for 'em. I guess you didn't ever really understand that, did you?"

"You can't say that!" she said, guilt and anger warring for control of her voice. "I was as much a team player as any of you! And I saved your butts a few times, too, if you'll remember. But I got hung up. I'd have gotten back faster if I could have. I didn't want you all to die for me!" As if to compound her guilt, the faces of her teammates swam through her brain, coming back with a clarity that she didn't think she could summon up anymore. She remembered her brief romance with Raptor, a couple of months before the accident, and wondered why she had never noticed this side of him before. "I didn't want you all to die," she whispered again, lowering her head.

"Of course not," he said, the sarcasm clear in his tone. "You've had it so bad since we died, didn't you? Jetting all over the world with that overgrown lizard – didn't anybody ever tell you never to trust a dragon, babe? They'll screw you over every

time. Thought you were smarter than that. But now you've got your pet dragon and that ganger boyfriend of yours – what else do you need? Not us, for sure. You're probably glad we're gone."

Even though his words angered her, Kestrel felt the guilt and grief overwhelming her anger almost immediately. "I'd bring you back in a minute if I could. All of you. I wanted to die with you in that helicopter. But I can't."

Raptor shrugged. "Sure you can. If you really want to, you can join up with us again. We can go find Indy and Geist and Cabal and be a team all over again." He smiled, this time with the smile of the old Raptor – cocky and shy at the same time. "I'd like to have you back, babe. We made a good team." Extending his hand, he took a step forward. "Come on. Don't break up the team. Do what you should have done back there on the island."

ShadoWraith simply stared. There was nothing he could say.

The woman who emerged from the mists was beautiful – so beautiful that there were not words to describe it. Tall, dark-haired, green-eyed, her skin fair as the finest alabaster, she wore a flowing red gown that accentuated the perfection of her flawless figure. Moving with inhuman grace, she stopped before 'Wraith and smiled. "It's been a long time," she said. Her voice was musical, slightly husky in a seductive way. Her dress swished softly around her legs like the faintest sound of a spring wind.

"Too long," 'Wraith said after a slight pause to get himself under control.

Desire had found him. He wouldn't even admit it to himself, but he had been searching for her ever since he had last seen her – danced with her – and now she had found him. A small smile touched his lips.

"I wanted to see you again," she said in that soft, irresistible voice.

"I have been hoping I would see you again."

She frowned – it looked incongruous on her beautiful features. "Why?"

The question caught 'Wraith by surprise. "I believe we have much to – talk – about," he said at last.

"Talk?" she said with a musical little laugh. "That has always been your problem, you know."

"Indeed?" Again 'Wraith was confused. But then, Desire didn't have to make sense. Sense was not her purpose – senses were.

"You're the only man I ever met who wanted to talk to me." She shook her head in disgust. "I knew I was wrong to waste my time on you. You're not what I was looking for. Not anything like what I thought you were." She started to turn away.

"Wait," 'Wraith said urgently. "What – do you mean?"

She stopped, half-turned. "I thought I could bring you around. Show you the true meaning of desire. Of passion. But I've been watching you all this time. You don't have any passion." She held him with her bewitching gaze. "Perhaps you did at one time, but no longer. I would have been better off to seek out one of your friends. The mage, perhaps, or the troll. They have passion. They would know what to do with me."

'Wraith shook his head. This could not be. This wasn't the Desire with whom he had danced at the party. She couldn't be. That one had understood him. "You are not Desire," he said flatly.

"Oh?" Her eyes glittered with mirth. "Are you so sure, my stoic friend?" Her smile grew wider as she leaned forward a bit. "Are you willing to take the chance, after all the time you have spent pursuing me?"

"I have not been pursuing you," 'Wraith protested, a little surprised at how roughened his voice sounded in his ears. "I have been seeking Thayla. Only Thayla."

She laughed again. "Trying to fool yourself now, are you? You aren't fooling me. You aren't fooling your friends. Besides,

Thayla is gone. There isn't anything you can do about that." She paused to look into his eyes again. "It's me or nothing, love. If," she added, turning back around to face him fully, "I decide to give you another chance."

'Wraith stared at her. "You – did not make a mistake. With the dance, I mean."

"Prove it," she murmured, once again injecting the throaty, seductive lilt into her voice. She reached out both hands to him; her fingers were long and lovely, the nails red-painted. "Come and dance with me again. Let me show you real desire. The dance before was only a taste of it. I can show you so much more, if you're not afraid."

'Wraith hesitated. "I – have a job to do now."

"What is more important?" she asked. She leaned forward a little further and locked eyes with him. "Come to me. Dance with me. I'll make you forget everything else." She rose, frowned, then smiled again. "Come with me now, or you'll never have the chance again. Desire doesn't often give second chances."

She extended her hands to him once more.

*Around the circle, Winterhawk reached out to Nigel –
Ocelot brought his fists up and took a step forward –
Joe bowed his head and prepared to make a choice –
Kestrel moved toward Raptor –
'Wraith extended his hands to Desire –*

"NO!"

All five runners heard the voices at the same time – two voices, from opposite sides of the misty circle.

They had almost forgotten about the circle – about the existence of their teammates around them.

Winterhawk and Joe stopped almost simultaneously and then staggered backward, crying out in what sounded like a single voice.

The other runners heard the voices and stopped as well.

The figures around the circle continued to beckon them.

"Stop!" Winterhawk called, his voice carrying surprisingly strongly given that they hadn't heard each other talking to the specters. "Don't do this. Fight it!"

The others hesitated.

"He's right!" Joe's voice boomed through the room. "It's not Bear—it can't be Bear! Come back to the middle of the circle! It's the team we need!" The great Bear regarded him silently.

Winterhawk tried not to look at Nigel's searching eyes. It was still too real, still too painful. "Yes—exactly. Don't believe them—they're not real!" He began stepping backward, slowly, toward the middle of the room. "I can't stay, Nigel," he whispered. "I hope you'll forgive me someday."

"What if they *are* real?" Ocelot asked, his voice strained. Hugo still bobbed and wove in front of him, grinning challengingly.

"Yes," Wraith added. She was so beautiful—would he ever have this chance again if he gave it up now?

"It's the right thing to do," Joe said. He too was moving backward. "I *know* it. I can *tell* somehow." He backed into Winterhawk and clamped his hand around the mage's. "Come on!"

Kestrel was the first to respond. "Sorry, Raptor," she said quietly. "I gotta stay with the living now. Good luck." With three quick steps she was next to Joe. She took the troll's other hand.

Ocelot stared at Hugo, the dead kid who'd been in his charge. The kid he'd failed so many years ago. "Life's gotta go on, Hugo," he finally murmured, almost convulsively throwing himself backward. He found

Kestrel's hand and grabbed it. She gripped it tightly, obviously still dealing with her own demons.

That left only 'Wraith. "Come to me," Desire murmured. "They've all given up, but you don't have to. You can have your heart's desire—the answer to all your prayers and hopes and dreams. You can be whole again. Don't let this chance go by; you'll regret it for the rest of your life." She took another step forward, her lips parting sensuously. She ran her tongue around them. "Come to me..."

'Wraith stared at her, for a moment trying to block out the sounds of his teammates calling to him. His entire body was shaking slightly with the force of being torn by two worlds.

Then his shaking quieted as a calm settled over him. With the tiniest hint of a smile on his lips, he met Desire's eyes. "I don't dance," he said, and stepped backward to the team. Kestrel and Winterhawk took his hands.

The room faded from view.

39.

The specific location did not look familiar, but the purpose of this place was all too easy to discern.

Gabriel and Stefan stood only a few meters apart, but it might as well have been worlds. The high stone walls of the cavern rose above them, disappearing into dimness at least twenty meters above. The walls were carefully carved out to form the chamber in which they now stood; the floor was made of the same stone covered over with a layer of soft sand.

It was a dragon's lair — but whose?

When the fog cleared and he could see the place where he now stood, Gabriel turned quickly toward Stefan, but his brother was already fading out as if he had never been there. There was no sign of Kestrel or any of the other runners. "Stefan?"

"Why do you call for him?" a voice spoke in his mind. *"Was he your partner in my betrayal?"*

Slowly Gabriel turned back around.

And stopped.

A massive figure was standing before him, although it had made no sound in entering the chamber. Gabriel did not need to see the figure's eyes or the color of his scales to know who it was—he knew by the voice. He knew immediately by the voice. "Telanwyr." Grief gripped him; he could barely speak his old friend's name through it. He never thought he would hear that particular voice again.

"Yes, my traitorous young student. It is I." Telanwyr stepped out of the fog, his huge head lowering until it was in front of Gabriel and only about a meter away from him. *"I do not understand how you can even face me after what you have done."*

Gabriel shook his head, holding his ground. "I have done nothing, Telanwyr," he said softly. "It was the Enemy. They used Stefan to lure you to your death."

Telanwyr shook his head. "*Gethelwain, my student – I had such high hopes for you. You were the finest of your generation. Tell me – what did it take to convince you to betray me? After all I have done for you, all the things I have taught you? What could it have been, Gethelwain?*" His voice in Gabriel's mind sounded infinitely sad and weary.

Gabriel fought his grief as it welled up again. How could Telanwyr believe that he had been responsible for his death? *Perhaps that is what he thought at the moment he was destroyed, the thought came into his mind, and that is what he believes now. You must convince him otherwise.* Yes. That was what he must do. "Telanwyr – please. You must believe me. I give you my word that it was not I who contacted you. I did not even know you had come until your – dying cry – hit me." He stepped forward, right in front of the great head. "I would have died myself to save you, had I known!"

Something rumbled in the back of the dragon's throat. "*And now you lie to me under cover of your word! Oh, Gethelwain – the others warned me against taking so much time with you. I should have listened to them. You had such promise, but I see now that you are no better than your miserable brother.*" He paused a moment. "*And why are you in that form? Are you ashamed of your true one?*" Lunging forward so fast that it was nearly impossible to follow the movement, he slammed into Gabriel with the tip of his nose, driving the young man down into the sand.

Gabriel fell hard, the wind momentarily knocked from him. "Telanwyr!" he cried, trying to get his breath. "Do not do this! I am here to avenge your murder! The Enemy has deceived Stefan, but he is here to right his error. Please do not make such accusations of me!" He struggled to rise again.

"I should kill you here and now," Telanwyr said implacably, bringing one great claw above Gabriel so he couldn't get up. *"That is what is done with traitors, is it not? Your brother should well know that, as should you. It would give me great pleasure to watch my contemporaries rip you limb from limb. Or perhaps to do it myself!"* He opened his mouth, baring his razor-sharp teeth and bringing his head in close.

Gabriel lay very still. He could feel Telanwyr's hot breath flowing over him. "Telanwyr—I am not lying to you! What can I do to prove that to you, if you will not take my word?"

Telanwyr did not answer. Instead he lowered the sharp claw a bit more, carefully aligning himself so it hovered right above Gabriel's shoulder. Still silent, he brought his foreleg down until the claw was just touching. *"Do you know how it felt to die, young Gethelwain? Do you know how it felt to have your flesh torn from you by explosives, and then to have projectiles ripping through you—deadly poisons delivered into your lungs? Do you know how it feels to have a laser split your head? Do you have any idea of the pain I went through?"* With each sentence, he brought the claw a bit lower until at last it punctured the young man's skin.

Gabriel gasped as blood welled up around the dragon's claw. "Telanwyr—do not do this! Let me explain to you what has happened. If you still wish to kill me then—" He trailed off. "Please."

"I am not going to kill you. I would not soil my talons on such a job. I have others to do that for me." Telanwyr's mind-voice sounded amused at the thought. *"And I have no use for your explanations."* Drawing back, he yanked the claw up and out of Gabriel's shoulder.

Again Gabriel drew a sharp breath at the pain, his hand flying up to cover the wound as blood seeped between his fingers. He quickly got to his feet before

Telanwyr could get into position again, never taking his eyes from the dragon.

Telanwyr wasn't trying to get into position, though. In fact, he was backing up.

And there were dark shapes coming out of the shadows.

Gabriel took a few steps back, dropping to a defensive crouch as the shapes advanced on him and quickly resolved themselves into black-furred, humanoid creatures with burning red eyes and wicked clawed hands. He tried to shift to dragon form, but apparently that was not included in the selection of actions allowed in this particular corner of the metaplanes. Gathering his magical energies, he then tried to fling one of his punishing area-effect spells at the approaching monsters —

— and nothing happened.

Magic isn't functioning here either? Gabriel took another step back, realizing he was in trouble now. He had no weapon, and without his magic or the ability to transform to his true form, he had only his human-based fighting skills on which to rely.

Something laughed maniacally behind him.

Spinning, he discovered that more of the creatures were coming up behind him. They moved nearly as fast as he did.

He was surrounded.

The creatures moved in —

Stefan's gaze darted quickly back and forth as the scene resolved around him. "Gethelwain? Answer me!" he snapped out when he did not see his brother next to him. "Where are you?"

There was no answer from Gabriel.

"*Gethelwain!*" he called, louder and more insistently. Had his brother deserted him? Left him alone to deal with the Enemy on his own?

"*He is not here.*"

Stefan froze.

No.

It could not be.

Not here.

"*Gethelwain!*" His voice grew more desperate as his mind tried to deny what he was hearing. "Damn you, brother! Show yourself now!" *Don't make me face this alone.*

The voice—the other voice—chuckled, but there was no mirth in the sound. It was a nasty, unkind chuckle. "*You never were brave enough to fight your battles on your own. But now you seek the aid of a child? I am ashamed of you, Sildarath.*"

Stefan wheeled back around, rage quickly taking the place of fear. "Do not even *speak* to me of shame!" he bit out.

A dark shape detached itself from the darkness and came forward into the cavern. Massive and green-scaled, the dragon moved with well-oiled grace. His eyes burned with some strange inner light; there was something subtly—*wrong*—about him. Something in the way he moved, the way his head swayed back and forth on his long neck like a cobra waiting to strike. Something in the core of his being, so deep that it had to be an integral part of him.

Stefan stared up at him, his expression mingled fear and hatred. He knew very well what was wrong. "What do *you* want?" he demanded.

Again the unwholesome chuckle. "*Sildarath, that is no way to speak to your father. You will show me the proper respect or I will show you my wrath.*"

Stefan snorted. "Respect? I would not honor you with the title of 'father.' Not after what you have done."

The dragon's head swiveled down until it was in front of Stefan. *"What I have done? Who are you, child, to judge what I have done? You display astounding hypocrisy. I did what was necessary. The others did not see that it was the only way. They saw only their short-sighted plans, their temporary measures. I would have saved them all, if they had not interfered!"*

Stefan stared at him, too shocked to speak.

The dragon bared his teeth in what looked like a sick smile. *"But you should understand that now, my son. Despite your insolence, I am proud of you. You have followed well in my footsteps. You have identified the true source of power and sought it out. You have at last made it possible to rid yourself of that insufferably self-righteous young brother of yours. Too long have you existed in that one's shadow! Bravo, my son! Now all you must do is to finish the job. Destroy your brother and join me in the true Power. We will rule together over the world with the Power at our side!"*

Stefan continued to stare, his mind having trouble processing what he was hearing. The old hatred of Gabriel tried to rise, but it was squelched almost immediately by the deeper, far more abiding hatred for the one who stood before him. The one who had betrayed them all. "You are *dead!*" he cried, his voice booming through the cavern. "You were destroyed like the mad thing that you are! How can you come back to haunt me now, here?"

Once again the dragon laughed. *"There is no death, Sildarath. There are merely differing planes of existence. I am more powerful here than I ever was when I was what you so naively call 'alive'. Here the Power has accepted my gift and has in turn given me what I have always sought."* He paused, cocking his head a bit sideways. *"And I can see that they have accepted your gift as well. You make a mistake in trying to*

fight it. Embrace it, my son. Cast off your brother—he only seeks to hold you back from what is truly yours. He is not as strong as you are. He will not seek the Power. Take what is yours and claim your destiny."

Stefan took a step back, his burning eyes never leaving his father's face. He was shaking with a rage that threatened to consume this fragile body in which he was a prisoner. He tried, but he could not do what he most wanted to do: change to his true form and rip his father to pieces where he stood. Instead, he waited.

Part of him, a tiny part in the deepest reaches of his mind, was tempted. *Come*, a little voice said to him (the Enemy? Had Gethelwain failed to block all of its influence after all? Or just his own lust for power?). *Come and claim the power. It is what you want...your father was not wrong to claim it, back so many years ago...They were wrong to destroy him for it. Come, take what is rightfully yours...*

"NO!"

The cry broke from him almost involuntarily, pained and strangled in his throat. "No! I will not! It ends here!" He lunged forward toward his father.

"Pity," the voice said as if it knew all along that this was the answer he would choose. *"Then I have no more need for you. I have many children, after all...Perhaps you would like to get acquainted with some of your other brothers..."*

The dragon faded from view.

A series of smaller shapes rose up from the darkness and began moving forward.

As they stepped (or rather, shambled) into the light, Stefan's heart began to beat faster as sweat broke out on his forehead.

The shapes were young dragons, barely more than hatchlings.

Or—they *had* been dragons at some point. Now, though, their bodies were twisted into grotesque mockeries of their former noble shapes. Their hides were

blackened in spots, bloody in others, and Stefan thought he could see the tiny writhing forms of worms in patches on some of their flanks. They had once been of a multitude of colors: green, blue, gold, red, silver—but now all of their colors had dulled to where they were barely indistinguishable from each other, uniform grays with tiny hints of their former hues. They glared at him with malevolent black eyes that burned with tiny glowing red pinpricks, their claws and teeth bared as they advanced on him. "*Come to usssss....brotherrrr....*" they whispered in his mind. "*Join usssssssss....*"

Stefan staggered backward, trying to summon magic to destroy these disgusting things. He soon found, though, just as Gabriel had, that magic would not help him here.

The little dragons lurched toward him, stumbling awkwardly like young creatures do, but never halting their forward progress. They seemed to be moving faster than their clumsy gaits would suggest, or else there were more of them than Stefan thought there were, because they surged around him, surrounding him.

The ring drew inward, and the tiny claws drew closer.

Stefan tried to retreat, but there was nowhere to go.

Gabriel moved in a blur, lashing out left and right, forward and behind, but still he was not fast enough. There were too many of the furred creatures, and they were hitting him from all sides. No single attack hurt him much—their claws were small and the creatures themselves were weak—but the injuries were beginning to stack up as the battle wore on. He took another step backward, striking out savagely with his foot to contact the neck of one of the creatures. With a sickening crunch of breaking bone, the thing sank to the ground. Three more surged forward to take its place.

Desperately Gabriel tried to think this through as he forced himself to fight on out of sheer instinct. He was glad now that he had spent all that time in his distant youth learning human fighting styles; most dragons did not bother, since they rarely needed to fight in this form, but he had always been fascinated by the different ways the humans and metahumans had to fight. His studies were paying off now.

Where was Stefan? He had briefly spotted his brother earlier, but now he was nowhere to be seen. Ignoring the pain when the creatures struck him and the sensations of numerous tiny rivulets of blood trickling from various parts of his body, Gabriel forced his mind to consider the question at hand. This was a test. The Dweller never presented a test that the subject could not pass. Sometimes the tests were merely difficult, while other times they contained a trick within them—something to force the subject to move his thoughts in a different direction. To "think outside the box," as it were. Why would Telanwyr not believe him? Why would he send these creatures to kill him, instead of doing it himself? Telanwyr had trusted him fully—if he had given his word that he had not been the one to betray him, then why would his mentor not believe him? What could this possibly be testing? He remembered how he had felt when Stefan had told him what had happened: the anger, the grief, the guilt—

—the guilt.

Yes.

That was it. That was why Telanwyr had not believed him.

Because he did not believe himself.

He knew that he was not the one who had betrayed his mentor—Stefan had done that, using his form as a disguise. But he recalled how the guilt had tightened

around him when he realized that Telanwyr had been calling for him, and he had not been there.

He might have been able to help, if he had been there.

But I could not have helped. Had I been there, they would have killed me too. I could not have saved Telanwyr. If they had killed me, I would not even be able to avenge his death.

And he knew it was true.

He had to find his brother.

"Stefan!" he called out as loudly as he could as the creatures' claws raked at him. "Stefan! I know you're here! I know you're close by! Answer me!"

But there was no answer.

Grimly, Gabriel fought on.

Stefan pivoted as he kicked and punched madly at the diseased little dragon-creatures that were swarming around him. "Get away!" he bellowed, sweeping two of the small creatures from where they had locked themselves on to his arm and crushing the skull of another beneath his foot. It died with a startled squeak; a few of the others skittered backward a bit, watching him. "Brotherrrrrr..." they continued to whisper in his mind, over and over until he thought it would drive him insane.

If he wasn't already there.

The little things seemed almost playful in a malign sort of way, skipping and dancing around him with their lurching baby-steps, nipping at his arms and legs with tiny sharp teeth. Each one was a bit less than half the size of Stefan's human form, which meant that if they were real dragons, it could not have been long since they had emerged from their —

Stefan drew a sharp breath as he finally understood. "Damn you, Father!" he screamed into the air.

The young dragons began to laugh as they attacked, alternating the sound with their whisperings. They came

in *en masse* again, leaping on Stefan's back, climbing up his arms and latching on to him, drawing more blood. As one climbed over his hand he could feel the tiny worms wriggling on his skin. Convulsively he slammed his other hand over them, feeling them squash and ooze. The dragonet dropped off, leaping backward. Its left flank was covered with a weeping, gangrenous wound; along the side of its neck the flesh was blackened and rotted. The others bore similar wounds and marks. For every one he destroyed, more appeared from the shadows; each subsequent wave appeared more mangled than the others, with twisted limbs and black bleeding holes where teeth and claws should have been.

"Join ussssss...." one whispered.

"Lead ussss...." another entreated.

"Brotherrrrrrr...." the others continued their litany.

"Take the powerrrrrrr...."

"It is your legacyyyyy...."

Stefan clamped his hands over his ears, but it did not help. The voices sounded in his mind. As he ceased to fight back for a moment the tide of little creatures surged forward again. They leaped and bit and chattered at him, never ceasing the undercurrent in his head. He was bleeding from multiple wounds now, flailing as he tried to keep the disgusting things from touching him.

Where was Gethelwain?

Was he dealing with something similar somewhere else?

Was he facing his own vision of hell?

Had he gone off, leaving Stefan to his fate?

The little dragons seemed to pick up on that last thought and altered their litany appropriately. "*He is gone...*" one assured him.

"*Left you to die...*" said another.

"*He hates you...*" a third whispered, one of its teeth dangling precariously from a bloody hole.

"*He has betrayed you...*" said a fourth, this one sporting a blackened stump where one of its forelegs should have been.

"*Trust us...*" others added, while the majority kept up the chant of "*Brotherrrrr...brotherrr...brotherrrrrrrrr....*"

"*No!*" Stefan screamed the word with all the power he could muster, his voice echoing back and forth through the chamber. His gaze darted around, still trying to spot Gethelwain. "*Gethelwain!*" he cried. "*Brother, answer me! Help me!*"

"*Gethelwain! Help me!*"

Gabriel's head jerked up as his brother's voice reached his ears. "*Stefan!*" he called, lashing out at another of the furred creatures. "*Where are you?*"

There was a moment's pause as if Stefan was surprised to hear an answer to his call, and then, "*Here! By the wall!*"

Gabriel looked quickly around again, not expecting to see anything since he had not seen anything the other dozen times he had searched for his brother, but this time, he was surprised to see Stefan several meters away from him. His brother appeared to be fighting off another group of the furred creatures. "*I'm behind you, Stefan! Come toward me!*" Slowly he began battling his way through the creatures toward Stefan.

Stefan nearly did not believe it when he heard Gabriel's voice. Was it another trick? But no, the little dragons were still keeping up their chant, trying to drown out his brother's voice. Trying to follow Gabriel's directive, he began moving backward, swatting the creatures away as he moved. Sparing a fast glance behind

him, he stopped momentarily in shock as he saw his brother across the cavern, beset by still more of the little dragon-creatures. "I see you, Gethelwain! I am coming!" Gabriel, too, looked like he was struggling through the hordes of small bodies, trying to reach Stefan.

With renewed vigor, he blocked out the murmurs in his mind and booted another small form away from him.

Gabriel continued to work his way toward Stefan. His breath was coming hard and fast now; he was stronger and more resilient than a human of his equivalent size and build would be, but his reserves were not endless. Bleeding from dozens of tiny wounds, he was finally beginning to feel the effects of the cumulative blood loss. He knew he wouldn't last much longer unless he and Stefan could come up with something that would deal with these creatures more than one at a time.

He wondered why he had not been able to see Stefan before now. The cavern was large but not *that* large; even past all the writhing forms of his assailants it should not have been so hard for him to see his brother—or for Stefan to see him. They were only a few meters away from each other, it turned out. But until Stefan had called for him, nothing had worked. All his cries had gone unheeded. Had Stefan been calling for him all this time as well? If so, then what had changed?

The answer came to him so suddenly that it surprised him into dropping his guard, allowing one of the creatures to cuff him in the side of the head. He quickly set about fighting again, but now he had the answer.

Stefan had *not* called for him before.

That was the key.

Let me test that theory, he thought grimly as he drew closer to his brother. The furred creatures renewed their

attacks with greater vigor as if suspecting that their prey would soon be out of reach.

Stefan kicked aside another dragon-thing as he finally reached Gabriel. The two of them, intent on their respective opponents, did not realize how close they had gotten until they backed into each other. Both spun around to face the other, glaring until recognition dawned. "There are too many of them!" Stefan said desperately as the little dragons moved in again. "We'll never kill them all! Not without magic!"

"That's the key," Gabriel said, shifting position so he was standing next to his brother, facing the creatures. To him, they all looked like the furred things. "Try your magic now."

"I *have* tried it. It isn't working here."

"Try it again," Gabriel ordered. "Together. On three – "
"Gethelwain – "

"Do it, Stefan! I'll explain later." He paused a moment, then: "One...two...*three!*"

Pointing his hands, he concentrated on the magic.

Stefan, on his other side, mirrored his actions.

Waves of pure power flew from their hands.

The creatures screamed and disappeared.

The cavern faded to black.

40.

Master?

I am here.

They have arrived.

Yes. I can feel them. It will not be long now.

I am not certain exactly where they are – they have separated, but I have not yet found them.

Do not be disturbed, my servant. They will come to us in time. I will see to that. All roads lead to us. And then I will have what I seek.

Yes, Master. I await that time with great anticipation.

Be patient, servant. All will occur in its proper time. Continue seeking them, and claim our prize at the appointed time.

What of the others, Master?

When the sacrifice has been taken, the others will follow. Their pain will be a fine supplement to the plan.

The young one?

I may yet have a purpose for that one as well. Events have not gone exactly as we planned, but that may yet work to our advantage. Go now, minion. Do as I have ordered.

Yes, Master.

41.

Ocelot struggled to wakefulness accompanied by the persistent feeling of his head smacking lightly and repeatedly against something.

As he opened his eyes just a crack, the feeling resolved itself into a more general one of his entire body jostling back and forth. He was seated, leaned sideways against something padded; his ears were full of the harsh sounds of rough wheels rolling over packed earth and the distant *clip-clop* of horses' hooves. Reluctantly he opened his eyes the rest of the way, afraid of what he might see.

He was sitting in a small cubicle, which was clearly the source of the jostling. Next to him, Kestrel leaned on his shoulder; Winterhawk was next to her on the other end of the seat. Across from him Joe took up most of the other seat, with 'Wraith leaned against the wall opposite Winterhawk. All of them appeared to still be asleep.

Ocelot stared at them, noting that their clothes were not the same ones they had been wearing last time they had been awake. All five of them (he looked down at his own clothes to verify this) were attired in outfits that looked to Ocelot as if they would be at home in the Old West: he and Kestrel wore jeans, plaid shirts, leather vests, and boots; Joe had dark pants, a leather vest with no shirt, and heavy boots; Winterhawk was dressed in a dark suit with a string tie; and 'Wraith wore a light gray, severely-cut suit. Ocelot was so busy examining his teammates' and his own clothing that he almost missed the other "difference" that had occurred.

'Wraith and Joe were not metahumans.

His eyes widened as he looked at them. Both looked similar as humans to their metahuman appearances: Joe was huge, broad-shouldered, and dark-skinned, with long

shining black hair in a ponytail replacing his usual Mohawk; 'Wraith was tall, thin, and long-limbed, a pale-complexioned face and light blond hair substituting for his normal albino skin-tone (which he usually covered with makeup) and white hair. Still, though, they were clearly as human as Ocelot himself was. *What the hell's going on here?* he wondered.

He didn't have much more time to think at that moment, as the others were stirring. Joe groaned and sat up straight, wedging 'Wraith further into his corner and rousing him as well. Next to Ocelot, Kestrel yawned and stretched, and Winterhawk opened his eyes. "Welcome to I don't know where," Ocelot said conversationally.

The four other runners took a moment to sort themselves out, staring at each other. "What the hell—?" Winterhawk began.

"That's what I wanted to know," Ocelot said. "I think we're in a stagecoach."

Joe grabbed the roll-up blind covering the coach's small window on his side and pulled it up. Outside, a grim landscape covered with scrubby brush and small bushes rolled by at a leisurely pace. "What are we doing here?"

Kestrel looked around. "And where are Gabriel and Stefan?"

"Maybe they're driving," Joe said, only half-kidding.

"Don't think so," 'Wraith said slowly.

Winterhawk shook his head. "Nor do I. I think we're in this one, whatever it is, on our own."

"You mean because we were alone before we got here?" Kestrel asked.

The mage nodded. "I don't think we ended up where we were supposed to, at least according to what Harlequin said. We were supposed to be near the Bridge,

but I didn't see the chasm anywhere. And then the Dweller—"

All five runners frowned involuntarily as the memories of the Dweller's tests came back to them. "The Dweller..." Kestrel echoed. "I'd pay a lot of money never to have to go through *that* again." She looked at Joe and 'Wraith. "And what happened to *you* guys?"

"The metaplanes," 'Wraith said as if that was self-evident.

"What he means," Ocelot clarified, "is that sometimes people change based on what part of the metaplanes they're on. Sometimes they're not the right metatype, or their cyberware doesn't show up, or like that. At least that was the way it was last time we did this."

Winterhawk nodded. "I imagine that, wherever we're going in this barbaric conveyance—" he shifted uncomfortably in his seat for emphasis "—they don't have metahumans there. Hence, 'Wraith and Joe must be human."

"Great," Joe muttered darkly.

"So where *are* we going?" Kestrel asked, rolling up the shade on the other side. The landscape was identical to that visible out the first window.

"And who's driving this thing?" Joe added.

"I think we're gonna have to wait until it stops to find out," Ocelot said with a sigh.

"Moo," 'Wraith agreed.

Kestrel glared at him. "That's the second time you've said that since we got here. What the hell does 'moo' mean?"

"It means," Winterhawk said, "that the last time we were all here together, the scenarios we were presented with lent themselves to merely following along with the script until some sort of final climax was reached. Deviating from the script generally resulted in either

frustration or a failure to achieve the intended goal. Rather like cattle in a chute, we all agreed."

"What I said," Wraith pointed out. "Moo."

"So..." Kestrel mused, "what you're saying is that we're on our way somewhere, and, say, jumping out of the stagecoach wouldn't be a good thing to do."

"Yeah," Ocelot said, nodding. "You'll just hurt yourself for nothing." Truth be told he had been considering the same course of action himself, largely based on his hatred of confined spaces. However, the open shades had been sufficient to alleviate his feelings of being trapped. Wraith had similar problems, Ocelot knew, but he too seemed to be dealing with them.

"So," Kestrel said, neatly changing subjects, "does somebody want to explain that whole Dweller thing to me? I get that it was some kind of test, and I guess we passed it, but—" she shivered. "It would have helped if you'd told me how *real* it was."

Wraith nodded soberly. "More so than last time."

"Hell yeah," Joe agreed. "I hope it *wasn't* real." He looked at Winterhawk, his eyes hungry for confirmation.

"What did you see?" the mage asked. "If you don't mind my asking." He looked around at the team, clearly including them all in the question.

"Don't want to talk about it," Ocelot muttered.

Winterhawk nodded. "I understand. My episode was quite emotionally painful—I would imagine that all of them were. Let me just say, though, that if we can analyze the individual tests, we might be able to find a pattern among them. As it is, I think anything we can discover that will help us will be valuable."

Hawk's teammates immediately recognized his favorite coping mechanism: when things became too difficult to deal with on an emotional level, he tended to retreat to the ordered, rational processes of the scholar. In

a way it was comforting to all of them; it shifted the harrowing situations a step away from personal and into the realm of something to be studied. "Okay," Ocelot finally said. "I'll tell you what it was. But I ain't goin' into details."

Winterhawk nodded, waiting.

"It was a guy from my old gang. One of the ones who got killed during the job where I got the money to get my cyberware. He was tryin' to get me to fight him. Said I didn't deserve to be a Predator, 'cause I deserted the gang."

Kestrel spoke slowly. "Mine was one of my old team members. Raptor. He tried to make me feel guilty because I didn't die with them. It worked, because I *do* feel guilty about it." She paused. "He told me I shouldn't trust Gabriel, because dragons always try to screw you over. That I should join up with him and the other guys so we could be a team again."

Joe didn't seem to want to speak, but he forced himself to do so. "I saw Bear," he said. "Or at least I thought it was Bear, but it wasn't. Bear wouldn't make me choose between my friends and him. He told me not to trust Gabriel either. Bear said that he and Stefan were using us as pawns. That they didn't care if we survived or not."

"He's got that *half* right," Ocelot muttered.

Winterhawk ignored him and looked at 'Wraith.

'Wraith looked right back at him. "Yours?"

'Hawk paused a moment, closing his eyes. "Mine was Nigel," he said quietly. "He had no trouble making me feel guilty about things I've done in my past."

Everyone knew about what had happened with Winterhawk's son years ago—Ocelot had even told Kestrel about it in general terms—so they all merely nodded sympathetically.

Only 'Wraith was left now. The silence dragged out as he tried to compose the words to describe what he had experienced. Finally, he uttered only one word: "Desire."

Winterhawk frowned. "Desire?"

"Rejected me. Offered a second chance."

"If you turned your back on your friends," Ocelot put in, following the line.

'Wraith nodded. For several moments the only sounds heard were the rolling of the wheels and the steady clop of the horses' hooves.

"So..." Winterhawk said slowly as the silence dragged out too long, "It sounds like the common threads among all the experiences are guilt or anguish over something each one of us has done in the past, and a pull between those events and remaining on this quest."

Ocelot nodded. "Somebody doesn't want us to go."

"Or," Joe added in his *I'm thinking this over as I go* tone of voice, "they want to make damn sure we *do* want to go."

Winterhawk stared at him, nodding. "Yes—that sounds more plausible. The Dweller was testing us to make sure that we were truly committed."

"Sometimes I think we should *be* committed," Kestrel muttered under her breath.

"So what's it all mean?" Ocelot demanded.

"P'raps nothing," Winterhawk said. "We've passed the test, so we're allowed to continue. It's just interesting to me that the Dweller chose similar scenarios for all of us. And that we've all got something in our past to be guilty about."

"*Everybody* has something to be guilty about," Joe pointed out. "What's interesting to me is that we're alone. That Gabriel and Stefan got sent off somewhere else."

"Maybe they're just off havin' a beer somewhere," Ocelot said sourly, but his tone indicated that he didn't really believe it.

"I doubt that," Winterhawk said as if he took Ocelot's comment seriously. "I have a feeling they've got their own trials to face—ones that don't have anything to do with us."

"So we'll meet up with them again later?" Joe asked.

"Probably," Wraith said.

"I hope so," Kestrel said. "We haven't got any idea what we're supposed to *do*, do we? We came here to destroy whatever piece of this Enemy thing that got over the...Bridge, right? That's what Gabriel said. But we haven't got a clue how to find this Enemy. So we need them."

"Patience," Wraith said.

"Yeah," Ocelot agreed. "I don't like it, but if this works like last time, everything'll happen when it's supposed to. That is," he added, "if we don't screw up."

Joe, apparently convinced that this was true, was tiring of the conversation. "What to you figure we're supposed to be?" he asked, looking down at his clothes.

Everyone else, glad for an excuse to forget about their predicament for a few moments with something mundane, took some time to more closely examine their clothing and check their pockets for clues. Wraith found the first major clue sitting at his feet. Leaning over (it wasn't easy next to Joe, even for someone of his slim stature) he picked up an old-fashioned leather briefcase. He laid it across his lap and opened it as the others looked on curiously.

When he saw what was inside, he raised an eyebrow. "Scales," he said. Sure enough, carefully packed against shocks inside the case was an old-style balance scale, along with a series of tiny weights. Each weight was

marked, from 1/16 ounce up to one full ounce. On the center pillar of the scale was a seal, labeled *Inspected – Department of Weights and Measures*. "Interesting," 'Wraith said.

Winterhawk had also found a bag at his feet, but as he picked his up, he discovered that it was of a more familiar type. Made of black leather, its top closure opened to a wide mouth that allowed easy access to the contents. "A classic doctor's bag," he said immediately.

"Okay," Kestrel said. "You're the doctor, and 'Wraith here is – what – some kind of banker?"

"Assayer, I think," 'Wraith said.

"Okay, assayer," Kestrel continued. "So what's that make us?" Like Ocelot and Joe, she had found nothing in her pockets or on the floor indicating her role.

"Good question," Ocelot said. "Maybe our stuff's outside. Maybe it's too big to put in here."

At that moment, the stagecoach came to a lurching stop.

The runners exchanged glances.

There was a *thump* outside as someone leaped down from the driver's seat. "Last Chance!" a voice boomed. "End of the line! Everybody out!"

The team was only too glad to extricate themselves from the sardine can in which they'd been riding, so they hurried to comply. Joe flung open the door nearest the voice, and less than a minute later they were standing on a dirt road, looking up at the big stagecoach. "Last Chance Line," it read on the side, in gold-painted letters of the classic Old-West style.

"Mind yer heads!" came a voice from above, and then bags began to rain down in front of the runners as the shotgun man tossed them from where they'd been secured on top of the coach. There were several of them, ranging from carpetbag-style luggage through leather

satchels through well-worn bedrolls with various implements and smaller bags hanging from them by straps.

"Looks like we're meant to be here awhile," Winterhawk commented as he eyed the growing pile.

Kestrel was already picking through them. "They're labeled," she said. "Looks like they've got our real names on 'em." She picked up one of the bedrolls and showed them the tag: "J. Harvath, Last Chance," it said in spidery, brownish script. Attached to the roll were a small pick and shovel, what looked like a mining pan, and several drawstring bags of various sizes.

The other runners hastened to pick up their luggage: 'Wraith had a carpetbag, as did 'Hawk, while Ocelot had the other bedroll. Joe had two bags: a shapeless suitcase and a huge leather satchel. When he looked inside the satchel he discovered that it contained tongs, hammers, and other traveling implements of a blacksmith. "Guess I'm the local smith," he said.

"Here y'are, lady an' gents. Wouldn't want to be without these." The runners looked up and noticed that the driver was trying to get their attention. He had the stage's strongbox unlocked and opened, and as soon as he had their notice, he carefully handed down weapons and ammunition. To Kestrel and Ocelot, he passed down two aged but serviceable-looking revolvers; 'Wraith got a nearly new long-barreled Colt Peacemaker; Joe got a Remington breech-loader shotgun, and Winterhawk got a small .22-caliber derringer with a pearl handle.

As the runners examined their weapons and sorted out their luggage, the driver and the shotgun man swung themselves back up into the stage's seats. "Good luck!" the driver called. He touched the horses' shoulders with his whip and the stagecoach headed off, leaving the five runners alone.

"Well," Winterhawk commented, stowing his derringer in his suit pocket and hefting his carpetbag and doctor's kit, "here we are."

"Where's 'here'?" Ocelot asked.

"Last Chance," Joe said.

"Huh?" Kestrel looked at him funny.

"That's the name of the town," he said, pointing. Sure enough, the words *WELCOME TO LAST CHANCE* were lettered high up on the front of the stagecoach station.

"Sounds like a bloody cheerful place," Winterhawk said dubiously.

"Wraith was looking down the street. 'Company.'"

The others looked up immediately from what they were doing to see a middle-aged woman heading toward them. She was dressed in faded jeans and serviceable work-shirt; her jeans were tucked into the tops of brown leather boots. Her only concession to femininity, which looked decidedly incongruous with the rest of her outfit, was a sunbonnet perched on top of her head, its straps tied in a neat bow beneath her chin. As she drew up closer, her face lit up with a tired but sincere smile. "I was beginnin' to wonder if you'd ever get here," she said. "C'mon with me—I got your rooms all ready, and dinner's only just a bit cold. I can warm it up for ya if ya want."

Winterhawk stepped forward. "We were expected, Madam?"

She frowned. "Didn't ya get the telegraph? Oh, for heaven's sake! That telegraph office ain't good for nothin'! That's 'bout the only good thing about the trains comin'—at least it'll force 'em to send up some decent telegraph equipment and somebody who knows how to run it." Suddenly aware that she was blabbering on about nothing relevant, she smiled again. "Well, don't you worry. We'll get y'all set up. I'm Mrs. McMurtry, and I run the one o' the local boarding houses. The *respectable* one," she added

with obvious pride. "Y'all will be stayin' with me. You'll need to double up on rooms, all 'ceptin' for the lady, but they said that ain't a problem. See, with all the miners waitin' to get up to the mountains and all the railroad boys, the whole town's fair to burstin' right now." She indicated their luggage. "Come on, then—bring yer gear an' follow me. It ain't far from here. Oh," she added as an afterthought, turning around to smile again, "and welcome to Last Chance."

The runners picked up their luggage and started off after Mrs. McMurtry. "Nice welcome anyway," Joe said.

"Yeah—wonder what all this is leadin' up to," Ocelot replied.

Everyone fell silent at that point, content to follow along behind their new landlady and take in the sights of Last Chance.

There weren't many. The town seemed to consist of one long main street with a few haphazard tributary streets feeding into the main one. The runners examined the buildings as they walked by down the wooden sidewalk that bordered the packed-earth street itself: there were several saloons and gambling halls, a dry-goods store, a hotel, a general mercantile, a combination livery/feed store, one restaurant (*Good Eats—Cheap!* a faded sign in the window proclaimed), a barber shop, a marshal's office, an assayer's office that doubled as a bank, a telegraph office, a doctor's office, and an office with *Last Chance Line—Victory United Railroad* painted on the front in much fresher looking letters than any of the others. Scattered between these labeled businesses were several two-story places that looked like privately owned rooming houses. So far, Mrs. McMurtry had made no move to head toward any of these.

There weren't too many people on the streets right now; it was twilight, the sun only beginning to disappear

beyond the far-off horizon. The runners could hear the faint strains of tinny music coming from behind the doors of the various saloons, creating a cheerful cacophony in the middle of the street. A few children played in the streets, but they looked subdued and quickly scurried away as the runners and Mrs. McMurtry approached. One pair was a bit bolder: two dark-haired boys, one a little older than the other, silently observed the six from behind a watering trough as they passed by.

A few more minutes' walk brought them up in front of a weatherbeaten two-story house which, despite the fact that it was painted peeling utilitarian gray, still managed to convey an image of hominess with its cheerful curtains and its line of boots arrayed outside the front door. A small plaque next to the door read, *McMurtry's Boarding House – Clean Rooms, Meals Included*. "Here we are," their hostess said, turning back around to smile at them. "I'll show you your rooms – you can drop off your things and clean up a bit, and then dinner'll be downstairs in half an hour."

Five minutes later found the runners installed in three adjoining rooms, each of which was clean (as advertised), simple, and small. After everyone had dropped their bags in their respective rooms, the five of them reconvened in the middle of the three rooms, which was the one occupied by Ocelot and Winterhawk. "What now?" Ocelot asked, looking around at the sparse decor of the room. All of it looked like it had seen many years of use but had been nonetheless lovingly patched, mended, and cared for as needed.

Winterhawk leaned on the windowsill and eyed the street below. "P'raps we'll find out something downstairs at dinner."

"Yeah," Joe agreed. Dinner sounded like a good idea to him, regardless of whether any information was to be discovered there.

The dining room was barely large enough to contain the number of people attempting to fill it. In addition to the five runners, the battered wooden table was occupied by three other men: a tired-looking young fellow in his mid-twenties who was dressed in jeans and plaid shirt; a man in his thirties with thinning blond hair and a dark suit; and a paunchy older man in a rumpled white shirt and gray slacks. They watched the runners with interest, but did not speak beyond brief greetings when they sat down.

As Mrs. McMurtry bustled around placing trays of food on the table, the blond man in the suit regarded the runners. "Just come in on the stage today?"

Winterhawk nodded. "About an hour ago. You do seem to be a long way from anywhere up here."

"Ain't *that* the truth." The older man snorted. "I'm James Waring, by the way. I run the general store."

That seemed to break the ice, and everyone exchanged introductions all around. The runners used their real names, since it was obvious that the metaplanar entities already knew them; the young man in the plaid shirt turned out to be Charlie Smith, while the blond man was Silas Weatherby.

"We won't be so far from everything soon," Weatherby said as he filled his plate with mashed potatoes and stew. "Once the railroad's completed, we'll certainly start seeing an increase in the population, and traveling by something other than stagecoach will become a reality."

Now it was Smith's turn to snort. "Silas, when are you going to get it through that thick skull of yours that the railroad ain't gonna *get* finished for a couple months at least. No matter how much you and that boss of yours

want to get it done, the workers ain't gonna risk their lives to get that trestle finished when the weather's still this iffy. It just ain't safe. We've already had too many close calls."

"Remember who you're speaking to, Smith," Weatherby sniffed haughtily. "And remember too that many of those workers can't live without the money that the Victory United is paying them." He smirked at Smith. "Or has the mining picked up again and no one has bothered to inform me?"

Smith didn't answer right away; he appeared to be trying to get himself under control.

To try to smooth things over, Waring spoke up: "Friends, please. We've had this argument a hundred times before, and I for one am getting right sick of it. We've got newcomers in town—let's try to make them feel welcome, instead of forcing them to listen to our disagreements." He looked at the runners, noting their attire. "It'll be good to have some help for Andy Sutton, the smith," he said to Joe. "You look like a big strong young fellow. Ever since he hurt his leg last fall, he ain't been able to keep up with things like before." To Winterhawk, he added, "And you're the new sawbones, right?"

"After a fashion," the mage admitted. He had already tested his magic up in the room and found that it still functioned, so at least he could do healing. If called upon to perform any more feats of medicine, he'd just have to bluff.

Silas Weatherby looked at the remaining three. "I hope you gentlemen and lady don't have any plans to make your fortune here by mining. Ever since the gold in Quimby Creek dried up, there hasn't been much money to be made there. Most of the townfolk who counted on the gold have either moved on or settled down into other

jobs. Once the railroad's here and Last Chance becomes a real town, it'll be easier for you to find something else to do."

"Yeah," Smith added, more than a hint of bitterness in his tone. "Or you can start up with Victory United and work yourself to death gettin' the tracks laid three months early so they can have their parties and bring all their bigwigs up here to look at all the sad SOBs who gave their lives for the damn thing."

"Smith!" Weatherby said sharply. "Any more talk like that and you might find yourself looking for employment elsewhere. You *do* have a family back home to think of, do you not?"

Smith glared at Weatherby, but the glare quickly turned to a sullen scrutiny of his plate. "Yeah," he muttered under his breath. "Scuse me, everyone." Standing quickly, he pushed his chair back and stalked out of the room.

Weatherby watched him go. "An excitable young fellow, but a good worker nonetheless," he said. Everyone present could hear the smirk in his voice. After a moment he too rose, picking up his plate of stew. "I believe I'll eat in my room—I have some business I must tend to. Please excuse me, lady and gentlemen."

When he was gone, James Waring turned back to the runners, shaking his head ruefully. "It's like that almost every night. This has been the worst in a long time, though."

"What's going on with the railroad?" Joe asked.

Kestrel nodded. "Can you give us the story?"

Waring paused to take another bite of stew and chew it thoughtfully before speaking. "There's a lot of tension in Last Chance right now, 'tween the railroad and quite a few o' the townfolk, especially the ones who came up here hopin' to strike it rich minin' gold, only to find out that the

gold had run out and so had their funds. With all the folks around lookin' for work and not bein' able to afford to get out of town, the pickin's have been slim, workwise. That all changed when Victory United showed up, sayin' that they wanted to build a line clear through from civilization up here to this God-forsaken nowhere of a town. They said they'd put us on the map, make us a real town. A lot o' folks jumped at the chance—and even better, they hired every able-bodied person who showed up willing to work, and paid 'em pretty good, considerin'."

Waring leaned back in his chair and shoveled in another mouthful of stew, pausing to undo the top button on his trousers to make room for his ample stomach. "That all happened about a year ago. Ever since then, they been layin' track, mostly from their end, but lately they been startin' in from this end too. There's a big canyon a couple miles out from town—they been workin' on buildin' a trestle so's they can have a bridge across the canyon. The whole thing's scheduled to meet up just outside o' town in a week or so, but the folks at V. U. have been pushin' that schedule hard. They've been promisin' lots of extra pay if the crews can get the whole thing done in three days."

"So the workers are protesting because the railroad is pushing them too hard?" Kestrel asked.

"That, and there's some who think that the whole thing's too dangerous this time o' year." Waring mopped up the last of his stew with a crust of thick bread. "It hasn't been long since the snow up in the hills started to melt, and the weather's been variable 'round here. If it starts to rain too hard, what with the water already comin' down from the mountains, it could wash out the whole trestle—and anybody who happens to be on it at the time."

Ocelot refilled his water glass from the pitcher in the middle of the table. "What was that Weatherby said about 'bigwigs' comin' in?"

Waring looked rueful. "Well, now, you've hit the sticking point for a lot of folks. See, Victory United's got some kind of high mucky-muck who's got it in his mind that he wants to stage a big celebration in Last Chance to commemorate the line gettin' finished. I guess this line is some kind of showpiece for 'em, and heads are gonna roll if it doesn't get done on time. That's why Weatherby and his boss—a fella name o' Grimmer—are pushin' folks so hard to finish. The guy's due up here in three days, and if the track ain't finished and he has to get ferried up here in a stage, he ain't gonna be happy."

"So all this work is so some corporate asshole can get his picture in the paper," Ocelot muttered, feeling his anger rise.

Waring appeared a bit confused at first, but nodded. "Yeah, I guess that's about the size of it. But since the V. U.'s pretty much the only game in town—at least if you want to make any kind of decent money—they're callin' the tune. And it *is* true that once they get it finished, there's likely to be a lot more traffic comin' through Last Chance, which oughta make things better for everybody."

"Except the people who get killed building it," Joe said. He looked about as displeased as Ocelot did.

"Ain't nobody been killed yet," Waring said as Mrs. McMurtry came in to gather the plates from the table. "There's been a few close calls, though. The trestle's gonna be the most dangerous part. Once they get that done, the tracks'll meet up just this side of the canyon."

Winterhawk looked dubious. "They're expecting to finish a trestle across a canyon in three days? Admittedly I'm not an engineer, but that hardly seems likely."

Waring nodded. "Most of the structure's there already. They just have to lay the track and reinforce some of the beams holdin' the whole thing up. They got a lot o' folks out there workin', practically 'round the clock. I think they'll make it." He stood, re-buttoning his pants. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you now, though. I've got some things I need to do down at the store before it gets too late." Bowing farewell, he waddled out of the room.

After he'd left, the runners regarded each other across the table. "I don't get it," Ocelot said.

"What?" Kestrel turned to him.

"What this is all about. Looks like maybe this whole railroad thing is the center of it, but I don't get what we're supposed to do."

"Sounds to me," Winterhawk put in, "like we're either supposed to stop them from finishing that trestle, or else make sure that they *do* finish it."

"But we don't know which yet." Joe sighed. "If this whole thing's supposed to be a metaphor like it was last time, it sure sounds like we're supposed to stop it, not help it."

"But we can't be sure yet," Kestrel said. "We don't even know if this is the right answer."

"We can't just sit here," Ocelot said, the frustration evident in his voice.

"Yes," Wraith said. "We can."

"Huh?"

"Moo." When Ocelot glared at him, he added, "Don't have all the facts yet. So we wait."

"And keep our eyes and ears open," Winterhawk added. "It probably wouldn't hurt to at least pretend to fulfill the roles we've apparently been cast in tomorrow. P'raps one or more of us might hear something useful."

Ocelot nodded, running a hand back through his hair. "Okay. Well if that's the case, then I'm gonna turn in. That ride in the stagecoach wasn't very restful, and we could probably all use a good night's sleep." He glanced out the dining room's small window, noting that a light rain had begun to fall; he could hear its gentle patter on the window and the roof.

Ocelot had no idea what time it was when he was awakened by loud pounding on the door, but it was still dark. "Doc!" cried a voice from the other side. "Doc Stone! You in there? Open up!"

Winterhawk was already awake, mechanically sitting up. "What the hell – ?"

"I think they're lookin' for you," Ocelot muttered, still not fully aware.

"Doc!" Voice and pounding both got louder. "Please! We got injured folks comin' in!"

"Just a moment!" Winterhawk called, struggling into his trousers.

Ocelot quickly dressed as well. When they opened the door, they saw three men, all of them clad in wet, mud-spattered work clothes, standing in the doorway, shifting from foot to foot with impatience and concern. As soon as Winterhawk made an appearance one of the men grabbed his arm. "Come on, Doc! They're bringin' 'em in now, and some of 'em are hurt real bad!"

All along the hall other doors were opening. Joe, 'Wraith, and Kestrel stepped out of their rooms, each looking like he or she had dressed with the same amount of haste as Winterhawk and Ocelot had. Kestrel approached one of the men. "What's going on?"

Already Winterhawk was being hustled down toward the stairs, barely having time to grab his doctor's bag. One of the men turned back to address Kestrel while still

moving forward. "Flash flood. At the trestle. We all knew this was gonna happen one o' these days, but nobody listens."

The three men continued herding Winterhawk urgently along, and the four remaining runners trailed behind. "Did it wash out?" Joe asked, his voice booming over the sound of the men and the rain as they stepped outside.

"What? The trestle?" Another of the men dropped back as he saw that his two fellows were getting their point across and Winterhawk was going willingly with them. "Naw, but there's some damage. A few of the beams washed out."

"That's gonna set the schedule back," Ocelot said sourly.

"*Damn* the schedule." The man's voice was full of passion. "You didn't see those guys—my friends—gettin' slammed into the trestle and the walls o' that canyon. You didn't hear 'em screamin' for help. And all that bastard Grimmer did was tell us to get the injured out and keep workin'."

"This Grimmer sounds like a real sweet guy." Kestrel's tone dripped with sarcasm. "So what did you do?"

The man snorted. "We told him to shove it up his—" he paused. "—er—we told him we'd be takin' the injured into town whether he liked it or not. Ain't nothin' else gettin' done on that trestle while the rain's like this. He'll just have to wait."

"Where is he now?" Wraith asked.

"Who cares? He can rot in hell for all I care where he is!"

One of the other men turned his head. "He's still out at the site with the guys he was able to bully into stayin'. He says as soon as the flood dies down they're gonna have to get back to shorin' up that trestle."

Surprisingly, the men were heading directly for Last Chance's largest saloon. "Stopping for fortification?" Winterhawk inquired.

"That's where we've got 'em. It's the biggest building in town." One of the men shoved open the door and stepped aside to let the others in.

The gambling hall had been pressed into service as a makeshift hospital. All around the room injured men lay on gaming tables and on blankets on the floor; some were alternately groaning and screaming, while others were unconscious. A quick glance around indicated about fifteen wounded. Saloon girls moved among them administering doses of whiskey, but they, like everyone else, looked frightened and uncertain of what to do.

"All right," Winterhawk said briskly, falling into his role. "Let's have a look at the most severely injured first. As for the others —"

"I'll take care of them," Joe said.

"I'll help," Kestrel added. "I've got some first aid training." Following Joe, she headed off.

Winterhawk examined the remaining wounded and immediately found the worst of them: a young man in his mid-twenties whose side had been pierced by a large piece of beam. He was clutching his midsection and screaming despite the saloon girl's attempt to quiet him with whiskey. Like all the others, he was wet and covered with mud and blood. The mage looked sharply up at his three escorts. "Has anyone got a problem with magical healing 'round here?"

The men's eyes widened. "You can do that? We've heard of it, but we never thought we'd see it up here."

"I'll take that as a no," Hawk said. He pointed at two of them. "You and you — get me some boiling water and the cleanest towels you've got. I'd like to at least make a go of cleaning this out before I heal it, or he's likely to

contract all sorts of unpleasant infections." When the men scurried off to do his bidding, he moved on to the next patient.

For the next hour, the room echoed with more screams and groans as still more wounded were brought in by wagon. The five runners moved among the injured, doing what they could. Joe's and Kestrel's first aid skills were well adequate for dealing with some of the more minor and even moderate injuries, while Winterhawk's healing spells took care of the serious ones. Between them they only lost one patient, an older man who had had his skull crushed when the rushing water had dashed him into the canyon wall. Aside from three other men who had been swept away by the flood before anyone could rescue them, it was a remarkably low casualty total. That hardly seemed to be consolation, however, to the weeping family members comforting each other in the saloon's corners.

When the healing had been finished and the patients were being made comfortable, Winterhawk slumped down into a chair next to a blackjack table that had been hastily converted to a hospital bed. All the magical expenditure had taken a lot out of him: dark stubble stood out in sharp relief against the pale of his skin, and his eyelids drooped despite his best efforts to keep them open. By this time, quite a few more of the townspeople, including more of the families of the injured men, had trickled into the saloon, making it suddenly a crowded affair. Slowly the groups sorted themselves out, with the families clustering around their loved ones and the other townspeople hanging nervously around the doors, unsure what to do.

Joe and Kestrel came over toward Winterhawk, where 'Wraith and Ocelot had already arrived.

Ocelot frowned, his anger clear for all to see. "That bastard out there almost got these people killed. If we hadn't been here, quite a few of these guys would have died." Since he had minimal first aid training, he had, like 'Wraith, played courier between the various healers. This had given him an opportunity to get a look at the carnage first-hand. He hadn't liked what he saw.

Winterhawk sighed. "Undoubtedly now that they're healed, the railroad will see no reason why they shouldn't be put back to work immediately."

"Right you are, sawbones," came a new voice from the door.

Everyone looked up to see a shadowed figure standing in the doorway. Several of the townspeople visibly drew back from him, including some of the injured. As he stepped into the room, the runners could see why. Although he wasn't particularly large or impressive physically, there was something about his eyes that made them uneasy. None of them could quite say why, though.

"Who the hell are you?" Ocelot demanded.

The man's unsettling gaze lit on him. "You must be new in town if you don't know me, friend. Name's Grimmer. I'm in charge of the Victory United Railroad in Last Chance." He turned to Winterhawk. "I came by when I heard there was a magic man in town doin' healing. Wanted to thank you. Now that you've got my men patched up, we can get right back to work starting first thing tomorrow morning. The flood was a little setback, but nothing we can't catch up with. We're right on schedule for gettin' finished up day after tomorrow."

"A little setback?" One of the townspeople, a woman in a gingham dress and a knitted shawl, rose to her feet. "We've lost *four men* tonight, Mr. Grimmer. Four good men, with families and hopes and dreams. You call that a

little setback?" Her voice rose to a scream as she lunged toward him.

He caught her by the arm and held her out from him, a strange little smile on his nondescript features. "Now, now, madam. The histrionics really aren't necessary. While it's certainly unfortunate that we've had—an incident tonight, everyone who works on a railroad knows these things happen. But," he added, addressing the room at large, "to show that the Victory United's heart is in the right place, I'm authorized to pay everyone who stays on and helps us get this line finished on time one and a half times' normal wages, plus a free pass for their entire family to anywhere V. U. travels." His gaze swept the crowd; there was something else in it, but it was too faint to pick out. "So who's with me?"

There was much grumbling in the room, but one by one the hands rose. Even most of the injured men who had been healed raised their hands.

"Good," Grimmer said. "Weatherby, note down the names. All the rest of you who aren't injured—I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go." His voice changed to a rueful cluck. "Budget cuts, you know. Unfortunate, but necessary. Last chance, gentlemen." He smiled at his own pun. "Anyone else?"

Even more slowly, the rest of the hands rose. The faces behind the hands were haunted and sad, but resigned to their fate. Grimmer smiled, nodding.

"Are you people fucking *crazy*?" Ocelot yelled, leaping his feet and turning around to face them. "This asshole nearly got you all killed, and you're gonna go back to workin' for him?"

There was a general uncomfortable murmur around the room; Winterhawk, sitting back leaning on his hand with his eyes closed, picked out snatches of words:

"...need the money..." "...don't like it, but..." "...no better job..." "...family to support..."

Again, Grimmer smiled. "Excellent. I knew you all would see things in your own best interests. I'll see you all at the canyon bright and early tomorrow morning, rain or shine. Weatherby?" With an imperious sweep of his hand, he turned and left the saloon with Weatherby following at his heels like a faithful dog.

The murmurs in the saloon continued, but most of them were below the level of audibility for the runners. Ocelot flung himself down in another chair. "It's no use," he said, disgusted. "These people are cattle."

"Good metaphor." Wraith turned a chair around and straddled it.

"Huh?"

"Moo."

Joe nodded. "They're just doin' what they're supposed to do, right?"

"Looks that way," Winterhawk agreed. He still hadn't come up from his slumped posture. "Doesn't make it any easier to deal with, though."

"You okay?" Ocelot regarded him with some concern.

"Will be. It's a bit harder to cast spells here than it is — where we're from."

"Should we go back to our rooms?" Joe asked. He looked around the room, watching the families of the healed men leading them slowly out. "Not much for us to do here now."

"Uh — sirs? And lady?"

The runners turned almost as one to see a young boy standing around the corner of the blackjack table. Dark-haired and unremarkable looking except for the spark of intelligence in his downcast eyes, he was dressed in smaller versions of the jeans and plaid shirt favored by most of the men (and many of the women) of the town.

He looked to be about eleven years old. Winterhawk spoke first. "What can we do for you?" He hoped that he sounded reasonably inviting in spite of looking like Death in a Chair.

"I—er—that is, *we*—" he indicated another boy waiting behind the table—"want to thank you for saving our pa's life."

Noticing the other boy, Winterhawk realized where he'd seen these two before: they'd been watching from the side of the street as the runners had followed Mrs. McMurtry to the boarding house. "I'm a doctor, young man. It's my job to help people."

The boy nodded solemnly. "Yes sir, I know. But still—can I shake your hand?"

Winterhawk looked at his companions, slight amusement almost making it to his eyes. "Of course. I'm pleased that we could help." He extended his hand to the boy.

After a nervous moment the child took his hand and gave it a firm shake. Winterhawk felt the crinkled form of a scrap of paper being pressed into his palm and kept any reaction from his face. He nodded solemnly as the boy reclaimed his hand, and simultaneously palmed the paper. "You boys had best be getting home now. Your parents will be worried about you."

The boy nodded and hurried off, joined by the other one. The two of them left through the saloon's back door.

Ocelot looked at him strangely. "What was that about?"

"Not now," Hawk murmured. Then, louder: "Let's go back to our rooms, shall we?" His expression clearly indicated that he'd share the purpose of the strange encounter as soon as they were away from the saloon.

It only took them a few minutes to get back to the boarding house. The lamp on the porch was still lit, and

Mrs. McMurtry surprised them by standing up from where she'd obviously been waiting for them. She didn't say anything, but instead silently went to the porch and turned out the light. She didn't even complain about their muddy boots.

"So," Joe said as they met up again in Winterhawk's and Ocelot's room. "What was with the kid?"

Winterhawk pulled the scrap of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. "Our young friend gave me this." Quickly glancing over it, he held it out for the rest of them to see.

The other runners craned their necks and moved in close to read the note, which was scrawled in pencil in a childish hand: *"Meet us tomorrow noon in Elkhorn Clearing. It's about Mr. Grimmer."*

The runners exchanged glances. "Trap?" Ocelot asked, his gaze traveling uneasily to the door.

Winterhawk shrugged. "P'raps our Mr. Grimmer has a secret."

Kestrel leaned back on her elbows. "The kid seemed sincere enough."

Joe nodded. "I thought so too. Maybe he's trying to help."

"Well," Winterhawk said with a sigh, "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm knackered. We can't do anything else tonight, so why don't we sleep on it and then tomorrow we'll find out what the little chap has to say."

Everyone agreed that was a good idea, so they got up and filtered out of the room. When they had all gone, Ocelot looked at Winterhawk. "They get weirder every time, don't they?"

The mage sighed. "My friend, I'll wager it hasn't even *begun* to get weird yet."

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When the darkness cleared again, the dragon's lair was gone. Gabriel and Stefan took quick stock of their surroundings and then looked at each other, confused.

They weren't dressed as they had been before; in fact, there was no sign of any of the bloody injuries both of them had sustained in their fights at the lair. Instead, both of them wore olive-drab military fatigues, old-fashioned helmets, and heavy packs on their backs. Both were spattered with dirt and grime, as if they had spent a long time wherever they were.

The area that surrounded them was heavily forested, with a carpet of greenery beneath their leather combat boots and leafy boughs over their heads as far as they could see. The sky, barely visible, was overcast; a light mist hung in the air. "What is this?" Stefan demanded, head swiveling back and forth to try to take in everything at once. "Where are we?"

Gabriel shook his head. "I don't know." Noting the rifle slung over Stefan's shoulder, he added, "It might be a good idea to find cover before we spend too much time in speculation."

Stefan didn't move. "How did we get out of there? What did you know?"

Before Gabriel could answer, another voice split the air. Gravelly and insistent, it carried through the forest without rising too loudly. "Gabriel! Stefan! Where the hell are you? Get back here *now*! We're gettin' ready to move out!"

The two dragons exchanged glances, then turned toward the source of the voice just as its owner came crashing through the trees.

At six-five and two-forty (all of it muscle), everything about the man who burst into the clearing where Gabriel and Stefan stood screamed "sergeant" without his having to say a word. He was dressed much the same way as they were, except for the stripes on his sleeves; his helmet covered a regulation high-and-tight and shaded an ugly face with eyes that somehow managed to look kind and angry at the same time. The nametag on his fatigues read *Sgt. Warner*. "Where have you boys *been*?" he said under his breath. "You knew we were plannin' to move out five minutes ago. The enemy's all over the place. We gotta get goin' or we ain't gonna make it. C'mon!" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and headed back through the trees.

Gabriel and Stefan looked at each other again. It was clear from Stefan's expression that he wasn't pleased with the idea of taking orders, but it was just as clear that they weren't going to find out why they were here until they rejoined whatever group they were currently supposed to be part of. After a moment they followed the sergeant.

There were about twenty men waiting in the clearing beyond the trees, most of them shuffling their feet and looking around nervously as if expecting to be attacked at any moment. All of them were clad in the same weathered green fatigues, helmets, and packs that Gabriel and Stefan wore; all of them had rifles slung over their shoulders. A quick glance around revealed that they were all human, with representatives from most of the human racial groups. Almost as one their attention turned to the two dragons as they came in, but they didn't speak. "All right! Move 'em out!" the sergeant ordered. "We need to get within close range of that installation before tonight, so it's gonna mean some fast movin'. Keep an eye out, though—the further we go the more dangerous it's gonna get."

The men fell into position like they were used to this; Gabriel and Stefan got into the line toward the end. Once they were all arranged, the column set off. The men continued to look around with obvious apprehension, several of them unslinging their rifles and holding them at ready. After a few moments the soldiers separated slightly into small groups, allowing the two dragons to hang back a bit and converse in private. "I don't understand this!" Stefan whispered fiercely. "What does this have to do with our mission? And where are your friends?"

"I don't know where they are, but you know the Netherworlds as well as I do." Gabriel kept an eye on the group ahead of them as he spoke. "The sergeant mentioned 'the enemy' – perhaps that refers to more than he thinks it does."

"So then—we are supposed to defeat the Enemy here?" Stefan looked around. "Have you tried to change form?"

"Not yet. I thought it unwise with these others around. We can try to find a place later if we stop again."

Stefan's expression darkened. "Magic does not function here. I tried and nothing happened. Unless—" his gaze fixed on his brother. "How did you determine that we could use magic when we were fighting those hatchlings?"

"What hatchlings?" Gabriel looked perplexed.

"The ones we were fighting in the cave!" Stefan's frown grew deeper. "You must have seen them—I saw you fighting them too."

Gabriel shook his head. "I wasn't fighting hatchlings, and neither were you—at least from my perception. They were some sort of furred creatures."

Stefan started to say something, then nodded. "I understand now. It was making us see what it wanted us

to see. But that still doesn't answer my question — how did you know?"

"I didn't at first." Gabriel paused to pick his way carefully across a particularly damp patch of ground before continuing. "It was difficult to think straight with all of them attacking me, but when I heard you calling for me I realized what the point of the test must be." Again he paused, turning his gaze on his brother. "It wanted us to cooperate."

Stefan mulled that over. "I don't follow."

"Yes you do. You just don't want to. I was calling for you, but you didn't answer. I doubt you could hear me, correct?"

"I did not hear you," Stefan confirmed. "Not until after I called for you."

Gabriel nodded as if that was what he expected. "My willingness to cooperate with you apparently wasn't enough. *You* had to be willing to cooperate with *me*. Once you sought my help and we began to work together, suddenly magic became functional again. As long as we continued to work separately, we wouldn't get anywhere."

Again Stefan paused to think that over before speaking. "So then — my calling for your help was what made you realize that we could use magic?"

"Right. I realized that it wanted us to work together and would reward us for doing so." He sighed. "I wasn't certain, though — I was taking a chance."

Stefan nodded grudging approval, then looked away, concentrating on the slippery footing.

Gabriel too fell silent as both of them focused on trudging through the underbrush and keeping sight of the men in front of them. The weather was oppressive, the combination of heat and humidity stifling. Even separated as they were from the others, they could hear the heavy

breathing of their fellow soldiers fighting their way along. Although both of them while in human form were tougher than an equivalent human would be, that didn't make much difference. After half an hour of marching at a fairly fast clip while carrying packs and gear, Gabriel and Stefan were nearly as tired as the other men in the group. The fact that they all had to keep constant vigilance for the unseen enemy only served to make things worse. By the time the sergeant called a halt and allowed half an hour to rest, everyone in the company was ready to drop.

Gabriel pulled the pack from his back, tossed it on the ground, and sank down on top of it. The back of his fatigue jacket was dark with sweat, and he could feel it soaking his hair under the clunky metal helmet. When he started to pull that off too, Sgt. Warner immediately came stomping over. "What the hell are you doin', son?"

Gabriel looked up at him, unsure of what he meant. "I'm taking off this helmet for awhile."

Warner snorted. "The kids I get these days!" he said to nobody in particular. Then, addressing Gabriel directly again: "You want the enemy to shoot off that pretty head of yours, boy? They might be hidin' in the trees right now, just waitin' for their chance."

"Sorry," Gabriel muttered, replacing the helmet. Stefan smirked a bit, but said nothing.

"I'm just tryin' to keep you boys alive." Warner's voice was gruff but not unkind. "You live through this, you'll know better for next time. That's what we're all aimin' for—to finish the job and go home. Remember that." Rising, he headed off to administer his wisdom to some other hapless soldier.

"It would be useful to know what the job *is*," Stefan said sourly as he too dropped down on his pack. He did not remove his helmet, however, even though he looked as uncomfortable as his brother did.

Gabriel nodded. "He spoke of an 'installation,' and said we have to get there quickly. But what is it that we have to do there?"

"You guys joined late, didn't you?" A voice spoke from their left. Gabriel and Stefan both looked up to see a young black man coming up to them. He dropped his pack down next to theirs and sat down. "You didn't get the whole briefing." Rolling his eyes skyward, he grinned. "Ain't that just like the Army—you end up sloggin' through this shit and nobody's even told you why. I'm Rodney Marcus, by the way." He offered his hand.

Gabriel shook it, and after a moment Stefan did too. "I'm Gabriel, and this is my brother Stefan. So what about this mission?"

Rodney Marcus didn't seem taken aback by the fact that both of his new friends apparently only had one name each. "Yeah, the mission." He lowered his voice. "Up ahead a couple miles is one of the enemy's most secret installations. They're developin' some kind of super-weapon there—a bomb of some kind, we think. It's a prototype—far as our intelligence knows, it's the only one that exists. We're supposed to get in there and destroy it before they get a chance to use it. If we can take out some of the scientists who are workin' on it, that's all the better."

"What kind of bomb?" Stefan asked.

Rodney shrugged. "Dunno. All they told us is that it's supposed to be way more powerful than a regular bomb. Somethin' to do with atoms or somethin'. Science fiction stuff, I thought, but I guess it just might be real after all."

Gabriel and Stefan looked at each other, but said nothing. After a moment Rodney continued: "The woods are crawlin' with the enemy, and there's more of 'em around the place we're headin' for. Not as many as you'd think, though, they said, since it's s'posed to be a secret.

The lieutenant said that if they had too many guys guardin' it somebody'd get suspicious."

"Lieutenant?" Stefan looked around the clearing. "I was under the impression that the sergeant was in charge."

"Yeah—he is. Lieutenant Shirofsky got killed a couple days ago. Sarge says we have to press on, though—this mission is too important. Lieutenant Shirofsky said that before he died, too: it could be the fate of the whole world dependin' on whether we succeed or not."

Gabriel leaned back a bit, trying to find the elusive comfortable position on his pack. "The fate of the world..." he mused, half to himself.

"I don't know if I believe it or not," Rodney said, "but I'm gonna do my best. If it's really that important, I want to make sure that the folks back home don't have anything to worry about." He stood and grabbed his pack. "I gotta go talk to Sarge for a minute. I'll see you guys later."

When he left, Stefan looked at Gabriel. "Such blind devotion to a cause. I didn't think the humans possessed that any longer."

Gabriel shrugged. "Who knows what time period this scenario is intended to be associated with? My guess from looking at the weapons and the uniforms would be early to mid 20th century. Although I notice that everyone here has avoided mentioning any nationality in particular. Just 'us' and 'the enemy'."

"So we're meant to destroy an atomic bomb." Stefan started to remove his helmet so he could run a hand through his hair, but stopped before doing so. "That sounds like a suicide mission to me."

"That depends on the way they plan to do it."

"Regardless—I don't plan to die trying to save nonexistent people on a nonexistent world."

Gabriel sighed. "Stefan, I don't think we'll have to. We don't have all the facts yet. Obviously we're meant to do something, but we haven't seen what. I don't think we will until we reach that installation."

"So you're in favor of just following along with whatever they decide to do?" Stefan looked like he would be most unwilling to accept that.

"Not necessarily. It might be that we're meant to help them come up with a more workable plan. But as I said, we won't know anything until we've got more facts. So we follow for awhile and see what happens." His eyes narrowed a bit. "Don't forget why we're here, Stefan. Never forget that. Everything else is irrelevant."

"I know. I know. And you will continue to remind me if by chance I *do* forget." Stefan sighed and glanced up, then rose and began gathering his pack. "It appears that our leader is summoning us to press on."

He was right. "Okay, men!" Sgt. Warner called softly. "Let's move 'em out! We got a long way to go today!"

Grumbling a little but otherwise cooperative, the soldiers gathered up their gear, slung it on their backs, and resumed their positions. After a moment Gabriel and Stefan followed suit.

They marched on for another hour, continuing to fight their way through the thick ground cover and thread their way among the numerous trees. As the day wore on and the sun began to dip (though it was still hard to tell through all the foliage), the temperature lowered somewhat and conditions became marginally more comfortable. They were not moving fast now; since they were getting very close to the enemy's installation, Sgt. Warner passed back the word that stealth was more important than speed. The men broke up even more, keeping close to trees and trying hard not to make unnecessary sounds. Every one of their faces showed the

strain the uncertainty about the enemy had engendered in their minds.

Gabriel picked his way along, his boots making almost no sound in the damp leaves. Stefan followed a few paces behind, tracing his brother's steps and also moving like a ghost among the trees. "I don't know how the humans can live like this," he whispered softly enough so only Gabriel could hear him. "No magic, no astral sight, no —"

The *crack* of a single gunshot split the air a few meters beyond their position. The soldier directly in front of them, who had become visible for a moment as he hurried toward another tree, did not even have time to scream before the left half of his head was blown off in a spray of blood and he fell to the leaves.

What followed was chaos. From somewhere off in the distance Sgt. Warner was yelling "Cover!" but nobody was waiting for that order. All around him Gabriel heard the sounds of his fellow soldiers diving behind trees and unslinging their rifles from their shoulders. Quickly he did likewise, catching sight of Stefan ducking behind another tree and fumbling with his own gun. The air was filled with more *cracks* as the hidden enemy continued taking shots at them. One round slammed into Gabriel's tree on the other side, startling him into bringing his head back from where he'd poked it out to take a look. He got only a brief impression of an olive-clad soldier retreating behind his own cover.

As Gabriel got his rifle unslung and was preparing to aim it, he heard a clatter followed by a muttered curse from his right. Glancing over, he saw Stefan scrambling to reclaim his own rifle, which he had dropped; the clatter had been the rifle banging into the tree on its way down. It didn't surprise Gabriel that Stefan was having trouble with the firearm: he doubted that his brother had ever

used one. Stefan prided himself on his magic and his natural dragon abilities, and as such considered using human weapons to be beneath him. Gabriel himself was not doing much better, though for a different reason: since he did not like to kill, and had no need for a gun as self defense, he had never bothered learning to fire one. Still, he had seen enough of them (and Kestrel had explained their operation in detail to him, including once taking one apart and showing him how each component functioned) that he could at least manage to get the thing aimed and keep watch for a target. He just hoped that, with his senses severely diminished from their normal dragon sharpness, he didn't end up shooting one of his own company. Loath as he was to admit it, he was finding some sympathy for Stefan's wonderings regarding humans and how they managed to function in such limited bodies.

There was another quick scream off to Gabriel's left as another of the squad fell to enemy fire. Gabriel squeezed off several rounds at the enemy figure trying to get back behind cover and was rewarded with another scream as that man too fell. He felt a pang of regret at having to do it.

He drew back behind the tree and pressed himself against it, holding the rifle tightly. There was a movement off to his left; he leaned out and then gasped sharply and sagged as a round grazed his upper arm. White-hot pain spiked through him, only getting worse when he hit the ground and landed hard on a rock, feeling it bite into his side. Fighting against the pain, he struggled to get back to his knees and get his rifle aimed as another soldier took out his assailant.

The gunfire continued, and the screams continued. All around him Gabriel could see and hear his comrades falling as they desperately tried to coordinate their

attacks. The enemy seemed to be everywhere. He glanced over to where Stefan was crouched; his brother appeared to have gotten the hang of using his rifle, but he wasn't shooting at anything at the moment.

Then, suddenly, Stefan's body jerked sideways at the same time another *crack* erupted from the trees beyond him. He cried out in pain and dropped to the ground, writhing, gun forgotten. Savagely, Gabriel brought his own rifle up and fired a barrage at the retreating figure; this time he didn't feel any remorse when the figure fell and didn't get up.

There was silence.

He waited a moment to verify that no one else was going to shoot at him, listening to the eerie sound of the cessation of gunfire, and then hurried over to his brother in a crouching run.

Gabriel dropped down on his knees next to Stefan, his rifle falling unnoticed from his hand. His brother had either landed on his side or rolled onto it, and now lay in an uncomfortable-looking heap in the leaves. His eyes were open and he was still breathing—both good signs—although he wasn't speaking at the moment. Gabriel struggled to shove Stefan's pack from his back so he could roll him over, then wriggled out of his own, wincing as the straps raked over the flesh wounds on his arm and his side. His eyes widened in concern when he saw the blood on Stefan's fatigue jacket, down low on his side right above his belt. "Stefan?"

Stefan stared up at him. "Gethelwain—" Fear and pain, two things normally foreign to him, showed in his eyes.

Gabriel's gaze darted around, looking for others from the company. "Stay still," he said; he kept his voice soft both to be reassuring and because he was afraid there still

might be wandering enemy patrols. "Don't move until I can figure out if anyone else is still alive."

"Gabriel?" A quiet voice called from somewhere nearby. "Stefan? Bollinger? Jimenez? Any of you guys over here?"

"Here!" His hand still gripping Stefan's shoulder, Gabriel indicated his position to the soldier coming through the trees.

The man hurried over to where they were, stopping when he saw Stefan. He was a short, powerfully built young man with dark eyes and close-cropped dark hair; a hasty makeshift bandage covered a spreading bloodstain on his upper leg. "We gotta move," he said urgently, casting glances back toward the area from which he had come. "Sarge got hit bad, but he's still alive. He says we're almost on top of that installation now. If we can sneak in before they realize their patrol is all dead, we might still have a chance. Otherwise we're goners for sure." He looked at Stefan again. "Can he move?"

"I don't know."

"I will—move," Stefan rasped through gritted teeth. "Help me."

Gabriel got down under Stefan's arm on his unwounded side, fighting to get his larger and heavier brother to an upright position. Stefan assisted as much as he could, though moving only caused his wound to bleed more. After a moment the soldier, still looking nervously around for stray enemies, came over and helped. Once the two were standing, he hefted Gabriel's pack and rifle and gave them to him, then picked up Stefan's pack. "Come on. We gotta get back to Sarge and find out who else is alive."

The trip to where the soldier (his name, it turned out, was Maselli) had left the sergeant was a slow, painful, and laborious one. Gabriel fought his way along with Stefan,

who was doing his best to walk but having trouble; Maselli was only marginally faster, limping along with his own pack on his back and Stefan's in his hands. If there was anything positive about the situation, it was that nobody was shooting at them, at least for the moment. "I think we got 'em all," Maselli huffed.

"I—hope so." Stefan's voice came out with no force behind it. Gabriel did not speak; he tried to ignore the sight of the fallen comrades they were passing, but could not help feeling sorrow for the blasted, bleeding bodies that up until a few minutes ago had been living men. He had to close his eyes briefly as they pressed on past the body of Rodney Marcus, whose eyes were frozen open in terror, his chest and part of his head blown away. Sighing, he wondered how the humans (and metahumans, now) could continue such barbaric practices even into his own present time—surely there must be a better way to settle differences. He shifted his position under Stefan's arm and continued on, steeling himself against his pain.

Sgt. Warner was in bad shape. One look at him told Gabriel that he wouldn't live to see the evening—and the evening was not far away. He had been hit at least twice; one round had destroyed his right shoulder, which was nothing more than a mass of torn and bleeding flesh, while the second had all but blown off his left leg at the knee. He lay now, his head propped on his pack and his skin drained of color, looking around with shock-glazed eyes. Even through all that, though, he took his leadership responsibility seriously. "Gabriel. Stefan. Maselli," he whispered, motioning weakly for them to come in close so he could make himself heard.

Gabriel gently propped Stefan against a nearby tree and then leaned in close to the sergeant; Maselli came up next to him.

"Listen." Warner's voice was barely audible; he was already fading. "You guys gotta get to that bunker. Maselli—did you find anybody else?"

"No, Sarge. Just these two. I think everybody else is dead."

Warner's eyes closed for a moment. "Just three left...out of twenty."

"Four, Sarge," Maselli corrected. His voice shook. "You're gonna make it."

Warner shook his head slowly. "Don't—be an idiot, Maselli. I'm done. But—I'm not important. None of us are." He coughed, his formerly tanned skin going whiter as he jarred his wounds. "The mission—that's important. You three—you gotta get to that bunker before they figure out—they didn't kill us all." His hand fumbled at his pocket. "Orders—take 'em. They'll—tell you what you need to do."

Maselli just stared numbly at Warner as he held out a bloodstained, folded paper. After a moment, Gabriel took it and put it in his own pocket.

Warner's gaze swept the three of them, the light in his eyes already fading. "Go. That's an order."

"Sarge—"

"That's an *order*, soldier!" Warner forced gruffness into his tone even though everyone present could see that he didn't want to stay here and die any more than they wanted to leave him. "All of you. Go. Now. Head north. It should be—only a few hundred yards away from here."

Gabriel and Maselli looked at each other; slowly Gabriel rose and bent to help Stefan up. Maselli took another long moment to regard Warner, whose eyes were now closed from the exertion of speaking. Wordlessly, the three of them shouldered their burdens and headed off toward the bunker. No one looked back.

Warner was right about the location, a fact which relieved all three of them. None of them at this point were in any shape to go casting around in the forest looking for a secret installation, so they were pleasantly surprised when, after a slow and painful march north for about two hundred yards, a long, low concrete form became visible. "Almost as if they want us to find it," Stefan murmured. Gabriel nodded.

"Huh?" Maselli turned back around from his position as point man, happy to have a moment to rest his injured leg.

"Nothing."

The three of them hid behind the heavy growth of trees surrounding the installation and looked it over. Maselli dug in his pack and came up with a pair of binoculars, which they passed around until all three of them had gotten a good look. "They hid this place pretty well," Maselli whispered as he passed the binocs back to Gabriel and pointed. "But it's hard to hide somethin' like that."

Gabriel nodded agreement. The installation was not very large; in fact, "installation" was quite a grandiose name for the ragtag collection of prefab buildings, cleared land, and scaffolding that served as the enemy's secret base. The only structures that looked relatively sturdy were the small concrete bunker that was set into the ground only a few yards away from the treeline and the large cylindrical object raised up on heavy scaffolding that rose nearly to the tops of the trees. Other than that, there was one large building that looked like a central headquarters and several smaller ones that probably functioned as housing for the scientists and military personnel working here. Several vehicles, all of them painted olive drab and covered over with camouflage netting, were parked off to one side. Like the vehicles, all

the buildings, the scaffolds, and the object they held up were all painted the same camouflage pattern. It wasn't very effective at close range, but Gabriel could see how it would be quite helpful in hiding this site from low-flying spy planes, especially with the dense forest that surrounded it.

There were no living beings in evidence; either the scientists and the remaining soldiers (if there *were* any remaining soldiers) were inside one of the prefab buildings or else they were in the bunker. There was no way to tell. "Damn this place," Stefan whispered to Gabriel. "If we could use astral perception, it would be simple to tell where they are."

Gabriel didn't turn around. "But we can't. We'll have to take a chance. If we can get into that bunker before anyone sees us, then we might gain some time to make our plans from there."

"What do we do?" Maselli asked dubiously. "They'll see us for sure if we just run over there. Especially as slow as we are. I doubt if we *can* run." He motioned toward his own injured leg, then indicated Gabriel's and Stefan's injuries with a brief head movement.

Gabriel nodded. "But if we can sneak in, staying close to the wall, we might blend in well enough that they won't see us."

"It'll be dark in an hour or so." Maselli looked around, nervous. "We might have a better chance then."

"They will – send someone to investigate soon," Stefan spoke up from his position propped against a tree. "We – must go now."

Gabriel looked over at him. He wasn't looking good; his skin was even paler than usual, and his face was slicked with sweat. "I agree with Stefan. Besides, we need some time to tend to these wounds."

Maselli shrugged. "There isn't really anybody in command now without Sarge, so I guess you two win. I just hope you know what you're doing. And I hope the door to that bunker isn't locked."

"It won't be," Gabriel said, sounding certain.

"Huh?" Maselli stared at him like he'd just sprouted wings. "How do you know that?"

Gabriel shrugged. *Because we're meant to get in there*, he thought, but to Maselli he said only, "Because if anything goes wrong while they're working on that bomb, they'll need to get to safety quickly. They can't waste time trying to get the door to their bunker open."

Maselli sighed. "I hope you're right." Standing, he picked up Stefan's pack and adjusted his own on his shoulders.

Getting into the bunker proved to be easier than any of them had dared to hope. Staying low and close against the camo-painted concrete walls (which stuck up out of the ground only about three feet), they crept up to the corner of the structure and peered around it. The door was closed, set down into the ground and accessed through hand-hewn steps cut into the ground. They had to move a bit faster than they wanted to in order to reach the door, since none of them wanted to be in the open any longer than they had to, but they reached it and practically tumbled to the bottom of the steps in relief. Gabriel grasped the knob of the heavy steel door and flipped the catch; all three of them held their breath.

The door swung silently open, accompanied by three soft sighs of relief. It was several inches thick, but moved easily on well oiled hinges.

Maselli went in first, tossing Stefan's pack ahead of him and holding his rifle ready. The small space was bathed in darkness. When he heard nothing moving inside he located the light switch and whispered, "Okay –

come on in." He waited until they were all inside and the door closed behind them before snapping on the light switch.

The three blinked as the place was bathed in the harsh light of a single bulb hanging from the ceiling. It was not a large room—only about ten by twenty feet, made smaller by the fact that there were boxes piled up along the back wall. Its only features were a short, heavily shielded window just above ground level (this window was currently covered by flip-down metal cover) and a tiny crude bathroom in the far back corner. Other than these features the room was completely plain and unadorned.

Gabriel looked around, noting the disused quality of the bunker. "I don't think they come in here very often," he said. "That can work to our advantage."

"Would *you*?" Maselli regarded the place with distaste. "This place is depressing. That must be some bomb if it needs a place like this to keep you safe from it." He carefully lowered himself to the floor, heavily favoring his injured leg. It was soaked with blood now.

Gabriel privately doubted whether the bunker would be fully adequate in keeping anyone safe from an atomic bomb— even one as small and primitive as this one—at this close a range, but he kept that thought to himself. "All right," he said instead. "The first thing we need to do is take care of our wounds, and then when it gets dark we can determine where to go from here."

Stefan had not moved from where Gabriel had put him down with his head on his pack. Gabriel shoved his rifle through the handle on the bunker's door to keep anyone from coming in, then dropped down next to his brother and began carefully removing his jacket. After a moment Maselli came over with a medkit from his pack. "How bad?"

Gabriel winced a bit when he saw Stefan's side, but forced matter-of-factness into his tone. "Not too bad. We'll take care of this." In his own mind, he wasn't so sure. Stefan had taken a shot to his side, right near his lowest rib. It didn't look like a deep hit, but that didn't make it any less serious, just less immediately life threatening. Briefly he wished that his powerful healing abilities were available, but banished the thought just as quickly. There was no point in wishing for what he didn't have.

Stefan's eyes opened. "Truth, brother."

Gabriel met his gaze. "It's bad. But if I can get the bleeding stopped I think you'll survive until we can get you some help."

Maselli started to say something, but decided against it. Instead he busied himself helping Gabriel clean out Stefan's wound, tend it with the limited supplies they had, and wrap his side tightly in bandages. Stefan settled back on his pack, closed his eyes, and said nothing more.

Gabriel looked over his handiwork for a moment, his eyes troubled. Then, consciously pulling himself together, he turned to Maselli. "All right — your turn."

The other man started to protest that Gabriel should be next, but Gabriel wasn't hearing any of it. Reluctantly Maselli allowed his leg wound to be cleaned and bandaged. It wasn't as bad as Gabriel had feared; it too was a glancing hit to the upper leg and hadn't injured any major blood vessels. Maselli winced as Gabriel swabbed it out, but bore the treatment stoically.

After that they switched places, with Maselli becoming the doctor and Gabriel the patient. Gabriel stripped off his uniform jacket and allowed Maselli to patch up the relatively minor wounds in his upper arm and his side, both of which were painful but neither of which posed much immediate danger. As Maselli finished fastening the bandage around Gabriel's arm, he looked

up, troubled. Speaking very quietly so Stefan wouldn't hear, he said, "You—uh—do know that there's no help anywhere near here, right?"

"What?" Gabriel moved his arm to give him a better angle.

"I mean—what you told Stefan—you know it's not true, right?"

Gabriel sighed. "How far from help are we?"

"We're about twenty miles inside enemy lines. I don't know what they told you guys when they dropped you in here, but that's the truth. Once we take out this place, we might be able to get out if we're healthy. You might make it. But me and Stefan—"

"No." Gabriel shook his head. "We're going to try." Again the doubts about the protective ability of the bunker came to the front of his mind, but again he didn't voice them. "We'll do what we have to do, and we'll try to get out."

Maselli nodded, clearly wanting to believe Gabriel's words but not succeeding. "Yeah. We'll try." He looked around the bunker. "So—when we gonna do it? It better be soon, before they figure out that we're in here."

"We should wait until full dark. An hour or two longer to rest shouldn't reveal our position, as long as no one tries to come in here." Gabriel shifted position on his pack. "As long as they don't know how many men there were in our company, even counting bodies won't reveal that anyone got away. And I doubt that they'd expect us to come here even if we *did* escape. Not right away, at least."

"I sure wish we knew how many guys they still have guarding the place."

Gabriel sighed, shaking his head. "Well, we don't. We can try observing them through the windows, but I don't think it's worth the risk right now. Too much chance that

they might see the light, and we need it right now. Before we go, we can turn it off and get a look then." He grabbed his jacket, which he hadn't put back on yet, and pulled the folded paper from the pocket, holding it so both he and Maselli could see it. "Let's see what they want us to do."

For a moment the two of them read the orders in silence, squinting to make out the small handwritten notes amid the grime and bloodstains. "One guy," Maselli said quietly. "Just one guy. "

Gabriel nodded. It made sense, though it would be very risky. The orders called for one man to sneak into the camp, get to the top of the scaffolding, and sabotage the bomb so it would explode. There were detailed instructions, undoubtedly obtained by their agents, describing how the sabotage was to be carried out. "So who's gonna do it?" Maselli asked.

"Let's rest a bit first," Gabriel said. "After that we'll decide."

Maselli looked around nervously again. "Not too long. I keep expectin' somebody to try to get in here."

"Just an hour or so. Try to get some rest."

The other man nodded. "Yeah." Picking up his pack, he moved a little distance away and lay down with his head on the pack.

Gabriel sat down next to Stefan. "Are you there?" he whispered.

Stefan nodded wearily. "I—heard everything you said." After a pause, he added, "Such an unpleasant way to die."

"You aren't going to die. Remember where we are. None of this is real."

"You hope." Stefan's eyes opened; he regarded his brother expressionlessly. "You always were too optimistic, Gethelwain. You know as well as I do that the Netherworlds are as real as our own, in their way."

"Yes, but I also know that death here doesn't mean what it does in our world. Not necessarily."

Stefan didn't answer that. For a long moment he was silent, then he looked up at Gabriel again. "What did you see in that cave, Gethelwain?"

The question caught Gabriel off guard. "Why?"

Stefan shrugged, wincing as he realized that had probably been a mistake. "Just—curious."

Gabriel considered the question for almost a full minute before answering. Then, reluctantly: "I saw Telanwyr."

Stefan's eyes held his gaze. "What—did he say to you?"

This time Gabriel had to look away. "He blamed me for his death. He said that I had betrayed him."

Stefan closed his eyes again. "Did you tell him of the Enemy?"

"I told him. He didn't believe me." A pause, and then: "That was when he set those creatures on me."

Stefan's eyes opened again. "You mentioned them before. I saw no creatures. What were they?"

Gabriel shrugged. "I don't know. Humanoid things with black fur and red eyes. I didn't recognize them." His gaze sharpened a bit. "You said you saw something else. Hatchlings. What else did you see?"

Now it was Stefan's turn to be silent.

"Stefan?"

"I saw my father." He stated it flatly; the shake in his voice could easily have been from the pain of his wound.

Gabriel's eyes widened. "Your father?"

"He wanted me to join him." Again the flat, emotionless tone.

"What—did you do?"

There was another long period of silence. "I cursed him. I told him I had nothing in common with him. I told

him to go back to wherever it was he'd come from." He looked up at his brother, and there was something new in his eyes. Fear? Shame? "He told me that I *was* just like him. He praised me for finally accepting the Power." Now there was no mistaking the shake in Stefan's voice.

Gabriel shifted position to hide the fact that he could not think of any way to respond to that. At last he said quietly, "But you have *not* accepted it. You were tricked, not seduced like your father was. You didn't know what you were accepting. He did."

Stefan didn't meet his eyes. "I was tempted, Gethelwain. Only for a moment, but I was tempted. How can I fight against this when I cannot even be certain that I will be able to resist its call? It already has a hold on me. How can I be sure that it will not claim the promise I have given it?"

Gabriel glanced over at Maselli; he appeared to already have fallen into a fitful doze on the other side of the room. Then he looked back at his brother. "Stefan. Sildarath. You *can* fight this. You don't have to give in like your father did. You are stronger than your father. I will help you. All of us will. I know you do not consider my friends worthy of your notice, but there is something about them that confounds me. You heard Harlequin—Fate has chosen them before. They will help you because they do not wish to see the Enemy set loose in the world any more than we do. But in the end it will only be you who can make the final choice."

"If I die here, I will not have to make a choice," Stefan pointed out. "Perhaps that is preferable."

Gabriel shook his head. "You aren't going to die here. And I won't allow you to simply give up. You're the reason we are here—and you are going to see this through." His eyes hardened, but more with resolve than with anger. "You started this, Stefan. You will stay to

finish it, one way or another." He changed position again, and with it the subject. "What about these hatchlings?"

Stefan didn't reply; he looked like he didn't want to talk about it.

"Stefan, tell me. If we are to win over the Enemy, we cannot have secrets from each other."

Still Stefan paused. Taking a deep breath, he winced again. "Something was — wrong — with them. They were — diseased. Grotesque. He said they were my — brothers."

"Your —" Gabriel stopped as the implications of that sunk in. The tone of his voice altered, grew more soothing. "Stefan, it was nothing more than a test. They weren't really there. Your father wasn't there. Telanwyr wasn't there. All of this was designed only to sway us from what we must do. You have to remember that — keep it always in the front of your mind. There will be resistance. We must remain committed to what we're doing, and not allow ourselves to be distracted."

Stefan's features returned to a ghost of their old look of contempt. "Very stirring, little brother. You always were the idealist in the family, weren't you? But surely even you know that it is not so easy."

"I know it won't be easy at all. But that doesn't matter. We don't have a choice. Not unless you want to give in to it. I think you're stronger than your father was. Are you?"

"I would not have come to you if I were not," Stefan pointed out through gritted teeth.

Gabriel nodded. "I know. So enough talk of death and giving up. Rest for awhile, and then we have to determine where we go from here."

Stefan raised up a little bit on his pack. "Let me see those orders."

Gabriel handed over the bloodstained paper. "You heard us talking before — they want us to send one man

out, to get to the top of that bomb and sabotage the wiring in it. They're quite clear about what needs to be done."

"This is a suicide mission," Stefan said, examining the instructions. "You *did* see that, did you not?"

Gabriel nodded again. "The chances of getting back to the bunker after getting to the top of that scaffolding and sabotaging the bomb are almost nonexistent."

"If this bunker will even provide any protection," Stefan pointed out. "But even if it does, there is no way to delay the explosion. *Almost* nonexistent is too optimistic. Once the sabotage is complete, the bomb will explode immediately."

Across the room, Maselli rolled over, trying to find a comfortable position propped up on his lumpy pack. Gabriel watched him for a moment, then turned back to Stefan. His eyes were quiet and resolute. "I know. That's why I will be the one to do it."

Stefan stared at him. "Gethelwain, you cannot. Loath as I am to admit it, if any one of us has a chance to defeat the Enemy, it is you. If you undertake this suicide mission and death *is* permanent here, then everything will be lost."

"What am I to do, then?" Gabriel matched Stefan's stare. "Send Maselli? He'll never make it on his injured leg. And you can't go. You're injured worse than any of us."

"That is precisely why I *should* go. I have been conserving my strength, and the bandages are holding. You know that we are tougher than humans are, even in these forms. But I can feel it already—the longer we remain in this scenario, the weaker I will become. I'll never make it if we have to leave here. I heard how far we are away from safety." He paused, his dark eyes fixing on his brother's. "I don't like this, Gethelwain. I don't want to do it. But there is no other logical option. I can keep

myself moving long enough to finish it, but probably not much longer."

Gabriel regarded him silently for several moments. He was right about his condition: already his complexion was graying, his face and chest slicked with sweat. The bandage on his side was already soaked through with blood. Gabriel knew that they had not adequately tended any of their wounds; in these primitive conditions infection would set in and they had no way to deal with it. He and Maselli had checked their packs and found only the most rudimentary of antiseptics and nothing else to combat infection. They'd done the best they could, but they both knew it wouldn't be enough. Taking a deep breath, he let it out slowly. "Let's rest for awhile, and then we'll discuss it. We shouldn't go until it's fully dark anyway. If we can wait until most of the enemy are asleep it will be easier."

Stefan nodded. "Yes." He looked relieved to be able to lie back and close his eyes for even a short time.

Gabriel rose, covering Stefan with his fatigue jacket. Troubled, he moved over to where he'd left his pack and lowered himself back down. He had no intention of allowing Stefan to perform the mission, but he knew that telling his brother that would only get them into an argument that neither of them had the stamina for. As he had said, they would rest for awhile. When it was full dark he would sneak out, with luck while both of them were asleep. If he was extremely lucky, he would complete the job before they awakened. And if he died —

—if he died, then it would be up to Stefan to finish what he had started.

As he drifted into a light sleep, his last conscious thought was wondering if Kestrel was safe, wherever she was.

43.

The next day dawned bright and sunny in Last Chance; it was as if the weather were trying to make up for all the trouble it had caused the previous night.

All the runners were up early, light knocks on the walls of their rooms bringing them all to congregate once more in Winterhawk's and Ocelot's room. 'Wraith's pocket watch indicated that it was only a little after 7:30 in the morning. "So we've got over four hours to kill before we go," Ocelot said. "What do we do with 'em?"

"I'm up for breakfast," Joe spoke up from his position by the window. "I can already smell it, and I'm hungry."

Kestrel nodded. "Me too. And maybe we can get some more information from talking to the other guys who live here."

Winterhawk appeared to be thinking about something else. His gaze snapped back to the present. "I don't think we should all go."

"Huh?" Ocelot looked at him strangely.

"To the clearing. I think it might look suspicious if we all went. I suggest two, three at the most. The others should remain in town and attempt to fulfill their roles.

Everyone nodded; it made sense. "Besides," Kestrel added, "we might scare those kids if we all showed up en masse. So who should go?"

"Hawk should," Ocelot said. "The kid gave him the note. But who else?"

In the end it was decided that Ocelot and Kestrel should accompany Winterhawk to the clearing. As the new blacksmith's assistant, Joe would be too conspicuous in his absence, and 'Wraith, as a banker/assayer (they hadn't completely figured out which one he was supposed to be yet), would probably prove more

intimidating to a couple of kids than two down-on-their-luck miners. That decision made, the runners retired downstairs, following the delicious scents wafting up from the kitchen.

If they had expected to talk to the other boarders, they were mostly out of luck. There was no sign of Charlie Smith or Silas Weatherby, although James Waring had beaten them to the table and was already filling his plate with eggs and bacon. "Mornin', lady and gents," he said agreeably through a mouthful. "Didn't expect to see you up this early, what with all the activity last night."

Kestrel muttered something about "—haven't quite gotten used to the place yet," and the five of them sat down. Mrs. McMurtry bustled in with another heaping dish of eggs, wished them a cheerful 'good morning' and headed back for the kitchen.

"Where's Weatherby?" 'Wraith asked, reaching for the bacon. One of the few advantages to being a temporary human was that he could eat meat, and he wasn't going to pass up the chance.

Waring shrugged. "Out with Grimmer, probably. They were workin' those poor guys all night once the rain stopped, gettin' that damn trestle shored up so they didn't lose any time." He looked at Winterhawk. "It was a good thing you were here, young fella, or we'd have lost a lot more good men than we did."

"I did what I could," Winterhawk murmured.

"What about Charlie Smith?" Ocelot spoke up when he saw that the mage wasn't in the mood for praise right now.

"I reckon he's upstairs asleep," Waring told him, glancing toward the dining room door. "He dragged in here about 5 a.m.—I know that 'cause I got up to answer nature's call and heard him clumping into his room, which is next to mine. I 'spect he'll be dead to the world

until at least this afternoon." He looked around at the five of them. "So—what do you folks have planned for today? I guess you'll be wantin' to get started with your jobs, won't you? Except for you—" he added to Winterhawk. "You've already got started, it looks like. Hell of a thing on your first night in town."

Kestrel smiled at him. "Terry and I thought we'd take a look around, and get an idea of what's around here. Maybe we'll even go have a picnic."

Ocelot cast an odd look at Kestrel, but knew better than to contradict her.

"Picnic, eh?" Waring considered that. "It's probably still pretty wet after the storm last night—"

She shrugged. "Maybe we'll just take a walk, then. Do you know any good places to go walking around here?"

The storekeeper thought for a few moments, apparently feeding his mental processes with copious quantities of eggs. "Well..." he finally said. "If you go north out of town, there's some nice meadowland up there. Some folks think it's pretty. Me, I just end up gettin' chewed up by bugs whenever I go up that way."

"Hmm..." Kestrel appeared to be thinking over his suggestion, but then she looked up brightly. "I remember now—someone mentioned that Elkhorn Clearing was a nice place to go. Can you tell me where that is?"

Waring frowned. "Well, now, whoever was tellin' you that must have been pullin' your leg, ma'am. That's nothin' but a place where the kids go to play. Not usually this time of year, though. It's a bit far out of town when the weather's this touchy."

"Well, if the kids aren't there now, then maybe it will be a nice place." She smiled again; Ocelot couldn't help smiling too, though he hid it behind his hand. "Can you tell us where it is?"

"Sure I can," Waring said, shrugging. "Don't know why you'd want to go there, but—you just go south out of town on Main Street, then turn left at the first fork in the road. Head down that way about half a mile, then go off the road where you see a big rock right next to it. You'll see some trees off a few yards from the road, and the clearing's in there."

"Thank you, Mr. Waring," Kestrel said sweetly, then gave Ocelot a look meant to suggest to the storekeeper that they certainly had things they could do at the clearing.

Waring, unsure what to make of that, muttered something unintelligible and returned his attention to his breakfast. The runners ate in silence until he took his leave and departed, and then Ocelot grinned and clapped Kestrel on the shoulder. "Nice going."

"I think you've scandalized our Mr. Waring," Winterhawk added with his own smile. "But you've gotten the information we need. Well done."

Kestrel shrugged. "I'm not much good at that 'feminine wiles' stuff, but occasionally it comes in handy."

Information obtained, the runners finished their breakfast in a leisurely fashion. Mrs. McMurtry seemed pleased that they had healthy appetites; Joe, especially, was singled out for her approval, while she kept clucking around Winterhawk trying to encourage him to eat more. They bore her ministrations with good humor and managed to kill an hour and a half over the meal.

They spent the rest of the morning wandering around the town, learning where things were and identifying landmarks; all of them noticed that there were very few men of working age in evidence on the streets. Grimmer and Weatherby were likewise nowhere to be seen. When it got close to the time when Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel would have to leave, 'Wraith and Joe headed off to

their respective places of business. The five of them agreed to meet back at the saloon in three hours.

Kestrel sighed as the three of them walked out of town. "What do you suppose this kid has to tell us about Grimmer? I still don't quite understand exactly what we're doing here."

"Me neither," Ocelot admitted. "But if it's anything like last time, things like this don't happen for no reason. If the kid has something to tell us, then I'll put money on the fact that it's important to what we're supposed to do."

"Which we still don't know." Winterhawk said, echoing Kestrel's sigh. He walked along for a few more moments, then mused, "I wonder what our two favorite scaly chaps are doing just now."

"I hope they're havin' better luck with it than we are, whatever it is," Ocelot said sourly.

Kestrel nodded. "I wonder if they're even together."

"Good question." Winterhawk shrugged. "I wouldn't even venture to guess what kind of situations the metaplanes would throw at a pair of Great Dragons. That's a bit beyond my area of expertise."

Ocelot was walking along listening to them when suddenly he got a strange look on his face. He turned to Winterhawk. "You don't suppose they're here, do you?"

Winterhawk raised an eyebrow. "I don't follow. Why would they be here?"

"And why wouldn't we have found them?" Kestrel added. "From what you guys have been saying, it sounds like the place is kind of self-contained, right? Wouldn't we have seen them?"

"Maybe we have." Ocelot looked at her first, then at Winterhawk. "Maybe we're goin' to talk to them right now."

Winterhawk looked momentarily confused, but then light dawned. "You think those two boys are Gabriel and

Stefan?" He frowned. "Hardly seems likely—why wouldn't they have contacted us? It doesn't make sense that they would be here and not recognize us."

"Maybe they did," Kestrel pointed out. "Maybe that's why they gave us the note."

"I don't know," Winterhawk said with a sigh. "P'raps you're right—it's certainly worth investigating. But if we confront them with the knowledge and they don't know what we're talking about, then it doesn't make sense that they'd be here unaware of who they are. I'm inclined to believe that Fate—or whoever else has set up these little scenarios this time—is just having a little sport with us."

Ocelot trudged along. "I'm not sure whether I hope you're right or wrong," he muttered.

Neither Kestrel nor Winterhawk answered that. They continued walking in silence, watching the landscape roll by. Any other day it would have been a pleasant walk: although the ground was still quite damp from last night's rains, the road wound its way through terrain that alternated between light forest and meadowlands. It was hard to tell what season it was at the moment, but their best guess was early spring—the earth was still caught in winter's grip, but just beginning to come to life again.

They found the large rock Waring had described without difficulty and left the road there as he had directed. They had to make their way through high weeds to reach the clump of trees, thoroughly soaking the cuffs of their pants. Kestrel and Ocelot, both wearing jeans and heavy work boots, weren't bothered, but Winterhawk's suit slacks and city shoes weren't faring nearly as well. To his credit, he didn't complain, though; he seemed focused on reaching the clearing.

No one else was there when they arrived. The clearing was not large, perhaps twenty by twenty feet, surrounded by trees with boughs that grew over the area, almost

enclosing it. Winterhawk pulled out his pocket watch and consulted it. "We're a bit early."

Ocelot nodded, setting up a pattern of pacing designed to ensure that they weren't surprised by unexpected visitors. After a moment Kestrel did the same thing. Winterhawk took a seat on one of the smallish rocks in the middle of the clearing and waited. He would have liked to have used astral perception to determine when the boys were coming, but that was one aspect of magic that he knew didn't function on the metaplanes, for whatever reason. He had tried it just to be sure when they were back in their rooms, to no avail. A clairvoyance spell seemed like overkill, so he forced himself to just be patient and wait.

It was only about ten minutes later that they all heard slight movements outside the clearing. The movements stopped suddenly just at the edge, and a young voice called quietly, "Doc? You there?"

Winterhawk rose quickly from his seated position. "Here."

The two boys stepped around from where they had been hidden behind a tree. Their gazes swept over Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel, then continued on as if looking for others. "Where's the other two?" the younger boy, the one who had given Winterhawk the note, asked.

"They had to work," Ocelot said. "We're it."

The boys looked at each other, then back at the three runners. The younger boy nodded. "Thanks for comin'. We figured you might not, since we're just kids. We thought you might not believe us."

"Why wouldn't we believe you?" Winterhawk asked, sitting back down. "It's fairly easy to see that Mr. Grimmer is an odd duck. We thought p'raps you might be able to enlighten us as to the details."

The boys' expressions clouded a bit at Winterhawk's strange phrasing, but they shrugged and came closer. "Yeah," said the older one.

"By the way," Kestrel spoke up with a quick glance toward her companions, "I just realized we don't even know your names. I'm Juliana, and this is Terry. You already know Dr. Stone."

Again, the younger boy spoke; he seemed to be the leader of the pair. "I'm Mike. This is my brother Nathan. Our pa's Clarence Briggs. He works for the railroad. That's how come you were healin' him last night."

Ocelot looked them over. "You know, you guys look kind of familiar," he lied. "Are you sure we don't know you from somewhere? Maybe by different names?"

The two boys looked at each other in confusion, then turned back to Ocelot. "Beggin' your pardon, sir," Mike said, "but I'm afraid we don't know what you're talkin' about. We ain't got no other names, and we never seen you before yesterday. You came in on the stage, right?"

Winterhawk nodded. "So you don't recognize the names 'Gabriel' and 'Stefan', then?"

Mike frowned. "Nope. There's a guy named Steve who works for the horseshoer, and old Gabe Sykes—he's a prospector who lives up in the hills. But that's it."

"Okay," Ocelot said. "No problem. Must have you confused with somebody else. So what's this you have to tell us about Grimmer?"

Mike and Nathan Briggs exchanged glances; it didn't get past any of the three runners that they looked scared. Moving in closer to the runners and glancing around to make sure no one else was watching, Mike whispered, "I think there's somethin' bad about the guy comin' in on the train. And I think Mr. Grimmer knows about it."

Now it was the runners' turn to look at each other. "Bad?" Winterhawk asked after a moment. "Bad in what way, exactly?"

Mike took a deep breath and let it out slowly, thinking. "I'm—we're not sure. Not exactly." He shifted back and forth from foot to foot; it didn't take a terribly perceptive person to tell that he was holding something back.

Winterhawk lowered his voice, speaking softly and persuasively. "You don't have to keep anything from us, Mike. We're here to help. If there's something going on, best if you give us all the details. Otherwise we won't be able to see how to help you."

"Don't be scared," Kestrel added. "We won't tell anybody what you tell us. Nobody except our other two friends, and they want to help too."

Mike's frightened gaze moved from Winterhawk to Kestrel to Ocelot, and then lit on his brother. Nathan shrugged; he too looked fearful, and kept constant watch on the perimeter of the clearing. "Promise?" Mike finally asked, his tone hesitant. "This is gonna sound dumb. But we're not lyin'. I swear on our ma's Bible, we're not lyin'."

"Yeah." Nathan nodded. "Me too."

"If you don't mind my saying so," Winterhawk said, "you young chaps don't look like you're very good at lying. I think we'd be able to tell if you were—and none of us think you will." Ocelot and Kestrel nodded agreement. "So why don't you just tell us and let us be the judge of how dumb it does or doesn't sound?"

The two boys were silent for several seconds before answering. Mike looked down at his shoes, around the clearing again, and finally back up at Winterhawk. "We think he's gonna kill everybody in the town," he mumbled.

That was certainly not what any of the runners had expected to hear. They all stared at the boys, startled into speechlessness for a second or two. "What—" Winterhawk finally got out, "—what gave you that idea?"

"See? They don't believe us," Nathan said sullenly. "Just like I said."

"Wait a minute!" Kestrel held up her hands in protest. "Nobody said we didn't believe you. It's just a little hard to take—surely you understand that." She nodded toward Winterhawk. "Why don't you tell us why you think this is true?"

"We heard it," Mike said.

"On the telegraph," Nathan added.

"Hang on a second," Ocelot spoke up. "Start at the beginning. You heard *what* on the telegraph? And who was it from?"

Mike looked at Nathan, took another deep breath, and started speaking with frequent checks around the clearing punctuating his words. "It was three days ago. Mr. Peabody, who runs the telegraph office, sometimes pays us a little bit to deliver telegraphs that come in—you know, the ones that ain't too private. Nathan's been kinda hangin' around the office learnin' how to run the telegraph—Mr. Peabody don't mind, 'long as it ain't too busy. So anyway," he continued as he realized the story was getting off track, "we headed over there three days ago to see if Mr. Peabody had anything for us to deliver, but he wasn't there. Mr. Grimmer was there."

"Is this unusual?" Winterhawk asked.

Mike shrugged. "Sometimes some folks use it to send private messages that they don't want Mr. Peabody to see—Mr. Henry, the assayer, used to do that when there was a lot of gold comin' into town. We ain't never seen Mr. Grimmer do it, though. Anyways, Mr. Grimmer don't like kids much, so we didn't go in. But Nathan was

curious about what kinda message he might be sendin', so we hid and listened." He paused, looking challengingly at the runners, as if daring them to make any comment regarding the morality (or lack thereof) of listening in on other people's conversations.

None was forthcoming. Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel remained silent, their full attention on the boys.

"So we listened. Nathan didn't pick up everything, but Mr. Grimmer was sendin' a message to his boss. Somethin' about, 'everything's almost ready, and when you get here, everybody in town'll die just like we planned.'" He turned to his brother. "Right?"

Nathan nodded. "Yeah. That's not it exactly—it was kind of fast and I'm not that good yet. But that's mostly it. The part about everybody dyin' I'm sure of."

The runners looked at each other. "Why would he want to kill everyone in town?" Ocelot asked. "It doesn't make any sense. I thought they were tryin' to get the railroad set up so the town could be somethin' instead of just a wide spot on the map."

Mike frowned. "We don't get it either. But that Mr. Grimmer's mean. He don't care about any of the folks in town, as long as he gets his railroad done on time. If you folks hadn't been here, our pa woulda died 'cause of him."

Kestrel sighed, shaking her head. "It doesn't make any sense to me either. Killing off the people who are going to run your business—"

"Are there any secrets in town?" Winterhawk spoke up suddenly. "Anything hidden that someone might not want people to know about?"

The two boys thought about that for a moment, but both shook their heads. "There used to be a lot of gold up in the mountains, but there ain't been any new gold discovered for a year or so. That's why everybody's havin'

such a hard time and havin' to work for Victory United." Mike shoved his hands in his pockets in dejection.

"I guess if there's any secrets, we don't know about 'em," Nathan added.

"All right." Winterhawk rose from his seat on the rock. "We'll have to think this over." Facing the boys, he smiled reassuringly. "Thank you for the information. We're not quite sure what to do about it yet, but I assure you that Mr. Grimmer or his mysterious boss won't be killing anyone else while we're around."

"You got *that* right," Ocelot said, slapping his palm with his fist for emphasis.

Mike's eyes searched the runners' faces. "Are you sure you believe us? You don't think we're just dumb kids?"

Kestrel nodded. "We believe you, Mike. Honest."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. "You might have just given us the piece of this puzzle that we're gonna need."

"What puzzle?" Nathan looked confused.

"Never you mind that," Winterhawk said briskly. "Now you boys had best be getting back to town before someone misses you. It won't do for anyone—especially Grimmer or Weatherby—to know we've been chatting."

The two boys nodded. As they turned to leave, Kestrel called after them, "One more thing?"

Mike turned back. "Yes'm?"

"You tell us if you hear anything else, all right?"

The boy smiled; the smile lit up his plain face. "Yes'm. We promise." And then they were gone.

"—So that's the story," Winterhawk told the assembled group. "Our young informants seem to think that the mysterious head of Victory United Railroad is the main culprit here, and I'm inclined to agree with them."

They were reunited again after 'Hawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel had returned to town and collected 'Wraith and

Joe from their respective jobs. Fortunately business was slow, so no one missed the two of them when they left (and more importantly, no one had expected them to do any work in the time their friends had been gone). The five runners were now sitting in the back corner of one of the local saloons, discussing the latest developments over appallingly watered-down whiskey and a large bowl of peanuts. Between them, the three who had attended the meet had related the story of what the boys had said, and now they were knocking around the implications of it all. "This sounds a lot like that one we did last time," Ocelot said, mulling it over. "Remember—with the dinosaurs and that thing from the mine?"

"Maybe the metaplanes have an affinity for the Old West," Winterhawk said sourly.

"Sounds like we need to stop that train," Joe said, getting back to the subject at hand.

"Wraith nodded. "Prevent him from arriving."

"It still doesn't scan, though," Ocelot said, almost to himself. "Why would the guy want to kill everybody? Unless there's some kind of big hush-hush secret up here that he doesn't want anybody to know about, what would be the point?"

"Maybe there is," Joe said. He shrugged. "We haven't been here very long. What do we know?"

"Yeah," Kestrel pointed out, "but kids hear things. Who around here didn't know everything that was going on in your neighborhood when you were a kid? People talk around kids, because they don't think they're paying any attention. If something like that was going on, I'd bet that the kids would know about it, or at least have a suspicion."

"So why, then?" Ocelot sighed in exasperation.

"What difference does it make?" Winterhawk looked like he had almost surprised himself with his words.

Everybody turned to him. "Huh?" Kestrel demanded.

"What difference does it make why?" the mage repeated. "I think we've forgotten where we are. It doesn't necessarily have to make complete sense. It's a *metaphor*."

'Wraith nodded slowly. "Yes."

"Yes *what*?" Kestrel looked even more exasperated. "Why don't you old hands explain this to the newbie, huh? *What's* a metaphor?"

"Everything," 'Wraith said before Winterhawk could speak. "The train. The chasm. The boss."

"Right," Winterhawk said. "And it's really quite a transparent metaphor when one gets right down to it. I'm rather surprised we didn't see it more clearly before."

"Yeah," Joe broke in as he caught on. "The canyon is the chasm between us and the Horrors. The trestle is the Bridge. So the boss must be—"

"Whatever they sacrificed Gabriel's friend to bring over!" Kestrel exclaimed, rather more loudly than she'd wanted to. Then, more quietly after looking around to make sure no one had noticed her outburst: "Okay. I get it now. But—if this is a metaphor, does that mean that whatever it is isn't here yet? In the real world, I mean?"

"That's a good question," Winterhawk said, rising from his spot at the table and pacing around the perimeter, "and one I can't answer. I don't think anyone can just yet. But regardless, I think our mission is clear now."

"Stop that train from getting here," Ocelot said.

"Blow up the bridge," Joe corrected.

"Both," 'Wraith added.

Kestrel joined Winterhawk in pacing. "How are we going to blow up a bridge? I don't carry high explosives around in my back pocket—do you?"

"Bound to be some around here," Joe said. "Somewhere. If they're mining, they have to have explosives to open up the shafts."

"So all we gotta do," Ocelot said dubiously, "is find out where they've got the explosives stashed, break in, steal us some without blowin' our asses off in the process, get out to the trestle, and blow it up, all without anybody seeing us."

"That's about the size of it," Winterhawk agreed.

"Hey," Joe said, shrugging, "if it was easy, anybody could do it."

"So when do we do it?" Kestrel took another sip of her whiskey, wrinkled her nose, and put the glass down.

"Pretty soon," Ocelot said. "The guy's due in sometime tomorrow, isn't he?"

"So we'd best get to it before he gets here," Winterhawk said.

"No."

Everyone looked at Wraith. "No?" Ocelot said, giving the elf a funny look. "Why not?"

"Must kill him."

"Blow the bridge up while he's *on* it?" Kestrel demanded. "What about all the other people on that train?"

"Wraith's expression was resolute. "If we don't kill him, they'll rebuild. He'll come back. Same problem, later on."

That was the longest speech anyone had heard ShadoWraith utter in a long time; it must have been important. Winterhawk nodded reluctantly. "He's right. It'll make the whole thing about ten times tougher to pull off, but he's right. If we leave the boss alive, then he and Grimmer will just force these people to build the trestle again. They won't stop trying."

Ocelot sighed loudly and ran a hand back through his hair. "Next time, I'm going to Tahiti. That's all I got to say about it." Picking up his glass, he downed the whiskey in one long pull.

"Tahiti sounds lovely," Winterhawk agreed, "but I don't think we're going to find out what we need to know there."

Joe nodded. "We need to figure out where the explosives are, when that guy is getting into town, and how we're gonna set the charges so nobody sees us. And we've only got about a day to do it."

"We'd better get on with it, then." Kestrel rose. "Ocelot and I are the logical choices to check on the explosives, since we're supposed to be miners. Maybe we can get some of the old-timers to talk to us."

"And the three of us can try to talk to some of the railroad guys," Joe added, standing too and brushing peanut-shells from his lap. "Maybe they know when the train's due in tomorrow."

"And can tell us about that trestle," Wraith added. "Should go look at it if we can."

Winterhawk nodded. "Right—p'raps I can do a bit of magical snooping at the Victory United office as well, and possibly find out a bit more about what our Mr. Grimmer and his employer up to."

Finally possessed of a plan, everyone was anxious to begin implementing it. The rest of them stood up and together they threaded their way between the gaming tables and around the saloon girls, headed for the door.

Several *clicks* greeted them as they stepped outside.

"Well, now, if it isn't our gang of would-be saboteurs," came a familiar voice, oily and mocking.

The area outside the saloon was surrounded by seven men arrayed in a semi-circle, all of them pointing rifles at the runners. Spinning around toward the interior of the

saloon, 'Wraith, Kestrel, and Ocelot immediately noticed that there were several more armed men inside, also pointing rifles at them. "What's this about?" Winterhawk demanded angrily.

Grimmer stepped out from behind two of the riflemen, a contemptuous grin on his face. Behind him, as always, was his lackey Weatherby. "What's this about, Doc?" His smile grew a bit wider. "I should think you'd know that, seein' as you were sittin' right there with the rest of these folks while they were conspirin' to blow up the hard work of these good townspeople."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?" Ocelot took a step forward, but stopped as two more of the riflemen trained their weapons on him. "You're crazy, Grimmer. Tell these guys to put the guns down and get the hell outta here before somebody gets hurt."

Grimmer chuckled, but it wasn't a happy sound. "Not half as crazy as you are. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider your statement? 'Cause Wilkins here—" he cocked his head toward one of the riflemen, whom the runners now recognized as having been fairly near them in the saloon while they were discussing their plan "—he heard you, plain as day, talkin' about how you were plannin' to blow up the trestle." He turned to one of the other gunmen, a middle aged gent with a star pinned to his shirt. "Sheriff, if you'd be so good as to lock up these folks, we can get about our work in peace."

The runners exchanged glances, but there was nothing they could do. Without armor or easy access to their own weapons, there was no chance that they were going to take down all the gunmen before being killed themselves. Grimmer had been prepared, that was certain. The sheriff stepped forward. "You're all under arrest," he said. "For conspirin' to blow up the railroad bridge. Come along peacefully and nobody'll get hurt."

As the ring of riflemen moved in a little closer, the sheriff circulated among the runners, divested them of their guns, and snapped handcuffs on them. Ocelot glared at the man and struggled a bit, but it was no use. Finally he sighed and allowed himself to be cuffed. "What are you gonna do with us?" he demanded.

"I assume we get some sort of trial," Winterhawk added.

Grimmer chuckled again, but the sheriff glared at him and then turned his attention back to his prisoners. "Yeah, you'll get a trial—in a couple days, after the trestle's finished and the first train's arrived." He waved his men forward. "Take 'em to the jail, boys, and lock 'em up good."

The line of prisoners and their keepers heading down Main Street toward the jail building captured quite a bit of attention from the townspeople; many of them came out of their homes or businesses to watch the five runners being led down the street. The runners ignored them, being much more intent on trying to find a hole in their captors' defenses so they could make a run for it. They found none. The gunmen were very good and very vigilant; not once did they take their attention away from their charges. All the runners feared that if they tried anything their friends might suffer for it, so they remained in line.

"This bites," Ocelot muttered under his breath to Winterhawk, who was next to him. "We ain't gonna do any good stuck in jail."

"I don't think this is over yet," the mage replied in the same tone.

"I sure as hell hope you're right. I just—"

"No talking there!" the man nearest Ocelot ordered, prodding him with the end of the gun. "Just get moving."

Ocelot sighed and shut up, fighting his natural impulse to kick the guy in the teeth. *This is just great. Some bunch of world-savers we are.*

He didn't see the two dark-haired boys hiding behind a water barrel, watching them go by, nor did he see the worried glance they exchanged as they hurried away.

44.

Stefan was having the kinds of thoughts he was not accustomed to having, and it was disturbing him more than a bit.

He sat propped up against his pack, a position into which he had laboriously dragged himself, being careful not to re-open his side wound. It would only make things more difficult if he started bleeding again. He wanted more than anything to be able to change to dragon form, not to be hindered by this fragile body, but he knew that was not an option. There was no sense dwelling on it. All that did was waste precious energy, and he had little of that to spare at the moment.

Across the room, Maselli was stretched out on his side with his back to Stefan, his mostly steady breathing with only occasional hitches of pain indicating that he was either asleep or passed out. Nearer, in the middle of the floor, his brother Gethelwain lay with his head on his pack, his eyes closed, sleeping fitfully. Stefan watched him for a moment, contemplating how much things had changed in the past few days. If anyone had told him a week or two ago that he would be sitting in the same room with his brother—his hated brother—his currently injured, exhausted, and vulnerable brother—and that he would do nothing more than calmly sit by and watch him sleep, his reaction would have been one of scorn. Depending upon his mood and the person doing the telling, he might have laughed coldly, or had the messenger killed for his impertinence, or taken him as a midnight snack. In any case, he would not have believed it.

He looked at Gabriel again, trying to summon the rage, the hatred, the jealousy—but he could not. The

vestiges were still there, certainly: he did not *like* Gethelwain any more than he ever had. The child was too naive, too willing to lower himself to play the games of the small ones, too—*good*. But yet—

Stefan sighed. The Enemy had changed everything. There was no going back now to the way things had been. Moving ahead was his only option—the only option for all of them. Once more—he had lost count of the number of times he had done so—Stefan cursed himself for having been taken in by the Enemy. The humans had an expression: "hoist with one's own petard." Much as he hated applying human expressions to himself (he considered it beneath his dignity), he reluctantly had to admit that this one had captured the situation all too well.

Gabriel stirred a bit, his handsome features contorting a bit as he jarred one of his wounds. He did not, however, awaken. Stefan continued to watch him as he considered his options. *The child was not meant for situations such as this*. The thought surprised him. As often as he himself had wished for his brother's injury (or, more often, his death), he found to his dismay that the thought of someone else having injured Gethelwain did not sit nearly so well.

A lance of pain in his side from his own injury took his thoughts away from his brother. He could feel a little trickling of blood starting up again under the bandage, and the pain was getting worse. He knew that it would do nothing but continue to get worse, especially since the bandages Gethelwain and Maselli had used to bind it were probably not sterile, given that they had been carried, covered only by flimsy wrappings, through miles of hostile terrain in a grimy backpack. He felt weak and light-headed; even though it was not at all warm in here, sweat trickled down his chest and coated his forehead. He wasn't familiar enough with being injured in human form

to know how long this body was likely to keep moving, but he knew instinctively that it wouldn't be much longer—a couple of hours at most before he started getting feverish and losing what little strength he had left. If he was going to take any action, he would have to take it soon.

Moving slowly and carefully, he slid his arms into his fatigue jacket and buttoned it up, shivering. He levered himself over until he was sitting against the wall, gritting his teeth against the pain, and dragged his pack over into his lap. There wouldn't be much there that he would need, but he took a quick look anyway to make sure. With occasional furtive glances over to make sure that his brother or Maselli weren't waking up, he gathered the few things thought he would need and shoved them in the pockets of his jacket, then he pulled himself to his feet.

He almost didn't make it. The pain was excruciating, and the bleeding stepped up its intensity a bit. Wincing, he leaned against the cold concrete wall until the wave of pain passed. He wished he could risk some of the pain-deadening drugs that he knew were in the first-aid kits, but he knew that they would deaden his senses along with his pain, and he couldn't afford that. He already suspected that in this form his intellect was not up to his normal capacity as a dragon; he couldn't risk losing any more of it. He gritted his teeth again and forced himself to stand upright. *I am a dragon. A simple thing such as this will not stop me from what I must do. My will is stronger than this injury.*

Surprisingly, it helped. The pain receded a bit (though not much). Stefan looked at Gabriel again. He knew if his brother awoke there would be a confrontation, for Gethelwain would not want him to do this. He would insist on going himself—*more folly from an idealistic child. I will not survive even if I remain here. You will. This has*

nothing to do with affection or sacrifice or duty. It has to do with practicality. I am not doing this for you, brother. I am doing this because I must.

He hefted his rifle, shoved the bloodstained paper with the orders in his pocket, and moved silently until he was standing over his sleeping brother. Still, Gethelwain was extremely perceptive, even in human form. He stirred, opening his eyes, half-awake.

"I am sorry, brother," Stefan murmured, and brought the butt of his rifle down on Gabriel's head with a sharp *thunk*. His brother got only a split-second look of astonishment before lapsing into unconsciousness. "If I have broken my word to you with my actions, forgive me," Stefan continued in the same soft voice. "But this must be done."

It was not until he had moved back across the room, switched off the light, and slipped out through the heavy steel door that he consciously realized that he had not enjoyed injuring his brother. In fact, he felt remorse about it, hoping that he had not done any permanent damage.

What is becoming of me? he thought, but had no time to dwell on the matter.

The camp was almost fully dark, with only a few pale lights around the perimeter to illuminate it. Stefan crouched on the earthen stairway, watching for a moment to get his bearings before moving. *It is fortunate that the camp is small. I would have no chance of this if it were not.* But it was small: the object of his mission could be clearly seen only about twenty yards away, held up by its network of scaffolding like some sort of space vehicle being prepared for launch. This was no space vehicle, however—or any kind of vehicle at all. The delivery system, according to the orders in Stefan's pocket, would come later, if the

enemy was allowed to complete their testing on this weapon.

He wondered how many people were still here. If the company that they had destroyed was similar in size to their own, then they had lost about twenty soldiers that day. That meant that they either had men to spare, or that they were now lightly guarded. Stefan hoped that the latter was true; even if they were expecting reinforcements tomorrow, it would not matter—tomorrow would be too late for them. He also hoped that they believed they had destroyed all of the intruders. *They must, he thought, or they would have found us already. Or perhaps not—what predator would expect the prey to take refuge in its own lair?*

A movement off to his right caught his eye and he quickly glanced up. A soldier, rifle on his shoulder, passed into his field of vision, marching a pattern around the scaffolding. After a moment, another soldier crossed into view. The two nodded to each other and continued on in opposite directions. Both of them looked nervously around as if expecting someone to jump them. Stefan watched for a few more moments and discovered that they returned to the same spot—completing the circle around the bomb—in approximately five minutes.

A look at the number of pre-fab housing units indicated to Stefan that the company they had annihilated today were probably the bulk of the unit guarding this installation; what had someone said earlier? That there could not be an extremely large military presence here if the place was intended to be a secret. Even taking into account that some of the guards (and the scientists working on the bomb) could be sleeping in the main administrative building, that still left room for only a handful of remaining guards. Stefan was sure that they would be getting reinforcements soon—this far behind

enemy lines, it would not take long. Taking a deep breath, he waited for the two marching guards to move out of his line of sight, then rose slowly and painfully from his place and began to move toward the bomb. He checked his pocket to make sure that the two grenades he had placed there were still where they belonged as he crept through the shadows near the tree-line.

As he moved, fighting desperately to control the pain in his side as his bandages soaked through with blood, he wondered again why he was doing this. Why hadn't he let Gethelwain go, if that was what his foolish brother had wanted? He was in better condition. He was the heroic one, always willing to fight (and perhaps even to die) for some higher cause. Stefan was much more of a realist. One did what one had to do to survive. One made sure that one was at the top of the food chain. Whatever it took—and it didn't take much, dealing with the small ones, since they were so predictable it usually wasn't even a challenge—that was what you did.

He sighed quietly to himself and pressed on.

Gabriel stirred. It was dark. Even after he opened his eyes, it was dark, and his head hurt like someone had split it with an axe.

What was going on?

Stefan.

Gingerly he brought a hand up to his forehead and felt the sticky wetness of blood. It couldn't have been long, since the blood had not yet dried. "Stefan?" His voice came out sounding weak and shaky.

There was no answer.

"Stefan? Maselli? Are you here?" He rose to a sitting position and immediately regretted it, but there really wasn't much choice. One hand pressed to his forehead, he

willed his vision to cut through the oppressive darkness. It didn't work.

There was a groan from the other side of the room. It took Gabriel a couple of seconds to process the fact that the sound had come from Maselli's last known position. "Maselli?"

"Gabriel?" A pause, and then: "Why's it dark? What's goin' on?" Another pause. "Hang on a second," Maselli continued, followed by the sound of rummaging around and then a tiny flame flicked into existence, barely illuminating the room.

Gabriel looked over where he had left Stefan, already knowing what he would see. "Stefan is gone."

"Gone?" Maselli dragged himself over toward Gabriel, grunting in pain as his injured leg protested the treatment. "Where?"

Gabriel sighed, closing his eyes briefly. "Stefan, what have you done...?" he whispered. Speaking so Maselli could hear him, he said, "I think he has gone to sabotage a bomb."

Maselli reached Gabriel, propping himself up against the wall. "He wasn't in any shape to do that. Hell, none of us are, but he was the worst of all." He eyed Gabriel critically. "Hey, you're bleeding. What happened?"

"Nothing. I—fell and hit my head in the darkness. I must have knocked myself unconscious."

The other man looked like he didn't believe that for a second, but he chose not to comment. "So—what do we do now?"

Gabriel dragged himself to his feet and approached the shaded window of the bunker. "We watch. And we wait. If we go out there now, we'll jeopardize any chance he has." *Stefan, why have you chosen this time, after all these millennia, to do something like this?* He leaned on his arms against the cool concrete wall and closed his eyes.

The tendrils of fever were already creeping into Stefan's brain as he hid behind some trees and watched the guards make another circle around the bomb.

Angrily he brushed the sweat off his forehead, feeling some of the stinging drops running down into his eyes. That in turn reminded him of his defeat at the hands of Gethelwain and his pets, and that almost brought the old hatred back.

Almost.

It is the Enemy. They will not have me. They will not destroy me as they destroyed my father before me. I will not allow it! Compared to this, Gethelwain and his puppies are of no consequence. They want the hatred. They feed on the hatred. The only objective now is to play the Netherworlds' games and defeat the Enemy.

The only objective –

His hand closed around one of the two grenades in his pocket as he sighted on the tiny, machine-driven elevator platform that would take him up to the top of the bomb. *So large...I do not remember even the early atomic weapons being this large from the pictures I have seen...* The elevator, part of the scaffolding, would take him there. All he had to do was reach it.

He hoped this body was still capable of what he was planning to do.

He gripped the grenade more tightly, feeling the ridges and protrusions of its pineapple-shaped casing in his palm. His hand was slicked with sweat; he didn't know if it was from fear or fever, but it didn't matter. Taking a deep breath and summoning all his will, he wrenched the grenade from his pocket, pulled the pin, and flung it out into the forest.

The explosion ripped through the trees and echoed through the silence of the night. Immediately, the soldier closest to Stefan's side yanked his rifle down from his

shoulder and sprinted off toward the edge of the clearing, yelling for backup. The other soldier, presumably on the other side of the bomb, was not visible.

Stefan ran.

His side burned with a white heat, the exertion re-opening the wound as he pounded across the clearing toward the elevator. His eyes were on his goal now; there was no room for outside distractions. He would either make it, or he would not. He forced himself to keep low even though it hurt worse, and to run in an erratic pattern. From somewhere a bullet zinged over his left shoulder; he ignored it. There was shouting from the other side of the bomb; he ignored that too.

Only a few more yards. Ten...six...three...

He nearly slammed into the scaffolding as he reached it, so intent was he on running and not stopping. His body screamed in protest, the pain nearly unbearable, his vision beginning to fuzz over from blood loss and fever.

No. Not yet. Cannot stop yet.

He leaped onto the tiny elevator platform, which was designed to hold about three people, and jammed his finger down on the button that would lift it upward. The soldier who had gone to investigate the explosion came running back; Stefan calmly pulled the second grenade from his pocket and flung it outward toward the man. He didn't even watch as it tore the soldier to pieces.

The elevator continued upward.

Inside the bunker, Gabriel and Maselli heard the explosion, muffled through the thick concrete walls. "Is that the bomb?" Maselli demanded, his voice pitching high and bright with fear. "Did he do it? Did it go off already?"

Gabriel struggled to pull the cover away from the bunker's narrow window. "No. That can't be it yet." He

thought it was an odd question until he remembered that Maselli had had no comprehension of atomic bombs and their behavior—not even a historical perspective. To him it wasn't history—it was the present. "The explosion is far too small."

"Then what's he doin'?"

"Get the binoculars." Gabriel finally succeeded in pulling the thin metal covering away from the window. The window itself was a thin slit of very thick glass, measuring only about six inches from top to bottom but running about half the length of the bunker's front. He leaned against it, glad to have something to lean on, and tried to make out anything visible through the hazy glass. *Good luck, Stefan. I don't know why you have decided you must do this, but everything is in your hands now.*

Maselli returned with the binoculars, which he handed to Gabriel. "Why didn't he wait for us? There ain't no room for heroes in this thing. We just gotta get it done the best way we can."

"Perhaps you're mistaken about that, my friend," Gabriel said under his breath as he brought the binocs up and searched the installation for any sign of his brother. When the second explosion sounded, he flinched back involuntarily—there was a blinding flash of light and a brief scream quickly silenced. But where was Stefan?

It was then that he saw the elevator rising upward in the scaffolding. There was a single figure in it. From this distance Gabriel could not make out who it was, but he didn't have to.

The lights were coming on in the pre-fab houses now, although no doors were opening yet. Presumably the scientists were too frightened by the explosions to venture out. Gabriel glanced quickly over at the bunker door, noting that the rifle he had placed there had been removed. *Of course. He could not replace it when he left.*

"Maselli—put that rifle back in the door before someone tries to get in here. If they realize what Stefan is doing, this will be the first place they come."

Maselli hurried off to do that as Gabriel continued watching the elevator's upward process. *Too slow. He'll never make it.*

This thing is too slow. Stefan's gaze raked the darkness below, looking for potential threats. The elevator rose at a crawling pace, or so it seemed, creaking and groaning in its ascent. Stefan crouched on the platform, pointing his rifle downward and taking random shots whenever he saw anyone approaching the elevator controls. He could not have them breaking the mechanism or stopping the platform—not yet. A quick glance upward told him that he had almost reached his goal; only about ten more feet and he would be at the top. If only this thing would move faster!

How ironic that I wish to hasten my death.

A bullet whizzed past him and hit the side of the bomb with a metallic *spang*. Stefan quickly ducked back, firing a couple more rounds downward. He was conserving his ammunition, because he did not know how many rounds he had or how to reload this weapon—even if he had any extra rounds for it. He had not brought any with him, deeming them unnecessary to his task. He was beginning to regret that decision, along with the one about only bringing two grenades. He could have used a few more.

"Don't, you idiot!" came a harsh voice from down below. "You want to hit that thing and set it off?" The voice was followed by the sound of a weapon being slapped sharply away from its aimed target. There were other voices, but Stefan wasn't listening to them. His head was pounding, the sweat pouring from his forehead now.

His side felt like it was on fire. *Must concentrate on what I must do. Nothing else.*

The elevator platform stopped with a shuddering thud. Stefan teetered for a frightening second as he regained his balance, nearly dropping his rifle in the process. Re-establishing his grip on it quickly, he fired two rounds into the elevator mechanism and was rewarded by an electrical *pop* and smoke coming from the control panel. *That should prevent them from coming up here – at least long enough for me to finish.*

As he fumbled through his pockets for the things he would need, continuing to ignore the voices far below, his thoughts returned once again to his brother. Perhaps Gethelwain *would* have been a better choice to go. He had not been injured so severely, and it was in his nature to want to do things like this. The child would, no doubt, sacrifice his life—all his thousands of years of *potential* (there was that word again)—to save that human woman he had befriended. The thought was inconceivable to Stefan, but he knew it was true.

But Gethelwain was not the one who was taken in by the Enemy. That was true too.

Forcibly putting those thoughts aside, he pulled an emergency candle from his pocket and lit it with the cigarette lighter he had found earlier in still another pocket (*the humans have such peculiar vices*, he thought idly), setting it up next to the metal skin of the bomb so he could see what he was doing. A second thought struck him; he picked up the candle again and dripped wax on the sheet of orders, using the wax to stick the sheet to the side of the bomb where he could see it. Then he replaced the candle.

These actions reminded him of the ritual they had gone through to get here. As much as he had been against the idea of the painted elf Harlequin coming along on

their journey, he reluctantly had to acknowledge that the elf's help would have been useful. But again there was no use pondering such things. Brushing sweat out of his eyes, he pried the panel off the side of the bomb with shaking hands and prepared to do what he had come here to do.

Inside the bunker Gabriel and Maselli watched anxiously. "What's he doing?" Maselli demanded.

"I can't see him anymore," Gabriel, who had the binoculars, told him. "I think he's reached the top." Pausing for quick scan, he reported, "The lights are coming on in the quarters buildings—there are about five soldiers gathered around the bottom of the bomb. They look like they're not sure what to do." *Please remain unsure. It will not be long now.*

But it was not to be. One of the soldiers turned to his buddies and said something that caused all of them to shoulder their rifles and head toward the scaffolding.

"What are they—?" Maselli started; then, more quietly, "Oh, shit..."

The soldiers had begun to climb up the scaffolding.

"We have to get out there and help him!" Maselli said, already beginning to hop and limp over toward where he had left his rifle. "Come on, Gabriel! We can take 'em before they get up there. Let's go!"

Gabriel nodded and turned to follow when something caught his eye. Turning back around, he slumped with dismay against the wall. "We cannot go," he said.

Maselli stopped. "Why?" His voice was sharp and full of frustration; it was obvious that he had been glad to find something he could do to be useful to the cause, and now Gabriel was trying to stop him.

"Look."

Maselli looked. "No..." he groaned, all the fight taken out of him. "No...not now..."

The doors to the quarters buildings had opened, and a crowd of pajama- and shorts-clad individuals were heading in a fearful herd directly toward the bunker.

Maselli's gaze darted around the room. "We can take 'em!" His tone was desperate. "Come on, Gabriel! He's your brother! They're in their *skivvies*! We can shoot 'em down and get out there! Come *on*!"

Gabriel watched the view out the window sadly and shook his head. How could he tell Maselli that it was obviously not meant to be? When the orders had specified one man, they had meant one man. The Netherworlds would see to that. He had little doubt that, if they did manage to get outside, more soldiers—with more guns—would materialize from inside those buildings.

The first of the scientists reached the door. The handle rattled, then rattled again, more insistently. Muffled voices cried out from the other side of the door, screaming hysterically for someone to open it.

Maselli looked at it nervously, watching Gabriel's rifle clattering in the door handle. Gabriel ignored them, his gaze riveted to the window. He was weakening, his head pounding and his legs trembling, but he ignored that too. All his energy was devoted to sending his strength to Stefan. He didn't know whether it would work, but it was the only thing he could do now. No one, not even a Great Dragon, could be completely certain how the Netherworlds would react.

"Gabriel!" Maselli's voice was even more panicked. "What do we do if they get in?"

Without looking away, Gabriel said with deadly calm, "Shoot them."

Stefan glanced down, but it was too dark and too far to see anything. He could hear, though: they were coming up. He redoubled his efforts, willing his shaking hands to be still, his befogged brain to process the instructions scrawled on the stained and torn paper stuck to the side of the bomb. He couldn't afford to make any mistakes.

Ironic again. I am trying to avoid making mistakes that will prevent an explosion, not those that will cause it.

Their voices called out to each other far below him as they struggled their way up the side of the scaffolding. The framework holding the bomb up was not meant to be climbed—that was what the elevator was for. Still, though, it was certainly possible. Stefan estimated that it would only take them a minute or two to get up here, and if they did, everything was lost. He was too weak to fight them all—he might be able to hit one or two with his rifle, but his aim had never been good and was getting worse as his body began to shut down. Aside from that, they were getting smarter: they were coming up from either side of him, out of range of his shots until they got to the top and began converging on him from two sides. He'd never hit them all before they got him.

So I must work faster, he told himself grimly. That is all. I am a dragon. I am more intelligent than these humans. I can process information faster, even in this form, and my will is far stronger. I must use these things. Do not think of the soldiers. Do not think of Gethelwain. Think only of the task and the Enemy.

The principle behind what he was attempting to do was a simple one: cut two wires and touch them together, sending an electrical spark down the wires and into the guts of the bomb where the spark would cause the chemical reaction that would detonate it. He wondered if this was truly the way one would detonate a primitive atomic bomb; he assumed that the procedure would probably be much more complicated, but this was the

Netherworlds. Things did not have to conform directly to what he knew as "reality." It was not the specific actions that mattered, he suspected, but the willingness to perform them. The Dweller's test had indicated that it wanted him to cooperate with his brother. If that was what it took to keep the Enemy from the world (and from his own mind) then that would be what he would do.

He continued searching through the bundles of wires behind the panel as he listened to the soldiers working their way up the scaffolding. It sounded like they were about halfway up now. There were so many wires! The instructions called for him to find a red wire in the bundle second from the left and touch it to a green one from the third bundle from the right. In the flickering candlelight, though, it was hard to identify colors; his fading vision wasn't helping matters, either. He leaned against the side of the bomb, his legs threatening to buckle under him, and squinted down more closely at the wires. Which one was it? If he got the wrong ones, he wasn't sure what would happen. He didn't want to find out.

The soldiers were getting closer.

Desperately, he reached down and snatched up the candle from where he had placed it, holding it up with one hand while he fumbled for the wire-cutters with the other. He knew he would give up his last chance at defending himself if he slung his rifle over his shoulder, but it couldn't be helped. He needed light, and he'd need both hands to hold the wires.

Pain lanced through his side, so sharp that it nearly caused him to drop the candle. Gasping, he steeled himself to ride out the wave, cursing the lost seconds. *Damn this body! You must keep going!* His entire side was soaked with blood now as it ran down his leg and saturated his fatigue pants.

"Hey! Get him!" cried a voice, closer than he expected.
"Get up there! Hurry!"

Stefan grabbed the bundle of wires and pulled, holding the candle up close.

The door continued to rattle. "Let us in!" screamed the panicked voices again and again. "Open the door! For God's sake, open up! He's gonna blow the bomb!"

Maselli had stationed himself in front of the door about six feet away, his assault rifle trained on it, his face grim. So far Gabriel's rifle was holding. "Anything?"

Gabriel still didn't look away from the window. "They're about three quarters of the way up now," he said tightly. "If Stefan doesn't do it soon —"

"Yeah. I know. You don't have to say it." There was a pause, and then, hesitantly: "Do you think this thing will be safe? You know, when the bomb goes off?"

For a long moment, Gabriel didn't answer. "I don't know," he finally said quietly.

Where is that red wire? Stefan fumbled with the bundle of wires, moving them around between fingers that felt three times their normal size.

He was losing it.

He wasn't going to be able to do it.

Why did I insist? Am I to be tripped up by my pride once more?

The soldiers were almost at his level now. "There he is!" one called. "Hurry up! Shoot!"

He spun the bundle between his fingers again.

There!

He had the red one!

Hurry up —

Stop his hand from shaking —

Careful...careful...

Snip.

There! One down!

Now for the other one. Three from the right. He had the bundle in his hands. Green wire —

Two of the soldiers brought their guns up, trying to get a bead on Stefan without hitting the bomb. Not quite there yet. Each of them moved toward the other, in closer to Stefan. Only a few feet should do it.

Sift the wires through his shaking fingers. Blue... white... yellow... "*Where is it?*" he whispered, feeling frustration and rage well up within him. He almost dropped the candle again, saving it only by gripping it so tightly that his fingers made indentations in its side. The hot wax dripped down on him, but he didn't even notice. He was almost beyond pain now.

The soldiers got into position, raised their rifles toward Stefan —

Success!

The green wire rested between his thumb and forefinger.

Again willing his hand still, he snipped the wire.

The soldiers fired.

Inside the bunker, Gabriel and Maselli heard the shots. Maselli stared at Gabriel, eyes wide with terror. "Do you think — ?"

Gabriel did not reply, except to close his eyes and lower his forehead to his hands.

The bullets tore into Stefan with great wet sucking sensations. He clamped his jaws together to avoid crying out in agony as they ripped into his back and came out his front, carrying with them great chunks of bloody flesh that splashed into the camo-painted side of the bomb like some ghastly form of modern art. Blood splattered the

wires in Stefan's hands, making them slippery and treacherous.

He felt consciousness slip and blackness come.

There was no pain, only a creeping blackness as he fell.

So this is what death feels like...

No! I will not fail! I cannot fail! I cannot –

Wrenching his unresponsive limbs by sheer force of will, he jammed the two wires together just as more bullets tore into him from the remaining soldiers.

As the black nothingness of death met the white brilliance of the explosion, Stefan felt something very much akin to joy.

45.

Ocelot slammed his fists into the heavy iron bars of the jail cell in frustration. They didn't budge.

They hadn't the last few times he'd tried, either. Nor the times when Joe had tried. These things were obviously built to last. "What the hell do we do now?" he muttered angrily.

Nobody answered. That wouldn't have done any good either, since all of them were asking the same question.

They had been ignominiously herded through town to the jail about half an hour ago, and now occupied the place's only two cells. Specifically, Ocelot, Joe, 'Wraith, and Kestrel occupied one, and Winterhawk occupied the other. The sheriff and his men had taken no chances with 'Hawk's ability to cast spells: while several of them held guns on him they had cuffed his hands together and covered his head with a burlap sack tied snugly around his neck. The mage now lay on a bunk farthest away from the other cell, his leg shackled to the bed to prevent him from seeking aid from his companions. He was not pleased.

Across the room, sitting behind a desk with his feet up and his gun in front of him, was the sheriff's deputy, a youngish, balding fellow named Skyler. With him, his chair leaned back against the wall and his hat tipped down over his eyes, was Skyler's assistant deputy, Hendricks. The sheriff himself had gone home after warning his two underlings to keep a close watch on the prisoners. So far the deputies had followed that dictum to some extent, in that one or the other of them had glanced at the prisoners fairly regularly once every five minutes or

so, but otherwise the five runners had been left pretty much alone.

Ocelot flung himself down on the bunk next to Kestrel. "We *have* to get out of here," he said under his breath. "There's gotta be a way to do it."

Joe, who was standing over by the door to the cell, tried rattling the bars again; this elicited only a knowing smile from the two deputies and no positive results. "Even I can't bust through these," he said. "I don't see how we can do it unless we get the keys."

Kestrel sighed. "It doesn't look like there's much chance of that." The keys were in plain sight, tossed on Skyler's desk, but they might have been a million miles away.

'Wraith was pacing around like a caged animal, unable to still his body long enough to sit down on the other bunk. He didn't speak; he looked like he was trying to get himself under control. This was not a pleasant situation for someone who hated confinement as much as he did.

Ocelot looked over at Winterhawk. "'Hawk—anything?"

The sack-clad head shook ruefully. "Sorry. I've been trying to wriggle out of this bloody thing, but no luck. I'm afraid I won't be much help to you until you can get me loose from it."

The runners lapsed into dejected silence for awhile; after about ten minutes of fidgeting inactivity Ocelot joined 'Wraith in his pacing. It was starting to get dark outside; they could see the sun going down outside the barred window, casting the cells in a depressing dimness as it went. Skyler got up and lit two lanterns, then sat back down again.

Time passed. The four runners in the cell grew more and more impatient as another two hours crawled by, but

came no closer to a solution than they had been previously. They had examined and discarded the idea of trying to somehow lure one of the deputies over so they could dispatch him; so far the two men had shown enough smarts to keep a gun held on the prisoners from a distance if any close-up work (such as delivering their dinner) had to be done. At least the food was good: beef stew, mashed potatoes, and cold milk. They'd been extra careful with Winterhawk, both of them holding guns on him while he'd been untied to have dinner. "Lovely ambiance, gentlemen," the mage had commented acidly. "P'raps you've got a bit of violin music and candlelight to go with the artillery?" They hadn't answered, except to tell him to hurry up.

It was Joe who hit on the first idea that sounded like it had any hope at all of success. "Hey, guys," he said suddenly a few minutes after the deputies had removed their dishes, "why don't we just tell them the truth?"

"Huh?" Ocelot stared at him. After a moment, so did Kestrel and 'Wraith.

"Not the *whole* truth," Joe amended quickly, lowering his voice. "Not about—where we are and who told us about things. Just about the fact that the boss is coming in on the train and he's gonna kill everybody."

"They ain't gonna believe that." Ocelot shook his head. "No way. Especially if we don't tell 'em how we found out."

"Maybe they will." Joe was getting more animated now, struggling to keep his voice soft. "Nobody around here seems to like Grimmer much, right? Didn't you see how the sheriff looked at him? He was just doing what he had to do, but you could see he didn't like doing what Grimmer said." He shrugged. "It's worth a try, isn't it? Maybe if they don't believe us, they'll at least send somebody out there."

Kestrel sighed. "I don't like it, but it doesn't look like we have much other choice, unless you guys are hiding something."

"Agreed," Wraith said reluctantly.

"So who's gonna do it?" Ocelot asked, looking around at his companions.

Everybody looked over at Winterhawk, who was usually the obvious choice for any endeavor involving persuasion. This time, though, it didn't seem likely that the mage was going to be very charismatic with a bag over his head and his hands cuffed behind his back. He didn't even appear to have heard their discussion.

After a moment, Kestrel spoke up. "I'll give it a shot," she said. Smiling evilly she added, "Hey, maybe if I bat my eyelashes at 'em, they'll come over here and I can pound 'em."

Ocelot shrugged, grinning in spite of himself. "Hey, it would work on me..."

"Flatterer." She leaned over and planted a quick kiss on the tip of his nose. "Okay — let's do this."

The other runners backed off so as not to look too intimidating, and Kestrel went up to the bars. "Hey, Sheriff?"

Skyler looked up. "Yes, ma'am? You need somethin'?"

Kestrel didn't get the chance to answer, because suddenly there was a loud commotion outside. It sounded like some kind of scuffle, but the voices were high, like women's —

— or children's.

The runners smiled at each other as Hendricks hurried outside to see what was going on. "Good timing, guys," Ocelot murmured softly. Joe, apparently disgusted with the whole thing, dropped down on the bunk next to the bars and began removing his boots.

Outside the sheriff's office, Mike and Nathan Briggs had gotten themselves into a right and proper fight. They rolled around on the wooden sidewalk, punching and kicking each other for all they were worth, each one yelling for the other to give up and admit defeat. As Hendricks came running out, demanding "Hey, you kids! What's going on out here?" Mike took advantage of his brother's sudden change of attention to land a savage punch to his brother's nose. Nathan screamed, his hands quickly coming up to clutch his nose, and rolled into a tight little sobbing ball.

"Hey!" Hendricks yelled again, grabbing Mike's shoulder and pulling him off his brother. "Stop that! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!" He knelt down next to Nathan and tried to pry his hands from his face. His concentration totally on Nathan, he didn't even notice that Mike had disappeared, running quickly inside the sheriff's office.

They had not been idle inside. As soon as the door had closed behind Hendricks, Joe had quickly stood and, with unerring aim, flung his large, heavy-soled boot at Skyler's head. The deputy didn't even know what hit him. He had been briefly turned around facing the door through which his companion had exited, so the boot hit him squarely in the back of the head with a loud *thunk*. There was another *thunk* as his forehead hit the floor. He didn't get up.

"Nice throw," Ocelot said.

"Yeah, well, it would've been better if they'd let me keep my rocks," Joe said, but he looked happy nonetheless. Much happier than he'd been when the deputies had searched them and confiscated the several large rocks that he always made it a point to keep in his pockets.

The door opened again and Mike came running in. He looked breathless but pleased. Immediately crossing to the desk and grabbing Skyler's gun and the keys to the cells, he tossed the latter toward Kestrel. "Hurry up," he urged, "I don't know how much longer Nathan's gonna be able to stall Mr. Hendricks. We have to go *now*."

The runners didn't need a second invitation. As Kestrel used the key to open the cell door, Joe put his boots back on and Mike used Skyler's own handcuffs on the groggy deputy.

Once the four runners in the first cell were out, Mike immediately offered Skyler's gun to the group at large. 'Wraith took it while Kestrel and Ocelot went over to open Winterhawk's cell and extricate him from his bonds. All that time Mike danced impatiently from foot to foot, continuing to exhort them to hurry. "Come *on*!" he whispered. "We got somethin' else to tell you, and it's important!"

Ocelot tossed the keys to Joe, who used them to open the safe and get their guns back. He had just passed them around when Hendricks came back in, dragging Nathan (who, surprisingly, showed no sign of a bloody nose or any other injury). The deputy's eyes widened when he saw what was going on inside; his hand went for his gun.

"I wouldn't," 'Wraith said calmly, his own gun already trained on Hendricks' head. After a moment three more joined it.

Hendricks' gaze darted around, noting Skyler on the floor, the (armed) prisoners out of their cells, and Mike. He sighed and dropped his hand. "Please don't kill me," he pleaded. "I got a wife and kids. I was just doin' my job."

"We know," Joe said.

"We aren't going to kill anybody," Kestrel added, moving over to slip the gun from his holster.

"Skyler?"

"Just unconscious," Winterhawk, who was now freed from his bonds, said as he came out of the other cell. "As you'll be in a moment." With those words he gestured at Hendricks, who slumped to the floor.

"Did you tell 'em to hurry?" Nathan asked nervously, looking around toward the door. "Did you tell 'em why?"

Winterhawk looked oddly at the boys as his companions dragged Skyler and Hendricks into one of the cells and locked them up. "What's going on? You didn't just come here to liberate us from prison?"

"He's comin' *tonight!*" Mike blurted out, his face a mask of fear. "Grimmer's moved it up! We heard it on the telegraph. The train'll be here in less than two hours! We have to go!"

The runners exchanged horrified glances. "Tonight?" Ocelot demanded.

"Wraith looked around the room quickly, pausing to grab one of the sheriff's rifles and a box of shells from a rack on the wall. "Need to get out. Make plans. Now."

Everyone agreed that was a good idea. "Where?" Winterhawk asked the two boys.

"Our barn's not far from here," Mike said. "We can go there."

"Lead on," Winterhawk said, nodding toward the door.

The barn was only a few minutes' walk from the jail. Fortunately now that it was dark there weren't too many people on the streets, so no one bothered them. Inside the barn, with the boys keeping lookout, the runners assessed their options. "We have to blow up that bridge," Joe said.

"Wraith nodded. "Yes."

"And we have to get out of town fast, before anybody discovers the deputies trussed up in their cells," Kestrel added.

"Okay." Ocelot began pacing. "What do we need?"

"Explosives," Joe said.

"Transportation," Wraith said.

"Luck," Winterhawk said, only half kidding.

Mike turned from where he had been watching the door. "I know where you can get explosives. They keep 'em in a shed outside of town, where they won't hurt anything if they blow up accidentally. It's locked up pretty good, though."

"What kind of lock?" Wraith asked.

"A big one." Mike indicated something about the size of a man's fist with his hands. "It's got a big keyhole in it. I don't know who has the key, though."

"Can you pick it?" Ocelot asked Wraith.

"Not without tools. Can't risk going back for anything."

"What kind of tools do you need?" Winterhawk looked around the barn as if expecting to find something there. "Joe, could you break it with a hammer and chisel or something similar?"

"I wouldn't want to try. The sparks might set everything off. That's a last resort."

Wraith had joined Winterhawk in looking around. "Need something long and thin. Metal."

"Screwdriver?" Kestrel spoke up.

"What about an awl?" Mike ventured. "Dad has lots of those. For workin' on tack."

Wraith almost smiled. "Yes. Perfect."

Mike motioned for Nathan to watch the door and ran into a little room off the barn. After less than a minute he returned with several awls of various sizes. "There's more, but they're bigger. I think they'd be too big."

Wraith picked through the assortment and selected four of the smaller ones. "These should work."

Mike looked pleased that he was able to help. "We better get going," he said, the urgency in this voice

stepping up a bit. "We only have about an hour and a half now, and it's a couple miles out to the trestle. We can take Dad's wagon."

Winterhawk shook his head. "No, Mike. I'm afraid you can't go with us. It's going to be far too dangerous out there."

Noting the disappointed look starting to form on the boy's face, Kestrel hastily added, "He's right, but there's something important you can do back here in town that'll really help us."

"What?" Mike regarded her with suspicion, clearly afraid he was being brushed off.

"Stay here and tell anybody who comes looking for us that you think you saw us heading for the boarding house to get our stuff."

"Or whatever else you can think of that'll get 'em off our trail for awhile," Ocelot said. "As long as they don't find the cops in the cells, they'll have no clue that you're workin' with us. Let's use that."

"Please tell us that the explosives shack is on the way out to the trestle," Winterhawk put in.

"Yeah," Mike said. "It's on the way. You'll see it a little bit off the road, about half a mile out." He looked at Nathan and sighed. "Okay. We'll do what you say. But we better get the wagon hitched up. If you can watch the door, we'll do that."

Ten tense minutes later the rough wagon was hitched up to the Briggs' two horses. So far no one had discovered their activities, but the runners were getting more nervous by the minute. "Do any of you know how to drive one of these?" Winterhawk asked, looking at the horses dubiously. He and horses had never gotten along.

"Sort of," Kestrel said. Sheepishly, she added, "I went through the horse phase when I was about thirteen. Had my own and everything." Before anyone (like Ocelot)

could comment on that, she swung up into the driver's seat.

As the others were loading up, Winterhawk paused to face the boys. "Don't want to leave without thanking you. If you're right about this—and I've no doubt that you are—you might have saved more than you can possibly know."

The boys shuffled their feet shyly, unsure now of what to say. "It's okay," Mike said. "Thanks for believin' us."

"Don't hurt our dad," Nathan added. "I think some of the railroad folks are out there. Please don't hurt him."

Winterhawk paused. How could he promise such a thing without knowing the details of what they would find?

"Hawk! Hurry up!" Ocelot called from the wagon.

Finally the mage nodded. "We'll do the best we can not to hurt any of the townspeople. I promise."

That seemed to satisfy them. "Okay. You better go now."

Winterhawk jumped into the back of the wagon. The boys swung open the barn doors, and Kestrel steered the horses out into the street.

Getting the explosives turned out to be easier than they had expected. Apparently because of the threat to the bridge they had decided to put a guard on the building, but Winterhawk's long range Sleep spell took care of him in a hurry. After that it was just a matter of Wraith's using his selection of awls to pick the huge lock holding the heavy door closed, and they were in.

Joe and Kestrel, the only members of the group who had any knowledge of demolitions, directed the loading of the explosives. Inside the shed, neatly stacked on stout wooden shelves, were boxes of dynamite and smallish, thick glass bottles of nitro-glycerine, all of them clearly

marked "EXPLOSIVE" and "HANDLE WITH CARE." Below these were barrels of gunpowder. "How much of this stuff do we need?" Ocelot glanced around nervously, uncomfortable with being surrounded by all this primitive destructive force.

They ended up taking two of the nitro bottles, carefully wrapped in the saddle blankets they found in the back of the wagon, and four boxes of dynamite. They elected not to take the gunpowder—the barrels were too big and unwieldy to be worthwhile. In less than fifteen minutes they were on the road again, albeit a bit more slowly than they had been. Nobody wanted to risk jostling the explosives.

It was totally dark now, but the full moon would have provided enough light for them to see even if their cybered (and natural, in Joe's case) low-light vision had not been operational. None of them had paid much attention to the fact previously, but they still had most of the functionality of their cyberware, including speed and vision enhancements, although there was no indication that they in fact possessed such cyberware. Obvious things like cyberspurs did not exist here. "So," Ocelot said from his spot in the back of the wagon, "you think there'll be anybody out there? Other than Grimmer, I mean?"

"Undoubtedly." Winterhawk didn't take his eyes off the road in front of them. He was seated in the shotgun seat next to Kestrel, a position he had won over 'Wraith when he had pointed out that he could take out large numbers of potential attackers at once without killing them. 'Wraith himself sat directly behind 'Hawk, rifle ready, also scanning the dark road ahead.

"I just hope that train's not early," Ocelot muttered.

They covered the rest of the distance in about forty minutes. When they approached the canyon where the trestle was, they could see it stretching out over the

expanse from a fair distance. They also saw the tracks laid out parallel to the road and about ten yards away. The road veered off before it reached the canyon, but the tracks went on.

There appeared to be no one there. Not even any lights.

"What the hell's goin' on?" Ocelot stood up halfway so he could see better. Nothing moved. "I thought this was supposed to be some kind of party."

"Maybe they changed their minds when they found out we were on to them," Joe said, jumping out of the wagon as soon as it came to a halt.

"You don't think Grimmer was somehow able to stop the train, do you?" Kestrel asked nobody in particular.

Before anyone could answer, they heard a far-off sound of a whistle.

'Wraith leaped out of the wagon and moved off where he could put his enhanced hearing to use. "Not far off," he reported a few moments later. "Must hurry."

"How we gonna do this?" Ocelot asked as he gingerly pulled the first box of dynamite out of the back.

"Nothing fancy," Joe said. "We'll just take the stuff out and tie it under the tracks, all together except for the nitro bottles, which go on top. Then, once we're back off, 'Wraith can shoot one of those nitro bottles with his rifle, and the whole thing'll go up."

"Oh," Winterhawk said wryly. "*That's* all there is to it. Does this sound suicidal to anyone else?"

Nobody answered; 'Hawk wasn't surprised, since he hadn't expected anybody to.

"Why underneath?" Ocelot looked around again, but still couldn't see any sign of anyone other than themselves. "Wouldn't it just be easier to put it on top?"

"Engineer might see," 'Wraith said. "Stop train before they reach it."

Kestrel nodded. "It takes forever to stop one of those things, but if they're paying attention, they might see a big pile of stuff on the track."

Moving quickly but carefully, the runners set about their task. 'Wraith moved off to find himself a vantage point where he could sight on the place he would have to hit; Winterhawk found another spot to keep watch and use magic if needed; Joe directed the placement of the explosives while Kestrel and Ocelot did the actual placing. "Wonder if Gabriel and Bozo got to do anything this fun?" Ocelot muttered to Kestrel as they painstakingly tied the last box to one of the ties on the bridge.

Kestrel just shook her head. She didn't want her concentration broken by thinking about Gabriel right now. It was bad enough that the promised opposition hadn't shown up yet.

While the three of them had been placing the explosives, Winterhawk had cast a Clairvoyance spell centered high above his head, allowing him to get a good view of the relatively flat territory covered by the tracks. He could see the light of the train engine as it approached; it was still a fair distance away, but moving fast. He took one last quick look around before dropping the spell, just for curiosity's sake.

There was a cloud of dust approaching from back toward the town. Much closer than the train. "Get off the tracks!" he called. "They're coming!"

'Wraith started to turn his rifle to face the new threat, but reconsidered. He would be the one who would have to ignite the explosives. He couldn't afford to let his attention be split now. The others would deal with the threat.

Moving as quickly as they could on the wooden railroad ties, Kestrel, Ocelot, and Joe headed back for the side of the canyon. They had placed the explosives near

the halfway point so as to have the best chance of getting the train when the dynamite went off, but that meant they had a long way to go to get back.

The riders were approaching.

Winterhawk turned to meet them, hidden behind a large rock a few yards from the edge of the canyon. As they got closer, he could see there were about ten of them. *Too spread out to hit them all with a spell. Bugger.*

The horsemen were already raising rifles as their horses thundered forward. Winterhawk recognized Grimmer and Weatherby among them as they approached, and centered the spell on them. At least he could take down the leaders—perhaps the others would listen to reason if their leaders were gone.

But he did not get the leaders. Grimmer and Weatherby rode by unhurt as the spell flowered around them; two men riding near them clutched their heads and fell from their horses, but the railroad boss and his toady continued on. Hawk spun and prepared to throw another spell.

Meanwhile, some of the other riders were taking shots at the figures on the bridge. "Down!" Kestrel yelled as bullets zinged past them. Ducking behind one of the heavy wooden supports of the bridge, she pulled out her own revolver and began firing back.

Joe grunted in pain as one of the gunmen's rounds hit him in the arm. Swaying, he almost lost his balance on the ties, but regained it by grabbing another of the supports. Ocelot, in front of him, flung himself sideways and quick-drew his gun. "You okay, Joe?"

"Yeah." Joe's voice sounded a little strained but otherwise all right. He drew his shotgun with his off hand and fired off a blast at the riders, and was rewarded by the sight of one of them clutching his gut and falling off his horse.

Ocelot spared a brief thought for Winterhawk's promise that they wouldn't hurt the Briggs boys' father, but quickly put it out of his mind. He didn't know if the man was in the group attacking them, but if he was and he was shooting at them, then there wasn't much he could do about it but fight back. The best he could hope for would be that Hawk nailed him with a Sleep spell before somebody else blew him away.

The riders, their numbers depleted now, continued to the edge of the canyon, spreading themselves out along its edge, rifles pointed at the three on the bridge. Winterhawk once again tried to hit Grimmer with a spell, and once again he failed. He sank back, breathing hard as he felt the drain begin to take its toll on him. He wouldn't be able to throw too many more like that one. *What is protecting him?*

"Give up!" Grimmer called from his position behind the line of gunmen. "Give up now and we'll go easy on you! Don't destroy the hard work of all these good people!"

"Hard work, hell!" Ocelot yelled around the wooden support. "Why don't you tell them what's *really* gonna happen, Grimmer? Tell 'em what your boss is gonna do when he gets here!"

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. The only thing my employer is going to do when he gets here is to stage a massive celebration to mark this historic day!"

"A massive *extermination*, you mean!" Winterhawk shouted, raising up slightly from behind the rock behind which he was hiding. "Tell them about his plans to kill everyone in the town!"

A murmur was beginning now among the gunmen. "What's this about, Grimmer?" one demanded.

Grimmer laughed unpleasantly. "Nothing but the insane ravings of a couple of lying children, I assure you! I

am finding it difficult to believe that five theoretically intelligent adults could be taken in so thoroughly by two children known for their propensity to tell falsehoods whenever they can."

The three runners on the bridge used Grimmer's momentary inattention to move a little closer to the edge. Behind them, they could now hear the whistle of the approaching train loud and clear; the rumble began to reverberate through the tracks. "Nobody believes you, Grimmer!" Joe yelled. "What's in town that you and your boss want? How come you have to kill everybody to get it?"

The murmur among the gunmen was growing a bit louder. None of them particularly liked Grimmer and his buddies, and they were hearing persuasive words from the newcomers who had saved some of them from death only a short time ago. "Get off there," one of the men called to the three on the bridge.

"No!" Grimmer screamed. "No!" Moving cat-quick, he leaped off his horse and grabbed a lantern from Weatherby, who was standing next to him. "We must stop that train before everything is ruined!" He ran forward with the lantern, waving it wildly around like a crazy man.

Ocelot, Joe, and Kestrel knew a good chance when they saw one. Rather than trying to shoot Grimmer, they all took off running toward the edge of the bridge. They believed that at this point the townsmen wouldn't shoot them.

They were right about that.

They were wrong about Weatherby.

As the three of them reached the edge of the canyon, the *crack* of rifle fire split the air and Kestrel went down.

At that point everything happened at once.

Kestrel fell, lunging desperately for the canyon edge.

Ocelot cried "Kestrel!" and dived to grab her before she disappeared.

Joe made a massive jump and landed face-first on terra firma.

One of the gunmen took careful aim and shot out Grimmer's lantern; right before it went out, Winterhawk saw two things: the gunman was Charlie Smith, their miner roommate from the boarding house, and Grimmer's face was changing as he howled protest to the skies.

The train thundered into view, wheels screaming and sparks flying as it tried in vain to stop before it entered the bridge.

'Wraith, who had never taken his eyes or his aim off the nitro-glycerin bottle atop the tracks, waited for the train to slide into his field of vision and gently squeezed the trigger of the rifle.

The bullet flew unerringly to its target, shattering the thick glass bottle.

The resultant explosion touched off the dynamite strapped to the bottoms of the ties; the second, larger explosion took out a twenty-foot section of the bridge. Everyone still standing was blown off his or her feet.

Except Grimmer. The railroad boss watched, screaming with rage and hatred, as the dark train skidded onto the collapsing rails and plummeted into the canyon. The engine went first, its weight pulling the remaining cars inexorably downward. "NNNOOOOOooooooo!!!" Grimmer shrieked, flinging the ruined lantern to the ground. Then he did a very peculiar thing: before anyone could stop him (were they even inclined to do so), he sprinted forward and dived over the edge, screaming all the way down.

The train hit bottom with a massive crash that shook the ground all around them. No one heard Grimmer hit.

Then silence.

Several moments passed. Slowly, the runners rose up from their prone positions, testing themselves for injuries. Kestrel, who had been hit in the leg, struggled to a seated position. "Well," Winterhawk said softly, coming over, "that's done."

"Look!" screamed one of the gunmen, pointing.

Everyone whirled around almost in unison to look where he was indicating. The runners stiffened; their gasps joined those of the townsmen.

Something was rising up from the canyon. A twisted, dark *something*, writhing and squirming, flew up out of the blackness below and disappeared into the night, screaming like the sound of protesting metal being stressed beyond its breaking point. After a brief moment another dark form, smaller this time, flew upward to join it. The screams echoed through the canyon, then stopped abruptly.

Again, silence.

The scene faded from view.

46.

Twisting, falling, spinning —
Strange lights flashing, images speeding by too fast to
process —

Slowing...slowing...

Darkness. Then dim light.

The five runners looked at each other in confusion as their vision cleared, trying to make sense of what had just happened. Only a moment ago — or at least it had *seemed* liked only a moment ago — they had been on the edge of the canyon watching the destruction of the train. Now, they were —

They were in a van. And it was moving.

Ocelot was the first to speak. "What the —?"

He stopped abruptly, startled.

He didn't recognize his voice. His normal low baritone had been replaced by a somewhat higher, more uncertain tenor.

Then he noticed his friends. They were staring at him. That was okay, though, because he was staring at them too.

Every one of his four companions seemed to have stepped into a fountain of youth and come out looking like teenagers.

"Hmm," Winterhawk said. "*This* is a new one." He looked to be about sixteen, almost his full adult height but just beginning to fill out teenage gangliness into adult slimness. Like all the others, he was dressed in gray slacks, navy blue blazer with an odd crest and the initials *RA*, white shirt, and blue striped tie. "If I look anything like you lot do, I think I might be getting flashbacks to boarding school."

Ocelot's gaze took in the rest of his companions quickly. all of them had regressed in age, but not by the same amount: 'Wraith (human again, but with his natural albino coloring) looked to be the oldest, although not by much—maybe seventeen to 'Hawk's sixteen. Kestrel (the only difference in her uniform from the others was that she had a blue string-tie instead of a necktie) looked about fifteen, and Joe a little younger than that. Joe's transformation was the most dramatic: he was still largish for his age, but nothing comparable to the huge troll they were used to or even the massive blacksmith from the previous scenario.

They were sitting in the back of a closed van—not a passenger van, but more like a delivery van that had been adapted for comfort while not allowing the occupants a view of the driver. The only window—small, grimy, and tinted—offered dim illumination out the back door but nothing else of any use. The seats were comfortable if a bit threadbare and looked as if they had once been quite luxurious, as did the carpeting on the floor. Currently, the five runners were the only occupants of the rear compartment, although there were seats for four more.

"Okay," Kestrel said, "I think this has just pegged my weird-meter." Looking down at her leg, her eyes widened. "I'm not shot anymore." She raised her gaze again, looking questioningly at the others.

"Me neither," Joe said, and immediately looked surprised at the faltering teenage tones coming from his mouth. "That happened the last time we did this, too. If you get hurt somewhere but you succeed, then you're not hurt when you go on to the next one."

"Then—" She still looked uncertain. "—we succeeded? What about that thing we saw?"

"I think we did," Winterhawk said. "We managed to thwart its plans and send it back to wherever it came from. I think that was all we were meant to do."

"So why are we kids now?" Ocelot asked, looking down at his own uniform. "Why the school uniforms?" He already hated the thing; school uniforms were just one more tool the system used to force you to conform. Immediately he loosened his tie, partly for comfort and partly for orneriness.

"Don't know." 'Wraith didn't seem bothered by his. "Guess we'll find out when we get there."

"Get where?" Joe leaned forward to examine the crest on 'Wraith's jacket. "And what's 'RA'?"

"I imagine we'll find out in due time," Winterhawk said. His eyes came up quickly as he glared at 'Wraith with mock exasperation. "And don't you dare say it."

"Moo," 'Wraith said with a raised eyebrow and a tiny hint of a smile.

Ocelot was staring at Winterhawk. "Hey, I thought your eyes were blue," he said. They were gray now.

"And yours are supposed to look like cat-eyes," Joe pointed out, getting into the act. Ocelot's eyes, normally pale blue and cat-slitted, were currently natural looking and hazel.

"Toto, I don't think we have our cyberware anymore," Ocelot said with a sigh. "You know, it would be nice if the damn metaplanes would just let us be *ourselves* one of these days. Is that too much to ask?"

"Apparently so." Winterhawk shrugged. Then, realizing something else, he stared hard at Joe, pointing his finger at him. After a moment he lowered his hand in disgust. "No magic, either."

"Great," Kestrel said. "So what are we — ?"

The van stopped abruptly, jarring the runners a bit in their seats. Ocelot shot to his feet, followed immediately by Kestrel and 'Wraith. "What —"

There was silence for a moment and then the back door of the van opened. A uniformed driver appeared there, his jacket adorned with the same RA crest as the runners wore. "Last ones," he said. "We'll be there very shortly. Watch your step." His voice sounded vaguely disinterested, as if he was performing his duties by rote. He stepped aside to allow the newcomers to climb into the van.

As they did so, the runners stared.

Two boys appeared in the doorway. When they saw the runners, they both stopped and joined the staring contest.

The driver gave the one in back a slight shove. "Get in," he muttered. There was no mistaking the dislike in his voice. "On with ye. I got a schedule to keep."

Mechanically the two boys allowed themselves to be pushed inside. The door closed behind them, and after a moment the van started to move again.

The runners and the boys continued to stare at each other. Finally, Kestrel ventured, "Gabriel?"

The boy in front nodded. "Kestrel." There was something in his voice that was hard to identify.

If the runners had had any lingering thoughts that Mike Briggs from Last Chance had represented Gabriel, they were swept away by the sight of the boy who stood before them. Small and slim, eleven years old at the most, he was if anything more physically beautiful than he was in his adult form. Regarding them with an adult's gaze through the face of an angelic child—in the true sense of the word—he looked fragile and a bit ethereal in his blue uniform. When he smiled at Kestrel, his face lit up in a way that made everybody around him want to smile too.

Almost everybody. Ocelot scowled a little as he noticed the other boy standing behind Gabriel. It had to be Stefan, of course—the relative ages were right, and Ocelot could see Stefan's hawklike features and piercing gaze hiding under the mask of a fourteen-year-old boy. Stefan looked strangely subdued, and did not return Ocelot's scowl. He looked like he was deep in thought about something very important.

Gabriel looked them over. "You've changed since we last met. I'm glad to see you're all well." The seriousness in his tone contrasted with the smile in his eyes.

"I'm glad to see you two haven't killed each other yet," Ocelot said, unable to keep a little sarcasm from his voice. "Or at least that he hasn't killed *you*."

Stefan did not take the bait. Instead, he crossed over and sat down in the chair farthest away from the runners and continued his silent contemplation.

"What's with him?" Ocelot hooked a thumb toward Stefan.

Gabriel glanced over toward his brother, then regarded Ocelot with an expression that was half sadness, half disappointment. "He has...been through a difficult time. Please leave him alone for now."

Kestrel, catching Gabriel's none-too-subtle request, grabbed Ocelot's arm and pulled him down next to her, motioning for Gabriel to sit on the other side of her. "Where have you been?" she asked him.

"Yes," Winterhawk spoke up. "Have you two been off saving the world from the forces of Evil like we have?"

Gabriel nodded. "In a sense, I suppose we have." He looked up, appearing to notice the interior of the van for the first time. "Does anyone know where we're going?"

"Don't you?" Joe looked surprised. "You didn't ask before you got in here?"

"We were—a bit preoccupied. All I saw was that the van had the same symbol on the door that we have on these jackets. The van picked us up less than five minutes after we appeared here."

Kestrel nodded. "We never got to find out. We were inside when we appeared." Shaking her head, she sighed. "This is all pretty strange, Gabriel. It's taking a lot of getting used to."

"I know it is." He spoke softly, gripping her arm as he focused his comforting gaze on her. It looked incongruous to the rest of the runners: a child trying to comfort a teenage girl—and appearing to succeed. She nodded, but didn't speak.

"I take it that your magical abilities don't function properly here either?" Winterhawk asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "We tried. Nothing."

"Nothing..." Stefan echoed.

Joe regarded him critically. "What *is* wrong with him?" he asked Gabriel again.

"We should discuss everything," Gabriel said, "but not now. Not yet. I assume that we're headed somewhere; it might be best to wait until we get there."

No one seemed to mind the fact that the one who appeared to be the youngest among them had taken charge of the situation; realizing that they weren't going to get an answer right now the runners settled back in their seats and held their questions.

The van rumbled on for another twenty minutes or so, then stopped. It was getting dark; the dimness in the rear compartment was alleviated only by tiny dome lights in the ceiling. Without their low-light vision, on which they had come to rely, both the runners and the dragons were feeling a bit uneasy. All of them stood, waiting near the door until it opened. When it did not do so right away, Gabriel reached out and tried it from the inside.

It swung open.

The driver came around the corner, looking none too pleased to see that the door was opening from the inside. He glared at Gabriel, who was standing in front. "Here we are," he snapped. "Ravenwood Academy. You'll need to walk up from here." He pointed off to his left. "Through the gate and up that hill. They're waiting for you."

Everyone was glad for the opportunity to get out of the stuffy van, so they hastened to exit before the driver changed his mind. When they were all standing on the ground, the driver jumped back in and drove off quickly, before they could ask any questions.

Ocelot turned to look in the direction they were supposed to go. "Holy shit."

That was enough to get everyone else's attention. They joined Ocelot in staring up the hill toward their destination.

Ravenwood Academy stood at the top of a hill, dark against the cloudy sky. It was a somber, forbidding-looking, enormous old mansion (it was hard to tell its construction from here, but Ocelot would have put his money on stone) with various odd towers, jutting protuberances, and a steep, treacherous roof. Kestrel blew air through her teeth, voicing the thought almost all of them were having: "If I was going to look in the dictionary under 'haunted house,' I think this place's picture would be there."

Winterhawk nodded. "Looks like something out of a bloody Dickens novel."

"And that's where they want us to go," Joe said. He didn't sound happy about the prospect.

"Great." Ocelot regarded the place nervously. "Looks like a great place for the whole damned *crew* of Horrors to hang out."

"No choice," Wraith said. He started to say something else, but decided not to. Winterhawk looked at him sideways and grinned, though it was a decidedly uneasy grin.

"Wonder why they didn't take us all the way up," Kestrel said as they started walking up the hill.

"Maybe they didn't think we'd get the full effect of it that way," Ocelot said sarcastically.

"Wouldn't be surprised." Winterhawk sounded serious.

It took them about ten minutes to trudge up the gravelled driveway. As Ravenwood Academy's disquieting structure loomed larger before them they slowed their pace unconsciously until, by the time they reached the towering front doors, they were barely moving at all. Even Gabriel and Stefan seemed apprehensive about the place. Still, though, it was Gabriel who took the lead.

As they approached, the tall, heavy wooden doors swung open and a man stepped out, after a moment followed by a woman. "You children are late," the man said in tones awash with disapproval. He was tall, balding, his face and body a study in sharp angles and long lines. A dark, long-out-of-style suit and squarish, wire-framed glasses completed his image. He consulted an old-fashioned pocketwatch and looked down his long nose at them. "You were due here an hour ago."

Gabriel shrugged. "We had no control over when the van arrived," he said.

Very briefly the man's face contorted into rage; for a moment the runners thought he might strike Gabriel, and they moved forward with the intention to form a protective ring around him. Instead, though, the tall man composed himself and returned his features to their former mien of contemptuous disfavor. "Get inside," he

ordered. "You've missed dinner, but if you ask Mrs. Brant here politely, she might find something cold in the kitchen for you. Now go." Without waiting to see if he would be obeyed, he turned on his heel and stalked off.

"Nice place," Winterhawk muttered under his breath to 'Wraith.

"Come along, children," the woman, who must have been Mrs. Brant, said briskly. She looked only marginally more hospitable than their host had: a large woman with her graying hair pulled back into an unrelieved bun and her plump body encased in an institutionally prim black dress, she appeared to be somewhere in her early fifties. Despite the fact that a woman of her age and stature might under normal conditions have looked rather matronly, the only context in which Mrs. Brant might have been associated with the word "matron" would have been if the word "prison" had been prepended to it. Her small, glittering eyes never left the group as they entered the big hall; when they were all inside, she closed the door behind them with a decisive slam. The sound echoed eerily through the hall with an air of finality. "Now then," she said, brushing her hands together to remove imaginary dust (or at least nobody saw any), "come with me and I'll show you where you'll be sleeping. If you want anything to eat, you can come down to the kitchen and get it. There isn't much left, though. Late children shouldn't be choosy about what they get for dinner."

Ocelot glared at her as she turned around and headed for the large wooden staircase. He started to move toward her, but Kestrel touched his arm and shook her head. Winterhawk, beyond her, nodded in agreement. Ocelot sighed and fell into step.

Upstairs, Mrs. Brant led them down a long hallway carpeted in threadbare red and decorated with grim portraits of dour old men ("I'd hate to see *their* yearbook,"

Joe commented under his breath as they passed them) until they reached a door at the end. She opened it with an old-fashioned key and stepped aside to let them in. "Choose any beds that aren't already taken," she said as if bestowing the favor of the gods. "The kitchen is downstairs, across the hall. Someone there can show you if you ask. I will performing various duties there for one hour. If you do not appear within that hour, you will have to wait until tomorrow." She closed the door and departed. Everyone waited for the key to click in the lock, but it didn't.

Winterhawk looked around the room sourly. "If you don't eat your meat, you can't have any pudding," he commented in a broad, singsong exaggeration of his normal British accent.

His friends looked at him strangely—all except for 'Wraith, who raised an eyebrow. "How can you have any pudding if you don't eat your meat?" he replied in his usual monotone.

"What the *hell* are you two talking about?" Ocelot demanded, then shook his head. "No, never mind. Don't answer. I don't want to know." He turned instead to examine their surroundings.

They were as depressing as the rest of the house. The room was quite long and narrow, set up rather like an old-style hospital ward. Beds, separated by small armoires, lined both walls; they were uncomfortable-looking metal-framed things with thin gray blankets and crisp stiff white sheets. The only windows were thin slitted affairs high above their heads; a door on the far side of the room presumably led to a bathroom.

It was difficult for a moment to determine which beds had been taken and which had not, since there were almost no personal objects in or around any of them. The group was forced to peer underneath looking for shoes, or

to open armoires to see if they contained anything. As it turned out, the ten beds closest to the door (and farthest from both the heater and the bathroom) were available; that left ten more that presumably had occupants. "Wonder where all the others are?" Kestrel asked, looking around.

"Probably off getting brainwashed somewhere," Ocelot said, dropping down on one of the beds. It creaked under him; the mattress was thin and as uncomfortable as it looked.

"Anybody else hungry?" Joe spoke up. When everyone looked at him, he shrugged. "I'm hungry. And maybe we can find out something down there." He gestured to indicate the room. "It isn't like we have much to do right now, is there?"

Kestrel looked at Gabriel. "Are you hungry?"

He shook his head. "I think I'll just stay here." Looking at Stefan, he added, "I assume you're not going?"

Stefan shook his head.

"Go on, if you like," Gabriel told her. "We'll be fine here."

"I'll go," Ocelot said immediately. He was experiencing an overwhelming urge to be wherever Stefan wasn't.

"Yes," Wraith said. "Hawk?"

Winterhawk looked back and forth, vacillating between his desire to accompany his teammates and his curiosity about what Gabriel and Stefan's quest had been. Curiosity won. "No, thanks. I think I'll stay here too. I'm not terribly hungry."

Kestrel nodded. "Me neither. I'll stay too." She smiled at Ocelot. "Bring me something?"

He couldn't resist a request like that. "Okay, you got it." Rising, he indicated the door. "Come on, guys. Let's go

find out what kind of eats they've got in this musty old place."

When the door closed behind them, Winterhawk kicked off his shoes, took off his jacket and hung it in his armoire, and lay back on his bed with his hands clasped behind his head. "Nice to get a little peace," he commented. "After what we were doing before, I mean."

Kestrel nodded, looking distracted.

"What *were* you doing before?" Gabriel asked. He was still sitting on the end of his bed. There was only a dim light on in the room, but no one made any move to try to brighten things up.

Kestrel looked at Hawk. "You want to tell him, or shall I?"

The mage shrugged. "Go ahead. I'm sure the others will have their own parts to add when they get back."

So Kestrel slowly recounted their adventures in Last Chance, including the two boys, the evil railroad boss, and the destruction of the train. Winterhawk occasionally added bits that she'd forgotten or made commentaries based on his previous metaplanes experience, but mostly kept quiet and let her do the talking.

By the time she finished, Gabriel was leaning forward listening intently, and even Stefan seemed to have come up from his dark mood to pay attention.

Kestrel shrugged. "Pretty weird, huh?" She indicated Winterhawk. "He and the other guys pretty much took it in stride, like they'd done things like this before, but for me it was damn strange. I remember you'd told me about the Netherworlds before, but you never told me they were this freaky."

She couldn't see Gabriel's face in the dimness, but his tone was gentle, the child's voice speaking the dragon's words. "The Netherworlds are different things to different individuals, Kestrel. I have never before faced a problem

with such far-reaching implications. My forays into the Netherworlds have largely been of a much simpler nature."

There was a long pause during which no one said anything. Then, after minutes had passed, Kestrel ventured, "Will you tell us about what happened to you?"

Another pause. "Stefan?" Gabriel said softly into the darkness.

"Do as you will, brother," came the quiet reply. There was a hint of sullenness in it, but also a hint of something else that neither Hawk nor Kestrel could identify.

"Did — things go badly for you?" Winterhawk asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "Not ultimately. Apparently we, like you, were successful in what we were meant to do. But our success was not without loss."

"Loss?" Kestrel got up from her bed, going over to sit on Gabriel's. "What kind of loss?"

Gabriel considered that for a few moments as if unsure of how to respond. "Stefan—" he said after a pause, "—did something very brave but very foolhardy. Although he was successful in his task, he experienced considerable trauma in the process."

"Trauma?" Winterhawk leaned forward.

"Death," Stefan snapped flatly.

"Death?" Kestrel frowned. "But—I don't understand. You're—here, aren't you?"

Apparently Stefan had exhausted his patience with the single word; he rolled over facing away from them and did not speak further.

Gabriel took up the story, nodding soberly. At the conclusion of his story, both Winterhawk and Kestrel were staring not at him, but at Stefan's back. Looking at him with a new — albeit grudging — respect.

"So—" Kestrel began, choosing her words with care, "—what happened — afterward?"

There was a creak as Stefan rose from his bed and stalked to the back of the room. A moment later, the bathroom door slammed.

Gabriel watched him go, shaking his head sadly. "We awoke sitting on a bench by the side of a road. I woke up first, and was pleased that both of us seemed to still be among the living—I don't believe that either of us were certain that would be the case after the bomb exploded. Stefan awoke a few minutes later, extremely agitated. It was then that he told me of what had happened—how the soldiers had mortally wounded him just as he was able to set off the detonation. He was astonished that he was still alive after all that. I tried to calm him down by joking that next time he wants to sacrifice himself to save the world, perhaps he could find some other way to render me unconscious than by clubbing me over the head, but it didn't work. He's been acting quite strangely ever since he woke up."

Kestrel sighed. "I still don't see. How can he be angry about finding out he's still alive after something like that? I'd be ecstatic if I were him."

"I don't think he is angry," came the quiet reply. "I think that, like Ocelot, he is using anger to cover something else. I suggest that we leave him alone for awhile and give him time to think over what has occurred."

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes, that seems the best plan." He was glad that Ocelot was not here—with his visceral hatred of Stefan, he could do nothing but complicate things.

Everyone fell silent after that, for different reasons: Gabriel looked to be deep in thought, while Kestrel and Winterhawk were reluctant to take the discussion too far until the others returned. Stefan remained shut in the bathroom for about another fifteen minutes, after which

he came out and resumed his position on his bed, this time staring upward at the ceiling as if it held the secrets of the universe.

Twenty minutes after that the door opened and Ocelot, Joe, and 'Wraith returned. Ocelot was empty-handed. "Hey," Kestrel said jokingly, "I thought you were gonna bring me something."

Wordlessly, Ocelot indicated Joe, who pulled out a napkin-wrapped bundle from the pocket of his blazer and offered it to her. "We had to sneak it out," Ocelot said disgustedly. He mimicked Mrs. Brant's voice: "*If children can't be bothered to come down for dinner, they can go without food for the night.*" In his own voice he added, "Not that it's anything great. If I hadn't been so hungry I'd have just said screw it and come back up here."

Kestrel gingerly opened the bundle, wrinkling her nose in distaste. "You're not kidding. But thanks for remembering, anyway. I guess there's no dessert, huh?"

"Here?" Joe snorted. "I don't think they've *heard* of dessert around here. It might make somebody happy."

"Place is grim," 'Wraith agreed.

"Did you find out anything down there?" Winterhawk asked. He showed no interest at all in sharing the substances Kestrel was now picking through with the meticulous diligence of a physician performing surgery.

"Not much." Ocelot sat down on his bed, noting that neither Gabriel nor Stefan seemed to be paying attention to them at the moment. "We're expected to go to class tomorrow, bright and early. And for some reason, Mrs. Stick-up-her-Butt down there seemed really pissed off that those two — " he hooked a thumb over toward Gabriel and Stefan " — didn't come down. She kept muttering stuff about *their kind* and *no respect for authority* and stuff like that."

"But she didn't mind that *we* didn't come down?" Winterhawk asked, indicating himself and Kestrel.

"Wraith shook his head. "Didn't appear to notice."

"What's this about classes?" Kestrel spoke up. "And where are all the other students of this place?"

"There aren't many here," Joe said. "Sounds like the school's on some kind of break or something. Most of the students go home, but some of 'em stay over. There's another couple of rooms like this, and from what we can figure, there's about twenty students total during the break. Normally they split up the classes by age level, but during breaks everybody's together in the same classroom."

"How convenient," Winterhawk muttered.

"So," Ocelot said, deftly changing the subject, "did you guys talk about anything interesting up here while we were gone?"

Winterhawk and Kestrel, speaking quietly, filled them in on what they had told Gabriel and what he had told them. When they got to the part about Stefan and the bomb, Ocelot stared. "You're kidding, right?"

"Not if you believe Gabriel," Kestrel said in a tone that indicated that if he didn't, she wouldn't be too happy with him.

Ocelot shook his head. "It ain't that I don't believe him. It's just that there's gotta be something he isn't tellin' us. There's no way Chuckles over there would do somethin' like that without an angle."

Despite their efforts to keep their conversation to themselves, Gabriel rose from his reverie and came over. "I assure you, Ocelot, there was no angle. Events occurred exactly as Kestrel and Winterhawk described them."

Again Ocelot shook his head. "I just don't believe it. There had to be something you didn't know about."

Kestrel glared at him. "Give it a rest, will you, Ocelot? Even *I'm* getting tired of hearing it. The rest of us are dealing with this because we have to—why can't you?"

"Look," he said angrily. "Maybe he's got you all snowed, but he ain't gonna snow me. I'll work with him because I said I would, but that doesn't mean I have to like him, or think he's some kind of fuckin' saint because he did what any of the rest of us would've done without thinking about it."

Gabriel looked at him, the disappointment clear in his violet eyes. "You must do as you will, Ocelot. But I ask you to remember that anyone can change given the right catalyst."

Ocelot snorted. "Yeah, like *he's* gonna change after all these years. You go on believin' that, kid." He started to say something else, then raised his hands in a *halt* gesture and shook his head. "No, never mind. Forget it. Like I said, I'll work with him. But that's it. When this is over, it's over."

Gabriel was about to answer when the door flung forcefully open. Mrs. Brant stood there. "Lights out, children." Her cold gaze raked over them, coming to rest on the remains of the food Ocelot and Joe had brought up for Kestrel. "Sneaking food, are you?" She stalked over and snatched it up. "Well, let me give you one warning and one warning only. If you're caught with food in your room again, it'll be a whipping for the guilty parties. We don't tolerate transgressions at Ravenwood Academy. Understood?" The last word was barked out in a tone that would have done a drill instructor proud.

There was a general muttering among the runners, but no definitive answer.

"Understood?" Mrs. Brant snapped again.

"Understood," Gabriel said quietly, stepping up to her. His face was composed, but his eyes were blazing.

The woman's face took on a purple cast as rage suffused her features. She clamped her hand tightly on Gabriel's shoulder and glared at him. "Do not use that tone on me, boy. I knew you and that brother of yours were going to be trouble the moment you got here. Your kind always is. You will speak to me with *respect*. Do you understand, boy?"

The runners hung back for a moment, waiting to see how Gabriel would deal with the situation. It was a strange tableau: the large, enraged woman looming over the slight young boy—and even stranger because it was obvious that the boy was in command of the situation. "Of course, Mrs. Brant," he said easily, with a tiny hint of a smile. "I understand perfectly. May I ask one question, though?"

"Yes?" She sounded as if her patience was rapidly reaching its end.

"What is 'our kind', exactly?"

Mrs. Brant made an exasperated and disgusted noise in the back of her throat and spun around toward the door. "Watch yourself, young man. Because I'll be watching *you*." With that, she flipped off the light and slammed the door. This time, everyone *did* hear the key turn in the lock.

"That went well," Winterhawk commented after a moment.

Gabriel sighed and headed back over to his bed, pulling off his jacket as he went. "Unless we're planning to try escaping from here, which I don't think would be wise, we should probably try sleeping. I suspect tomorrow will be an interesting day."

Kestrel nodded. "Like that Chinese curse, right?"

Nobody answered.

47.

Although none of them slept very well that night, they were all shocked and startled out of slumber by a loud, unpleasant bell that seemed to go off interminably – at top volume – somewhere above their heads.

All five runners instantly leaped out of bed, eyes darting around looking for threats, and only calmed down when it registered on their sleep-fogged brains what the bell signified. "Shut that fucking thing *off*!" Ocelot yelled at the ceiling.

Gabriel and Stefan had both come up to sitting positions, but hadn't had quite the reaction the runners had. Before either of them could say anything, the bell stopped.

The runners allowed themselves to relax. Ocelot, who had gotten the least amount of sleep of the team because he was half-afraid Stefan would try to murder them all in their beds, sighed. "Great way to start a morning." It was still dark outside, with only the faintest hint of light shining in through the window far above.

"It's only going to get better, I'll wager," Winterhawk said.

They arrived downstairs en masse about half an hour later, after changing into the fresh uniforms they found in their armoires (they hadn't been there last night, but nobody was asking questions at this point). Only a few minutes after the bell had gone off, Mrs. Brant had come by and unlocked their door, yelling in that they were expected at breakfast at six o'clock sharp, and that they'd better not be late. They (or at least some of them) had considered indulging in civil disobedience, but changed their minds when 'Wraith reminded them that they still

hadn't learned all the details of their situation. Ocelot (naturally the ringleader of the stillborn disobedience movement) had reluctantly conceded that he was right.

The dining room was as unhospitable as the rest of the mansion. It was a great, high-ceilinged hall done in somber colors, with row upon row of gray tables surrounded by row upon row of gray chairs. The windows, tall and narrow, were covered by drab curtains; the only light in the room came from the dusty chandeliers hanging above their heads. "This looks bloody appetizing," Hawk commented.

"We weren't here last night," Joe said. "It was closed. We ate in the kitchen."

"Which was about as depressing as this," Ocelot added.

This was the first time they had seen evidence that there was anyone else present other than the group itself, Mrs. Brant, and the dour man who had greeted them on their arrival. The dining room looked like it could have held about a hundred students, but now only a few of the tables were occupied by a handful of children ranging in age from around ten to around seventeen. All of them looked up as the newcomers entered, and a quiet hum of conversation was touched off among them.

Some of the runners would have liked to have gone off and eaten at their own table, but they didn't get the chance to voice this opinion before Gabriel immediately headed for one of the occupied ones. Sighing, the others followed him.

The table he had chosen was already claimed by four other children: two boys and two girls. All four of them looked to be around fourteen. "Mind if we sit here?" Gabriel asked, favoring them with his best angelic smile.

They all shook their heads, indicating the empty chairs with glances. They seemed to be eyeing the

runners—and especially Gabriel and Stefan—a bit oddly, but said nothing about it. "You're new here," one of the girls said. "You just got in last night, right? I heard them talking about you."

"Yeah," Ocelot said. As usual he waited to see where Stefan sat and then chose his own seat as far away as possible, but at least he was subtle about it this time. "This is some creepy place."

The four teenagers looked around nervously when he said that, then one of the boys nodded. "It is, but there's nothing to do about it. If you complain, they punish you."

"He's right," one of the girls added. "A few weeks ago, during regular session, one of the boys complained about the food. They beat him and put him in the lockup all day, and he had to go without food the whole time."

"The lockup?" Wraith raised an eyebrow.

"It's this room that's all dark, with no windows and no furniture," the other girl said. "And no heat. It's down in the cellar. I've never seen the inside of it, but that's what they—the kids who've been in there—say. They say they've even heard rats in there." She shivered. "Once you go in there, you don't disobey again. Nobody wants to go back."

"Some school," Joe said, shaking his head. "Great way to teach kids anything."

They had to halt their conversation for a few moments, because Mrs. Brant and two other similarly-dressed women came by at that point and began serving breakfast. By the way in which they flung the trays down on the tables, it was apparent that they weren't terribly pleased with their jobs. Winterhawk looked down at the contents of his plate with distaste. "I think this is supposed to be eggs and—" he pointed—"what *is* that?"

"I think it's oatmeal," Kestrel said with a similar expression.

Joe hesitantly tasted it. "Yeah, I think so." Satisfied that whatever it was, it wouldn't kill him, he began eating.

During the time everyone else was concentrating on their food, Winterhawk, who was a rather finicky eater under any circumstances, and 'Wraith, who made it a point to observe what was going on around him even more diligently than the average runner, both noticed something odd. Their four tablemates, when they thought no one was looking, kept shooting glances toward Gabriel and Stefan. They would look quickly and then look at each other with puzzlement evident on their faces, then return their attention to their plates. They had repeated this cycle twice and were stealing their third glance when Winterhawk said casually, "What is it that you keep looking at?"

"What?" Four pairs of eyes came up, guiltily. "Uh—nothing," said one of the boys.

"No," 'Wraith said. "Gabriel and Stefan. Why?"

Upon hearing their names, Gabriel, who had been watching another table, and Stefan, who had been staring into his plate without eating much, looked up.

The four teenagers looked at each other, and one of the girls smiled sheepishly. "We're sorry. We were just trying to figure something out."

"What?" Gabriel asked. He looked very interested in the answer.

"Well—" The girl didn't meet their gazes as she spoke—"Robert here heard Mrs. Delany talking to Mrs. Brant, about you new kids. She said that you two—" here she indicated Gabriel and Stefan with a subtle head movement—"were going to have a hard time of it, because the headmaster hates your kind. Mrs. Brant said that was understandable—that none of the staff around here likes your kind very much. So we were trying to figure out what they meant." Her tone became apologetic.

"Sorry – we didn't want to hurt your feelings or anything. It's just that we can't figure out what 'your kind' is. You don't look much different from the other new kids."

Gabriel and Stefan exchanged glances, but neither said anything. Ocelot spoke up to fill the silence: "So who's this headmaster? Is he the tall skinny guy we saw last night?"

One of the boys shook his head. "No, that was probably Mr. Harner. He's the assistant headmaster, and he teaches some of the classes."

"Nobody's ever seen the headmaster," one of the girls said.

The other one nodded. "He never comes here. He just talks to Mr. Harner on the telephone and tells him what to do."

"Just like Grimmer," Winterhawk whispered to Wraith, who nodded.

"Does anybody even know his name?" Joe asked.

"Nope." The four looked a little surprised to realize that. "Everybody just calls him 'the Headmaster'. And nobody wants to get sent to him, 'cause kids who do never come back. That's where you go when you get expelled."

"Never come back..." Gabriel murmured.

"Don't worry," the girl said, mistaking his thoughtfulness for a young boy's justifiable fear of such a frightening personage. "You look like the kind of kid everybody likes. Just don't make any trouble and you'll be fine."

Gabriel just nodded, distracted. Stefan looked at him sideways but said nothing.

Before anyone could inquire further about the mysterious headmaster, they were startled once again by the loud bell sounding somewhere far above their heads.

"Shit!" Ocelot muttered, glaring darkly upward. "I wish I had a gun so I could shoot that damn thing out."

All around them, children were standing, pushing their chairs in, and filing out of the dining hall. "We're all in the same class for the break session," one of their companions whispered. "Since there's so few of us and only a couple of teachers. C'mon. We'll show you."

The classroom to which their new acquaintances led them continued the Dickensian atmosphere of the rest of the school quite nicely. The room was large and dark, without windows, and contained rows of old-fashioned desks with scarred wooden tops and uncomfortable wooden chairs. Up at the front of the room was an enormous desk made of some kind of hard black wood, its surface completely devoid of any items. Behind the desk was a tall wooden chair, and behind that was an aged blackboard that looked like it had not been new in this century, and a closed door. There were no posters or other decorations on the walls.

The group filed into the room, with the runners, Gabriel, and Stefan following their four tablemates. "Don't sit in the front," Robert whispered. "Nobody sits in the front."

Taking his advice, the group selected seats halfway back and off to one side. There were enough desks in the room for about thirty students, but there were only around fifteen in evidence. "I'm getting flashbacks to boarding school again," Winterhawk commented to nobody in particular.

"You went to a school this depressing?" Ocelot put his feet up on the chair in front of him, then thought better of it and put them back down again. Instead, he yanked the knot in his tie down a little further.

"Not quite. But bloody close. In England we called it 'traditional'. I always just called it dreary."

"Dreary's right," Joe agreed, looking around.

The door at the front of the classroom opened, and a man entered, carrying an armload of books. He walked slowly forward to the desk and slammed the books down on it. Immediately all the class' regular students faced front, sat up straight, and regarded the man attentively.

The newcomers recognized the man right away: it was Mr. Harner, the dour figure who had met them at the door upon their arrival the previous night. If anything, he looked more dour now than he had then, his chill gaze skimming over the rows of students as if looking for someone to punish. After a moment he bent to pick up one of the books from the desk. "We shall continue the lessons from yesterday," he said in his deep, sepulchral voice. "The older children will do the algebra exercises I will write on the blackboard, while the younger children will do the long division problems on pages 47 through 50 of the workbook. Is that clear?"

There was a murmur of *yes, sirs* throughout the room in which the newcomers did not participate.

Mr. Harner nodded, gave the class one last glare, and then opened his book, turned, and picked up a piece of chalk. He began writing on the board, his back to the class.

Ocelot watched him for a moment before glancing over the classroom. Except for their own group, all the other students were either removing musty-looking workbooks from their desks or noting down algebra problems in old-fashioned notebooks. He returned his attention to Harner, who was getting quite animated in his problem-jotting. He had already broken one piece of chalk and was well on his way to breaking other. He was

attacking the board like he had some kind of personal vendetta against it.

"Wonder if he can sit down with that stick up his ass?" he whispered to Winterhawk, grinning.

Harner stopped.

Carefully he put the chalk back down, and slowly turned around. "Who spoke?" he said, his tone dripping ice.

No one said anything.

Harner examined the faces of the students again through his wire-rimmed glasses. Then he started to move. Walking slowly, like a stern monarch surveying his subjects, he made his way down one of the aisles, glancing at each face as he went.

He stopped in front of Gabriel's desk.

"You," he snapped. "You were the one. What did you say?"

Gabriel shook his head, appearing not at all bothered by the fearsome presence towering over him. "Nothing, sir."

"Don't lie to me, boy." Harner's voice got lower but more menacing. "What...did...you...say?"

Ocelot turned around in his chair. "It wasn't him," he drawled with contempt. "It was me. Why don't you come try to pick on me instead?"

A low murmur of alarm began among the regular members of the class.

Harner didn't even turn. "Don't try to cover for this little troublemaker. It won't work." He glared at Gabriel. "Tell me the truth, boy!"

"I always do, sir," Gabriel said calmly. He still appeared unruffled by the situation.

Suddenly Harner's face purpled with fury and he began to shake. Before anyone could even move, he hauled off and backhanded Gabriel across the face so hard

that the blow knocked him off his chair. "*Don't lie to me, you little whelp!*" he screamed.

Several things happened at that point. Ocelot, moving cat-quick, jumped from his chair and silently lunged forward, grabbing the arm with which Harner had struck Gabriel and trapping it next to the teacher's body, then using his foot to take Harner's knees out from under him. Rage bringing his street-fighting instincts to the surface where they overcame his rational mind, he was intending that his next move would be to break Harner's leg.

He never got the chance to do that. Before he could, he caught a glimpse of another figure hurtling forward with an inarticulate cry, arms forward, heading straight for Harner's throat. At first he thought it was Kestrel, but then —

Stefan?

As Ocelot felt Joe grab his shoulders and begin to pull him up off Harner, his eyes widened in shock at what he saw: sure enough, Stefan, eyes blazing and face a mask of wrath, had clamped his hands around the protesting Harner's throat and was proceeding in an attempt to bang his head repeatedly into the floor. Ocelot was so surprised by this that he didn't even fight Joe's grasp.

"Stefan — no!"

Ocelot turned, still held by Joe, to see what was going on in the other part of the room. Gabriel was picking himself up off the floor despite Kestrel's protests and heading for Stefan. Winterhawk and 'Wraith, unsure of how best to be effective and reluctant to get involved in a physical confrontation, stood back and watched the scene play out before them. The other students stood even further back, distancing themselves from what was going on.

As Gabriel reached Stefan and tried vainly to pull him off Harner, the door slammed open and Mrs. Brant

entered, followed by three strong and angry looking men. "Everyone stop this instant!" she cried, her voice splitting the air like a siren. When it became obvious that Stefan wasn't listening to her, she made an imperious gesture and the two men surged forward. One grabbed Gabriel and the other locked his hands on Stefan's shoulders and yanked him, still flailing, off Harner. The teacher slumped, gasping and clawing at his throat.

Mrs. Brant balefully regarded Gabriel and Stefan, now held securely in the grips two of the men. "*What* is going on here?" she demanded.

Both of them glared right back and said nothing.

"That—that *hoodlum* tried to kill me!" Harner croaked, pointing at Stefan. "And *that* one was assisting him!" Here he pointed at Gabriel.

"Wait a fuckin' minute!" Ocelot stepped forward.

"No. That will be all." Mrs. Brant nodded as if that had been exactly what she had expected to hear. She turned to the three men. "Take them downstairs." Pointing at Ocelot, she added, "That one too. Let's see if a day in the cellar will do anything for their outlooks."

The men nodded, preparing to hustle the three of them out.

Kestrel stepped up. "Just hold on a minute! Are you just going to let this—this *bully* get away with hurting little kids? If that's the case, maybe you should take all of us." The others nodded.

"There's no need to cover for them," Mrs. Brant said airily. She pointed at Gabriel and Stefan. "Especially not these two. Just as I said before, we all know they're troublemakers." To the men, she said, "Take them."

As the other runners made as if to protest and to block the path of exit, three more large men came in and interposed themselves between them and the door. Gabriel turned his head around as he was roughly shoved

out the door and met the eyes of Kestrel, who was in front. "Don't cause trouble," he said. "It will only make things more difficult." And then he and Stefan were gone.

By this time, Harner had gotten himself up off the floor and was making a show of straightening his fussy little bowtie while casting venomous stares at the four remaining newcomers. "Mrs. Brant, I want them out of here. They may not be the main troublemakers, but they're disrupting the class. Take them up to their room for the day. They can work on their assignments there."

The woman turned to them. "You heard Mr. Harner. Up."

Kestrel glared at her and was about to say something when 'Wraith touched her arm. "No trouble," the elf mouthed, with a head gesture toward the door through which the two dragons had disappeared. "Worse for them?"

Kestrel got the message. Much as she hated to follow docilely along like a lamb to the slaughter behind this malevolent cow, 'Wraith's words had reminded her that it was not they, but rather their absent companions, who would get the brunt of the punishment for their misbehavior. Grudgingly she nodded and allowed herself to be herded out. The other students cast furtive and sympathetic glances at them as they left.

No one said anything until Mrs. Brant had trooped them upstairs and turned the key in their door, after informing them that they would be allowed out for dinner in a few hours 'after they'd had time to think about what they'd done.' At that point, Kestrel flung herself down on her bed with a loud frustrated sigh. "So now what?"

"We wait." 'Wraith sat down on the edge of his own bed, his face, as usual, expressionless.

"Until that collection of freak-show escapees decides to let us out of here?" Winterhawk looked like he wasn't thrilled by the prospect.

"It's either that or try to escape," Kestrel said, rolling up to a seated position. "And I'm not going anywhere without the rest of our group."

"You think they put them in that lockup those kids were talking about?" Joe asked.

"Probably," Wraith said.

"Lovely." Winterhawk began pacing, unable to sit still. "So they're down there with no light, no heat, and rats." He glanced sideways at Kestrel. "Sorry."

She shrugged. "Gabriel and Stefan are ancient dragons, not little kids. I'm sure a little dark and a few rats won't freak them out. And Ocelot's tough. It's just frustrating having to spin our wheels all day."

Winterhawk nodded. "I haven't even quite got my mind around what the purpose of this particular scenario is supposed to be. It sounds like this Harner is this place's answer to Grimmer, and we've got our mysterious headmaster—that has to be whatever they're trying to bring over, yes?"

Joe nodded. "Yeah, sounds right. But what are we supposed to do about it? If we were supposed to stop them from hauling our friends off to the lockup, we weren't very effective."

"Don't think that was it," Wraith said, but he didn't offer anything in its place.

"And then there's all this stuff about everybody around here not liking Gabriel and Stefan's kind," Kestrel mused, looking up at the high windows, "but nobody will say why. And they won't say what they mean by 'their kind'." She paused. "What sorts of things *could* they mean?"

"Well, it can't be males, people of a particular age, or Caucasians," Winterhawk said, sitting back down. "They're the only ones who've been identified as brothers—p'raps it's a family thing."

"Dragons?" Joe spoke up.

"Wraith shrugged. "How would they know?"

Kestrel nodded. "True. They seem to be taking things pretty much at face value around here. But aside from their being brothers, it's the only thing that's different between them and at least one of us."

"So someone either doesn't like their family, or doesn't like dragons," Winterhawk said, half to himself. Then he shrugged again. "I'll be buggered if I can figure it out. P'raps they'll have some insights when they get back."

"What I want to know," Joe said, "is why Stefan stuck up for Gabriel like that. I thought they hated each other, but now he's defending him. It doesn't make much sense."

"I suppose we can ask him when they get back." Winterhawk sighed. "But I wouldn't hold out any great hopes that he'll favor us with an answer."

Everyone nodded, looking bleakly around the room. It was going to be a long day, and none of them were looking forward to spending it locked in this dreary place. All in all, life was not looking good.

48.

Ocelot fell hard when he was shoved into the small chamber, cracking his elbow into the far wall. He didn't have time to recover his balance before another figure was pushed into him; both of them went down in a tangled heap as the door slammed and the lock was engaged from the outside. The room was bathed in total, impenetrable darkness, so thick it was almost palpable.

The other figure struggled to separate itself from the tangle with Ocelot; off to one side he could hear the third figure pulling itself to a seated position. Far off, the sound of water dripping could be heard.

"Is everyone all right?" a voice asked. Young, concerned. Gabriel. He was across the room. That meant —

Ocelot redoubled his efforts to extricate himself from Stefan. "Yeah...I'm okay. Just whacked my arm. It'll be fine."

"Stefan?"

"Fine." The voice was a bit clipped, but not as hostile as it usually was.

Ocelot sighed, trying to find a comfortable position on the cold stone floor. He slammed his palms down in frustration. "This is just fucking *great*."

Across the room, Gabriel rose. Ocelot could hear him heading over toward where the door was supposed to be. First he rattled it; when that didn't work, he pulled harder. "Nothing. It won't budge."

"Let me try that." Ocelot got up and moved carefully over, grasping the door handle. Even putting all his (admittedly diminished, given his teenage form) strength into it, he couldn't make the door move at all. "From the sound of it, this thing's pretty thick. I think we're stuck

here until they let us out, unless either of you two can put your brilliant dragon intellects to work on a way out." He didn't mean to sound so sarcastic, but the confinement was already getting to him. He hated being in a box, and that was essentially where he was. In a big, dark, cold, musty box.

"I don't think we're meant to get out of here," Gabriel said. "If you want to lift me up on your shoulders I can see what the ceiling is like, but I suspect it will do us no good. Do any of you have a light source?"

Ocelot fished around in his pockets, but found nothing that could produce light. "Nothing."

Gabriel didn't bother to quiz Stefan when he did not answer. "Do you want to try it?"

Ocelot wanted to try it. Anything that could provide a possibility of getting out of this hell-hole was something he wanted to try. Even as he boosted Gabriel up on his shoulders, though (he was surprisingly light, even for his size) he knew it would be to no avail. As Gabriel jumped back down, he confirmed it. "Nothing but solid concrete and wood beams up there. No way out."

"How's your jaw?" Ocelot sat back down, trying to find another subject to take his mind off the fact that he was trapped.

"It will be fine. No permanent damage."

"And what the *hell* was that stunt you pulled?" he demanded, turning to face Stefan – or at least the patch of darkness where Stefan had last been sitting.

"It was almost successful," Stefan said evenly. "A few more seconds and I would have snapped his neck." For some reason he seemed to have temporarily forgotten his self-imposed injunction against speaking to mere humans.

"But *why*? I thought you couldn't stand your brother, and now you're *rescuin'* him? It doesn't make any sense to me."

"It does not need to make sense to you."

"Hey—" Ocelot started to move toward Stefan with the intent to rearrange his outlook, but he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Ocelot. Stefan. Please. It appears that we're going to be in here for quite some time, so I suggest we try to make the best of it. As we have seen, we aren't going to succeed without cooperation." Again, Gabriel's words sounded odd, delivered as they were in the clear child's voice.

Ocelot blew air through his teeth. "Okay. Fine. I'll play nice." He paused a moment, and then: "Would you mind—just to satisfy my curiosity—tellin' me why you stuck up for Gabriel? That would've been the last thing I expected you to do. It surprised the hell out of me when you dived past me to jump him. I thought you were Kestrel."

There was another long pause, during which Ocelot thought Stefan would not answer. But then he spoke, in the same even, controlled tone: "He was the Enemy."

"Huh?" Nobody could see Ocelot's face, but it was perplexed nonetheless.

"The teacher represented the Enemy. He might have jeopardized our quest had he injured Gethelwain."

Ocelot nodded, although again no one could see it. "Oh, I get it. Okay. So this is purely a self-interest thing. You didn't want to put the quest in danger." *Yeah, and I'm the fraggin' Pope.*

"Correct. Gethelwain has the highest chance of success. If he is lost, the quest is threatened and the Enemy gains a higher probability of prevailing in their plans."

"Okay..." He mulled that over for a few moments. His next words were drawn from him grudgingly, as if with great effort: "Well, whatever it was, it was a damn nice job. I was just gonna break his leg, but you went straight

for the throat." If anybody had told Ocelot prior to this moment that he was going to be complimenting Stefan on his tactics, he probably would have laughed in the unfortunate person's face. He still didn't quite believe it himself.

"I intended to kill him. There is no point in fighting for sport."

That was Ocelot's philosophy of life too—it was even stranger hearing *that* coming from this guy he couldn't stand. "So why didn't you kill Gabriel when you had the chance? You've had a lot of chances, from the sound of it."

"I gave my word that I would not." The statement was flat and emotionless, spoken in the same tone in which someone else might say *the sky is blue* or *cats have four legs*.

"And that's all it takes?" Ocelot was the kind of guy who only kept his word to people he cared about—otherwise, he was perfectly happy about giving it and then breaking it later if he needed to. It was one of the things he learned long ago about surviving in a mean world: the only people who matter are the ones you trust. Everybody else is out to screw you and just looking for a way to do it. Therefore, screwing them back—first—was the only smart thing to do.

The next person to speak was not Stefan—it was Gabriel. "Yes, Ocelot," he said quietly. "That is all it takes." He paused a moment as if trying to decide how to continue. "Your skepticism is understandable, given your lack of understanding of dragon society. Let me see if I can clarify the situation for you a bit.

"Dragons are by nature rather contentious creatures. The protocols and etiquette among our race are very much concerned with preserving dignity and station and with avoiding conflict. We have elaborate rituals for everything from greeting one another to asking favors to raising disagreements in such a way that they don't result

in conflict. No one wants this conflict, because it would not only reflect badly on the combatants, but might leave all of dragonkind open to revealing things we'd rather not reveal. Hence, all the rituals."

He paused again, considering. "In the short time I've been awake in this world, it appears to me that many of the rituals from the previous age have been — abbreviated or eliminated altogether. But one tradition that I do not believe will ever be eliminated is that a dragon's word is not broken. Once given, it can be trusted fully." Gabriel chuckled, just a bit. "Of course, we rarely give it. Dragons are masters at making the appearance of giving their word without actually doing so. But if a dragon tells you *I give you my word* that he or she will or will not do something, you can trust it with your life."

"And — he did this? When?" Ocelot leaned forward, a little interested in spite of himself. He still wasn't sure whether this was just more of Gabriel's naivete, but he was at least willing to listen.

"Back on the night when he first came to me, asking for my help. He did not volunteer it, but when I asked him to do so, he did it readily. He has given me his promise that he will not harm — or cause anyone else to harm — me or any of my friends. Since you are all numbered among my friends, he cannot harm you. That was all that was needed."

"But what about your mentor?" Ocelot's tone changed, took on a bit more of an edge. "Are you just gonna let him get away with that?"

"That is between Stefan and me, and it will be dealt with when this is over."

"In other words, it's none of my business and I should let it go."

"Yes."

Ocelot thought that over in silence for a few moments. "Okay," he finally said. "But there's still one thing I don't understand."

"What is that?"

"You said he promised not to harm you. But you said he clubbed you over the head back in that army thing."

There was a long pause. "By the letter of the agreement, he has broken his word. But by the spirit, I do not think so. He was acting with my best interests in mind. I do not consider that he has broken his word to me."

Ocelot sighed. Dragon relationships were too fraggin' weird for him. It was probably best to leave it that way. "Well, anyway," he said after a pause, "it was a damn nice attack. I wish you'd killed that bastard." Unable to sit still any longer, he stood and began pacing around the tiny room as best he could, feeling the walls and doorframe for imperfections. "I wonder how long they're gonna leave us in here."

No one answered; there really wasn't any point, since none of them knew.

Ocelot spent the next few minutes continuing to pace, but found nothing encouraged him that they might be able to escape from the small room. Disgusted, he sank back down against the wall. The floor was still cold, but at least it wasn't wet.

He lost track of time, but he thought about half an hour passed in near-silence, the only sounds being the slight shifting and soft breathing of the room's three occupants, the far-off sound of water dripping intermittently, and the occasional skitter of some small creature. He sat with his back pressed up against the wall, his knees drawn up and his hands clasped around them, trying to keep his mind occupied so he didn't think too hard about how dark and close this room was. He wasn't

afraid of the dark—on the contrary, darkness was usually his friend. Confinement, however—that was another story. Not fear, but an irrational anxiety that threatened constantly to force him into explosive action just to *do* something. He was glad that 'Wraith was not here as well: he had the same problem to a worse degree. The two of them together in this box would not have been a pretty sight.

Gabriel and Stefan, on the other hand, seemed to be dealing with things quite adequately. Barely moving at all, they sat without speaking, their breath coming slow and even instead of harsh and fast like Ocelot's own. "How can you guys just *sit* there?" he finally demanded, unable to keep quiet any longer.

"What is the alternative?" came Gabriel's soft reply.

Ocelot sighed raggedly. "Never mind. Don't mind me. I just don't like bein' caged up, that's all."

"Is there anything I can do to help you?"

Ocelot shook his head, but then spoke when he realized that Gabriel couldn't see that. "No...I just gotta deal with it, that's all. It would help if there was something to take my mind off it. I just can't stand the thought that they're winnin' and we're stuck in here. I keep feelin' like we're supposed to be doin' something else."

"I too have the same feeling," Stefan spoke up quietly.

That surprised the hell out of Ocelot. Ever since they had gotten to this Ravenwood place, Stefan had been acting not only out of character, but downright *civilized*. He caught himself wondering what could have turned him and his brother against each other so long ago. Never the soul of tact, he decided this was the best time of any to ask. All they could do was tell him to mind his own business, and they couldn't beat him up here. "So," he said in a tone that was conversational but a bit strained, "what

is it with you two, anyway? Why have you hated each other all these years? Seems to me like several thousand years is a long time to hold a grudge, even for a guy like me who's a pro at it."

This time there was a *very* long pause. The minutes dragged on interminably as the water dripped in the distance. Finally it was Gabriel who spoke. "I do not hate Stefan," he said very quietly. Then another long pause, followed by: "Stefan?"

"What?" Stefan sounded weary but unaccountably not angry.

"I think—given our situation—that it would be better if he knew. It would—explain a lot of things, you must admit."

Minutes passed again. When Stefan answered, it was in a voice that sounded even more tired than it had the last time. "Do as you like." He sounded like he had no more fight left in him.

Ocelot remained silent. This was not going at all according to plan. The plan was that Stefan would get huffy and tell both him and Gabriel to mind their own business, and then everybody would subside back into tense silence. Instead, Stefan actually seemed, if not willing, at least not averse to Ocelot's hearing the story.

"Thank you, Stefan," Gabriel said quietly. He shifted position, his shoes scraping the floor in the darkness, and took a deep breath. "Stefan has not always hated me, or so I understand. As I think I told you once before, we share the same mother but have different fathers, and the egg clutches from which we were hatched were around five hundred years apart. I won't go into the details of the dragon mating process because it isn't relevant here, but it is fairly common for different males to mate with the same female over time. It is also fairly common for most of the young dragons from a Hatching not to survive their

first hundred years. Many are lost to fighting and other factors—only the strongest survive, and only they are given any regard by the adults.

"As it happened, my particular clutch was quite small, and I was the only one among my clutchmates to survive the requisite time. I do not have much memory of that period—hatchling dragons are focused almost exclusively on food and survival—most of the higher mental processes don't develop until later on. At any rate, since I was the only survivor, I was given a great deal of attention by the adults—especially since my father was a member of an elite council that existed to deal with those situations that could not be dealt with by individuals—the closest thing that dragons ever get to a government. It was a highly-regarded position, and since I was his son, I was the recipient of much of that regard. People—even dragons—had more belief in omens and portents in those days, partly because they were more likely to be true. They believed that since I was the only one to survive, I must be destined for something."

There was a sound from Stefan's side of the room, but otherwise he said nothing.

Gabriel sighed. "I didn't say I believed it, Stefan. I am merely reporting the facts as I recall them." He turned his attention back to Ocelot. "So in the beginning, Stefan barely noticed me, let alone harbored any hatred for me. But as time went on, he began to resent the attention I was receiving. Through no fault of Stefan's, his father was not as well regarded as mine—in fact, it was a surprise to many that he had been able to succeed against all the others and mate with our mother. I cannot blame Stefan for resenting me, truthfully."

"So..." Ocelot put in slowly, "you guys have carried on a feud for this long because he's jealous that you got more attention than he did when you were kids?" That sounded

so ridiculous to him as to be almost unbelievable. Surely dragons weren't *that* petty.

"No." Gabriel paused, gathering his thoughts. "No, that was only the beginning of it. Years went by, during which time both of us continued our studies and left each other alone. Both my father and Stefan's grew older and more powerful, though Stefan's father never did secure a position on the Council. He and my father disagreed on several occasions—at one point it almost reached the point of a formal challenge, but cooler heads were able to dissuade them from it.

"It was around this time that the mana level was rising higher and the Enemy began to appear in the world, though they were not yet strong enough to be a threat to us. The dragons began preparing themselves for their long sleep, knowing that this was the only way they would survive the Enemy. They had done it before during the previous Scourge. They still had years to go before it would be necessary, though.

"Meanwhile, another female dragon was ready to mate. To everyone's surprise, Stefan's father was once again successful. Makara was an influential dragon—she too was on the Council—and successfully mating with her elevated Stefan's father's status in everyone's eyes. Still, though, they wondered—Kinsatar was not the largest or the strongest by far among those in contention, but yet he had prevailed."

Again Stefan moved uncomfortably in his spot. Ocelot heard him get up and cross the room, then sit back down as far away from them as possible.

Gabriel took a deep breath. "Forgive me, Stefan. I know this is difficult for you." A few moments passed. "What no one knew at the time—not even the other dragons—was that the Enemy had actually made greater and more subtle inroads into our world than anyone had

suspected. They were looking for powerful beings whom they could corrupt by promising power and influence in exchange for their aid."

"Wait a minute..." Ocelot said under his breath.

"No." Gabriel spoke quietly but sharply. "Let me tell this, Ocelot, without interruption." Resuming his old tone, he continued, "The Enemy used Kinsatar's resentment and hatred as a gateway into his mind. They seduced him with promises of great power—the kind of power that would allow him to force himself into membership in the Council. If he would agree to do what they required, then in exchange they would give him the power he desired."

Gabriel moved again in the darkness. "Part of what they promised him was the strength to be successful in the mating flight with Makara. And part of what they asked in exchange was that he turn a portion of the resulting clutch over to them while making it look like they had met with mishap. It does happen sometimes—there are those who would steal or destroy dragon eggs when given the chance. Who would suspect that the children's own father would do such a thing?"

Ocelot's eyes widened. "He handed his own kids over to the Horrors?" he whispered.

"He tried to." The young dragon's voice shook a bit now with the memory. "However, before he was able to complete the exchange, he was discovered by my father. He immediately called in others, including Makara, and Kinsatar was seized and taken away. Close examination revealed that he had been marked by the Enemy—a much stronger mark, let me add, than the one Stefan currently possesses. Once this was revealed, there was no choice in what to do.

The shaking in his voice grew a bit more pronounced. "Of all the species on the Earth, we dragons hate the Enemy perhaps more than any others. We have no

tolerance for them because we know the kinds of things of which they are capable. Some—including my father, Makara, and a few of the others—remembered the previous Scourge and how insidious and malevolent the Enemy can be. There is no question of tolerance where they are concerned."

Another sound of movement came from Stefan's corner, but it was impossible to identify exactly what it was.

"So—what happened?" Ocelot asked, keeping his voice low. He almost felt like he was talking in the presence of the dead.

"There was a trial," Gabriel said. "I was there as an observer, as was Stefan. The trial was merely a formality, though—everyone knew the outcome. Dragons are not merciful when it comes to the Enemy, nor to threats to their children. Kinsatar was sentenced to be executed. My father and some of the others carried out the sentence immediately." He trailed off, reluctant to go further.

Stefan, however, was not. "They ripped him limb from limb," he said in a dead voice.

"Right in front of you?" Ocelot demanded, shocked in spite of himself. He didn't question that it had to be done—he *was* corrupted by the Horrors, after all—but to do such a thing in front of his son?

"Right in front of all of us," Gabriel said. "After that, Stefan had a difficult time of it. The others constantly looked at him as if they expected him to show the same inclinations that his father had shown. He —"

"—I was the traitor's son," Stefan said bitterly. "While Gethelwain—the golden child in more than the obvious way—was the son of the great and respected Gilvirian, who had discovered the traitor in his treachery. I grew to hate him and everything he stood for, and the feeling merely grew over the years."

"Wait a minute," Ocelot said. "You were *defending* your father, even after what he did?" He felt his nascent sympathy for Stefan's situation begin to melt away.

"No," Stefan snapped. "I was ashamed of him and his actions. I did not even want to be associated with him. But Gethelwain and his father were always there, always a reminder of what had occurred. Even our mother was uncomfortable around me after that. I had gone from the son of an unregarded dragon to the son of a traitor, all because my cursed *father* was too weak to withstand the Enemy's seduction!" There was a pause, and then his voice came almost inaudibly: "And now, in my pride and my hatred, I have done the same thing."

Ocelot stared into the darkness, stunned. He didn't know what to say. After struggling for the right words and failing to find them, he finally said nothing.

"So now you know my secret," Stefan said with the tiniest hint of his old contempt. As before, though, he mostly sounded tired. "Gethelwain has agreed to help me make right what I have done because he has no more desire to see the Enemy brought into the world than I do. I will not repeat my father's mistakes." This last was spoken softly, but in the tone of an impassioned vow.

Ocelot continued to sit in silence, his mind racing as it turned over the things he had been told. Finally, quietly, he said, "Do you think we can do it?"

"We *will* do it," Stefan stated. "There is no alternative."

"But we don't even know what we're up against yet." He slammed his open hand into the wall. "And we're stuck in here for who knows how long."

"Patience, Ocelot," Gabriel said gently. "We will do what we can do. I believe that the Fates are on our side. We have only not to give up."

Ocelot sighed. "Yeah. But I was never any good at patience." Allowing his muscles to relax, he slumped back

against the wall, suddenly tired. Right now, he wasn't feeling anything like the certainty being evidenced by his two fellow prisoners.

49.

The day had passed with agonizing slowness for the four runners locked in the room. The hours crawled by one after the other while the door to the room remained locked and still. Once they thought they heard someone going by, but whoever it was continued past without stopping even when they called out.

Eventually, upon exhausting their discussions, concerns, and speculations regarding the status and treatment of Gabriel, Stefan, and Ocelot and discovering that there was next to nothing to do in the room (they had even attempted to raid the other armoires, but found nothing except clothes and a few textbooks which none of them had any desire to read), the four of them settled down into various attitudes of repose. 'Wraith sat down cross-legged in the far corner and induced a meditative state that he used to calm and focus his energies; Winterhawk lay down on his bed and closed his eyes – whether he too was meditating or asleep was not clear, but either way he seemed to be unreachable; Joe, after a brief and unsuccessful attempt to contact Bear, also lay down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. Kestrel, whose relaxation techniques had more in common with Ocelot's than they did with any of the others', took off her jacket and tie, rolled up her sleeves, and began performing various *katas* and martial-arts exercises. Eventually, upon finishing her workout and taking a shower, she too stretched out on her bed and soon fell asleep.

It was later that evening – they could tell because the light filtering in through the windows was growing dimmer – that they finally heard a key rattle in the lock.

Coming immediately to readiness, the four of them waited.

The door swung open and Mrs. Brant stood framed in the doorway, her ample form blocking most of the hall behind her. "Have you children thought sufficiently about what you've done?"

"Where are our friends?" Kestrel demanded.

Mrs. Brant glared daggers at her. "I asked you a question, young woman. You will answer it, and not with another question of your own."

"We've had quite a lot of time to think, Mrs. Brant," Winterhawk said smoothly, stepping forward. "Would you mind, if you please, giving us an update on the status of our friends? Will they be returning here this evening?"

She turned her gaze on him, and it softened only slightly. "They will be returned to your room later this evening. Until then, you will come downstairs for dinner. The other children have already eaten and returned to their rooms. Now come along."

Normally the runners would have rebelled against such an order, but all of them were anxious to get out of the room, so they followed.

When the door to the lockup opened suddenly and light streamed in from a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling, all three occupants of the tiny room shied painfully away from the glare. "Come on," said a gruff voice. "Get up."

Even smarting from the light, Ocelot, Gabriel, and Stefan didn't have to be invited twice. They scrambled to their feet and hurried from the room without looking back. "Nice of you to come get us," Ocelot said sarcastically. "Did we miss dinner?"

"No dinner for you. Mrs. Brant's orders." One of the men motioned them forward. "We're to take you back to your room."

They hadn't had anything to eat since the morning's breakfast; Ocelot, for one, was getting hungry. "What kind of outfit is this?" he demanded. "No food all day?"

"Shoulda ate the rats." The other man chuckled nastily. "Now come on, unless you wanta go back in there again for the night, and miss breakfast too."

Gabriel touched Ocelot's arm and shook his head. Clear in his eyes was the message, *Don't make trouble now. It will do us no good.* Ocelot sighed in frustration and nodded. Together the three of them followed the two men.

When they reached the door to their room upstairs, the men stopped and turned back to them. Pointing at Stefan, one of them said, "You. Mr. Harner wants to see you first thing in the morning."

Stefan's eyes narrowed. "Why?"

Gabriel and Ocelot looked at each other. Was more punishment in store for the attack on Harner? And if so, why wasn't it being administered to them as well?

The man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. "You're going with Mr. Harner to meet the Headmaster tomorrow. They've been on the phone about it for an hour or so. He's coming here especially to see you."

"I am not going anywhere," Stefan said.

Again the nasty chuckle. "Oh, yes you are. It's all right here on paper—with your signature and everything." He flashed a piece of paper, but too quickly for anyone to read it. "Severe cases of misbehavior get sent to the Headmaster." He nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "This is the first time he's ever come out, though. Usually they go to him. You must be a special case." The last sentence was accompanied by an unpleasant smile.

"He says he's looking forward to seeing you," the other one said, rather ominously. "He says he's been expecting you for a long time." He flung open the door. "Now, inside."

Stefan faced them defiantly. "I said I wasn't going anywhere. Not now and not tomorrow."

Gabriel stepped forward. "If we're to see the Headmaster, we'll all do it together or not at all."

The other man shook his head, looking at Gabriel as one would look at a child presuming far too much about his level of power relative to the adults. "You'll get your turn someday, kid," he said. "The Headmaster said he'd much rather see you than your brother, but mouthin' off isn't enough of an offense for him to bother with." Silently three more men, their faces eerily similar to the first two, appeared from nearby doorways. "Get inside. Now."

There was really no question of fighting back. Gabriel suspected that if they tried, even more nondescript flunkies would appear to block their way. Sighing, he stepped into the room. After a moment Ocelot and Stefan, glaring back over their shoulders, followed.

The door slammed behind them.

Kestrel, Winterhawk, 'Wraith, and Joe met them at the door. "You're back!" Kestrel cried, unable to keep the happiness from her voice. Then she settled down and regained her dignity, looking them up and down. "You don't look any the worse for wear..."

"We survived," Ocelot said, nodding, with a little flippant smile. "Nothing we couldn't handle. Right, Gabriel?" He didn't *feel* quite that flippant, but he was damned if he was going to show it in front of Kestrel.

Gabriel shrugged with his own smile. "Nothing. A bit of darkness and boredom."

"Boredom," Winterhawk spoke up. "We certainly had our share of that today. It was ghastly. Nothing to do but sit 'round and contemplate our navels all day."

"Figuratively speaking," Kestrel hastened to add.

"So you've been in here all day?" Gabriel looked around the room, noting its general state of disarray.

"Got *that* right," Joe muttered. "They locked us in here right after they took you away. Hey – you guys eat?"

Ocelot shook his head. "Nope. They said we didn't get to eat until breakfast. This place is getting more like a damned Dickens novel every minute."

Joe sighed in frustration. "We shoulda smuggled something up –"

"Don't worry about it," Ocelot said. "We're big boys – uh – dragons – whatever. I think we can go a night without dinner and not suffer any lasting effects."

Gradually they all made their way over and sat down on the beds. "What was that I heard in the hallway about Stefan's going to visit the Headmaster tomorrow?" Winterhawk asked.

"I am not going," Stefan said, glaring at Winterhawk as if expecting him to disagree. When the mage said nothing, he subsided back into silence.

"I think we need to talk," Kestrel said. "You know – compare notes. We were talking about some things today, and wondering if you might have any insights. And it sounds like you might have some things to tell us too."

Gabriel drew his legs up to the edge of the bed and clasped his hands around them, looking very much like the ten-year-old boy he appeared to be. "What sort of insights?"

"Well, for one thing, we were trying to figure out why you," she said, glancing toward Stefan, "have suddenly started defending Gabriel."

Before Stefan (or Gabriel) could answer, Ocelot spoke. "Cause they're the Horrors."

"What?" Kestrel looked quite astonished that he had answered, given that previously he had never said anything about Stefan that wasn't insulting.

"That's what he told me. Because the people who run this place represent the Horrors. It's that old 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend' thing."

Stefan looked at him with some surprise, but nodded. "Essentially that is the case. I have agreed to provide whatever aid I can provide to prevent the Enemy from prevailing."

"Hey, he talks," Joe said, eyes widening. "What happened down there?"

Ocelot, Gabriel, and Stefan exchanged glances. Finally it was Gabriel who spoke. "Ocelot will tell you later. For now, the only important thing is that I think he has a better understanding of Stefan and his motivations. I think that will help us in our efforts."

The four remaining runners nodded. It was obvious that they—especially Winterhawk—wanted to question them further, but they refrained from doing so. "So what's this about the Headmaster?" Joe asked. "Stefan's supposed to go see him tomorrow but he's refusing to go?"

"From the sound of it, the Headmaster's comin' to him," Ocelot said. "But they didn't say what was going to happen after that. All he said was that Stefan had already signed somethin' that said he was going." He looked at Stefan. "Did you sign anything?"

"Of course not." Stefan snapped.

"Just a moment," Winterhawk said, staring off at nothing like he often did when he was thinking. "Let's see how this fits our metaphor, shall we? We've already decided that the Headmaster must represent whatever sort of nameless Horror is out there waiting to have the

world as its hors-d'oeuvre—he's the equivalent of the thing on the train in our previous scenario. And Harner is its toady, who communicates with it so we never have to see it."

"Perhaps because we *cannot* see it," Gabriel said suddenly.

"What?" All six gazes fixed on him.

"Perhaps they cannot see it—because it is not here yet."

Stefan's stare grew harder. "Are you saying—that they are attempting to bring something over here?"

Gabriel sighed. "I don't know. They used Telanwyr's death to power some sort of ritual—Harlequin is fairly certain of that. What we don't know is the purpose of that ritual. Perhaps now they are attempting to power another one."

"Using Stefan as the bait?" There was fear in Winterhawk's voice.

Stefan nodded bleakly. "The promise."

Kestrel looked perplexed. "What promise?"

"The unspecified favor that Stefan has promised the Horrors in exchange for killing Telanwyr," Gabriel said in a monotone.

"The signature..." Winterhawk's gaze came up again.

Gabriel and Stefan nodded almost simultaneously. "So they come to claim their prize," Stefan said. The weariness in his voice now dwarfed anything that he had shown before.

"Well, then," Winterhawk said with a briskness he wasn't feeling, "we'll just have to make sure that they don't have the chance to take you."

"And how the hell are we gonna stop 'em?" Ocelot demanded. "You saw the way it works around here—every time we fight 'em, more of 'em show up."

Gabriel met each of their gazes in turn, his eyes quiet but intense. "We will do what we can do. We will fight them as long as we have the strength to do so. We are not without our resources. We have simply chosen not to use them yet."

Stefan shook his head, looking down at his hands in his lap. "He is right, brother. I will fight, but—I believe it is too late. I have foolishly given myself to them, and now they have come for me."

"I don't think so," Gabriel said. "I don't believe we have no chance. If that were true, then the Enemy would simply have come for Stefan, and none of these scenarios would have occurred. Remember what Harlequin said—the Fates are behind us in this. I doubt that they want to see our world ravaged by the Enemy any more than we do. I believe that they are attempting to give us the answers we need by manipulating these scenarios."

"So where does the part where they hate you come in?" Joe spoke up suddenly.

Gabriel turned, frowning. "I don't follow what you mean."

"You know—that all the people who run things around here hate you and Stefan. We were wondering if it was because of something about your family. Remember, they said that the Headmaster especially hates 'your kind'?" Joe sighed. "So they must hate your family or something. That was the only thing we came up with. Either that," he added, "or they have a thing against dragons."

Joe had meant that as an offhand, flippant comment. Thus, everyone in the room was shocked by Gabriel's reaction to it.

He stopped, going suddenly stiff as if he'd been hit by an electrical current. All the color drained from his face,

and his eyes went wide. "What...did...you...say?" he asked, forcing the whispered words out between breaths.

Joe backed off a bit, sure Gabriel had gone insane. "I just said maybe they have a thing against dragons," he said carefully. "It was supposed to be a joke."

"No..." Gabriel was still whispering. Very slowly, he turned to face Stefan. Reaching out, still with a slowness that made him look like he was moving underwater, he gripped Stefan's shoulders. "Stefan...no...it cannot be...they would not be so foolish as to attempt it..."

Stefan met his brother's gaze. "Tell me, Gethelwain. What is it?"

Gabriel was physically shaking. None of the runners had ever seen him even look frightened, let alone gripped by stark terror as he seemed to be now. "Stefan...It all fits. All the pieces...The power needed...supplied by the sacrifice of a dragon...more than one dragon..." He paused, taking a deep breath and trying to compose himself. It didn't work. "The Enemy...that hates dragons...Stefan, it cannot be! They cannot do this!"

As the runners continued to watch the exchange with confusion, light dawned in Stefan's eyes. He drew in a deep breath, his own eyes widened, and his hands snaked out to grip Gabriel's upper arms. "No, Gethelwain—" he breathed. "There must be another answer—" But even as he spoke, the fear on his face betrayed him. Whatever Gabriel was proposing, he knew it was the truth.

"Excuse me a minute," Ocelot spoke up. "Would you two mind letting us in on what's going on? What the hell are you afraid of? You knew before that there was a big fuckin' Horror out there tryin' to eat us for lunch. So what's the big secret you guys are so worked up about now?"

For several moments neither Gabriel nor Stefan answered. Then, still moving at half-speed, Gabriel turned

to face the runners. "The big secret," he said softly, "is that we are almost certain now that we know which of the Enemy that they are attempting to bring over." All his energy exhausted, he dropped down to a seated position on the bed, his hands clasped weakly in his lap. "I did not think that anyone would be foolhardy enough to attempt it, but the Enemy has grown bolder in their plans over the past few years." He lowered his gaze to his hands for a moment, and then looked back up to meet the runners' eyes. He spoke the next word in hushed tones, as if he expected to bring down the wrath of the unknown upon them with its mere utterance:

"Verjigorm."

50.

The runners stared at the two dragons. "Verji...gorm?" Winterhawk said, confusion showing in his eyes.

"Not so loud!" Stefan said urgently, glancing around in fear.

Ocelot leaned forward. "Who the hell *is* this guy?" He kept his voice low too; the dragons' fear was starting to infect him already. Anything *dragons* were scared of...

Gabriel's violet eyes came up to settle on his face. The fear was still there, but he was trying to control it. "Did your parents ever tell you stories about the bogeyman when you were children?" he said, barely audibly. "Verjigorm is the bogeyman that dragon parents tell *their* children about."

The five runners exchanged horrified glances. "And..." Winterhawk began, "...they're going to bring *this* over?" Suddenly their chances of success had just gone from slim to negative in his mind.

"But how?" Joe demanded. "Something so powerful—I thought it wasn't possible to do that with the magic level this low."

"And how can you be *sure*?" Kestrel added. Gently, she added, "Could you be mistaken?"

Gabriel shook his head miserably. "No. I don't think so. All the signs are there. I was reasonably certain that they were attempting to bring *something* powerful across the Chasm—otherwise they would not need to sacrifice Great Dragons to do it. But if you are correct—and I believe that you are—that the Fates are attempting to influence these scenarios to give us insights into what the Enemy is planning, then this is the only logical answer. An extremely powerful Horror who hates dragons—it all

fits. From the sound of things, it's already got an agent on our side of the Chasm, preparing the way."

"The elf," Stefan said, nodding. His complexion was as drained of color as Gabriel's was; he looked like someone had just whacked him over the head and he hadn't completely recovered from the shock yet. Figuratively, that was probably close to the truth.

Gabriel nodded too. "Probably. Even that one must be of a reasonably high power level – otherwise it would not have been able to deceive you long enough to secure your cooperation – and more importantly, it would not have been able to engineer Telanwyr's death."

"But you didn't answer my question," Joe reminded him. "If this thing's so powerful that dragons are scared of it, how are they going to get it over? I thought the Great Ghost Dance wasn't even strong enough to finish the job of completing the Bridge – and that's gotta be tougher than bringing one Horror over. Even a powerful one. Right?"

Gabriel shook his head. "It doesn't have to work that way. The Enemy can be summoned by those who know how to do it. I had thought that knowledge to be lost, except perhaps among the most powerful of the Great Dragons, who would never use it. But if one of the smaller Enemy – a minion, perhaps, with such knowledge given to it by Verjigorm itself – were able to make it across the Chasm..." he trailed off, lowering his head to his hands.

"So you're saying..." Winterhawk said slowly, "that it doesn't take a high level of magic to *sustain* them, but merely to provide the power to get them over here in the first place."

Gabriel nodded without raising his head. "Once they are here, the level is high enough to sustain even the most powerful of them. Especially if they remain in astral

space." He sighed. "Stefan, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to stop this."

That admission frightened the runners more than the realization of what they were up against. None of them had ever heard of Verjigorm and no frame of reference for its power level, but they all knew how strong-willed Gabriel was. To see him in such despair –

Kestrel spoke gently again. "Is there any way we could – get someone else to help us? Now that we know what's going on, can we...I don't know...go back? This Harlequin guy, or – you mentioned other dragons before –"

"No..." Gabriel shook his head. "It is far too late for that now. It would take too long to return and seek the other dragons. I doubt that those of sufficient power to help us would even believe our story." His eyes came up to meet hers, and Kestrel was shaken by the look of utter loss in them. "Consider it, Juliana – what would happen if a human child were to stumble upon a plan to summon some ancient evil into the world? Even if the adults to whom the child took the story believed such an ancient evil existed, how likely would they be to believe the child was not deluded or worse? By the time we were able to convince anyone, it would be too late." His gaze dropped again. "We *are* children, Kestrel. Children who have discovered something we cannot hope to prevail against."

Ocelot looked at Gabriel and then over at Stefan, who was still staring off into nothingness. "So...you're just giving up?"

Gabriel sighed. "No. We cannot give up. I will fight this with all my power. But I don't think it will be enough."

"It won't if you have *that* attitude," Ocelot said roughly.

"Wraith nodded. "Must fight. Always a chance. Not here yet."

"Right," Winterhawk added, hoping he sounded more encouraging than he felt. "P'raps if it's not here yet, we can stop it before it gets here. Yes?"

Gabriel looked up at him. "It is our only chance," he whispered. "Once it is here—" He shook his head, lowering it back to his hands.

Joe looked like he was trying to decide whether or not to say something. Finally he took a deep breath and spoke: "Can you—tell us about this Verji-whoever? I like to know what I'm up against."

"No, you do not," Stefan said. He looked at Gabriel.

Gabriel nodded. "I will tell you what all young dragons are told—it is a story that is told to hatchlings, partially to teach and partially to ensure that such a thing is never allowed to occur again." Taking a deep breath, he began, speaking in quiet but stronger tones.

"Long ago, before the dawn of time, the world was barren and dark. It was the domain of the Dark One, an unspeakably evil creature with one thousand and seven eyes. The Dark One created many foul minions to crawl and swim and fly over the face of the world, but eventually it grew tired of these because they were mindless things. It decided one day to create a different kind of creature—something in its own image. Thus were born the *horoi*—the Dark One's children." Gabriel shivered; obviously even the story itself frightened him. Stefan was doing no better.

"The *horoi* were foul and evil things, and soon they began to create their own children, each one trying to outdo the others for the favor of the Dark One. They became jealous and began fighting among themselves, littering the world with their corpses. The Dark One

created new *horoi* to replace the lost ones, and this went on for many years.

"Then one day the Dark One spawned a *horoi* that was different from all the others. This new *horoi* was not interested in the squabbles of its brothers, and fled them by flying high into the sky, beyond the dark clouds. Eventually it discovered a place that the Dark One had not yet corrupted, and lay down to sleep.

"Ages later it awakened to discover that it no longer possessed the foul form of its father the Dark One. Instead, its body was covered with beautiful white scales. Instead of the loathsome shapeless form, it had four legs, a long neck and tail, and wings. As it marveled at its new form, it realized that it was alone. There was no sign of any other creature in the sky, on the ground, or in the waters. And the *horoi* realized that it was lonely."

Gabriel paused a moment, but no one spoke. All five runners were leaning forward intently, and even Stefan was listening.

"As it came to this realization," he continued, "the earth began to blossom under its feet. Grass grew, creatures appeared, clean water flowed—all around it the world was renewing itself. And as the *horoi* saw what was occurring, it wept with joy. It shed nine tears, and where each tear fell, a creature appeared. The first of these creatures was in the *horoi*'s own image—and it called the creature Dragon. The eight remaining tears became the other races that were then called the Name-Givers: Human, Elf, Dwarf, Ork, Troll, and three others that do not exist in this age. The new creatures went forth and covered the earth with more of themselves, and for awhile all was well.

"Eventually, however, the Dark One found out about the *horoi*'s treachery, and it sent its minions in a foul army to destroy what its traitorous child had brought forth. The

battle went on for seven days and seven nights, with the *horoi*'s children fighting against the overwhelming army of the Dark One. At last only the *horoi* and its nine original children remained. At that point, the *horoi* reared up and in a great voice that echoed over the land, it shouted, 'I am Nightslayer, Mother of Beauty and Father of Good, Protector of All that is Light! I command you to leave this place! Be gone!'" Gabriel spoke these words in a shaking voice, with an inflection that suggested that they had been taught to him by rote, like an American child from the previous century would have been taught the Pledge of Allegiance. Ocelot noticed that Stefan was silently mouthing the words along with his brother.

"At that point," Gabriel continued, "the very land itself rose up against the Dark One and its foul children. Terrified, the minions fled despite the Dark One's enraged exhortations that they remain and fight.

"As its minions ran away, the Dark One turned to the *horoi*. 'You will pay for your insolence,' it promised. 'I, Verjigorm, will hunt your children for the rest of time. I will slay every last one of them, and my minions will feed on their pain and terror.'" Gabriel paused. Again he had sounded like he was reciting from a book. Taking a deep breath, he went on. "Verjigorm promised that of all the *horoi*'s children, the Dragon would not be given the mercy of death. Instead it would be tormented throughout time, corrupted and twisted and made Verjigorm's own. Then it fled, pausing to throw a great fireball at the *horoi*. It gathered its nine children beneath its wings, but was unable to protect itself from the fireball. The nine emerged from beneath their father's wings, but the *horoi* was dead."[\(2\)](#)

Gabriel looked up as if coming from a trance. "Verjigorm did not appear in the Fourth World—the speculation of the scholars was that it feared a direct

confrontation with the Great Dragons at that time. However, its minions—in the form of corrupted dragons and members of its cult—were well in evidence, even in the days following the Scourge." He paused, his gaze meeting the eyes of each of the others. "And now it appears that it is attempting once again to use dragons to further its ends."

"And it wants me," Stefan whispered. He looked down. "What have I done...?"

"Well, it doesn't have you yet," Kestrel said resolutely. "And if I have anything to say about it, it isn't going to *get* you. Isn't that right, guys?"

The others nodded. After a moment, even Ocelot did. "You ain't goin' anywhere," he said. "Not while there's fight left in us. This thing isn't gonna win. We'll figure out some way to stop it."

Stefan did not answer, but Gabriel looked up at them with haunted eyes. "How can I sit here, paralyzed by my fear, when the five of you are showing such courage?" He stood up, moving calmly and deliberately. "I will do what must be done. I will continue to lead you, if you will have me, and together we will do what we must do. Verjigorm will not have Stefan, and it will not have me." His voice grew stronger as he spoke, though there was still a faint shake in it.

Ocelot gripped his shoulder. "Yeah. I know all about fightin' even when you're scared out of your wits. I've been scared this whole time. But we ain't going anywhere. We're behind you, kid."

"Wraith nodded. "Yes."

"Me too," Kestrel said.

"And me," Joe added.

Winterhawk stood. "Sounds like you've got your team, my friend. So where do we go from here?"

Stefan's gaze came up. For a moment he looked up at his brother and the five who were arrayed around him. Slowly, as if the words were being drawn out with great pain, he spoke: "Gethelwain—I have been wrong about your companions. They have no idea what they are going up against—except that it is a being that even the greatest among our race fear—and yet they stand with you. It is rare in any age to have such friends. I can see why you value them as you do." Then, having said too much, he lowered his eyes again.

Gabriel watched his brother's bowed head for a time, and, apparently feeling that the most compassionate thing he could do at the moment was to say nothing, turned back to the five runners. "We must prevent them from taking Stefan. If they return for him, we must fight."

Ocelot was still recovering from Stefan's astonishing pronouncement; apparently this was the day for surprises, both good and bad. But still, he perked up when he heard the word *fight*. "Yeah," he said, slapping closed fist into open palm, "we'll fight. There's plenty of stuff in here we can use if we need to. And even though we're in these kid bodies, we haven't forgotten what we know. We'll take 'em."

The other runners, glad to finally have something concrete to do, set about searching their room for anything that might be used as a weapon. Gabriel and Stefan did not participate in the search; the former remained seated on the edge of the bed, deep in thought, while the latter continued to look more than a bit shell-shocked by the situation.

Less than an hour later, the runners had amassed quite a collection of makeshift weapons. From the ties and belts in the armoire they had fashioned garottes, while pillowcases stuffed with heavy textbooks and tied off made effective clubbing weapons. Joe had gathered a

small pile of wooden hangers to use as throwing implements, while Ocelot had pulled the mattress off one of the far beds and jumped up and down on the slats until they had broken, then made himself some hand weapons out of the debris. They decided against trying to break the windows for the glass (too easy for someone to spot them or hear them), but instead broke the mirror in the bathroom and used the long pointed shards wrapped in bedsheets at one end as decent substitutes for daggers.

"I don't think there's much else we can do," Ocelot said as he carefully put the bed he had broken back together in case Mrs. Brant decided to favor them with a surprise inspection. "There ain't much in here we can use as weapons."

"Probably on purpose," Gabriel said, finally taking an interest in what they were doing. He surveyed the array of weapons laid out on the floor beyond the farthest bed and nodded approvingly. "I doubt that this is intended to be easy."

"I wish we'd known about this earlier," Joe said. "We could have smuggled up some of the silverware from the dining hall when we had dinner."

"Too late for that now," Winterhawk said. "We'll just have to make do. When they show up for Stefan tomorrow morning, they'll be in for quite a surprise." He looked maliciously pleased at the thought of what would befall their captors.

"So what now?" Kestrel asked, looking around. "Do we just go to sleep and get up early tomorrow."

"Need a watch," Wraith said. "Make sure no one enters during the night."

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. I wouldn't put it past 'em to sneak in." He sighed. "Okay. That's it. We have a plan now. Let's just hope it works."

Kestrel nodded. "Amen to that."

Mrs. Brant had not come in to inform them of lights-out by the time they settled down in their beds and prepared for sleep. They chose the watches by lot, with only Stefan left out of the choosing: 'Wraith would take the first, followed by Ocelot, Winterhawk, and finally Gabriel. Stefan did not comment on the fact that he was not included in the watches, nor on the competency of his guardians.

'Wraith took up his position in near the door while the others lay down. "Doubt I'll be doing much sleeping," Winterhawk said, taking a last look around the room. They had moved some of their collection of jury-rigged weapons alongside each bed in the event of an attack during the night.

"Nor I," Gabriel agreed soberly. He had not yet lost the haunted look in his eyes.

Kestrel looked at him worriedly, but said nothing. She knew there was nothing she could say now that would be of any help. The best thing she could do—that any of them could do—was to make sure that they were prepared for the confrontation that would occur in the morning.

Ocelot struggled fitfully to wakefulness. His mind refused to quiet; something was nagging at the back of it, and hard as he tried to put it aside, it would not go away. Something was wrong. Something that was pawing at him, telling him that he should wake up now —

A warm wind blew across his face. He rolled over, suddenly uncomfortable. The mattresses were hard, but they had never seemed quite *this* hard before. *Must be sore from sitting in that lockup room all day*, his subconscious suggested. *But where's that wind coming from? Is a window open? There's something I need to do —*

He opened his eyes.

Then he gasped in shock.

He was lying on a flat, arid plain. The earth under his back was a deep reddish color, and the sky only somewhat less red. The warm wind blew little whorls of dirt over the landscape.

Around him lay his friends, curled up in various uneasy-looking positions—asleep or unconscious. There was 'Hawk, and 'Wraith—Kestrel was a few feet away next to Gabriel, and there was Joe—

Oh, shit...

Stefan was nowhere to be seen.

2 This story is paraphrased from FASA's *Horrors* sourcebook for *Earthdawn*, written by Robin D. Laws, et al., and used without permission.

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For a moment Ocelot was seized by total panic. His gaze darted around but saw little: plains, jagged mountains, reddish sky. No sign of the dormitory room. Scrambling to his feet so fast he almost overbalanced and fell over, he dropped down on his knees next to Gabriel and grabbed the young man's shoulders, lifting his upper body up from the ground and shaking him. So intent was he that he didn't even notice that Gabriel was back to his normal human form, and that his own hands and forearms were the tanned, muscular ones of his adult self. "Gabriel! Wake up! Now! Come on!"

Gabriel's eyes flew open. For a moment his expression hardened until he realized who was calling him. "Ocelot?"

"Wake up!" Ocelot cried out more loudly, trying to take in everyone at once. "He's gone! We're not there anymore, and he's gone!"

All around him his companions were awakening and leaping to their feet as they realized they were not where they had been when they had begun their night's sleep. All of them, including Ocelot and Gabriel, were dressed in the same clothes that they had been wearing what seemed like eons ago at the ritual circle that had sent them here, with the exception of their armored coats. "What the hell —?" Winterhawk began.

"Where's Stefan?" 'Wraith scanned the horizon, but they were the only living beings to be seen.

Kestrel ran a hand through her hair and blew air loudly through clenched teeth. "Oh, man..."

Gabriel extricated himself from Ocelot's grasp and stood, joining his own grim search to the others', with similar results. "They have taken him." His voice held defeat.

"But how?" Joe demanded. "We had a watch—who was supposed to be on watch?"

"I don't think it would have mattered," Gabriel said quietly. "They have deceived us as to their plans. The Fates were able to warn us that the Enemy was coming for Stefan, but they were not able to tell us the way in which they would do it."

"So—is it too late?" Winterhawk spoke hesitantly as he took another look around. "Where the hell are we?"

Gabriel shook his head and sighed. "I don't know. I have no idea where they might have taken him. The sort of sacrifice that they must be planning takes a great deal of time to prepare, though—they can do some of it without his actual presence, but they will require him to be there for most of it. That means that, assuming we were not asleep for long, they cannot be more than halfway into it. If we can find him and disrupt the ritual before then—"

"But how are we supposed to find him?" Joe interrupted. "He could be anywhere."

"If we are meant to find him, it will not be difficult," Gabriel said, sounding a bit distracted. "And we must do so quickly. Perhaps the Fates—or whatever other entities have a stake in our success—have managed to transport us to where they have taken him." Closing his eyes, he lifted up off the ground and floated several meters above their heads.

All the runners were startled. They were so used to being without their cyberware and magical abilities that it had not occurred to them that things might have changed. As Gabriel made a new examination of the area from his new higher vantage point, the runners took stock of their situation. Wherever they were, this place didn't seem to have a problem with cyberware or magic. Even obvious cyber like Ocelot's cyberspur, Kestrel's hand razors, and

'Wraith's pinprick white eyes appeared to be present and accounted for. To test his magic, Winterhawk levitated upward to join Gabriel in his search.

By the time he got up there, though, Gabriel was already coming back down. "I think I've found something," he told the group. Pointing, he indicated a direction heading toward the jagged mountain range. "There are a large number of beings in that direction." Closing his eyes for a moment, he cast another spell and paused to study the results. When he opened his eyes again, he looked fearful and resolute. "They are there. And the ritual has already begun, as I had feared. Come—we must hurry."

"Wait a minute—are we just gonna walk *in* there?" Ocelot demanded. "They'll have us for lunch. How many of 'em are there, anyway?"

"I don't know—I didn't count them." Gabriel sounded distracted. "I can cloak us in a concealing illusion, but I do not know how effective it will be. It might be sufficient to get us close enough that we can disrupt the ritual. If we can manage to do that, then at the very least they will be forced to begin anew. That will buy us some time. But we must go."

Ocelot—most of the runners, in fact—were not anxious to go into such a situation without weapons, but it seemed to be the only thing they *could* do. *At least I've got my spur*, he thought as he hurried along with the others after Gabriel had cast his spell, *and Kestrel's got her razors. It's better than nothing*. Joe was bending down as they went, picking up large rocks from the barren landscape and shoving them in the pockets of his coat. Winterhawk and 'Wraith rounded out the grim-faced parade heading over the rise.

The walk seemed to take forever. The air was arid and biting, the slight but constant wind blowing dust from

shifting directions into their squinting eyes. The sun, if that was what it was, was a nauseating shade of sickly pink, hanging there in the reddened, cloud-choked sky like some kind of foul fruit ready to drop. Gabriel pressed on, appearing to be oblivious to the hellish landscape surrounding him. If he was afraid now, he wasn't showing it. He strode along purposefully, his eyes fixed on the way ahead. By the time he reached the rise, he was several meters ahead of the rest of the team.

At the top, he stopped. Abruptly.

The runners stopped too, a short way back. The sudden way in which Gabriel had halted suggested that he had seen something—something that had caused him to merely stand there, unmoving, at the top of the rise and stare.

Kestrel, after a moment, moved forward and drew up alongside him. "Gabriel—" she began, and then she saw what he was looking at. "Oh, my God—"

The others hurried forward and, just as Gabriel and Kestrel had done, drew up short at the scene laid out before them.

They had indeed found Stefan.

The panorama stretched out like some bizarre hybrid of an outdoor amphitheatre and one of the lower circles of Hell.

The area was shaped like a shallow bowl, its red-stone sides hollowed out into levels upon levels of tiers looking down upon the vast cleared-out space at the bottom. The bowl was not quite complete, though: it was fashioned like a slightly round-topped "U", open at one end. Beyond the open end, a massive chasm could be seen spreading out so far that it was only barely possible to see the other side as a dim and hazy outline off in the distance.

Every spot in all of the tiers was filled with some sort of loathsome creature; if the things' leaping and gibbering

had not been so horrific, the scene would have been surreally reminiscent of some sporting event of the damned. All that was missing were the waving pennants and the guy holding the *John 3:16* banner. On second thought, the guy with the banner was probably better off in his absence.

The creatures' attention—and indeed the runners' own—was focused, however, on the centerpiece of the amphitheatre: a great dark altar made of red-veined black stone. This object dominated the scene, drawing the observer's eye inexorably downward. Clearly this altar and its occupant were the stars of this macabre show.

Stefan, still in human form, was the occupant of the altar.

They'd had him for awhile, from the look of things. Naked and bloody, he was shackled by his wrists and ankles across the stone surface with heavy chains snaking down to unseen anchor points at the bottom of the structure. Arrayed around it were piles of what could only be lifeless corpses, their dead eyes staring at nothing, their bellies ripped open by some cruel weapon, their entrails spilling out.

"My God—" Kestrel whispered again. "What have they done?"

"They've begun the ritual," Gabriel said in a dead tone. "The bodies were innocents killed to provide the power to begin the most difficult parts."

No one wanted to ask how Gabriel knew that; most of them were shocked into speechlessness by the view before their eyes.

"What—can we do?" Ocelot finally managed to get out. "Can we stop it?"

"I don't know." Again, Gabriel spoke numbly, as if the sight was too much even for him. Then he visibly pulled

himself together. "But we will try. They cannot be allowed to succeed."

He looked as if he had been about to say something else, but stopped when he caught sight of more movement down in the grim amphitheatre. Before, no one had looked beyond the altar, but now the motion there caught their attention. Another tall stone structure stood there, high and vaguely shaped like a judge's bench. Behind it was a figure who rose from where it had been seated, stood on top of the bench, and faced the crowd of foul creatures. "Well!" it cried in a voice that was at the same time cheerful and malevolent, and that carried across the distance as if they were all standing next to each other. "It looks like we have some visitors for our show! I do *so* love visitors!" Turning, he faced Gabriel and his friends. "And such *distinguished* visitors, too! Everybody's favorite juvenile dragon and his posse of misfits! Oh, *do* come on down! We've got a place all ready for you! You'll have the best seats in the house."

"Wraith looked at Gabriel. "The masking—?"

"Obviously isn't working," Gabriel said grimly. "Step back—we must make our stand now or we will not have the chance."

The runners, realizing not only that he was serious but also what he meant by his request, hurried to get out of the way of the young man's transformation. Each of them felt fear but also a bit of anticipation—it was finally going to be over, for good or ill.

They stepped back, and disappeared.

Down in the amphitheatre, the elf/Horror laughed uproariously as the five of them reappeared, each one guarded by three large creatures with nasty-looking weapons. "Oh, young one! You *are* amusing! To think that you could triumph against us in our own domain!" The cheerful overtones dropped away from his voice, leaving

only the evil. His eyes, cold and merciless, met those of the golden dragon who now stood on the hillside. "Now change back, *now*, or I will have your friends eviscerated right before your eyes. You might be able to stop one or two of them, but can you stop them all?"

"Don't do it, Gabriel!" Kestrel cried, struggling in the grip of a vaguely humanoid Horror-thing while two others pointed barbed spears at her neck and abdomen.

Gabriel watched them for a moment, then looked back at the elf/Horror. Almost resignedly he shifted form again, remaining there on the hillside.

"Good!" the Horror said approvingly as Gabriel's friends fought between relief and despair. "Now come on down here. We're not going to hurt you *or* your friends. Not yet, at least. Why would we do anything to injure our best audience?"

Gabriel briefly closed his eyes, then started down the hill toward the floor of the amphitheatre. When he arrived, he was surrounded by more of the oversized creatures; he and his friends were herded over to another boxlike area containing six seats. "Here we are," the Horror said, back to being cheerful again. "Box seats for the show. The scalpers would charge a *fortune* for these, you know."

"Six seats. Just as if they were expecting us..." Winterhawk murmured as they were pushed inside. The Horror closed the door behind them with an audible *click* and resumed its place on top of the bench, grinning down at them.

"Why did you *do* that?" Kestrel demanded of Gabriel. "This is more important than us. You should have done what you had to do." All around her, the others nodded.

But Gabriel shook his head. "No. I will not sacrifice my friends—at least not when it isn't yet necessary. There

is still time." Turning toward the sight of the altar, he would say no more.

"Just so you know," the Horror said conversationally, now seated on the edge of the tall bench with its legs hanging over like a child on a playground swing, "Your seats are completely shielded, so don't try any funny business. You're here to watch—not to participate." It pointed at the box. "Go ahead—try it if you don't believe me."

Gabriel met his gaze, then pointedly looked away. On the altar, Stefan weakly turned his head to look at his brother. His eyes held fear and despair. Although he was covered with blood, he did not appear to be seriously injured. Instead, his body was crisscrossed with a network of small cuts that seemed designed to produce blood but leave the victim reasonably cognizant of what was happening. After a moment, Stefan closed his eyes again.

"We're right next to the Chasm," Ocelot said, pointing. "Did you see it over there?"

Winterhawk nodded. "What better place to bring something over? My guess is they've even gone to the trouble to find a spot where the gap isn't as wide as in some of the other areas."

"But what can we do now?" Kestrel asked, her gaze still darting around, trying to take in everything at once. She was trying hard not to show how freaked out she was by this whole thing, but her control was beginning to slip. "Gabriel—could they be lying about the shielding?"

Gabriel sighed. "I don't want to give them the satisfaction of testing it until it's needed. It's exactly what they want me to do. There is still time."

"You said that before," Joe said. "Have you got a plan you're not telling us about?"

But Gabriel did not answer.

Things were starting to happen near the altar now. The Horror/elf jumped down off the bench and moved over toward it; for the first time the runners became aware of the intricate circle that had been carved into the stone around it. "That's odd..." Winterhawk said half to himself. "I've never seen a circle carved like that."

"It's far more powerful that way," Gabriel told him without taking his eyes from the proceedings. "Carving the circle into living stone takes much longer to prepare, but it has a much higher chance of success, especially when performing a ritual of this magnitude."

"So you were right about their having prepared most of this ahead of time," the mage said.

Gabriel nodded. "It would have taken them at minimum two days—possibly longer—to set something like this up. I'm certain, though, that they had at least most of it prepared since they gave Stefan that statuette. They have been expecting this."

"Must stop it," Wraith stated. "We are irrelevant."

Ocelot nodded. "If they get that ritual finished and bring that Horror over, we're all dead anyway. I'd rather go down fighting."

Joe nodded too, looking at Gabriel. "You do what you have to do. Don't worry about us. This is more important."

Gabriel's haunted but determined gaze met each of theirs in turn. "I know," he said softly. "If it comes to that, then I will do as you ask. But it has not yet come to that."

The Horror over by the altar was now walking slowly around it, chanting something in a guttural language that none of the runners understood. Even Gabriel did not appear to be following what the thing was saying. The Horror continued its march around the circle, which was at least twice the size of the one that Harlequin and the two dragons had constructed to get the team to the

metaplanes. Behind it, the red dirt swirled around, mingling with the blood that stained the ground from the corpses and Stefan himself. The Horror gestured, and several of the larger and more intelligent-looking of the other Horror-things came forward, taking positions around the circle as if they had been briefed in their duties beforehand. In the tiers, the other creatures continued to scream and shriek and gibber in anticipation of what was to come. The Horror/elf gestured again, and the swirling dust began to take a vague form up above the altar.

Gabriel stiffened, his eyes widening. "They're further along than I thought," he said softly, the fear evident in his voice.

"What?" Winterhawk demanded. "How do you know?"

"I just do," the young man said distractedly. "I can't follow the language, but the process is clear enough. They will finish the ritual in less than a few hours. I thought we had longer..." he trailed off, sounding at a loss again.

Kestrel touched his arm. "Gabriel—"

On the altar, Stefan turned his head toward them again. Joining the fear in his eyes was pleading—*do something*, he was clearly saying, although he did not speak. He must have known that the ritual was getting close as well. There was no trace of the arrogant, contemptuous CEO of Messina Corporation on his features now: he was in fear for not only his life, but perhaps for even more than that. The runners stared at him, unable to do anything else. They all knew that if anything was to be done, it would have to be Gabriel who would instigate it. All of them were on edge, prepared to do what needed to be done, but as yet they did not know what that was—or even if anything *could* be done.

Gabriel was no longer paying attention to them. His focus was riveted on the altar, on Stefan, on the Horror.

He leaned forward, gripping the edge of the box, watching the ritual as it played out before him. Kestrel, upon glancing at his expression, could tell that his mind was warring with itself over something, but he gave no indication as to what that was.

The Horror's chanting grew louder, and the dust swirled higher. It was definitely taking some kind of form now, but it was still impossible to tell what the form was. The thing motioned toward something off to the far side of the circle, out of the view of the spectators. After a moment three of the Horror-things came forward, carrying a long blade across their forearms. The weapon was curved and barbed, its blade flat black and wicked looking. It seemed to suck up any light nearby and trap it within its darkness.

Stefan saw it approaching and struggled weakly against his bonds, casting another terrified glance toward his brother.

The Horror/elf solemnly took the blade from the three minions, who quickly faded back into the crowd as if even they were afraid of its power. Holding the blade over its head in both hands, the thing looked like some kind of demonic vision with the red mists swirling around it and the gutted corpses at its feet. The runners looked on, unable to take their eyes off the scene, nearly numbed by the shock of what they were observing.

The Horror raised the knife above Stefan, whose chest was now rising and falling so fast with his panicked breathing that, were he truly human, he probably would have fainted dead away. But that respite was not available to him. His eyes were so wide with fear now that the whites could be seen all around his dark pupils. As the point of the blade came slowly downward toward his chest, he cried out, "*Gethelwain!*"

"Wait!" a voice boomed out over the amphitheatre.

It took the runners a moment to realize that the voice was Gabriel's.

The blade stopped, hovering mere centimeters above Stefan's heaving chest. The Horror looked up, interest showing in its eyes. "Yes? Is there something I can do for you?" It spoke sarcastically, but the interest was unmistakable.

Gabriel stood. All the fear had left his face now, replaced by a hard resolve that gave him the look of some kind of pure hero from a bygone time. Stefan stared at him, shocked.

"Gabriel, what are you –?" Kestrel began.

He ignored her and spoke to the Horror. "You don't want him," he said in the same commanding tone, "and you know it."

"Oh, really?" The Horror put its hands at its sides and cocked its head sideways a bit. "And what *do* we want, youngster?"

"Me."

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A collective gasp went up from the five runners – and from Stefan – as that sunk in. "*What?*" Ocelot demanded. "Gabriel, are you fuckin' *crazy?*"

Again Gabriel ignored the runners. "It's true, is it not? You're not sure you can complete your ritual with Stefan. That's why you've been preparing this circle even longer than it would have normally taken, and you're *still* not certain."

Interest grew in the Horror's eyes. It withdrew the knife, leaning it up against the side of the altar, where it rested on two of the corpses. "Go on..." it said slyly.

The young man did not waver. "I will make this offer: Release Stefan and I will take his place."

"Gabriel, *no!* You *can't!*" Kestrel cried. She gripped his arm, but he still paid her no heed.

From the altar, Stefan spoke, his voice raspy with pain. "No, Gethelwain. Do not – "

"Is that all?" The Horror asked, the interest growing even further on its face. All around them, a low murmur began from the crowd of spectators.

"No. You will remove your taint from Stefan immediately, and you will allow him and my friends to observe the ritual."

Winterhawk, Ocelot, and the rest of the team exchanged dumbfounded glances. Was Gabriel insane? Had the sight of his brother on the altar driven him over the edge? If he gave himself to the Horrors, then all was truly lost!

The Horror took a few steps toward the spectator box containing Gabriel and the runners. "And if I agree to this, then you will take your brother's place in the ritual? You will cooperate with us? Willingly?" The pace of its speech

had picked up a bit; its entire bearing suggested anticipation.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes."

The Horror considered that for a moment, and then its eyes narrowed as its sly smile grew a bit wider. "Your *word*, dragon?"

Gabriel's gaze remained steady. "First you will release Stefan from his promise and remove the taint."

The runners had given up trying to influence Gabriel; they knew it would do no good. They had to content themselves with sitting back tensely and hoping that the dragon knew what he was doing.

"You *wound* me, young one," the Horror clucked in mock dismay. "Don't you *trust* me?"

"My hatred for you is stronger than I have ever felt for any being on this or any other world," Gabriel said calmly, with just an edge of coldness. "Release him and then you will have my word. Not before."

"You know," the Horror said, putting its hand to its chin in a pose of thoughtfulness, "I could just continue with your brother and take my chances. We both know that the chance that his power is sufficient is so great as to be almost certain." It appeared not at all bothered by Gabriel's pronouncement.

Gabriel shrugged. "You could do that," he admitted. "But you won't. You would rather have me for your ritual, and you know it. We both do. You know that my power will be sufficient." His gaze hardened again. "Choose. My offer does not stand forever."

The Horror eyed him, trying to discern any ulterior motives. More than just its own posture conveyed anticipation now: there was an almost palpable feeling of it in the air, as if the powerful being on the other side of the Chasm was somehow adding its own desires to the mix. Stefan, still struggling against his chains, closed his

eyes. Silence hung between the foul elf-creature and the young man as their eyes locked.

Finally, the Horror grinned, showing shining pointed teeth. "All right, dragon," it said, "I accept your offer. You and your foolish brother will change places." It turned toward Stefan, then looked back over its shoulder toward Gabriel. "You know, I'm not sure which of the two of you is the more foolish—the one who did it for hatred or the one who is doing it for misguided loyalty." With that, he resumed his path toward the altar as the throng of Horror-creatures cheered.

The runners crowded around Gabriel. "Why did you do that?" Kestrel demanded, worry and anger fighting for control of her features. "They're just going to do to you what they were going to do to Stefan."

Winterhawk nodded. "And if what you said is true—if his power isn't enough, but yours is—then why are you giving them what they want?"

Gabriel's eyes were quiet; he appeared serene and without fear. "It is the only way," he said gently. Indicating the altar with a head movement, he continued, "The ritual had almost reached the point beyond which it could not have been safely stopped. The chance that Stefan's power would not have been sufficient is very low. I wasn't willing to take the chance. Not when the stakes are so high."

"So why, then?" Joe asked. "What good will this do except get you killed instead of Stefan to bring this thing over?"

Gabriel was watching the Horror as it worked around Stefan. "Time."

"Huh?" Ocelot stared at him.

"Time," Gabriel repeated. "It will buy you time. A ritual of this potency is highly personalized—they cannot use the same one for me that they used for Stefan. That

means that it will require time for them to prepare a new one. If I had allowed them to complete their sacrifice of Stefan and it had been successful, then all of us — all of the world — would have been doomed. I had to do something." At this point, he turned to face them. Rarely had they seen him look more serious; it was clear that he had not arrived at this decision lightly. "It is up to you and Stefan now. If they allow you to remain together, work with him. You and he are the only hope the world will have." He smiled slightly — it was an ethereal, faraway thing. "I have faith in you. I think that together you can do it. And remember — Fate is still with you."

Kestrel gripped his arms and closed her eyes. "Gabriel — Gethelwain — I —"

He returned the grip, closing his hands around her arms as well. "There isn't any other choice, Juliana. You made me promise you once that I would ask for help if I needed it. I am asking now. From all of you."

She opened her eyes and met his. "I hope I can have as much courage as you do."

He shook his head; his gentle smile made him look very young. "It isn't courage, Kestrel. I've never been more frightened in my life. But I know what will happen if we fail. There is no other option."

"How touching," drawled a voice.

Everyone swung quickly around. The Horror was standing there, right in front of the box. It hadn't been there a moment ago. Shaking its head, it grinned with foul glee. "If all of you are quite finished with your Kodak moment, we'll get on with things." It pointed. "Observe, dragon: we've kept our end of the bargain. You can check if you like."

Gabriel and the runners looked beyond the Horror. Stefan was being released from the shackles on the altar; as they watched, two large creatures hoisted him roughly

up and dragged him over next to the Horror. His head slumped forward; Gabriel thought he was unconscious until he saw his eyes open slightly. Another creature opened the door to the box and made an exaggerated "after you" gesture to Gabriel.

With a last look at his friends, Gabriel exited the box and approached Stefan. "Sildarath?"

Stefan's head raised just a bit. "Gethelwain, why have you done this?" he whispered.

Gabriel didn't answer. Instead, he reached out and gently touched his brother's bloody forehead. Closing his eyes, he concentrated for several minutes while all around him the gazes of the Horror, its minions, and the runners were locked on him. At last he pulled his hand back and met the Horror's eyes.

"Well?" the thing asked.

Gabriel nodded, once. "If you have done as you have promised and not attempted to deceive me," he said in a tone both soft and chill, "then I give you my word. I will go willingly."

The runners looked away, closing their eyes.

The Horror smiled. "Excellent. Take him!" he barked toward his minions. Two of the large creatures came immediately forward and locked their grips tightly around Gabriel's arms. "Go—put him somewhere until we're ready for him." Dismissively he turned back to the runners and Stefan, the latter of whom was still being supported. "As for our *guests* here—" he spoke the word as if it were an insult —"take them to the dungeons. They can remain there until it's time to watch me slice our dear young dragon up into a light snack for the Master. I'm sure he'll be hungry after his long trip." It laughed and stalked off, back toward the altar.

The creatures grinned big nasty toothy grins at the runners as they shoved Stefan forward toward them.

"Here—*you* carry him. We don't want him. And don't try anything. We ain't supposed to kill you, but we can make you wish you were dead."

Joe stepped up and caught Stefan before he fell, lifting him effortlessly in his massive arms. Bloodsoaked and pale, he was nearly unconscious; he didn't even raise his head as Joe picked him up.

Several more creatures appeared and began herding the group out of the amphitheatre. At one point or another every one of the runners turned back to get a final look at Gabriel being led off in the opposite direction. He walked with his head held high between his two hulking captors, and did not look back. The runners all wondered if they would ever see him alive again.

The place where the creatures took them had not existed prior to their discovery of the amphitheatre—they were all sure of that. As they came up over the rise where they had been hiding before, they saw to their surprise that the landscape had once again been transformed. Instead of unceasing reddish dust and rocky terrain, they were greeted by a street made of black cobblestones and a small collection of dingy buildings that would have looked at home in 17th-century colonial America. "What the hell—?" Ocelot muttered, looking around.

"Try not to think too hard about it," Winterhawk suggested in the same tone. "It's not too good for the sanity."

"Not that I've got much of *that* left at this point." Ocelot sighed and continued to trudge along. He was entertaining thoughts of trying to overpower their guards and escape, but retained at least enough sanity to realize that it would not have done him any good. There were too many of the creatures, they were too well armed, and—most importantly—where could they go? No, much as he

hated it, he knew they were going to have to play along and try to figure a way out of this.

The guards led them to a squat, blocky building near the edge of the tiny town. While several of the creatures held spears trained on them, one pulled out a large, old-fashioned ring of iron keys and opened the stout metal-strapped wooden door. Once inside, the team was led down a flight of stone stairs. As they descended, an unpleasant smell began to rise from the darkness below. The runners looked at each other but said nothing.

The Horror hadn't been exaggerating when it had referred to 'the dungeon.' What met the runners' eyes as they reached the bottom of the stairs fit the classical definition of such a place frighteningly well.

Two large cells, enclosed by thick iron bars, flanked a stone walkway between them. The floors of the cells were spread haphazardly with dirty-looking straw, but contained no beds or other furniture. The walls and floors of the cells were stone as well; the only light came from a tiny half-window carved into one of the cells' walls at eye level, indicating that they had not quite gone a full floor underground. In the other cell, three dead bodies in various stages of decay lay on the floor alongside what looked to be a large pile of old rags. All around the runners, the stench of rot and death and waste permeated the air.

The lead creature stuck the key into the big sturdy lock on the cell with the window and swung open the door. It creaked alarmingly but looked nonetheless strong and impenetrable. "In here," it ordered, pointing. "Hurry up, or I'll change your mind and put ya in *there*." It pointed toward the cell containing the three rotting bodies.

Still thinking it unwise to start a battle here, the runners allowed themselves to be installed in the

indicated cell. The creature slammed the door shut behind them and locked the door. "There," it said in satisfaction. "You have fun. The Master will have need for you soon enough." With that, it and the other creatures headed back up the stairs.

Kestrel immediately went over to the small window and leaned on it, putting her head down on her arms.

Winterhawk looked around at their surroundings in disgust, but said nothing. It was a testament to the gravity of their situation that he did not have a sarcastic remark handy. Instead, he looked at Stefan, still held in Joe's arms. "Look at this place. We can't put him down on this filthy floor. Not with wounds like that."

"Can you heal him?" Wraith asked, coming over.

"I don't know. But I'm certainly going to try." Looking around again, he tried to find a relatively clean spot on the floor. There wasn't one.

Joe solved the problem by carefully sitting down and holding the unconscious Stefan in his lap. With his great height and width, he made as good a platform as they were going to get. "There. Do it now."

As Winterhawk came over and squatted down next to Stefan (reluctant to sit down fully), and Wraith went over to examine the lock on the cell door, Ocelot approached Kestrel. Gently, he touched her arm. "Hey..."

She looked up. Her eyes were almost as haunted as Gabriel's had been. "I don't know if I can take much more of this, Ocelot..."

He sighed, nodding. "I know. I don't know if I can either. But Gabriel's counting on us. We gotta do something."

"But *what*?" she asked in despair. "Maybe you guys know more about this kind of situation than I do, but what can we do against something like that? How will we stop it if Gabriel can't? Stefan's hurt —"

"Hawk's trying to fix him up." Ocelot shook his head, leaning one arm on the cold stone wall. "I'm so scared right now that I'm getting numb to it. There's only so long you can be scared shitless before you either go crazy or you get to where you don't notice it. I figure we're dead anyway, so at least we'd better try to do something."

"We don't even know how long it will be before they get the ritual ready. We don't know how much time we have." She sighed. "I'll do it. Whatever it is, I'll do it. But —"

He gripped her shoulder. "I know. Just think of it as a job. That's how I try to deal with it. If I think of it as a job then I don't think about all the bad stuff. If you worry about Gabriel, you aren't gonna be able to function, and we need that right now. Remember — if we do this, he'll be fine. And if we don't...then we'll be past caring about Gabriel or anybody else."

She nodded slowly. "That's not very comforting, you know. But I get it." She gave him a small smile. "I'll be okay. After all, I'm a professional."

"That's the spirit." He pointed. "Come on — let's see if they've got him patched up yet."

Over near Stefan, Winterhawk was deep in concentration, running his hands about six inches over the dragon's chest. As the runners watched, some of the injuries began to close up and disappear. "None of these are serious," the mage muttered, almost to himself. "It looks like they were trying for the greatest amount of blood with minimal real injury. I guess they were saving that for the real show." He sighed. "If I can get him conscious again, he can do most of this himself, with his much stronger magic. But first I have to get him awake."

Almost as if he had heard Winterhawk, Stefan's eyes fluttered open. They widened as he saw all the faces surrounding him. "You're all right," Winterhawk assured

him. "Except we're locked up in a stinking hole of a prison cell and they've taken your brother away."

Stefan sighed. "Gethelwain..." he whispered, shaking his head. "I've always said you were too idealistic for your own good...now you have certainly proven it to be true."

"He said he was buying us time," Joe told him. "We have to figure a way out of this. Can you heal yourself the rest of the way?"

Stefan took a quick inventory of his condition and nodded wearily. Without further comment he set about doing so. It did not take long, although the runners got the impression that it had taken longer than it would have if Stefan had not been through such an ordeal. They watched as the remainder of the wounds closed up and a little color came back to his complexion. After he finished the healing process, he cast another spell: the air shimmered around him, and for a moment his usual severe corp-style suit hovered into existence. Then, as if he had reconsidered, the suit morphed into simple black slacks and shirt.

"Nice trick," Ocelot said. "I don't suppose you could magic us up some chairs, could you?"

Stefan didn't answer that, and Ocelot didn't seem to be bothered by that fact.

"So what happened?" Joe demanded. "Last thing we remembered, we were going to sleep in that dorm room, and then Ocelot was freaking out waking us up here and you were gone."

"I don't know." Stefan slowly rose from his position seated on Joe and unsteadily propped himself upright against the stone wall. Glaring down at the smelly straw on the floor, he gestured and flung it across to the other side of the room. "I did not think that I would sleep, but apparently I did so. When I awoke, I was — chained to the altar and they were preparing to begin the ritual."

Winterhawk shook his head. "It appears that we're not meant to figure this place out. I'd thought we understood the process, but apparently the metaplanes are still capable of throwing us a few surprises."

Joe nodded. "I thought we were gonna have to fight the people at the school. It made sense, with all the other ones."

'Hawk turned back to Stefan. "I don't know how much you heard, but if your brother wasn't fooled, then you've been released from your promise, and the Horrors don't have their claws into you anymore."

Stefan closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Yes...I think I can sense it. I feel — weak, but the unease I have felt ever since — the elf's arrival is gone."

Joe was testing the bars on the door and the window, wrapping his huge hands around them and devoting all his considerable strength to trying to weaken them. His loud sigh of frustration indicated his lack of success. "These things are damn tough."

"Yes," Wraith said. "Locks are complex as well."

"There's probably more going on here than it appears," Winterhawk said. "I wouldn't be surprised if they've bolstered the locks and the whole place with magic. Otherwise Stefan here should have no trouble breaking out of a stone-and-metal prison."

Thus challenged, Stefan pushed himself off the wall and approached the bars. Staring hard at them, he made a gesture in the air and whispered something under his breath.

The bars didn't budge.

"I think you are correct," he acknowledged reluctantly. "So we remain here. Until —?"

"Until the ritual," Wraith said.

Ocelot nodded. "Gabriel made them agree to let us watch it. I don't know why."

"Maybe that was the only way he could be sure they'd keep us alive that long," Kestrel said.

"But how long is that?" Joe came back over to the group. Addressing Stefan, he added, "Do you know?"

Stefan shook his head. "Probably at least two days. It is a very complex ritual, and they will be overly concerned with verifying that everything has been constructed correctly, since they have only one chance. They had prepared most of it when I awoke, but as Gethelwain said, they must begin anew for him." He sighed. "I cannot fathom him—but yet he may have done the only thing that will give us even a small chance to succeed."

"I hope we can take that chance and make something of it," Kestrel said quietly. She didn't sound convinced that this was a foregone conclusion.

Winterhawk had wandered over by the bars, glancing across the hallway into the other cell. The three corpses lay there, the flesh rotting from their bones. He suspected that they were the source of most of the appalling smell. "I wonder what *they* did," he said, mostly to himself.

To his shock, the pile of rags beyond the corpses moved. He started violently, taking a couple of steps backward. "Bloody hell! That thing's alive!"

That got everybody's attention in a hurry. As they crowded around the bars, craning their necks to see what Winterhawk was talking about, the ragpile shifted again. "Who's over there?" Ocelot demanded. He didn't want to say it out loud, but he was half afraid that any minute now the corpses were going to animate as well and begin shambling around the cell. After everything they'd been through today, that might just have been the final straw for him.

The rags shifted around again. In a strangely birdlike fashion, a head poked out from beneath them. It looked around, then dropped back down again.

"Who are you?" Kestrel demanded. "Say something! Are you all right?"

The rags cackled, a high-pitched and disquieting sound. "All right?" a voice croaked. It too was high-pitched, shot through with the kind of raspiness that results from either too many cigarettes or too much overuse. The head poked up again.

This time, though, things made more sense as the head swiveled on its scrawny neck to face them. Bright sharp eyes, wrinkled skin, sharp nose and chin, toothless mouth—the adjective "birdlike" fit the figure quite aptly. As it rose a bit, it became clear that the head wasn't *under* the pile of rags, but rather *attached* to it—as in, the rags were clothing the rest of the scrawny body. "All right?" it repeated in the weird quavering voice. "Not all right! Not all right at all!"

The runners and Stefan exchanged glances. "Is there anything we can do for you?" Joe ventured. He didn't have any idea what it would be, but he felt like had to at least ask.

"Do?" The old woman-thing cackled again. Her sharp little beady eyes took in the assortment of onlookers and she grinned, showing pink-gray gums. "Must do."

"What?" Joe looked confused. He wasn't the only one. "What should I do?"

"Nothing!" The wrinkled head shook back and forth rapidly. "You—nothing! Not you do. *You* do!" Her gaze swept the group again. "Dark days coming. Bad for children." Apparently she thought that was funny, for it sent her off into a paroxysm of mad giggles. Then, as if someone had cut her strings, her head dropped back down again.

"Hey—you okay?" Ocelot called, eyes narrowing. When he got no answer and the ragpile didn't stir, he turned back to the group. "What the hell was *that* about?"

Winterhawk shrugged. "Atmosphere? After all, what's a proper dungeon without a freakish old crone and a pile of rotting corpses in the next cell?"

"Well—is she dead?"

"She lives," Stefan said. Shaking his head, he returned to his former spot. "This is irrelevant to our difficulty. We must make plans."

"What plans?" Wraith met Stefan's eyes. "Cannot overcome them. Too many."

"But we still have our powers and our cyberware," Winterhawk pointed out. "P'raps we can catch them by surprise."

"That's the only thing that makes any sense to me," Ocelot said. "If they're all focusing in on Gabriel, maybe we can hit 'em with something before they know what's up."

Kestrel turned to Stefan. "Can you change into your real form?" She wasn't in any rush to see the big green dragon—especially since last time she had seen Stefan in that particular form, he had been trying his best to kill her and Gabriel and the rest—but she had to acknowledge that having a Great Dragon on one's side in a fight could be nothing but a good thing.

"I dare not attempt it here," he said. "But I think that I can." He fixed his gaze on her, and his eyes changed from their normal obsidian-chip human appearance to solid green with slitted pupils.

Ocelot glared at him. "Hey, enough of that, okay? 'Yes' would have been sufficient." He sighed, shaking his head. He was still getting used to the fact that Stefan was not the enemy any longer. Maybe he would be again when this was over, but right now they couldn't afford strife

among themselves. To change the subject, he said, "Okay, so you can change into Tall, Green, and Scaly. Maybe that'll be enough. It sure makes things look more possible anyway."

Kestrel was looking perplexed. "There's something I don't get. Why is it that in—the last place we were, in that school—magic didn't work, Gabriel and Stefan couldn't change form, and we didn't have our cyberware, but here all of those things work? Wouldn't you think that these... Horrors would like it better if we couldn't do that kind of stuff?"

"The Enemy does not control this area of astral space," Stefan said. "They are strong, but they are not omnipotent. Even they must work within boundaries. Since this is not their native plane, they must expend a great deal of energy to power their illusions. They have managed to create barriers through which magic cannot pass, but they cannot do so for the entire area. Undoubtedly this is one of those areas—that is why they have put us here until they have need for us."

Ocelot sighed. Apparently when Stefan got going on a lecture, he was every bit as bad as Winterhawk in full 'professor mode'. He wondered if there was something about mages—even draconic mages—that made them like the sound of their own voices. "So," he cut in before Stefan got up too much of a head of steam, "what you're saying is that maybe we can break their illusions if we punch hard enough?"

"Crude," Stefan said, nodding, "but essentially true."

"In that case," Winterhawk said, "we should conserve our energy until it is needed. As long as they are not attempting to injure us and they haven't begun the ritual, we should be safe enough here. It's just a matter of patience."

Again Ocelot sighed. Patience was one thing he had in short supply. Glancing around, he could see similar expressions on the faces of his friends—all except for 'Wraith, who was as inscrutable as always, and Stefan. "I'm gettin' tired of *sitting*," he said in frustration. "I want to *do* something. I can't stand all this sitting around waiting for things to happen!"

Winterhawk was about to reply when 'Wraith's posture stiffened. "Wait." There was a pause, and then: "Heard something." Without waiting for an answer, he moved over to the window and looked out. The other runners and Stefan quickly joined him, pressing in close so they could all see.

The window was at ground level, but they could still get a reasonably good worm's-eye view of what was going on outside. Several large Horror-creatures like the ones that had been their "escorts" to the dungeon were milling around several meters away from the window, in an area facing the main cobblestone road that wound its way through the small town. Two of the creatures were carrying thick black metal poles, each one about four meters tall and about fifteen centimeters in diameter.

"What are they doing?" Kestrel leaned in a bit more to get a better look.

"Whatever it is," Stefan said grimly, "they want us to see it. Otherwise they would not be doing it outside our window."

The group fell silent as they observed the creatures' progress. First the things holding the poles put them down on the ground and stood back; after a moment, another creature came into view, carrying a large contraption resembling an outsized hand drill. One creature held the top of the drill while another turned the crank. The drill sank down into the ground far more easily than it should have given the stony composition of

the terrain, and far deeper than the actual length of the drill bit would have suggested.

This done, they carefully measured off several paces (it would have been almost comical if it had not been so disquieting) and repeated their performance about three meters away. The entire process of drilling the two holes took about half an hour; during that time none of the prisoners moved from their spots.

"Okay..." Ocelot muttered as he watched. "So they're gonna put those poles in the holes they drilled, but why?"

No one answered; even Stefan did not have an idea — or at least not one he wanted to share at the moment. They continued watching.

As Ocelot had predicted, the creatures hefted the two tall poles and proceeded to slide one down into each of the holes. By the time they were finished, a little over three of each pole's original four meters stuck up out of the ground. The things admired their handiwork for a moment, then another one came into view with a bucket. From the bucket, it poured some kind of viscous black substance around the holes, then stepped back. Ten minutes or so later, two of the workers came forward and each one grabbed a pole and shook it vigorously, testing it for strength. The poles did not move. They seemed as strong as the bars in the team's cell.

Kestrel sighed. The waiting and the uncertainty was getting to her as much as it was to Ocelot. *When all else fails, try the direct approach.* "Nice construction project, guys," she called out the window sarcastically. "What's it for?"

Surprisingly, one of the hulking creatures looked up. It grinned and sauntered over, looking like a construction worker on a break (except for the fact that its hide was a scaly yellow and it had two misshapen horns poking out from the same side of its head). It squatted down so it

could look in through the low-set barred window. "You talkin' to me?"

Now I've done it, Kestrel thought. "Yeah," she said, forging ahead. "What's that thing for?"

"Uh—Kestrel—" Ocelot began nervously. There were enough Horrors around this place without going out of one's way to attract their attention.

The creature's already ugly features got even uglier as its grin grew nasty. "That? That's for your pretty-boy friend. Boss' orders. We gotta put him *somewhere* until the boss is ready for him. Figured you might wanta keep an eye on him." It laughed, a thoroughly unwholesome sound. "Ain't we nice?"

It was then that the runners noticed the metal loops at the top of the two poles; the other creatures were attaching short chains to the hooks—chains ending in stout manacle cuffs. Kestrel's eyes widened. "No—" she whispered.

The Horror-thing laughed again. "Oh, yeah, chickie. You don't think he's gonna get off *easy*, do ya? You know how long the boss been after *that* one? We got him right where we want him now." Apparently tired of talking, he stood back up and headed over toward his friends, still chuckling.

Ocelot put his hand on Kestrel's back. There really wasn't much he could say that would help, so he kept silent.

Stefan didn't. "It was as I feared," he said quietly. "I had hoped I was mistaken." Shaking his head, he pulled back from the window and, using a spell to clear out an area on the floor, sat down. He clasped his hands over his knees and bowed his head on them.

Suddenly none of the runners wanted to watch the project any longer. One by one they drifted back into the middle of the cell.

"I think," Winterhawk said with no trace of humor in his tone, "that if we manage to get through this, I'm going to take up gardening." He dropped down against the wall, heedless of the condition of the floor.

They didn't watch when they heard the sound of more approaching creatures about an hour later, nor when the creatures' calls to each other mingled with the clanking of the heavy chains. Kestrel sat down next to Ocelot, her head on his shoulder, and closed her eyes. Stefan and Winterhawk each remained in their own worlds, while Joe and 'Wraith became interested once again in the bars facing the stone hallway. It was only when the sounds outside ceased that Kestrel hesitantly drew herself up and approached the window.

He was there, just as she knew—and dreaded—that he would be. He was on his knees, his head bowed in either exhaustion or unconsciousness—Kestrel couldn't tell from where she was. His wrists were clasped in the manacles, his arms drawn up above his head. His white shirt hung on him in bloody ribbons. There was no sign of any of the creatures.

Kestrel gripped the bars. "Gabriel? Can you—can you hear me?"

It took a moment, but his head came up. Surprise showed on his battered features, although it looked like he had not identified the exact location of the voice. "Kestrel?" Even in her mind his voice sounded ragged. "*Are you all right? Have they harmed you?*"

How very like him to be worried about her. "No—they didn't hurt us. We're all here. In the cell. You can see me in the window if you look over here." She stuck her arm out through the bars and waved it back and forth to provide a reference.

He nodded wearily. "*I—see you. Is Stefan with you?*"

"He's here. Winterhawk healed him some, and then he healed himself. They can do magic inside the cell, but they think there's some kind of barrier preventing it from getting out." She paused. "Gabriel – what have they done to you? I – I thought they needed you – unhurt – for the ritual."

"Nothing...serious. Do not worry about me, Juliana. I have withstood worse than this. They have put me here to distract you. You must not allow that to occur."

"Can't you – heal yourself?"

He lowered his head again. *"They have forbidden it. Since I have given them my word that I will cooperate, I must do so."* His eyes came up to meet hers across the distance. *"Juliana, the time until the ritual is to begin will not be pleasant. You must remember – nothing matters except that you must make your plans. If you do not, then all is lost. You cannot count on me to be available to help you. I think they will prevent it. Can you do that, Juliana? Can you convince the others that this is true?"*

Slowly she nodded. "I'll do it, Gabriel. I won't let you down. None of us will."

He gave her a tiny smile that she could barely see. *"Good. Now go. Please. There is no reason why you should see this."*

Kestrel took a deep breath, feeling her throat tightening with emotion. She did not want to walk away from him, but yet she knew he was right. Moving as if in a dream, she turned and went back to the others. Meeting Stefan's eyes, she asked, "Did you hear that?"

Stefan nodded, his expression more gentle than anyone had ever seen. "I heard. And he is right. If we are to help him, we must not allow distractions."

From across the hall in the other cell, the ragpile rose again with a sound like old leaves rustling in the wind. "Bad time for children..." the old woman intoned in her creaky voice.

Ocelot had had about enough of this, and his patience was about to break. "Will you shut *up* over there?" he demanded peevishly, glaring across at her. "If you got somethin' to say, say it. Otherwise leave us alone. We got more important things to talk about."

She cackled. "Important things...important things...Oh, yes, very important. You know not what important means."

Ocelot started to snap at her again, but Winterhawk touched his arm and shook his head. To the old woman, the mage said, "What *does* it mean, then?"

She fixed her beady gaze on him, her bony hands coming out from beneath the rags to grip the bars of her cell. "Oh, yes...freakish old crone knows important..." She favored him with her toothless grin.

Joe came forward. "What's important?" he asked. He could make his voice very gentle when he wanted to; he did so now.

Her pink smile grew a little wider as she transferred her scrutiny from Winterhawk to the young troll. "Ah, yes...this young one knows passion. Troll knows love. Love and friendship...those are important. Trust is important. There is strong power in these. Hate is impotent against them. Nothing else matters." She laughed crazily again, but then her wrinkled, wizened features rearranged themselves into a mien of sanity, just for a moment. "Remember this..." she whispered. "Remember, for it is your only hope in this world."

She collapsed back into the pile of rags once more.

The runners stared at each other. "That was weird..." Ocelot said slowly.

Winterhawk was looking at the pile of rags. "No..." He spoke even more slowly. "What is weird...is that there isn't anyone there."

The runners spun on him. "What?"

"He is right," Stefan said. "There is no living being over there. Only the corpses. The rags are merely rags."

"We all saw that, right?" Kestrel asked, glancing around the cell nervously.

"Yes," Wraith stated.

Winterhawk nodded. "I certainly did. *I* insulted her, remember?"

Joe was staring off into nothing, a strange contemplative look on his face. Ocelot waved a hand in front of his face. "Joe? You still here?"

The troll's gaze switched back on. "I think I know what it was about," he said.

"Huh?"

"The old lady. I think I get it. I—*felt* something when she was talking to me."

"Well, then, out with it," Winterhawk said. "It makes no bloody sense to me, that's for sure. What's the point of an old crone showing up to drop cryptic pronouncements from a ragpile? She's—"

"Fate," Wraith said suddenly.

Joe nodded. "Yeah. I think she was trying to help us."

Stefan was staring at them. "The painted elf spoke of Fate being with you—as did Gethelwain. I was not certain I believed them."

"Oh, believe it," Ocelot said. "We met weirder stuff than Fate last time we were here." He looked at his teammates. "Could it really be her?"

Winterhawk shrugged. "It's certainly possible. It's happened before. If so, we'd better figure out what the hell she was blathering on about and take it to heart in a hurry."

"It's obvious," Joe said, looking at the mage like he was a slow student, and obviously enjoying the reversal of roles. "She's telling us that we have to trust each other."

That it's not fighting that's gonna get us out of here—it's love."

"Love?" Ocelot looked dubious. "I dunno, Joe—maybe I don't think Stefan here is the biggest asshole this side of Pluto anymore, but love? I don't think I could fake that to save the friggin' *universe*."

"Wraith took a deep breath. "Trust. Friendship. Must be genuine. Can't fake the Fates."

"Okay," Kestrel said. She'd been hanging back listening to this, but now she had to speak up. "So suppose that Joe is right, and our only hope is to work together in peace and harmony and all that stuff. How? Is she telling us that we can bust out of here? That we can mess up the ritual? What? I mean, I guess you can't expect Fate to just walk up and give you a crib sheet, but she could have been a *little* more specific, couldn't she?"

"That ain't the way she works," Ocelot said with a sigh. "She doesn't give you the answers. At least she never did before. She just points you in the right direction."

Joe nodded. "Yeah. You have to figure out what to do with it."

Winterhawk dropped back down to his seated position. He glanced up at the window; the light outside was getting dimmer. "Or maybe she was just a crazy old crone after all. I'll wager we'll get the chance to find out. I just hope that if she's on the level, we're quick enough to identify what we need to know before our chance passes us by."

53.

Outside, it was late. The faint pinkish sun still hung high above, but the sky around it had darkened, casting a blood-colored dimness over the land.

Gabriel opened his eyes and for what had to be the hundredth time glanced over to the tiny barred window behind which his friends were being held. There was no movement over there, no light coming from the cell. Were they asleep? Were they even still there?

He didn't know.

He was back on his knees again; he'd tried standing for awhile, but between his injuries and his exhaustion, he had been unable to remain upright for long. A simple levitation spell would have solved his problem instantly, but that option was not available to him.

No magic, they'd told him. They had wanted him to suffer.

After they had led him away from his friends, the creatures had worked him over, secure in the knowledge that he could not fight back. He knew that as long as they did not kill or seriously injure him, the Horror in charge of this foul farce would not object.

And they had not injured him severely. They had set about their task with the efficiency of a team of mafia enforcers and the enthusiasm of a horde of schoolyard bullies. When they had finished with him he was battered and bloody, but with no injuries that would have been considered permanent on a human body.

As they had done the job, he had fought against it the only way he was permitted—by sending his mind off elsewhere, focusing on his friends, on the changes in Stefan, on the battle that lay ahead. He even indulged himself with a few thoughts of what he might do to his

captors were he somehow permitted to change to his true form and have his way with them. The sort of guilt he normally got on the rare occasions when he had thoughts like that did not exist here — this was the Enemy. The only guilt would be in surrender.

Several hours had passed since he had last spoken with Kestrel. Her voice had been like sunshine in his mind — just the act of speaking with her for those few moments had given him an extra measure of resolve. He was doing this for her. He was doing it for all of them — even Stefan — but mostly for her. The thought brought him pleasure.

The pleasure was short-lived, though. Invariably it was driven off by thoughts of what was to come — and of what had come before. It had seemed so long ago that he had felt Telanwyr's death-agony echoing through his mind; had it really only been a bit more than a week ago? Time passed differently in the Netherworlds, so he could not be certain how long they had been about their quest — he wondered if Harlequin and Jane Foster had been successful in vanquishing the Enemy that had come through the gateway, and if they were still waiting in his Seattle apartment, watching over their still bodies. If he and his friends did manage by some miracle to survive this, they would have quite a story to tell the elf and his student.

He allowed that thought to divert his mind for a few moments. Sleep was, of course, out of the question, since he was not yet tired enough to simply pass out from exhaustion. The dull, incessant pain in his arms and the sharper pain of the manacles biting into his wrists would only get worse without even the minimal effort he was exerting to keep himself upright. The temptation to relieve the pain with magic was almost irresistible, and yet he continued to fight it. It was not so much that he

minded breaking his word to the Enemy—although he would not do so, since that would bring him down to their level—but rather that he knew what would befall his friends and his brother if his resolve wavered. The weight of such responsibility settled heavily on his young shoulders, but there was no other way. He remembered something he had thought back when he was fending off Stefan's attacks as his brother had sought to reclaim the dragon statuette: pain was simply the way to know that you weren't dead yet. In that context it was almost welcome.

"Well," came a voice from behind him. "You're holding up better than I expected, young one. You'll prove to be a better sacrifice than your brother, I think."

Gabriel made no attempt to turn his head. He would not give the thing the satisfaction of exerting effort on its behalf.

Chuckling, the Horror came around in front of him. It was cloaked once again in its elven form, dressed as it had been when it had first visited Stefan. Its roiling eyes scanned Gabriel with cold amusement. "I see my—assistants—have had their fun with you. I *do* hope they didn't hurt you badly. Of course, it doesn't really matter. You'll be all healed up good as new before the ritual begins."

Gabriel did not answer. He watched the Horror without moving.

"Oh, such a stoic young dragon!" The elf-thing began pacing around in front of him. "So concerned for his friends that he's volunteered to take his brother's place—even though his brother was foolish enough to be suckered in the first place, just like his brother's equally foolish father—just because he thinks a motley collection of street scum and one disgraced dragon can pull some sort of last-minute rabbit out of a hat!" It laughed again as

Gabriel's gaze came up to fix on it. "Oh, yes, I know all about that. I've been listening to their little plans, and I want you to know that they aren't going to work." It paced in silence for a moment, grinning, then turned back to the young man. "It's not as if we're planning to do anything to *stop* them, mind you—in fact, I expect it to be highly amusing watching them try to put aside their hatreds long enough to attempt anything. That's why I'm letting them live—for awhile, at least. They're fun to watch. Just like that association of idiots I hired to destroy your friend."

Gabriel's breathing picked up a bit, involuntarily. The Horror must have noticed it, because it began to laugh again. Reaching out, it brought one finger up under the young man's chin and pushed it upward, moving in close. "*That* was quite a sight to see. Too bad you missed it. But then, I guess you didn't miss it, did you? I was watching when you tore it out of the mind of that insane rigger—and when you killed him. Nicely done! I didn't think you had it in you. Threatening to eat him was a *very* nice touch." It paused, pulling its finger back. "That's when I really started to think that I might have a chance at you, you know. When you killed Slyde. Before that, I'd thought you to be some sort of gold-plated, too-pure-for- your-own-good, incorruptible little princeling. It was nice to know that even you had your limits. Kind of restored my faith in the way of things." It grinned. Then its eyes widened in exaggerated surprise. "But I just realized something! You *haven't* seen all of it, have you? You couldn't have, because I didn't let Slyde keep it all. Most unfortunate, but necessary—couldn't let you have too much at once, or you might have figured things out too early and spoiled all our fun. But now—" It reached out again, this time clamping its hand over Gabriel's forehead. "—I think it's time for you to see the rest of the show."

Gabriel fought to resist the visions that began flooding into his mind, but he could not do it. There was a power behind this elf-thing—a power far greater than it could have possessed on its own—and it drove the images past his weakened barriers before he could stop them. Telanwyr...the helicopter...the laser...the screams...and then—

—and then the red glow. The *things* in the air. The things devouring Telanwyr's body. The sickening pink miasma—then the image of a massive corpse, rotting away on a reddened plain—

"No!" Gabriel cried, shaking his head violently back and forth, squeezing his eyes tightly shut.

The images faded as the Horror's laughter rose to a crescendo. It stepped back, threw its head backward, and laughed madly up into the sky. "Oh, young one! You are more foolish than your brother if you think that you can triumph over us! My Master is older than the oldest of your race! Do you think that you could deceive us, youngster?" It patted him on the head as one would a puppy. "I'll leave you with those pictures to give you company while you sleep—if you can sleep. And you can go on believing that your pathetic brother and your street scum friends can do anything more than simply watch you die. Whatever it takes to get you through the night. Ta." Its laughter died down to a mild chuckle as it turned and headed back off toward the town.

Gabriel watched it go, his eyes narrowing, his handsome face distorted with hatred. The compulsion to destroy the thing where it stood with his most powerful magic was almost impossible to ignore.

It would be so easy—

Slowly, though, his features returned to calm. Despite the Horror's attempt to torture his mind and lay open the

darkness within him, he knew something that the Horror did not—and could not—know.

Hatred was not the answer.

"It is not yet over, Telanwyr..." he whispered to himself.

54.

The morning of the second day in the cell dawned pink-tinged and uneasy – as usual.

For the occupants of the prison, the hours had crawled by slowly, seeming to stretch out endlessly with no relief. There had been no indication regarding when this would change.

They had spent much of the time sleeping – at least half-sleeping, since it was hard to do much else on the uncomfortable stone floor. It passed the time most efficiently, even though much of their sleep was haunted by vague nightmares and queasy images. At least the smell had faded. The runners now firmly believed the old idea that living long enough around even the most horrible of smells will result in their fading in intensity until they eventually go almost unnoticed.

By unspoken agreement, they had not often checked on Gabriel. It was partly because they were afraid of what they might see, and partly because it did no good and only disturbed them. Several times they had heard the creatures out there with him – apparently the elf-Horror had given them the green light to do what they wanted within certain boundaries. None of them wanted to see that. The few times they – mostly Kestrel and Stefan – had gone to the window to attempt to communicate with him, he had been unconscious. Kestrel had been the last to concede that it was probably for the best if they simply acted as if he were not there, especially since the Horrors had put him out there for exactly that reason – to upset them.

They had talked some, although less than it might have been expected. None of them were particularly in the mood for conversation. Surprisingly, the previous day

Stefan had asked Ocelot if he had told the others the story that Gabriel had told him in Ravenwood Academy's confinement room; when Ocelot said that he had not, Stefan urged him to do so. Now that it had come out, the dragon seemed to feel it was important that the others knew as well. They had reacted in much the same way Ocelot had, but in deference to Stefan they had asked no questions.

After that it was a succession of attempts to sleep, exercise sessions (these were mostly done by Ocelot and Kestrel—the cell wasn't big enough for Joe to move around much, and Winterhawk and 'Wraith seemed content with simple stretching exercises), and quiet meditation. They did not discuss much about their plans; the general consensus seemed to be that they could not plan anything specific when they did not know what would occur. They had the basics—the specifics would come later. Besides, they were reasonably sure that the Horrors were listening to them, so there was no point in giving them any more ammunition than necessary.

There had been no contact with the Horrors: no one had come down to check on them, to bring them food, even to taunt them. Oddly, though, they had not noticed any diminishing of their capacities from being without food and water. They had not even noticed their lack of hunger and thirst until Joe had commented that he was surprised that he didn't feel hungry after all this time since his last meal. That was fine with them, though—even starving would have been preferable to the sort of food the Horrors would likely have brought them.

The ragpile had not moved again.

Now it was the morning of the second day, and Stefan's soft voice awoke them from their fitful slumber:

"He is gone."

All around the cell the runners snapped to full wakefulness. Kestrel stared at him. "What did you say?"

Stefan sighed. "It has begun. They have taken him." He indicated the window.

Kestrel was the first to reach it, but the others weren't far behind. She gripped the bars so tightly that her knuckles whitened.

The two poles were still there, along with the chains and the manacles. Gabriel was gone.

"When did they take him?" Ocelot demanded. "I wasn't asleep—I would have heard something."

"Not necessarily," Wraith said.

Winterhawk nodded, but did not speak.

"So it begins," Stefan said, still gazing out the window at the spot where his brother used to be. "They will come for us soon."

Ocelot didn't say it, but he hoped Stefan was right. If they were going to get their shot, he wanted to *do* it. He didn't think he—or Wraith, for that matter—would last much longer locked up in this cage.

Almost as if the whole thing had been carefully choreographed—or as if the Horrors had been listening outside—the heavy wooden door at the top of the steps rattled and opened, and six of the big guard-creatures descended in a line toward the dungeon level. "About time," Ocelot called to them.

They ignored him. All six of them carried wicked-looking weapons: spears, curved scimitars, and axes. Five of them stood back while the sixth used its key to open the cell door. It grinned, stepping aside. "Showtime, kids," it announced. "Out."

They expected to be taken back out to the amphitheatre where the previous aborted ritual had taken place. Instead, upon leaving the jail building, their escorts

indicated for them to turn in the opposite direction. The runners and Stefan exchanged glances, but none of them spoke. Glancing back over his shoulder, Ocelot could not even see the amphitheatre off in the distance, although they had been able to see it from here two days ago. He shook his head. The world had gone insane—might as well deal with it.

Their destination loomed ahead of them, another place that had not been there two days ago. Where before the cobblestone road had simply led out of town, now the way was blocked by a massive building that looked like a combination of town hall and church—again consistent with the sort of thing one might see in seventeenth-century America. Huge and white-painted, the building had great wooden double doors which were currently closed, large windows tinted so dark that nothing inside could be seen, and a tall twisted steeple that soared up into the sky. Instead of a cross, though, the steeple bore a misshapen emblem that made the runners vaguely queasy to look at it.

They didn't get much chance to do so anyway: as they and their guards approached, the double doors swung open. The creatures poked them with their weapons, indicating for them to enter.

Inside, the building was even bigger than it appeared from the outside. Most of the enormous space was taken up with tiers of wooden benches, separated from the front part of the room by a waist-high wooden partition. The area beyond the partition was shrouded in darkness; no matter how hard the runners craned their necks and squinted their eyes, they could not penetrate the inky black.

As in the amphitheatre, most of the seats were occupied. Now, though, the Horror-creatures were in mostly human form, clad in dark somber suits and drab

dresses that fit with the mood of the room. "Looks like the bloody Salem witch trials," Winterhawk muttered as they were led in.

'Wraith nodded. That thought had occurred to him as well.

This time they were herded up to the front of the seating area, directly in front of the partition. A group of seats had been carefully roped off with a black silken cord; hanging from the cord was a card with the word *Reserved* written on it in calligraphy. "Guests of honor," one of their guards said with a nasty laugh. "You guys are real V.I.P.s." The rest of the guards thought that was funny too; they were laughing as they prodded Stefan and the runners into the indicated area and removed the rope.

Even from the front row they still could not see past the curtain of darkness that hovered over the front part of the church. Winterhawk turned to Stefan. "Can you still use magic?" he whispered.

The green slitted eyes met his gaze in silent reply.

'Hawk nodded and returned his attention to trying to pierce the veil.

"Well, well," said a voice from the darkness. "Everyone's here now — we can begin."

The lights switched on.

The front part of the church/courtroom was much larger than the rear part, even though again it did not look possible from the outside of the building. The view was dominated by three objects: an enormous window, a real judge's bench, and the altar.

The window was easily ten meters tall, rising high up in the rearmost wall of the building. Rounded at the top like a stained-glass window in a church, it seemed to be formed of a single sheet of clear glass. Behind it, the Chasm could be seen looming out into the distance.

In front of the window was a wooden judge's bench. This one was real, as opposed to the stone facsimile from the amphitheatre. It was made of some sort of dark wood and intricately carved. Behind it, dressed in a black robe and long white powdered wig, was the Horror. It grinned at the assembled group, its bony fingers wrapped around a black gavel.

Finally, in the middle of the floor, was the centerpiece of the show: the altar. Again, it looked subtly different from the one they had used for Stefan: instead of red-veined black stone, this one was made of solid red stone with darker red veins running through it at irregular intervals. It was a bit smaller than its predecessor as well, although the ritual circle that surrounded it seemed to be larger and more intricate. Everywhere there were patterns carved into the stone floor, candles, sigils drawn in some dark substance (blood?), and other magical artifacts that the runners could not begin to identify. The only thing that was missing was the corpses arrayed around the altar.

Gabriel occupied the same position his brother had only two days previously: chained naked to the altar by his wrists and ankles, his arms and legs stretched out to full extension, he appeared to be unconscious at the moment. He wasn't as bloody as Stefan had been; in fact, the only wound on him appeared to be a shallow slash across his right shoulder which had already stopped bleeding. He had been healed of his previous injuries and otherwise looked unharmed, which in one way made it worse—the slash looked somehow obscene on his otherwise flawless form.

Kestrel gripped Ocelot's hand tightly. Stefan leaned forward, his jaw tightening and his fists clenching in his lap. The other runners looked on grimly.

The Horror grinned again. "I see our little spectacle has made its impression, so we'll get started." It tapped the gavel on the bench, then lightly jumped down, robes flapping, and approached the altar. "Ladies, gentlemen, and others!" it called in a voice that carried through the entire room, echoing up into the thick wooden beams supporting the ceiling. "How nice of you all to come, to witness this most historical and important event!" It began pacing around like a showman making a pitch, its bearing almost maniacally animated. "For today, after millennia upon millennia, we welcome my Master, the Great Hunter Verjigorm, to the world! Oh, what a reign the Master will enjoy! How long he has been waiting to have his revenge!" It paused to look down at Gabriel, who was now semi-conscious and glaring at it with all the intensity he could summon. Grinning, it placed its hand on the middle of Gabriel's chest; pointing its sharp fingernail, it pierced his skin and traced a bloody scratch down several centimeters. Gabriel gritted his teeth, but did not cry out; neither did his glare waver. The Horror stuck the finger in its mouth, savoring the blood a moment, and then returned its attention to the assembled group. "And this, my friends, is the young dragon who has generously volunteered to welcome the Master to this world. We have already made use of one of his accursed race to lay our initial groundwork—and the Master has great plans for another when he arrives." It looked straight at Stefan when it spoke the last sentence.

Gabriel and Stefan both caught the implications of that at the same time. Gabriel struggled to rise, straining against the chains holding him down, as Stefan leaped to his feet. "You have released him," Gabriel said through still-clenched teeth. "It was a requirement of our bargain."

The Horror laughed, replacing the hand on his chest and shoving him back down. "Oh, but we *have* released

him, foolish young one, just as we have promised. Your brother will not be used as a sacrifice. You see," it added, an edge of mocking in its tone, "dragons are not the only ones who can keep their word—and not the only ones who can find other ways to get what they want." It smiled down at him. "The Master, you see, has more use for your brother alive than dead. Once he has taken his rightful place here, your dear brother will be the first to fall before him and become his slave."

"NO!" Stefan cried, rage darkening his face. "I will *not*! I will die before I serve you!" Gathering his energies, he clasped his hands together and pointed his fingers at the Horror. Crackling blue power arced from his hands and streaked toward it—

—and bounced back against some invisible barrier, flinging back into Stefan and hurling him backward over the benches and into a group of creatures.

The Horror's laugh grew louder; it was practically dancing with glee as it watched the dazed Stefan struggling to rise. "Do you see how ineffectual he is?" it asked Gabriel, who was observing the scene with some alarm. "Do you see now that your friends cannot save you? Bring in the children!" it barked toward the back of the room.

Joe and Ocelot, meanwhile, were hauling Stefan back to a seated position. The dragon's eyes were unfocused; he appeared to be confused about where he was. "Stefan?" Joe called to him. "You okay?"

Stefan put a hand to his head as his vision cleared slowly. Then he closed his eyes. "We are lost," he said.

"What?" Ocelot glared at him. "Why?"

His eyes opened again; he met Ocelot's gaze with one that contained no animosity, only resignation. "Gethelwain has put his trust in us—in me—and I do not think that I can help him." He paused. "That was one of

my most powerful spells. Had I not gotten my barriers up in time, I would have killed myself with my own spell. If their barriers are strong enough to deflect my full power—" He shook his head in despair.

Before anyone got a chance to answer him, an unseen back door opened and several creatures came in. They led a group of children, ranging in age from six to about fourteen, each one dressed in a white robe. They moved sluggishly, as if drugged. "Oh, shit..." Ocelot whispered. He remembered this all too well.

Kestrel stared. "What are they doing with those—" she stopped. She already knew the answer.

The runners looked at each other. They remembered their last trip together to the metaplanes, with Harlequin. And they remembered the litter of corpses around Stefan's altar.

"Why kids?" Kestrel asked softly.

The Horror must have heard her. "Innocents, my dear. Our young dragon here is quite the innocent himself. A fitting touch, wouldn't you say?" At that point it turned away, ignoring her, and raised its hand into the air. Around it, an unseen, tuneless chant began. One creature came forward with a dark-bladed knife, smaller than the one the Horror had been preparing to use on Stefan.

Gabriel watched the children being led in and closed his eyes briefly. He knew that, somewhere back on the material plane, their drugged bodies lay waiting to die. They were probably street kids—there was always an overabundance of them—homeless, parentless, SINless. The Horror's agents had probably found them with no trouble at all. The same kind of kids he tried to help when he could. And now they would be killed.

Do not think about it. You cannot affect it. He knew it was true, but he didn't have to like it. Despite the Horror's words, he was not an innocent. He knew the stakes here.

It was Stefan he had to worry about now. If Stefan lost his will, then they were all lost. Opening his eyes, he looked across at his brother.

Stefan felt the gaze on him and looked up to meet it. He shook his head, once. *I cannot. I am sorry. Forgive me.*

Gabriel's gaze grew harder. There was no communication—magic could not pass through the barriers surrounding the altar and blocking the partition—but the intent was clear. *You can. You must.* He continued to hold Stefan's eyes, willing his brother to have strength, to believe, to fight on.

Something in Stefan's expression changed. Slowly he nodded. *I will try. I can do nothing else.*

On the altar, Gabriel smiled slightly. It was all he could ask for.

The next hour was the stuff of which nightmares were made. The Horror, all business now, set about the task of laying the framework for the main part of the ritual, wielding its grisly knife with the skill of a master. One by one the children fell under the Horror's knife as it plunged the wicked blade into one heart after another, allowing the spurting blood to spray over itself, over the altar, over Gabriel, taking on a fiery power all its own as it coated the area. They did not even scream, so deeply drugged were they, as they watched their fellows die before them. As each one died and was drained of blood, the Horror snatched up the body and tossed it against the side of the altar, creating a grim base. By the time it had finished with the last child, both it and Gabriel were completely covered with blood.

The runners didn't watch much of the slaying. Even Winterhawk, who was able to calmly observe carnage that made most sane men physically ill, and Stefan, who presumably had seen much worse, did not watch. Winterhawk and the other runners used the opportunity

to take in the details of the rest of the room, while Stefan appeared to be deep in thought. All of them, even the mundanes, could feel the power level around the altar beginning to rise. There was anticipation in the air, but it was a twisted and unwholesome anticipation.

Ocelot, still gripping Kestrel's hand and not sure if he was giving comfort or getting it, was looking everywhere but at the altar. He wondered how they could get all this stuff in a space contained by the building they had entered, but didn't worry too much about it. Magic was like that. No point in thinking too much about magic, because it just gave him a headache. His eyes swept over the massive ceiling-beams, the huge window with the Chasm beyond it, the judge's bench, the chairs, the creatures, the telephone —

The telephone?

Ocelot poked 'Wraith, who was sitting on his other side, in the arm. "Hey."

The elf seemed glad to have something on which to concentrate. He raised an inquiring eyebrow at Ocelot.

Ocelot pointed. "Look. There's a phone over there. And it's off the hook. Wonder why?"

It was plain to see why none of them had noticed it before: it was tucked away in a dim corner next to the judge's bench, where it could be overlooked easily in favor of the more compelling views and gruesome spectacles occurring in the room. It was on a simple, unadorned wooden pedestal, the kind that might be used to hold an art object. The phone itself was utterly unremarkable except for its antique design: it was the thoroughly utilitarian, indestructible, government-issue, rotary-dial telephone that might be found in just about every office and suburban house circa 1955. And, as Ocelot had noted, the receiver was off the hook and lay next to it on the pedestal's surface.

"Wraith raised an eyebrow. "Interesting. Doesn't fit."

The other runners had caught on that there was a conversation going on, and chose to join in rather than helplessly watch the Horror carving up defenseless children. "What doesn't fit?" Winterhawk asked under his breath.

Ocelot pointed. "There's a phone over there. And it's off the hook."

"Wrong time," Wraith said.

"What?" Joe scooted over a bit on the bench to get a better look.

"Wrong time," Wraith said again. He indicated the room with a glance. "Salem—colonial America. No phones."

Winterhawk nodded slowly. "You're quite right."

Joe pointed. "Look. If you look carefully—is that a cord coming out of it? It seems to be going back toward the window."

They all leaned forward, trying to spot it in the dimness. "Can't be sure," Wraith, who had the sharpest eyes, said. "Looks like it reaches the window and goes out through the wall."

"Of *course*!" Winterhawk whispered. "This is still the metaplanes we're on. Nothing's real—it's all metaphor. So a phone represents —"

"Communication," Wraith said.

"With the other side," Joe added, nodding. His eyes narrowed. "You think that cord goes all the way across the Chasm to that—" he paused, reluctant to say the name aloud in this setting — "you know, over there?"

Stefan, whom they had thought was not listening to them, suddenly took an interest in the conversation. "Yes..." he whispered, leaning in closer to them. "I think you have discovered something very important." He

paused a moment, thinking, and then his eyes widened. "Of course... that is why they had to kill Telanwyr first."

"Why?" Winterhawk glanced over toward the altar; the Horror was pacing around it, chanting something and smearing blood on itself. Gabriel had turned his head to face them and was now watching them intently.

"Because they needed the power of a being such as Telanwyr to reach across the Chasm with their communication line," Stefan said, lowering his voice even further. "It all makes sense now. You cannot comprehend the level of power it would require to send even such a small thing across such a vast distance, and to hide it from prying eyes on this side." He sighed, looking away. "They have harnessed the energy of such a being merely to *begin* their plans. And now they plan to use Gethelwain to end them."

"So—" Ocelot began, "—what does this mean? Is he gettin' instructions from the Big V over there?"

"Metaphorically speaking, probably," Stefan said. "Instructions, and likely some small measure of its power."

"Does that mean if we cut it, that thing will lose some of its power? And maybe it won't be able to finish the ritual?" Kestrel allowed herself to look hopeful.

Stefan sighed again. "I do not know. It will undoubtedly help, although I do not know how much. It is something to consider, though, if we are able to get to it."

"That's the sticky part," Winterhawk said glumly.

The cadence of the Horror's chanting changed, attracting their attention once more away from their discussion. It had stopped pacing and stood once more in front of the altar, its face and powdered wig stained red from the blood. Several other creatures had taken places at various points around the circle. As the runners and

Stefan watched, the Horror pulled out the knife it had been using on the children and waved it back and forth over Gabriel, still chanting.

"Is this it?" Kestrel looked frightened. "So soon?"

"No." Stefan's voice was strained. "Not yet." He met her eyes and held her gaze. "You must tell me, though — what is it that you think we should do?"

Behind Stefan, Winterhawk and 'Wraith exchanged surprised and sober glances as they immediately caught on to what Stefan was doing. Surprised because even they had not yet fully accepted the "new Stefan," and sober because they knew what he was attempting to do. The question had been irrelevant — his intent was to hold her attention.

"Why are you asking *me*?" Kestrel looked at him sideways. "I don't know. I can't even think straight. I—" She gasped as she looked beyond Stefan and saw what the Horror was doing.

It had brought the knife down and made a slice on Gabriel's left shoulder similar to the one on right shoulder. As blood welled up from the wound, the Horror plunged his other hand into it and then flung a spray around the circle. Everywhere the drops flew, crackles of blue energy shone briefly in the air and then faded. Grinning and chanting, the Horror set about making more cuts and spreading more blood. Gabriel shifted slightly, but made no other move or sound as the knife sliced him again and again. His defiant gaze was still fixed on the Horror.

"No..." Kestrel whispered. "Gabriel —"

Stefan gripped her shoulders tightly. "You must not be distracted," he said in a tone that was harsh but not unkind. "He is depending on us. We must hold our focus!"

"Focus on *what*?" she demanded miserably. "What can we do? You couldn't punch through that barrier, so Winterhawk doesn't have a prayer of even trying. What can the rest of us do against this?"

"Whatever it is," Joe said, "we have to do it together. That was what the old lady was telling us. We can't do it on our own."

"But how the hell are we supposed to do that?" Ocelot glanced over at Gabriel and quickly back to his friends. "We all want to stop this thing and get Gabriel out of there. We're all on the same page, right? How can we be any more together than that? Are we supposed to hold hands and dance around in a circle?"

Winterhawk was staring off into space. "Possibly something like that might work..." he murmured.

Ocelot looked at him like he was crazy. "'Hawk, what are you talkin' about?"

The mage's gaze switched back on again. "There is precedent for it—the holding hands part, anyway. It helps to focus the energy of a group of people. Haven't you ever been to a seance? Sometimes people were even able to get them to work back before the Awakening, if their desire for it was strong enough."

Joe nodded. "Let's try it, then. We have to do something."

'Wraith and Kestrel looked dubious, but Stefan seemed to approve. "You are right," he said grimly. "We must do something, and soon. I did not want to tell you this, but we are dangerously close to the point of no return in the ritual—at least the part beyond which we will no longer be able to save Gethelwain, even if we disrupt the summoning. Most of the ritual had already been completed before we arrived. Come—let us try it."

Faced with that level of urgency, the runners quickly arranged themselves into as much of a circle as they could

manage given the seating arrangements. The Horror, deep in its blood-lust, paid them no attention, and the other creatures in the tiers were likewise fixed on the scene at the altar. The tuneless cadence was growing louder, and the air was now fairly crackling with magical energy.

Winterhawk grasped one of Stefan's hands, while Joe took the other. Ocelot was next to Winterhawk, followed by Kestrel and 'Wraith, the latter of which linked the circle by taking Joe's free hand. "Concentrate," Stefan said quietly, closing his eyes. "Concentrate on Gethelwain, and on the power we will need to break the ritual. Do not lose your focus."

The runners leaned into the circle, concentrating for all they were worth. Winterhawk, trained in magical discipline, and Joe, who occasionally communicated with the totem Bear despite being a mundane, had no trouble getting their minds into the proper state; 'Wraith used meditation techniques to clear his thoughts of all outside influences, while Ocelot and Kestrel merely tried to focus their passionate desire to help Gabriel and prevent the completion of the ritual. Stefan, his mind and magical strength more potent than the five others' put together, forced himself to do as he had directed the others to do — to concentrate, to keep his focus, to think of nothing else —

"This is not working!" he snapped in despair after several minutes had gone by with no discernible change in their situation. Pulling his hands back, he shook his head and sighed. "I cannot feel anything. There is no power that was not here before." He dropped his hands in his lap and lowered his head. "The old woman must have been mistaken."

"We can't just *quit*!" Kestrel protested. "We have to keep trying! Come on — there's got to be something we're doing wrong. You guys said it yourself — Fate *wants* us to

succeed. So what are we doing wrong?" Her voice pitched a bit higher — she sounded like she was about to lose it.

"She's right," Winterhawk said, his tone somewhat calmer but still strained. "We can't stop. What did the old crone say? That was have to cooperate. That was the key."

Joe nodded. "That love and trust and friendship were the important things."

"Hatred is impotent against them," Wraith added.

Ocelot was racking his brain, trying to remember everything the old hag had said. "So we gotta cooperate. We gotta work together. But —"

"It's too bad we can't — I don't know — like meld minds or something," Joe spoke up suddenly. "Maybe that was what she meant. But we can't —"

"Yes, we can!" Stefan gripped the troll's shoulders, piercing him with his obsidian-chip gaze. "Yes..." he whispered again. "We can."

"Huh?" Ocelot glared at him. "What are you on now, Stefan?"

Stefan looked over at his brother on the altar. The Horror had finished with the knife; the young dragon was now covered with the same latticework of bloody slashes that Stefan himself had suffered two days previously. The Horror was standing back, its eyes rolled back in its head, reaching out as if invoking some sort of incantation. Around it, there appeared to be a faint disturbance in the air. "Come. We must hurry. Time grows very short."

"What do we have to do?" Kestrel had calmed down, but still spoke urgently. She leaned forward toward Stefan.

Stefan took a deep breath as if trying to center himself. "This will not be easy. Not for me, not for any of you. But I think it is the only way." He paused a moment, looking at each of them in turn, and then continued. "I can link us together, using a much more powerful form of the

telepathy that dragons normally employ to communicate. It is a process akin to a mind probe—with all that that implies. It will require you to lay open your minds to me—and I mine to you." His gaze settled on Ocelot as he spoke. "It will require you to trust me fully, because I must control the spell. If you try to wrest control from me, it will disrupt the process and it will fail—with possibly disastrous results." His breath was coming a bit faster; clearly this was not an option he was anxious to employ, but just as clearly he was desperate.

The runners looked at each other. What Stefan was asking them to do—to leave their minds, their inner beings, fully open to him—

Could they trust him? Dragons were tricky, and Stefan was trickier than most. Was this just some sort of elaborate, carefully-constructed plan to have his revenge on them and on Gabriel?

But if he was telling the truth, then he would be as vulnerable as they. If it was true that they could disrupt the process—and that he feared that they would do so—then how could he still offer to do this?

Ocelot hesitated, remembering his almost irrational hatred of Stefan. He had been the longest in accepting the dragon's change. But had he accepted it fully enough?

He remembered his promise to Gabriel, that he would work with Stefan, and put aside his own feelings until this was over.

The old woman's voice came back to him, almost like it was speaking in his head here and now, rather than as a memory: "*Hatred is impotent against it...*"

He took a deep breath. Everyone was watching him now. They all knew he would be the weak link because of his hatred. Could he do this?

He looked at Kestrel. Her eyes were on him, haunted, pleading. She said nothing, but her feelings were evident.

This was bigger than Ocelot. It was bigger than any of them.

But yet—it wasn't.

Ocelot let his breath slowly out and nodded. He looked Stefan right in the eyes with no trace of hate or mistrust on his face. "Okay, Stefan. Let's do it."

Next to him, Kestrel allowed herself to breathe again. The other runners' faces—even 'Wraith's—showed relief.

Stefan nodded solemnly, with something else showing in his eyes. Respect? "I need a few moments to prepare," he said. "Please do not disturb me until I speak to you again. At that point, join hands again as we did before." Without further comment, he closed his eyes and began what looked like some sort of breathing exercise.

The runners turned back to the scene on the altar. The shimmer in the air had grown larger now, although it still had an amorphous, bloblike shape with no discernible features. It hovered around the Horror, sucking in the blue sparking energy that flew around Gabriel. The young man was watching them again—he seemed to have figured out that they had come up with a plan, because his violet eyes were fixed on them with great intensity. They still showed no fear, but only confidence that his friends would succeed.

The Horror raised its head and uttered a phrase in an unknown language, and Kestrel gasped. From a door that wasn't there before in the side of the hall, the three creatures entered with the big black knife laid over their forearms. She touched Ocelot's arm and pointed.

Winterhawk noticed too, and nodded grimly. "I hope Stefan can get himself together quickly. I don't think we've got long now."

Joe pointed across the room. "Look at the phone."

Everyone turned their attention to the pedestal next to the judge's bench. The blue energy that was arcing around

the form in the air was also crackling around the telephone. It was almost impossible to see it clearly now because of all the power flying around.

"Hurry up, Stefan..." Kestrel whispered.

The creatures reached the Horror, which had begun chanting again, and offered the knife. It took it, holding the thing out in front of it and speaking what sounded like an incantation over it. Part of the blue energy broke away from the hovering form and surrounded the knife.

The runners held their breath.

"All right," Stefan rasped. "Now."

Immediately the group turned back to him. His face was lined with the effort of concentration, beads of sweat standing out on his forehead. He held his hands out. "Remember—" he added in a near-whisper —do not try to control. If you want to save Gethelwain, you must trust me."

Winterhawk took a deep breath and grasped Stefan's hand. Joe reached for the dragon's other hand, but Ocelot touched his arm and shook his head. Joe backed off and Ocelot decisively took the place at Stefan's right side. The other runners quickly fell in and completed the circle.

Immediately they knew that this was going to be a different experience than before. As soon as the last handclasp was made, all five runners could feel power coursing through them, almost like low-grade electrical current. It was a strange but not unpleasant feeling. "All right," Stefan spoke in their minds now. *"I am initiating the contact. Do not fight it."*

Each of the runners in turn, radiating out from Winterhawk and Ocelot through 'Wraith, Joe, and Kestrel, felt something push its way into their minds. It was gentle and hesitant at first, but then took on more potency as it encountered no resistance. Ocelot stiffened as he felt it, but forced himself to let go. *Hatred is impotent against it...*

And then he felt it. In amongst his own thoughts, he could sense others that were not his. Thoughts of fear and pain and shame and determination. Thoughts moving so quickly that he could scarcely follow them, with occasional flashes of understanding like small silvery fish shooting by in roaring rapids.

And then there were others—jumbled images, slower but still flitting by. He was afraid he would go insane with so many thoughts that were not his inside his brain. *Is this what it feels like to be able to read minds?*

He wondered if anyone had ever read five minds simultaneously before.

Off in the distance, in what felt like another world, Kestrel gripped his hand more tightly. He barely noticed.

The thoughts continued to flash by, with the faster ones gradually taking control of the slower, feeding them all into one vast rumbling river so enormous that it could wash over everything in its path—such vast destructive power, but under the control of a sure and determined hand. A hand ruled by a mind that wanted nothing more than to right the wrongs it had caused.

All at once Ocelot understood.

He had wanted to believe before, but he did not know if he could do so. Now it was all clear to him.

Stefan's hatred—of Gabriel, of the runners—was gone. Not a vestige of it remained. It had somehow been burned away as if it had never been. It was over.

Ocelot released the last of his mental barriers and allowed the flood to wash fully over him. The last of his power, the part he had been holding back, was released. The river thundered onward.

The man that was Stefan but not-Stefan rose slowly, and the runners unconsciously rose with him. They moved as a single entity now.

The man raised his hands, bringing Ocelot's and Winterhawk's up with him. He opened his eyes.

At the altar, the Horror had raised the knife and was bringing it down over Gabriel's chest.

Gabriel was not watching the knife. He was watching Stefan. And he was smiling—a beautiful smile, terrible and cold, that even in the state he was in made him resemble nothing more than his angelic namesake. His eyes blazed with hope and confidence.

The Horror lowered the knife.

Behind it, through the great window, another figure could be seen taking form, far away across the Chasm.

Stefan brought his hands down and pointed at the Horror. His eyes were no longer black—they whirled with color now: Winterhawk's electric blue, Ocelot's pale blue, Joe's and Kestrel's green, 'Wraith's white.

The Horror's eyes widened as it finally realized what was happening. It barked something into the air and brought the knife down faster.

Stefan released the power.

55.

The massive, shining blue beam of light that flew from Stefan's hand pierced the barrier before them as if it were made of the flimsiest paper. A bright light flared over the runners, momentarily blinding them, as the Horror-creatures in the tiers scrambled to obey their master's frantic order.

The world changed.

Suddenly the building, the seats, the judge's bench — all were gone, replaced by only the stark and arid red plain and the Chasm. There was no town, no amphitheatre, no structures —

Save for one.

The altar was still there, but now it was a crude stone thing, not the intricately carved structure that had stood there previously. The Horror looked the same, as did Gabriel. The thing was screaming at the top of its voice now, still trying to salvage its ritual. In rage, it rammed the knife downward.

The knife hit Gabriel, but in the Horror's fury it had swung wildly and thus missed its mark in the young dragon's heart. Instead it pierced his side, glancing off his ribcage. Blood welled up around the wound, crackling with energy. The Horror's scream mingled with Gabriel's cry of pain as the thing fought to draw back the knife and try again.

It wasn't to get the chance, though. As the barrier shimmered out of existence, Stefan and the runners were already in action. Leaping upward, Stefan shifted form, transforming into the enormous, green-scaled dragon that was his true self. He bellowed in rage, heading straight for the Horror.

The runners were not idle. "We gotta cut that line!" Ocelot yelled. "Come on!"

The Horror-creatures were already surging forward. They seemed to be everywhere.

"Look!" Joe cried, pointing. "We're glowing!"

And sure enough he was right. The light from the spell that had bathed them still hovered over them, outlining their forms in crackling blue fire. "Let's hope it's something helpful," Winterhawk said grimly. "We're bugged if we have to fight all these things."

But it was too late for hope now. It was time for action.

The Horror-things continued to approach, some of them splitting off to head toward their master while most of them went for the runners. They were no longer dressed in their drab finery, but had returned to their former misshapen appearances. Many of them carried weapons.

"Stay together!" Ocelot yelled. "If they split us up we're dead!" He ducked as one of the things swung a scimitar at him, then brought his foot up lightning-fast into the thing's gut. He was rewarded by a pained *Oof* as the thing staggered backward.

"We can hurt 'em!" Joe's cry was almost exuberant. For too long he'd been forced to sit and watch. Now he could finally do something. He waded in, swinging his massive arms at a pair of the creatures.

The Horror saw Stefan diving for it and realized that it would not survive the attack of a near-fully-grown Great Dragon in its current form. "*You will die, young one,*" it hissed at Gabriel, and then it changed.

Stefan was almost brought up short in shock at the sight of the Horror's true form. No one on Earth had ever seen it, and even the creatures on the astral plane had

avoided the sight. The unassuming-looking elf grew and stretched out, its slender body becoming bulbous and covered with rot and running sores and yellow eyes with blood-red pupils. The thing was almost as big as Stefan, with great clawed forelegs and a maw that seemed to hold the blackness of oblivion within its confines. "*A foolish mistake from a foolish child,*" it whispered to Stefan, its voice like the sound of rotten flesh being ripped from dead bones. "*You will pay for your foolishness, and the Master will have you and your accursed brother for his own!*" Lunging forward at a far greater rate of speed than one would have thought such a bloated thing could achieve, it launched itself at Stefan. The two met with a great *crunch* that shook the land all around.

Gabriel, semiconscious now, watched the battle rage around him. He could not see the knife wound in his side, but he could feel the blood trickling down and pooling beneath him, joining that from all the other wounds the Horror had inflicted on him. This one was different, though, and he knew it. The large black knife with which it had been inflicted had been enchanted for just that purpose. Though small, the wound was the most serious of all. He knew that he did not have long, but he struggled to remain conscious and continue observing the battle. *If they are successful then these wounds will mean nothing. But if I die here –*

His vision was already starting to fade. *I must not give up. They have done so much – I know that they have it within them to do this. I have placed my trust in them. I will give them what little power I can give them, in the form of my hope.*

Ocelot, Winterhawk, and the other runners were having a hard time staying together despite their efforts. The Horror-things were coming in from all sides and

seemed to have it as their main purpose to separate the five of them. Divide and conquer. Even Winterhawk, who, with his magical abilities working once again, was laying waste to the things four and five at a time, was barely making a dent in their numbers.

The only thing that was saving them, at least so far, was the strange glow that surrounded each of their bodies. If there was any doubt in any of their minds that Fate was behind them in their endeavor, that doubt had been laid to rest the first time one of the creatures had brought an enormous club down on top of Joe's head. The thing should have bashed the troll's brains in, but instead the club deflected against the glow, which flared briefly a brighter blue and then settled back into its previous intensity – or perhaps just a bit dimmer.

"Won't last forever," Wraith said between breaths. "Must do something." Of all the runners he was at the most loss without a weapon in his hand. His mastery of firearms would not help him here, and, like Winterhawk, he was not physically tough enough to take too many hits. When the glowing armor failed, he would be in big trouble.

"We need to get to that line!" Ocelot yelled again. "That's all that matters."

"What about Stefan?" Kestrel got out as she slashed a creature's eyes out with her hand razors.

Winterhawk glance over at where the dragon and the Horror were now locked in combat only meters away from Gabriel's altar. "I don't think we can help him," he said. "Ocelot's right – we have to get that line."

"But where is it?" Joe slugged a creature out of the way and glanced over toward the chasm. "The phone's gone!"

He was right. The telephone had disappeared along with the rest of the trappings of the church/courtroom.

"Where did it go?" Ocelot demanded. The things were coming in thicker now. Taking a big risk, ducked under the axe one of the things was swinging at him, jamming his cyberspur up to the root into its gut. The creature screamed, spurting yellowish-black blood all over him, but dropped the axe. Ocelot snatched it up and tossed it to Joe.

"It's got to be over by the edge of the Chasm," Winterhawk said, puffing. He was already tiring, the drain from the large area-effect spells he had been casting taking its toll on him. "Let's work our way over there."

"Careful!" Joe warned. "Remember how nasty it was over there last time. If that wind catches you —"

"Maybe we can pitch a few of them in." Winterhawk flung another spell at a group of creatures coming in from his left side; they clutched their heads and dropped. Immediately 'Wraith and Kestrel surged forward and grabbed two of their weapons: the elf hefted a scimitar, while Kestrel chose a staff. Thus armed, they turned their attention to another group approaching from the other side. At the same time, the group of runners began backing up, retreating toward the edge of the Chasm.

"Protect 'Wraith—he's got the best eyes," Ocelot said as he struggled with another creature over possession of a black spear. "Somebody's gotta spot that thing or we're all dead!"

Stefan and the Horror were well-matched, and that disturbed the dragon. It had already gotten several wicked shots in on him, slashing at his chest and forelegs with its dripping claws. Everywhere the Horror had wounded him he felt a burning sensation—the poison was not strong yet, but he could feel it working its way into his system. This could not be a protracted fight.

They had given up on casting spells at each other. Here, with Verjigorm's power—or even a tiny portion of it—supplementing its magical barriers, the Horror was barely scratched by Stefan's most powerful offensive magic, while Stefan's barriers were holding against the Horror's own offenses. Instead they had fallen to the level of physical confrontation, a primal struggle of two titanic creatures ripping at each other tooth and claw. Stefan was reminded briefly of his battle with Gabriel six months ago, something that he now regretted. He was having trouble now remembering the hatred he had felt for his brother, let alone summoning any of it up. He risked a sideways glance at Gabriel, still a prisoner, naked and vulnerable in the midst of the battle but still watching him with quiet confidence—and redoubled his efforts, slashing at the Horror with his claws and gouging with his massive teeth. *I will not fail you, Gethelwain. I have given you my word and I will keep it.*

The runners were making progress, but not as fast as they had hoped. Already their glowing armor was beginning to fade, with no end in sight of the creatures that were stumbling over the dead bodies of their fellows to reach their prey. "Anything, 'Wraith?" Kestrel called.

"Not yet," came the terse reply.

Ocelot had gotten hold of the spear and was now wielding it with deadly precision, keeping the things at bay from his side. Sweat ran down his forehead and his back; his muscles burned with pain. He knew that if he was feeling this way, then Winterhawk and 'Wraith must be feeling much worse. Joe could go on forever, but he was taking the brunt of the attacks as usual. His armor was dimming dangerously. He was making good use of the creature's outsized axe, though, cutting a swath

through the things on his own side of the fight. "We gotta move faster!" Ocelot yelled desperately.

"Wraith knew the urgency of the situation and concentrated harder on his task, trying to ignore the fighting around him. His sharp eyes scanned the edge of the Chasm, looking for any sign of the means of communication the Horror had strung across it using Telanwyr's death-energy as the power. It had to have some tangible form, or they would not have been concerned with hiding it. It could be very small, but it had to be nearby —

When he finally spotted it, he almost missed it, passing right over it without even seeing the narrow red cord that snaked out of the Chasm about ten meters away, anchored down by a piece of the red rock right on the edge. The end of it appeared to be plugged directly into the ground. As he stared at it, a little spark of energy crackled around it and the ground nearby glowed slightly. "Got it," he said sharply.

"Where?" Joe looked around but saw nothing. He had to turn his attention back to the battle as another creature tried to take his head off. His armor was now only a flicker.

"There." Wraith pointed. "Red cord. Near rock."

Winterhawk allowed himself a brief moment of levitation up over the crowd. "Yes! I see it!"

"Let's go!" Ocelot spoke through gritted teeth. "We're losin' it here!"

As if to punctuate his words, Joe's armor flared brightly for a second and then disappeared. The creatures, seeing an advantage, renewed their efforts.

Stefan sunk his teeth into the Horror's body again, struggling not to gag at the stench and taste of rot that wafted across his nostrils and flowed into his mouth. The

thing laughed, bringing its claws up over his back and raking across his wings, rending the tender membranes with great bloody slashes. Stefan screamed in pain, releasing his grip on the Horror and staggering backward. The thing pressed its advantage again.

Stefan began to feel fear. He was losing, and he knew it. Already slashed and bleeding from the thing's claws and its foul teeth, he could feel the poison continuing to take effect. His limbs were growing heavy, his vision clouding. *Have I come so far to be defeated now?* he thought in despair. They were getting precariously close to the Chasm; he knew that if he lost his step here, he would be sucked down into the swirling winds and never be seen again. The Horror seemed to be subtly steering him in that direction.

Stefan glanced once again over at his brother. Gabriel's eyes were closed now; he seemed to be unconscious, or perhaps just conserving his strength. Stefan could not tell if he was alive, but he suspected that he would know—somehow—if Gethelwain had died. He couldn't concentrate on that now. Leaping forward, he slashed at the Horror again and again. It was a small consolation to him that he appeared to have hurt the thing badly enough that it had stopped talking. He staggered onward.

The runners were moving over toward where 'Wraith had spotted the wire, but things were not looking good. Joe had so far managed to avoid the worst of the injuries the Horror-creatures were trying to inflict on him, but he had still already taken several bloody wounds following the demise of his armor. Ocelot and Kestrel were not doing much better, their own armor now having reached the dim stage that preceded its disappearance. 'Wraith and Winterhawk were trying to remain behind their

comrades, since it appeared that the creatures didn't want to get too close to the Chasm and had therefore abandoned their plan to surround the runners from all sides in favor of attempting to surround them from only three sides. That left 'Wraith and Winterhawk, at least for the moment, relatively free of attacks and able to concentrate on the task at hand—taking out creatures with spells and keeping track of where the wire was.

As they drew closer to it, they could feel the energy growing in the air. Winterhawk, especially, seemed affected by it. His hand flew to his head and he staggered sideways, paling.

"What?" 'Wraith regarded him with concern.

"Don't—know," the mage gasped. "Power is—strong here. Like—trying to walk through—water."

Joe nodded. "I feel it too. This—*buzzing* in my head." A creature lashed out at him with a whip, opening up a long jagged wound on his arm. He clubbed the thing over the head and Ocelot snatched up the whip.

"It's the wire," Winterhawk got out. "That thing over there's fighting us." He struggled onward, but it was getting harder and harder to cast spells now. The power was sapping his magical strength.

Stefan and the Horror had reached the edge of the Chasm. Locked together tooth and claw, each of them tried to pitch the other one over into the abyss, but their strength was matched equally enough that so far neither had an advantage. "*Give up, dragon,*" the thing hissed at him, spitting venom. "*You cannot win. You have no power here.*"

Stefan ducked his head sideways to avoid the venom, lunging in at where the thing's neck seemed to be again. He did not answer, opting instead to sink his razor-sharp

teeth into the thing's hide once again. *If I can just get it off balance, I can throw it over the edge –*

But he was weakening. He knew if he was going to do something, it would have to be soon. The Horror was still gaining power from its connection to Verjigorm, but even without that infusion, Stefan was losing hope that he could defeat it. Grimly he threw his weight into it again.

Ocelot paused briefly to glance over at the fight going on further down the Chasm. Stefan was wrestling with some kind of disgusting thing that chilled Ocelot's blood just to look at it. *So that's what it really looks like – and if we fail we'll be that thing's slaves...or worse yet, slaves to the thing that thing serves...*

His armor flared and disappeared. A creature, seeing its chance, aimed a slash and got in under Ocelot's guard, raking its claws across his side and hip. Ocelot gasped and staggered backward as Kestrel waded in to his aid.

They were almost there now. Only a few more meters. Ocelot gritted his teeth. *Must hold on –*

The Horror gathered all its strength and shoved Stefan sideways, screaming something in an ancient language that was probably better left untranslated. Then it cried, *"Die, dragon! Die like your father did! Your line is good for nothing but to be used by us and then discarded to the wrath of your betters! Die like your miserable brother has done!"*

Stefan cried out in rage, the red haze over his eyes not coming entirely from his many wounds. Digging his powerful back legs into the ground, he clamped his forelegs around the Horror's body and used his leg muscles to shove forward. The edge of the Chasm was so close –

The Horror fought for purchase in the rocky soil, and for a moment Stefan thought it was going to resist,

shoving him backward. But then the thing's foot slipped on the loose gravel! Stefan screamed again, this time in triumph, as he felt the resistance begin to give as the thing staggered back, trying to regain its balance —

The Horror, screeching in protest, went over the edge —

—but before the top part of its body could completely go over, its forelegs shot out, its claws digging deeply into Stefan's shoulders, and its head came up, clamping its teeth even more deeply into the dragon's neck.

Stefan, the pain almost making him insane, threw his body down on the edge of the abyss, neck thrashing, sinking his rear claws into the ground to hold his position. They hung there thus, the Horror dangling precariously with its hooks buried in Stefan, the dragon laying flat on the ground to prevent himself from being carried over.

And then, very slowly, the Horror began climbing.

"Look!" Kestrel shouted, pointing.

The other runners stole glances when they could and spotted Stefan with the Horror locked to him, teetering on the edge of the Chasm.

"Get the wire," 'Wraith said. "Cannot — help — Stefan."

All their armor was gone now. Joe was staggering, barely standing; Ocelot's side was white-hot with pain, joined now by more slashes on his arms and legs. Kestrel was bloody too, while 'Wraith and Winterhawk were nearly exhausted...

The creatures seemed interminable.

They were almost there.

So close —

The Horror laughed, as much as it could do with a mouthful of Stefan's neck. Most of it was in his mind. It disengaged one set of claws from the dragon's bleeding

shoulder and sunk it in a bit further up. Stefan went rigid with pain. *"Ah, foolish one, it is as I said! I will prevail. You cannot move, because doing so will cause you to lose your grip. But I will wait until you are dead, and then I will use you as my stepping-stone once again – as I have done all this time – and I will have my victory! There is nothing you can do."* Its voice dissolved into peals of laughter again.

Stefan felt the blood running from him in dozens of places. He felt his brain begin to be consumed by the fog that would eventually lead to oblivion if he didn't do something soon. But he did not have the strength to dislodge the Horror – and even if he did, just as the thing had said, he would lose his balance and the thing would just climb over his body. He did not think that the thing could climb fully upward – not while he lived. But if he remained as he was, the Horror would wait him out until he died, and then –

Stefan smiled.

On the altar, Gabriel struggled back to consciousness from the drifting miasma that had been threatening to pull him downward. The first thing he saw was Stefan and the Horror poised on the edge of the precipice.

And then he saw Stefan smile, and all at once he knew why. *"Sildarath – no. There must be another way."*

Stefan heard his brother's voice in his head and it brought him strength. Gethelwain was not dead after all.

"No," Gethelwain said again, urgently. *"You cannot."*

Stefan's smile grew a bit bigger, gentler. *"I must. Even if we are successful in our efforts, the other dragons will see nothing but that I participated in Telanwyr's murder."*

Gabriel's eyes met the one of Stefan's that he could see. *"Yes, but it was not your doing. You were influenced by the Enemy."*

"*So was my father,*" Stefan reminded him. "*I will not continue his legacy.*"

On the altar, Gabriel struggled against the chains, leaning closer to his brother. "*I will argue for you. I will stand before all the dragons in the world if that is what it will take.*"

Stefan shook his head, a tiny little barely-perceptible movement. "*I admire your loyalty, little brother. I don't deserve it. But it is too late for that now. We are only children. They will not listen to us. I'd rather my life meant something.*"

Gabriel struggled harder, but he had no strength left. "*Sildarath –*"

"*Goodbye, Gethelwain. I am sorry for all I have done to you.*"

He gathered the muscles in his powerful rear legs and shoved forward with all his remaining strength.

The Horror realized too late what Stefan was doing. Desperately scrambling, it redoubled its efforts to clamber up the dragon's body, but the point of no return had already been passed. Stefan drove himself forward and out over the edge, his talons still sunk deep in the Horror's flesh.

He did not scream as the two of them plummeted down into the darkness of the Abyss.

The Horror did.

Gabriel closed his eyes and at last allowed the blackness to take him. But just before he passed out, he felt feelings wash over him, so strong that they were almost tangible things.

Happiness. Gratitude. The satisfaction of a wrong finally having been righted.

"Thank you, my brother." He did not know if the words in his mind were his or Stefan's. Either way was all right with him.

Winterhawk and 'Wraith, at precisely the same time, were making their final stand as their three companions held off the never-ending army of creatures. Both nearly dropping from fatigue, they knew they only had one shot at it. They looked at each other and nodded, unspoken communication passing between them. Winterhawk grabbed 'Wraith and lifted them both up, levitating them the final few meters toward the cord.

'Wraith raised his scimitar and, held there in 'Hawk's grip, brought it down with all his power on the conduit.

When it split, a massive charge came up through the scimitar, flinging 'Wraith and Winterhawk backward into the other runners. The cut ends of the cord sparked blue and then red, and then fizzled into nothingness.

A soul-chilling scream was heard from somewhere across the Chasm.

The scene faded to black as the sound of an old woman's laughter echoed through their minds.

56.

The climate in downtown Seattle was typical of what could be expected this time of year: overcast, drizzly, and utterly depressing.

That suited the five individuals who sat around a table in the back corner of the Glass Spider just fine, since it mirrored their states of mind far better than a moonlit starry night ever could have.

They had not met at Lunar Dreamscape by unspoken agreement. It just wouldn't have seemed right—not after the last time they had met there all together following something like this. Instead, when Ocelot had called the others and suggested that they get together, he had suggested this place as his best attempt to return to "normal"—whatever the hell that was.

They all sat there now, hands wrapped around various libations, competing with each other for how somber they could be. They had left a sixth seat open at the table and left a message with its intended occupant, but none of them expected the message to be received or the chair to be occupied. Again, it had just seemed the right thing to do, even if they all knew it was in vain.

It was hard to believe that only one day had passed since they had returned. The sights of the city had looked odd to them: the cars, the people, all the signs of bustling life going about the business of living. It had been strange, for awhile, until they got used to it again. They had been reluctant to leave each other's company for long, as if the act of having gone through that had forged an even deeper bond between them that returning to the world too fast would tear apart. Inherent in that bond was the knowledge of just how close the world had come to being

plunged into hell; it was hard enough dealing with something like that without having to do it alone.

Only one day...and before that, less than a day had passed while they had been gone. That had been the part that had truly amazed them, although as they continued to discuss it they realized that it was not so unusual, really—after all, their last trip had taken even less time than that.

They had awakened lying there in the circle, their bodies just as they had been left (with the exception of the cushions Harlequin had placed under their heads). They had emerged from their trances blink-eyed and woozy, with the feeling that something was both very right and very wrong. Harlequin had leaped from his seat and hurried over to them, while Frosty had roused herself from a nap to join him. "Well?" had been his first question.

His second had been, "Where's Stefan?"

He had seen Stefan's body disappear, he told them, but did not dare disrupt the circle to investigate in fear of preventing the rest of them from returning.

It was at that point that Gabriel had awakened.

He had risen from his spot on the floor, whole and unscathed, looking no different than he had when they had departed—

Except for his eyes.

Silently, as the runners, Harlequin, and Frosty had watched, he had gone over to the spot where Stefan had been. He had stared at the space on the floor long and hard, examining the smudge-marks in the chalked sigils and sand where his brother had lay. And then he had turned and slowly, deliberately walked over to Harlequin.

He had stood before the clown-painted elf without a word for a moment, meeting his eyes, and then he had traced a complicated gesture with his left hand, following the gesture by placing his outstretched fingers on his

chest, just below his heart. "Thank you, Caimbeul," he had said softly. "For everything."

For the first time the runners had ever seen, Harlequin had been at a loss for words. "Gethelwain, I—"

Gabriel had shaken his head. "No. Please. Just—accept my gratitude."

Harlequin had paused for a moment, looking into his eyes, and nodded. He had glanced over at the runners briefly, then turned to Frosty. "Come on. I think I just remembered some place we need to be." With a quick nod of farewell to the five runners, he and Frosty had departed. None of the runners had attempted to stop him.

When he was gone, Gabriel had returned his attention to the runners. "And my thanks to you as well. I am forever amazed at the infinite capacity of your people for perseverance, for confidence—for hope. Again you have helped me, and again I owe you my gratitude." Something in his eyes had told them that he was not yet finished, so they had met his gaze in silence. He looked simultaneously older and younger than he had before—older because of the deep grief showing the purple depths of his eyes, and younger by the way he appeared fully open to them, with nothing to hide. "Now," he had said very gently, "if you will excuse me, I must go to mourn my friend and my brother."

Kestrel had stepped forward worriedly. "Gabriel—"

"No, Juliana, you cannot come with me," he had told her with a tiny faraway smile. "This is something I must do alone."

"Will you—be back?" she had ventured, afraid of what his answer would be.

He had hesitated a moment as if considering the question. Finally with great care he had said, "You will see me again. But I do not know when."

And then he had gone, leaving them to stand there on the vast floor amid the ruins of the ritual circle.

They hadn't stayed long. They had all felt uncomfortable in the place without the presence of its master—there were too many ghosts and too many memories there. They had ridden the elevator down to the garage and picked up the truck (noticing that both the Phaeton and the Dynamit were still in their usual places); when they drove it out into the street, they had been surprised to see that it was dark. A quick check of their chronos indicated that only a few hours had passed, and now it was a bit after 21:00.

They had spent the night at Winterhawk's place because no one had wanted to go home, and the next day they had made an attempt to get their lives back on track. The oddest part of the whole thing was that, essentially in the cores of their beings, they felt *good*. They had done the impossible. They had once again prevented the Horrors from crossing into their world, once again without anyone else's knowledge. But Gabriel's departure and Stefan's sacrifice had cast a pall over their celebratory moods.

The meet at the bar had been something of a compromise: not really a celebration, but just a chance to get together and discuss what they had experienced. Ocelot (and Kestrel, who had spent most of the day with him, not wanting to return to her townhouse and be alone) both felt that it would be welcome, and the others had readily agreed.

For an hour or so, they had talked about nothing in particular, pointedly avoiding the subject that everyone had come there to discuss. No one, it seemed, had wanted to bring the subject up, so they had instead just enjoyed each other's company as any set of friends might after a hard day, commenting on sports scores, the quality of the beer at the Spider, and various other such irrelevant

topics. All of them knew it couldn't last forever, but they were determined to draw it out as long as possible. Nobody was quite sure why.

"So," Ocelot finally said with a sigh, taking another pull of his beer (he had gone with the good stuff tonight, not his usual cheap variety), "we just saved the world. How come I feel so crappy?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "If you figure it out, please let me in on it, will you?" He too sighed. "We certainly seem to have a precedent for mourning dragons by getting drunk out of our minds, don't we?"

That elicited the tiniest of smiles from the others (except Kestrel); it had been some time since they had gotten themselves plastered in Winterhawk's apartment upon hearing the news of Dunkelzahn's assassination — enough time had passed that they could laugh about it, even if it was only just a little laugh.

Ocelot looked up, his eyes going a bit wide. "That's what we're doing, isn't it? We're mourning Stefan. If anybody had ever told me I'd be doing that —"

Joe nodded soberly. "Yeah."

Kestrel took Ocelot's hand. "He redeemed himself. I don't know if I would have had the courage to do what he did."

Winterhawk signaled for another beer. "Nor I. Gabriel was right about everyone's being able to change given the right catalyst." He raised his glass. "But I for one salute him." He looked up. "Here's to you, Stefan, old boy. If you're listening — thank you."

Slowly the other runners raised their own glasses, silently echoing Winterhawk's words.

Kestrel brought her glass back down, staring into the depths of her beer. "Do you think he'll come back?"

Everyone immediately realized she wasn't talking about Stefan. "He said he would, didn't he?" Ocelot reminded her. "You know he's good for his word."

She shook her head. "He said I'd see him again. He's very careful with his words. But I don't know what he meant by that. I went by his place today — just to see if he might be there. He wasn't." Sighing, she swirled the beer around in the glass. Then, making a visible effort to pull herself together, she looked up at her companions and smiled. "But hey—we saved the world. We should celebrate that, right? Pretty soon everything will be back to normal, and we'll go on, and that'll be the end of it. Right?"

The others nodded. "Yeah," Ocelot said. Finishing up the contents of his glass in one long pull, he put it down on the table with a decisive thump. "Right now, though, what I think I want is a good night's sleep in my own bed. 'Hawk, your floor ain't too comfortable, you know?"

"Hey, you coulda slept with me on the couch," Joe said jokingly.

"Not an option," Wraith said with a raised eyebrow. "But agreed about sleep."

As they finished their drinks and gathered up their gear to leave, Ocelot touched Kestrel's arm and motioned for her to hang back. "You—uh—want to come over tonight? So you don't have to be alone, I mean?"

She nodded gratefully, and this time her smile was genuine. "Yeah. I would."

Epilogue

The night was beautiful; Kestrel had to give it that. Out here, away from the lights of the city, you could even see a few stars twinkling in the blackness of the sky. Maybe not as many as you could if you got fully away from Seattle's foul air, but enough to make you feel like you were actually getting a little bit in touch with nature.

She was at the Shadow Lake Nature Preserve, which had always been a haven for her—a place where she could get away from everything and be alone with her thoughts. She hadn't wanted to do that very much lately; this was the first time she'd been here in the three months since —

—since their "adventure."

That was what she had euphemistically labeled it in her mind: their "adventure" — complete with the quotation marks. It helped her keep her sanity, and it helped her to cope with the fact that she had not seen the one person she had wanted most in the world to see in all that time.

She'd been here for awhile already, having driven her little green Westwind up before it had gotten dark and hiked up to the lake. She had been sitting here on the bank ever since, tossing stones into the water and trying to sort out her thoughts. She wasn't worried about anyone bothering her; nobody came up here at night anyway, and even if they did, she was quite capable of dealing with them. Especially since she wasn't in the most forgiving of moods to begin with.

This was the first night in a long while that she had been alone for any significant length of time. Since the "adventure" she had developed a strong dislike of being alone, and had thus sought out places full of life—bars, nightclubs, trideo theatres, shopping malls, restaurants,

sporting events—anything to stimulate her mind and keep her demons at bay. Nights—at least the ones she didn't spend with Ocelot—were the worst, because those were when the nightmares came. They had been fading over the past few weeks, and she was sure they would eventually go away completely, but for now they occurred with enough frequency that she dreaded going to sleep. She almost always fell asleep on her couch now, with the trideo or the music blaring away.

It helped, some.

Ocelot had been wonderful. She smiled a little, thinking about him and the way he had of coming up with things they could do to take her mind off her troubles. She knew he was haunted by the events too, but he never showed it. In fact, he never talked to her about it unless she brought it up first. He seemed to be determined to make up for the fact that there was now a big hole in her life.

She didn't have the heart to tell him that he never could.

His teammates had been great too. In the ensuing three months she had gotten to know them much better, joining in their occasional get-together-and-drink nights like another member of the team, and even helping them out on runs when she could. They had immediately gone back to work a few days after they returned; Ocelot said it helped them forget.

She sighed, heaving another stone into the water and watching it skip across the surface and finally sink under the waves many meters away. This hadn't really helped her, coming out here; she had hoped that perhaps getting away by herself might help her come to terms with things, but all it had done was make her more depressed. Forcing herself not to think about it might not have been the healthiest thing she could have done, psychologically

speaking, but it had at least allowed her to function. Her emotions were like a flood being held back by the flimsiest of floodgates, and now here she was, methodically picking away at that floodgate brick by brick.

Or stone by stone. She was going to have to move soon; she had over the last hour depleted her immediate area of skippable stones. She sighed. *Might as well think about heading back. It's getting cold out here.*

She had started to rise when a soft voice spoke from a few meters behind her. "I had thought I might find you here."

She spun around so fast that she lost her balance and fell right back down on her butt. It was the last voice she had expected to hear. "Gabriel?!"

He stepped out of the trees and into view. "Hello, Juliana."

She looked him up and down, drinking in the sight of him. Dressed in jeans, white T-shirt, and thin leather jacket, he looked very young; it was the kind of outfit she used to tease him about. "Hope you're not planning to visit any bars in that getup," she murmured, unable to keep the slow smile from spreading across her face. "Remember how embarrassing it was last time, when you got carded?"

"You were just jealous," he said serenely. He indicated the spot next to her. "May I?"

She rolled her eyes in mock exasperation. "Sit." When he had complied, she looked at him with a more serious expression. "Are you back?"

He considered that a moment. "Yes...and no," he finally said.

"What does that mean?"

He smiled at her, just a little. "I will tell you a bit later. But first—have you been well?"

She took a deep breath. "I guess so." Using the search for more stones as an excuse to avoid his gaze, she added, "I missed you, though."

"I hope you will forgive me for leaving you so abruptly," he said, his voice full of sadness. "I was—not myself at the time."

"No—it's okay." She put her hand on his arm. "You had to do what you had to do. I understand."

"Do you?" His gaze, so beautiful and calm and purple, settled on her.

"I—think so," she said, this time with less certainty. "Where—did you go?"

"As I told you at the time—to mourn Telanwyr and Stefan."

She shifted sideways a bit to get a better view of him. "What—does that mean? How do dragons mourn death?"

"There is a ritual. You saw it, you said, after Dunkelzahn was murdered."

"You mean all the dragons flying around in those intricate patterns?"

He nodded.

"I didn't hear anything about that," she said. "And I was sort of watching the news for anything about dragons."

"It was—quite private," he said, looking away. "But very well attended. Since the two deaths were interconnected, the mourning ritual was as well. When I explained to the dragons what had occurred, most of them were willing to forgive Stefan's transgressions in favor of his sacrifice."

She was interested in spite of herself. "Who was—there? Anybody I've heard of?"

"I doubt it. Lofwyr sent his condolences but did not attend. Several of the younger Great Dracoforms—Arleesh, Masaru, Perianwyr—were there, though."

Telanwyr was well regarded among the dragons, and Stefan's sacrifice did not go unnoticed."

She nodded, although she did not completely understand.

"I did not remain for the disposition of their personal property, though; I had no desire to get involved in that."

"I guess dragon probate can get pretty nasty, huh?" she said with a little smile. "You weren't here for all the trouble Dunkelzahn's will caused a couple of years ago."

He shook his head. "That was most irregular. Normally dragons determine ownership of the deceased's property by rite of challenge."

"You mean you all get together and fight over it?" she demanded incredulously.

"Essentially."

"That doesn't sound very—I don't know—civilized to me."

"It is not. That is why I didn't want to get involved. I suspect that Lofwyr will end up with most of Telanwyr's holdings. Probably Stefan's as well. There are few dragons who want to contend with him." He shrugged. "I do not care."

"So Messina Corporation will become a subsidiary of Saeder-Krupp..." She tightened her grip on his arm.

He didn't answer; instead, he stared down at his hands in his lap.

"Are you okay?"

"What? Oh—yes. I'm all right now."

"What did you do...I mean after the ritual? Does it take so long?"

He shook his head. "No, the ritual was very short, and occurred only a few days after I left you. After that..." he trailed off.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," she said gently.

"No—it isn't that. I am just trying to find a way to put it into words." He paused for a long moment. "I—spent quite a bit of time simply wandering. Visiting various places, meeting people—coming to terms with the fact that all of my connections to my old life are gone now. Dunkelzahn, Telanwyr, my parents, Stefan—there is no one left." His voice dropped to a near-whisper.

She moved in closer to him, pulling him into a tight hug. "I'm sorry, Gabriel..."

"No, do not be. Even dragons die eventually. It is a fact of life. It just took me some time to accept it. One of the dragons who attended the ritual invited me to visit her, and so I did, for awhile. It was—quite helpful to me. She is much older than I, and was able to help me to put things in perspective."

"Who was this?" Kestrel asked, interested.

"You would not know her—she lairs down in the California Free State. I had not met her before, but she is a great lady and has become a good friend." He looked up at her, again giving her the tiny faraway smile that she loved so much. "I have missed you as well, though."

"Is that why you came back?"

He nodded. "Only for you. That is what I wanted to discuss with you."

She pulled herself up a little straighter. "What?"

"I have decided to leave Seattle, at least for awhile. There are too many wounds here that have not yet healed. There is much of the world I have yet to explore, and I think this would be a good time to do it."

Her eyes widened. Had he just come back, and now he was leaving her again? "And..." she began, speaking hesitantly.

"And I would like you to come with me."

That was not what she had expected to hear. She drew a sharp involuntary breath. "Go—with you?"

He nodded. "I am merely asking. I will understand if you do not wish to leave your life and your friends here."

Thoughts whirled through her head. Pick up, leave Seattle indefinitely, and travel around the world with an adventurous young dragon? Leave her friends, her business associates, the team —

Ocelot?

The answer was obvious, of course. There really wasn't even any question in her mind.

She would explain it all to them before she left. It wasn't like she was leaving forever, after all. She would be back.

They would understand. Hell, Ocelot might even approve.

She smiled, feeling a weight lifting from her shoulders. For the first time in three months, she felt...right. "So — when do we leave?"

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Thanks to all of you for making it this far!

Cheers,

--Rat

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