

Ever feel like your whole life has been wrong?

LEGACY

The conclusion to the series begun with
CROSSFIRE

A Shadowrun Novel

R. L. King

LEGACY

a Shadowrun novel

by

R. L. King

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1.

Sean Eric Hunter stood on the roof of the Bainbridge High School gymnasium and wondered what it would feel like to fly.

It was the twilight at the edge of darkness, a cool early summer night dominated by an indigo sky and the far-off smell of the ocean. You could still see the stars out here — Bainbridge was far enough away from New Haven that the lights from the buildings and the cars and the planes didn't interfere with the view. A beautiful evening, full of all sorts of possibilities.

Sean stood poised on the edge of the roof, his tall, lean body held in perfect balance. Without conscious thought he made tiny adjustments to his position to hold himself proudly upright, his eyes scanning the dark huddled forms of the town's buildings below. They all looked pretty much alike from up here: most of them one or two stories, most at least a hundred years old but nicely restored in support of the little town's reputation as 'historic.' The low-slung, aerodynamic forms of the silent cars that prowled the streets looked odd, as they always did, next to the wooden and brick structures that formed Bainbridge's primary architectural styles.

It was just a bit chilly tonight, a little cooler than summer evenings normally were around here, but despite the fact that he wore only loose-fitting pants and a tank top that barely qualified as a shirt, Sean wasn't cold. He felt exhilarated, as he always did when he took chances like this.

"Sean!" called a voice from down below. Althea's voice. He crouched down, leaning slightly out over the edge of the gym, and grinned at her.

"Up here!"

Some ten meters below, a slender, dark-haired girl stepped out from the shadows of the building and craned her neck to look upward. "Sean? Is that you up there?"

In one smooth motion, Sean swung himself forward, hanging onto the lip of the roofline, and clambered down one of the exterior support columns, his hands and bare feet finding purchase nearly on auto-pilot. He dropped silently down near Althea, swiped his white-blond hair back off his forehead, and grinned again. "Not anymore."

The girl started, spinning around to face him, and then mirrored his grin. "Don't *do* that," she protested. She looked back up at where he had been. "Your parents would drek themselves if they knew where you were, you know."

"Oh, probably," he agreed cheerfully. "But they don't have to know, do they? It's better for them that way."

Althea Ellis chuckled. She was shorter than Sean by a full head, with a slender build and pale skin that made her look very fragile. It was only when one got closer to her that it became clear that the pale complexion was makeup, not nature, and the slender form covered taut muscle. "Don't look at me," she said. "I didn't see a thing. But you'd better get inside and get changed, or you'll have to forfeit and *Sensei*'ll have you cleaning out the drekkers at the dojo for a week."

Sean nodded. There was no doubt in his mind that his friend was right—*Sensei* Watanabe had certain codes he expected his students to follow, and promptness was one of them. Cleaning the dojo's bathrooms was only one of the elf's favorite punishments for transgression. "Okay, okay. Just lost track of time, that's all. And anyway, you'd better stop worrying about me and get changed yourself. Your first match is before mine."

Her only reply was to grin back over her shoulder at him and pick up her pace.

He followed Althea inside, under the glo cloth banner reading “Tri-Counties Regional Martial Arts Championship Tournament, June 24, 2078, 20:30.” The gym’s entrance hall was filled with people milling around, talking and examining the holo-trophies in the alcoves along the walls. Althea veered off to the left toward the women’s locker room, while Sean turned right toward the men’s. “Good luck!” she called.

He grinned. “Don’t need it,” he called back. “And neither do you.”

The locker room was almost deserted—most of the tournament’s entrants had already changed into their *gis* and headed out to warm up. Sean shucked off his pants and tank top, tossed them on the bench, then slotted his idchip into his locker and pulled out his bag. He dressed leisurely in front of the mirror, not worried about the time. Despite his lackadaisical attitude, he was never late for anything.

As he shrugged on his black *gi* jacket, he examined his chest in the mirror, looking for any sign of his newest tattoo. He didn’t see any, but that didn’t surprise him—ultraviolet tats only showed up under certain kinds of light. He smiled to himself, remembering how the magnificent coiled Eastern dragon had glowed in the purple light of the artist’s shop. It had been a real, hand-rendered job, not one of the cheap ones done by machine. Cost him nearly two months’ wages from his after-school job at the rec center plus a good chunk of his high school graduation gift money, but it had been worth it. He’d been surprised his parents had been so accommodating about it—they hadn’t objected to any of his other, smaller tattoos or his piercings, but this one had been the biggest yet by far. He supposed they were just glad he hadn’t asked them for cybermods.

He did up the black belt with its three gold embroidered stripes without even looking at it—he'd tied this belt or one of its lower-ranked predecessors almost every day of his life for the biggest part of his seventeen years, to the point where it was as much a part of his routine as putting on his shoes. *Seventeen, almost eighteen*, he reminded himself, grinning at his reflection in the mirror. His reflection—pale, ice-blue eyes, tanned handsome face, and the shock of white-blond hair he kept long and spiked on top and crewcut short in the back—looked back at him almost challengingly. Only a little less than a month. Eighteen—the magic number that meant adulthood and getting out of Bainbridge. He had a whole summer ahead of him before he had to head off for college, and he was planning to make the best of it. This would probably be his last tournament for awhile. He shoved his street clothes into the bag, the bag into the locker, and slammed it decisively shut.

Outside in the main gym, the quiet of the locker room gave way to the loud clamor of contestants, officials, and spectators all hurrying to their respective locations. The big chrono on the wall read 20:22. Sean made his way through the crowd without touching anyone, turning his body sideways to slide between openings like a snake. He didn't like crowds, and he especially didn't like to touch strangers (or them to touch him) inadvertently. It always made his skin crawl a little, though he didn't know why. His eyes scanned the bleachers for his parents; he was a bit surprised when he didn't see them, but then he lowered his gaze and spotted them coming toward him. He met them halfway, over near the bottom of the bleachers.

Kristi and Grant Hunter were smiling broadly as they hurried up to their son. An attractive, settled-looking

couple in their early 50s, the elder Hunters were dressed in their usual corp-casual style. Kristi held a little portable holoviewer much like many of the other spectators had: the devices could be programmed to display a holo of one of the contestants, and Kristi's of course showed a smaller image of Sean in mid-flying kick. She threw her arms around him. "I was hoping we'd get to see you before it starts! Good luck, honey. We'll be watching!"

Sean returned the hug, smelling his mother's familiar scents of lavender soap, hairspray, and just a hint of her favorite perfume, *Metamorphosis*. He'd always liked the way the perfume responded to the wearer's body chemistry and adjusted the scent and intensity to match. "Thanks, Mom. I'll do my best."

His father nodded, clapping him on the shoulder. "We know you will, son. We're proud of you." He glanced at the glowing chrono as a voice boomed through the gym, directing the contestants to their places. "We'd better get back to our seats. See you after."

"You got it, Dad. Thanks." Sean gave his mother a quick kiss on the cheek and hurried off to join the others.

They were all there already, even Althea. *Sensei* Watanabe gave Sean a raised eyebrow and a glance at the wall-chrono as he hurried up, but said nothing else. As usual, Sean had managed to squeak in under the line.

Althea moved over next to him and squeezed his arm. He smiled at her. The black *gi* with its Watanabe School patch depicting a phoenix rising from a red mountain looked good on her—she always looked good in black. She only had one gold stripe on her belt—first *dan* to Sean's third—but then she had only been studying since she was nine. He'd met her here all those years ago when she'd been a shy, skinny little girl with red hair and he'd been a brash, cheerful little boy who thought he had the

world by the tail. They'd both changed a lot in those last few years but they both still found themselves gravitating to each other when they had things they wanted to discuss. There'd never been anything romantic between them—just the kind of friendship where you could tell the other person anything—or at least almost everything—and not fear rejection or ridicule. Sean thought everybody should have a friend like that. He wished he could open up completely to her, but in the past couple of years even the two of them had grown a little more distant. Not much—just to the point where there were things they kept to themselves now instead of talking them out on long walks or during breaks in classes. He supposed it was just a natural part of growing up: no matter how much you cared for someone, there were just some things you couldn't share.

He smiled at her now. "You're up first," he said, helping her do up the back of her sparring gear. "Go out there and kick some butt for the school."

"One butt-kicking, coming up," she agreed, rising from the bench and moving out toward the padded competition area.

Sean grinned. He knew she wasn't kidding.

The Tri-Counties tournament consisted of several classes: human unmodified, modified, and adept, along with various other classes as needed for metahumans and changelings. There weren't too many metahumans participating except for elves—dwarfs didn't tend to go in for martial arts around here for some reason, and the ork and troll contestants for the entire tri-county area could be counted on the fingers of two hands. Sean knew there were plenty of them—particularly orks—who studied martial arts, but they had their own schools and their own tournaments. Especially the trolls—the rules said they

could only fight each other to avoid any grievous injuries, so they grouped together to form their own federation. As for the changelings, there were only two that Sean knew of in the whole area, and both of them were close enough to human that they didn't need the special category.

Sean himself competed in the unmodified human category. The modified slot was for those who had gotten some kind of cybernetic, biological, or nanotech enhancements that could improve their skills—reflexes, muscle replacement or augmentation, bone lacing, or the like. Sean knew that even at high school level, many athletes had already gone under the laser; the procedures were expensive, but they were practically required for most professional sports. For the most promising, the colleges paid for all or part of the surgery as part of the athlete's scholarship. Sean himself, who had already been courted by several colleges because of his football prowess as Bainbridge's star quarterback and who'd been offered a scholarship to Notre Dame to play for them, had been presented with the same deal, but had refused. When they had brought it up, the thought of submitting himself to metal and plastic and electronics inside his body had filled him with a revulsion so strong he'd nearly been physically ill. Even the thought of bioware disturbed him. His refusal had doomed his chances at a football scholarship, but he wasn't worried: his parents had amassed a substantial college fund for him, one that would allow him to attend just about any school he wanted. Let some kid who needed the money have the scholarship, he figured. He would show them what he could do when he got there. Who needed modifications?

His inability to compete in the adept category bothered him more. Ever since his early teen years when he had watched the students identified as physical adepts go through their practices, their limbs moving so fast

normal human eyes couldn't follow, their bodies under absolute control, he had felt a twinge of jealousy and regret. He'd been tested along with all the other children at age 12, and his results had come back 100% mundane. He had been crushed. All his life he'd been exceptionally good at sports, and he'd had a mastery of his body not matched by too many other kids his age. It had been his secret dream to be a physical adept, to take his training to levels he couldn't reach as a normal human, and he had been convinced that his early prowess was an indicator of a nascent magical talent. He hadn't let his parents see his disappointment when he'd been proven wrong, but he thought they'd probably known anyway. They'd never brought it up again after the test results came back, and he was grateful to them for that.

The tournament itself was almost anti-climactic after all the buildup. Sean won his matches with an ease that surprised even him. His opponents, all three of them, were worthy competitors and had obviously been well trained by their teachers, but there was something about them that Sean couldn't identify—something *ordinary*. He had experienced the feeling many times before during matches: the sense of knowing what they were going to do before they did it, of their punches and kicks moving in slow motion even in full-contact bouts such as this. His second opponent, for example, tried to fake him out with a flurry of punches followed by what would have been a devastating spinning kick if Sean had been there for it to connect with. But as he watched the young man's eyes, Sean could almost picture what he had in mind. When the kick came around, cat-quick, Sean simply stepped back and let it go harmlessly past him, using the advantage to get in two strikes of his own at his opponent's unprotected side. The astonishment on the young man's

face was priceless: Sean knew he was a dangerous competitor and had been favored to win the tournament. *That's before he met me*, Sean thought with no particular bravado. He didn't have to be conceited about his talent — it was as much a part of him as breathing or sleeping, just something he did as second nature. He congratulated his opponent on a good fight and was pleased to see the look of grudging respect in the other boy's eyes.

The second match was actually the hardest of the three. The third was against Ivar Gunderson, a boy who was both taller and heavier than Sean, a boy who was used to winning matches with a decent level of talent backed up by considerable strength. Ivar didn't hit as often as some of the others, but when he did he took down his opponent in short order. Sean had fought him before and respected him: like himself, Ivar disdained cyberware and preferred to get by on his natural talent — or so he said where anybody was listening. Sean thought it might have something to do with the fact that his parents were poor and couldn't afford the mods, but nobody ever said anything about that, least of all Sean. In his mind, anybody who worked hard enough to get as good as Ivar was without “cheating” was somebody worthy of his respect.

That didn't mean he gave the guy an easy time of it, though. He had to smile a little when the match was announced and Ivar's face fell — he knew that he was one of the few competitors here today who could consistently beat the big blond powerhouse. And beat him he did, after a relatively short fight that mostly involved Ivar trying to land one of his devastating strikes and Sean flitting around like a little fish annoying a whale until he'd nickel-and-dimed the larger boy to a victory. He realized he was making it look easy and hoped that anybody watching didn't make the mistake of

underestimating Ivar: the guy was good. It was just that Sean was better. As the applause of the crowd thundered over him following his victory, Sean offered Ivar his hand. "Nice one," he said.

Ivar grunted good-naturedly, using the back of his hand to swipe sweat out of his eyes. "Yeah, right. One of these days, Hunter, you're gonna make a mistake and *pow!*" He punctuated it by slamming one gloved hand into the other one.

"Yeah, but not in this lifetime." Sean grinned and smacked Ivar playfully in the side of his padded headgear. He knew it was probably the last time he'd see him, as the two of them attended different schools both for academics and martial arts, and now that finals were over and the tournament was at an end, they'd be going their separate ways. The thought made him feel a little sad. He didn't have long to do it, though, as the other students from Watanabe's were hurrying over to congratulate him on his win. "See you, Gunderson," he said. "Take care of yourself, you big ox, okay?"

"*Pow,*" Ivar said again, grinning, and then Sean was surrounded.

His parents were coming down from the stands. His mother threw her arms around him, heedless of the sweat still soaking his uniform. "I'm so proud of you!" she cried. "I knew you could do it!"

Sean hugged her, only a little self-conscious. His mother had always been demonstrative—it was just something he'd had to get used to, and he had to admit he kind of liked the attention. His father, though more reserved, was glowing with pride at his son's accomplishment.

"You'll be off to your party now, won't you?" his mother asked, stepping back to get a good look at him.

He nodded. "Yeah. It's at Nicky's place." Nicky was one of the other students Watanabe's school and a fellow recent Bainbridge High grad; his parents had a big house up in the hills.

"Well, don't stay out *too* late," his mother said, her eyes twinkling as she stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek. Then her expression turned a bit more serious. "No trouble, all right?"

Sean grinned. "No trouble. I promise." He knew he'd likely be out most of the night at the party, but he knew the kind of "trouble" Mom referred to—the kind his daredevil nature always seemed to be getting him into. Not tonight, though. Tonight he just wanted to relax, celebrate his and his friends' victories, and enjoy the summer night.

His father put a hand on his shoulder. "All right, then. We'll be heading out. Our plane leaves in an hour. We'll be back by morning. You have the number, right?"

"Got it, Dad. Don't worry. Go have fun. I'll be fine."

His mother gave him a last hug, ruffled his hair, and they were gone, bound for their own party, which was being given by Dad's boss up in Boston. They'd be taking a commuter flight because they hadn't wanted to miss Sean's tournament. He watched them go, still flush with pleasure over his wins tonight.

"Hunter! Get a move on! You're driving!" called one of his friends, jolting Sean from his thoughts. He hurried off to change. Tonight was going to be fun.

Nicky's house was up in Bear Heights, about half an hour out of town. By the time Sean and the rest of his carload of friends arrived, the party was in full swing. Driving synth-pop flavored with Native American and troll beats filled the air around the big house, and partygoers, mostly high school students but some older,

spilled out into the front yard. Sean knew from experience that the neighbors, close enough that their houses were visible but far enough away for privacy, would leave them alone until around 2 a.m., so they had at least three hours to enjoy themselves.

Inside it was even louder. Sean hooked his leather jacket on a finger and slung it over his shoulder and moved through the crowd, greeting people as he went. There weren't too many of the Bainbridge crowd that he didn't know at least casually, although barring a couple of exceptions he had few close friends. He would have been lying to himself, though, if he hadn't admitted that he enjoyed the attention he got from the girls as he went by—that was part of why he'd worn the tank top, which showed off his slim, ripped frame to maximum advantage. The fact that his build was natural and the product of hard work and exercise made him a bit of an oddity—many of the other guys and some of the girls in his circles sported equally impressive frames, but most of them had gotten theirs through bod-mod shops. Beauty could be had by anybody with enough nuyen these days, so it didn't really impress Sean; however, if his own impressed the right girls, that was okay with him. It was just as well that he didn't need artificial help anyway, because he knew his parents would never have gone for it. They were a little old-fashioned that way. Sean thought it was amusing. He was convinced that they put up with his taste for tattoos and piercings because he'd shown no desire for anything more drastic than that.

"C'mon, Hunter—got some people I want you to meet!" Nicky took his arm, handed him a beer, and dragged him into a crowd of people, and he allowed himself to get jolted from his own thoughts and lost in the music and the camaraderie.

He lost track of time after that. He let himself go as he rarely did, dancing and having a little too much to drink and trading flirtatious banter with a few girls he had his eye on—he didn't have a steady girlfriend, but had had his share of casual relationships over the past couple of years. He had managed to convince one of them, a dark-haired young woman named Jen, to get into the hot tub with him, and was sitting there with her discussing the latest Sylvia Nightstar simsense when Nicky approached. "Hunter...that you?"

Sean leaned his head back so he was looking at his friend upside down. "What do you want, Nicky? I'm busy here." Next to him Jen moved in a little closer to him and glared at Nicky as if to say *Go away. You're interrupting us.*

Nicky, usually self-possessed, looked uncomfortable. "Sean...there are some guys here to see you. Star. I think you'd better talk to them."

Sean frowned. Star? What would they want with him? He hadn't done anything illegal—at least not illegal enough to warrant a personal visit to a party on a Friday night. "Did they say what they wanted?"

Nicky paused. "Sean...just go talk to them, okay?" His voice sounded very odd.

Sean looked hard into his friend's eyes. Nicky knew something, but he wasn't saying what it was. He sighed. "Okay, but this better be good." He stood, gathered his towel, and unselfconsciously began drying off and dressing. He turned back to Jen. "I'll be back, okay? Keep my spot warm."

"You got it," she agreed, settling back into the steaming water. "Don't take too long, though..."

Dressed, Sean followed Nicky back through the house. "They're not here to break up the party, are they?" It sure didn't look like it—the music was loud as ever, and

all around he could still see underage kids doing the things underage kids did at every unsupervised party.

"They're in the kitchen," Nicky said. He clapped Sean on the shoulder, then quickly headed off into the crowd.

Sean was perplexed. This was getting stranger and stranger. He racked his brain as he made his way through to the kitchen, trying to figure out what he might have done to arouse the ire of Lone Star. Could someone have seen him on the roof of the gym? But that was minor compared to some of the things he'd done —

He pushed the door open and found himself faced with two stern, somber-looking Lone Star cops. They still wore their leather jackets but had taken off their mirrorshades. Both were standing, and both looked uncomfortable. Despite the fact that they stood still, they gave the impression that they'd been pacing. "You guys were looking for me?" Sean asked.

The taller of the two cops nodded. "Sean Hunter?"

"Yeah, that's me."

The shorter cop, a little older and stockier, took a deep breath. He didn't meet Sean's gaze. "Sean — I'm very sorry to have to bring you this news, but — there's been an accident."

Sean froze. "An — accident?"

"A plane crash," the other cop said softly.

Sean could only stare dumbly at them for several seconds, his brain seizing up, refusing to process the information he'd just been given. "A — plane crash? But — my parents —"

The younger cop put a hand on his arm. "There was an engine failure, shortly after takeoff. There were — no survivors. I'm sorry, Sean..."

He pulled away from the officer's hand, his heart thumping so hard in his chest that he was sure both cops must have heard it. "No — this can't be right — They — they

were just going to Boston for a party—" he took a deep breath. "Are you sure? Could they be wrong? Could it—"

"I'm sorry," the cop repeated, his voice gentle. He looked like he'd rather be just about anywhere than where he was.

Sean stared at them, wide-eyed, first at one and then the other. Their hard stone faces showed compassion, the looks of men who had had to deliver similar messages far too many times in their careers. He blinked, feeling his whole body growing hot, growing shaky. Then he did the only thing he could think of to do—he ran.

2.

The memorial service for Kristi and Grant Hunter was held three days later. It was a beautiful service held at a lovely park by the seaside, well attended by the couple's many friends and business associates. Many had even come in from out of town, shocked and saddened by the sudden end to two beloved lives.

Sean barely remembered any of it, as he barely remembered the three days leading up to it.

He sat numbly in the family section of the white wooden folding chairs, staring straight ahead and not even trying to quiet his thoughts, which were at the same time molasses-dull and flitting around so fast he couldn't pin them down. There weren't many others in the family section: his maternal grandparents and paternal grandfather were dead, and his paternal grandmother was somewhere in Europe and couldn't be reached in time to attend. She had called last night in tears and she and Sean had talked for awhile, but both of them had been too stunned to be much help to each other.

Some of his friends were there too, and he was glad for that—Althea, who sat next to him and held his hand; Nicky and Kim and some of the others from Watanabe's, including the *Sensei* himself; his childhood friend Jay, others. Their faces were all a blur, just a sea of light and dark. He hoped they didn't mind, but at the moment he didn't care.

After the service he left alone, gently shrugging off his friends' and his parents' friends' attempts to engage him, to take him out for something to eat, to try to get his mind off what had happened today and what had happened three days ago. Just as he had for the previous days, he wanted to be alone, to think—or *not* to think.

There had been people in and out of the house for the last couple of days, but after the service, either by accident or design he had the place to himself for awhile. He parked his car, a 20-year-old Eurocar Westwind he'd been working on ever since he'd bought it last year, out in front of the place; there was a spot in the garage now next to his mother's shiny new QZX700, but he didn't feel right parking there. Somewhere in the back of his mind he still expected his father's sleek black corp-style sedan to glide silently back in and take its rightful place.

Inside everything was quiet and dim and...*normal*. In one of his more lucid moments, Sean had mused about how strange it was to see normal life just going on all around you when something terrible has happened. The household computers still went about their business, making kaf and running lawn sprinklers and queuing up Dad's favorite trid shows in his den at eight o'clock each night. The first time the latter had happened, the night after the crash, it had startled Sean so badly that it took him a couple of hours to recover from it – the suddenness of the trideo unit blaring the nightly news into the silence when no one would be there to watch it was the first step in his long slow convincing that things weren't going to change back.

He wandered through the house in a daze, stopping to pick up an item here or look at one there. The hallway full of holopics had commanded his attention for an hour last night, as he carefully examined each image of himself at various ages from baby to unsteady toddler to nearly full-grown man, and the images of his parents as young lovers, as newlyweds, as parents proud to show off their handsome blond son. The pictures had been here for as long as Sean could remember, but he had never really looked at them. *Why bother*, something in the back of his

mind had always said. *You can always just look at the real thing.*

But now he couldn't look at his parents anymore. He'd never see them again—he hadn't even been able to say goodbye because they wouldn't let him see the bodies. He knew why, of course: because there hadn't *been* any bodies to speak of. Plane crashes weren't kind to the fragile human form. They'd been able to identify his parents and the other victims by dental and DNA records, but a memorial viewing had been out of the question. Sean knew that was for the best. Still, though, he would have liked to have had the chance to say *something*.

He continued on his way through the house, his eyes skimming over the items that had made up two lives. There wasn't much of him out here, by his own choice—he had a big bedroom upstairs where he rarely spent time, but he was content to keep the items that were important to him there. His mother's taste pervaded the place: they weren't rich, but they were comfortable, and Kristi Hunter had a knack for choosing a few expensive items of decor which, when combined with the tasteful but relatively inexpensive things that filled the majority of the house, gave the place an air of genteel grace. Sean was often surprised at how good the house looked, given that both Mom and Dad had demanding jobs and weren't home as often as they'd like to be. The robo-maids kept the place clean, but machines couldn't add that personal touch.

His own room upstairs, which he reached eventually, was in its usual state of disarray. He threw himself down on the bed and looked around the walls. They were covered with holoposters of his favorite subjects: martial arts, sports in general, and Eastern dragons. Now they shimmered and shifted, going through their motions as Sean watched with detached disinterest. On the floor

were piled most of his clothes (Mom had more than once accused him of having been frightened by a closet at a young age), his sports equipment, boxes of music chips and schoolwork and martial arts magazines—in short, a typical sort of bedroom for a seventeen-year-old boy.

He didn't even feel like it was his anymore.

Restlessly he got up and went over to his desk, where his dataterminal sat covered by two tank tops and his high school graduation program, printed on old-fashioned stiff paper with raised letters. He hadn't even turned it on since before the accident—email hadn't been high on his list. Now, he pushed the shirts and the program off, switched on the machine, and waited for his email to load. This would have been a lot easier if he, like many of his fellow students, had a datajack, but his distaste for invading his body with such things had made that impossible. He wasn't the only one without a jack, but most of the others who didn't have one were magically active in one way or another. Sean got teased about it some, but he was content to be a "turtle" if it meant keeping anyone from drilling holes in his head. The only kinds of holes he wanted were the kind you put jewelry through.

The little terminal paused for several seconds, longer than it usually did. Sean didn't often get much email. He and his friends communicated in person, and since school was over he wasn't getting assignments. What could be taking so long? Then the list came up and he knew.

He scrolled up from the most recent, noting name after name of the senders: high school friends, acquaintances, the other members of Watanabe's school, the folks from his job—all of them offering their condolences and help if he wanted it. Sean's hand shook a little as he continued scrolling. There was the usual collection of get-rich-quick schemes and investment

opportunities and porn solicitations with them, but most were from people he knew. He hadn't realized he *knew* this many people.

Then, as he got to the top of the new messages, he froze, staring.

His mother's name was there.

He looked at the date: June 24, 15:30. She'd sent it before the match. With a shaking finger, he stabbed the button to play the message.

It was a card, the sort that you could send through various sources to commemorate events. The window popped up and his parents' faces appeared, proud and smiling. In the background, one of his favorite songs played. "Hello, son," his mother's voice said, sounding just like she was standing right there in the room with him. "I just wanted to send you this to let you know how proud Dad and I are of you, not just for tonight but for everything. I don't want to get all mushy because I know you don't like that, but we both love you and wish you best of luck in the tournament tonight."

The image faded out and a moment later so did the music. Sean didn't notice. His shoulders shaking, he buried his face in his hands and finally let himself cry.

After that it was a little easier. Later that day the Hunters' lawyer (who was also an old friend of the family) came by and told Sean that she had been appointed his guardian for the month or so until he turned eighteen. In exchange for his promise not to get into trouble, Sean was allowed to continue living alone in his parents' house, only having to check in with the lawyer once a day to verify that everything was all right. Sean was fine with that—the sort of trouble he normally got into due to his fearlessness and his tendency to dare himself to do dangerous things just to see if he could

wasn't something he wanted to pursue right now anyway. He had too many other things on his mind for that.

The lawyer, whose name was Gretchen Peck, also had copies of the Hunters' wills. Sean wasn't surprised that they'd left him everything except for a few personal items that had gone to friends, but he *was* surprised to see the extent of it. When he turned 18 he would be the owner of the house in Bainbridge as well as the family's vacation cottage on Chesapeake Bay. He would also be the recipient of several substantial bank accounts, including his college fund which turned out to be several times bigger than he'd been led to believe. It wouldn't be enough to make him rich by far, but if he was careful he could live on it for many years without having to work.

He barely paid any attention to any of this. Money and property weren't things that interested him, especially since he had no intention of remaining in Bainbridge after he graduated from college.

"Do you want me to look into selling the house after you leave for college?" Ms. Peck asked gently. "You don't have to make a decision anytime soon..."

Sean shrugged. "Can you just look after it for me — you know, hire someone to come in and clean it once a month or so? I don't know what I want to do right now."

She patted his arm. "I understand. I wish there was more I can do." She explained to him that she, as trustee of the money until he came of age, had set up a separate account in his name for living expenses for the next month, and that all the accounts would automatically revert to his name the following month. "Call if you need anything," she told him. "I'm just downtown, and I'm here for you if you need me."

He thanked her and saw her to the door, his mind still spinning.

He didn't do much in the next couple of weeks. His friends called and he visited with them for an hour or two at a time, but aside from that he spent most of his days puttering around in the house, going through his parents' things and boxing them up for storage. Once he left for college he didn't want some stranger pawing through his family's personal things while cleaning the house. Ms. Peck arranged a storage locker for him and so he spent his days looking at things, putting them in boxes, and carting the boxes off to storage. It was hard on him: his mother was the type who saved just about everything that had ever been important to her or her family, so Sean had to sort through drawers full of his old school drawings (he was amused by the fact that he seemed to have loved Eastern dragons ever since early childhood—he'd forgotten about that), assignment papers, school holopics, childhood favorite clothes, and other items from his early childhood, as well as letters and pictures and mementos from his parents' lives together both before and after his birth. Eventually he got to the point where he was just glancing at things and tossing them into the boxes—if he looked at everything, he'd be here for far more than a month, and he only had three before he was off to college. He wanted to get it done before then.

He was finishing up with his father's study one day when the doorbell rang. He stabbed the button on the desk that activated the front door security camera and saw that the visitor was Jay Canfield. The dwarf had been one of his two best friends since they'd both been small children, and he'd been dropping by occasionally just to make sure Sean was all right. Sean clicked the speaker button. "Hey, Jay," he called. "Come on in. I'm up in Dad's office."

He was boxing up the last of the office when Jay appeared in the doorway, with his deck bag slung over his shoulder and carrying a large white bag in his arms. The dwarf was about as much the opposite of Sean as it was possible to be: short where he was tall, squat where he was slender and muscular, cynical where he was generally fairly upbeat. Jay and Sean didn't see as much of each other in the last couple of years as Sean had become more involved in his martial arts and football and Jay had gotten himself a datajack and hooked up with Bainbridge's decker community, but they still made time to get together on occasion.

Sean engaged the auto-seal on the last box and tossed it on the couch. "What's up?" he asked, dropping down next to it.

Jay shrugged. "I was just in the area." That was a lie and they both knew it—the dwarf's family lived on the other side of town. "Still boxing? You ever even eat anymore?"

"Yeah. I had lunch...I think."

"You think." He held up the bag, which bore the logo of a local sub shop. "You think you could have another one? You know how much I hate eating alone."

Sean smiled. "Yeah, I think so. Thanks."

They ate lunch in the office, sitting on the floor and talking about safe topics. Jay told Sean about his acceptance to MIT&T, where he was planning to major in Matrix science.

"You, a corper?" Sean asked in mock disbelief. "I'd never have thought—"

"What corper?" Jay's expression was scornful. "You can learn more there than how to be a good little drone. You just gotta know the right people, that's all." He paused. "So you decide where you're goin' yet?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah. Georgetown."

"Football scholarship?"

"No. They offered me one, but turned me down when I didn't want to get the mods. Same with Notre Dame."

Jay cocked his head. "How come? You aren't the type to be scared by the surgery..." He patted his own pair of datajacks, blued chrome against the pale shaved skin of his left temple. "Didn't hurt at all."

"No, it's not that. I just—" he shrugged. "It just didn't feel right. It's like there's something inside me that says don't do it."

Jay took a big bite of his sandwich and chewed noisily, considering. "Well, it's not like you're a wizkid or anything, right? I thought you got tested and turned up mundane." When Sean didn't answer, Jay let it go. "Yeah, yeah. Well, you got the grades to get in even without the jock scholarship, right? Got a major?"

"Nope. I guess I'll figure it out when I get there."

Jay's shrewd dark eyes studied his friend's face. "You don't know *what* you want to do with yourself, do you, Hunter?"

Sean sighed, looking down at his sandwich, realizing that his friend was right. A few weeks ago his life had been so easy—continue his martial arts studies, play football, hang out for the summer and then go to college. Now none of that seemed important to him anymore.

Jay got up, wadding up his sandwich wrappings and tossing them in one of Sean's trash boxes. "C'mon," he said. "Let's go see a trid or something. You need to get out of this place for awhile."

"Can't. I need to finish up with this. Maybe after."

Jay looked around the room. "What else you got to do?"

Sean paused. "The attic. And...Mom and Dad's bedroom."

"Tell ya what—how long you think it'll take to do the attic?"

"I don't know—a couple hours, maybe. There's not a lot up there. Mostly furniture, and it stays where it is."

Jay nodded. "Okay. How 'bout if I help you finish up the attic and then we go see a trid? You can do—the rest—tomorrow. Kay? I'll even spring for the tickets."

Sean knew what Jay was trying to do, and he appreciated it. He hadn't been looking forward to going through the musty attic alone. "Okay," he said decisively. "Deal."

They cleaned up the rest of the lunch trash and then together they trooped to the back of the house, where a narrow, seldom-used back staircase led upward to the attic. Sean went first; flicking the lightswitch at the foot of the stairs he was rewarded with the comforting glow of three low-powered light panels that illuminated the place with an adequate but uninspiring glow. There was one window up here, round and high up on the wall, but it was so covered with dust and grime that it barely let any light in at all.

"Bleah," Jay said, pushing dusty cobwebs out of his way as he followed Sean up into the big open room. "How long's it been since anybody's been up here?"

"Ages. I used to play up here when I was little—Mom and Dad didn't know it, of course—but that hasn't been for years. I don't think they've come up since." Sean shoved some more cobwebs aside and moved further in. As he'd expected, most of what was up here was furniture, sheet covered lumps crouching along the walls as if waiting for someone to come and take them away. Sean's parents liked to refurnish the house occasionally, and as was his mother's tendency, they rarely sold the old furniture. It just went up here in case it was needed again.

Aside from that, boxes were stacked in a disorderly pile next to a wooden dresser. The rest of the place was clear.

"You guys have the same pile of junk in your attic that my folks have in ours," Jay remarked, picking up a broken toy car out of one of the nearest boxes and examining it. "Did your mom save everything you ever touched, or what?"

"Let's just get on with it, okay?" Sean's voice was a little harsher than he'd intended it to be, but his friend let it go.

It only took them a couple of hours to go through the boxes. Most of them were filled with old toys, clothes, school projects, and other such items that were easy to catalog. Sean decided to leave them where they were, since they had no intrinsic value and he had no emotional attachment to them. He shoved the boxes against the wall in a neater stack and wiped the sweat off his face. It was hot and very dusty up here; he could feel more sweat running down his back and soaking his chest. Jay was looking equally wilted; he'd already gone downstairs twice to retrieve soft drinks from the refrigerator. "Are we about done with this?" the dwarf asked after the second cache of sodas had run out. "What I could use right now is a nice shower."

Sean sighed. "Yeah, I guess so. It's not like anybody's going to want to steal any of this stuff. I'll have to have it moved out when—if—I decide to sell the house, but for now it can stay."

"Okay, then. Let's go. I want to go home and get that shower before we go to the trids."

They had almost reached the stairs down when Sean stopped. "Wait a minute."

"What?" Jay demanded.

Sean pointed to a heavy wooden trunk that had been shoved back behind a moth-eaten chair. "I didn't see that before. I'd better check it."

Jay made a long-suffering noise. "Couldn't you do it later? It's roasting up here."

"You can go on if you want. It'll just take a minute. It's probably full of linens or something." Without waiting for an answer, he moved over and pushed the chair out of the way for a better view.

Jay didn't leave; instead, he moved up next to his friend and watched with curiosity as Sean flipped the catch and opened the chest. "See?" he said knowingly when the contents were revealed. "You were right. Linens." He grew silent, however, when Sean pushed the old tablecloths aside to reveal a safe hidden beneath.

"This is weird..." Sean murmured, lifting the thing out and examining it. It wasn't large, only about half a meter square, with heavy plasform sides and a stout metal door. He'd seen similar things for sale in office supply stores, but not often and not recently—it was the kind of safe people bought to keep their valuable papers safe from fires. The only thing was, most people's valuable records were stored electronically, so there wasn't much call for this kind of safe. The one Sean held looked quite old, at least twenty years.

"You think there's anything in it?" Jay, as befit deckers everywhere, had a highly developed sense of curiosity. "Can you open it?"

Sean set the safe down on the top of the dresser and tried the door. As he expected, it was locked tight. "Looks like a maglock," he said, "but an old-style one."

"Do you know what the code might be?"

"No idea. I wouldn't know where to start looking." Sean eyed the safe with consternation. "It's probably empty anyway. Why else would it be up here?" He picked

it up and shook it, but the walls were heavy enough that no sound came through.

Jay was getting a gleam in his eye. "We could open it, you know..."

"How? I told you, I don't know where the —"

"Yeah, I know. But we don't need a code." He dragged a chair over, climbed on it, and examined the front of the safe. "Maglock, all right. Simple one, from the look of it. Old. I could have this baby open in a minute."

Sean looked at him in surprise. "I didn't know you could do that."

"And you still don't," Jay told him conspiratorially. "What you don't know won't hurt you. You want it open or not?"

It took only a few seconds for Sean to decide. "Yeah," he said at last. "Let's take it downstairs, though. It *is* hot up here."

Sean lugged the safe downstairs to the kitchen table while Jay went out to his car for his tools. Less than ten minutes later, the dwarf had popped the cover off the maglock and was fiddling with it with some electronic probes and a meter from his electronics kit. A moment after that there was an odd popping noise and the door swung minimally open. "There," Jay said, satisfied, returning his tools to their case. "Nothing to it." He paused. "You want privacy?" His expression suggested he considered it his duty to ask but would be crestfallen if his friend replied in the affirmative.

Sean shrugged. "No point in secrets now. Let's just look at it." He pulled open the door and peered inside, then pulled out a sheaf of folded papers. "This is it?" he muttered. "Papers?"

"What's on 'em?" Jay asked from the other side of the table. He'd helped himself to another soda from the fridge and was tossing it back while he watched Sean.

But Sean wasn't paying him any more attention. He'd unfolded the sheaf of paper and his eyes cut back and forth over whatever was written on the first page. As he continued to read, riffling through each sheet in turn, his eyes grew wide and his jaw tightened. The papers fell from his nerveless hands and dropped onto the table, where they followed their creases and returned to a semi-folded position. Sean continued to stare at them, ignoring Jay.

"What?" Jay demanded, reaching for the papers.

Sean dropped his hand over them. "I can't believe this..." he whispered. "Why didn't they tell me...?"

Jay stared at him, his expression warring between a friend's concern and a decker's frustrated curiosity. "Sean? What are you talking about? What did they —"

Sean shoved the papers across the table. "According to this—I was adopted," he said in a dull, dead tone. "My parents — weren't really my parents."

3.

Jay stared at Sean, stunned. "Did you just say what I thought you just said?"

"Look for yourself," Sean mumbled. He was looking straight ahead and hadn't moved. He looked like he'd just witnessed an accident—or been in one himself.

The dwarf gently picked up the papers and opened them. As he reached the third in the stack of four, he whistled softly. "Drek...I was hoping maybe you were wrong, but this about clinches it, doesn't it?" He kept his voice soft, unwilling to intrude on his friend's shock. Silently he spread out the paper on the table, folding out the creases.

"My birth certificate," Sean whispered.

Jay tilted his head. "But—haven't you seen your birth certificate before? Didn't you need it to—I don't know—get into school and sports and stuff?"

Sean picked up the document and stared at it. "I've seen *a* birth certificate," he said. "Electronically, I mean. I've never seen one on paper. I didn't think they did that anymore." He wasn't even seeing the words or the two tiny holographic images on the sheet—his mind wasn't functioning that rationally.

"Could it be a fake?" Jay got up and came over to the other side of the table, peering at the certificate. "Have you ever heard of these people...uh...Juliana Harvath and Terry Symonz? What kind of name is Symonz, anyway? Maybe the whole thing's a joke."

Sean shook his head. Even amidst the shock of this new discovery following so closely behind the tragedy of his parents' (or maybe *not* his parents') deaths, a tiny finger of understanding was scratching gently at the back of his head. "I don't think it's a fake," he said. His voice still sounded numb in his ears.

"You know these people?"

Sean shook his head. He leaned in closer, examining the two faces in the holograms. They were institutional-style holos, the kind that never made anyone look good, and showed a woman in her early 30s with strong features, green eyes, and short white-blond hair, and a man perhaps a little younger with darker blond hair, the purposeful look of a predator, and ice-blue cybereyes fashioned to look like cats' eyes. "I don't know them...but look at the woman, especially. Juliana."

Jay did as directed, then looked at Sean's face. "You look like her," he said reluctantly. "But it's easy to fake pics like that. I could do it—"

"But *why*?" Sean demanded almost angrily. "Mom and Dad didn't expect to be in that plane crash. They didn't expect me to find this stuff. They hid it away for a reason! Why would they possibly want to fake my birth certificate?" The exclamation took the fire out of him and he lowered his head, burying it in his hands so his spiky hair stuck out between his fingers. "I don't know what to do. The scary thing is, things are starting to make sense."

"What do you mean, make sense?" Jay asked. He glanced at the other papers, which were thick with legalese. They did indeed seem to pertain to the adoption of a baby.

Sean took a deep breath without looking up. "Ever since I was a little kid, I never felt—quite right. I don't even know how to explain it. Mom and Dad were always good to me, they loved me—I know that. But I always sort of wondered how I could have ended up as their child. You know what I mean?"

"No," Jay said frankly. "But don't let that stop you."

Again Sean sighed, this time meeting his friend's eyes. "What I mean is that Mom and Dad were...they fit in. They were successful in their jobs and respected in the

community and they never did anything to step outside the lines. They followed the script, and were happy to do it. But me—ever since I was a kid I’ve been getting into trouble.”

Jay smiled at that. He remembered—most of the time Sean had dragged him along on his adventures: everything from climbing to the top of the tallest building in town (Jay stayed on the ground for that one) to hopping freight trains to distant cities to shoplifting items and then sneaking them back into the store to return them to running off at night to hang out with friends in the ork and troll parts of town—Sean had been a restless thrillseeker ever since Jay had known him. There was never anything malicious about it and his stunts were usually only at worst borderline illegal, but he seemed driven by the compulsion to constantly test himself and his limits. It was a trait very different from those of his staid, stable parents. “Yeah,” he said wryly. “I know all about that.”

Sean got up and paced the kitchen, still holding the birth certificate. “I never really thought about it consciously until now, but—I guess I always kind of wondered how parents like Mom and Dad could have ended up with a kid like me. That’s what I mean.” He stopped in front of Jay. “Hey, do you mind if I skip that trid tonight? I’ve got some things to think about.”

Jay nodded slowly. “You want me to stick around?”

“No...I think I just want to be alone right now, if that’s okay. And Jay?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t tell anybody about this, okay? Promise.”

Jay gave him a look. “Come on, Hunter. You know me better than that.”

Sean nodded soberly. “Yeah, I do. Sorry. I’m just—a little preoccupied right now, you know?”

The dwarf gathered up his gear and gave his friend a look that might have been sympathy. "Can't imagine why." Sean followed him out and he paused at the front door. "Take care of yourself, Hunter, okay? And call me if you need me to look into anything for you." He tapped his datajack.

"Thanks. I might just do that."

After Jay left, Sean sent the next hour sitting nearly motionless at the kitchen table, poring over the four sheets of paper that had once again turned his life upside-down just when he thought he'd started getting it back in order again. Three of them were mostly legal boilerplate pertaining to adoption, or at least that was the conclusion Sean came to as his eyes glazed over trying to make sense of the lawyer-speak. The birth certificate occupied most of his attention: he was becoming more convinced by the minute that it was genuine. Terry Symonz and Juliana Harvath's dates of birth showed that he would have been thirty and she thirty-three when Sean was born; the birthdate was right: July 27, 2060. It listed both of their occupations as "freelance security consultant."

The place of birth was, oddly, Seattle.

Sean's eyes narrowed. Seattle? It was strange, wasn't it, to bring a baby all the way from one coast to the other for an adoption? He supposed people adopted babies from all over the world, but still –

There were a few curious omissions from the certificate and the other papers, such as the name of the hospital where the baby was born, the attending physician, and the SIN assignment. Sean knew that babies were assigned SINS at birth, so it should have been on here somewhere. It wasn't. "Why didn't you tell me...?" he whispered to nobody, staring at the two small faces

and then at one of the holos of his parents on the hallway wall outside the kitchen.

Without thinking, he snatched up the phone and punched in a number. When the party at the other end answered, he demanded, "Why didn't anybody tell me?"

Gretchen Peck came over quickly after that, and to Sean's shock she was every bit as surprised as he was. She examined the papers he showed her, her brow creasing with concentration. She looked up at Sean, shaking her head. "I didn't have anything to do with these papers, Sean. I give you my word. If you're adopted, I didn't know about it. I don't think anybody in town did."

"This is *crazy*," Sean yelled, once again pacing. "Are you telling me they adopted me in *secret*? How can somebody just show up with a baby and nobody notices they weren't expecting?"

Ms. Peck watched Sean pace, glancing from the papers to the boy. "I think I can help you with that, at least. You see, I didn't meet your parents until they moved here to Bainbridge. That was almost eighteen years ago. They arrived here and bought this house. At the time, they had a baby perhaps two or three months old at the most."

Sean stared. "You mean...they showed up here with me as a baby? They were new in town?"

The lawyer nodded. "They settled in quickly, got involved in the community, and I guess it just seemed to everyone after awhile that they'd been here forever. Especially considering how often people move around. But no, they showed up about the same time you did."

"Do—do you know where they came from?" Sean came back over and perched on the arm of the couch. "Could it have been Seattle?"

"I don't think so," she told him ruefully. "They claim they were from somewhere in upstate New York. Nobody checked—nobody thought to—but the accents were right."

"So..." Sean paused, looking out the big picture window at the front of the house. The sky was darkening to a deep blue, birds calling to each other from the trees. "You think that they might have moved here to hide the fact that they adopted a baby instead of had one?"

"It's possible," Ms. Peck agreed. "Your mother, especially, loved children—I always wondered why she never had any others, but it wasn't my business so I never asked. Perhaps she was unable to, and was ashamed about it. Or perhaps your father was unable." She shrugged. "It's all speculation now, of course."

Sean shook his head in confusion. "I just don't understand. They didn't even mention it in the will. Were they just planning to let me go through the rest of my life without knowing?" His voice sounded more bitter than he'd wanted it to.

"I don't know, Sean," Ms. Peck said gently. "I can do some looking into it if you like, but after all this time I don't know what I'll be able to turn up. I will tell you one thing, though." She held up the papers. "These aren't standard adoption papers."

Sean turned back around to face her. "What? Why not?"

"The language is...different than a standard adoption document. Certain bits of information that should be here are missing, such as the name of the agency. And you've already noticed that the SIN and the hospital and physician names are missing. If I had to make a guess, I'd say that this adoption was carried out with some degree of secrecy. It was certainly never registered with the

authorities, or it would have come out after your parents' deaths."

Silence hung in the air for several seconds. When Sean finally spoke he didn't want to ask, but he had to know: "Why...might they have done the adoption in secret?"

Ms. Peck looked uncomfortable. "I don't think it would be right to speculate on that, Sean. Your parents —"

"—aren't my parents," he finished. "I want to know, Ms. Peck. It's my right to know. In a week I'll be eighteen—an adult. I have a right to know who was messing around with my life." He paused and when the lawyer didn't speak, he continued: "Let's see. It could have been that Mom or Dad couldn't have kids and were embarrassed about it, like you said. It doesn't sound like I was kidnapped or anything, 'cause if that was true we wouldn't have the birth certificate—" He looked challengingly at Ms. Peck, as if inviting her to step in at any moment.

She sighed. "I'm sure it's nothing like that, Sean. I don't want to speculate, but if you force me to—I'd say that the adoption itself was illegal. As in, one or both of your natural parents didn't have SINS, so they couldn't go through the proper legal channels."

Sean's eyes widened. "You mean they're criminals? Illegals?"

"I don't know, Sean. It's possible. It seems the most likely scenario. There are a lot of people without SINS out there."

He nodded slowly. "Yeah...maybe that is it." He leaned back against the soft couch, lounging perfectly but precariously balanced on the arm. "I'll tell you this, though—I'm going to find 'em. If they're still alive, I'm going to find 'em."

Ms. Peck looked sober. "I can't tell you what to do, Sean—not after you turn eighteen, anyway. But I can tell

you I don't advise it. You could be leaving yourself open for disappointment at best, and serious danger at worst. Remember, many people who don't have SINS don't have them for a reason—because they don't want to be found."

Sean bowed his head. "I appreciate the advice, Ms. Peck. But my parents—my adopted parents—did this for a reason too, and I want to find out why. And if my real parents are still alive, I want to find out why they gave me up."

The lawyer nodded wearily as if she knew this would be his answer. "I understand your need to do this, Sean. I hope you'll understand that I, in all good conscience, can't help you. I can wish you luck and hope for the best, but that's all." She rose and picked up her leather briefcase. "But remember—for another week you're still under my care, so keep that in mind before you do anything rash."

"I promise." Sean didn't even hear himself saying the words. As he showed Ms. Peck out the door, he was already making plans.

4.

Sean did keep his promise to Ms. Peck, but it wasn't because he felt any particular compunctions against heading out a week early. No, he had to prepare.

He spent most of the week when he wasn't working at Jay's place, lounging in a chair in his friend's cluttered bedroom while Jay lay stretched out on the bed plugged into his deck. Watching a decker work, he knew, was one of the most boring pastimes on the face of the earth, but he didn't have anything else to do. His body longed to move, to run, to be outside under the sun, but his mind was more interested in finding out whatever information Jay was locating. So, he remained in the room viewing the information he'd downloaded about Seattle on his portable trid rig, surfing the Matrix turtle-style, and pacing.

Jay, of course, had been all too willing to help when Sean had asked him the morning after Ms. Peck had left. He'd taken all the information Sean had given him and set some of his automated processes to go off and search for more, then jacked in and went in pursuit of the rest of the data himself. "It's old," the dwarf warned Sean. "Don't get your hopes up too high—do you know how much drek has accumulated on the Matrix in nearly eighteen years? This stuff's probably buried so deep it'll take ages to find it, if it hasn't been archived somewhere offline. But I'll give it my best shot."

That was all Sean could ask him to do, and he was grateful for the help. He suspected that Jay was glad to have some real-world information to go after, instead of pursuing the educational but pointless hacking he'd done in the past with his decker friends. Jay had shown him some of the "improvements" he'd made to his deck using components these friends had helped him obtain, and it

was clear even to a non-decker like Sean that this machine was set up to do quite a bit more than the standard rig owned by the standard high-schooler. For nothing more than keeping Jay well supplied with food and sodas he was getting the kind of help that he wasn't sure he could find anywhere else.

The trouble was, Jay wasn't finding much. On the eve of Sean's eighteenth birthday, the dwarf pulled the deck's plug out of his jack and tossed it on the bed with a disgusted sigh.

Sean leaned forward, putting aside his holo-goggles. "Nothing?"

"Not fraggin' much." The dwarf hadn't given him anything yet, preferring to find as much as he could before delivering the goods.

"Well, tell me. Anything's better than I have."

Jay pushed himself up to a sitting position, took a long pull from a soda can on his nightstand, and then took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's start with your parents. Your adopted parents, I mean."

Sean's eyes narrowed. "You checked *them* out? I didn't ask you to do that."

"I thought it might be relevant." Jay shrugged. "You want the data or not?"

"Yeah..." Sean said with a sigh.

"Okay. Your lawyer-lady was right: they did come from upstate New York. White Plains, to be exact. Your dad used to work for a little corp that's since gone out of business."

Sean nodded. His parents never talked about their lives before Bainbridge; he wondered why he'd never noticed before. But then, despite their affection for each other, he and his parents hadn't ever really discussed much. "So?"

"So, I did a little more checking. Hospital records. They show a Kristi Hunter checking in on May 15th, 2060." He looked up. "These kinds of records are usually pretty hard to crack, but I guess 'cause they're so old they haven't bothered to update the encryption. Anyway, she checked in then, and the record shows she was three months pregnant. She had a miscarriage."

Sean's eyes widened.

"Yeah," Jay said, nodding sympathetically. "I guess something went pretty wrong, 'cause the record says after that she wasn't able to have kids anymore."

"So...she...they adopted me because they couldn't have a baby of their own?"

"Looks that way," Jay said. "Also looks like they didn't waste much time. If you were about three months old when they brought you home, that means they had to do the adoption between July and October of the same year."

"Less than six months..." Sean whispered. "That's fast, isn't it?"

Jay shrugged. "How should I know? I haven't ever adopted a baby. But it sure sounds fast to me. So whatever they did, they set it up quick."

Sean mulled that over for a few moments. "Okay, so what about Juliana and Terry?"

"Damn little. That's what I was looking for just now, and a few of my searches finally came back. I've found a couple of references to both of those names in Seattle, around that time and a little before, but nothing to go on. No addresses or anything."

"So they *were* there, though," Sean said.

"Yeah, looks like it. But who knows where they are now?"

Sean sat up straight, then stood. "That's what I'm gonna find out. It's a starting point. Thanks, Jay. I owe you big."

The dwarf scrambled to jump off the bed, tossing his deck aside. "Wait just a minute, *omae*. Where you going?"

"Seattle." He paused. "Is there anything else you found that I should know?"

Jay moved to block the door. "Hang on. You're just gonna take off to Seattle? Just like that?"

"Yeah. After tomorrow nobody can stop me anymore. I'll drive out in my car. Why?"

Jay looked up at him, his dark eyes serious. "Then I'm coming with you."

Sean snorted. "Don't be crazy, Canfield. I'm probably going on a wild goose chase out there. It's already almost August, and you leave for MIT&T in September. I don't know how long I'll be gone."

The dwarf crossed his short arms over his chest stubbornly. "You're gonna need some backup, and besides, I know people in Seattle." He indicated his deck with a head motion. "I can get us a place to stay, and once we get out there, I might be able to find some more data for you."

Sean was staring at him like he'd gone crazy. "Jay —"

"No go, Hunter. You got yourself a co-pilot, so don't argue."

Truth be told, Sean was just as glad to have Jay along. The long drive alone wasn't sounding appealing. But — "Okay, Jay, fine. You want to come, you can come. But why?"

Jay relaxed. "You really want to know?"

"Yeah, I want to know."

He crossed the room and picked up his deck, which he packed away in its padded bag quickly but reverently. "It's Seattle, Hunter. Where the action is."

Sean looked puzzled. "Action?"

Jay leaned in conspiratorially. "Remember I told you before that I wasn't going to end up as a good little corper?"

"Yeah...you said you could learn lots of things if you had the right teachers."

"Well, Seattle's where a lot of those teachers are. I've already hooked up with some of 'em online, but I want to be in the middle of it. I want to learn the stuff they don't teach you at school."

Sean looked at him severely. "You telling me you might not be coming back to MIT&T?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Who knows? I'm keeping my options open, is all. So, we on?"

There was no point in arguing about it. "Yeah, we're on. I'll pick you up in the morning. I just hope you know what you're getting into."

"Maybe more than you do, chummer," Jay said seriously.

Sean woke up at dawn the next morning after having spent most of the night tossing and turning in bed. He showered, wolfed down an energy bar and some juice from the kitchen, and threw the few things he wanted to take with him into a duffel bag. This he tossed into the entryway by the front door with his thermal sleeping bag. He toured the house one last time before he left; taking a final look around his bedroom, he wondered when (or if) he was going to see it again, then hurried down the hall. At the last moment he snatched a small holo of himself and his parents off the wall and slid that into a folder along with the papers he had found in the attic. He locked up the house, took a deep breath, and ran down to the car without a look back.

Althea was there waiting for him, leaning against the Westwind's silver hood.

She looked slim and serious in her goth black and pale makeup, her dark eyes huge in the face of a somber pixie. "Hi," she said softly.

Sean dropped his gear on the grass and approached her. "Hi." It was very rare indeed for her to be up this early—usually she stayed up most of the night and slept until well past noon.

"You're leaving, aren't you?" Her face betrayed no emotion, positive or negative, to accompany the question.

"How did you know?"

She shrugged. "I didn't. But I suspected. I was pretty sure Bainbridge wouldn't hold you any longer than it could." She gave him a faraway smile. "Happy birthday, Sean."

With everything that had happened, he'd almost forgotten. His eighteenth birthday had become less a cause to celebrate and more simply a day that meant his liberation. "Thanks." That sounded awkward, so he added, "Thanks for remembering."

Althea nodded. "I just wanted to give you this before you left." She held out a small box, simply but exquisitely wrapped. "Just something to remember me by."

Suddenly he felt strange. "I'm not dropping off the face of the earth, Althea," he said in a vain attempt at teasing. "You have my number. You can call me whenever you want."

"I know. Just—happy birthday." She held the package closer.

He took it, touching for just a moment her small cold hand. She wasn't acting like herself this morning. Feeling her eyes on him, he slipped the wrapping off the package and opened the small velvet box within. He stared at it, then at her. "Althea, I—"

"Just remember me, okay?" she asked, her voice soft.

Sean nodded slowly, taking the golden chain from the box. Suspended from it was a coiled Eastern dragon, its mouth open in a silent roar. The only spot of color on it was the tiny pale blue jewel of its eye, the same color as Sean's own eyes. "I don't know what to say —"

She closed her hand around his, squeezing the little dragon gently. "Don't say anything. Just take care of yourself, wherever you're going. And come back to visit sometime?"

"I promise," he whispered. Bending, he kissed her on the forehead. "I don't forget friends. You know that."

"Yeah. I do." She pulled back, letting his hand go. "Take care, Sean," she said again, and then she turned and was gone, hurrying off down the street. From behind, with her black-dyed hair and her long black coat billowing around her slender frame, she looked like a tiny piece of the night that had broken free for one last dance under the sunshine. Sean watched her until she disappeared behind some trees, his hand clenched around the pendant she had given him. After she was gone he looked down at it for a moment, then clasped it around his neck, loaded up his car, and drove off.

Jay was hurrying out of the house before Sean could stop the car. He threw his bags in the trunk (except for his deck which remained on a strap over his shoulder) and glared at Sean. "You have second thoughts about going? I thought you'd be here half an hour ago."

Sean shook his head. "Just get in and let's go."

The dwarf didn't ask questions, but did as he was told and soon they were underway. "Anybody give you any trouble?" he asked as he watched the scenery. They were too far outside town for the grid, so Sean was driving manually.

"No. I called Ms. Peck last night and told her I was leaving. She didn't like it, but she knew she couldn't stop me so she didn't say anything."

"So you've got control of your bank accounts now?"

"Yeah...I don't want to dip into 'em more than necessary, though. That money's got to last me through college." He paused. "How 'bout you? Any trouble with your parents?"

"Nah...half the time I don't think they even know I'm home. I told Mom I was takin' off and she just told me to make sure to clean up my room before I left so she could rent it out, and to be back in time to leave for school."

"So, you clean your room?"

"Hell, no!" Jay grinned. "She's kidding anyway. She probably won't even go in there till I get back." He rustled around in his bag, pulled out a music chip, and popped it into the Westwind's stereo. The loud pounding beat of his current favorite band, Little Dead Things, poured out of the speakers. He settled back with a contented sigh.

The trip to Seattle took them six days, and it was only that long because Sean had to stop occasionally to sleep. The Westwind's elderly autopilot wasn't robust enough to trust it to a cross-country drive, and even now the Grid wasn't everywhere. Jay slept in the car—he couldn't share the driving because the Westwind wasn't set up for his dwarf limbs, so he earned his keep by playing DJ, switching music chips in and out and playing them at top volume to keep Sean awake.

They didn't talk much beyond what was necessary—the two of them had been friends long enough that they were comfortable in each other's company and didn't need a constant stream of patter to keep their interest. Sean drove fast but not too fast, as he had no desire to get picked up by the cops in some of the Native American

lands they were crossing. He'd heard those guys had no sense of humor and he didn't want to test the hypothesis.

As they got closer to Seattle, less than a day out, Sean asked Jay, "So—you said you've got us a place to stay?" He had originally figured they'd get a motel room somewhere, but he liked the dwarf's idea better: for one thing it touched his savings less, but more importantly it was more interesting. His primary mission was firmly in mind, but if he got to meet some intriguing people in the process he wasn't going to complain.

"Yeah. We'll have to rent a place for the night 'cause the guy wants to meet us in the meat before he takes us there, but don't worry, we're in."

Sean nodded. He knew from past experience that the words 'don't worry' coming from Jay were about as trustworthy as a shark saying *c'mon in the water...I won't eat you...* but that was okay. Nothing in life was certain, after all.

They arrived at the edge of the Seattle plex early that evening. It was already dark, and the towering forms of the buildings that made up the city's skyline blazed in the inky blackness. They could pick out the Renraku Arcology, the Aztechnology Pyramid, and the Space Needle without difficulty. As the traffic increased Sean switched the Westwind to autopilot and let the grid take over the steering, directing the car to take them toward Downtown.

"Now what?" Sean asked an hour later. They were back off the grid again and he was guiding the car down rainslicked streets lined with tall buildings a few blocks away from Downtown. The neon from the buildings' signs flashed eerie colors into the puddles, changing them from red to blue to green and then back again. The ads were everywhere, nearly blotting out the streetlights.

They'd have blotted out the moon and the stars too, if they'd been visible in the first place. The overcast, cloud-choked sky formed a weird backdrop to the lurid manmade excesses that surrounded them.

Jay was plugged into his deck, consulting the map that displayed on his cybereyes. "Anywhere around here's fine. Just find us a place for the night with a jackpot and I'll get in touch with Crank."

Sean found a motel not too far away that showed a vacancy, so he pulled the Westwind quickly into the small parking lot. The place was flanked on one side by a squat building advertising XXX NUDE GIRLS - HUMAN/META/CHANGELING XXX and on the other side by a well-patronized liquor store. Nobody gave Sean and Jay a second look as they got their gear out of the car and arranged for a room. The ork behind the counter shoved two magkeys across the counter without looking up from whatever was playing on his unseen screen. "You sure the jack in there works?" Jay asked, looking dubiously around the tattered lobby.

"What?" The ork looked up, annoyed. "Oh. Yeah, yeah. Works fine." Without waiting for an answer he returned to his screen.

Jay muttered something under his breath and followed Sean out.

The room was in better shape than might have been indicated by the lobby: it was plain and unremarkable, but at least it was clean. Sean tossed his bag on one of the two beds and lowered himself down after it while Jay got his deck out and hunted for the jackpot. "I'm gonna be here awhile," he told Sean. "You might want to go get some dinner or somethin'. Bring me back somethin', kay?"

"Yeah, okay." As Jay located the jackpot, snugged the deck's plug into it, and settled back on the other bed,

Sean dug out some fresh clothes, showered, and dressed. As an afterthought, he slipped on his jacket. Oddly, the simple action comforted him. The jacket itself had been a gift from his parents a couple of years ago: real leather, its rich brown folds butter-soft and distressed (both artificially by the maker and naturally by Sean himself). Over the past two years Althea, a talented artist, had painted various designs on it: dragons, Japanese and Chinese characters, the Watanabe school's rising-phoenix logo. It made him think of home, but in a good way. Like he had a home to go back to, if he wanted. He slipped out of the room, locking the door behind him. Jay didn't even look up.

Outside, the street was teeming with life. Sean had seen a McHugh's a few doors down when they were driving in, so he headed for that. It wouldn't have been his first choice for dinner, but it was close and Jay had a taste for junk food. He walked quickly but confidently, his eyes always moving.

"Hey, cutie," called a voice from his left. Two troll women dressed in short skirts and glittering jackets lounged in a doorway, grinning in a rather unwholesome way. Their tusks were polished to match their jackets. "Want a little action?"

"Not tonight, ladies," Sean said cheerfully without stopping.

"Too bad. We could show a nice boy like you a *real* good time. You come by if you do, 'kay?"

"If I do, I will." He grinned back over his shoulder at them, and their expressions softened somewhat. They weren't much different from Mamie, the troll joygirl who worked the East Side area back in Farwell. He'd never taken Mamie up on that particular offer either, but she did make great oatmeal cookies.

He passed several more people on his way to McHugh's: two more joygirls (a human and a blue-furred changeling), a hurrying corp-type who had the look of a john leaving an illicit tryst, and three young humans in jackets with matching markings who watched him through hooded eyes as he passed. Sean kept his pace the same but stepped up his awareness; he'd seen enough gangs to recognize these three as gangers, even though he didn't know the particulars. They simply watched him and did not move.

McHugh's itself was packed with customers of all metatypes, so it took nearly twenty minutes for Sean to get his order and get out. He spent the time people-watching, more than a little amazed at the sight of so many people of so many different types together. The restaurant's high security gave it a reputation as a safe place, so its customers ran the gamut from frail-looking human bag ladies to huge, tough young troll males in studded leather and everything in between. Sean was already beginning to realize just how insular his upbringing in Bainbridge had been, despite his numerous forays into the neighboring towns to get tastes of how other people lived. He decided he'd better be on his guard even more than usual until he got more of a feel for the place.

When he got back to the room Jay was still zoned out. He grabbed the dwarf's sock-clad foot and shook it vigorously. "Dinner's served," he called. "Your favorite – glop on a bun."

"Ah...you found a McHugh's," Jay muttered. His eyes glazed over for a second as he finished up what he was doing and pulled the plug out of his datajack. He grabbed the bag and started spreading out the food on his bedspread. "Any trouble?"

Sean shook his head. "Got us a place yet?"

"Yeah. We got a meet in two hours. Place called the Mouse House. Crank likes us, we got a place to crash for awhile."

"You didn't ask him about what we're looking for, did you?"

"Not yet." Jay bit into a McHugh burger and chewed contentedly, mopping up the runnel of grease that meandered down his chin and got stuck in his goatee. "Once we're in, I'll ask."

Sean dropped down into the chair next to the bed and regarded the food. He decided he wasn't hungry yet. "So this Crank—how much do you know about him?"

Jay shrugged. "Not much—been talking to him for a couple of months."

"So how do you know he's not gonna roll us for our credchips?" Sean didn't sound like he was terribly worried about the prospect, but just making conversation.

"I don't," Jay said cheerfully, taking another massive bite. "But I think I've learned a thing or two, and you're not exactly the thickest plank on the boat yourself. We'll do okay."

Sean nodded. Leaning down, he reached into his bag and pulled out the birth certificate. "Can you make copies of these pictures, so we don't have to show the whole thing to anybody?"

"Sure. Was figurin' on doing that anyway, after I finish eating. I'll put it on a chip for ya."

Sean nodded, examining the tiny faces again. By now he'd committed them to memory. He wondered if the blond woman and the man with the cat-cybereyes were still in Seattle—if they were even still alive. She would be fifty-one now, and he forty-eight. Lots of people didn't live that long, especially if they were outside the law. He stared into the direct green gaze of the woman who was his real mother and wondered what she was like. He

wondered if the man would be proud of what his son had become, or if he had, as many guys did, just taken off and long forgotten about this particular misstep in his life.

"Hunter?"

Sean was startled from his thoughts by Jay's voice. It didn't sound like the first time he'd called. "What?"

"You were sure in your own world there...Listen, I'm done here. You gonna eat anything?"

He shook his head. "Not really hungry. I'll grab something later."

"What say I make those picture chips for you and then we head over to the Mouse House? You know — scope the place out a little. Before they show up." Jay swung his legs over the edge of the bed, dropped to the floor, and began pulling on his boots.

"You don't trust 'em either, do you?" Sean was pleased that his friend hadn't fully succumbed to the lure of finally getting to meet face to face with a "real" dealer.

The dwarf shrugged. "Better safe than sorry, right?"

5.

The Mouse House was only a few miles away from their hotel, but it took them nearly an hour to get there because of the snarled Seattle traffic. Like most big cities, Seattle didn't slow down at all when the sun went down; in fact, if anything it became more chaotic as the ordered patterns of the commuters gave way to the confused mishmash of thousands of people simultaneously looking for a good time.

Sean punched in the address and let the Grid take the car to the Mouse House, leaning back in his seat and watching Jay's stubby fingers flying over the keyboard of his deck. He'd already scanned in the pictures of Terry Symonz and Juliana Harvath, enlarging and enhancing them and then burning them onto several tiny datachips which Sean now had in his possession. At this moment he was busily producing fake identification in case one had to be 21 to get into the House and the staff wasn't amenable to bribes.

They needn't have worried. The bored-looking ork at the door barely gave them a second glance as they entered the bar, slotting their five-nuyen cover charges and handing back their credchips with a rote-sounding "Have fun."

Inside they paused a moment to look around. Jay grinned. "This place is *wiz*," he declared. The lighting was dim but all around them the walls were decorated with old pieces of computer hardware—some from as far back as the previous century—painted with various substances that made them glow brightly in different colors. There were tables on several levels, each one with its own bank of jackpoints, and along the far wall were a line of working old-fashioned console video games. Strangely, some of them appeared to be playing themselves until

Sean noticed several of the bar's patrons jacked in nearby and occasionally glancing toward them. Like the walls, the games and the tables glowed as well. Sean glanced down at himself and was pleased to discover that his UV dragon tattoo was shining a soft purple, its head and neck poking out of the deep scoop of his tank top.

Jay was tugging on his jacket sleeve. "C'mon. Let's take a look around."

Sean followed his friend in and they spent the next fifteen minutes wandering around looking at the items on the wall, the table decor, and the clientele (the latter discreetly, of course). They selected a table in the back and Jay jacked in, using the bar's automated ordering system to summon them a couple of beers. When asked for ID he plugged in the fakes he'd made and they were accepted without question. "See?" he demanded to Sean proudly. "I do good work."

"Either that or they don't care as long as they make an effort." Sean, unable to jack in, was lounged back in his chair with his legs stretched out in front of him, watching the door. Most of the clientele in here didn't look like they could pass a serious check into the legality of their being here, but the bartender and the waitstaff ignored them except to provide more drinks. Of course, the fact that most of the waitstaff was robotic might have had something to do with it. The only living employees Sean noticed were the ork at the door and the human behind the bar.

"How are we supposed to find this guy?" Sean asked as another ten minutes ticked away and Jay continued to commune with the Matrix.

"I already sent a message. He'll get tagged when he comes in."

"So we wait."

"Yeah, looks like it."

They didn't have to wait long. Only a couple of minutes later, text flashed on the screen that doubled as their table: *You're early.*

Jay did something with his deck and his own words became visible on the table's screen. "So are you. Where are you?"

I'm watching you now. Don't look.

It was hard, but both Jay and Sean managed not to look up. "What do you want us to do?" Jay typed. Sean could tell he was frustrated by this archaic method of communication, but Crank ran the show.

The words crawled across the screen. *Prove you're who you say you are. What's the name of the utility I sold you last month?*

Jay thought about it a moment, then nodded and typed, "CrankYank 2.01."

There was a pause. *What's your sister's name?*

"Don't have a sister," Jay typed, rolling his eyes at Sean.

Another pause. *Okay. Look at the back wall and find the iPod. Follow the instructions there.*

Sean, who was reading upside down, looked perplexed as Jay typed an acknowledgement. "What's an iPod?"

"Kind of like an antique music chip player," Jay said, getting up from the table and blanking the screen. "Pretty wiz in its day. C'mon."

Sean followed him to the back of the bar. He didn't have any idea what he was looking for but apparently Jay did because a moment later they were standing in front of a small white device attached to the wall in the midst of some other ancient computer hardware. It had a tiny screen, which the two of them had to lean in close to read. The message there said:

Push down, then pull out.

The two of them looked at each other for a moment, then Jay grinned. Reaching out, he grabbed the iPod and pushed down on it. It moved easily. Then he gripped it and tugged.

The little device came out from the wall about an inch, but that was clearly not the important part, because a section of the wall swung away with it. Behind this secret door a narrow corridor led to another, more conventional-looking door. Graffiti lined the small hall between the two.

Behind Jay, Sean sighed and looked amused. He'd never met a decker who didn't have at least *some* flair for the dramatic. Apparently Crank was no exception.

Jay knocked on the door at the other end of the hallway. "Enter," came a voice. It sounded young—maybe late teens or early twenties.

They pushed open the door and went in. Sean didn't know what to expect, but what he saw was certainly not it. The room was small and smelled of equal parts BO and pizza. There were pillows spread out across the floor, which was otherwise covered by industrial-grade carpeting. The single window was painted over with black paint. There appeared to be no other exit.

Sitting in the middle of the floor on a pile of pillows was a young man—at least Sean *thought* he was young. It was hard to tell because he was covered from head to toe in a short, dense coat of dark fur. His yellow eyes were catlike, but the hair on his head looked human and not very clean. He wore long cutoff shorts and a floppy black T-shirt that read "FREAK NATION" across the front. "You Canfield?"

Jay nodded. From the expression on his face Sean didn't think his friend had expected Crank to be a

changeling, but he recovered quickly. "Yeah. This is my friend Hunter."

"How you liking Seattle so far?"

"It's damp," Jay said. "Listen, you said you might be able to find us a place for a few days. Did that work out?"

Crank shrugged and sat up, shoving his deck aside. "Yeah. Me and my roommates got floor space. It isn't fancy but it's out of the rain." He grinned, looking Jay up and down. "You didn't say you were a halfer."

Instead of getting offended at the slur, Jay just grinned right back. "You didn't say you were a hairball."

Crank shrugged again. "Hey, in the Matrix nobody knows you're a dog." He and Jay both laughed at that, and Sean was left to ponder the universal strangeness of deckers once again.

He cleared his throat and glanced at Jay.

"Oh, yeah," the dwarf said. "We need a little local help, too, if you or your guys can do it. We're looking for somebody who might or might not still be in town."

Crank stood up, brushing pizza crumbs off his shirt and stuffing his deck in a backpack which he slung over one shoulder. "Let's get outta this dump. Only reason I use it for meets is because Morey the owner doesn't hassle me." He glanced at Sean, then back at Jay. "We can talk more back at our place."

Crank's place proved to be a small apartment in a dingy building about a mile from the Mouse House. Sean followed the two deckers, who seemed to have bonded like long-lost brothers on the ride back, inside, noting the tiny security camera that had been mounted outside the door.

Inside the place resembled the room where they had met Crank, littered with old mismatched furniture, threadbare carpet, fast-food wrappers, and pornographic

magazines. The only things that appeared to be both functional and in excellent working order were the various decks spread out over folding tables and the trid unit in the corner. The place had two other occupants currently: a human and an ork, both of whom were sprawled over stained couches with datajacks plugged into their heads. They didn't even acknowledge the newcomers' presence.

"Don't mind them," Crank said, waving a dismissive hand. "They'll be out for the rest of the night." He shoved some pizza boxes off another couch and sat down, motioning for them to do the same. "You guys can sleep here on the floor—you'll just have to clear it off. Bathroom's over there, matrix connection on the wall, and there's a soyburger joint across the street. Now, what's this you need to find?"

For the first time, Sean spoke. He pulled out the pictures of Juliana and Terry and handed them across to the changeling. "Their names are Terry Symonz and Juliana Harvath. They used to live in Seattle. They didn't have SINS, for whatever that's worth. I want to find them if they're still in town."

Crank examined the pictures. "These look old. How long ago did you say they were in town?"

"Eighteen or so years ago."

The black-furred decker sighed, shaking his head. "That's a long time. Data that old gets hard to find."

"Are you saying you can't do it?" Sean asked.

The yellow eyes settled on him. "Didn't say that. Didn't say that at all. Just saying that it might take awhile."

"How long is awhile?"

Crank shrugged. "Assuming it's there to find, could be a couple of hours, could be a month. It depends on who they were and how much they don't want to be

found." He sighed, leaning back on the sofa and stretching in a very catlike manner. "There's another problem, too."

"What's that?" Jay asked.

"I won't be able to get to it for at least a couple of days. I've got a job I've got to finish first—a real paying job." He grinned at Jay ruefully. "You know the score, *omae*—paying biz comes before friendship. Meeting you two at the Mouse House already cut into the time I was supposed to be spending on it."

"We can pay—" Sean started, but Jay waved him off.

"Okay," the dwarf said. "You can't do it. Can you tell us anyone who can? Sooner than a couple of days?" He looked over at the two stuporous figures by the trid. "What about them?"

Crank snorted. "Them? I wouldn't trust them to find the newspaper. They're screwups, mostly." He thought a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. If you really want to find old stuff, especially if it doesn't want to be found, you'll want to look up Teddy. Teddy's not cheap, but if you want something fast, that's the place to go."

6.

Sean paced the room while Jay hooked up Crank's hitcher jack to his deck. "So you say I'll be able to talk and move around, but not touch anything?"

"Yeah, right." Jay sounded distracted, fiddling with some setting that only he could see. "They've really improved hitchers in the last few years. Used to be it was like you were just piggybacking along with the decker, pretty much along for the ride. You'll still have to stay in my sight, but at least this way you're not stuck to me like glue and not able to say anything."

Sean nodded. He was still getting the stiffness out of his muscles from the nap he'd taken on the hard smelly floor of Crank's apartment. He hadn't wanted to take one but Jay had insisted, saying that a tired decker was a dangerous decker. Now, at a little after midnight, he was awake and refreshed. Sean was just awake. "Have you ever done this before?"

"Only once, but don't worry. We're not going anywhere dangerous. This is just a meet."

"I'm not worried," Sean protested. "It sounds kinda cool, actually. I'm just wondering, that's all."

Jay nodded, still distracted. Then he patted the deck and looked up. "Okay, ready. Come over here and let's get this thing on you."

Sean sat down in the chair opposite Jay's and leaned down so the dwarf could settle the 'trode rig on his head. The little contact points felt cold against his forehead and hummed very slightly. Jay made a couple of adjustments and then handed Sean a pair of goggles. Sean put them on, settling them into place. It was dark inside, but after a moment the goggles switched on. Standing in front of him was a smiling cartoon tiger with a big nose, bouncing

around on his tail. "Can you see me?" the tiger asked. The voice didn't sound like Jay's.

"Yeah." Sean had always been amused that his cynical friend had chosen the old Winnie-the-Pooh character "Tigger" as his Matrix icon. Of course, this Tigger was colored in shades of blue and purple instead of orange and black and his eyes glowed bright green, but the thought was there.

"Okay, good. Try reaching out and see if you can see your hand."

Sean did as he was told and a silvery human hand extended into his line of vision. "Check."

"Great." Jay ran him through a couple of other tests to make sure he could move around all right and then patted his shoulder. "We're good to go. This thing is pretty damn wiz. I'm gonna have to get me one."

"Jay —"

"Yeah, I know. Let's go. And remember — when we're in the Matrix, don't call me Jay. Call me Tigger or Tigg. What do you want me to call you?"

Sean thought about that for a moment. At Watanabe's *Sensei* sometimes called him *Hebi* — Snake — because of the speed of his strikes. "*Hebi* will do."

There was a pause, and then the tiger nodded. "Okay. Let's go. Take my hand and hang on. You can't get lost but if I lose sight of you you'll get dumped and I'll have to set things up again."

Sean moved forward, feeling awkward in the silvery body. It didn't move the same way he did and he kept feeling like he was about to trip. He grasped the tiger's cartoon paw tightly. It felt warm and furry.

"Hold on. Here we go."

Immediately the scene changed. The nondescript room where they had started gave way to a rush of scenery flying past them at a high rate of speed. Sean was

looking everywhere at once, taking in glowing towers, figures flitting by on their errands, the constant hum of datastreams. He had seen pictures of the Matrix on the trids and visited many times in his classes via simrigs, but had never experienced the real thing in such detail before this. He could even feel the “air” rushing past him as they flew. The feeling was both exhilarating and very, very weird. He wondered if this was what Jay did every time he jacked in or if he was just showing off a bit for his friend’s benefit.

Before he got the chance to think about much more, they were dropping down. “Here we are,” Jay’s Tigger-voice said in his ear.

“So soon?” He was almost disappointed, but then he remembered why they were here. He looked down at the place they were approaching and his eyes widened.

It was a toy store, a little freestanding building with brightly lit plate-glass windows. Painted on the windows in glowing block letters was “TEDDY’S TOY SHOPPE.” As Jay and Sean came to rest in front of the store they could see movement inside: dozens, maybe hundreds, of small toys doing their various things: electric trains, walking dolls, jack-in-the-boxes, toy dogs and cats and robots. Looking closer, though, they could see that all of the toys were just a little off what one might expect: some of the dolls had slightly maniacal expressions, the trains disappeared into tunnels and came out looking different, the jack-in-the-box wore mirrorshades. “Weird...” Sean whispered.

Jay didn’t argue.

They moved up to the door. Jay tried the handle but it was locked tight. At the sound, several of the toys looked toward them with interest. After a moment a little mechanical man tottered over and stood on the other side

of the door, peering up at them with shiny black eyes. "We're closed," it announced in a squeaky clanky voice.

"We've come to visit Teddy," Jay said, following the instructions Crank had given them before returning to his paying job and tuning them out.

"Teddy's busy." The little man made as if to turn around and walk away.

"We have a new toy for Teddy," Jay said quickly.

The mechanical man stopped and turned back. "A new toy? Well, why didn't you say so? Put it through the slot in the door."

"There isn't any—" Sean started, but then was surprised to see that there *was* a slot in the door. It hadn't been there before—he would have staked a lot on that.

Jay reached into the pocket of his tiger-suit—which was odd because Tigger didn't *have* any pockets—and withdrew a little puppet that looked like it had been made out of old socks and buttons. Crank hadn't told them what the puppet represented, but he assured them that Teddy would be interested and that it would serve as an introduction. He pushed it through the slot.

The mechanical man caught it and spent a moment examining it, his clucks of pleasure sounding like gears meshing. "Come in," he said at last. "I think Teddy will see you, even though we're closed."

The door swung open and Jay and Sean quickly entered the store before this strange creature could change its mind. It closed behind them and locked with a click.

"Just a moment," the little man said, and disappeared.

Sean and Jay didn't get much time to look around because almost immediately out from behind the counter came a black teddy bear, its button eyes twinkling blue, its mouth shaped into an impish smile. "I don't get many new toys here," the bear said, tilting its head at Tigger.

The voice had a vague feminine lilt to it, but it was difficult to tell for sure.

"We're looking for Teddy," Sean said, stepping forward. "Is that you? Can you help us?"

"Oh, I'd say I can." The bear seemed amused. "I've heard about you two—looking for old data."

Sean nodded. "That's us."

"So—what's the deal? What have you got?"

Jay reached into his pocket and held up his paw. The images of Terry Symonz and Juliana Harvath appeared, floating in the air. "We're looking for information on these people. From about eighteen years ago."

The bear moved a little closer, pulling a pair of old-fashioned pince-nez glasses from its own nonexistent pocket and settling them over its ample nose. "Hmmm..." it said noncommittally. Around it, the other toys in the shop continued to chug, rumble, and whirr about their business. "What do you already know about them?"

"Just their names," Sean said. "Terry Symonz and Juliana Harvath. And that they were supposed to have been in Seattle during the time we're looking for."

"Mmm hmm..." the bear said again. Its twinkly blue-eyed gaze became a little more businesslike as it fell on Sean. "And why are you looking for them?"

"I'd—rather not say right now," Sean said uncomfortably. He was afraid it would want to know—from his past experience with Jay, deckers wanted to know *everything*.

"Hmm..." the bear said, nodding. It took off its glasses, stowed them back in its pocket, and crossed its furry arms over its middle. "You want me to track down ancient-history information about people but you don't want to tell me why. I understand. But you have to understand that these kinds of things don't come cheap." It raised one arm to lean its chin on it. A little mechanical

bird flew down from high in the shop's rafters, settled on Teddy's head for a moment, then flew away. "My standard rate for this kind of search is five thousand nuyen."

Sean's eyes widened as he exchanged glances with Jay. Five thousand nuyen! He had that kind of money—he had a lot more than that, in fact—but he didn't expect he was going to have to spend his college fund on information gathering. "Five thousand? Just to find some information?"

The bear nodded. "That's right. More if there's any danger involved. A bear's got to keep itself safe, right?" It paused and the grin got wider. "In advance, of course."

Sean looked at Jay again. There had to be other deckers in town who'd been around that long. Maybe they could find one willing to work cheaper. "Thank you," he said, turning back to Teddy, "but I think we'll have to pass. I don't have that much money."

The bear shrugged. "Have it your way. Of course, there's always another way to fulfill my payment."

Sean stopped in the act of turning away. "And what's that?"

"You can tell me why you want it." Teddy came forward, moving gracefully on stubby footless bear legs.

"Why do you care?" Jay demanded.

"Let's just say I like information," the bear said, managing to look smug. "I'd think you'd understand that."

Sean looked suspicious, or as much so as a featureless silver humanoid can look. "That's it? I tell you why I want the information and that's all you want for payment? No five thousand nuyen?"

"Nope. That's all. Well, except for a one-time fee of two hundred and fifty nuyen to cover basic expenses."

Sean thought about it for a few moments and then shrugged. "It's not exactly a secret, after all. I don't care if she knows." He looked at Jay for confirmation.

"Hey, it's your data, *omae*. You gotta make the choice."

Sean nodded and turned back to Teddy. "Okay, you've got a deal."

The bear looked pleased. "Wonderful. Please slot the two-fifty right there..." She pointed with a stubby arm toward a small pink piggy bank that was crossing the floor toward them. The bank had the head of a cartoon pig and the body of a real one. On the side was a glowing dollar sign. It trotted up to Jay and grunted once.

Sean nodded, knowing he didn't have the means to perform the action here. "Go ahead, Tigg. I'll pay you back."

Jay pulled a credchip from his pocket (it came out looking like an old-time coin) and dropped it into the bank's slot. The pig grunted happily, squealed, and trotted off.

"Okay," Teddy said. "That's part one. Now: why do you want the info?"

Sean crossed his silvery arms. "You find it first. Once you've got something, then I'll tell you why I want it."

Teddy paused a moment, then nodded. "Have it your way. You want to wait, or shall I call you?"

"We'll wait," Sean said.

"I warn you: it could take awhile. Eighteen years is a long time."

"We'll wait," he said again.

"All right, then. Make yourself at home. You can play with the toys if you want—some of them might even want to play with you. I'll be back." Without waiting for an answer, Teddy turned and trundled off with her odd graceful bear-gait.

"I think I like the real world better," Sean muttered under his breath to Jay.

It was hard for Sean to tell how long it was before Teddy came back; it seemed like it took forever but according to Jay's chrono readout it was only about half an hour. The dwarf spent the time prowling around examining the various toys while Sean paced.

When Teddy returned she popped up out of an oversized toybox on the other side of the room, startling both her visitors. "Okay!" she said briskly. "I've got something. Your turn to hold up your end of the deal."

"How much did you get?" Sean asked quickly.

The bear shook its paw. "Uh-uh. That wasn't the deal. I've got something, so now you tell me why you want it. Then I'll tell you what it is."

Sean took a deep breath. "Okay, have it your way." He waved toward the place where the pictures had been visible before. "I think those people are related to me. I'm trying to find them. My family lost touch with them a long time ago, right after I was born. My parents died recently, so I'm trying to track down some other relatives." It wasn't quite the truth, but close enough that Sean hoped she would accept it.

Teddy studied him for a moment, then nodded. "What kind of relatives?"

"Aunt and uncle," Sean said firmly, meeting the bear's gaze.

Again she paused a moment, and again she nodded. "Well, all I have to say is that you've got some strange family members, my friend." She made raised her hand and Terry Symonz' picture appeared in the air between them. "Found a couple of references to the name you gave me, but it was the picture match that did it. Do you know anyone named 'Ocelot'?"

Sean shook his head. "No."

"Looks like an alias he went by fairly often, back then. Hasn't been seen in Seattle for years, though."

"Ocelot?" Sean and Jay exchanged glances. "Why would he need an alias?"

The bear chuckled. "From the look of things, your 'uncle' was a shadowrunner. And a pretty good one too, in his day."

Sean stared at her, stunned. "A—shadowrunner?" He'd heard of them, of course—everybody had. They were criminals, doing illicit jobs outside the law for the massive megacorporations. "My d—my uncle was a shadowrunner?"

Teddy nodded. "Mid-50's through about mid-'60s. He was good, or he wouldn't have lasted that long. Dropped out of sight after that."

Sean struggled to compose his thoughts. "Why—might he have done that?"

"One of two reasons, most likely. Either retired or somebody killed him."

Sean took a long, deep breath and let it out slowly. He was getting used to the icon now and it felt almost natural to do that. "What about...my aunt. Juliana. Was she a—"

"A shadowrunner too? Hard to tell, but I'd bet so. She wasn't in town for as long as he was, and she kept low because there isn't as much info on her. This is just a guess, mind you, but her description matches a runner named Kestrel who spent some time with Ocelot."

Sean's mind was reeling. For several seconds the only sounds were those of the toys in the shop as he struggled with the information. "Is there...anything else?" he asked numbly.

"Oh, probably. I didn't check in depth. If you want more, you'll have to pay more." Teddy cocked her head at him. "If you're trying to save money, you might be better off asking around. Seattle's a smaller town than you

might think, and the shadow community's smaller still. You might get lucky and find somebody who remembers them."

Another long pause. "Can you...suggest anybody I can talk to?"

"'Fraid not." The bear shook its head in an exaggerated negative. "Assuming I ever had any involvement with *those* sorts of people, it ended years ago."

Sean didn't believe her and he didn't think Jay did either, but he couldn't exactly force her to get involved. "All right. Well—thank you for your help. I appreciate it."

"Null sweat. I hope you find your...aunt and uncle." She paused just long enough to let Sean know that nobody was fooling anybody. "And hey—leave me your number. If I turn up anything good I might give you a call."

Sean sat up in his chair, stretching his body and twisting his neck back and forth to work the cricks out of it. As soon as the image faced from the goggles he pulled them off, followed by the 'trode rig. Shivering, he tossed them on the bed next to Jay. "No, thanks," he said. "That's enough of that for me. I'll do my hunting in the real world."

Jay pulled his plug and started carefully stowing his deck and other gear away in his padded bag. "That was some setup she had," he said appreciatively. "That kind of resolution and clarity's gotta cost major nuyen." His eyes glazed over a little as his mind relived what they had just experienced.

Sean tossed a roll of socks at him. "Come on, Canfield. Get decker envy later, okay? I gotta find somebody to talk to so I can find out about my parents."

Jay nodded and whistled. "Yeah. Right. Shadowrunners." He looked Sean up and down. "Well, you do look more like a shadowrunner than a clean-cut burb kid from 'bridge..."

"You should talk," Sean said sourly. "Now come on. Are you gonna help me or not?"

"Yeah, yeah. I'll ask Crank. He might know where we can go to find shadowrunners. You want me to try some more searches on this Ocelot guy?"

Sean shook his head. "No, not yet. If he's really a shadowrunner he might have ways to find out if people are checking into him. Let's try this first and if we don't turn up anything then you can do that."

Jay looked disappointed, but nodded grudgingly. "Okay. Have it your way. So what's our next move?"

Sean grinned and grabbed up his leather jacket. "Like I said — hunting in the real world."

7.

The name of the bar was O'Riley's, and as soon as Sean saw it he felt a thrill of exhilaration. He was in over his head and getting deeper with each passing moment, but that was a situation he was well familiar with. He just hoped Jay's fake IDs would work again. It was one a.m. and the place was clearly jumping. Sean liked a town where life didn't begin until after the sun went down.

There was a troll lounging just inside the door, perched precariously on a narrow stool that barely looked capable of supporting his weight. He wore a black T-shirt with KILL 'EM ALL across the front in white letters stretched tightly across his massive chest, snow-camo fatigue pants, and a red bandanna tied around his head. He glared at Sean and Jay as they approached. "Kiddie joint's down th' street," he rumbled around a thick unlit cigar.

Sean presented his ID chip calmly, watching it disappear into the troll's outsized paw. He waited, forcing himself to remain still and keep his gaze steady, while the bouncer slotted it and examined the results. After a moment the troll looked up at him. "You don't look 21," he said.

"Clean living," Sean replied, reaching out for the chip.

The troll didn't hand it back. "Or fake ID. We get 'em all the time. Maybe I oughtta check with the boss."

Sean produced a twenty nuyen note from his pocket, glad he'd thought to get some paper currency instead of relying on his credchip. "Or you could just let us in," he said. "We're just here for the same thing everybody else is—to relax. Okay?"

The troll eyed the twenty for a moment and then smoothly palmed it. "Hey, I was just makin' a

observation, that's all." Handing Sean back his ID, he eyed him up and down. "Ya got any weapons?"

"Weapons?"

The troll gave him a sideways look and spoke in a slow voice like his was addressing a four-year-old. "Weapons. You know—guns, knives, things to hurt people with?"

"Oh. No. No weapons."

"Me neither," Jay said, presenting his own ID.

Apparently the troll had tired of his game; he waved Jay through without looking twice at his chip. "No trouble," he called. "Or ya get tossed out on yer ears."

Sean waved back over his shoulder in assent and he and Jay hurried inside before the troll could change his mind. Once they were out of sight, they stopped and stepped back into the shadows where they could observe. "So this is where shadowrunners hang out," Jay commented. "Looks like a dive to me."

Sean nodded, but he didn't seem bothered by this fact. The place *was* a bit of a dive—it had that threadbare, over-the-road look of a bar that had been around since the dawn of time and would probably be around long after everyone inside was long dead. "You sure Crank knows what he's talking about?"

Now it was Jay's turn to nod. "Yeah. He told me a few things before, and I, like a good little trust-nobody decker, did some checking up on him. He's small potatoes as far as shadowrunners go, but he's done a few minor-league jobs for some folks who aren't. This might not be the best place to look, but it's a good place to start."

Sean looked around. The place was filling up, the clientele mostly nondescript looking people of all metatypes. He suspected that the few flashy sorts he saw milling around—one with a heavily chromed cyberarm, another in a long coat covered with glowing magical

sigils—were probably not the people he wanted to talk to. He didn't know much about shadowrunners beyond what he'd seen on the trideo, but he suspected that real ones probably didn't want to draw attention to themselves in places like this. "I'm going to look around," he said. "You coming?"

Jay shook his head and pointed toward a table in the back of the room where two men and a woman were hunched over what looked like a data display. "I'll see if I can track down the decker angle for you. Yell if you need me to beat anybody up for you."

Sean grinned and waved him off. After the dwarf had left, he realized he didn't know where to start. There were all kinds of people in here, but which ones should he ask? *You're looking for information about old-time shadowrunners. Asking young guys probably won't get you anywhere.* He nodded to himself, realizing the thought was probably a good one, and moved over toward the bar. It was full, but after a moment, a raggedy looking elf stepped back with his drink and headed away. Sean quickly took his place.

In answer to the bartender's wordless question, he ordered a beer; while he waited for it to arrive, he looked surreptitiously around at the people near him. On one side was a muscular ork in jeans, synthleather jacket, and a tank top; on the other side was a dark-skinned female elf who looked like her mind was several kilometers away. He decided not to disturb the elf, but he nodded greeting to the ork.

The ork nodded back, grunting something under his breath that Sean couldn't make out. He didn't look like he was in the mood to talk.

Sean shrugged and waited for his beer, his mind running fast as he tried to come up with some logical choices to start with. He almost didn't notice the glass

shoved toward him, nor the weathered hand that did that shoving. "That'll be five nuyen," said a gravelly voice.

Sean looked up. The bartender was looking impatient—a middle-aged human with slightly sagging jowls and small brown eyes. Sean pulled out a twenty-nuyen bill and before he realized what he was doing said, "Keep the change. Maybe you can answer a question for me."

The barman looked noncommittal, but he did pocket the change. "You can ask. Don't know if I know the answer."

Sean drew a deep breath and pulled out his two holos. "I'm looking for these two people. They go by Ocelot and Kestrel, and I understand they used to hang around Seattle awhile ago. Any idea where I might find them, or who I could ask that might know something?"

The bartender examined the pictures carefully. Sean noticed out of the corner of his eye that the ork was looking at them as well. After a moment the bartender asked, "How long ago we talkin'?"

"Awhile. Fifteen, maybe twenty years ago."

The bartender whistled softly. "You don't want much, kid. Drek, I ain't even been around this town that long. I sure's hell haven't ever seen 'em." He lowered his voice. "You realize if you're askin' around here and you know where you are, they're probably dead. That line of work don't produce too many old folks."

"Yeah, maybe," Sean said, taking back the holopics. "But I want to know for sure. The only information I have on them is that they used to be—in that line of work—in Seattle in about that timeframe. And the man at least, Ocelot, was pretty good at it. I'm hoping maybe they retired before somebody got to 'em."

The bartender spread his hands. "Sorry, kid. I wish I could help you, I really do. But I ain't seen nobody like

that. I don't know anybody in here that goes back that far. Like I said, there's a high turnover."

Sean nodded. "Yeah, well thanks." He didn't let his disappointment show; after all, this was only the first person he asked. It wasn't as if he expected that he'd ask one guy, the guy would know the story, and he'd be set in ten minutes. He sipped contemplatively at his beer as he watched the bartender head off to wait on somebody else.

"Why you lookin' for them?" said a voice to his right.

Sean started a bit, then turned to find himself looking into the face of the ork who'd grunted at him before. He looked old for an ork, but it was impossible to tell if he was one of the rare goblinized orks who lived a normal human lifespan or if he was just pushing thirty hard. "Sorry?"

"I said, why you lookin' for them?" he asked again, indicating the pocket where Sean had stowed the holos.

"They're—were—friends of my parents," Sean told him. "Why? You know something about them?"

The ork shrugged. "Buy me another beer and we'll talk."

Sean did as directed, motioning for the bartender to bring him another of what he was drinking.

The ork took a long pull at it and ran the back of his hand across his mouth to wipe off the head. "You say the guy's name's Ocelot?"

"Yeah."

"And the woman?"

"Kestrel."

The ork shook his head. "Never hearda her. Him, though—I don't recognize the pic, but the name's familiar. Timeframe sounds right, too."

"So—you knew him?" Sean hardly dared to hope.

"Nah. Never met the guy. I just said the name's familiar, and I think you got the time right. Not too many guys named Ocelot, y'know?"

"I guess not," Sean agreed. "So—you have any idea where he might be? Maybe if he's still in town?"

The ork shrugged. "Nope. If he's the guy I think he is, he ran with a decent team back in the day. Their names got out there, y'know? The guys who could do the job, even if the job was weirder'n drek."

Sean was interested, and leaned forward. "What—what kind of runner was he? You know—what'd he do?"

The ork thought about that for a few moments, trying to recall long-buried memories. "You gotta remember this was a long time ago, kid, 'specially for a guy I never even met. But if my brain's still here, I think he mighta been a fighter of some type. Martial artist type."

"Physical adept?" Sean didn't know whether to be impressed or bitter—the former because it hadn't even occurred to him that his father might be, the latter because even if he was, he hadn't passed any of it on to his son.

"Don't think so," the ork said, taking another long draught of his beer. "Could be wrong, though. I—" He stopped, noticing that suddenly Sean wasn't listening.

Sean didn't know what made him turn around—it was just a feeling in the back of his mind, but he'd had such feelings enough times that he knew enough to heed them. This time it took him a moment to spot its source, and then he was up and vaulting off his barstool without a second thought for his ork companion.

Across the bar near the back corner, two men had cornered Jay near the entrance to the restrooms. Both wore shredded jeans, synth-leather jackets, and elaborately colored mohawks. One, a human, appeared to be having a one-sided conversation with Jay while the second, an ork, stood by to provide backup. Sean noticed

that Jay was trying to look nonchalant, but he'd known the dwarf long enough to know that he wasn't enjoying the attention.

He crossed the bar and was about to tap the human on the shoulder and ask him what was up when suddenly the ork's hand snaked down and clamped around the collar of Jay's shirt. His other hand balled into a fist.

Sean was in motion. Before the ork could land the punch on Jay, Sean slipped through the crowd cat-quick and swept the ork's leg out from under him with a well aimed foot. The ork bellowed, let loose of Jay's collar, and went down more surprised than hurt.

"What the fu — ?" the human began, wheeling on Sean as Jay slipped away to the sidelines.

"You guys have a problem with my friend?" Sean asked, keeping a wary eye on the ork scrambling to his feet off to his right.

"What's it to you, drekwipe?" the ork snarled. "We don't like stunties. And unless you want yer face handed to ya, you better get yer ass outta here and take yer stunty boyfriend with ya."

Sean stood his ground long enough to show them he wasn't afraid, then shrugged. "Whatever. It's a big bar. Why don't you do your business and we'll do ours, okay?"

The ork chuckled. "Yeah, sure, chummer."

The human nodded. "Why not?"

"Great." Sean turned to leave. He had taken perhaps one step before he deftly sidestepped, grabbing the charging ork and using the larger man's own momentum to fling him forward into an unoccupied table. The ork yowled in rage, scrambling among the chairs to get up.

Sean didn't have time to watch him, though, because the human wasn't far behind. He dived on Sean's back, trying to get his hands around his throat. His only

problem was that again Sean had anticipated his move and flung himself to the side, lashing out with a kick neatly planted on the human's butt. He joined his ork friend in the litter of overturned furniture.

By this time the troll bouncer was wading through the crowd, shoving people aside like bowling pins. "What the hell?" he demanded, his voice booming over the ambient noise. He glared at Sean, who was the only apparent combatant standing. "Didn't I tell you no trouble, kid?" he yelled. "Get the hell outta here before I —"

"Wrong guy, Jake," said a voice behind Sean.

It was the ork he'd been talking to at the bar. Apparently he was known around here, because the troll hesitated.

The ork hooked his thumb toward the two with the mohawks, who'd finally managed to get free of the chairs and stand up. "It was these two frag-ups who started it, not the kid. They jumped him and he was just defendin' himself."

Jake looked uncertainly between the ork, the two mohawks, and Sean. "Yeah?" At the ork's nod, he switched his baleful stare to the mohawks. "You two. Out. Now. Before I use ya for bar rags."

The human and the ork glared at the troll, then slunk out with many nasty looks over their shoulders at Sean. Once they were gone, the troll waded back to his post without another word.

"Thanks," Sean said to the ork. "I owe you one. Want another beer?"

"Wouldn't turn it down," he said, shrugging. After a pause, he added, "Where'd you learn to fight like that?"

Now it was Sean's turn to shrug. "I studied some martial arts myself."

"Yeah, I can see that. But it's something more. Like how you knew those guys were coming at ya. That's natural talent, kid."

"Yeah, I guess it is," Sean agreed, not sure where this was going. They'd reached the bar again and he waved for another beer. He was about to sit back down when the ork met his eyes.

"Listen, kid," he said, "I like the way you handled that. You didn't start the fight, but you finished it. Lotsa young guys fight just 'cause they can, but you got enough sense to know when to let it go." He glanced beyond Sean to the doorway where Jay had been. "Tell ya what. See that door, the one that leads to the can? You go through it, past the cans, and there's another door. Knock on it, and when the guy answers, tell him you're with Shorty. I ain't promisin' anything, but maybe you'll find somebody who can help ya there—or at least somebody who can point ya in the right direction. Talk to the elf behind the bar."

Sean nodded slowly. "Thanks," he said.

The ork waved him off. "Get outta here, kid. I got an appointment with another beer."

Jay was hovering near the bar, not close enough to intrude but near enough that (he hoped) nobody would start trouble with him again. He looked relieved to see Sean. "So, we going?"

"Not yet. I need to meet some people. Want to come along?"

The dwarf shrugged. "Better than waiting around here." He gave Sean an odd look. "Hey—thanks. For before, I mean. Those guys were probably all talk, but—"

Sean nodded. "Don't worry about it. So what were those guys bothering you about, anyway?"

"Just assholes. You know: 'it's different, so we have to pick on it.'"

"Yeah," Sean said with a sigh. "Too many of that type around, unfortunately."

"So where we going?"

Sean motioned for him to follow. As the ork had directed, he went through the door toward the restrooms, then past the marked doors to the unmarked one at the end of the hallway. It looked significantly heavier than the bathroom doors. "Who's back here?" Jay whispered as Sean knocked.

"Don't know yet. Maybe somebody who knew my parents." He was going to say more, but at that moment a little slot near the top of the door slid open.

"What do you want?" a gruff voice demanded.

Sean felt a tap on his side. He turned to see Jay pointing upward, and followed his finger to see a tiny lens that had moved slightly to follow their actions. He nodded and faced the door again. "We're with Shorty. He said we should come see you."

There was a pause, then something behind the door clicked and it swung open. "Hurry up," the gruff voice ordered. Sean and Jay slipped in and the door closed with a bang behind them.

Standing there at the top of a short stairway downward was another ork. They could hear sounds of music and conversation filtering up to them. The ork was already heading back down.

Sean and Jay looked at each other, then shrugged and followed him down.

Sean didn't know what he expected to see, so he didn't know whether to nod knowingly or be surprised to find another barroom at the foot of the stairs. This one looked much like the one on the floor above except that it had no windows, was a lot smokier, and had many more nooks and crannies around the edges, each with a small table tucked inside. The whole atmosphere of the place

made it difficult to get a good look at any of the patrons. Sean noticed right away that there were no rowdy drunks like the two who had accosted Jay down here — everybody seemed to be minding his or her own business, chatting in pairs or small groups.

“What the —?” Jay muttered, barely loud enough for Sean to hear.

“I think this is where the business gets conducted,” Sean muttered back. “The *real* business, I mean.”

Nobody paid them any attention as they moved up to the bar and ordered beers. Right away Sean noticed the elf, a young-looking guy with solid chrome cybereyes. On closer examination, though, he was probably older than he looked. When informed that Shorty had sent them down, he paused. “So?”

Sean shrugged. “I’m looking for some information about an old-time runner named Ocelot. Around town maybe fifteen, twenty years ago. He said you might be able to help.”

The elf appraised him for a long moment before answering. “Maybe,” he said at last. “Not me personally, but hang out awhile. I’ll put the word around and we’ll see what comes back.”

Sean and Jay did as they were told. Minutes passed, and then an hour. Sean didn’t order any more beers — the smoke was getting to him, and he was beginning to wonder if this whole avenue had been a dead end. Jay, on the other hand, was on his third beer and didn’t mind the smoke at all. He chatted away pleasantly about nothing while Sean leaned on his hand and contented himself with a little discreet people-watching.

It wasn’t long after that that he began to get a strange feeling, although he couldn’t quite put his finger on the source. Jay cocked his head at him. “Hunter?”

Sean shook his head to clear it. “What?”

"You didn't answer me. Did you even hear what I said?"

Sean tried to replay his mental tape recorder to recall the dwarf's words, but it was blank. "Sorry. Guess I zoned out there for a minute."

"You okay?"

He was about to answer yes, but then looked quizzically at Jay. "Yeah...but—" He pointed at something past the dwarf's shoulder. "You see that guy over there?"

Jay turned. "Which guy?"

Sean sighed, shaking his head. "He's gone now. I could swear I've seen him somewhere before, but I can't figure out where."

"What was he doing?" Jay craned his neck trying to spot anyone in the shadows, but aside from two ork women with beers, nobody was there.

"Not sure. Maybe I didn't even see him. But it seemed like he was—watching us."

Jay snorted. "You're getting paranoid, Hunter. Just because we're hanging out with shadowrunners doesn't mean you have to start acting like one."

Sean took a deep breath, then chuckled. "Yeah, you're probably right." He took a drink of his beer, wishing he could feel as sure as Jay was. He'd only gotten a glimpse of the guy, enough to tell he was slender, Asian, and dressed in black, but the nagging feeling of familiarity wouldn't leave him.

"How much longer are we gonna stay here?" Jay asked, looking around.

Sean shrugged. "I don't know yet. Why? Want to leave?"

"Nah. Just gotta go make room for some more beer. Back in a minute."

"Don't get yourself beaten up in the can, okay?"

Jay grinned, slipped off the stool, and headed for the restrooms.

He wasn't gone more than thirty seconds when someone else took his place. Sean glanced over, startled, about to tell the person that the seat was taken, but something made him hesitate. Maybe it was the fact that it was a woman, and she was looking at him like it was the most natural thing in the world for her to be sitting there. "Little young for this place, aren't you?" she asked. She herself was human, in her mid-20s, slender but muscular. "Thought your dwarf buddy would never leave."

Sean kicked himself mentally for not realizing sooner what had happened. "Can I do something for you?" he asked noncommittally.

Her eyes, almond-shaped and obviously cyber, appraised him. "Oh, I'm sure I could come up with something," she purred with a lecherous half-smile. "But business before pleasure, and I want to finish up before your friend gets back. I hear you're looking for an old-timer."

Sean nodded. "Yeah. Guy named Ocelot."

She returned his nod. "So I hear. We might be able to help each other."

"Oh?" Sean leaned back on his barstool and waited, hoping this wouldn't be yet another dead end.

"Maybe so," she said. "Tell me—if I can point you at somebody who can tell you where to find him, would it be worth doing a little favor for me?"

Sean tensed ever so slightly. "What kind of favor?"

"Just make a delivery for me. Just so happens I have something for the very person who can help you—that's why I'm here. But see, I'm a little busy and can't make the drop myself, so that's the deal. You deliver my little package, and I hook you up with this person."

"What's in the package?" Sean asked, his eyes narrowing.

She smiled. "Now, now. The first thing you have to learn if you're going to be a shadowrunner is when to keep your mouth shut and your curiosity under control. It's usually better not to know."

He considered, watching her face closely. "Is this guy a friend of yours? I want to find Ocelot, but it's not worth delivering something like, say, explosives."

She laughed, her eyes twinkling, and patted his shoulder. "Not to worry, kid. Believe me, the last thing I want to do is hurt this person. No—I'd say it's more like...delivering a little happiness, if you get my meaning."

Sean relaxed. He personally wouldn't touch recreational drugs—not due to any moral compunctions but because, like cyberware, they artificially altered the way his body functioned and thus the whole concept made him uncomfortable. However, what other adults did with their bodies was their own business. Besides, he could sense that the woman was telling the truth, and he had learned long ago not to doubt his instincts. "How much happiness?" he asked after a pause.

She reached in her pocket and withdrew a box about the size of a cigarette box, carefully wrapped. Keeping it shielded with her coat, she let him see it and then stuck it back in her pocket. She gave him a look like, 'so?'

Sean nodded. "I'll do it."

"Wiz." She glanced around. "Okay, so here's the deal—"

By the time Jay returned from the bathroom, she was long gone.

8.

“So why can’t I come along?”

It was the next night, around ten. They were back at Crank’s, where Jay had spent most of the day helping the deckers out with their jobs, and Sean had spent most of it prowling the streets around the neighborhood, looking for outlets for his restless energy. It wasn’t until after they’d had dinner and Sean was getting ready to go out that Jay realized something had happened the previous evening.

“I told you already,” Sean said patiently. “I have to do this one on my own. Besides, aren’t you guys in the middle of a project?” He indicated the threadbare couches, where Crank and his buddies were sprawled, oblivious to the world. One spot, the one that had been occupied a few minutes earlier by Jay, was vacant.

The dwarf looked reluctant, obviously torn between the allure of helping with an actual decker job and the responsibility of sticking by his friend. “Well —”

Sean clapped him on the shoulder. “Look—I don’t think this is going to be dangerous or anything,” he said, hoping he wasn’t lying through his teeth. “I just have to drop something off for somebody, and hopefully get some information in return. I should be back in a couple of hours at most.”

Jay sighed. “It’s not like I can talk you out of anything, you know. You do things your own way whether anybody else likes it or not. At least take your phone, okay? If nothing else, I’ll be online and I can call for help if you get in trouble.”

Sean grinned, well used to his friend’s pessimistic tendencies, and pulled the phone from his pocket. “I promise. If I get in trouble, I’ll call and you can come save the day. Happy?”

"No. But I'm not going to get anything better," Jay grumbled.

"Hey, you're the last one I want to piss off," Sean said, his grin getting bigger. "You'll mess up my credit rating or something."

"You don't *have* a credit rating," Jay pointed out.

"Oh, yeah."

The dwarf brightened. "Want one?"

Sean laughed and flung the first thing within reach—a wadded up Sloppy-Soy wrapper—at Jay. "I'll see you later, okay? Don't wait up for me."

Jay snorted, already returning to his couch.

Sean's first stop was the same bar he and Jay had visited the previous night. The woman was there, just as she told him she'd be. She slid the package across the table to him. On top of it was an address. "Take this to this address and ask for Gretsche. He'll know who it's from. Don't give it to anybody else, just him. He'll be the one you want to talk to."

Sean nodded, pocketing the package. "Where is this?"

"In the Redmond Barrens, but not the really bad part. You can still get cabs there."

That was comforting.

She was right—he *could* get a cab there, or at least almost there. The ork driver dropped him off at a corner flanked by decaying abandoned buildings. "It's right down that block," he said, pointing. "Other end."

"So aren't you going to take me there?"

"Dispatcher gets nervous if I get off the main routes," the ork told him. "Now for a little extra—"

"No, that's okay. This is fine." Sean paid the cabbie and got out, noting how quickly the ork got out of there. Part of him was wondering if this had been a good idea,

but he shrugged it off. He'd been in bad neighborhoods before.

He moved down the block, staying near the middle of the sidewalk and remaining mindful of his surroundings. A few lounging residents looked him over as he passed, but nobody moved in his direction. He had long ago cultivated the art of carrying himself like someone who wasn't to be messed with—so far, it seemed to be working.

It took him a few moments to find the address because very few of the buildings were numbered and most of the streetlights didn't work. Finally he stopped in front of a likely looking place and addressed two young men leaning casually on the rotting steps leading up to the door. "I'm looking for a guy named Gretsche. You know him?"

One of them shrugged. "Who wants to know?"

"I've got something for him."

"What?" The two looked more interested now, pushing themselves up to more upright positions.

"That's for him to know. He around?"

As one, they moved closer. One of them was about to say something else when a third figure leaned out of one of the upper windows. "Somebody down there?"

The two out front looked disappointed. "Somebody here say he's got somethin' for ya," the taller of the two said reluctantly.

"A d'livery," the other added.

"Well tell him to get his ass up here then," the voice called. "'Bout fraggin' time."

The taller youth hooked a thumb over his shoulder toward the door. "You heard the dude," he told Sean. "Don't make him wait. He don't like it."

Sean nodded. Going into the house was probably unwise and he knew it, but he also knew that asking the

mysterious "Gretsch" to come downstairs to claim his delivery was possibly more unwise. He passed the two youths and moved inside. He wasn't in the mood for a fight right now.

The interior of the house was shadowy, ramshackle, and rotting, although the upper floor was in marginally better shape than the lower. At the top of the stairs Sean moved toward the only open door, which was to a room with a window that looked out over the street. "Who's out there?" a voice called. Sean recognized it as the one that had summoned him up here.

"I've got your delivery," Sean called back. He took the box out of his pocket.

"Well, get on in here, then."

Sean did as he was directed. The door opened on a threadbare bedroom with a few pieces of old furniture. On a chair in front of a trideo unit that was probably the newest thing in the room lounged a man. Human, mid twenties, dark hair. He wore jeans and a skintight T-shirt that barely stretched over the muscles in his chest and arms. On the arm nearest to him, Sean could see a large tattoo of a dagger that disappeared beneath the T-shirt sleeve.

As soon as the man caught sight of the box he was instantly on his feet, moving with the kind of speed and grace that screamed enhancements, either cybernetic or magical. "Hand it over," he ordered.

Sean tossed him the box.

He caught it easily and settled back down in his chair, where he proceeded to rip it open. Sean got a brief impression of several clear capsules, each one suspended in its own cushioning material, before Gretsch put the box aside. "You still here?" the man asked, annoyed. "You made your delivery, kid—get the hell outta here. What, you want a tip or something?"

"No, I want an answer," Sean said, more calmly than he felt. "The person who had me bring you that told me you might be able to help me out."

Gretsch snorted. "Great, now I'm the fraggin' Salvation Army. Get outta here, kid, before I toss ya out the window and let the boys have you."

Sean didn't move. "I'm looking for a guy named Ocelot. Word is you might be able to help me find him."

Surprisingly, Gretsch's belligerence seemed to tone down a bit at the mention of the name. He sneered. "You? I don't think so. He wouldn't waste his time with you."

That was a new bit of information. So he *was* still around, and still doing something at least somewhat active. Sean kept his expression mostly neutral, with a touch of his normal bravado. "Maybe that should be up to him to decide, yes? Look, all I want to do is talk to him. Is he still in town? I know he used to be here, but my information's a little old."

Gretsch looked him up and down. "Assuming this guy *is* still around, how'd you hear about him? He don't exactly advertise." His tone was suspicious.

Sean wondered if there was more to this Ocelot than simply long-ago shadowrunning. "I have my sources," he said. "Shouldn't surprise you that I'm not in a hurry to reveal 'em." Again, he balanced calm with bravado.

Gretsch didn't take offense. In fact, he relaxed a little in his chair, continuing to give Sean the once-over. "Tell you what, kid," he said at last. "See, Ocelot, he works on referrals. You don't just get to waltz over to his door and say 'hi, I'm here!' That means somebody he trusts gotta vouch for you before he'll see you, got it?"

"And I suppose that's you, right?"

"Damn straight, kiddo. And I don't know you from the troll wino down the street, which means if you want a referral, you're gonna have to show me what you got."

Sean remained silent, waiting. This could mean anything from yet another fight where he'd have to prove his skill to the kind of proposal he wasn't prepared to take the man up on, or anything in between. In cases like this it was often best to just keep one's mouth shut and see what happened.

Gretsch rose from his chair in another of his preternaturally fast and graceful movements. "You wired?" he demanded.

"No."

"Adept?"

Sean shook his head.

Gretsch scowled. "So why you wanta see Ocelot?" Without waiting for an answer, he began pacing around the room. "Whatever. You'll never make it anyway." Wheeling back around to face Sean, he grinned. "See, I'll tell you where you can find Ocelot—I'll even put a good word in for ya. But here's the trick." He pointed out the window. "Look out there. See the block this building's in?"

Sean moved over and nodded. "Yeah..."

"Okay. You're gonna give me a thirty-second head start, and then you're gonna have to catch me. Only rule is, I gotta stay within this block. Other than that, anything goes. You catch me in an hour, you get your info. You don't, you go on home and quit botherin' people. Scan?"

Despite the fact that Sean knew this guy had to have some kind of enhancements that would make this task a very difficult proposition, he felt a slow grin spreading across his face. "You got it," he said. "I catch you, and you tell me where he is and how to contact him, right?"

"Right in one, kid. Better hurry, though—I ain't gonna go easy on you. Remember, thirty seconds. My guys see you before then, the whole thing's off." Without another word, he snatched up the package from the table, stuffed

it in his pocket, and leaped out the open window with a whoop.

Sean hurried over to the window and watched as Gretschi hit the ground, executed a perfect roll, and leaped up already running. In less than ten seconds he'd disappeared around the corner and was out of sight.

Flicking his gaze back and forth between his chrono and the window, Sean felt like the remaining twenty seconds were taking forever. At the dot of thirty he swung out the window and dropped nimbly to the ground—it wasn't as flashy as Gretschi's exit, but it got him there just as fast. He didn't even acknowledge the presence of the two guys out front, but instead hurried off down the street in the same direction where his quarry had disappeared seconds previously.

It didn't surprise him at all that there was no sign of Gretschi when he rounded the corner. However, the directions he could have gone were limited, since he had to stay within the block. Sean stood for a moment on the streetcorner and took stock of the area.

The block wasn't large, but it was densely packed with buildings, most of them abandoned. It was hard to tell from where he was just how many buildings he was dealing with, especially in the dark. "Okay—first thing is to get up high," he mumbled to himself. Suiting action to words, he grabbed hold of a gutter-spout on the corner of the nearest building and began climbing.

The spout held, but barely. It was a good thing the place was only three stories—he didn't think it would have borne his weight for much longer. Swinging up to the roof, he saw a wide expanse of flat space broken up by a few small ventilation pipes and huddles of blankets, probably left here by squatters. Sean's gaze flicked around the area, looking for signs of intelligent life. He spotted a

movement on the far side of the roof, near the corner where Gretsche had run, and hurried over.

The ork man wrapped up in the blanket looked scared, but tried not to show it. The tiny flame of his cigarette bobbed in his mouth as he spoke: "Hey, chummer—I got nothin'. Don't—"

"Don't worry," Sean cut him off. "I won't hurt you. Did you see a guy run by down there a couple of minutes ago?"

The ork blinked, obviously trying to get his mind to work properly. "Just now?"

"Yeah. Just a couple of minutes ago. He ran by here. Did you see where he went?"

"You got any cigarettes?"

Sean sighed, wishing he'd brought more stuff to trade—but how was he to know he'd be in some weird game of hide-and-seek? "No, no cigarettes. Look," he said quickly, pulling a five-nuyen note from his pocket, "You tell me where he went and you can buy your own cigarettes, okay?"

The ork's eyes immediately perked up when he saw the note. He leaned over the edge of the building and pointed. "He went that way, 'round the corner. There's an alley back there, 'tween the two sides of the block."

"Thanks!" Sean barely slowed as he dropped the fiver into the ork's outstretched hand and took off for the opposite corner of the building.

Reaching it, he leaned over as the ork had done. He was looking down in to a dingy alley with a rickety fence separating the two sides. The only signs of life here were an old cat picking its way along the fence and two junkies sprawled next to a dumpster, but Sean didn't think they'd be much help to him. He glanced up and down the alley but saw nothing else.

"Hey, kid!" called a taunting voice. It was Gretsche. "You're gonna have to do better than that if you want to catch me! Time's a-wastin'!"

Sean's head snapped up in the direction of the voice, and saw his quarry standing on top of the next building on the same side of the street, laughing at him. As soon as he saw that Sean had spotted him, he waved, ducked down, and disappeared.

Sean growled. Without giving himself a chance to think he was up and running. The distance between the two buildings was only about three meters, and he leaped and cleared it without without a thought. Landing hard on the roof's debris-covered surface he went down and rolled up again. Gretsche was gone.

Where could he have gone? There was only a single vent pipe here, and it wasn't big enough for him to have—

Down.

The thought didn't come to Sean so much as a word as a feeling, a deep sense of *downness* that scratched persistently on his brain. Never doubting his instincts, he carefully picked his way across the roof. The night was cold, and a light mist that threatened to turn to rain was falling. Sean pulled up his collar and zipped up his jacket. He took another careful step forward.

His foot went down, and then kept going down. His body pitched forward and he desperately flung it back to avoid going head over heels through the hole that had been hidden by the pile of trash. He crashed to the roof with a grunt, his cheek digging into the rough tarpaper, and swore under his breath.

His dismay didn't last long, though: this had to be the way down, the way Gretsche had disappeared. Now he wished he had a flashlight, but once again it couldn't be

helped. He levered himself back up to a crouched position, then lowered his body down into the hole.

It smelled bad down here, like the squatters had been using the place as a trash dump. *Could be worse*, he told himself wryly as he got his feet under him and tried to penetrate the darkness. *They could have been using it for a toilet.*

It took only a couple of moments for his eyes to adjust—it wasn't really pitch dark down here, as several broken-out windows lined the far wall. The place had probably been an apartment building at some point, but in the meantime somebody had taken out several of the dividing walls to make one large clear area. He saw many more signs that squatters lived here, though no movement. Forcing his breathing to slow, he stood very still and listened, trying to make out any sign of Gretsch's footsteps as he left.

Nothing.

It was as if the guy had simply disappeared.

If he left at all...

Once again the wordless thought poked at his awareness. Sean tensed, willing himself not to move, to continue his attitude of listening for far-off sounds. If Gretsch was still here, he was hiding well. *Invisible?* That wasn't one of his instincts, but just a thought that gave him a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He hadn't asked the guy if he was a magician, and Gretsch hadn't volunteered the information. If he *was* a wizard, this whole thing would be pointless: it wouldn't be hard to hide from a mundane kid if you had magic powers.

Sean shook his head and swiped his hair off his forehead. That couldn't be it. If the guy had wanted to get rid of him, all he'd have had to do was tell him to buzz off. No, he was here, somewhere. Sean could feel it.

He crossed the room slowly, moving in the direction of the exit and keeping up the ruse that he was listening. His eyes were downcast, searching for footprints on the dusty, rotten floor. His feet made no sound.

And then—a noise. The tiniest of noises, from above. Sean didn't stop, but his awareness shifted. Could be a mouse, or a rat, or something worse. But it could also be —

He spun himself around and leaped forward, looking up. "Ha!" he yelled, unable to contain himself: Gretsches, grinning, hung from the open beams of the ceiling. As Sean sped toward him he gracefully dropped, crouched, and then took off toward the exit.

"Not bad, kid!" he called back over his shoulder. "But you haven't caught me yet!"

Sean was right there with him. Now that he had him in his sight, he wasn't going to lose him again. Gretsches had only a couple of seconds head start on him now, but it was enough: the two of them pounded down the dilapidated hallway, neither gaining any ground on the other.

At the end of the hall was a stairway leading down. Gretsches grabbed hold of the railing and vaulted over it, landing on the next flight down without a stumble. Sean didn't hesitate, but followed his lead. His landing wasn't as nice to look at, but he didn't twist anything and didn't fall. Gretsches was still laughing as he ran.

At the foot of the second flight of stairs was a window, its glass long ago broken out. With Sean only a second or two behind him, he nimbly jumped up on the windowframe. However, instead of leaping down as Sean had expected, he launched himself *up* and immediately disappeared from view.

Sean took his place in the window and wasted a couple of precious seconds taking stock of the situation: he had expected something like this. Above the window

was the remains of a rusty fire escape, and he could just spot Gretsche's foot as he swung over the top of the roof and took off again.

He was going to have to do something to even this out, or he'd never catch Gretsche. Clearly the guy didn't run any faster than Sean, but just as clearly he knew this area and all its nooks and crannies. If he got out of Sean's sight again it would be over. Again Sean followed his lead, scrambling up the fire escape and flinging himself over the edge of the building.

Gretsche hadn't disappeared this time—he was still running across the roof toward the other side. He'd reach it in seconds, long before Sean could catch up with him. Sean had only a couple of seconds to make a decision.

He did as he always did in situations like this: he gave control over to his body and his subconscious mind. Instead of chasing Gretsche to the other side of the roof, he hurried to the side of the building off to his right and swung himself over, his hands and feet finding purchase in the rotting bricks, gutters, and window frames. In a moment he was back on the ground floor, around the corner from where Gretsche had been. He waited, knowing that if his instinct failed him this time, he might as well go home, because—

Gretsche came barreling around the corner, almost faster than Sean could react. His expression showed shocked surprise as he slammed into Sean. The force of impact took them both down, but Sean had the presence of mind to throw his arms around the man's shoulders and hold on tight. "Caught you!" he cried triumphantly.

Gretsche's shoulders were shaking, and at first Sean thought he was trying to struggle free—but in a moment he realized the man was laughing. "Damn straight, kid," he said, rolling out of Sean's arms and jumping back to his feet. Now there was an expression of reluctant admiration

on his face. "I don't know how you did it, but you got me. How'd you know I'd be coming around that corner?"

Sean shrugged, also getting back up and brushing the dirt off his jacket. "I don't know. Just lucky, I guess. I knew I wasn't going to catch you if I just chased you down."

Gretsch punched him in the arm—a hard punch, but nonetheless a comradely gesture. "Not bad at all," he admitted. "If nothin' else, you might give Ocelot a few laughs."

"So you'll tell me where to find him?"

Gretsch indicated for Sean to follow him, back toward the building where they'd started. "Yeah. That was the deal, right?" When they got back to the building's front, he stopped. The two guys who'd been there before were gone now. He took a scrap of paper from his pocket and wrote an address on it. "You'll have to do some travelin', though. He ain't around here anymore."

"Where is he?" Again, Sean felt a sinking in his stomach: what if the guy had relocated overseas or something? It was still doable, but not without a lot of trouble. He was getting impatient.

"San Fran. He's got a dojo down there—only takes students by referral. I think you might have the stuff."

That wasn't what Sean had expected, but it didn't surprise him, either. He took the scrap of paper and stuck it in his inner jacket pocket, then grinned. "Thanks, man. That was fun."

"Yeah, well, don't get cocky. I went easy on ya—the guys down there won't. Hope you like bruises."

"We'll see."

Gretsch nodded. "Just tell 'em I sent ya—that should get ya in. Now get outta here—got things to do."

Sean nodded. He was still grinning as he headed down the street toward someplace where he could call

another cab to pick him up. So his father was some kind of fighting instructor. This could work out well after all. Although he wondered why he should care given that the guy had abandoned him, he had an irrational hope that maybe he could actually make Ocelot proud of him.

“Next stop, San Francisco,” he said to himself under his breath.

San Francisco, and with any luck the end of his search.

9.

Sean decided not to take his car to San Francisco—it hadn't been running all that well since its cross-country trip anyway, and furthermore it just wasn't worth the hassle of trying to talk his way past the notoriously humorless Tir Tairngire border guards.

He also decided not to take Jay, although part of this decision was based on the fact that when he returned to Crank's apartment after his meet with Gretsche, he found the dwarf, along with Crank, the ork, and a couple of other people he hadn't met, apparently dead to the world with their datajacks plugged in and their fingers twitching. Whatever they were doing, it looked like they'd been at it for awhile and probably didn't want to be interrupted. He found a datapad tossed on a table near some pizza boxes and tapped out a note to Jay telling him where he'd gone (at least in a general sense; he didn't reveal the location Gretsche had given him) and that he'd probably be back in a few days.

It wasn't like they were parting company completely, after all: they both had cell phones and if Jay needed him for anything he could just call. He shoved his clothes into his bag, left the datapad propped on the case to Jay's deck where the dwarf would be sure to find it, and left the apartment.

He slept most of the way on the bus down, leaning against the window. Apparently he didn't look suspicious, because by the time he awakened his chrono indicated they were well on their way through the Tir. He turned to his seatmate, an elderly Asian human woman. "Did we cross the border yet?"

She smiled. "You sleep deeply. We crossed several hours ago and now we're about an hour out of CalFree."

Sean nodded. He knew the border patrols weren't as strict as they used to be—the Tir had been having economic problems for as long as he could remember. Just as well. He smiled back at her; now that he was awake, he wouldn't mind a bit of conversation. "Do you live in San Francisco, or just visiting?"

"Oh, I live there. I'm coming back from visiting my daughter and her husband in Seattle." The lady stowed her magazine away in her shapeless bag and settled back in her seat. "What about you?"

"I'm trying to find somebody I've heard is there."

She looked interested. "Oh, really? An old friend?"

"More like—a long lost relative, I guess."

The old lady smiled. "That's always a good thing to do. It's important to keep in touch with your family."

"Yeah, I guess it is. I just hope I can find him. This is my first trip here."

"I'm sure you'll be fine, dear," she said. "It's not that large a town, really, once you get to know it. Crowded, though. Lots of people, of all different types. Much nicer than the old days when it was all Japanese, except for the metahumans who came in to do the dirty work." Her wrinkled features twisted into a look of delicate distaste. "I was so glad when that all ended. It was terrible there for awhile, under General Saito."

Sean realized she was talking about things that had happened long ago, back when he was a baby. "You must be pretty familiar with the town, if you've been there that long."

"Oh, I've been there most of my life. I've often thought about moving, but it's such a beautiful town and, well—it's home." She shrugged. "It's hard to leave your home, even when things get unpleasant."

Sean nodded. For some reason, her words brought on a sudden wave of homesickness of his own. "Yeah..." he said softly. "Yeah, I guess it is."

She gave him another of her birdlike smiles. "Good luck with your quest. I hope you find the one you're looking for." She settled back and closed her eyes, which Sean took to mean she either didn't want to talk anymore or else she was tired.

That was all right with him. He sighed, leaning back against the window, and thought about Bainbridge. He wondered what Althea was doing, if she missed him—if any of them missed him. For the first time, it sunk in to him what he had done: taken off for the opposite coast on what might still end up being a wild goose chase, just because he'd found some papers in an old trunk in his parents' attic.

Adopted parents' attic.

He sighed. Even that he didn't know for sure. Although it wasn't likely, it was still possible that the whole thing was an elaborate hoax, that the Hunters really *were* his true parents, and he was in for a big disappointment if and when he found this Ocelot guy. And even if it was true (somehow he knew it had to be, since much as he loved the Hunters they hadn't had much in common with him or he with them), what about his mother? There had been almost no link to her. Was she alive? Were she and Ocelot together? Would they even want to have anything to do with him after they'd given him up so long ago?

So many questions, and no answers. Sean hoped he'd find some in San Francisco, but he wasn't holding his breath.

The bus pulled into the station early the following morning. Sean grabbed his bag from under the seat and got off quickly, waving goodbye to the old lady. Outside

the weather was clear and sunny, chilled a bit by a cool wind coming in off the bay. He glanced down at the scrap of paper containing the address (even though he'd already memorized it) and decided he'd better get himself a place to stay before he went any further. Flagging down a cab, he gave the driver the address and asked if there were any motels nearby.

The cabbie punched the address into his onboard computer and shook his head. "That ain't really tourist town," he said. "Mostly residential, light industrial, that kind of thing."

Sean nodded. "Okay. Then can you find me a something not too far away?"

Again the cabbie consulted his computer. "There's some places a couple kilometers away, gettin' closer to the tourist areas. That work?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Let's go there and I'll decide."

He leaned back in his seat and watched the town go by as the cabbie drove. It really was a pretty town, very hilly and full of old buildings in various states of repair. As the old lady on the bus had said, it was crowded—a lot more than Bainbridge, that was sure. But Sean was no stranger to big cities, and he liked the vitality provided by lots of people. *I could get to like it here*, he thought idly.

After maneuvering his way through snarled traffic for several minutes, the cabdriver turned onto another street and pulled over. Sean looked out the front window, noting that he was facing the ocean. The Bay Bridge was visible in the distance. "Here we are," the driver said. "There's about five places to stay along here, and it's a decent area. Okay?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah, great. Thanks." He slotted his credchip, including a nice tip for the extra service. He got out and hefted his bag as the car drove off.

After looking over the offerings available, he finally decided on a small place that specialized in longer-term accommodations. It was all on a single story, arranged around a nice little courtyard. Sean arranged for a room for a week and the clerk showed him where it was, around the back side of the complex.

He tossed his bag on the bed and dropped down next to it, feeling good to be stretched out after the cramped bus seat. He thought about his next options. It was only eight o'clock in the morning, which probably meant that if the address he had was a dojo, there wouldn't be anybody here this early—and besides, if Ocelot was anything like most of Sean's friends, he wouldn't even be awake this early. He decided to wait until at least noon, which gave him four hours to have a nap (despite the fact that he'd slept on the bus he didn't feel refreshed: the seats had been far from comfortable), get a shower, change clothes, and make himself presentable. That was important to him, he realized. He wanted to make a good impression on this guy.

He shrugged out of his jacket and started removing things from his pocket in preparation for a nap. When the cell phone came out, though, he stared at it for a moment. *Three hour time difference...might be enough.* He flipped it open and hit one of the speed-dial buttons.

She picked up after two rings. "Sean?" The voice was a bit groggy, but sounded happy. After a moment the video pickup turned on, showing her looking all tousle-headed like she'd just gotten up.

"Hi, Althea. Yeah, it's me."

"How are you? *Where* are you?"

He chuckled. She sounded a lot more animated than her usual cynical drawl. "Miss me, eh?"

"Of course not, silly."

Again he laughed. "Well, I missed you. I miss everybody, actually. Except Jay. I haven't been away from him long enough to miss him." He paused. "I didn't wake you up, did I?"

"It's only eleven. You know you did. But that's okay. Where are you? Have you had any luck?"

"San Francisco, and maybe. I'll let you know after today."

She smiled. "That's great. I was afraid you were going all the way out there for nothing. How's San Francisco?"

"Dunno. I just got here." He turned his phone so the video picked up his spartan little room. "Gorgeous, isn't it?"

She stuck her tongue out. "Not exactly House Beautiful. Oh, that reminds me: your house is fine. I drive by every now and then. Somebody's mowing the lawn."

"That's good." For some reason it did make him feel good, knowing he'd have a home to go back to if he wanted it. "So everybody's okay?"

"Yeah, fine. *Sensei* misses you. He doesn't say it, but I can tell."

That made Sean feel good too. "Well, tell him I'll be back one of these days. But he'll have to get himself a new star student once I go off to college."

She nodded. "It's good to hear from you, Sean," she said softly.

"Yeah..." he said in the same tone. Then he grinned and pulled out the little dragon she'd given him. "Don't worry, though—your little spy is keeping an eye on me."

Althea nodded gravely, but there was a glint of mischief in her eyes. "Good. He's been reporting back to me, so you be good."

"Scout's honor," Sean assured her.

"Yeah, right—you as a scout. Got any more good jokes?"

He laughed. "I'll have to get back to you on that. Right now I think I hear a nap calling. Tell everybody I said hi, will you?"

"Yessir." Again her expression grew serious, just for a moment. "Be careful, okay?"

"Always."

As he hung up, he stared at the phone for a long time. Then he put it on the nightstand and lay back on the bed. His last conscious thought before drifting off to sleep was that he hoped he could keep his promise.

He was in a dark cavern. It was neither damp nor musty, but it smelled...old. Like it had been here for millennia, unchanging and unchanged. There were voices up ahead. He started toward them, exiting the cavern and moving into a narrow tunnel, but they remained naggingly just out of his reach. Many voices, male and female. They muttered back and forth at each other, but he could not make out the words.

Then there was someone behind him. He whirled in time to see a shadow disappear around one of the bends in the tunnel. He tried to call out but no sound came from his lips. He ran, retracing his steps back through the tunnel. When he reached the turn, he stopped.

No one was there.

Pausing a moment, he waited. The voices were still behind him, still indistinct but no softer or louder. Of the shadow, though, there was no sign. Sighing he turned back and once more headed toward them, faster this time.

He burst into another cavern. The walls were alive with shadows here: Big shadows. All around him they moved and writhed against the stone walls. He got brief impressions of long necks, of wings, of sharp teeth. Everywhere, the voices whispered and muttered, but remained maddeningly indistinct. Something was new, though: even though he couldn't understand what they were saying, he somehow knew they were discussing him.

Again he drew breath to speak, but again nothing came out. He had no voice here. The whisperings were starting to get to him now, to work their way into his brain. Even after he clapped his hands to his ears to shut them out, they continued. It was as if they were inside his head instead of all around him.

They were moving now, drawing in closer to him, their voices growing louder. He spun around and saw that they surrounded him, moving in from all sides. And then he realized that the shadow from the tunnel was there too, blocking the exit, and it was one of them...

Sean awakened with a start, letting out a quick sharp breath of surprise. He often had vivid dreams, but not one that unsettling in quite awhile. He sat there, waiting for his heart rate to go back down to normal. Already the dream was fading—not that it had been all that distinct in the first place. Something about shadows—

“Guess somebody’s telling me it’s time to get up and get on with it,” he said aloud, shoving his sweat-dampened hair back off his forehead. He was glad to comply, since he didn’t relish the idea of going back to sleep and picking up Part II of the dream.

He took a long shower, the first hot one he’d had since moving in with Crank, whose apartment had only had cold water. Letting the water roll over his body and carry away the stresses of the last few days, he thought about what he would do. He had no idea how he was going to approach Ocelot. Could he just show up on the guy’s doorstep and announce, “Hi, Dad! You don’t know me, but I’m your long-lost son”? Somehow that just didn’t seem like the way to go. He sighed, pulling on a fresh pair of jeans, a black T-shirt, and his leather jacket. He’d just have to play it by ear, that’s all. He’d always been good at that.

The first thing he did was get a map from the motel office and then rented himself a nondescript cheap car,

not wanting to be at the mercy of cabs and buses. He stopped at a diner and ordered breakfast, using the time to pore over the map and figure out where he was going. As he was getting ready to pay his check and leave, his phone rang. Wondering if it was Althea again, he pulled it out and snapped it open.

It was Jay. "Oh, so you *are* still alive," the dwarf said, half relieved, half sarcastic.

"Why wouldn't I be?" Sean slotted his chip to pay for breakfast, then headed out of the diner, still talking.

"What's the idea of giving me the slip?"

Sean shrugged. "You were busy, and I didn't want to interrupt you."

"So you couldn't have waited?" Jay sounded almost offended.

"Sorry—I got some good information, and I wanted to follow it up right away. I'll be back in a couple of days." He paused. "So how'd your job go?" He was moving down the street now, to where he'd managed to find a place to park a couple of blocks from the diner.

Jay's bad mood couldn't last once he started talking about decking. "Great! We ran into a little trouble, but that system was ripe for the taking. Crank even cut me in on the take, so when you get back up here I'll buy you dinner."

"Great. McHugh's," Sean teased. "I can hardly wait."

Jay snorted. "Hey, I'll spring for the *double* McHugh burger."

"Okay, big spender. You do that. Like I said, I should be back in a couple of days."

"So did you find this guy?"

"I'm on my way there now, or at least to where he's supposed to be. We'll see how it goes."

"Okay, then I'll let you go. It's sounding like we might have another little job coming up, and Crank's got some utilities he's gonna let me have cheap."

"Whee." Sean chuckled, as always amused at how he and Jay could be such good friends when they had almost nothing in common.

"Yeah, right. Go beat somebody up or something." Jay was grinning as he broke the connection.

Sean had just about reached the car, so he put the phone back in his pocket and was reaching for the magkey when something tickled the back of his neck. It wasn't a physical feeling, as if someone had touched him, but yet it felt as if it was. He turned around quickly –

—just in time to see somebody disappearing around the corner at the intersection he'd just passed less than a minute ago.

He stiffened: he couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn that the brief impression had been of the slender Asian he'd seen back at the bar in Seattle. He acted without thinking, taking off at a full run back toward the intersection.

He knew it would be useless, and it was. When he skidded to a stop at the corner and looked down the street, he saw no one except a woman pushing a baby stroller in the opposite direction.

He let his breath out. What the hell was going on here? Was he going crazy? Seeing things? Or *was* somebody following him? He turned in disgust and started back toward his car, his mind racing.

Why would somebody follow him? If this was the same guy, he'd tracked him from Seattle. The only people aside from himself who knew he was in San Francisco were Jay and Althea, and he'd stake his life that neither of them had anything to do with this. So who?

Are you sure it's anybody at all?

He sighed, reaching the car and getting in (after checking the back seat—his paranoia was stepping up a bit despite his best efforts to keep it under control). Whoever the Asian man (or the figment of his imagination) was, he didn't have time to deal with him right now. He had a dojo to find, and one of the most important meetings of his life coming up.

Still, he was glad he'd bought the map. Paranoia or no paranoia, he decided that taking an indirect route to the dojo was just good common sense. If nobody was following him then it wouldn't make any difference, and if somebody was—well, maybe he could make sure they weren't still on his tail when he reached his destination.

10.

If Sean hadn't known what he was looking for, he'd have never spotted the place. From the outside it looked like all the other rundown, nondescript buildings on the street with grimy coatings that spoke more to age than to disrepair. The only indication that he was in the right place was the tiny number plate at street level that matched the address he had been given. There was no sign, no other evidence that the place was a business at all. A dim stairway led down to a door painted in peeling green.

Sean double-checked the address, glanced around to see if anyone was watching him, and then descended the stairs. As he got closer he could see that the door, which looked from the street like it was made of wood, was actually fairly hefty steel. There was a small intercom speaker next to it, and a button. Sean pushed the button.

For several moments there was no reply. Then the speaker crackled. "Yeah?"

Sean took a deep breath. "I'm looking for the dojo. Is this it?"

"Who wants to know?" The voice was firm but not hostile.

"My name's Snake. A guy named Gretsche told me about the place. I was hoping to get in. You know, sign up. Heard this was the place to go to get taught right."

There was a pause. "Gretsche, eh? Haven't heard from him in awhile. How is that dwarf, anyway?"

Sean smiled. "I wouldn't know—the guy I talked to was human. Big guy, dark hair, tattoo of a dagger on his arm."

Something behind the door went *click*. "C'mon in. Class is in session right now but we can talk after."

Slowly, Sean reached out and tried the door. It was open. Before the person on the other side (*was it Ocelot?* he wondered) could change his mind, he slipped through and closed it behind him. It *clicked* again.

He was standing in a short hallway. There was no one else here, and no furniture, just two doors on either side of the other end. The one on the left was slightly ajar and he could hear voices behind it. After a moment's hesitation he opened the door.

The first thing he noticed when he stepped inside was the smell: the mingled scents of sweat and leather and canvas, along with the faint metallic tang of bodies working hard. It was a smell he was very familiar with after years of study at Watanabe's. He looked around, taking in the padded floor, the mirrored wall on the other side of the room and the others hung with practice weapons, the benches.

There were four other people already there, and it was a testament to their discipline that three of them weren't looking at him. The fourth, obviously the teacher, was. He motioned Sean toward one of the benches and then continued the lesson without a break.

Sean did as he was told, sitting down on one of the wooden benches and watching the class go through its exercises.

One of the students was human, as was the teacher. The other two students were an ork and an elf. All of them were dressed in nondescript workout clothes, a vast difference from the starched black *gis* Sean was used to at Watanabe's. He could see the contrast almost immediately, not only by the surroundings, but by the types of exercises the students were doing: the purpose of Watanabe's was to train up some upper middle class suburban corp kids to learn a useful skill and maybe be able to defend themselves if they were attacked. The

purpose of this place was life or death. Sean could see it on the faces of both students and teacher: they took this very seriously.

Sean was impressed. Everyone in the room moved with quick, fluid grace—he was sure they were either adepts or wired, as no one without augmentation could do the things they were doing with such ease. At the moment they seemed to be going through an intricate *kata* of some sort, but Sean couldn't place the style. It wasn't the one he'd been taught, he was certain. If anything, it looked like an amalgamation of at least three or four, possibly more. He watched and tried to commit the moves to memory, planning to try them out in his room this evening.

Mostly, though, he watched the teacher. A tall, well-muscled human, the man had dusty-blond hair pulled back in a long ponytail, a short neatly trimmed goatee, and a hard no-nonsense expression in his eyes. Was the man Ocelot? Sean couldn't be sure: he certainly looked like the man in the picture, but he appeared to be at most in his late thirties. The man Sean was seeking, if the birth certificate could be believed, would be close to fifty by now. Knowing he couldn't answer the question without talking to the man, he leaned back on the bench and waited.

Ten minutes later, the teacher gracefully returned to facing his class. "Okay, that's it," he said, bowing. The students returned the bow. "We'll pick up from where we left off on Thursday." As the students headed for the bench to pick up their towels, the man raised a hand. "Otto, hang out a minute, will you?"

The human student paused. "Sure. What's up?"

The teacher looked over at Sean. "So you want to join the class, do you? Think you can keep up?"

Sean stood. "Yeah," he said firmly. "I do." Of course he didn't: there was no way he would be able to compete with wires and magic, but he'd give it his best shot. Maybe he'd impress the guy.

The man gave him a tight little smile. "Okay, let's see what you can do. Otto, go easy on him. I just want to see how he moves."

Otto grinned a little predatorially and moved into the center of the padded floor. "C'mon, kid. Let's see it."

Sean kicked off his shoes, bowing out of habit as he stepped onto the mat. Moving in closer to Otto, he met the human's gaze and began circling slowly, trying to get a feel for him.

Otto didn't attack him right away—in fact, he seemed to be doing the same thing Sean was. For several moments the two circled, eyes locked. Then, suddenly, Otto struck with a punch. It was fast, but Sean saw it coming. Even so, he barely got out of the way, off balance so he couldn't counterattack. Otto was fast, faster than he was. He knew he'd have to be careful if he was going to make even a decent showing. He readjusted his perceptions and dropped back to circling.

"C'mon. Take a poke at me." Otto's tone was mocking as he made a *come on* gesture. "Scared?"

Sean wasn't flustered by the man's words. Taunting was part of the game, and the guy who let it get to him was the guy who'd lose the fight. He'd seen it too many times. "I've got time," he said.

It continued like that for another minute or so: Otto taking shots at Sean, and Sean either barely getting out of the way or getting clipped by a fast-moving punch or kick. None of them connected fully, however. Sean could see Otto was getting impatient, and inwardly he smiled. The strikes had hurt and he'd probably have bruises tomorrow, but they were worth it if they could make Otto

screw up. From the corner of his eye he saw the teacher circling around outside the edge of the fight, his eyes never leaving the two opponents.

Otto struck while Sean's attention was distracted. It was a two-part attack, and the first part, the punch, connected solidly with Sean's shoulder. Grunting in pain, he staggered back, and Otto followed up with part two, a blazingly fast round kick. That, however, did not connect. Sean let his body take over control from his mind. His hands shot up and trapped Otto's leg, spinning him around and dropping him unceremoniously in a heap on the mat. He stepped back, breathing hard and rubbing his sore shoulder.

"Stop," came the teacher's voice from behind him.

As Sean reached down to give Otto a hand up, he could sense the teacher's eyes on him. "Not bad," the man said. "Not bad at all. Okay, Otto. Hit the showers. Thanks."

Otto nodded, giving Sean a look back over his shoulder that was half respect, half challenge. "Next time, kid. I won't go easy on you."

Sean turned back to the teacher, who was watching him with his arms crossed over his chest. "Where'd you learn that?" the man asked.

"I've been studying since I was four years old."

"Oh, yeah? Where?"

"Back East. You probably haven't heard of the place."

"Or you don't want to say." The man shrugged. "That's okay. We don't pry around here. We all have our reasons for wanting to be here. What's yours?"

"I told you—I want to learn. I heard you were the best."

The man didn't look satisfied by his answer. "Maybe I am, maybe I'm not. But the fact is, everybody has a reason *why* they want to learn. You don't come to a place like this

so you can compete in tournaments and win trophies." His gaze raked over Sean and the younger man could tell he had seen through part of his cover already.

Sean kept his cool. "I'm new in town. Looking to—make my fortune, if you know what I mean. Fighting's what I'm best at, but I know I'm not good enough yet. So, are you gonna take me on or not?"

"Maybe." The man wouldn't be baited. "I want to see something, though. Let's see how you do against me."

Sean tilted his head. "You?"

"Humor me."

"Hey, it's your school." Sean dropped down into a defensive stance and waited to see what the teacher would do.

This time, the fight didn't last long. Sean gave it his best shot, but he was hopelessly outclassed, and the teacher wasn't holding back. His skill at guessing what his opponent was going to do next was no match for this man's superior speed, skill, and strength. Sean's blocks were there, but the teacher drove right through them, connecting with punches, kicks, and throws one after the other. Sean never even touched him with an attack. He realized early on that his shoulder bruise was soon going to have a lot of company. Finally, less than a minute after they'd started—almost as if he'd been waiting for just the right opportunity—the teacher plucked one of Sean's punches out of the air with easy grace, grabbed his hand, and twisted his arm around behind his back. He held it there just long enough to show that Sean had no choice but to take it, then shoved him forward and dropped him on the mat in the same spot where Sean had taken Otto down just moments ago.

The teacher waited while Sean picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself off. "Where'd you learn to do that?" he asked, standing back.

"I told you—back East." Sean was puffing, brushing dirt from the mat off his T-shirt.

The man shook his head. "No, I don't mean the skills. I mean, where'd you learn to anticipate like that?"

Sean tilted his head. "I don't get it."

The teacher pulled a practice sword off one of the nearby walls and began spinning it in lazy circles. "What I'm talkin' about is the way you always seem to know what I'm gonna do. You're not fast enough or skilled enough to do much about it, but I could tell by your eyes that you knew it was coming. That's strange, since my style is that most of the time *I* don't know what's coming until I do it. Who taught you that?"

"I—nobody taught me. It's just the way I fight. I've always done it."

"You sure you're not an adept?" The teacher picked up another sword and spun the two of them together. They interleaved like a pair of gears, never touching.

Sean shook his head. "I got tested," he said a little bitterly. "I'm mundane all the way through."

The swords stopped spinning. "Got a problem with that, don't you?"

He looked down. "Yeah. But it can't be helped. I'm a little old to start showing adept powers now."

"Yeah, probably," the man agreed. "So you say you're new in town. How new? You got a place yet?"

"Yeah. I was in Seattle for awhile. I'll probably go back there someday." It was only a small lie—he *would* have to go back to pick up Jay before they headed back home. "So am I in?"

The man nodded. "Yeah, I'll give you a shot. I'll put you in with the advanced unaugmented class—you should mop up the floor with those guys from the look of things. If you do, we'll see about some extra lessons."

"How much?"

"Hundred a week. That's for three lessons and unlimited time in the dojo when the place is free. You don't have the money, we can work something out. You said you were here to 'make your fortune.' If that means what I figure it does, I might be able to line you up some small-time jobs to help finance your schooling."

Sean nodded. "That's okay—I'm all right for awhile." He pulled out his credchip and handed it over. "That's for the first week." After a pause, he met the man's eyes. "So—are you Ocelot?"

"The one and only, kid." He grinned, but it didn't reach his pale blue cybereyes. "Now get outta here, will you? Come back tomorrow, same time. Wear somethin' you can move in, and be ready for a few bruises." He looked Sean over and amended, "A few *more* bruises."

Sean nodded. "I'll be here." He headed for the door, but stopped before he reached it. Slowly he turned back.

Ocelot was gathering up the pads and practice weapons and hanging them back up in their spots. He gave Sean an odd look. "There something else?"

Sean sighed. His plan was to come back to the class a few times, observe the man, get to know him a little before he said anything. Now that he'd finally located him, though, he found he couldn't wait any longer. He came back into the room, never taking his eyes off Ocelot. "Your name's Terry, isn't it? Terry Symonz."

Ocelot stopped in the act of hanging up a focus mitt and moved closer. He moved like the predatory cat that was his namesake, smooth and quiet and a little dangerous. "What makes you think that?" he asked. The tone in his voice was deceptively soft, steel under velvet.

"Because if it is—I think you're my father."

11.

There was no outward indication that Sean's statement had surprised Ocelot. He merely stopped and continued to regard the younger man with a gaze that was hard to read. "Oh?" was all he said.

Sean nodded. "My name's Sean Hunter. It's a long story, but my parents—well, I thought they were my parents, anyway—died, and I found a birth certificate with your name and picture on it. I've been looking for you."

For a long moment Ocelot didn't say anything. He left the room and Sean heard the *click* of the door's lock being engaged, then he came back and sat down on one of the benches. "I thought you'd probably show up one of these days," he said quietly.

Sean's eyes widened. "So—it's true?" It seemed too easy after all the trouble he'd been through on the search. "You're—"

Ocelot took a deep breath and held up his hands. He looked inexplicably tired. "Slow down, kid. Why don't you give me the whole story, okay?"

"That was what I was hoping *you'd* give *me*." Sean protested. "I don't even *know* the whole story." He was still convinced there was something wrong here—this man looked too young to be his father, but clearly he was acting like the revelation hadn't been a surprise.

"Sit down," Ocelot said, patting the bench. "There is a story here and you'll hear it, but we gotta do this right. There's a lot more to it than I think you suspect." He looked around the dojo as if seeing it for the first time, then sighed again. "Like I said—why don't you start by telling me what you know, what happened."

Sean looked at him a bit suspiciously, but finally nodded. Slowly, he told Ocelot the story of his life, his

parents, and what had happened after their deaths. By the time he was done, he was shaking. Ocelot listened silently, his face showing no emotion. "That's it," Sean said at last, fighting to get his voice under control. "My whole life's been a big lie. Nobody ever bothered to tell me I was adopted, and finding something like that without expecting it—" He shook his head.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah, that's gotta be rough," he agreed. Almost under his breath, he said, "They weren't supposed to keep anything like that, dammit...but this'd be about the right time..."

"Look," Sean said, bringing his gaze up to meet Ocelot's. "If you really *are* my father, I think you owe me—I don't know—some kind of explanation. Like for why you gave me up, why nobody ever told me I was adopted—"

Ocelot held up his hands. "Hold on. You gotta give me a little time here, kid. This isn't what I was expecting at all today."

"Well, I didn't exactly expect what I found, either." He looked Ocelot in the eyes, studying their pale, ice-blue depths. "I want to know. I'm not leaving here until I do. And what about my mother—Juliana? Is she around here too?"

Ocelot stood, and Sean didn't miss the brief odd look that crossed his face at the mention of the name. "Here's what I want you to do," Ocelot said at last. "I need to make a few calls. You're right—you deserve to know what's going on. But you have to trust me. Like I said, there's more to it than you know, even now."

"Is she alive?" Sean demanded.

Long pause, followed by a slow exhale. "Yeah."

"Is she really my mother?"

Ocelot gave him a hard look. "Sean, I'm not kidding here. I promise—you'll find out everything. But you're

gonna have to let me do this my way, okay? Leave a number where I can reach you, and I'll call you back tonight. After I've talked to some people."

Sean glared at him. "So what are you gonna do, run away again? Disappear so I'll never find you?" He stood, slamming his fist into one of the practice pads. "Listen, *Dad*—if you don't want me around, just tell me and I'm outta here. I don't need this drek. I want to know what's going on, and I want to know now."

"I can't tell you now," Ocelot said. There was the subtlest hint of strain in his voice, but it was hard to tell whether he was keeping his own temper in check or just having a hard time saying what he was saying. "I know this sounds like bullshit to you, but you're gonna have to trust me. The whole story's not mine to tell, and I have to get in touch with somebody else before we can go on."

"Mom? Juliana?"

Ocelot sighed. "No. Yes. She's one of the people I have to call."

"So you *do* know where she is."

He nodded. "Yeah."

Sean stalked around the room. He couldn't stand still anymore. "I don't get this. You know, and you're gonna call her—that makes sense. But why do I have to go away? Why can't you just call her now and we can all get together? What else is there going on here?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Ocelot said wryly. He shook his head. "I hate to keep repeating myself, but this is the way it's gotta be. I give you my word that I'm not gonna run off, and that I *will* call you tonight after I get in touch with people. You're just gonna have to believe me."

Sean stopped, sighed. "I guess you wouldn't be much of a father if I couldn't believe you, would you? But then again, you *did* get rid of me when I was a baby, so —"

Ocelot was there, instantly, gripping his shoulder hard enough to hurt a little. His eyes flashed. "Listen up, kid. We did *not* get rid of you. You'll see what a stupid thing that is to say when you get the whole story. But that ain't the way it happened. That much I can tell you now."

"Why, then?" Sean met him glare for glare. "Why didn't you keep me?"

Ocelot sighed. "Okay," he said quietly after a pause. "I'll tell you one more thing, and then you're gonna have to go. That's it. Scan?"

"Maybe."

He didn't appear to notice the sullenness in Sean's tone. "What we did, we did for your own safety. That's the truth. Look at me and tell me I'm lying to you."

Sean looked into the pale blue cat eyes and couldn't do it. He lowered his head. "Okay," he said. "I'll tell you where I am. But if you don't call —"

"I'll call, Sean. I promise."

Sean gave him his LTG number and the name of the place he was staying. "When are you gonna call?"

"You'll hear from me by 20:00 tonight. Even if I can't get hold of 'em, I'll call. But I think it won't be a problem."

Sean nodded. He still looked a little suspicious, but managed to keep it under control. "Okay, then. I'll wait to hear." He turned to go.

"Sean?"

Sean turned back. "Yeah?"

"Listen—don't spread this around, okay?"

His lips curled in a bitter little smile. "Why? Are you ashamed of me?"

Ocelot bowed his head, suddenly looking every bit the age he was supposed to be. "No, kid. Not at all. It's the safety thing again. Once you get the whole story, you can do whatever you want with it. But keep it quiet until then. I'm just askin'. It's for your safety, not mine."

Sean was getting more and more confused by the minute, but he decided to let it go. "Okay," he said grudgingly. "I'll keep quiet until tonight. After that—we'll see." He turned once again and stalked down the hall. At the end, before he opened the door, he called back, "See you tonight—Dad."

The door closed behind him, so he didn't get to see Ocelot finally release the pent-up energy in his muscles by doing his best to put his foot through one of the walls.

Sean drove a little too fast heading back to his room at the residential motel, but he didn't go directly there. Instead, he cruised around San Francisco for an hour or so, not caring where he was going or where he ended up. His mind was spinning, trying to make sense of what had happened, but it couldn't put everything into perspective.

Ocelot had obviously admitted to being his father, but why all the secrecy? Why the talk of phone calls and personal safety? He could understand why Ocelot would want to tell his mother about his reappearance (Sean was inexplicably sad that it seemed like the two of them were no longer together) but what was the need for calling one or more third parties. Lawyers, maybe? What did shadowrunners need with lawyers? But his father wasn't a shadowrunner anymore, he was a martial arts instructor. Sean wondered what his mother was doing; was she still a shadowrunner? Was she in town? Was that why his own safety was at risk? He knew that shadowrunners ran with some dangerous people—frag, they *were* some dangerous people—so he supposed it might not be safe for their enemies to know of his existence. But he could take care of himself. Ocelot had seen that. Why the secrets?

Another thought struck him, suddenly, drawing his gaze quickly up to his rearview mirror: Did this have

anything to do with the man who'd been following him? But there was no sign of anyone suspicious back there, and he remembered that he still wasn't certain that anyone actually *was* following him. He sighed, turning his attention back to driving. He had enough to worry about without manufacturing more.

When Sean finally made it back to the motel (after having to stop twice to reorient himself and the car's nav after getting lost), he shook his head quickly to clear it of all the flying thoughts. He pulled into his parking space and got out of the car. He supposed that despite all the thinking he'd been doing, it really wasn't all that worthwhile to dwell on trying to solve the puzzle, since with any luck he'd get the whole story tonight. That was if Ocelot had told the truth, of course. He wondered if he had been a fool to trust him, if he should have insisted on staying—

He slid his magkey into the door lock and stalked into the room, shucking off his jacket and flinging it over the nearest chair. Right now all he wanted was a nice long shower and—

There was a man in the room.

His quick perceptions instantly got the details—human, dressed in a suit, looked somewhat familiar, holding a gun—before his reflexes took over and he spun, intending to run back to the door and outside.

He nearly ran into the other man who had moved out of the shadows behind him. The second man raised another gun. There was a little *thwip* and Sean felt a sting in his side. As his legs turned to rubber and he fell, his last two thoughts were of recognition—the man had been one who'd followed him back in Seattle, and of regret—now after all the work he'd done he would never get to hear the story of his real parents.

12.

Sean was dreaming. In his dream he flew high over a verdant mountain range, spinning and rolling lazily on the air currents, diving, in ecstasy over the simple feeling of the wind beating his face and whipping his hair back like flame behind him.

He awoke abruptly in a dimly lit room, jolting to a sitting position. Beneath him he felt the softness of a bedspread over a mattress; his head had been propped on soft pillows. *What's going on?*

He blinked a couple of times, letting his eyes adjust to the twilight, and then took in his surroundings. He was indeed sitting on a bed. The room was large and well appointed, with ornate-looking furniture, heavy drapes, and some kind of flocked wallpaper. There was a door on the other side.

Gingerly Sean got up, testing his balance. He still felt a bit woozy from whatever they'd shot him with, but nothing more than that. He pulled up his shirt to examine his side where the shot had hit and saw only a tiny red pinprick. *So whoever's got me, they want me alive. I wonder how long I've been here. Does this have anything to do with the 'safety issue' Dad had mentioned?*

He moved around the room, examining his surroundings. There was a lamp next to the bed; he flipped it on, filling the room with gentle light. Then he checked the door and the window: the former was locked tight as he expected, and the latter was made of some kind of heavy armored glass. He doubted he could break it even if he threw one of the chairs through it. *I'll keep it in mind if I have to, though.*

Another door off the bedroom led to a sumptuous bathroom with a sunken tub and golden fixtures. *Whoever owns this place is loaded. Wonder what they want with me?* He

examined the bathroom window, knowing from experience that even those who carefully guarded their main windows against intruders sometimes forgot about the bath, but this one was locked and made of the same material as the one in the front.

He ran some water in the sink, washed his face, and dried off with one of the thick towels hanging on a rack next to the vanity. Then he headed back out to the main room.

The man who had shot him was sitting in one of the chairs.

Sean started violently—he hadn't heard the door open or the man come in, but yet here he was. "What—?"

"Good evening, young Sean." The man smiled. He was around thirty, Asian, dressed in the same black suit he'd been wearing earlier. "I am pleased to see you are awake."

"What do you want?" Sean demanded. "Who are you, and what the hell am I doing here?"

The man chuckled. "So many questions. Do not worry, young one. All will be answered in time. In the meantime, is there anything I can bring you to make your stay more pleasant?"

"I just want out of here. That's it. You have no right to hold me here. Just tell me what you want and let me go."

The man nodded blandly. "All things come in time. There is no need to hurry. Have we not treated you well?"

"If you call getting shot with some kind of tranquilizer 'well,'" Sean growled. "Why were you following me in Seattle? Why did you follow me to San Francisco?"

"Because my employer wished to speak with you."

Sean glared at him. "Who's your employer?" Then a thought occurred to him suddenly, and he blurted it out before his brain could process it: "Does this have something to do with my father?"

The man's smile broadened. "You could say so, yes."

"Is he your employer?" He didn't know who to trust now: if his father had hired these men to follow him, then he had betrayed the promise he'd made to Sean. *But he didn't even know I was looking for him until today –*
– or did he?

The man's expression didn't change. "My employer will be here soon, and then the reason for your visit will be explained to you."

"So Ocelot *did* hire you to grab me."

A brief look of –amusement?– flickered across his captor's face. "You will find out soon enough," he said again. "I am surprised, in truth, that you do not know already. Perhaps he has protected you from the knowledge. No matter. All will be revealed." He stood. "Until then, I hope that you will enjoy our hospitality here. If there is anything you require – food, beverage, diversions – you have only to ask."

"But I won't be allowed to leave this room," Sean said brusquely. "Right?"

The man stood and made a slight bow. "I hope you will forgive me, but I have been requested to have you remain here until my employer arrives. I hope it will not be too much of an inconvenience."

"Damn right it's an inconvenience!" Sean yelled. "I want *out*!" He lunged forward, meaning to attack the man, but his captor sidestepped him with ease. The smile never left his face.

"I will leave you here now," he said. "Please call if you need anything." He left Sean standing there in the middle of the room, grasping at air. The door closed softly behind him.

Sean tested it anyway, even though he knew it was locked. Then he pounded on it a few times in sheer frustration – he didn't expect anyone on the other side to

notice or care, but he had to get rid of his excess energy. “What the hell is going *on*?” he whispered to himself, his fists tingling from the effort. He stalked back over to the bed, threw himself down to a sitting position, and glared around the room. “Think, Sean, think. Who’d want to kidnap you?”

There were only a few possibilities, and none of them held water very well under examination. The most likely possibility was his father, Ocelot. Perhaps he didn’t want anyone to know he’d had a son so long ago and was taking steps to make sure things stayed that way. Sean didn’t believe that, though. He considered himself a fairly good judge of character (frighteningly good at times, though he had no idea what controlled this hit-or-miss ability) and he would have bet a large amount of money that Ocelot had been genuinely surprised to see him today. He could have sent the man to his room to kidnap him, but since Sean was more than passingly sure that the man was the same one who’d been following him for the past few days, that would have meant Ocelot had to know about things in advance.

But if not Ocelot, who? His mother the shadowrunner, maybe? Could she have been keeping tabs on him? It didn’t seem likely. Someone from Seattle? He hadn’t been up there long enough to annoy anyone to the point they’d do something like this. And besides, the Asian man had referred to ‘his employer’ and to the fact that Sean would ‘find out everything in time.’ That implied that whoever had him knew something about his situation – didn’t it?

Sean sighed and scrubbed at his hair. This wasn’t getting him anywhere. He had to get out of here.

He spent the next hour in a fruitless search for a way out. He pulled out all the drawers and examined them for anything he could use as either a weapon or a way to pick the window lock in the bathroom, but found nothing. He

prowled around the room looking for secret exits, weak spots in the windows, crawlspaces, anything. No such luck. The room was a comfortable, well-furnished, temperature-controlled prison. In despair he sank back down on the bed.

The door clicked, then opened. Sean leaped off the bed and was over there in less than two seconds, but the door had already closed behind the black-suited Asian man. He carried a tray laden with food and drink. "I thought perhaps you might be hungry by now," he said softly, his face as blandly pleasant as ever. "I hope this will be acceptable."

Sean started to glare at him but decided a different approach might be warranted this time. "Listen," he said, trying to sound as reasonable as he could. "Can you just tell me why I'm here, and who your employer is? If he wants something, maybe we can work something out. Somebody's gonna miss me before long, and you guys could be in a lot of trouble."

The man smiled and set the tray down on the table. "Don't worry, young one. All is well. My employer will be here in the morning. We regret the necessity to keep you here overnight, but he will join you tomorrow and you can ask your questions then."

"And after that I can go?"

"That will be up to you and my employer, after you have spoken with each other. You may discover that you do not wish to go after all."

"What?" Sean was getting very tired of all this mystery, and especially of all these variations on *I can't tell you now but you'll find out later*. "Why would I want to stay here? I mean, it's a nice place and all, but I don't generally like staying in places where I'm being held prisoner."

"We shall see," the man said. "Please—enjoy your meal. You should have everything you need here. You

will find sleeping clothes in the—Ah, I see you have already examined the dresser drawers. Good. I will return for you in the morning.” The man bowed and moved back toward the door. The motion was so graceful that it almost seemed as if he were floating. This time Sean didn’t try to follow him.

As the door closed behind the man, Sean examined the tray. The food looked very good and there was plenty of it, but he wasn’t hungry. He was too keyed up to be hungry. Maybe just a little bit, to keep his strength up—

Half an hour later he’d polished off most of the food on the tray, surprised at how much he’d managed to eat despite not being hungry. He pushed the dishes aside, got up with a sigh, and paced some more. It was going to be a long night. He checked his pockets again to make sure they hadn’t left him with anything he could use for communication, even though he knew it was useless.

This whole thing is useless. I’m not getting out of here until they let me out. That thought didn’t please him at all, but he knew it was true. He didn’t like the idea of just giving up and waiting. It wasn’t the way he did things. This time, though, it seemed he didn’t have a choice. His captors had planned this all too well. Shaking his head in disgust, he lowered himself back down to the bed and swung his feet up. He didn’t think he would sleep, but at least he could get some rest.

He awoke suddenly, all his senses immediately aware.
What was that?

He listened. Silence.

He looked around. The room was the same as before: even the light he’d left on was still burning. There was no one else in the room. He was puzzled. What—?

A sound. Outside the door somewhere.

Sean leaped off the bed and hurried over to the door, flattening himself against the wall next to it. If someone was coming in, this time they weren't going to surprise him.

More sounds. Weird sounds: muffled thumps, the low hush of voices. Sean didn't know how he knew it, but his senses were telling him that something was wrong. What was going on?

There was a *click* and an instant later the door was flung open. Sean didn't even have time to react before the room was flooded with black-clad and helmeted figures. No—there were only five of them, but they were moving so fast they seemed like more. Out in the hall there was the sound of running feet.

One of the black-clad figures grabbed Sean by the arm. "Come on," it hissed. "We're getting you out of here."

"What the hell—?" Sean demanded, trying to wrench his arm from the man's grasp. The man was too strong.

"Sean—it's me." For a second the man pulled up his helmet visor to reveal the pale blue cat-eyes and purposeful features of Ocelot, then he lowered it again and let loose of Sean's arm. "Just follow us and stay down." He looked over. "Got the coat?"

One of the other figures—a little taller than Ocelot, and thinner—tossed him a long black coat. Ocelot shoved it into Sean's hands. "Here. Put this on. It's armored. Hurry."

Sean shrugged into the coat, feeling its heavy folds settle over his shoulders. As he did, he got a better look at his rescuers: Aside from Ocelot, there were two men and two women. One of the men was the one who'd had the coat; the other was large and bulky, probably an ork. The two women were swift and thin, and both held SMGs at calm readiness. None of their features were visible.

"They're coming," the ork said, moving over toward the door and lowering an assault rifle into position.

"Let's do this nonlethal if we can," Ocelot said. "Sean, you stay in the middle and follow us. Got it?"

"Yeah." Sean's heart was beating fast, but more with adrenaline than with fear. These were real shadowrunners, and they'd come to break *him* out!

Ocelot took the point, along with one of the women. The other woman and the thin man flanked Sean, and the ork brought up the rear. As they stepped out in the hall, they all spread out as much as they could, keeping Sean covered at all times. He watched in amazement at the coordination of their efforts, the way they all moved almost as one. He stayed near Ocelot as they hurried down the hallway.

"Incoming!" the ork shouted, and then the hallway behind them was filled with the crackle of gunfire.

Sean felt himself flung roughly behind Ocelot. As he stumbled against the wall he saw the thin man raise his hands and point them at the gunmen at the end of the hall. Suddenly bright blue energy flowered around them, lighting them up as they clutched their heads. Out of the four, three dropped to the floor. "That ought to give them something to think about," the thin man said. His accent was British.

"Yeah, well, let's get our butts outta here before they send the whole place after us," Ocelot snapped. "Come on!"

They hustled Sean down the hall. Glimpses flashed by of the house, which looked quite large and opulent, but he couldn't get a good look because someone was always shoving him this way and that. More gunmen appeared, but they were clearly outclassed by this invasion force. Once Sean felt something hot forming around him, but it fizzled out before it could take hold.

They got to the front door, an ornately carved, double-sized wooden portal that looked formidable. Ocelot turned to the British mage. "Anybody out there?"

There was a pause. "No, but they're coming from around the back. If we hurry —"

Ocelot didn't wait for him to finish. He and the ork flung the two doors open. "Let's hurry, then. Charlie, bring the car around. Go!" And he was out, pulling Sean along with him.

Outside it was twilight. Sean got brief impressions of large grounds surrounded by a high wall, a large expanse of well-manicured lawn, and trees. A heavy wrought-iron gate was visible beyond a large circular driveway. Outside the gate he could see a black van, its lights on. "Come on!" Ocelot snapped, and they ran.

"Five o'clock!" came the voice of one of the women, and then the chatter of gunfire once again. She and the others swung their guns around and answered the challenge, never slowing down. The ork swore as a round tore into his arm, but he kept going. Sean, feeling useless, pounded along behind. They were ten meters from the wall. Five. Four —

He was just wondering how they were going to get over the wall when suddenly he felt his legs leaving the ground. He cried out in surprise, still pumping along but no longer under his own power. Around him, others were similarly floating, but they continued firing behind them as if this was something they had expected. He looked down and saw the heavy stone wall speeding by beneath them, and then they were over. The van was in sight, the door open invitingly —

Something slammed into Sean. A bright light exploded in his head and he felt himself falling. Then he didn't see anything else.

13.

Sean was getting very tired of feeling woozy. As consciousness returned to him, his head felt like someone had stuffed cotton in it. This was really getting old. He opened his eyes, half afraid he'd find himself back in his posh prison.

This time, though, there were no flocked walls or fancy curtains or thick rugs. He was on a couch in a room with one window, no-nonsense white walls, and a plaswood chair next to it.

Ocelot was sitting in the chair, leaned back and balanced on two of its legs. "Finally," he said wryly, dropping the chair back to its normal four-legged stance. "Thought you'd never wake up."

Sean sat up a little. He and Ocelot were alone in the room. "Huh—? Where—?"

"It's okay, kid. You're safe." Ocelot wasn't wearing the black clothes or the helmet anymore; he was back in jeans and a sleeveless T-shirt.

"But—what happened? Who—?" Sean realized he sounded like an idiot, but he felt he was entitled. He sat up the rest of the way. The woozy feeling was already leaving him. Outside, it was dark. "Who were those people? And what happened to me?"

Ocelot took a deep breath. "Okay. It's kind of a long story. I'm sure you're sick of hearing this, but I can't tell you all of it right now. You'll be happy to know, though, that I made the phone calls I told you about, and you're gonna find out soon. In a couple hours, actually. It'll be kinda late for dinner, but we've got a meet set up."

"A meet?" He looked around the room. "Where's everybody else? There were more—"

"They're around. Well, some of 'em are. We hired the rest to help us get you out of there."

Sean paused, gathering his thoughts. "This is crazy. I don't know what the hell is going on. Can I just ask some questions and have you answer them?"

Ocelot leaned back in his chair. "If I can. If not, you'll have to wait till the meet."

"Okay." He nodded. "Why was I unconscious again? Did you do that?"

"No. You got hit with a stray round and passed out. They were shooting gel rounds at you, but they can hurt like hell if they plug you right."

That brought on a small attack of panic (*I've been shot? Where?*) until he realized that he didn't feel any pain and all his limbs still worked. "Shot?"

"Yeah. You got healed. Magically. It wasn't bad. Like I said, they used gel, so it was mostly a case of sleeping it off. I don't think they wanted you dead."

Sean swallowed. "Who were the rest of those people?"

"Friends. That's all I can tell you right now."

"Was Mom one of them?"

This time it was Ocelot's turn to pause. Finally, slowly, he said, "Yeah."

"She's okay?"

"Yeah."

"You called her? She was one of the phone calls?"

"Yeah."

"Where was she?"

"Can't tell you that yet."

Sean paused again, looking down at his hands. Then his gaze came back up quickly. "Who kidnapped me, and why?"

"That's part of what I can't tell you yet too." Ocelot looked a little disgusted. "I hate this as much as you do, kid, but once you get the story you'll know why."

"But you do know who it was."

"Not entirely. Mostly, though."

"Does this have something to do with what you were telling me about being in danger if anybody found out about—what was going on with me?"

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah."

"The guy told me his 'employer' would talk to me in the morning. Do you know who that is?"

"No, not exactly. In a general sense. But one of the people you're gonna talk to tonight knows more."

"Mom?"

"No."

"How many people are going to be at this meet tonight?"

Ocelot thought about that for a moment and then said, "Five or six, including you."

Sean stared at him. "You mean there are *that* many people who know what's going on with me? I thought this would be just between you and me and Mom."

"Not quite. And a couple of those who'll be there are just kind of—observers. One of 'em was around when everything got started so he wanted to see how it ended up."

Sean shoved his hair back and slouched. "You know, this whole thing stinks. Have you got any idea what it's like to be me and have all these people telling you they know more about your life than you do?"

Ocelot nodded. His face was serious. "Yeah. I don't know exactly, but I can imagine what it's gotta be like. You don't have to believe me if you don't want to, but I'm not kidding when I say I hate doin' this to you almost as much as you hate havin' it done. But neither one of us has a choice."

Sean sighed. He wasn't going to go there again. "Okay, I have another question."

"Yeah?"

"How did you know where I was? After I left you at the dojo I went back to my place. They were waiting for me there. How'd you find out where they'd taken me? And by the way, where *did* they take me?"

Ocelot got up and started pacing the room as he spoke. "As for where you were, that's easy. You were in a mansion up in the hills a ways south of San Francisco. Little town called Woodside."

"And how you found me—?"

There was a long pause. "Let's just say—we had help."

Sean cocked his head. "Magical help?"

"Yeah."

"That guy who was with you? The spell-slinger?"

"No."

"Somebody else."

"Yeah."

"Somebody who's gonna be at this meet tonight, or somebody you hired to find me?"

"He'll be at the meet." Ocelot was looking out the window.

Sean mulled that over for a few moments before speaking again. "Where are we now?"

"In a safe house."

"A—safe house?" His gaze sharpened. "This is more shadowrunner stuff, isn't it? *Aren't* we safe?" He looked around as if half-expecting a group of black-suited Asians to come busting through the door.

"We're pretty safe," Ocelot assured him. "Nothing's 100% safe. You should know that."

"Yeah. I'd—I'd just like to get to find out what the hell is going on before somebody *else* tries to kidnap me."

"Well, there's not much chance of that—the kidnapping, I mean." He dropped back down into the chair. "Listen—you're probably gonna want to get

cleaned up before the meet. It's gonna be at a pretty nice place. You don't have to get dressed up if you don't want to, but there's a suit in the bedroom through that door if you want it. We'll be leaving here in about an hour."

Sean looked a little suspicious. "What are you gonna do?"

"You mean now?"

"Yeah."

"Wait for you. And get dressed." Ocelot's expression suggested that he didn't like suits any better than Sean did.

For some reason, this made Sean feel better. "Okay," he said, getting up. "I'll be out in a few minutes."

As it ended up, he took longer than a few minutes. Once he got into the shower, the hot water rolling over his body felt so good—just the simple pleasure of a hot cleansing after all the weird stuff he'd been through in the last few days—that he didn't want to leave it. He didn't even think much, but just practiced some of the meditation techniques *Sensei* Watanabe had taught him what seemed an eternity ago and let his mind wander. By the time he was out, toweled off, and shrugging into the unfamiliar suit, half an hour had passed. He came out tugging at his tie, and grinned.

Ocelot was in the front room, his damp hair slicked back, tugging at his own tie in much the same way Sean was. When he saw Sean, he smiled wryly, shrugged, and gave up, letting the tie hang ever so slightly askew. "Ready?"

How can I ever be ready for this? "Yeah."

Ocelot was driving a black van, different from the one he'd seen back at the Asian man's mansion. Sean was almost certain this was not his regular mode of transportation, but he didn't ask. Instead, he sat in the

passenger seat and looked out the window, watching the darkened scenery go by.

From the look of things they were still in San Francisco somewhere, though he didn't recognize the street names. The traffic, as was almost always true in large cities, was a nightmare. Ocelot let the grid control the van's movements but kept a sharp eye on their surroundings. He didn't look like he was expecting trouble, but rather that he would be ready for it if it came.

"How long have you been a shadowrunner?" Sean asked suddenly as the van drove through a neon-lit commercial district full of coffee houses and bars and closed retail stores.

Ocelot shrugged. "Awhile."

"Are you still one?"

"Only occasionally."

"What do you mean, only occasionally?"

Ocelot turned to look at him. "I mean, only occasionally. I only do a few jobs now, and only the ones I really want to do. Mostly the dojo takes up my time."

"Training new shadowrunners."

In the darkness Ocelot smiled faintly. "Yeah. Something like that."

"You mind if I ask you something kind of personal? I've been wondering about it for awhile now."

"You can ask." He shrugged. "Can't tell you if I'll answer till I hear it."

Sean leaned back in his seat and watched the traffic. "The birth certificate—the one I found—says you were 30 when I was born. I'm 18 now. That means you'd be almost 50. But you don't look it. Have you had some of that age-retarding stuff done?"

Ocelot smiled; clearly that wasn't the question he'd expected to be asked. "You could say so, yeah."

"The shadowrunner thing must pay pretty well. That stuff's expensive."

"Doesn't have to be. Not if you have the right friends."

Sean thought about that and finally nodded. "Yeah, that makes sense, I guess." He paused. "What's the name of the place we're going to?"

Again Ocelot smiled—this time it was an odd smile. "It's a Chinese place. The Golden Dragon."

Sean nodded and subsided back into silence. A light rain was falling, coating the van's windshield with little droplets which were quickly whisked away; he watched the rivulets wind their way down and pool up at the bottom of the glass next to the *Armorlite* logo and wondered what Jay was doing right now. He should probably give the dwarf a call so he didn't think Sean was dead or something. *Better wait until after tonight. Who knows what's gonna happen then.*

It took them about another twenty minutes to reach the restaurant. Although it was after midnight the place looked busy, with many cars moving in and out of the parking lot. Ocelot pulled the van past the tasteful facade of the place's name in English and Chinese characters done in understated red neon flanked by two uncoiled Eastern dragons. Beneath this was a carved wooden door that reminded Sean a bit of the one at the place where he'd been held. *Makes sense, though—San Francisco's heavily Asian, so lots of the decor would be Asian.* He waited while Ocelot parked the van (he wouldn't surrender it to a valet) and armed the security system. "Okay," Ocelot said. "You ready for this?"

"No," Sean said honestly. "But that's okay. At least now I finally get to find out what's been going on."

"That's the truth," Ocelot agreed.

As they crossed the parking lot, Sean looked around a little nervously, once again inexplicably afraid that somebody was getting ready to jump them. No one did, though—in fact no one looked at all suspicious. He followed Ocelot through the wooden doors without giving it another thought.

Outside, three cars down from the van in a nondescript black sedan with blacked-out windows, an equally nondescript middle-aged Asian man keyed his headware radio and sent off an updated report consisting of three words:

"He has arrived."

14.

The Golden Dragon Restaurant was every bit as opulent from the inside as it was from the outside. Sean followed Ocelot through an antechamber carpeted in thick, dark red and flanked by two enormous tanks filled with large multicolored fish. The chamber was packed with people waiting for tables but Ocelot said something under his breath to the silk-clad hostess and she bowed, motioning for them to follow.

The interior of the restaurant was laid out in such a way that there were areas where table occupants could see others and areas where the tables and booths were set up so plants, fish tanks, and paper screens hid them from prying eyes. The music, barely audible over the low hum of conversation, was tranquil and serene, as were the movements of the waitstaff who, despite their languid appearance, moved quickly and appeared to be performing their duties most efficiently. All of this Sean took in as he continued to follow Ocelot and the hostess back past most of the tables. When the woman stopped they were standing before a wooden door carved with the restaurant's twin-dragon motif. "Your party's room is here, sir," she told Ocelot. "The remainder of your group has not yet arrived, but I will bring them here when they do. Your waiter will be in shortly to take your appetizer and cocktail orders."

"Thank you." Ocelot motioned Sean forward and shoved the door open.

Inside was a beautifully decorated, small banquet room. Sean looked around, examining the walls painted with Chinese scenery, the lack of windows, the gentle smell of flowers in the air, and the small flowing fountain and pond in the corner of the room where shimmering koi swam under soft natural lamps. In the center of the room

was a polished mahogany table surrounded by six chairs. Ocelot glanced at his chrono. "We're a little early. Have a seat. They'll be here soon. Trust me, nobody's gonna be late for this."

Sean did as instructed, taking one of the chairs facing the door. He could feel an odd sort of sensation in the room, almost like the walls were pressing very gently in on him, accompanied by a strange subliminal humming. He wondered what it was but didn't ask.

As promised, the waiter showed up after less than two minutes. Ocelot declined the appetizers but ordered a beer; Sean asked for a glass of mineral water. He didn't think his stomach was up to much more now. He kept glancing at the door, wanting someone to show up, wanting *something* to happen, but trying to keep his impatience under control. Ocelot sipped his beer silently and watched him.

There was a chrono on the wall and Sean stole looks at it to avoid being caught checking out his wrist every thirty seconds. When the time stood at five minutes before the scheduled time of the meet, the wooden door opened again. Sean was certain it was just the waiter coming back, but it wasn't the waiter. Three people filed into the room and took seats around the table. Each one nodded a greeting at Ocelot and smiled at Sean, but they didn't speak.

Sean's eyes moved around the table quickly, examining each face in turn as the waiter came in behind them and took the newcomers' orders. The first, sitting next to Ocelot, was the only woman in the group. Tall, blond, purposeful-looking, green-eyed—she could be no one but Juliana Harvath. His mother. His *real* mother. Like Ocelot she looked younger than she should, given that her age on the birth certificate put her in her early fifties now. She was dressed in a simple black leather jacket over a

white scoopneck T-shirt and matching black leather pants. She looked tanned and healthy and just a little bit dangerous.

Next to her was a man that Sean was pretty sure was the thin mage from his rescue force. Slim, sharp-featured, dark-haired, elegant, the man had bright blue cybereyes and a look of grim amusement. He wore a fine, loosely-cut suit with a wool overcoat he'd tossed over the back of an unused chair. In the crook of his left arm he held a large, very beautiful black longhaired cat with deep green eyes. The cat watched the proceedings with a look that suggested more than simple feline intelligence; in fact, when she noticed Sean looking at her she met his gaze and meowed softly.

The final occupant of the room was also male, and Sean wondered where he fit into the situation. Raven-haired and violet-eyed, the man looked barely older than Sean himself. Even Sean, who was avowedly heterosexual, couldn't help but notice the young man's astonishing beauty of face and form. He wore an expression of calm serenity, as if he would wait patiently as long as necessary for things to begin. He too was clad in a fine suit of exquisite tailoring.

The group exchanged pleasantries for a few moments while the waiter finished up and left; Sean tried to listen to all the conversations at once, but he only heard snippets: Ocelot asking the dark-haired mage about his home, family, and work (when Sean heard the man's British-accented voice, he knew he had been right about his identity as the mage); the mage and the handsome young man chatting briefly about the weather in London vs. that in DeeCee; other snatches of talk that Sean couldn't quite make out. He didn't feel left out, oddly – the gathering reminded him very much of some he'd attended with his adoptive parents, visiting with people

they hadn't seen for awhile. He was content to sit back and watch them patiently until they were ready, realizing that they couldn't say anything important with the waiter coming in and out.

And then, suddenly, the black cat was in front of him. He hadn't even seen it move, but there it was, watching him with paws together and wide green eyes. "Mrrow?" the cat asked.

Sean smiled, looking across the table at the British man. "Can I pet him?"

"You'll have to ask her," the man said wryly. "She makes her own decisions, quite independent of me. Her name is Maya, by the way."

Sean's smile widened as he put out his hand and Maya nuzzled it. Her fur was wonderfully soft and luxuriant. He ran his hand across her back and was rewarded with a loud, rumbling purr.

"She likes you," the Brit said. "That's a good sign. She's quite discriminating in her tastes."

Sean nodded. "I think she does," he agreed. He didn't think too hard about why the man had brought a cat to a meet like this—he was happy to have someone there who seemed intent on lowering his apprehension level.

Finally the waiter brought them in a selection of delicious-looking dishes and departed, telling them that they could use the order-panel in the table if they needed anything else. As the door closed behind him, everyone looked at Sean.

Sean looked at everyone else. He wondered who was going to speak. He was surprised when it was the beautiful young man who spoke first.

"Welcome, Sean," he said. His voice was soft but somehow carried without effort around the room. His smile was warm. "First, let me apologize for the manner in which things have occurred. I'm sure we can only

imagine your confusion and frustration at what's happened to you over the past few weeks, and especially after you finally located Ocelot. Well done, by the way. We all expected that you would find him at some point, but I think we were all surprised at how quickly things developed."

Sean nodded a little numbly, looking into the young man's bright violet eyes. "Uh..." he said slowly, "Before we go too far—it seems like you people all know who I am. Could I at least know your names?"

The young man smiled. "Forgive me. Of course." He indicated people around the table as he continued. "You already know Ocelot. The lady next to him is Kestrel, or, as you've probably already determined, Juliana Harvath."

"My mother." Sean turned to get a good look at the woman. She smiled at him, her green eyes twinkling in her otherwise serious face, and nodded once.

The young man indicated the British mage. "This is Dr. Alastair Stone, or Winterhawk. Although he isn't directly involved in the situation, he is a longtime friend to all of us and was present at the beginning, so of course he wanted to be here when you finally met your true parents. His companion, whom you've already met—" He smiled here: Maya was curled up on the table, purring under Sean's stroking hand "—is Maya. She is a blackberry cat and an associate of Winterhawk's."

Again Sean nodded. Now things made a little more sense. He vaguely recalled something he'd heard on the news a few years ago about blackberry cats being given sentient-being status, like sasquatches. He glanced down at her and then back up.

"And my name," the young man said, "is Gabriel."

Sean looked at him, back at Ocelot, and then back at him. "And how do you fit into this?" He took a deep breath. "You're not my brother, are you?" That would be

even stranger, to find that he not only had different parents, but that he had an older sibling who looked like a sim star.

"No." Gabriel shook his head. The small smile didn't leave his face. "I am not your brother. Do you mind if I start at the beginning? You are going to hear some things tonight that are going to stretch your beliefs to the breaking point, but I assure you they are all true and will be proven."

Sean looked around. The others were beginning to fill up their plates like nothing was wrong here, although they were all watching him. "I don't get it," he said. He looked back at Gabriel. "No offense or anything—but why are you telling the story? Shouldn't Mom or Dad be telling it?"

"It's okay, Sean," Kestrel said, speaking for the first time. "Believe me—Gabriel knows the story better than any of us do." She reached across the table and touched Sean's hand briefly; hers was warm and felt good on his, which was cold.

Sean looked at Ocelot, who also nodded. "Okay," Sean said, leaning back in his chair. "I guess it doesn't matter who tells me—just *somebody* tell me, okay?"

Gabriel nodded. His smile faded, but the sense of amusement didn't leave his eyes. He drew a deep breath as if gathering himself, and then looked at Sean. "Everything started, as you might expect, almost nineteen years ago," he began. "Your mother and a group of friends were involved at the time in a series of highly dangerous adventures involving the metaplanes." He paused. "You do know about the metaplanes?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah. The places where only initiated mages can go."

"Yes." Pause again. "During the course of these adventures, your mother and your father, who were dear

friends but not romantically involved—made what some might call an error in judgment.”

Kestrel smiled. “Some might,” she agreed, smiling a little slyly.

Sean looked back and forth between Kestrel and Ocelot. They weren’t looking at each other. Ocelot was eating and Kestrel was watching Gabriel.

“As a result of this...error in judgment...” Gabriel continued, “your mother discovered that she was expecting a child.”

“So I was a mistake,” Sean said. That didn’t surprise him, but the realization still made him more bitter than he’d expected it to.

Gabriel didn’t address that. “When your mother found she was pregnant, she told your father, unsure of how he would react. As she had been taking precautions against this sort of thing, she was understandably upset and unsure about how to proceed. She was not entirely certain who the father was.”

Kestrel grinned. “I got around a bit in those days. When I told—your father—about the baby, I was telling him as a friend. I had no idea he’d turn out to *be* your father. He was as shocked as I was to find out.”

Sean looked back and forth between Ocelot, Gabriel, and Kestrel. Maya had gotten up and returned to Winterhawk’s side, where she was now primly nibbling on a plate of raw fish the mage had prepared for her. “So...” he said slowly, “I still don’t understand. If you didn’t want me, why didn’t you just—”

“Have an abortion?” Kestrel asked. At Sean’s nod, she shrugged. “It surprised me too. I’d always figured that was what I’d do if anything ever went wrong that way. But once I learned I was pregnant, I just—couldn’t do it. I figured the kid deserved a chance.”

"I guess I'm grateful for that, anyway," Sean said wryly.

Gabriel picked up the story again. "The difficult part was that there were—certain considerations that had to be taken into account. The pregnancy was highly unusual and the child could be in great danger if anyone were to find out about his existence. Precautions had to be taken to ensure that the pregnancy and birth were kept absolutely secret, and that the child was raised by someone else—someone who knew nothing of the circumstances of his birth."

Sean's eyes darted between them again and he held up his hands. "Wait a minute. You're losing me again. Okay, I know that both Mom and Dad were shadowrunners. That they had enemies who might try to use me against them if they found out about me. But this sounds like a drekload more trouble than even something like *this* should be worth. Did you two have *that* many dangerous enemies who would come after me if they knew?"

"Yes," Gabriel said. "That is exactly what could have occurred." He leaned forward a bit. "Sean...this is the time where your trust is going to be stretched. Now that you have the background, I can tell you the part that has been carefully withheld from you—so carefully that even now you have no inkling of its existence." His violet eyes were very serious as he met and held Sean's gaze. "Sean—Kestrel is indeed your mother. But Ocelot is not your father."

Sean stared. For a few seconds that was all he did, as his brain processed that bit of information and made sure he'd heard it correctly. "Not—my—" he whispered. "Then—who is?"

Gabriel nodded once. "I am, Sean," he said gently.

It was like someone had suddenly put up a wall of electricity between Sean's ears and his brain. He sat there, eyes wide open, and said nothing. Gabriel and the others were still watching him, waiting for some reaction. Finally, he pounded both fists on the table and glared at the group angrily. "No!" he cried. "No, this can't be happening. Damn it, will everybody just stop fragging with my head?" He glared at Gabriel. "You're my father? That's crazy! You barely look old enough to be out of high school! Next thing you'll tell me is that you all went through some kind of time-travel field and had me before you were born or something!" He stood up so explosively that his chair toppled behind him. "You know—maybe I'm just better off not knowing. Maybe I'd just be better off if I went back to Bainbridge and went to college and tried to forget that this whole thing happened. Maybe I'll just *do* that!" He turned abruptly toward the door.

"Sean. Please sit down." Gabriel's soft voice held nothing but concern, but somehow it still had the quality of a request bordering on a command. "There is more that you must know. And remember, I did warn you it would be difficult to believe."

Sean stood there for a moment, poised between returning to his chair and heading out the door intent on losing himself in the crowd before they could catch him and drag him back in. Finally he sighed loudly and dropped back into the chair. "Go ahead," he said wearily. "I don't think you can shock me anymore."

"Don't be too sure," Winterhawk murmured, earning him a brief glare from Kestrel.

Gabriel ignored them, his attention fully on Sean. "After it was verified that I was in fact your father, it became even more imperative—for reasons that I will tell you shortly—that no one find out about your existence. We examined many possibilities and plans of action,

discarding each for one reason or another, until we finally came upon the idea of asking Ocelot to claim paternity. That way, if anyone examined things too closely, they would be traced back to your mother and Ocelot—just as you did with the birth certificate you found—rather than back to me.”

Sean frowned. “But what’s the big deal about you? You must be older than you look because otherwise you couldn’t be my father, but what was the problem with anyone finding out?” His frown deepened. “Wait. You weren’t underage when you—” That would explain a lot, but not very pleasantly. If Kestrel had a taste for young boys and something had gone wrong—

“No, Sean,” Gabriel said, shaking his head. “That isn’t what happened. Not at all.”

Sean took a deep breath. “Okay. So let me get this straight. Somehow, *you’re* my father, not Ocelot, but as far as anybody else is concerned—even me—Ocelot is my dad. Nobody wanted anybody to find out about you, again for some reason you don’t want to tell me yet. So what I don’t get is, why tell me now? Why not just let me go on believing that Ocelot’s my dad? That could solve a lot of problems, right?”

“It could,” Gabriel agreed. “But it isn’t possible for three reasons.”

“And those are?” Sean leaned forward, his arms across the table, his hands balled into loose fists.

“The first and at the moment the least imperative of the three is that it would not be fair to you. There are things you have a right to know, things that will have bearing on your life from now on. The second is that at some point in your life you will undoubtedly have a DNA scan and find out at least some of the truth, which would probably be a worse shock to you than this—not to mention potentially much more awkward. But the third

reason is why it's necessary to tell you now, with little preparation, instead of waiting as I had hoped until you were a bit older."

Suddenly Sean had one of his strange flashes of insight. "This has something to do with the guy who kidnapped me, doesn't it?"

Gabriel didn't seem surprised that he'd caught on. He nodded. "Yes."

"So — this guy knows something about me?"

"I suspect that he does."

"He knows you're my father? Is this guy some enemy of yours? Is that it?"

Pause. "Not...specifically. I believe he has suspected that I am your father. He is not an enemy of mine *per se*, but rather — he has issues with the circumstances of your birth."

Sean leaned forward a little more, eyes narrowing. "Tell me. Just spit it out, will you please? All this mystery is really starting to get to me."

Gabriel wasn't, however, going to be rushed. His expression grew more serious. "Sean, tell me — have you ever felt...wrong? Had feelings you couldn't explain, insights you couldn't understand? Odd dreams? Have you ever felt —" For a moment, he seemed to be searching for the right words — as if you were a stranger in your own body? As if there were something more out there, and if you could only reach it, things would be right again?"

Sean stared at him. Gabriel's words had instantly brought back a flood of memories. He was thinking about his certainty that he should have been a physical adept despite testing mundane. About the strange dreams and the feelings he sometimes got that alerted him to danger before it happened. About his revulsion at the thought of having any cyberware installed in his body. About his

restlessness, his inability to completely fit in with the other kids from Bainbridge. Gabriel's words had brought it all back as if he had switched on a trid screen in Sean's mind. "Yeah..." he whispered. He was surprised to find his hands were shaking.

The young man's violet eyes were sober. He paused for a long time, looking at Sean but not speaking. He appeared to be trying to figure out the best way to say something. "Sean..." he said at last, "there are things you should know about your birth. About what you are. But you must promise me that you will listen and try to keep an open mind. After I've told you everything you can do what you like. But until then, will you promise me you will remain here and listen?"

Sean's body felt like it wasn't quite his. There was a strange electric hum in his head as he studied Gabriel's face. Something big was about to happen, he knew it. But did he want it to happen? Would it be better if he just got out now while he could? He heard himself speaking as if floating above his body. "Yeah...I promise. I'll listen."

Gabriel nodded and he smiled a little. "Good. I know this isn't going to be easy for you. I'm sorry to draw out the suspense—that isn't my intent at all. I'm afraid to simply—drop this on you after all these years."

Sean took a long deep breath. "Just...drop it," he said. His voice sounded a little strangled in his throat. "It'll be easier that way, I think." He wondered what kind of terrible truth this odd, beautiful young man was about to reveal. His hands involuntarily gripped the edge of the table. Around him, he could sense that the attention of the others, even Maya, was upon him.

Again there was a pause. "Sean—" Gabriel's voice was very soft now. "The reason it was necessary to keep you a secret from the world is because your very existence is against the laws of my people."

Sean blinked, frowned. That wasn't what he'd expected. What was this guy, a member of some kind of weirdo religious cult that punished anybody who took up with people who weren't part of the club? "Your—people?"

"I'm not human, Sean."

"Not—"

Gabriel, in answer, reached out his hand toward Sean. Very slowly and gently, the small golden dragon pendant Althea had given him what seemed like years ago rose and hovered about an inch above his chest. Gabriel's smile was equally gentle, with a faraway quality that suggested he had a great deal on his mind. "You got the species right..." he murmured, "although you were off on the specific type."

"The eye color's wrong too," Kestrel said in the same tone from across the table. It was a bittersweet tone, half amused, half sad. She reached over and covered one of his hands with hers, squeezing slightly.

Sean's eyes darted back and forth between the two of them and then down to the pendant, which settled back down against his chest. An answer was poking at him, but his mind simply wouldn't accept it. It was too crazy. It was—

"—you—you're a—"

"A Great Western Dragon," Gabriel said. "And you, difficult as it probably is for you to believe, are half-dragon. Dragon-kin."

If Sean thought his brain wasn't responding before, he realized he hadn't even started. For several seconds he could only stare dumbly, his eyes wide, his mouth working but no sound coming out. But then—somewhere in the darkest reaches of his mind where he wasn't even sure what went on—somewhere back there was the tiniest of little thoughts: *ah, okay. That explains a lot.*

But that part of his brain wasn't strong enough yet to fight for primacy over the spinning thoughts and roiling emotions that were flying unchecked around Sean's head. When he was finally able to sputter out coherent words, they ended up being: "But—Mom—?"

Kestrel squeezed his hand again. "No, Sean. Not me. I'm 100% boring mundane human."

"So...I'm—" He looked around the table, where Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Maya had all become interested in their meals. He was grateful they weren't all staring at him. "No...This can't be true. This is all *way* too weird. Somebody's playing a joke on me, right?" He looked around the room. "This is one of those trid shows where they play the joke and hide the camera, right?" His voice pitched a little higher and got a little louder. "Somebody's gonna pop out with the camera any minute now, right?"

Gabriel shook his head. He was still looking serious. "I'm afraid not."

"But—" Sean was grasping at straws now. "Dragons—and humans—they can't—"

"Yes, they can," Kestrel said.

Gabriel nodded. "It's very rare and almost impossible without magical intervention. Your conception, shall we say, beat some very long odds."

Breathe, Sean. Don't forget to breathe. No matter how weird this is. "This is crazy," he said at last. "I can't be half dragon. This can't be all there is to it." He spread his arms. "I mean, look at me. I'm human. I look like a human. I tested mundane. Are you telling me that a human and a Great Dragon can have a kid and the kid just ends up *normal*?" He twisted the word so it almost sounded like an insult.

Gabriel bowed his head. After a moment, Kestrel spoke, taking up the story. "We—Gabriel—had to do it. We couldn't risk anyone finding out about you. About

what you were. It would have been too dangerous for you, growing up."

Sean's gaze fixed on her. "Do what?"

"A ritual was performed on you shortly after you were born," Gabriel told him. "A ritual to lock away your innate abilities and magical potential—to make you look to any scrutiny short of another Great Dragon or the equivalent to be a normal, mundane human."

Sean's eyes widened. He was silent for several seconds, then said, "You mean—I *had* magical potential—and you—took it away?" His mind returned once again to all the hours he had spent fantasizing about having adept abilities or even magical powers, and how crushed he had been at the pronouncement that he had none. And this man was casually talking about *removing* them? Anger began to crease his smooth brow.

Gabriel quickly shook his head, raising his hands to forestall Sean's growing anger. "No. Not took away. *Locked* away. What is locked can be unlocked. Now that you are an adult and after you are told all the consequences, I will perform the ritual to return you to your natural state."

Sean stared at him. "You're not kidding, are you?" he said very quietly. "This is all real. I'm...half dragon...and...I—I *do* have magic?" Slowly, very slowly, his sense of shock and confusion over what was being revealed to him was beginning to give way to a sense of wonder and eagerness. "I'll be able to—"

Again Gabriel held up his hands. "You will have magic," he confirmed. "After the ritual has been completed, I will help you to explore it if you like. But—"

"What kind of magic?" Sean asked.

Gabriel was looking serious. "Sean—I can't answer that right now. The ritual to lock away your abilities was performed when you were only a few days old. There was

no way to tell. We'll have to wait and see. But please—you promised to hear me out. I will answer all your questions, I promise, but it is important that you hear this."

Sean stopped in mid-breath and looked around the table. The others were watching him again, and they all looked as serious as Gabriel did. Even Maya. He nodded slowly. "Okay...I'm listening."

Gabriel nodded. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "As I said before, your existence is against the laws of my people. From a time before the last Age of Magic, it has been against dragon law to create dragonkin."

"So—what does that mean?" Sean leaned forward a little. "Are you and Mom in trouble for—for having me?" His worried gaze darted between them. He'd barely had the chance to get to know the people who had finally been identified as his true parents; he didn't want to lose them again so quickly.

"Your mother is not, in any case," Gabriel told him. "In any such exchange it is the dragon who is presumed at fault, and I take full responsibility for what happened."

"The hell you do," Kestrel murmured. She looked at Sean. "Despite what Gabriel says, we're in this together."

Sean didn't answer. Instead, he waited.

Gabriel regarded him again after a brief glance at Kestrel—a glance full of gentle tenderness. "There is a danger to me should your existence come to light, but that isn't what concerns me. As I said, I am willing to take whatever consequences would be decided—most likely banishment from dragon society. But the risk to you, Sean, could potentially be much more immediate and dangerous."

Sean paused, thinking. "So—you think the guy who kidnapped me knows about—what I am? You think that's why he kidnapped me?"

Gabriel nodded once, reluctantly. "I fear so. The 'employer' your captors spoke of could be any number of dragons who are known to frequent this area—I have my suspicions about his identity, but because I am not certain I will not divulge them."

Kestrel tilted her head and looked at him. "Is he someone who might—hurt Sean?"

"If he is the one I suspect, no, he would not hurt Sean directly. But undoubtedly he would wish to inform others."

"Wait a second," Sean broke in a little angrily. "Are you telling me that I'm in real danger? That somebody—other dragons?—would want to hurt me, or even kill me, just because I was born?"

Gabriel bowed his head. "That is what I am telling you, yes," he said. His tone was very soft and weary. "That is why I asked you to hear everything I had to say before you decided what you wanted to do. To leave now, with the knowledge you have but no way to defend yourself against potential threats—"

"So I can't leave," Sean said. He looked around the ornate dining room, which was beginning to take on the aspect of a prison instead of a pleasant meeting place. "You're saying that if I leave this guy might come after me again."

"I am saying," Gabriel said, meeting Sean's eyes once more, "that it would be best if you were to remain with me at least until I am able to perform the ritual to unlock your abilities and teach you how to use them. I cannot say that you will be truly safe then, but at least you will have the capacity to defend yourself."

Once again Sean looked around the room—at Ocelot, Kestrel, Winterhawk, and Maya. “So—you guys were all in on this, right? You all knew.”

Winterhawk nodded, his expression sober and comforting. “We all knew,” he confirmed, “although we had varying degrees of involvement.”

“And you let me grow up without any idea—”

“Sean,” Kestrel said, touching his hand again. “We didn’t *want* to do it. We had to, for your own safety. And you have to admit, it worked. Nobody bothered you for eighteen years. If it hadn’t been for what happened to the Hunters, they might not have bothered you even after that.”

“So you were just planning to let me go through life without ever knowing?” He glared first at Kestrel and then at Gabriel.

The young man shook his head. “No. The plan had always been to tell you when you turned twenty-one. We didn’t expect that circumstances would require you to find out significantly sooner than that.”

Sean’s eyes widened as a thought occurred to him. “You don’t think this had anything to do with my—with the Hunters—?”

Again Gabriel shook his head. “No. I had some trusted people look into the crash that killed the Hunters. There was nothing suspicious about it. A tragic and unfortunate accident, but nothing more sinister than that.”

Sean nodded slowly. His brain was still a little numb—a *lot* numb—but the little seed of excitement that had begun growing earlier was getting larger. He would definitely have to give this some thought in the days that followed—and if this meant that he would have the magical abilities he had always dreamed of, then—

His fast-moving thoughts stopped abruptly as he got a look at Gabriel's face. Suddenly the young man was looking more serious than he had been all evening — tired and sad and resigned all at once. "What's — wrong?" Sean asked hesitantly.

Gabriel's shifted his gaze to the door and back again without moving his head. "It has begun," he said softly.

Winterhawk, Ocelot, and Kestrel exchanged confused glances. "What has —" Ocelot began.

At that point there was a soft knock on the door, which then opened to reveal the waiter. He bowed respectfully. "Forgive my interruption," he said, "but the remaining member of your party has arrived."

15.

In the dining room, everyone looked at everyone else in confusion—everyone except Gabriel. The young man stood, squaring his shoulders as if preparing to face a judge or an executioner. He faced the door and waited. The others watched from their seats, still and uncertain.

The waiter stepped aside, admitting the “remaining member of the party” to the room, then moved off and silently closed the door behind him.

The man who entered was neither large nor particularly impressive looking—he appeared to be in his late forties, slightly built and dressed in an expensive, conservative suit. His Chinese features showed an expression that was absolutely impossible to read. Only his eyes, dark and ageless, gave any indication that he might be more than he seemed. He ignored everyone else in the room, fixing his eyes on Gabriel. He bowed, and when he spoke his voice was soft and melodious. “Good evening, young one. I hope I have not—interrupted anything.”

Gabriel returned the bow—it was subtly different, and anyone familiar with Chinese culture would have recognized it as the bow of a younger man to an elder. “We are honored by your—unexpected visit, sir,” he replied. The words had the tone of a ritual.

The older man made no moved to sit or to acknowledge the others. “You are no doubt aware of the purpose of my visit.”

Gabriel nodded once. “I am.”

Behind them, the others watched the exchange silently. Sean started to speak but Kestrel touched his arm and shook her head.

"It is true, then," said the older man. "My suspicions were strong. Your—involvement here has all but confirmed them."

Gabriel's gaze was respectful but unwavering. "Yes, sir. It is true."

The man nodded. "I hope you will forgive my unorthodox methods of earlier today. I assure you that I and my servants were careful to maintain the utmost discretion."

"Then no one else knows?" Gabriel asked.

The man shook his head. "No. Not yet." For the first time his eyes moved from Gabriel to settle for a moment on Sean. "You are aware of what must be done, are you not? At this point our law leaves us little discretion in the matter."

"Yes." Gabriel took a deep breath. "Yes, I am aware of it."

Sean was looking back and forth between Gabriel and the older man, growing increasingly agitated as they calmly discussed his fate. Was this man another dragon? Was he going to kill him? Was his father simply going to *allow* it? His mind raced, fighting the impulse to leap up and make a break for the door. If the man *was* a dragon, then there were two of them in the room, not to mention the fact that he didn't know where the others stood on the matter. He sighed softly and settled back, but his muscles and his awareness remained on edge.

The older man's expression still had not changed. "These are new days, young one. There has not been a test of this law since before the last Sleep."

Gabriel did not answer. He continued to watch the man with a mixture of respect and resolve. "What is to occur?" he asked.

"The Council will be called, of course. Again, there is little room for discretion. It has been so since the law was made."

Again Gabriel nodded. "Of course," he said softly.

"Transportation is waiting outside. You will accompany me. You and the boy."

Sean stiffened. "Wait a minute," he said, unable to hold his silence any longer. "Go where? Don't I get a choice?"

The older man ignored him. Gabriel's only reaction was that his posture slumped infinitesimally, something that only Kestrel and perhaps the Chinese man noticed.

"Where?" Gabriel asked.

"The location has not yet been determined." The man looked around the room briefly. "If you wish, I will wait outside for you while you finish your meal."

Gabriel shook his head. "That is not necessary," he said softly. "I am ready when Sean is."

Sean stood. "Hold on," he said angrily. "I'm not going anywhere. Aren't you even going to *ask* me?"

Gabriel turned to face him. Sean was surprised to see that he looked every bit as young as his human appearance suggested he was. "There is no choice, Sean," he said. His voice was tired and resigned. "We must go. We will have our chance to plead our case before the Council, but we cannot refuse."

Before Sean could say anything, Kestrel stood. "If that's so, then I'm going too," she declared. "I'm every bit as much involved in this as Gabriel and Sean are."

Ocelot stood as well, and after a moment so did Winterhawk. "As are we," the mage said.

Ocelot nodded. "Yeah. We were all in on this pretty much from the start. We deserve the chance to speak up for the kid." It was hard to tell whether he was talking about Sean or Gabriel—or perhaps both.

"Out of the question," the Chinese man said. "It is not permitted for those not of our people to attend Council."

"It is not against the law," Gabriel told him softly. "Merely against custom. There is precedent for it, and as you said, these are new times."

The Chinese man's gaze flickered angrily for a moment, but he nodded briefly. "As you wish, young one," he said. "If your friends accept the will of the Council then you can request that they be allowed to attend. It is not my decision to make, as you know."

Gabriel nodded. "Thank you, sir."

The older man bowed. "Come, then. There is much that must be prepared." He looked at Sean and then back at Gabriel. "Perhaps your youth will persuade the Council to be merciful. I truly hope it will be so." Gracefully he stepped aside and nodded toward the door.

Gabriel turned back to the others. "Are you sure you wish to accompany us?" he asked. "I won't refuse your request, but this is likely to be a long and difficult process." He gave them a ghost of his old smile. "Dragons never decide anything quickly."

"We're going, Gabriel," Kestrel said. Her tone was gentle but her eyes were resolute. She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. "It'll be okay."

Gabriel nodded and turned to Sean. "I am sorry, Sean," he said. "I wish it could have been another way. Still, though, perhaps it is best that this be taken care of in an expected way. There are those among our people who would not have handled it as — diplomatically — as Shaozu has."

"But—" Sean whispered, "they want to kill me, don't they?"

"The decision will be up to the Council," Gabriel said softly, so his voice did not carry to the waiting Shaozu. "But I will tell you this, and you have my word on it: I

will fight to the limits of my ability to see to it that you remain safe. If that means I am forced to accept a harsher punishment to spare you, then so be it."

Sean's eyes widened. "You—you would do that for me? You've only just met me tonight. How do you know I'm worth it?"

"You are my son," Gabriel said, in the tone of *that's all that needs to be said*. "Come, now. We will face the council and we will plead our case there. I am young, but I am not without allies. We shall see what happens." Turning, he drew himself to his full height and faced Shaozu. "We are ready, sir."

A flicker of something—was it approval?—flashed across the older man's face. He inclined his head. "Then come."

They left the restaurant, trooping out looking like a bunch of friends who had gotten together for a late dinner, although no one who looked too closely at their faces would have believed it was a pleasant one. Outside, a long black Mitsubishi Obsidian waited for them, its engine already running. Sean got in with the others and settled into the butter-soft leather upholstery. The Chinese man, Shaozu, did not get in with them. "I have instructed my driver to take you to the airport," he said. "A private jet awaits there. We will not see each other again until the Council convenes." He gave Gabriel an odd look, half compassionate, half stern. "I wish that this were not necessary, but I trust in your honor that you will not make any attempts to—delay the proceedings."

Gabriel bowed his head and shook it. "No, sir. I accept what is to come. We will do as you request."

Shaozu bowed, took a final glance at Sean, and moved off into the night. The driver closed the limo's door and

after a moment the big car glided soundlessly into the flow of traffic.

"Well," Ocelot said, letting his breath out, "*that* was fun."

Nobody answered him. Sean, settled between Winterhawk and Kestrel, looked around the inside of the limo. Everything in it spoke of luxury, from the real wood trim to the plush carpet to the smell of good leather. He supposed that dragons wouldn't go for anything less than top of the line. Dragons! He was still having trouble getting his mind around that, so he forced it away for now. He'd have time to think about it later, when he was alone—if he lived that long. "So..." he ventured, "What exactly is this Council?"

Gabriel faced him from across the limo's U-shaped bench seat. He looked a little shellshocked himself. "It is something that has only been called once before in this Age," he said. "It is a meeting of all the Great Dragons of the world, and only occurs in cases of great import."

"And they're calling it for *us*?" Sean demanded. He tilted his head. "No offense or anything, but—are you that important a dragon?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. I am in truth a rather *unimportant* dragon. I am young and have been in this world only somewhat longer than you have. It is not what I am that concerns them, but what I have done."

"What *we* have done," Kestrel put in.

Sean looked back and forth between them. "Are you telling me that this is the first time anybody's done this? It's *that* important? Why should they care whether dragons have kids with humans? You said it's not even easy, so it can't happen that often, can it?"

"It is that important," Gabriel told him. "The law is very clear on the matter. The reason for it comes from a time very long ago, when mistakes were made and steps

were taken to prevent them from happening again. The last time a dragon was found to have created dragonkin, he was banished from our society – forbidden from ever having contact with dragonkind again.”

Sean’s eyes widened. “But – aren’t dragons immortal?”

Gabriel nodded and did not look up. “In some ways it would be kinder to simply put the guilty party to death.”

Kestrel reached over and put a gentle hand on his knee.

Sean took a deep breath. He didn’t know what to say. It was all so confusing. All his life he had been attracted to dragons – to their beauty, their power, the concept of super-intelligent beings with near-limitless magical and physical abilities – and now here in the space of less than an evening he had found out the impossible: that one of those creatures was his own father, that he was half-dragon himself. As unsettling as the whole thing had been, he was finding that he liked this young man. Even more, he was finding that he trusted him. He didn’t want to be the cause of an immortal being’s banishment from his society – but on the other side, none of this was his fault. He hadn’t exactly had a say in the matter. “Will they – listen to us?” he asked hesitantly. “It’s not an automatic thing, is it? You know, like in some places if you commit a murder you get executed?”

Gabriel brought his gaze back up to meet Sean’s. “No. It isn’t automatic. The Council is wise, and as I said I am not without allies among the dragons.”

Sean almost didn’t want to ask the question, but he couldn’t help it: “What...what about me?” He paused. “You told me about how you might be punished, but what will they do to me? Do they always kill the...dragonkin?” The word sounded strange on his lips.

Again the young man shook his head. "No, not always. As I said, there is very little precedent for this, but in the most recent of the well-known cases, the dragon-kin accompanied the banished dragon back to his lair. In that case there were more than one. They set up a settlement nearby and founded a dynasty that ended up being fairly powerful in its day."

Sean nodded slowly. "But—that was a long time ago, right?"

"Yes. It would be difficult to do the same sort of thing now."

Maya, apparently sensing Sean's growing unease, left Winterhawk's lap and moved over to curl up on Sean's. She tilted her head up at him, her wise green eyes searching his comfortingly. Sean was surprised at how heavy she was. He gently ruffled the fur on the back of her neck, glad to have something else to concentrate on for awhile. "Does she travel with you all the time?" he asked Winterhawk.

"Only when she wants to," the mage told her wryly. "No one makes Maya do anything she doesn't want to do."

Sean nodded, still stroking Maya. "Well," he said at last, looking across at Ocelot, "I guess I see what you mean now."

"About what?"

"You said you'd explain everything to me and that it would all make sense once I had the whole story."

"You mean it makes sense now?" Kestrel asked with a little smile.

"Well—no. But at least now I know who all the players are." He looked around. "I—uh—*do* know all the players now, right? I'm not gonna find out I've got an Awakened tree for an uncle or anything?"

Even despite the seriousness of the situation, Gabriel had to chuckle at that. "No, Sean," he assured him. "You have no Awakened trees in your lineage." He glanced at Kestrel. "Unless there's something you haven't told me."

She laughed too, her green eyes twinkling. "Nope. Although I do sometimes wonder about my Aunt Chloe."

Sean smiled and settled back in his seat. For a few moments, he decided, he'd let himself relax. He didn't think he was going to get another chance for awhile.

The limo took them to a small airport, where a little jet was fueled up and waiting for them. The driver ushered them out of the car and into the plane, but did not board it himself. The plane took off shortly afterward.

"I wonder where we're going," Ocelot said, looking around the little craft's posh interior. Someone had spared no expense to make them comfortable. He looked at Gabriel. "Any idea?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. The only other Council meeting held in this Age was in astral space, so this is a departure."

"I suppose we'll just have to wait and see, then," Winterhawk said, settling back into his seat. Maya had once again installed herself on his lap. Shortly after that, both of them were asleep.

It was very late and the lights in the plane had been dimmed for their comfort; it wasn't long before Kestrel dropped off, and even Ocelot, who was fighting it by trying to read a magazine on a little glowing datapad, eventually succumbed, his head leaned against one of the windows.

Sean didn't think he'd ever sleep again. He sat next to another window, staring out at the black nothingness and finally letting the awe and amazement and confusion and

fear of the past few days—particularly the past few hours—catch up with him.

He still didn't quite believe it, of course. He was still expecting that any time now he was going to wake up in his bed in Bainbridge (or at least his rumpled bedroll at Crank's place, listening to Jay snore on the other side of the room) and discover that he was still the same old Sean: an eighteen-year-old kid who'd just lost the only parents he'd ever known and was trying as best he could to sort out his life.

Was it possible that Gabriel and the others had been lying to him? After all, nobody had actually *proven* any of this to him. Anyone could claim to be a dragon. Maybe they just hired a young model to play the part and this whole thing was just an elaborate plan to—

—to *what*, though? That was the part that didn't make sense. What would anyone gain by convincing him that he was half dragon? If Ocelot was really his father as it said on the birth certificate, what possible reason would he have for going to this level of hassle to convince him otherwise? And besides, Kestrel readily admitted to being his mother. He glanced at her across the aisle, at her spiked blonde hair and her trim figure: the two of them were even built similarly. Both were tall and slim and athletic, and he could see his own features in her straight, ever-so-slightly-turned-up nose and her strong chin. He wondered how she had felt when she'd found out she was pregnant with a dragon's child. It wasn't exactly the sort of thing you could talk about with your friends. He remembered when one of Mom's—of Kristi Hunter's—friends' oldest daughter got pregnant, and how everyone had fawned over her, excited about the upcoming event. Kestrel would have had none of that. He wondered if she'd have wanted it.

He knew he was avoiding the most important thing, but he wasn't sure he wanted to face it head on. He leaned back in his seat, closed his eyes, and let his mind skip over his body, trying to see if he could find anyplace where he felt—different. If he truly was half-dragon—half *Great Dragon* from what Gabriel had said—shouldn't he at least feel *something*? He didn't. He was a little tired, his muscles ached slightly, he was a bit hungry because he hadn't eaten much at the restaurant (he suddenly realized the irony of the restaurant's name—the Golden Dragon—and wondered which of his new friends had chosen the venue), but that was all. No thrum of latent magical ability, no rush of increased intelligence, no great insight into the mysteries of the universe. He just felt like the same old Sean. Even his strange intermittent sixth sense seemed to have deserted him. He wondered if that had been an artifact of his dragon heritage or just perhaps the vestiges of a tiny bit of magical talent that hadn't been strong enough to break fully free.

"You should try to get some sleep," a quiet voice said from his other side. He turned away from the window to see Gabriel standing there, watching him with a look of gentle concern.

Sean shrugged. "I'm not tired. I don't think I'll be sleeping for awhile."

Gabriel indicated the seat next to him. "Do you mind?"

"No, go ahead." Sean shook his head and waved him to the seat. "You can't sleep either, huh?"

"I don't require sleep as often as a human does, even in this form," Gabriel told him. "I thought you might like to talk a bit while the others are resting."

Again Sean shrugged. "I don't even know where to start."

"If you have questions, I will do my best to answer them. Or if you'd prefer to be left alone—"

Sean realized that was the last thing he wanted right now. "No, no. It's okay. My thoughts aren't very good company right now." He paused, then looked at Gabriel with concern. "You can't—you know—read my mind, can you?"

The young man smiled a little. "I can—but I would never do so without your permission."

"So you aren't now." Sean's voice held relief. It was bad enough that *he* had to live with his whirling thoughts. He didn't want to share them, unfiltered, with anyone else.

"No."

Sean nodded. He looked at nothing for a few moments, the only sound the low rumble-whine of the jet's engines, and then turned back to Gabriel. "What do you do?"

Gabriel tilted his head. "I don't understand."

"I mean—what do you do when you're not chasing down long-lost kids? Do you—I don't know—hang out in your lair sitting on a big pile of treasure? Do you run a corporation like Lofwyr? Would I ever have heard of you on the news or anything?"

Gabriel chuckled. "I don't sit on treasure in my lair. That went out thousands of years ago."

"But you do *have* a lair?"

He nodded. "And a rather sizeable treasure. But a significant portion of it is invested these days."

Sean thought about that for a moment and nodded. "I guess it doesn't make sense for a dragon to have a job, does it?"

"In some cases, no. But I do have one."

That surprised him. "You do?"

Gabriel nodded. "I have for years now, although I changed it shortly after you were born."

Sean smiled a bit. "Okay, so what do you do? Don't tell me—you star in sims. You know, the kind girls like where everybody ends up kissing and crying all over the place."

Gabriel laughed at that, but softly so as not to wake the others. "No. Although Kestrel used to tease me years ago that I should model underwear." He paused a moment as if reminiscing, then shook his head. "Before you were born, I used to work with Kestrel. Do you know what a 'fixer' is?"

Sean's eyes widened. "You mean like with shadowrunners?" Then he nodded. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. It explains how you know all these shadowrunner types." Another pause. "How did you come to do that? It seems a little weird for a dragon."

"That is a story I'll tell you some other time," Gabriel said. "It's a bit long. The short version is that Kestrel was a shadowrunner and she saved my life shortly after my Awakening. We became friends and, since I had little experience with the world at the time, I used the job as a way to help me understand this new Age."

Sean nodded. That seemed reasonable to him. "So what do you do now? It sounds like you're not a fixer anymore."

"No. These days I work with the Draco Foundation."

"You do?" Sean stared at him. The Draco Foundation and its scientific arm, the Dunkelzahn Institute of Magical Research, were huge organizations dedicated to all sorts of things from medical research to the study of magical phenomena to undoubtedly numerous things too secret to divulge to the general public. He leaned forward, intrigued. "What do you do there?"

"I'm sort of a—freelance operative," Gabriel told him. "Although that isn't quite correct because I'm not on their payroll. I'm in charge of a small organization that investigates odd and usually dangerous magical occurrences."

"A secret organization?" Sean was becoming even more intrigued.

"Not specifically, no. It's not well publicized because there is no reason to alarm the public with some of the things we do, but anyone who wanted to do a bit of looking around could find us."

"Does Mo—does Kestrel work with you there?"

"Yes." He indicated the front part of the plane with a head movement. "So does Winterhawk, but only occasionally. He does freelance work for us out of London."

"So he's not a shadowrunner anymore."

"Not for years. I won't tell you what else he does, because it's not my place to do so. He'll tell you if he wants to."

Sean nodded. That was fine with him. He looked around at the sleeping figures and then back at Gabriel. "Can I ask one more question? Maybe it's none of my business and you can tell me so, but I'm just curious."

"Of course." Gabriel's bright violet eyes were gently encouraging; even though the rest of him looked barely older than Sean, his eyes gave him an ageless quality that made Sean believe a little more that he might indeed be what he claimed to be.

Sean took a deep breath. "Ocelot and Winterhawk and Mom—how do they all look so young? I mean, if the birth certificate I found can be believed, they should all be at least close to fifty, but they don't look anywhere near that. I know people can get age-retarding drugs and surgery

and that sort of thing, but it doesn't make sense that all three of them would have gone for it. Or does it?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. It was something that happened long ago—again, shortly after you were born. It was a gift I gave them in gratitude for something they did for me. Again I don't want to go into detail right now, but it is a form of powerful dragon magic that retains their youth. Their lifespans will not significantly exceed those of normal humans—perhaps twenty or thirty percent longer—but the spell holds off the effects of aging until well into the final years of life."

"You—can *do* that?" Sean stared at him. "You can make people live longer? Not age?"

Gabriel looked sober. "It is not something undertaken lightly," he warned. "There are risks involved. But I owed them all a great deal and felt that this would be a way for me to begin to repay them."

Sean looked around at the others. "Can you—do it for me too?" he asked hesitantly. "I mean—if we get out of this?"

Gabriel's smile was gentle. "If we get out of this, Sean," he said softly, "I won't need to."

"What does that mean?"

"After the spell I've put on you has been released and you regain your dragonkin abilities, you will age much more slowly than a human. Once you reach full adulthood you will essentially remain a young adult for an extremely long time before you even begin to age."

Sean could only stare at him. "You're kidding."

Gabriel shook his head. "Not at all. The lifespan of a dragonkin is significantly longer than that of a human."

"So—you're saying I could live for hundreds of years and not age?" He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Yes."

Sean nodded slowly. This was all so amazing, and getting more amazing by the minute. But still, even with all that, there was something big hanging over his head – so big that it overshadowed everything else. “Do you think they’re going to let us go?” he asked quietly.

“I don’t know, Sean.” Gabriel’s reply was equally quiet.

“Do you think we have a chance? Tell me if you don’t. Please. I’d rather know.”

Gabriel sighed. “There is always a chance. I will do everything I can to make sure that you are spared this.”

“But what about you?”

“It was my fault the situation occurred. I should have known better. If there is any punishment to be borne, I will bear it. You have no fault here. I hope I can make them see that.”

Sean looked down at his lap. He didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what was coming, what it would be like, or what, if anything, he could do to affect it. He felt like a child again, forced to play along with something he didn’t understand. “We’ll do it,” he said with bravado he didn’t feel.

Gabriel nodded. “We will do our best,” he agreed. “That is all we can do.” He smiled and gripped Sean gently on the shoulder. “You’d best try to get some rest,” he said, rising. “I suspect that it will be awhile before you have the chance again.”

“I will.” Sean looked up at him. After a moment he said, “You know this is all pretty hard to believe, don’t you?” He chuckled, more a nervous laugh than anything else. “It’s not every day you find out your mom’s a shadowrunner and your dad is a dragon underwear model.”

Gabriel sighed, laughing silently and shaking his head. “Go to sleep, Sean.”

16.

They landed once, though Sean wasn't quite sure where except that from the look of the scenery and the length of the flight, they were somewhere in Europe. They remained there for about an hour, with the passengers doing as requested and remaining inside the plane. Looking out the window Sean could see that they were refueling. He wondered where they would go next and asked the question aloud.

"Don't know," Kestrel told him. She indicated Gabriel, who was leaned back in his seat. He appeared to be looking out the window but his eyes were far away. "I think he's getting the story now — if so, he'll tell us."

Sean nodded and contented himself with putting together a small breakfast from the plane's well-stocked refrigerator. Kestrel had done so awhile ago; Ocelot wasn't eating, nor was Winterhawk, although the mage had made up a plate of roast beef and fish for Maya. The blackberry cat was now stretched out elegantly across the back of one of the seats, her paws draped over on both sides. Of the occupants of the small cabin, she was undoubtedly the most relaxed.

When Gabriel's awareness popped back in, Kestrel looked at him questioningly. "Anything?"

He nodded. "We're going to Zurich," he told them. "They've secured a hall for the Council meeting there. The meeting itself will take place tomorrow evening."

"That's fast," Sean said, surprised. "I guess dragons just drop anything and run for this, huh?"

"It is a rather important event," Gabriel reminded him. "Remember, this is only the second such Council in this age. It isn't something to be taken lightly."

"So—all the dragons will be there? Even Lofwyr?" Despite their predicament, Sean was impressed. He'd

seen images of the big golden CEO of Saeder-Krupp on the trid news, but he'd never expected to see him in person.

"Undoubtedly." Gabriel looked significantly more sober than Sean did at that moment. "I suspect he will not be pleased to be called from his business dealings, but then I doubt that many of those attending will be pleased at the necessity."

Sean nodded, getting serious again. "That's got to be a pretty big hall to hold all those dragons..."

"They will be in human form." Gabriel rose and began pacing around the cabin. "There are no longer structures in existence large enough to contain the world's Great Dragons in their true forms."

Sean was a little disappointed at that. The tiny part of him that was anticipating this event was sorry that they wouldn't get to see dozens of dragons—maybe even more—all in one place. When he thought about it he was surprised by some of these feelings he was having—somehow he thought he should be more upset about the whole thing, but at this point he was still having trouble accepting that it was all real. He was sure it would be sinking in soon. "How far are we from Zurich now?" he asked.

"About an hour's flight. We'll be taking off again in a few minutes."

Sean nodded. One way or another, soon this would all be over. There wasn't much to do now but wait.

The small jet took off again on schedule and a little less than an hour later touched down again. Twilight was beginning to fall as they exited the plane at the tiny, picturesque airport. Sean looked around, impressed by the mountains looming around them. He had not traveled much with the Hunters and had never been anywhere in

Europe; the scenery was a lot different than what he was used to in Connecticut. Kestrel smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder as she walked next to him.

There was another limousine waiting to pick them up, this time a white Mercedes with blackened windows. The group piled into the car and it headed off into the heart of Zurich.

Sean was surprised when they didn't remain in the city but instead appeared to be heading outside it. "I thought you said we were going to be in Zurich," he said to Gabriel.

"A short distance out, actually," the young man told him. "There is a hall in the mountains that is normally used for corporate retreats. It will afford our meeting the maximum amount of privacy."

Sean nodded. He hadn't thought about that. "I guess all those dragons don't really want just anyone knowing they're getting together, do they?"

"No. But by the time the magical protections are in place there will be no awareness that we are there. The administrators of the hall will think only that a group of businesspeople have gathered for a meeting."

"How did they get the place on such short notice?"

Gabriel smiled; it was an odd mirthless smile. "They're dragons."

"Would *you* want to tell them they can't have the clubhouse for their meeting?" Kestrel leaned over the chair behind them.

Sean took a deep breath and settled down again. His mind wouldn't stay still; it kept flitting back and forth between wanting this to be over and wanting it to last as long as possible. All his life he had admired dragons, and now he was going to be the subject of a meeting of all the Great Dragons in the world. Him! Sean Hunter, burbs kid from Connecticut, teenage nobody. All those dragons

would be paying attention to *him*. He wondered if one of them would eat him if things went badly. He wondered if they even did that anymore.

Maya seemed to pick up on his agitated thoughts, as she once more carefully picked her way across the various laps and settled herself in Sean's. He smiled, stroking her, and looked up at Winterhawk.

"I think she's taken quite a liking to you," the mage told him. He seemed amused by it.

"I'm glad." Sean stroked her behind the ears and she purred. He *was* glad—her attentions were once more taking his mind from having too many apprehensive thoughts.

The limo soon left the main highway, turning off onto a smaller road that snaked through breathtaking scenery and steadily climbed upward. Sean saw other cars ahead of them and wondered if they were going to the same place. He craned his neck upward, trying to spot dragons in flight, but saw none. It made sense, he supposed—if they were trying to keep the meeting quiet, it wouldn't do to have giant winged creatures making landings on the roof. Perhaps they were flying invisibly. *Or maybe they're just driving*, he told himself wryly.

They remained on the winding road for another half-hour or so. As they rounded one last curve Sean got a good look at the place: it was built into the side of the mountain, and someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make it blend in with the surrounding scenery. The tall, vertical windows shone like diamonds in the fast-ebbing sunlight, looking like giants had cut into the mountain and revealed the treasures beneath for all to see.

Gabriel appeared to be getting instructions again as the limo pulled up at the hall's massive front entrance. "A suite has been prepared for us," he told them as he

switched back in. "There is no need for any sort of check-in procedure. One of the spirits will show us the way."

And indeed as they got out of the car they could see a hovering form waiting for them. It bowed respectfully and indicated for them to follow.

"Spirits?" Ocelot asked, looking around. "How do they explain that to the folks who work here normally?"

"There is no one currently here who works here normally," Gabriel told him. "The Council has taken over the entire complex for the duration of the meeting. All the servants and workers you will see are spirits or have been otherwise brought here by the participants."

Sean followed along behind them, amazed at the amount of sheer clout the dragons could muster when they wanted to. He supposed he shouldn't have been surprised—even *one* Great Dragon could pretty much have what he or she wanted just by making the desire known—but still, this was so far outside his realm of experience that there weren't even proper words for it. He looked around as they entered the main lobby, taking in the thick carpeting, the soaring stone walls, the crystal chandeliers, and the elegantly dressed individuals moving about their errands. He wondered which of them were dragons and which were spirits or servants, and noticed that occasionally one of them would glance surreptitiously at Gabriel. Some of these wore expressions of curiosity; others, of ill-concealed anger.

Their suite was, by the indicator on the elevator, underground. The silent spirit led them down the hallway, making no sound as it floated a few centimeters off the floor. The hallway itself contained only four doors, widely separated by expanses of stone walls. Clearly this was either the VIP area or someplace where few people stayed. The spirit opened a set of double doors at the end

of the hall and swung them wide, motioning the group inside.

If this was any sort of prison or holding area it certainly did not look like it. The suite was huge, containing a central sitting room with a fireplace, small kitchen and bar, and a panoramic view of the mountains outside (which, due to their location was no doubt holographic, but it was impossible to tell this just by looking at it) surrounded by several other doors that undoubtedly led to bedrooms. After determining that the suite was acceptable, the spirit bowed and left them alone closing the door behind it.

Gabriel immediately went over to the “window” as Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Kestrel flopped down on various couches. Sean remained where he was, looking back and forth between them.

“Now what?” Ocelot asked. “We just wait here until tomorrow night?”

“We are free to move around the complex,” Gabriel told him without turning away from the window. “There are numerous recreational facilities, bars, restaurants, gyms, and other diversions available should you wish to visit them. Sean and I have been asked not to leave the complex. It is possible for the rest of you to leave if you wish, but I would advise strongly against mentioning the purpose of your visit here.”

Kestrel shook her head. “I don’t think any of us are in a hurry to leave.” She looked over at Sean. “How are you holding up?”

Sean shrugged. “This is weirder than anything I’ve ever done in my life. Okay, I guess—all things considered.”

“That’s the spirit.” She smiled a little, then looked out the window. “Switzerland. That’s quite a view. It’s been a long time since I’ve been here. Remember, Gabriel?”

Again he nodded without turning. "I remember."

"It was only a few days before you — uh — started out," Kestrel told Sean, getting up and moving over next to Gabriel at the window. "That's another story somebody should tell you one of these days."

Sean looked surprised. "So this is where I—" There was an irony there that he wasn't sure he thought was amusing or not.

Kestrel, however, shook her head. "No. Actually, it was in Gabriel's lair."

Gabriel's expression was sober. "Yes — and we will tell you about it sometime, Sean. But I don't think this is the time."

Sean nodded, not wanting to pry into his parents' business, although his curiosity was strong. Up until Gabriel's announcement at the Golden Dragon, it hadn't even occurred to him that dragons and humans could mate and produce children. Everybody knew dragons — at least some of them, and none were forthcoming about which ones — could take human form, but he'd always thought it was some kind of elaborate illusion designed to fool the puny humans and metahumans.

"We have a lot of stories to tell you," Kestrel said, smiling. "And I'd imagine you have some to tell us, too. We weren't able to keep close tabs on you because it would have been too dangerous for you, so there are a lot of things we don't know about your life."

Sean shrugged, smiling a little. "It sure wasn't anywhere near as exciting as yours, that's for sure."

"But was it happy?" She seemed genuinely concerned about his answer — he could sense faint guilt behind her expression.

He thought about that for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, it was," he said softly. "The Hunters

were...great. They took good care of me, even though I wasn't the easiest kid in the world to raise."

"Oh?" She didn't seem disturbed by this, but rather more amused. "Not the model son, huh?"

"Let me guess," Gabriel put in. "You were always getting into trouble because you weren't able to simply go along with what was expected of you."

"How'd you—?" He grinned. "Oh, yeah. You're a dragon." He flopped down into a chair. "That's about it. No serious trouble: I never got arrested or anything like that. I just—" Shrugging, he realized he couldn't find the words. "Yeah," he finally finished lamely.

"Not surprising," Gabriel said. "I did nothing to alter your personality—only hid your abilities and your nature. Dragonkin children are almost always risk-takers who have trouble fitting in with their societies."

Sean nodded. That sure sounded familiar to him. "In a way it's a relief to find that out. I didn't always *want* to be like that, but it was like I couldn't stop. Whenever there was something to try, I had to try it, just to see if I could. The Hunters thought I was overcompensating for the fact that I didn't test as a physical adept."

Kestrel laughed. "Well, you're your father's son, that's for sure. You two should get along great. Gabriel's been a daredevil ever since I first met him."

"You're not exactly home tending your knitting yourself," Ocelot pointed out from the other side of the room.

"Hey, I've slowed down some," she protested. Then, in a quieter sheepish voice, added, "...a little..."

Gabriel smiled and turned away from the window. After a pause, he said a bit reluctantly, "If you'll forgive me, I'm afraid have to deal with a couple of things before tomorrow so I'll have to ask you to excuse me for awhile."

Kestrel nodded. "We'll be fine. I should probably at least try to get a nap in, and I'm sure Sean and I will have a lot to talk about later on this evening."

"Yeah," Sean agreed. "I'd like that. If you're going to have a nap, I think I'll go exploring for awhile. I can't sit still and I doubt I'll have any luck trying to sleep." He didn't say so aloud, but he also wanted a little time alone to let the events of the past few hours sink in.

Gabriel seemed to understand immediately. "It's a big complex, but you should have access to most of it. Anywhere they don't want us to go will be locked. Just don't leave—I suspect they will try to stop you if you do."

"I won't. I just need some time to think. We can talk later on, okay?"

Kestrel smiled. "You got it."

After he left the suite Sean just wandered aimlessly around the complex for an hour or so, letting himself drift in whatever direction his instincts took him. Gabriel had been right : the place *was* big, and probably designed to handle many more people than were apparently attending this meeting. The fact was, he didn't see anyone at all in the halls—no spirits, no humans or metahumans, and certainly no dragons. He wondered if they *would* all show up tomorrow, arriving at the last minute. Dragons had to be busy creatures, he mused—far too busy to cool their heels waiting around for things to happen.

He let his breath out slowly as he rounded a corner and passed a couple of large dining rooms. Half dragon! He was still halfway convinced that he'd wake up back at Crank's place and discover that the whole thing had been a bad dream. People didn't just discover they shared ancestry with the biggest, baddest, smartest creatures ever to walk the earth. *I guess most people don't*, he thought wryly.

He thought of the people he had met today. He liked them. In a way, he was sorry that Ocelot wasn't his father. He'd felt an instant kinship with the man, and they did have a lot in common. *My real parents...* He visualized Gabriel, so young and—well, un-parentlike—and Kestrel, with her hard beauty and twinkling eyes, then pictured Kristi and Grant Hunter. He still felt a strong sense of loss when he thought about the Hunters. Part of him wouldn't allow him to fully accept that they *hadn't* been his parents, even though he knew it wasn't so. You didn't grow up for almost eighteen years thinking people were your blood kin and then suddenly throw that all away. He wished they hadn't had to die for all this to be set in motion.

He glanced up, realizing that he'd still been walking while lost in his reverie, and now he was at a part of the complex he didn't recognize. That didn't bother him, though—his sense of direction had always been good and he had no doubt he could find his way back. A glance at his chrono did startle him, however: he'd been walking for more than an hour. Also, there was something else, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. A feeling. He turned quickly and looked behind him, half expecting to see Shaozu or one of his employees there, but he saw nothing. The hallway was deserted. Why, then, was he getting the feeling that somebody was watching him?

Dragons, he thought. Maybe they, or at least some of them, *were* here already, hidden away in their secret places where he'd never find them. *Watching me?* The thought made him nervous. He didn't think he would be the most popular person around here in any case—if they were watching him, why were they doing it? He decided he didn't want to wait around and find out.

As he turned and moved back toward the familiar areas and the suite, he picked up his pace a little faster than before.

When he got back Sean found Winterhawk lounging in the main room, reading a magazine on a datapad. Maya was curled up on the chair behind him. The mage looked up and smiled as Sean came in. "Sean. Didn't hear you come in." He put the datapad down on the table next to him.

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

"Oh, I'm quite disturbed enough already," Winterhawk said cheerfully. "Have a seat if you like. Been out exploring?"

"Yeah, a little. I didn't want to go too far—I kept getting the feeling that I was being watched."

Winterhawk nodded. "I try not to let it bother me. I figure with this many dragons about, if they want to know my innermost thoughts they're going to do it with or without my consent, so why worry?"

Sean nodded, perching on the edge of the chair. "I guess that's a good way to look at it. Is Mom around?"

Winterhawk shook his head. "No—she was having more trouble sleeping than she thought, so she went out looking for Gabriel."

Sean paused. "Do you mind if I ask you some things?"

The mage shrugged. "Go right ahead. I can't guarantee I'll know the answers, but try me."

"How exactly do you know my father? He told me you used to be a shadowrunner, but you're not anymore."

"That's right." Winterhawk nodded. "Gave that up years ago. These days I teach magic."

"Teach—"

"At University. London. I'm heading up the Thaumaturgy Department there. I suppose your father told you about what else I do?"

Sean lowered himself down fully into the chair. "He said you did some freelance work for the Draco Foundation."

Again Winterhawk nodded. "I'm in charge of the British arm of a little group that investigates odd magical phenomena."

"Dad said dangerous."

"That too," he agreed. "We look into them, try to figure out what's causing them, and if need be, deal with them."

Sean smiled a little. "That sounds like a great job. How did you end up doing it?"

'Hawk leaned back, reaching up to stroke Maya, who was half asleep. "It's all your father's fault. After a few adventures we had together—your father and Ocelot and Kestrel and a couple of others and I—and after you were born, he decided he wanted to have a bit more active role in the world. He went to the Draco Foundation and basically volunteered to do some work for them. As he's a dragon they were glad to have him and set him up his own little division. He was looking for someone to handle the European end and asked me." He shrugged. "I was already thinking about cutting back on the shadowrunning, and it was right about that time that I'd married and my son was born—"

"You have a son?" Sean was interested. "He'd be about my age, then, yes?"

'Hawk nodded. "About, yes. Ian's a year or so younger. He'll be starting University this year."

Sean nodded. "Does your wife do this too?" he asked, thinking about Ocelot and Kestrel. "The weird-magic hunting thing, I mean?"

The mage chuckled. "Oh, no. For one thing, I'm not married anymore. We've been divorced for years, although we're still the best of friends. Marriage was the

worst thing that could have happened to our friendship, I think. It was good we both realized it and got out when we did. No, Cynthia's a clothing designer. Jet-set, world travelling type. Ian's with her now. I think they're in Milan." He looked at Sean. "You'd be about ready to start University yourself, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah. I'm due back this fall."

"Where, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Georgetown."

Hawk nodded noncommittally. "Good school. You'll actually be not too far from Ian. He's going to be attending Dunkelzahn University. He wanted to get away from England, and their thaumaturgy program is first-rate."

Sean nodded. "Yeah, I've heard that. Georgetown offered me a football scholarship, but I didn't take it because I didn't want to get cyber or nanomods."

"Understandable." The mage tilted his head a bit, looking at Sean with a probing gaze. "Have you given any thought to changing your plans, now that you know more about your—situation?"

Sean realized then that he hadn't. He hadn't exactly had *time* to, but he hadn't allowed himself to think about it. "No. I guess I just want to get through this. It might all be useless anyway."

Winterhawk picked up the tiniest little shake in his voice. "Sean," he said gently, "It will be all right. I've known your father for many years, and despite the fact that he insists that he's young and has little influence with the other dragons, I've never seen him fail in anything he's set his mind to. I know he's got one or two major aces up his sleeve. He isn't going to let anything happen to you."

Sean lowered his head. He wanted it to be true, but wasn't sure he could believe it. "Yeah, but—even if that's

the case—what about *him*? I don't want to see him get some kind of terrible punishment for this either. I don't want any of this to be my fault, and it is."

"No, it isn't." Winterhawk's voice was very firm, his gaze even sharper than before. "Listen to me, Sean. *None* of this is your fault. How could it be? You were no more at fault for your existence than any child born in less than perfect conditions is. If there is any fault to be assigned—and frankly, I don't think there is, given what I know of the circumstances—it lies with your parents, not with you. Do you understand?"

Sean brought his gaze up to meet the mage's electric blue eyes. "Yeah. In my head, I do. In my heart—I just don't want to see anybody get hurt because of me."

Winterhawk nodded. "Of course you don't. And that's very honorable, given that you've only known most of this collection of miscreants for less than a day. I'll just tell you this—I can't guarantee how things will go. I don't presume to understand the affairs of dragons. But I *do* know that Gabriel isn't someone to take lightly. He can hold his own against this lot. What he lacks in political power, he more than compensates for in intelligence and sheer chutzpah." He smiled. "So try not to worry, even though I know that's an impossibility at this point."

Sean smiled. He liked this cynical mage; someone to lighten up the situation was welcome. "Well, we'll see. And if I do get out of this, I'd like to meet Ian."

"I'll arrange it. That's a promise." The mage looked at him a little oddly. "You know, this is just a suggestion, but after all of this is over and Gabriel's given you back your abilities, you might want to consider rethinking your University plans. Georgetown isn't known for their magical programs."

"Yeah, I know." Sean's tone was a little bitter, and he hoped Winterhawk didn't notice. One of the reasons he'd

chosen them aside from their impressive academic program was that they *weren't* known for magic, which meant that there were very few physical adepts on the athletic teams. "I'll think about it," he told him. "After, I mean."

'Hawk nodded. "If you've got the grades to get in, I'm sure your father could pull a few strings to get you enrolled late at Dunkelzahn." He shrugged. "As I said, just a suggestion." He stood, picking up his datapad and stowing it in his pocket. "If you don't mind, though, I think I'm going to try to get some sleep. I slept a bit on the plane but that's never terribly restful." He held out his arm, and after a moment Maya made a soft *meow* and draped herself lazily over it.

Sean grinned at the sight. "Hey...thanks. For talking to me, I mean. I appreciate it. I don't think I'm going to get much sleep. There's too many things to find out."

"You're quite welcome." He smiled. "It's good to see you've turned out so well. Last time I saw you, you were much shorter—and much louder." Without waiting for an answer, he turned and headed toward the door to his room. As he reached it, Maya craned her head around his arm and meowed at Sean.

"What'd she say?"

"She said 'don't stay up too late'. Good advice, though I doubt you'll be heeding it."

Sean just smiled at her and didn't answer.

17.

After Winterhawk went to his room the suite seemed very quiet, so Sean headed out to look around again. He didn't know exactly what he was looking for, but somehow he gravitated to the gym. The place was small but very beautiful, with one full wall constructed of angled glass that looked out on a nighttime view of the

mountains even more spectacular than the one in their room.

This time of night the place was empty except for a solitary figure over by the window, going through a series of *katas* in silence. Sean recognized Ocelot and wondered if something had drawn him here—he hadn't realized it consciously, but Ocelot was exactly the person he wanted to see right now. He sat down on one of the benches and watched him for awhile, musing once again over the turns his life had taken in the past few days. Only two days ago, he had thought this man was his father, and he had accepted it nearly without question. It had made sense: there was a slight resemblance between the two of them (although after he saw Kestrel in person he realized that he resembled her much more than he did Ocelot), they liked the same sorts of things, they were both gifted athletically, both were risk-takers and daredevils—he'd had an easier time believing that this former shadowrunner was his father than he could have possibly believed, given that he'd spent most of his eighteen years thinking he was the son of a kindly but conventional mid-level corporate couple who didn't quite understand why their son was always restless, always testing himself. Ocelot understood. It had been a profound relief to Sean that someone did.

At that moment Ocelot turned and noticed Sean sitting there. "Been there long?" he asked between breaths. His face was slicked with a thin sheen of sweat, and his sleeveless T-shirt stuck to his chest and back. Apparently he'd been there for awhile himself.

"No...just a couple of minutes."

Ocelot nodded, picking up his towel and swiping it across his forehead. "Thought you'd be asleep. That was dumb of me, wasn't it?"

Sean shrugged. "Couldn't sleep. Didn't really try, I guess. After I got back I wasn't tired."

"Where you been?"

"Talking to Winterhawk for awhile. He's up in the suite."

Ocelot tossed the towel back on the bench. "Didn't mean to desert you or anything. Thought you'd be with Gabriel."

"No, he's still out at his meeting. Kes—Mom's with him too—Winterhawk said she couldn't sleep either so she went looking for him. I think they're talking about what's going to happen tomorrow."

Ocelot nodded. "For a place that's supposed to be full of dragons, this place sure is deserted."

Sean realized he was right. He had seen a few individuals when they arrived, but he was more and more convinced that they had been spirits, not dragons. "Maybe they're not getting here until tomorrow."

"Yeah, maybe. I guess dragons aren't a very communal bunch—makes sense they'd arrive as late as possible."

Sean nodded. He indicated the mat by the window where Ocelot had been doing his *katas*. "Don't let me interrupt you. I'm just kind of wandering around."

"No problem. You can join in if you want. They've got workout clothes in the locker room."

Sean hesitated. "I don't think I could keep up with you." He looked out the window a moment, then back at Ocelot. "I was meaning to ask you, back in San Francisco—what style do you do? I didn't recognize it in your class."

Ocelot grinned. "Style? I guess you could say I kind of make my own. A little bit of everything. That way, your opponent doesn't know what to expect. Predictability can get you killed."

Sean knew that all too well. "Yeah, I guess I do that too, when I get into real fights. Not in class, though. *Sensei* Watanabe would kill me." He dropped his gaze as suddenly he was hit with a wave of homesickness. He hadn't had much time to think about it, but he missed *Sensei* and Althea and Nicky and all his other friends from Bainbridge. He wondered if he'd ever get to see them again—and if he did, if anything would ever be the same again. He already knew he wasn't the same person who'd set out in search of his father.

"You okay, kid?" Ocelot was asking.

Sean nodded. "I'm okay. Just thinking about home—well, what used to be home, anyway."

Ocelot slung his towel around his neck. "Once this is all over there's no reason you can't go back, you know."

"Yeah there is." He began pacing around in front of the window. "I mean, if a miracle happens and I get out of this alive, Gabriel said he'd give me back my powers as a—dragon-kin. I don't know what that means, but I don't think I'm gonna want to go back to Bainbridge and get a job and a house in the suburbs."

"Is that what you wanted before?" Ocelot asked.

Sean's gaze came up quickly. "No, I guess it isn't. I think that's what the Hunters wanted me to do. They worried about me. I think they were afraid I'd get in some kind of trouble."

Ocelot smiled. "They were probably right to worry, yeah?"

Sean shrugged, then he too smiled. "Well, I didn't exactly stay home nights and do my homework."

Ocelot looked like that didn't surprise him at all. "I'll tell you one thing, though—whatever you do, you should keep up your martial arts. You're damn good. You surprised me how good you were—especially that trick you have for anticipating the other guy's moves. That's

rare. If you're this good as a normal human, think of what you'll be able to do when you get whatever powers you've got."

Sean hadn't thought about that. "You think they'll have anything to do with that?"

"How should I know? Even Gabriel doesn't know exactly what you'll be able to do. But it's damn sure whatever you'll end up with, it can't hurt."

Sean smiled. "You still owe me a week of instruction, you know. I paid my hundred nuyen in advance."

"Yeah, you did, didn't you?" Ocelot shook his head, grinning. "They don't get much past you, kid." After a pause, he said, "So, you given any thought to what you *do* want to do?"

Sean sighed and perched himself on the edge of one of the benches. "I was talking to Winterhawk before. He thinks I should change my college plans."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I'm scheduled to start at Georgetown next month. He thinks I should consider a transfer to Dunkelzahn University."

"It's a good school, especially for magic stuff."

"Yeah, I know. That's why I didn't apply before. But now—" He shrugged. "He said his son was starting there too. You ever meet him?"

"Ian? Yeah, once or twice."

"And?"

Now it was Ocelot's turn to shrug. "Nice kid. Smart. Year or so younger than you. Good mage. A lot like his dad, though he'd run himself through before he'd admit it."

"They don't get along?"

"No, that's not it. They don't see much of each other, from what I understand. But Ian's one of those—rebellious types." He grinned. "You'll probably like him."

Again he paused. "'Hawk tell you your dad's on Dunk U's board?'"

Sean's eyes widened. "No."

"Yeah. He's kind of a silent partner, but he put up a pile of money when the place was first being built fifteen years or so ago. Not anything like Dunkelzahn's estate, of course, but a big enough chunk that they let him join the party."

Sean nodded slowly. "Then that's why Winterhawk said he thought Dad should be able to pull some strings and get me in if I decided I wanted to go." He sighed and slumped, resting his elbows on his knees, suddenly dejected. "But what's this all matter anyway? Tomorrow I'm gonna have to stand up in front of every Great Dragon in the world and I'll probably be dead before any of this means anything."

Ocelot was there next to him immediately. His eyes were hard. "Listen to me, kid," he growled. "I don't want to hear any more talk like that. I mean it. Yeah, maybe things aren't that great right now. I ain't gonna sugarcoat it because I'd be insultin' you if I did. But I'm *not* gonna let you give up. You're gonna fight this just like Gabriel is. Just like all of us are."

Sean sighed. "Yeah, I'm gonna fight. But come on—let's be realistic here. Gabriel said the dragons hate dragonkin. Making them is a big enough deal that they banish anybody who does it. And from the sound of things, that threat has been enough to keep anybody from doing it for thousands of years. Do you honestly think they're gonna let us off the hook because of our charm and good looks?" His tone was growing bitter and he didn't stop it.

"What I think is that Gabriel wasn't kidding when he said he had friends. Powerful friends." He grabbed the towel from around his neck and wadded it up in his fists.

"Look—I don't know much about how dragons do things. I've been actively *avoiding* knowing much about dragons. It's a lot safer that way. But I do know this much: the kid's not one to just roll over and give up. If there's a way to do this, he'll figure it out. You just have to trust him."

"Do you?" Sean stood, meeting Ocelot's eyes.

"Trust him?" Ocelot paused a moment, then nodded.

"Yeah. I do. It took me a long time, mainly 'cause I've been paranoid all my life and I thought for quite awhile that he must have something up his sleeve, but after knowing him this long—yeah, I trust him. And you should too. I know this much for sure: if he's on your side, he'll do just about anything for you."

Sean nodded slowly. He was trying to concentrate, but to his surprise he realized that the heavy feeling that had been creeping into his brain when he wasn't looking was fatigue. He sighed. "I sure hope you're right," he said quietly. "I think we'd better talk later, though—I didn't think I'd ever be tired again, but I think I'm getting there now."

"Go get some sleep, then. Might be your last chance for awhile."

He nodded again. "Yeah, you might be right." He turned and started toward the gym's exit, then stopped and turned back. He started to say something, didn't, and turned away again. "G'night...and thanks," was all he said as he left.

On his way back to the suite he met Gabriel and Kestrel coming in from another hallway. "I was hoping to find you before you went to sleep," Gabriel told him. "The council meeting starts tomorrow morning. We're to be in the hall at eleven."

Sean took a deep breath. So few hours. In less than half a day a bunch of dragons would meet and determine his fate. "Okay," was all he said. "I won't be late."

"Are you all right, Sean?" Kestrel asked. "I know this is all pretty overwhelming—"

"Yeah, you could say that." Again it was difficult for Sean to keep a little bitterness out of his voice. "But it'll be okay. I don't really have a choice, do I?"

A brief look of sadness crossed Gabriel's face, but then it was gone. He said nothing.

"Are they here already?" Sean asked.

"Who?" Gabriel tilted his head in question.

"The other dragons. I was just talking to Winterhawk and Ocelot a little bit ago, and I realized I've hardly seen anybody around here."

"They'll—be arriving in the morning," Gabriel said.

Sean nodded, wondering if his theory about their not wanting to be together longer than necessary was right. "So—this is the first time in years that they've all gotten together?"

"For the Council, yes. Many of them gathered for a ritual following the death of Dunkelzahn, and fewer but still many for—other death rituals." His voice took on a slight odd tone here.

"So they only get together when somebody's died or somebody's in trouble?"

Gabriel dropped his gaze. "It would seem so, in this age," he said. Sean didn't miss the sadness in this voice. "In the days of the last Awakening there was more contact—but then, in many ways our world was smaller then. There were fewer things to occupy our interest, so therefore our interests intersected more often. In these times there are a myriad of pursuits open to both metahumans and dragons, and more of the world available to pursue them. Not to mention the fact that

many more dragons are becoming involved in metahuman affairs than ever occurred in the previous Age." He paused. "It is best, though, that we don't get together too often, given the level of intelligence and ego involved. Too-frequent meetings could be—difficult."

"You mean you'd all get together and squabble like a bunch of old biddies?" Kestrel asked, grinning.

"Well—yes, if you want to put it that way." Gabriel couldn't help smiling despite the gravity of the situation. "If you've ever watched a group of intelligent but contentious people try to put up with each other long enough to get anything done—multiply both the intelligence and contentiousness by several orders of magnitude and you've seen a dragon meeting."

"So you've been to these?" Sean asked. "You sound like you're speaking from experience."

"I have—but only as an observer. Remember, I was a child in those days. True I was the son of one of the leaders and therefore was given a few more privileges than others were, but I was still treated as a child. I had no input into the decisions."

"So you sat back and watched and vowed that you'd never be like that when you grew up," Kestrel said with a sly smile.

He chuckled. "You know me too well, Juliana."

"And now that you *have* grown up?" Sean asked. The moment of good humor was infectious.

"I haven't, really," Gabriel reminded him. "In dragon reckoning, I'm still considered very young. Younger than you are, certainly."

That surprised Sean. "Really?"

Gabriel nodded. "I'm considered an adult, but just barely." He tilted his head as Sean started to laugh softly. "What?"

He looked at Gabriel, still grinning. "So I'm the son of an unwed teenage dragon."

That made Kestrel laugh too, and even Gabriel couldn't help smiling. "That's about it," Kestrel said. "I corrupted him, you see. At least I didn't contribute to the delinquency of a minor—but just barely."

Gabriel affected an offended look, but the twinkle in his eyes belied it. "If you two are going to insult me, I think I'll go to bed," he said with mock stiffness.

Kestrel reached out and ruffled his hair. "You love it and you know it."

He didn't answer that except to smile fondly at her, but then his expression turned serious. "You really should try to get some sleep, Sean—and you too, Juliana. If I know anything of how these things progress, it will be a long day tomorrow."

Sean nodded. "Yeah, I guess you're right." He doubted he was going to be able to sleep at all, but at least he could give it a try. For a few moments joking with the two of them, he'd almost let himself forget about what was going to happen the next day. *Am I even going to be alive tomorrow night?* He didn't voice his fear because he didn't want to upset his parents, but judging by the way Gabriel was looking at him, he suspected that the dragon knew exactly what was on his mind.

18.

Sean had not previously been inside the enormous hall that would play host to the Dragon Council meeting—up until this morning its massive double doors had been locked up tight, the tasteful little holo-sign next to them reading “Closed—Private.” It was one of the things he’d discovered last night during his prowlings.

Now, at nearly eleven o’clock (how ominous that sounded for such an innocuous number) he followed Gabriel inside with a growing feeling of trepidation. The doors were open now, swung wide and manned by two suit-clad beings that were undoubtedly spirits. The spirits bowed politely to the group (Kestrel, Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Maya were following) and one of them spoke softly to Gabriel. The young man nodded. Another spirit appeared in the hallway ahead of them.

“Come,” Gabriel told them. “This spirit will lead us.”

Sean moved as if in a daze, tugging absently at his tie. That morning there had been a selection of suits in his room’s walk-in closet that he was sure had not been there the previous night. He’d tried not to think too hard about the fact that not only did they fit him perfectly, but they’d also taken into account his tastes in color and cut. All of them were a bit too conservative for his liking, but he supposed given the circumstances conservative was good. He had even trained his hair down into something approaching respectability.

The spirit led them up a stone stairway that swept out to the left side of the main doors and then down a hallway lined with holopics of the city of Zurich. There were even a few old-fashioned photographs in frames, interspersed with closed and unmarked doors. The floor was covered with soft, plush carpeting that muffled the sound of their steps.

At last the spirit stopped in front of one of the closed doors and bowed again. The door swung open without any apparent intervention from the spirit, revealing what looked like a high-class version of a luxury sports box, or perhaps a group of balcony seats at an opera house. As the group moved in, the spirit closed the door behind them. *"If you have need of anything,"* Sean heard clearly in his mind, *"you have only to call and I will provide it."*

That was comforting. Spirit room service.

"So now what?" Ocelot asked, looking around the small box as the door closed. "We just sit here and wait?"

"Apparently so," Gabriel said. He had already sat down in one of the chairs; there were six of them all together, large and well padded and comfortable looking while still managing the appearance of stuffy respectability. As was the case in all the other areas of the complex that they had already seen, this one was made of stone and plush carpeting and velvet upholstery. There was a low divider, perhaps a meter or so high, in front of the chairs, and above it, blackness. They could hear nothing going on outside.

Sean didn't sit down. Instead, he prowled around the box, examining the divider (he discovered that he could poke his hand out into the darkness but when he tried his head he encountered only more darkness) and the door (which was not locked). Finally he dropped down into another of the chairs next to Gabriel.

Ocelot was exploring too. He looked at Winterhawk. "This place remind you of anything?"

The mage looked puzzled. "No, I don't think so. I —"

"Long time ago. In another place. A courtroom." Ocelot's expression changed; it was clear to Sean that his words had a lot more meaning than they indicated.

Light dawned on Winterhawk. "Ah, yes. Of course. The box, the darkness—yes. But even given the circumstances I think I'd prefer to be here than there."

"What are you guys talking about?" Sean asked. Normally he wouldn't be rude enough to cut into another's conversation, but he was bored and scared and nervous and his normal governors weren't working at full capacity.

"You will hear the whole story, I promise you," Gabriel said from the other side of the box. "After this is over."

"You know how tired I'm getting of that line?" Sean asked with no rancor. It was almost a joking question. "It seems like my whole life lately has been 'there's all this weird stuff going on but you have to wait until *later* to find it out.'"

Gabriel sighed. "Sean, I—"

Sean shook his head. "No, don't worry about it. I understand. But understanding doesn't mean I have to like it, does it?" Without waiting for or expecting an answer, he slumped back down in his chair, leaning forward so his elbows rested on the edge of the divider and his chin rested on his crossed arms. Right now all he wanted was for something to happen, for this whole thing to get underway. He wasn't in a hurry to have the dragons decide to eat him or whatever they were going to do with him, but the waiting was killing him. He glanced at his chrono and saw that it was now after eleven o'clock. Had they meant they were going to *start* then, or just that the accused and their friends had to be there by then? That second thought hadn't occurred to him before. He sighed loudly. If that was true, then who knew how long they'd have to wait?

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he did not hear the door to the box open until he noticed that his

friends were all getting up. Quickly he did the same. "What—?"

A woman stood there, and Sean would have bet the remainder of his inheritance that she was not another spirit. Tall, dark-haired, dressed in a flowing robe, she looked young and ageless and stern all at the same time. Her eyes were a blue so pale they were almost white.

She ignored the rest of the group and looked at Gabriel. "I am told you wish to allow humans to attend our Council meeting." Her voice was soft and without emotion.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. They are my friends and are—involved with the situation. I claim the right for them to attend the proceedings."

The woman did not visibly react. "It is not encouraged, but the law does not prohibit it. They must undergo the Oath, however, if they are to remain."

"Wait a minute—what oath?" Ocelot demanded, stepping forward.

The woman did not answer, so Gabriel did. "Remember many years ago, when we first met? When I first revealed my true nature to you?"

Winterhawk nodded. "Yes. You asked us to take an oath never to reveal what we knew to anyone else. You later removed it."

"Is this the same kind of oath as that?" Kestrel asked. She glanced at the woman and then back at Gabriel.

"Somewhat." Gabriel was as expressionless as the woman. "I did not know whether they would require it. It is a magically binding oath that will prevent you from revealing anything you see here to anyone who was not in attendance. The process includes certain magical protections that will make it impossible for anyone to take the information from your minds by force."

"Is there any danger involved?" Winterhawk asked. "What would be the consequences of breaking the oath? Not that I intend to, of course."

Gabriel shook his head. "It is not that kind of oath. After you have sworn it you will not be able to reveal anything even if you should choose to. The magic blocks the memories from being revealed to anyone who did not attend the meeting."

"Sounds like somebody's gonna do some serious mucking around with our heads," Ocelot growled.

The woman spoke again, but once more she addressed Gabriel as if the others were not there. "If any of them refuse to submit to the Oath then they must leave now." Her tone had a finality to it that would not entertain any sort of compromise.

Gabriel nodded and turned back to his friends. "I fear there is no choice," he said softly. "You cannot be forced to take the Oath, of course, but there is no question of your remaining should you choose not to."

Kestrel stepped forward. "I'll do it," she said firmly. She smiled at Sean as if to say, *I'll do just about anything to stay here with you.*

Winterhawk nodded. "As will I." He glanced down at the cat in his arms. "Will Maya have to take the oath as well?"

For the first time the woman seemed to notice someone other than Gabriel. Her gaze traveled down and met Maya's. For a moment they locked eyes and then the woman nodded, satisfied. "The blackberry cat need not submit to the Oath," she said, again addressing Gabriel. "She understands the issues involved."

Ocelot sighed. "Okay," he grumbled. "I'll do it. I don't like it, but I'll do it. It won't be the first time dragons have mucked with my head."

Sean stepped forward. "Me too." He tried to keep his voice from shaking, and he thought he succeeded. This *was* the first time dragons would be mucking with his head—at least the first time he *remembered*. He imagined that there had probably been some serious mucking going on back when he was too young to remember it.

"There is no requirement for the young one to submit," the woman told Gabriel.

Sean stared at her. "Huh? Why not?"

This time she didn't answer, at least not aloud. An odd look crossed Gabriel's face and he nodded soberly. "Let us continue, then," he said. His voice sounded tired.

The actual oath itself was not complicated or dramatic. The woman moved down the line of humans, beginning with Kestrel, then Winterhawk, and finally Ocelot. She touched each of their heads, spoke some words in a language none of them understood, and then met their gazes for several seconds each. Sean watched from the sidelines, wondering what, if anything, they were experiencing. They didn't look like the process hurt, or felt good, or anything. They just stood there silently until it was over and the woman stepped back.

"It is done," she said. "You may return to your seats. The Council will convene shortly." Without any farewell or acknowledgement, she turned and left the box. The door closed softly behind her.

"Bye..." Kestrel muttered under her breath.

"So you think this means they'll finally get this show on the road?" Ocelot asked, glaring at the darkness at the front of the box.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. We must be patient. As I said before, dragons rarely do anything quickly."

"Why didn't I have to take the oath?" Sean asked suddenly. He turned to face Gabriel. "You know, don't you?"

Gabriel bowed his head. "Yes. I know."

"Why, then?"

His gaze came up to meet Sean's. "Because regardless of the outcome of this meeting, the fact that you have witnessed it will be of no consequence." His voice still sounded tired.

Sean stared at him. "You mean..." he said slowly, "if things work out I'll be—more connected to the dragons than a human would—and—if they don't—"

"Yes." It was clear he didn't want to say it, but there it was.

Sean was about to say something else when Gabriel tensed and held up his hand. "We should be seated. The meeting is about to begin."

"Guess they got their act together after all," Ocelot muttered, but nobody replied.

19.

The lights came up on the main hall suddenly, piercing the darkness surrounding the box and revealing the rest of the chamber to its occupants.

The boxes, the tiers, the seats along the floor of the hall—every one of them was occupied by a silent, formally-dressed presence. Sean's eyes widened as his gaze darted back and forth, taking in the scene.

He did not doubt that every Great Dragon in the world was currently in this chamber. His searching eyes took in forms—mostly human, a few dwarfs, no elves or orks or trolls—representing the racial characteristics of every human subtype. Everything from blond and pale Scandinavians to deep chocolate brown Africans, from Asians to Hispanics, was represented in the group inhabiting the hall. There were a roughly equal number of males and females—most looked young adult to middle aged, although a few looked very old and a few as young as Gabriel. Sean knew that these appearances were no indication of their actual ages and wondered how many thousands of years of life were represented here. Their formal clothes ranged from crisp corp-style suits to robes, wraps, and flowing gowns.

All of them were looking at the box containing Sean, Gabriel, and the others.

Sean felt Kestrel's hand close over his shoulder as one of the assembled group stepped up to the elaborate podium at the front of the room. "It'll be okay..." she murmured.

"Yeah..." he agreed. His voice sounded strangled in his ears. He wished he could believe her words, but with all these unnerving eyes on him, it was becoming more difficult to do so.

The man behind the podium was tall and radiated power. His long, steel-colored hair was only a shade lighter in hue than his suit, and his eyes were golden – the eyes of a predator who missed nothing. He stood silently, looking over the crowd, patient to wait.

“Who’s that?” Winterhawk whispered.

“Lofwyr,” Gabriel whispered back. “He is chairing the meeting.”

“Great.” Ocelot’s expression belied his words. “So Lofwyr’s in charge of the dragons? I knew he was big stuff, but not *that* big.”

Gabriel shook his head. “No. Although Lofwyr holds an important position among dragonkind, no one is ‘in charge’ of the dragons. We’re not an organization. If another Council meeting were to be held next year, it would have a different chair. The position is honorific, nothing more.”

“And we had to get lucky and get Lofwyr.”

“Shh,” Kestrel admonished. “He’s about to start.”

At the front of the hall Lofwyr did not have to raise his hands for attention. Suddenly as if everyone had simultaneously gotten the same message (which they in all likelihood *had*), all heads swiveled around to look at him instead of at the box containing the “guests.” Lofwyr waited for a few more seconds and then began to speak. His voice, which carried clearly through the hall without any visible means of amplification, spoke in a strange, flowing language utterly unlike anything Sean had ever heard before in his life.

“What’s he saying?” he whispered to Gabriel. His stomach sunk a bit as the fear struck him that the entire proceedings would be conducted in some language he didn’t understand, his fate decided without even allowing him to comprehend the discussion.

“Shh,” Gabriel said softly without turning. “It’s a formal greeting, welcoming everyone to the Council and thanking them for taking time from their endeavors to come. It will go on for awhile, but after that he should switch to English.”

Lofwyr continued speaking in the strange language for several more minutes, his expression solemn, his gaze cruising smoothly around the hall. For a moment it lit on Gabriel and Sean, then moved on. The cadence of the words did sound like some kind of ritual greeting, almost like the prayers spoken at the beginning of a church service. When he finished the other dragons responded in unison with a phrase in the same language, their voices echoing to the high stone ceiling of the hall.

Lofwyr stood silently for a moment as the echoes died and the crowd settled back down. When he spoke again it was, as Gabriel had predicted, in English. “Members of the Council of Great Dragons and—honored guests—” Here his gaze once again settled on the box containing Gabriel and the humans “—as you all know we have come together here for a grave and solemn matter: a great transgression has been committed against our Laws by one of our own, and we gather here to examine what has occurred and determine the proper course of action.” He paused a moment, allowing his words to sink in, and then looked over at Gabriel. “Gethelwain, son of Gilvirian, stands accused of violating the prohibition against the creation of the abominations known in the common tongue as dragon-kin. That this violation has occurred is not the issue—as you can all see, the evidence of Gethelwain’s crime stands here before us.” His golden eyes shifted for a moment from Gabriel to Sean, and Sean felt a shiver run down his spine. Lofwyr’s expression was utterly and completely neutral. “Rather,” the dragon continued, “the issue is what shall be done about it. Our

Law is very clear on the matter, but it seems that some feel that these are new times, a new Age, and that perhaps the time has come to re-examine the Law in light of this fact. In any case, our Law also allows the accused and those who support him to offer a defense, and so it shall be done."

There was another pause, and Sean looked around, feeling somehow odd. For a moment he didn't realize why, and then it came to him: there was no low murmur of voices, no undercurrent of hubbub of the type one might expect after such a pronouncement in the kinds of trials Sean was familiar with: human and metahuman trials. *I guess dragons don't have to discuss things like this*, he thought. *Maybe they're all discussing it telepathically*. He looked at Gabriel, who looked a bit tense but nothing more, watching Lofwyr.

The Council's leader was speaking again. "It is custom in matters where one of our own stands accused of a crime," he said, "for members of the accused's clan to stand with him, to defend him against the charges. Gethelwain, are there any who will stand with you?"

Gabriel rose. Sean could see the stiffness in his jaw. "My clan is gone, sir. There are none remaining."

Lofwyr nodded. It was clear that he already knew that but that the ritual must be followed, the questions must be asked. "Have you no friends among us who will defend you, then?"

Gabriel's voice was clear. "I will ask no one to become involved in my act. It was committed by me and any defense will be provided by me."

Lofwyr paused. "There is no precedent for this," he said gravely. "To provide one's own defense against such a charge—"

"I will defend him," said a voice. Strong, clear, female.

Everyone turned, even the dragons. On the opposite side of the hall from Gabriel's box, a woman stood up. A tall woman with skin the color of chocolate and the fine-boned features of an ancient Egyptian queen. Next to her stood an even taller man, dark-skinned and bald, dressed in a formal robe.

"Neferet?" Winterhawk whispered, eyes wide.

"And Unekei," Kestrel added. She looked as surprised as he did.

"Who—?" Sean began, but he didn't get to finish.

"I will stand with him," Neferet said again, meeting Lofwyr's gaze with eyes as golden as his own. "I am not of his blood, but I have been his friend for many years. I believe that he is in need of friends at this moment."

Lofwyr executed a slight respectful bow in Neferet's direction. "You have the right, lady," he said, "Assuming, of course, that the accused accepts your offer of counsel." He turned to Gabriel. "The Lady Neferet has offered to assist you in your defense. You may accept or decline, as is your right. What is your decision?"

Gabriel paused for a long moment. He looked first at Lofwyr, and then turned and met Neferet's gaze. Sean watched the two of them, wondering if there was some communication passing between them. She was very beautiful in an exotic sort of way, dressed in rich silks and African-style headdress. He wondered how she knew Gabriel, and for how long.

The seconds dragged on as the two of them continued to look into each other's eyes. Sean was certain now that they were exchanging messages, and wondered if the other dragons could hear their conversation. Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Kestrel looked back and forth between the two of them, occasionally glancing over at Lofwyr who, for his part, stood still and silent at the podium. Dragons were nothing if not patient, Sean figured.

At last Gabriel nodded once and broke the strange gaze. Their eyes lingered for a moment on each other and then Gabriel turned back to Lofwyr. "I have made my decision," he said formally. "I will accept the Lady Neferet's kind offer to assist in my defense, and I am indeed grateful that she has chosen to stand with me in this matter."

Lofwyr inclined his head in acknowledgement. "It is done," he said. "Let the records show that the Lady Neferet will serve counsel to Gethelwain." He looked around the hall at the others. "Is there any other who will stand in the accused's defense?"

Silence. The others did not look at each other, nor look around to see what their peers were doing. No one spoke or coughed or even shifted in their seats. Sean looked at Gabriel, wondering if he would be disappointed that no one else had stood up for him. The young man's face was a mask, unreadable.

Lofwyr nodded again. "Done. The record will show that no others have stood to defend the accused. It is truly unfortunate that Gethelwain's clan has been lost, but the Law is clear on the matter. The Council will stand adjourned for one hour to allow time for communication between the accused and his counsel."

"One hour?" Ocelot protested as some of the dragons in the hall began to rise and file out to some of the side halls off the main one. "I didn't think that was enough time for dragons to say hello, let alone discuss defense."

"Some haste is required," Gabriel said softly. "It will not be possible to keep this many dragons from their own affairs for too long, as it might have been in previous days." He stood. "If you will excuse me, the Lady is calling."

"I want to go along," Sean said, standing too.

Gabriel shook his head. "Not this time, Sean. Please remain here with the others. Our communications will not be audible to you – it is necessary to speak telepathically if we are to have enough time for our discussion. I will return soon."

Sean watched him go with a sinking feeling. He was starting to feel seriously out of control here, like he had no way to affect anything that was going on. It was probably true, he knew. He was just a pawn, a toy for all these dragons to bat around until they all got tired of the game and someone swallowed him up. He sighed and turned back to the others.

Kestrel put a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"No. Not really."

Her arm went around him. She was only a little shorter than he was, and her arm felt strong, whipcord-thin and hard with muscle. Her brilliant green eyes met his. "I wish I could tell you everything was going to be fine," she said. "I wish I could tell *me* that. But I can't. We're just going to have to trust Gabriel and Neferet. I *will* tell you I feel better now that we've got somebody else on our side."

"Who is this Neferet?" Sean asked. "Nobody ever mentioned her. She's not related to Ga – to Dad, is she?"

"No. She's a good friend of his, someone who helped him – helped all of us out a long time ago. He still keeps in touch with her, and we've gone to visit her a few times after what happened. We didn't know she knew about you, though – she never mentioned it. I think Gabriel was surprised when she spoke up."

"What about the guy with her? Is he a dragon too?"

"Uneki? No, he's a free spirit. Kind of like her servant, except not really anymore. He's almost as powerful as a dragon in his own right."

Sean shook his head in disbelief. He knew about spirits, of course—everybody did. But he'd never heard of one who could hold his own against a dragon. "Is he going to help with the defense too?"

"I'm sure he will, if they let him. I don't know how hung up they are on having to have dragons do everything. We'll have to wait and see."

Sean nodded. "But this—Neferet—she's powerful?"

"Very. She's a lot older than Gabriel. He tells me jokingly sometimes that she's kind of taken on the role of his mother since his real mother's gone. She says he could use one."

Sean smiled a little. The thought of a Great Dragon needing a mother struck him as amusing in a sweet sort of way. Sighing, he dropped back down into his chair and absently stroked Maya, who was now padding gracefully along the edge of the box.

The hour passed slowly. The others did not seem inclined to talk, so Sean passed the time by looking around the hall. Many of the dragons had left (he wondered with some amusement if they'd gone out to have a smoke or to use the Little Dragons' Room) but many more had remained, gathering into little knots and chatting with each other like Old Home Week. He wondered what they looked like in their true forms, and if their apparent ethnicity had anything to do with their dragon type—for example, was the Aztlaner-looking gentleman in the black suit a feathered serpent, or the beautiful Asian woman an Eastern dragon? Or were they doing a sort of draconic cross-dressing, trying out a different ethnicity than their true one? He wondered if dragons always assumed the same human form or if they tried on different ones like a true human would try on costumes. He glanced up at the podium, but Lofwyr had withdrawn back into a chamber behind it.

When everyone came back it was simultaneous, as if they had all heard the same silent cue. No light flashed or bell rang but suddenly everyone was filtering back inside and taking their seats. Sean glanced down at his chrono and noted that exactly an hour had passed, but somehow he doubted that the dragons were wearing chronos.

The door to their box opened and Gabriel entered. His expression was neutral. Neferet was not with him.

"Where's Neferet?" Kestrel asked, looking around. "I thought she'd be with you."

"She and Uneke have returned to their seats," Gabriel said. "There is no need for them to be here physically."

"Did you — did she — figure anything out?"

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. But expect this session to be very long. She has been gauging feeling since she arrived early this morning. She says we are not without support, but that many will go against us."

Sean swallowed hard and tried once again not to think about the fact that this might be his last day of life. He sat down and looked toward the podium.

Lofwyr was coming out now. He waited silently while everyone resumed their seats, and then spoke once again. "Honored Council," he said formally, "as the accused has now spoken with his chosen counsel, the next stage of our proceedings can begin."

He drew himself to his full height, somehow managing to convey the power of arguably the strongest dragon currently on Earth even in the guise of a mere human. "We will begin with a bit of history, for the benefit of those who might not be fully aware of the gravity of the situation we have before us." Again he paused; Sean had a crazy thought for a moment that he was going to pull out a holoprojector and begin a slide presentation, but he didn't. "Long ago, in an Age that has long ago passed into history, there were some among our

people who sought to create servants of a new type. Not content with the traditional servants of dragonkind, these individuals devised a plan in which they would mate with members of the Young Races—almost always elves due to the length of their lifespans—and thus produce offspring who possessed the near-immortality of dragonkind combined with the adaptability and the—more tractable nature, relatively speaking—of the Young Races. These children would, in the minds of those who created them, become ideal servants. They would be obedient to their masters and they would live long enough that training them would not be an exercise in futility.

“Unfortunately for those creators, the plan did not progress as expected. Ah, it did for awhile—the dragonkin did make superb servants and agents for their masters, and unlike drakes, they bred true and, especially when augmented with occasional infusions of draconic blood, passed their traits along to their children. At the time, there were many—even some of the original detractors—who thought that the experiment was a success.

“However, as is the case with any unwilling servant who is not magically created for his purpose in life, the dragonkin began to be restless. Powerful beings in their own right, they chafed under the control of their dragon masters and sought freedom. Eventually they rebelled, nearly killing their creator in the process. Worse, when the dragons were forced to retire to their caves for the Great Sleep, these dragonkin had no such requirement. Many of them spent the time between the dragons’ withdrawal and the beginning of the next Age of Magic searching for the lairs of not only their masters, but other dragons as well. Many of our people were lost during this time. By the time the dragons had Awakened again at the dawn of

the Fourth World, the dragonkin had amassed significant power in the world and were no longer the easy prey that they might have been in the beginning. Although many of them had moved on with the other concerns of their lives and no longer bore the dragons ill will, enough of them remained who did that there have been uneasy relations between their descendants and ours for thousands of years. It was at this point in the Fourth World history that the Council gathered and set in place the Laws we discuss today—the Laws preventing any dragon from creating dragonkin.” Here he glanced coldly, as he had done several other times during his speech, at one of the other dragons. The enmity between their gazes was visible to anyone who cared to notice it. “There have been transgressions in the intervening years,” he continued, returning his attention to the group at large, “but these have been few and have been dealt with harshly. This is the first such transgression that is known to have occurred in the Sixth World. We are gathered here now to discuss whether our Laws and the punishments for breaking them remain valid and just in this new Age.”

Sean’s eyes widened as he listened. No wonder dragons didn’t like dragonkin! To create children who would later rebel against their dragon parents—true, their intent back then was to make servants and slaves, not children, but still—He could certainly understand why they wouldn’t want this to happen again. If only such a decision wouldn’t affect *him*...

“Who’s that guy Lofwyr keeps giving the hairy eyeball to?” Ocelot whispered to Gabriel.

Gabriel’s expression was a little strange and his voice was flat as he answered. “That’s Alamais. His brother. They can’t stand each other.”

Kestrel stared at him; Sean got the impression that this was significant somehow, but he didn't know why. He made a mental note to ask later – if there *was* a later.

Ocelot took a deep breath. He too appeared affected by Gabriel's words. "Any particular reason?" he asked carefully.

"There are many reasons, most of which I am not privy to," Gabriel told him. "But he is acknowledged to have been the first of our kind to create dragonkin as servants—including many of what are now known as immortal elves."

"So he started this whole bloody thing?" Winterhawk asked.

"There is much more to it than that," Gabriel said. "We'd best listen now – I will explain it to you later."

Everyone nodded and settled back down to pay attention to the proceedings. Lofwyr was finishing up with the history, discussing the last dragon to have created dragonkin and his punishment, as well as the fate of the clan he founded.

"So dragonkin can pass on the dragon powers?" Sean whispered.

Gabriel nodded. "Without a regular infusion of dragon blood the traits eventually dilute out, but the power, decreasing somewhat in potency each time, can last for several generations."

Sean mulled that over. So, if he was allowed to live and fathered any children, they too would be dragonkin? He hadn't expected that either. He wondered if there would be any end to the weirdness that was persistently dogging his existence, and then wondered if he wanted there to be.

Lofwyr was wrapping up. "So as you see, honored Council Members," he was saying, "the transgression for which young Gethelwain stands accused is a serious one

indeed, and the laws that have been adopted by our people to address the situation have not been made lightly. The question before us is whether those laws still apply in this new Age, and if so, whether they should be dispassionately enforced or whether mitigating circumstances may be raised to temper our decisions."

"Is he for us or against us?" Sean whispered to Gabriel.

"There is no way to know." Gabriel didn't look at him. He was still watching Lofwyr. "As Council Leader he will not offer an opinion, and his vote will come last."

"Let us begin our deliberations, then," Lofwyr said. "The remainder of this session will be given to a discussion in which anyone here may voice his or her stand on the matter. Discussion will continue until everyone who wishes to be heard has had the opportunity to do so, and the accused and his counsel shall be permitted to provide a rebuttal, if desired, to each statement. In deference to our human guests, recesses will be taken at the end of each day and the session will resume the following morning." He paused a moment, looking around. "Honored guests, I wish it were not necessary for me to ask this, but I believe that all of us here would benefit from each speaker's endeavoring to state his or her stand completely but briefly. These are not the days of old when our Council meetings could span months, and many of us have obligations from which this gathering has taken us."

One of the dragons stood, an expression of annoyance on his face. "You ask us to decide such an important question in haste, Lofwyr?"

Lofwyr's golden gaze swiveled around to meet the man's. "I did not say 'haste,' Vast Green, but merely that each of us carefully consider his or her position before voicing it. This is not the place to bring up—outside

influences." His eyes held the man's for several seconds, ending when the man nodded briefly, dropped his own gaze, and sat back down.

"What is he talking about? Who was that?" Winterhawk whispered.

Gabriel leaned a little closer to him. "That was SIRRURG. He has been waiting for a Council meeting to discuss some of his own interests, but Lofwyr isn't going to allow it."

"Did Council meetings really used to last months?" Sean asked under his breath.

Gabriel nodded. "Sometimes many months. In those days they were considered social events, as the dragons rarely got together—both by choice and by necessity, given the distances involved."

"To that end," Lofwyr was continuing, "Discussions will be confined to the issue under consideration, and each individual will be given a time limit of one hour to state his or her views. Is that acceptable to all?"

Again it struck Sean as odd that there was no low rumble, no undercurrent of discussion and grumbling, but simply nods of agreement. Some were a bit more grudging than others, but that was the only indication that everyone wasn't in full agreement. He looked around—at a quick guess, it looked to him like there were several dozen dragons here. If each one of them got an hour to speak with intermissions each night, they *would* be here awhile. Maybe not months, but certainly weeks.

"Don't worry," Gabriel whispered to him as if he had picked up on his thought. "They won't all want to speak. If this works as I expect it to, there will be around a dozen who feel strongly one way or the other, and those will represent the others."

Sean nodded but didn't answer. It was a relief—he didn't think he could take sitting here for several weeks.

Several days—or even several hours—were going to be hard enough.

Lofwyr wasn't paying any attention to them; he was still speaking to the group at large. "After everyone who wishes to speak has been heard, we will adjourn one last time and resume the session the following morning, during which time a vote will be taken. A simple majority is required, and the will of the Council will determine the fate of the accused, as well as any other unanswered questions that might remain following the decision." He looked around again. "If there are any objections to the method chosen for these proceedings, you are invited to speak now. If the methods are acceptable to all present, then we will continue."

No one spoke. Even the man who had stood up before remained in his seat; he still looked somewhat annoyed, but raised no objection.

Lofwyr waited several moments in silence, then nodded once. "It is done, then. We shall proceed as has been agreed. Who among you wishes to speak first?"

There was silence for a few seconds and then an older Asian man in traditional Chinese garb stood. His eyes were hard, his mouth a thin line. "Honored Chairman, if I may be recognized —"

"The Council recognizes Lung," Lofwyr said formally.

The man stepped out onto the main floor and took his place behind the podium as Lofwyr drew back once more into the shadows. He paused for a moment, looking out over the assembled group, fixed his gaze on Gabriel and Sean for a moment, and then spoke. "Honored Council. I must admit to being surprised that all of this discussion is necessary. As our Chair has said, our Law is very clear on the matter of what should be done in the case of one of our own who has committed the serious crime of creating

an abomination such as the one you see sitting before you now." Here he glanced at Sean again, and Sean shivered.

Kestrel squeezed his shoulder a little, but her eyes were hard too as she glared back at the speaker.

"The question here," the man was continuing, "is not Gethelwain's youth—he is young, yes, but he is undoubtedly old enough to know right from wrong. He was the son of Gilvirian, Leader of his region's own Council—surely his father has taught him of such things, and if not his father certainly his mother or someone from his clan. I do not think that Gethelwain would deny it now, were I to ask him, that he knew that what he has done is wrong. The fact that he has attempted to conceal his transgression for eighteen years does nought but add to his guilt."

Sean looked at Gabriel as if he expected Lung to turn and question him, but he did not. "Isn't somebody gonna object?" he whispered.

"We will have our time," Gabriel whispered back. He looked distracted.

"What we are faced with here," the man continued, "is a matter of principle. Our Law is clear. There are no provisions in it for intent. Our Honored Chair Lofwyr has already explained to us—particularly to those of us who have perhaps forgotten, or were too young to be aware at the time—why these Laws have been put into place. Perhaps some of you, Awakened now in this new Age with its new technologies and new ideas, have forgotten that many of our own were murdered in their lairs as they slept by the very spawn that had been created by us to be our servants and our children. These ungrateful ones have turned against us and harbor great hatred for our kind, just as we do for them. If this young one's transgression is allowed to stand, then what will stop others among us from attempting the same? What *should* stop them? Are

we to set off down the same roads once more in order to spare a youngster who should have known better?"

He gripped the edges of the podium as he spoke, his sharp dark eyes moving around the hall, picking out a gaze here or there. He paused a moment here, staring challengingly out over the crowd. "My point is simple, honored Council members—our Law must take precedence over the actions, wishes, or intent of any individual. Our people have never been known for their ability to reach agreement on issues—without our Law we have nothing to stand on, and we will likely be thrown back into chaos should we, as we undoubtedly will, be confronted with another such issue in the future. Is that a chance you are willing to take to save young Gethelwain, regardless of his youth and his promise?

"Dramatic, isn't he?" Winterhawk whispered out the corner of his mouth.

Sean didn't answer. He doubted Gabriel even heard.

Lung stopped again. After a moment, Lofwyr stepped forward. "Have you anything else?"

The man shook his head. "There is more, of course, but as you have requested brevity I shall leave it to others to say. I am certain that there are many here today who feel as I do."

Lofwyr inclined his head. "Indeed. Thank you. You may be seated." He waited until Lung had returned to his seat, then addressed the hall again. "Who wishes to speak next?"

This time it was a woman who stood: tall, severe-looking, with short reddish hair, silvery eyes, and a long, almost military-looking black jacket that skimmed the floor at her feet. When Lofwyr recognized her to speak, she moved up to take her place where Lung had been before.

"I wish to state that I am in agreement with the honored Lung in all that he has said," she began. Her voice was as severe as her expression and her posture. "But to these very serious accusations I wish to add another that he has not yet mentioned—the involvement of several humans in the situation. May I remind the Council that our secrets have remained secrets for thousands of years and that there are reasons for this secrecy. Yet the accused has chosen to reveal these secrets to his friends,—” her lip curled a little around the word “—thus compounding his already considerable crime. It is clear to me, and should be clear to this Council, that young Gethelwain has very little respect for our laws and customs—if he chooses not to follow them, then perhaps the mandated punishment for his crime, banishment from our society, might not prove such a hardship for him as it might for another who has more respect for our ways.” As she spoke her gaze came around and settled coldly on Gabriel.

“Now wait just a minute—” Kestrel protested under her breath, eyes blazing.

Gabriel put his hand on her arm. “Calm, Juliana,” he whispered. “I expected this from Anri. She will be one of our strongest opponents. She has hated my family since long before I was hatched.”

“But—we just have to sit here and *listen* to this?” She sounded like she was barely able to contain herself from jumping up and yelling her thoughts at the woman.

“We will have our time,” he repeated. Even Sean, who did not yet know him very well, could hear the tension in his voice. Winterhawk and Ocelot were grim-faced.

The woman was continuing. “Honored Council,” she was saying, “It will be said today, I am sure, that Gethelwain is young and that he should be given leniency for this fact. But I wish to reiterate what the honored Lung

has already pointed out—that not only has he committed this act, but he has chosen to conceal it for eighteen years. If the honored Shaozu had not discovered Gethelwain's deception, who among us knows how long he would have continued in his attempt to hide his crime from his people?"

Sean glanced over at Neferet, across the hall. She was watching Anri with great concentration. He wondered if this was the dragon version of taking notes.

"Further," the woman was saying, casting a rather contemptuous glance toward Gabriel, "I wish to put to rest a point which will surely be raised by Gethelwain's defenders—that he is a child." She shook her head, turning back to sweep her severe gaze over the crowd and then back to Lofwyr. "This one is no child, Honored Council. Perhaps he was when he retired to his family's lair for the Sleep, but he has grown since then, in size if not in maturity. Physically, as any of us can see when he is in his true form, he is old enough to fly a mate, to father children—the fact that he has fathered this—*child*—" again her lips curled around the word "—is proof of that." She turned once again to look at Gabriel. "And if he does not know the gravity of what he has done, of the abomination he has created, perhaps I might be the one to remind him of what has befallen his own parents." Her voice rang through the hall and then faded as she stood there facing her adversary.

Even though the room was otherwise silent Sean got the impression of a shocked hubbub nonetheless. He turned to Gabriel and was surprised to see his father's head bowed, and expression of veiled grief on his face. "What—?" Sean whispered. "What's going on?"

Gabriel didn't answer. After a moment Kestrel, who had her hand on Gabriel's back, leaned in and whispered in Sean's ear: "His parents were both killed by what he

calls 'down-cycle hunting.' Like Lofwyr said before, apparently some of the dragonkin who became the immortal elves spent most of the time while the dragons were sleeping trying to hunt them down and kill them in their lairs while they couldn't protect themselves."

Sean stared at her, stunned. "And — they — his —"

She nodded. "That's what he told me. He doesn't like to talk about it."

Even Lofwyr seemed a bit surprised by Anri line of accusation, but he said nothing to indicate it. "Is there anything else?" he asked.

"No, Honored One. I am sure there are many others who will build on what I have said. This one is no innocent child, despite what his defenders will have you believe. He is a young adult, and one who clearly maintains little respect for the laws, customs, and history of his own people. I am sure that the decision will be made accordingly." She primly moved back to her seat and sat down, nodding once for emphasis.

Ocelot glared at her. "Somebody stuck something up *her* ass, that's for sure," he muttered.

Kestrel nodded in grim agreement.

Another speaker, this one a male Aztlaner whose human form appeared to be in his late twenties, rose. After being recognized by Lofwyr, he launched into another speech condemning Gabriel for what he had done. He used many of the same arguments as the previous two, punctuating his words with passionate gestures. Instead of remaining at the podium he strode around the area behind it, pausing occasionally to make eye contact with some member of the assembled group.

"Who's that?" Kestrel whispered. "He looks familiar, but I can't place him."

"That's Dzitbalché," Gabriel told her. "Remember, from Amazonia?"

"He's the one you —?"

Gabriel nodded. "Apparently he harbors grudges for a very long time."

"But he's not a Great, is he?"

"No. He must have obtained special permission to be here. I do not know how he managed it. There are a number of other non-Greats here as well, though all of those here are almost as old as the Greats."

Sean was confused, but decided not to ask questions now. He added this one to his list of things he would ask about later when conditions were less stressful. That would probably be for the best, he decided.

As the speaker continued, Sean's attention began to wander. He leaned back in his chair, looking around to try to gauge the reactions of the other dragons to the speaker's words. Most of them were expressionless, listening with blank faces and neutral postures, giving away nothing—at least not to Sean's mostly human perceptive powers. He wondered what they were thinking. Were they angry at what Gabriel had done? Did they feel sorry for him, as one might for a young man from a good family who had unknowingly committed some terrible deed? Were they even going to listen to the other side, or had they already made up their minds? He couldn't tell. Most of them were looking at the speaker, and a few were looking at Lofwyr, who had once more retired back behind the podium. They were —

One of them was looking straight at Gabriel.

Sean tensed a little, turning so he could observe from the corner of his eye without having to look directly at the woman across the hall who was indeed paying more attention to Gabriel than she was to the proceedings. She was beautiful, a silk-clad Asian woman with a young but ageless quality to her features and long, lustrous black hair tied in a graceful bun at the back of her neck. Her

expression, Sean could see, was a combination of interest and confusion. *She looks like somebody who's trying to figure out what she's looking at*, he thought. He glanced at Gabriel and noted that he was leaned forward in his chair, watching the speaker, but he seemed tense. *Not surprising, I guess. They haven't exactly been kind to him over the past couple of hours.*

Sean leaned closer to Kestrel and nudged her. "Who's that?" he whispered.

"Who?" she whispered back.

"The Asian lady across the way there. The one who keeps looking at Gabriel."

Kestrel followed his gaze to the other side and paused a moment, doing the same thing Sean had done—looking without looking. "I don't know," she whispered after a pause. "I've never seen her before."

Sean nodded, wondering if he should ask Gabriel about her later on. He supposed it wasn't really important, though. He glanced over again and the woman had looked away from Gabriel and back to the proceedings.

But now Gabriel was looking at *her*.

It was only for a few seconds, but Sean watched with interest, noting that Gabriel's expression was very similar to the Asian woman's a few moments ago—like someone who had seen something they knew should be important but had no idea why. Finally he settled back again and the moment passed without comment. Sean decided to concentrate on the business at hand.

The remainder of the session passed with much of the same—it seemed to Sean that the dragons were spending an awful lot of time reiterating the same points, but he supposed that was just how they did things. Not all of them took their full allotted hour, so by the time Lofwyr resumed his spot behind the podium and announced that

they would break for the evening, a dozen dragons had had their turn to speak. So far sentiment was running strongly against Gabriel, although there had been several of the dozen who had at least partially supported him. Sean tried hard not to get nervous, but it wasn't easy – if things continued to go the way they had gone today, he didn't think they had much chance of making it out of this successfully.

They had dinner in a small dining room off the main room. Sean noticed immediately that after the dragons left the hall most of them seemed to disappear; at least they didn't show up for dinner. He thought about asking Gabriel where they'd gone but decided against it.

Neferet, the dragon who had chosen to defend Gabriel, and her spirit companion Uneke did join them for dinner, however. Sean looked at the delicious looking food that had been set before them and wondered if he was going to be able to eat anything at all. He nibbled at the food and settled back to listen to the conversation.

"How do you think things went today?" Winterhawk was asking Neferet, keeping his voice neutral. He, like the other human guests, had had little to say during the meeting itself.

"It is difficult to tell yet," Neferet replied. "There are many others who have not yet spoken, and many who will not speak. Their choice will not be known until the vote is cast."

"I'm wondering," the mage continued, "How is it that with this many dragons present, all of you aren't getting a sort of – psychic overload from each other's thoughts and emotions? I assume that you can block this sort of thing out, but with emotions running as high as they are and so many dragons –"

Neferet nodded. "This building has been heavily shielded against just that. While it is still possible for us to communicate telepathically if we choose, it prevents us from receiving random impressions from the others. It is done in any place where dragons gather—in those places we control the shielding is a permanent addition."

"So Gabriel's lair would be shielded like that?" Kestrel asked.

Gabriel nodded. "Yes. As Winterhawk has surmised, moments of high emotion are difficult for even most dragons to block out completely, and we find it uncomfortable to be unwittingly party to others' thoughts."

"So what you're saying is you can't tell who's gonna say what?" Ocelot asked. He too seemed not to be terribly hungry; for that matter, none of them were.

Neferet took a deep breath and let it out. "We can form impressions," she said at last. "And I am, of course, familiar with many of those here—more so than Gabriel is in many cases."

"So how do you think they'll vote?" Kestrel asked. "Those you know, anyway."

This time the dragon paused so long it was uncertain whether she would answer the question at all. "I believe that many of the younger dragons will vote with us," she said quietly. "Perianwyr, Arleesh, Hualpa, Masaru, many of the other Eastern Dragons, who have less issue with the dragonkin question than the Westerners—" She spread her jewel-laden hands in a graceful gesture. "But as for the older among us—it is difficult to tell. Alamais, for example. As he was the one responsible for the prohibition in the first place, he could go either way: he might choose to uphold the prohibition, or it is possible he might choose to flout the traditions of the Council and vote with us."

"Are the votes determined ahead of time?" Winterhawk asked. "Or can the vote of one member influence the vote of a later member?"

"There is always influence," Neferet said. "The vote is not predetermined. However, each Council member is expected to vote his or her conscience on the matter. Dragons are not easily influenced by other dragons. It is a matter of pride."

"But somebody might vote one way and then the next guy might change his vote based on that?" Ocelot asked. "Great. As if this wasn't hard enough already."

Kestrel must have realized that Sean wasn't joining in the conversation, because she looked over at him. "You okay?" she asked gently.

Sean was almost startled that someone had spoken to him—he had been staring into his waterglass and absorbing the conversation. "What? Oh—" he sighed and shrugged. "Yeah, I guess so. The suspense is getting to me, though. I wish they could just get it over with."

"Do not worry, child," Neferet said; her voice, too, was gentle. "At the rate the arguments are progressing, I predict that the matter will be put to a vote before the end of the week. Possibly as early as tomorrow."

"I don't know whether I'm happy about that or more nervous," he said. "It sure didn't sound like things were going our way."

"We shall see," she told him, unruffled. "Remember—we have not yet had a chance for our answering arguments."

Sean nodded, but he didn't think anyone at the table believed he was was convinced.

20.

After dinner Neferet and Uneke took their leave, promising to meet the others again in the morning, and the rest of the group retired to their suite. Sean was surprised at how tired he was—he hadn't thought sitting in a chair all day would be all that taxing, but then he realized that it wasn't his body that was tired, but his mind. He had been on the edge of his seat all day, listening to speaker after speaker condemn his father's action and press for the full mandated punishment; even the few who had provided some support hadn't been enough to get the knots out of Sean's stomach. The little bit of dinner he'd eaten felt like a lump of lead, making him glad that he hadn't done his usual trick of wolfing down everything put before him. Deciding that the best thing for him might be to just go to bed, try to get some sleep, and get all that much closer to the end of all this in the morning, he bid everyone goodnight and headed for his room. He noticed that Winterhawk and Kestrel were making similar moves, and even Ocelot was looking less restless than usual and more bleary-eyed.

He wasn't sure what time it was when he awoke, but he knew it couldn't be morning yet. The window next to the bed was still dark, with the moon high overhead silhouetting the mountains against the black sky. He grabbed his chrono off the nightstand and sighed. It was only a little after one in the morning, which meant he'd only been asleep for about two hours. Usually he didn't have any trouble getting to sleep and staying there—why now?

He knew why, of course, and there wasn't any helping it, either. Sighing, he swung his legs out of bed and sat up, running his hands back through his hair. He knew from experience that when this happened, if he

remained in bed and tried to get back to sleep all that would happen would be that he'd lie there for the next few hours, counting spots on the ceiling and getting increasingly more frustrated. He'd be more rested in the morning if he just got up now, took a walk, and tried to work off some of his restless energy. After that he might be able to come back and get in a couple hours' sleep before he had to get up.

Moving in near-silence he pulled on a pair of loose-fitting pants and a T-shirt, then crept out of his room. He halfway expected to see someone out front, but the living area was dark and quiet: Winterhawk's, Ocelot's, Kestrel's, and Gabriel's doors were all closed. Fortunately the moon provided enough light through the huge display window on the other side of the room that he didn't stub his toes on any of the furniture—he didn't want to wake anyone up. If they could get any sleep tonight he wished them well. Idly wondering if dragonkin powers would allow him to see in the dark, he opened the suite door and slipped out, closing it quietly behind him.

The hallways were lit only dimly by faint sconces hung at intervals along the walls. Sean headed toward the main complex and away from the residential area, taking the elevator back up to the ground floor. He considered checking to see if the gym was open, thinking a workout might help him, but decided against it. If he had any hope of getting to sleep tonight, the last thing he needed to do was get his body all wound up so it could be as restless as his mind. No, the walk would do for burning off restless energy. He wished he could go outside—he probably could, actually, but he wasn't sure and he certainly didn't want to get caught by some dragon security guard and accused of trying to run away. Better to stay inside where at least somebody might believe him if he told them he

just couldn't sleep. It didn't occur to him to remember that dragons could read minds.

He spent the next half hour prowling some of the hallways he hadn't checked out before—it had always been a trait of his that whenever he was in a new place he liked to explore it, to get the lay of the land as it were, in case he had to make a quick getaway or find something in a hurry. This complex was quite large but it had a logic to it once you figured it out: main hall in the center (it was locked up tight with the “Do Not Enter” sign back in front of the doors), smaller halls off to both sides, dining area and kitchen down one hallway, recreational facilities (including the gym, a large indoor pool, a well-stocked trideo entertainment center with games and trid movies, and a library with old-fashioned paper books) down another; storage rooms, maintenance areas, and other administrative-type rooms peppered throughout along with large and opulent restrooms. Truly a place for the jet set to get together—the combination of the state-of-the-art tech and the old-fashioned, ageless stone architecture appealed to Sean. He wondered if the dragons liked it because it reminded them a little bit of home.

After making a circuit around the whole area he still didn't feel sleepy, so he retraced his steps to the rec wing. He'd poked his head in through the door to the library before, noticing the tables and the soft comfortable couches arrayed along with shelf after shelf of books. Maybe finding something to read for awhile would relax him. He liked to read, although he never got as much time as he wanted to read for pleasure because he was always either doing homework or out participating in some sport or stunt or his martial arts training. He was particularly intrigued by paper books—the Hunters (weird how he had already stopped thinking of them as “Mom and Dad,” even though his love for them and his pain at their

loss had not lessened in the slightest) had a few but they were more for show than anything else—old classics with leather bindings and stiff heavy pages. Even now in the latter part of the 2070s paper books were still made, but they were usually considered to be either a luxury item due to their expense or else the province of fringe groups like mages and collectors—sort of like something Sean had read once about how some people still liked to listen to old-tech “compact disks” instead of music chips, claiming that the sound was more “real.” He had never seen this many physical books in one place before. His high school library had been mostly virtual, accessible via dataterminal, and the tiny collection of real books they had were available only to those who had documented reasons for needing them.

He pushed open one of the big double doors and went in, looking around to see if anyone else was here. He stood silently inside the door for a few moments, listening for footsteps, breathing, chair-scraping, or any other noises that indicated that he wasn’t alone. He heard none, so he moved inside.

The library was quite large, its ceiling extending up two stories. The bookshelves reached to the ceiling as well, with a narrow catwalk accessible at points by a rolling ladder providing access to the upper reaches. Down below were the tables and couches, including an inviting-looking arrangement of two chairs and a couch along with a low table, all set on a raised area and facing the floor-to-ceiling window at the far end of the room. Light was provided, as with the rest of the complex, by sconces placed periodically along the walls. It wasn’t a lot of light, but it was enough, along with the moonlight coming in through the window, to read by.

Sean moved along the shelves, glancing at titles occasionally. The books appeared to be arranged

according to subject, although he couldn't figure out the filing system. He didn't try very hard. Instead, he just continued looking until he came upon a group of books concerned with various sports. He nodded approvingly as he found the martial arts section: it was fairly extensive, and had books dating from far back in the previous century and covering most of the common arts and a few that were not so common. He carefully pulled out a couple of books that looked interesting and carried them over to the couch, where he sat down, put his feet up on the table, and opened one of the books.

Time passed without Sean's notice as he became more and more absorbed by what he was reading. After a time, however, he began to feel his eyelids drooping and realized that he hadn't remembered the last couple of pages he'd read. He swiveled around and put his feet up on the couch, leaning back against the overstuffed arm. *I'll just close my eyes for a few minutes*, he told himself. *Then I'll finish looking through these books and go back to bed. I'll –*

Sean awoke to the sound of soft voices and of the wooden doors closing quietly. He tensed. Was someone in here? Had they just arrived? Were they leaving? Did they know he was here? He forced himself to remain still, listening.

The voices continued. They were far away, probably over on the other side of the large room, but the silence in the library was so complete that Sean had no trouble hearing them. He couldn't recognize them yet, though – they were too far away for that. He hoped they'd stay there. He didn't like the idea of eavesdropping on anyone's conversation, but there wasn't much else he could do at this point. If he rose up and made his presence known, they would think he had been listening anyway – he had no idea how long they had been here. Also, he didn't think he would be able to sneak out without

someone catching him, since he'd have to pass very close to the voices' location to get to the room's only door.

Footsteps, and the voices moved closer. Sean's eyes widened and he stiffened again. One of the speakers was Gabriel! He craned his ears to recognize the other one, but he could not. It was a female voice, but neither Kestrel's straightforward tones nor Neferet's strong cultured alto. This one was soft, musical, and a little tentative. For that matter, Gabriel too sounded tentative.

Sean took a silent deep breath. What should he do? Admit his presence now? Would Gabriel be angry with him for being here? He didn't think so, but it *would* be an awkward moment. He wondered why they hadn't noticed him, then remembered what Gabriel and Neferet had said earlier about the shielding—if it could block out unwanted dragon thoughts, Sean imagined that it must be a lot more effective against puny human brainwaves. Sighing softly, he sank back against the couch and tried not to listen, but his curiosity got the better of him.

"I didn't expect to see you—anyone—here," Gabriel was saying. Sean couldn't see him, of course, but he could tell by the tone in his father's voice that he was not upset or troubled by this meeting. His voice was soft and surprisingly gentle.

"I could not sleep," the woman said. "I thought perhaps I might find something interesting to read here, or a quiet place for meditation."

Seems like a popular thing to do tonight, Sean thought. He wished he could see the woman, but he dared not raise up. Even though his thoughts were hidden, he didn't think the sudden appearance of even the top part of his head over the back of the couch would be equally safe from discovery.

The woman was speaking again; there was soft amusement in her voice now. "I likewise did not expect to

see you here. You have had a long and difficult day. Should you not be resting?"

"I could not," Gabriel admitted. "My friends are all asleep downstairs in our suite, but my thoughts would not allow me to rest tonight."

"And your son?" the woman asked. Sean tensed again, wondering if she knew he was here.

"I suspect that he too will get little rest," Gabriel said. "Although I hope that he will manage to sleep for at least awhile. I know this is not easy for him." There was a pause, and then: "Forgive me—I have forgotten my courtesy. I am Gethelwain. I am sure you already know that." There was faint amusement in his voice now, and Sean could almost picture him bowing over the faceless woman's hand.

The woman chuckled; her laugh was even more musical than her voice. "You *have* been rather the center of attention today," she said. "But still, I am pleased to finally make your acquaintance. I am Minhailreth."

"I am honored to meet you," Gabriel said. There was formality to his tone, but Sean could detect—something else. Something he couldn't identify.

There was a long pause. "You are looking at me—oddly," the woman said at last. She didn't sound displeased about it.

Another pause. "I am—wondering if perhaps we have met before, but I do not see how it is possible. I certainly would have remembered you if we had."

"That is strange," Minhailreth replied. Her voice was softer than before; Sean realized he was straining a bit to listen and admonished himself to stop it, but he could not. "I feel the same. But I do not think we have met."

"Your voice—sounds familiar to me, as if I have heard it before, a long time ago." There was a pause, and then a

chuckle. "Forgive me. I did not mean to subject you to my faulty memory."

Minhailreth laughed quietly. "It is all right. I am just pleased that we had the chance to meet. I was watching you today during the Council meeting. I do not know how you can remain so calm in the face of all that has been brought down upon you today."

"Calm? Hardly, my lady. I am anything but. But I do not wish to give them the satisfaction of—how does my friend Kestrel put it?—seeing me sweat."

"Your detractors—or your son?" Minhailreth's voice was gentle.

A pause. "You are perceptive, lady. I would say both. It is he I fear for the most, not myself. Even if they were to find me guilty and banish me, I could adapt. I feel no shame for what I have done. But Sean has done nothing. He has not asked for what has happened. He did not ask to be born. I am proud of him, of the way he has grown to the edge of manhood—I cannot allow his life to be ended because of millennia-old traditions that no longer have a purpose in this age."

Sean held his breath, wondering how the woman would respond. He knew who she was now: the Asian woman he had noticed watching his father during the meeting today—the woman his father had been watching as well.

"Of course you cannot," she murmured. "It would be barbaric of them to expect you to. You have done what you did not out of any desire for power, but out of love and innocence."

"There are those who say I should have known better," Gabriel said softly.

"That does not give them the right to punish you—or your son—for something that you did not even think was

possible." The woman's voice rose a bit, and Sean thought she sounded somewhat indignant.

Gabriel sighed. "We shall see," he said. "I am grateful for your words, Lady—it seems that there are few who support me, judging by the discussion today."

"That number may be greater than you suspect," Minhailreth said. "There are many who are silent, but the arguments on your behalf have been strong. Do not assume because they are silent they will go against you." There was a pause. "Do not give up hope, Gethelwain. You have support. I realize I am only one and can speak only for myself, but I will stand on your side. And I will try to influence others as well. I cannot bear the thought of one of your youth and promise banished—nor the thought of an innocent life lost through no fault of his own."

"Lady, your words give me hope. Thank you. I—" He paused and did not continue. Sean was almost tempted to raise up this time, even if it meant discovery. In his mind he could picture his father bowing to Minhailreth as he spoke.

"Be well, Gethelwain," she said gently. "This is not over, and I sense that you have much yet to do in this life. They will see reason, and not allow such a waste."

"Thank you..." Gabriel's voice was barely audible at this point. Again, Sean heard something else in his tone, and again he could not identify it. When his father spoke again, he sounded more normal: "And now, Lady, I should go. I do not wish to interrupt your meditation."

"It is not an interruption, Gethelwain. In truth I am pleased that we had this chance to meet, to talk." There was a pause. "It is odd, but I almost felt—drawn to this place. As if perhaps we were meant to meet."

"As did I," Gabriel said softly. "Odd, indeed. But I have learned not to question such feelings—especially

when they lead to pleasant outcomes. Good night, Lady Minhailreth—and thank you for your kind words and your understanding. They are profoundly appreciated.”

There was a smile in Minhailreth’s voice. “When this is over and these hidebound traditionalists have been shown the error of their ways, perhaps we might meet again.”

“I would like that very much, Lady,” Gabriel murmured.

“Good night, then—until we meet again. I too should be returning to my suite.”

There was silence again for a moment and then Sean heard the delicate *clicks* of Minhailreth’s shoes and the slightly louder sound of his father’s light tread as the two of them made their way back across the library. The door opened, then closed again behind them. Sean was alone once more.

He let his breath out slowly and sat up, looking at the space where they had been. He was filled with mixed emotions: on the one hand he was glad he had heard the exchange because now he was convinced more than ever that his father *did* care about what happened to him—cared very much, in fact. On the other hand, though he felt embarrassed at having eavesdropped on a private conversation. Should he tell his father he’d been there? Or would that cause more problems than it solved? He didn’t know the answer. Worse, what if Minhailreth had known? Here she was defending him—did she know he was sneaking around in the dark listening in where he shouldn’t be? If she didn’t know and she found out, would that change her opinion of him? Of his father? Sean knew they needed all the friends they could get right now. He couldn’t risk losing one.

With a sigh he swung his legs around, gathered up the two martial arts books, and returned them to their

shelves. Regardless of what he decided to do, he knew he should get back to the suite and at least try to sleep. He didn't think tomorrow was going to be any shorter or less stressful than today had been, so any rest he could get would be welcome. Besides, he didn't want to explain to his father what he'd been doing out so late. He didn't think he'd be able to keep a lie from a dragon—and he wasn't sure he wanted to anyway.

Thanks to DeckerM for letting me borrow Minhailreth.

21.

By the next morning when the Council meeting resumed, Sean had relegated the memories of the conversation he had observed the previous night to the back of his mind. He had managed to get some sleep the night before, and everyone rose early to partake of the sumptuous breakfast served in their room by silent spirits. Everyone, that was, except Gabriel, who had already left the room by the time the others arose. Either that or he had never returned last night. He'd left a note telling them that he would meet them back at their box but that he had things to attend to. Sean wondered what they were but didn't ask.

No one talked much during breakfast, and after they were finished they headed off together to the council chamber. As they made their way down the last hallway Sean felt a hand on his back and turned to see Kestrel next to him. She smiled encouragingly. "It's going to be all right," she said. "We just have to keep believing that."

Sean nodded but didn't reply.

The dragons arrived as they had yesterday: silently and efficiently moving into the hall and taking their seats without discussion—at least without verbal discussion. Sean wondered idly as he watched them settle into their seats whether he would be able to communicate mentally when (*or if*, a little part of his mind reminded him) he was given back his dragonkin powers. It would be useful to be able to talk without being overheard, but then again it might be annoying to listen to people's thoughts all the time. He was sure they could block such things out, but they were dragons. He was just a confused 18-year-old kid who'd have to relearn many of the things he'd taken for granted all his life. That was, if they let him live at all.

He looked across the hall and noticed that Minhailreth was there, clad in an elegant but businesslike silk dress. Once again she was watching Gabriel, but when she noticed Sean, her gaze moved to him. She smiled. *She knows*, he thought desperately. *She knows I was there. She knows I heard them.* But she gave no indication of it beyond the smile, which was warm and reassuring. Sean forced a smile in return and looked away shyly; when he glanced at her again she was back to watching Gabriel. He was afraid to look at his father to see if he was watching her, so instead he checked to see if Neferet and Uneke were in their places yet. They were. Apparently dragons didn't show up late for important functions.

Lofwyr was taking his position at the front of the hall. He didn't speak, but as one all the dragons turned to him. "Welcome, honored Council members," he said when he had their attention. "We shall now continue what was begun yesterday. Who wishes to be the first to speak?"

To Sean's surprise, Neferet herself rose. "Honored Chair, I request permission to be the first."

Lofwyr inclined his head. "The Lady Neferet is recognized," he said, stepping back into the shadows.

Neferet did not go to the podium, but instead made her way gracefully to the floor and moved around the large area as she spoke. Uneke stayed where he was, Sean noticed.

"Honored Council," she began, her deep, cultured tones ringing out over the assembled group, "As you know I have chosen to defend young Gethelwain from the accusations that have been laid against him. If you will permit me, I wish to take some of my allotted time to explain to you *why* I have chosen to do this, despite his obvious guilt." She paused a moment, looking around, and then resumed. "There is no doubt in any of our minds that Gethelwain is indeed guilty of the creation of a

dragonkin. Even he does not deny this, and as you can see his child sits with him now, awaiting your judgment as Gethelwain himself does. But we are intelligent beings – it is a reasonable statement that there are none more intelligent than we in this world – and I believe that as such we are capable of looking at more than mere actions and rather examining intent. These are not the days of old when these Laws were made, but a new age with new situations, new beliefs, and new requirements.” She looked over at Gabriel. “Gethelwain is a child of the previous Age, but only just barely. He was a child at the time he entered the Sleep; a child who, like all children, was shielded from many of the unpleasantnesses of life. This is a common practice: children of our people are expected to live long and have many experiences, so there is rarely a hurry to expose them to the affairs of adults. As the son of a Council Leader and one who was being groomed to be the next Leader himself he was perhaps privy to more of the adult world than another of his age might have been, but the fact remains that he was young and inexperienced when he entered his lair for the Sleep, and despite the fact that he is older now and has coped remarkably well with the trauma of Awakening in a new world with little support from his clan and his friends, I believe that most of you will agree that he has not had the benefit of the experiences that have shaped the lives of most of those present today.”

The red-haired woman who had spoken the previous day looked like she was going to say something, but Neferet silenced her with a look.

“I have not told you anything that you do not already know,” Neferet continued, “but all of this is merely a prelude to what I wish to speak of.” She looked around, her challenging golden gaze daring anyone to speak. When no one did, she went on: “I want to remind you all,

because so far no one else has seen fit to do so, that were it not for this young one who has been accused of crimes against his people, many of us might not be here today – or if this is not true, certainly the world would not be as we know it. Have we so quickly forgotten what happened less than twenty years ago? It is a mere instance in our reckoning but yet none care to acknowledge it.”

Sean frowned, looking at Winterhawk because Gabriel and Kestrel were both leaning forward, thoroughly fixed on Neferet’s words. “What’s she talking about?” he whispered.

“She’s good,” the mage murmured back. “It’s a long story, but I think she’s going to jolt a few arses with that.”

Apparently Winterhawk was right, because many of the assembled dragons, while still silent, nonetheless appeared – uncomfortable. It was hard to put one’s finger on exactly *how* this was true, but Sean could tell. Neferet’s words had caused more than a bit of squirming.

Neferet wasn’t letting up, either. “Many of you attended, as I did, a memorial then for Sildarath, Gethelwain’s elder brother, who, as Gethelwain himself came very close to doing, sacrificed himself to prevent the Enemy from completing a plan to bring no less than the Great Hunter himself across the Chasm and into our world.” Her gaze swept the group as they became even more uncomfortable. “The Great Hunter, honored guests. That which I will not name, that which did not appear in this world during the last Age, that which sought to imprison, torture, and corrupt those of our kind, to twist us to its own foul purposes – this young one and his brother, and, I might add, the humans you see here with him, faced nearly impossible odds and nearly certain death – or something far worse than death – to prevent this from happening. And,” she added, pausing for effect, “they *succeeded*. Against all of these odds, they succeeded.

I will not take time now to tell you of the trials they were forced to endure as a result of these actions, the threats to their lives, their sanity, their souls—but suffice it to say that Gethelwain has paid a high price indeed for his sacrifice. I submit that in light of what he has done, the Council should see fit to consider mitigating circumstances that might not be factors in another such trial. While no one here, certainly not I and I suspect not even Gethelwain himself, would say that what he has done here is right or lawful, I believe that we as his people owe him much for what he has done in the past—enough, unquestionably, that he should be allowed his single youthful indiscretion without fear of losing both his child and his people.” She looked at Gabriel, whose head was bowed. “He has lost so much already—his clan, his brother, his mentor Telanwyr—and endured much more than any of us would ever ask one of his age to endure. I ask this Council for compassion, and for understanding.” Again she looked at Gabriel. “Gethelwain,” she said gently.

Gabriel raised his head. “Yes, Lady?” His voice was quiet and tired.

“Will you answer these questions for me, and know that the Council will be aware if you speak any but truth?”

He nodded. “Yes, Lady. Of course.” He rose, facing her.

“Was it your intent to create dragonkin?”

“No, Lady.”

“Were you aware that it was possible to conceive a dragonkin child when you chose to do what you did?”

There was a pause. “I was...aware that it was possible,” Gabriel said softly. “I thought...magical intervention was required in nearly all cases, though.” He paused again, then looked into her eyes. “But...the

thought did not enter my mind at the time. It was not what I sought, and not the reason for – what I did.”

Neferet nodded as Kestrel put her hand on Gabriel’s arm. “If the Council chooses to be lenient with you, to forgo the prescribed punishment of banishment and to allow your son to live, do you intend to do this again? Will you seek to create more dragonkin?”

Gabriel looked stricken. “No, Lady. I will not.”

“How can the Council be certain that you speak truth?”

He drew himself up to his full height and met her eyes. When he spoke again, his voice was strong and clear. “I give my word, Lady. It will not happen again.”

There was a low murmur, almost subliminal, around the assembled group. Sean looked around in some surprise: at Gabriel’s words, the expressions of some of the dragons had changed. Not many of them, true, but he saw some of the faces go from stony blankness to a look of – understanding? Affirmation? It was hard to tell, but there was definitely a thaw there. He remembered the other times Gabriel had said that he gave his word on something; it had seemed to him at those times as well that this meant something beyond what he might have expected. He glanced at Kestrel questioningly.

“Dragons don’t go back on their word,” she whispered. “Ever. They might twist it around or make you believe they’ve agreed to something they didn’t, but once you nail them down that they will or won’t do something, that’s the way it is. It’s an honor thing.”

Sean nodded, oddly gratified by her words. Honor was something you didn’t often see these days, and it pleased him that his father shared it.

Lofwyr, as usual, showed no outward reaction to the events in the hall. He addressed Neferet: “Have you any more you wish to say?”

The elegant woman shook her head. "No, honored one. I believe that Gethelwain has said all that needs to be said. His words say to me that his transgression was only that—a mistake that will not be repeated."

Lofwyr inclined his head in acknowledgement, then turned to the hall at large. "Are there any others who wish to speak?"

For a long moment there was silence. Then Sean was surprised to see the woman Gabriel had been talking with the previous night—Minhailreth—rise gracefully from her seat. "I wish to speak."

"The Council recognizes Lady Minhailreth of the Celestial Long."

Sean's eyes widened. That sounded important. He glanced at Gabriel, but his eyes were locked once more on Minhailreth.

"I will speak only briefly," Minhailreth was saying in her soft, musical voice. "I have only, in fact, met Gethelwain the previous night, although at the time of our meeting I found myself with the impression that we have known each other much longer. As I have seen him here these last few days, I see only admirable qualities: kindness, mercy, courage—I see that he is willing to do what he must do to protect his son, and I have great respect. Our clan values family highly, as do many of us—and we also value mercy and forgiveness. To destroy two lives—perhaps even three," she added with a gentle glance at Kestrel—"to vindictively punish an error which the accused has given his word never to repeat, to remove a promising young one from our fold in these days when our numbers are diminishing—seems to me the height of folly. Perhaps my perspective is different than those of some of you, as the dragons of the East were not forced to contend with the trials that resulted in the creation of this Law, but perhaps a different perspective might prove of

some value." She paused, looking at Gabriel for a moment before once more addressing the Council. "Given what we have heard today, I submit that the only civilized response is mercy, and so that is what I ask of you." She bowed and returned to her seat. This time she didn't look at Gabriel, but instead dropped her gaze almost demurely.

Sean looked at Gabriel again. He hadn't moved since she had begun speaking. The faces of the others hadn't changed—those who had looked receptive still did, as did those who had looked hostile. Most of them were still neutral—too many of them. He was still worried.

Lofwyr's gaze traveled around the hall. "If there is no one else who wishes to be heard, then let us adjourn until 0900 tomorrow morning, at which point the vote will be taken."

"Wait!"

Everyone looked around, and even those in the box were startled (perhaps even more than the others) to see that it was Kestrel who had spoken. She stood now facing Lofwyr, her gaze strong and unwavering even though she herself looked a bit surprised at what she had done.

Lofwyr's expression did not change; he looked at Kestrel as if her spontaneous interruption had been included in the day's script all along. "You wish to speak?"

Kestrel nodded. From the spot next to her Sean could see that she was shaking but trying hard to hide it. "Yes. Is it allowed?"

There was a faint muttering from the dragons, but Lofwyr silenced it with a look. "One of the things we seek to determine here is whether new times warrant new interpretations of old laws. I will permit you to speak, but I caution you to be brief. There are those here who do not agree with this decision."

Again Kestrel nodded. She glanced at Sean and then at Gabriel, and then turned her attention back to the dragons and spoke. "Honored ones," she said, "Before you make your judgment of Gabriel and of—our son—" her voice shook a little here "—I want you to know something else that nobody has told you yet. Gabriel won't tell you because he wants to protect me, but I'm not going to let him protect me if it means that he's going to be punished for something that wasn't his fault. Not completely, anyway." She began moving restlessly back and forth across the front of the box. Sean noticed that Gabriel's eyes were locked on her, his expression hard to read.

"I don't know how much dragons get together and swap stories," she said, "but I wouldn't be surprised if at least a few of you knew how Gabriel and I met. For those of you who don't—he got into some trouble with his brother right after he Awakened, and I happened to be in the right place at the right time to help him out. I would have done the same for anyone, because I don't like to see innocents die, but the fact is it was Gabriel I helped and because of this, he felt like he owed me some kind of debt. I told him he didn't, but he insisted. We decided to stay together so I could teach him about the world and he could teach me about dragons. We became good friends." She paused again, looking around. The dragons were all watching her, focused on her words. Sean could see she was shaking a little more than before. "Anyway, one of the things that happened shortly after this was that he showed me his human form. After that, aside from considering him my dearest friend, I began to feel an attraction for him in a more—basic way. I already loved him as a friend, and one night I—well, I asked him if we could take it further. He explained to me why that wasn't a good idea, because of our differences and all, and we

left it at that. I wasn't happy about it, but that was the way it was. But at the time he *did* tell me that he still considered that he owed me a debt and that if I truly wanted it, he would go along with it. Back then I told him no, it was okay. If it wasn't his wish, I certainly wasn't going to force anything on him that he'd be uncomfortable with. We went on like before."

She paused again and looked around, but this time she didn't look at Gabriel. She didn't look at Ocelot either, Sean noticed. After a moment she started up again: "Neferet has already told you about some of the things he and I and the rest of our group here went through—about what happened to Stefan, about the Hor—the Enemy, and how hard on us all it was. Well, what she didn't tell you was that the night Gabriel and I—were together—it was my idea. I asked him to. I was upset and feeling lost and I loved him so much that night—he was feeling guilty about hurting me when he hadn't been himself, and I wanted to show him what it felt like to be alive again. I brought up his promise that he would do it if I asked, and I asked. He was far too honorable to turn me down. I think he needed it too. If you weren't there you have no idea what we felt like, what we'd been through—but the point of all this is: it was my idea and he went along with it because he gave me his word. So if there was any wrongdoing here, it wasn't his fault. He didn't ask me to do it. He didn't even mention it. I asked him." She looked beseechingly around at the sea of stonelike faces watching her. "I ask you, please, to keep this in mind when you decide. Don't condemn Gabriel because of something a human did." She took one last look at them, then sat back down, shaking.

It looked as if Gabriel might rise and say something then, but Lofwyr didn't give him the chance. "Thank you," he said, nodding to Kestrel. "Your words have been

heard and no doubt will be taken into consideration.” He paused. “This Council meeting is adjourned until tomorrow morning at 0900. Please do not be late.”

Thanks to DeckerM for letting me borrow Minhailreth.

22.

The next morning dawned bright and beautiful, the brilliant rays of the sunrise illuminating the stark loveliness of the mountains and forests outside the massive windows of the suite.

Of course it was all fake since they were underground, Sean thought as he dressed in the new suit that had appeared in his closet last night to replace the old one, but the holographic window-views usually mirrored the conditions in the real world and it was a particularly impressive sunrise.

Just the thing, he thought. It's nice that it's a pretty day, seeing as how it's probably my last one alive.

He hadn't slept much the previous night; his mind kept going over the arguments, all the things the dragons had said both against and in defense of his father and his actions, and his mother's last-minute plea for understanding. He hadn't realized until yesterday just how much his father had been through, how much he had done since Awakening in the Sixth World only a little more than twenty years ago. Had Gabriel and his friends really saved the world from some kind of extradimensional evil? And what about the brother both Neferet and Kestrel had mentioned? Sean couldn't remember what his name was, but apparently Gabriel had a brother who had sacrificed his life for their cause. Every time he turned around the story got stranger—and more intriguing.

He was tempted to pinch himself but a little afraid to, wondering what he would do if the pinch worked and he woke up in his own bed in Bainbridge—woke up and discovered that none of this had actually happened. Would he want that? No, he decided. Although he wished profoundly that his adoptive parents, the Hunters, could

be returned to life, he would not want to give up any of the rest of this. In the past few weeks he had realized what he had been born for — why he had been driven from the time he was a small boy to take risks, to push his limits, to seek some mysterious *thing* out there that always eluded him no matter how hard he pushed himself. This was why he existed. He wasn't a suburban boy from Bainbridge, destined to go to college, grow up, and take his place among the community of upright but unremarkable citizens. He was the son of a Great Dragon and a shadowrunner, possessor of powers he was afraid to even speculate about, and his destiny was in a completely different direction.

Your destiny, he had told himself sourly as he stared at the inside of the shower enclosure while the warm water beat at his body, *is probably some dragon's dinner tomorrow*.

He immediately chided himself for being overly dramatic. Whatever happened — whether they chose to kill him or send him into exile with his father or simply overlook the whole thing and pretend like it had never happened, Sean didn't doubt that the situation would be dealt with in the dragons' usual efficient way. He wondered if dragons these days *did* actually eat anyone, and decided they probably didn't. They might be orders of magnitude above what they called the "young races" in experience and intellectual capability, but somehow Sean couldn't see them settling down to a nice meal of Sauteed Elf and Dwarf a l'Orange. The thought made Sean chuckle in spite of the gravity of the situation, and he was grateful for that. He could use a little humor in his life right now, even if it was of the decidedly black variety.

He shrugged into his pants and shirt and knotted up his tie, struggling to get it set right (it wouldn't do to face his fate looking like you'd dressed in the dark) and thought about his father some more. He realized

suddenly that Gabriel (Gethelwain, he reminded himself—that's his *real* name; the other is just a disguise) hadn't been around this world much longer than he himself had been. Kestrel had told him that he had only Awakened a couple of years before Sean was born, which meant that, at least with regard to experience in this Age, Gabriel's apparent chronological age was just about right. Sean wondered if he would allow himself to age as he remained here longer, or if he would simply continue to present himself to the world as such a young man. Maybe he could ask him later—after.

He got the tie about as done up as it was going to get and put on his jacket. The suit was blue today, its dark navy color matching nicely with his light hair, pale blue eyes, and healthy tan. Not that he particularly noticed, though—they could have given him shapeless gray pajamas to wear to the proceedings and he would have simply put them on the same mechanical fashion. Might even have been better, considering that pajamas didn't have ties. He glanced in the mirror, ran a hand through his hair in an attempt to set it into place, sighed and decided he'd better comb it after all, and was out of the room only a couple of minutes later.

Winterhawk was out in the common room, looking out the holo-window at the last colorful streamers of the sunrise. He turned as he heard Sean. His expression was neutral but kind. "Morning." Unlike Sean, who was all ready to go, Hawk was dressed in faded jeans, a sweatshirt with the London University crest on the front, and socks.

"Morning." Sean paced the room, wondering if the others had actually managed to sleep. They didn't have to be at the council chamber for almost two more hours, after all. He wasn't sure why he'd gotten up and dressed so soon, but whatever impulse had driven him to his

actions had obviously affected the mage as well—at least the getting up part. “Couldn’t sleep?”

Winterhawk shrugged. “Not really. I’m not surprised you couldn’t either. Care for a cup of tea? I was just thinking about making one myself.”

Sean shrugged. “Sure, why not?” He wasn’t the least bit interested in the tea and he suspected the mage knew this, but he would rather talk to someone than wander around like a lost soul for two hours. “Where’s Maya?”

“Still asleep. I saw no point in waking her—she doesn’t like tea anyway.”

He followed Winterhawk out to the suite’s little kitchenette and perched on one of the counters as the mage gathered the tea, filled the teapot with water and set it to boil. “Have you seen anybody else this morning?”

‘Hawk shook his head without turning from his task. “I think I heard Kestrel and Ocelot leave awhile ago to have a workout. Haven’t seen Gabriel all night. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s off somewhere either by himself or consulting with Neferet.”

Sean nodded slowly and sighed, drawing his long legs up and wrapping his arms around them, perched with precarious but perfect balance on the edge of the counter. “You know, part of me is scared to death, and part of me is just glad this is going to be over with today.”

Winterhawk turned now, setting two cups on the counter next to the tiny stove. His electric blue eyes were kinder than before. “I don’t doubt it,” he said softly. “None of this has been easy for you, has it? You’ve gone from a normal life—the only life you’ve ever known—and gotten yourself dropped into the middle of a bloody weird situation. I’m frankly surprised you’re bearing up as well as you are.”

Sean shrugged. “What else can I do? Going to pieces over it isn’t going to help things. But—this feeling of

having everybody *staring* at me, knowing that most of them hate me for something that isn't even my fault, knowing that they're going to be the ones who decide if I get to live, and if my father gets sent into exile for something that sounds like it wasn't even *his* fault..." He sighed. "This is pretty heavy stuff for a guy who up until a few weeks ago was worrying about passing his calculus final and getting the hell out of Bainbridge."

Winterhawk nodded. "Well, you managed the last part of it," he murmured with a tiny smile that clearly wasn't meant to be mirthful.

"Yeah...and I did pass the calculus final. But you know what I mean."

Again the mage nodded. Behind him at the stove, a cheery whistle announced that the teapot was ready. He paused a moment to pour the water and situate the teabags, then turned and handed a steaming cup to Sean. "I know exactly what you mean. I suppose over the years I've gotten used to some of the weirdness, but when one spends any significant amount of time with your father, one comes to expect a little weirdness in one's life. He seems to be a magnet for it."

Sean stared down at the teacup in his hand. Its pleasant, slightly bitter odor wafted up to his nose and he discovered that he was in fact hungry. Leaping down gracefully from the counter he rummaged around in the cabinets and began gathering a makeshift pre-breakfast to go with the tea. He glanced questioningly at Winterhawk but the mage shook his head, content with just the tea. "Is it true what they said yesterday, about you guys saving the world? Speaking of heavy stuff – it's not often you get to meet somebody who did something like that."

Winterhawk shrugged. "I suppose we did. It was a long time ago, and I think we're all trying to forget about it. Things were stranger back then, right around the time

Dunkelzahn died. And as usual, if there was oddness to be involved in, your father was involved in it." His expression suggested amusement.

"And what about his brother? Did you know him?"

"Stefan? Oh, yes. We got to know him rather well before it was all over."

"Stefan?" Sean frowned. "I don't remember what they called him yesterday, but I don't think that was it."

Winterhawk took a sip of his tea. "No. His real name was Sildarath, but none of us ever called him that. He went by Stefan like your father goes by Gabriel. Dragons don't like letting their real names get tossed about too much, at least not among non-dragons."

"What happened to him?" Sean had managed to gather a couple slices of bread, two energy bars, and a banana to go with his tea; he resumed his position on the counter and began to eat without appearing to pay attention to his actions. "They said he died—that he sacrificed himself."

"That he did." Winterhawk nodded soberly. "That's a story I don't think we've time to go into in detail right now, but that's exactly what he did. Your father and his brother didn't get along very well at first, but all that changed as time went on. If it hadn't been for Stefan's decision, none of us, including your father, would be here today."

Sean paused to consider that. There was so much he didn't know, so much he wanted to ask, and so little time to do it. Maybe so little time left for him to live. He glanced at the kitchen clock and saw that they had been talking for about half an hour. The others would be back soon, and in only a few hours his fate would be sealed. He sighed. "How do you think the vote's going to go?" he asked suddenly. He realized that he had abruptly lost his appetite and was barely able to swallow the mouthful of

banana that had instantly turned from sweet fruit to bitter sludge in his mouth.

Winterhawk sighed softly, his expression carefully neutral. "I'd be lying if I told you I had any idea," he said at last. "But I will tell you that I think they would be fools if they allowed ancient laws to bind them to the point that they would send an innocent to his death and allow someone like your father to be exiled from them."

"But you're not a dragon," Sean said, staring into the remains of his tea. "You don't know how they think any more than I do. They might just decide that law's more important than anything and never mind the rest of it."

"They might," Winterhawk agreed without looking at him. "You're right—I'm not a dragon, and even after all this time as your father's friend, I still don't have the barest idea how their minds work. Especially since your father, from what I understand, isn't exactly typical in that regard. But the fact remains that if they remember what he did all those years ago—and one thing I do know is that dragons have long memories—they might surprise us all. We'll just have to wait and see." He looked like he was going to say something else, but didn't.

"What?" Sean asked.

The mage turned back around. "What?"

"You were going to say something. What was it?"

Winterhawk paused for several seconds as if trying to decide whether to speak. Then he sighed again. "All I was going to say," he told Sean softly, "is that I hope that they do decide in your favor, not only for the obvious reasons, but because I'm afraid of what your father might do if they sentence you to die."

23.

The mood in the hall was, if possible, more sober than usual as Sean and his friends took their seats in their now-familiar box. They arrived a few minutes early; most of the dragons were already there, settled into their appointed spots, waiting. There was no conversation – no sound at all beyond the occasional rustle of clothing or movement of a chair. No one looked at anyone else.

Sean looked around at his friends, who looked almost as sober as the dragons did. His mind drifted back to an hour or so ago. Ocelot and Kestrel had returned a little after ten and headed off to their rooms to shower; Winterhawk at that point had already disappeared into his own room, leaving Sean staring out the window at the artificial landscape.

Gabriel had come in a few minutes after that. He was already dressed in a dark, rather conservative suit, the bright violet of his eyes his only color. He immediately went to Sean, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Are you all right?”

Sean nodded. “Yeah, I guess so. Where’ve you been – talking to Neferet?”

“No. Just taking a walk. Thinking.” He paused a moment and then looked Sean in the eye. “We have to leave soon, but I want you to know something before we go.”

“What?”

“That I will do whatever is necessary to ensure that you are allowed to live. As I’ve told you before, and as I am sure you know, none of what has happened is your fault. I won’t allow you to suffer for something you had no control over.”

Sean was surprised at how intense, how passionate his father looked, even though his face was calm. There

was something about those eyes that just burned right into your soul. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling—it was more like an answer to the wish that most teenagers, Sean included, experienced sometime during their years of growing up: the wish that someone out there could simply understand them. Sean had no doubt in his mind that Gabriel understood him.

Still, though, he wondered how far the gesture would go. "How can you say that?" he asked. "I know you'll try—I know you'll do whatever you can. But you can't stand up to all those dragons, can you? If they decide to kill me, what are you going to do, fight them all?"

"If necessary," Gabriel said. His voice was dead calm, his eyes level. "But I do not think it will come to that. They might require—certain concessions to spare you. If they do, I will agree to them. They're not unreasonable, Sean, I can tell you that. There are those who do not approve of what I have done, and those with longstanding dislike of my family, but like humans, most of them do not wish to see the indiscriminate loss of life."

"But—" Sean took a deep breath. "Most of them aren't like you, are they? I mean, sure they don't want to see *dragons* die, but do they care about one insignificant human, especially if he stands in the way of their laws?"

"You are *not* insignificant, Sean," Gabriel said. There was an edge of intensity to his voice now. "And you are not human. You are dragonkin. Whether they approve or not, the blood of their own kind runs in your veins. They will not attempt to destroy you without cause." He paused a moment. "Aside from that, with a few exceptions most of them value life of all types, at least to an extent." This last he added somewhat reluctantly.

"You mean they think of us kind of like we think of pets," Sean said, a little bitterness creeping into his tone.

"As long as we amuse them or don't get in their way, we're okay."

Gabriel sighed and looked away. "I won't tell you that there are not some among us who feel that way," he said at last. "But you might be surprised to know that they are by far in the minority. Most dragons see humans and metahumans as an important part of the world's plan—as beings who can do many things that we cannot, and as key players in the events that shape the world's destiny."

Sean looked surprised. "You mean they actually think we've got some use? I mean—I've admired dragons all my life, but I always thought they were so far above humans and metahumans that they operated on a whole different plane. I never thought I'd even get to meet one, because they don't hang around the same places or do the same things we do."

"You would be surprised," Gabriel said again. "Dragons, like other intelligent races, are individuals, with individual preferences, desires, and actions. Some, like Ryumyo, are recluses, rarely seen outside their lairs. Others, like Lofwyr, have stepped fully into twenty-first century life, choosing to work with the other races rather than avoid them, even if it is only to further his own ends. Some, like Hualpa and Masaru, have their own causes which require them to interact with other races. Still others truly care about the welfare of humans and metahumans, and enjoy their company. I include myself in this category—for a more famous example, look at Dunkelzahn."

Sean nodded slowly. He had never thought about the fact that dragons were in many ways, when you boiled it down, simply larger, stronger, more magical, and more intelligent versions of the other races. Sure they had their own agendas and in many cases their thought processes were unintelligible to those who didn't share their mental

and magical keenness, but they were still living beings who needed many of the same things their smaller counterparts did. "So—they might not just blindly follow the law because that's the way it's always been done?"

"Not all of them," Gabriel said softly. "Some will—believe me, you haven't seen a hidebound traditionalist until you've met some of the older dragons. And there are those who have very personal reasons for opposing the creation of dragonkin. But many of them will look at the circumstances, see that they have nothing to fear from me or from you, and decide accordingly."

Sean nodded again. His mind drifted a little off course as his father's words brought something back to his mind. *Hidebound traditionalists*—that was what the woman, Minhailreth, had said the night before last when she and Gabriel had spoken in the library. Suddenly Sean didn't want to keep his secret anymore. He looked at Gabriel. "Dad—?"

Gabriel tilted his head questioningly, surprised at Sean's sudden change in mood. "Yes?"

"I—" He took a deep breath. "There's—something I have to tell you."

Gabriel didn't look disturbed by this. "What is it?"

Another pause. "You—reminded me with something you said. I—" He forced himself to blurt it out: "I was in the library the other night. I heard you talking to that lady, Minhailreth. I'd fallen asleep reading on the couch and I was afraid to show myself while you were there."

To Sean's surprise, Gabriel merely smiled. "I don't mind," he said. "Did you think I would be angry with you?"

"I...didn't know, I guess." Sean still looked uncomfortable. "I don't like to eavesdrop on people's conversations."

"I know that," Gabriel assured him. "And as I recall, we didn't say anything that could be construed as private or embarrassing."

"So—you're okay with it?"

"Of course. I'm glad you admitted it, though—I did not know you were there. The shielding is very strong here."

"That's what I figured—either that or you noticed and just decided not to say anything." He looked out the window for a moment before turning back to Gabriel. "I wonder if she knows, though. She was looking at me strangely yesterday—smiling. I got the impression that she might know I was there."

"I don't know," Gabriel said. "I have not spoken with her since that time, so she has not mentioned it. I don't think she would have minded either, though."

Sean smiled a little, relieved. He looked at his father, and before his mind could stop his mouth, he said quietly, "You like her, don't you?" His eyes widened as he realized what he'd just said.

Again, Gabriel didn't seem bothered. "She is...fascinating," he said at last. "And as I said that night, I cannot rid myself of the feeling that we have met somewhere before."

"Sounds like she thinks the same thing," Sean said. "But you don't know where?"

"I have been trying to place it, but so far I've been unsuccessful. Had I met her before, doubtless I would have remembered her. She—has that effect."

Sean smiled. "She certainly has been checking you out during the trial. And I've seen you looking at her too."

Gabriel returned the smile; his was faraway, wistful. "Perhaps this is not the time to discuss this, Sean. We'd best be going—today of all days it would not do to be late."

Sean didn't argue.

And they had left it at that, leaving the suite to arrive at where they now sat, in their box in the Hall waiting for the last phase of the trial—the vote—to begin. It was almost time now; he expected Lofwyr to emerge from the room behind the podium any minute and set things in motion. Taking one last look around he noticed Neferet and Uneke seated in their accustomed places—both wore serious but mostly unreadable expressions. Across the hall Minhailreth was watching Gabriel with a serene face but worried eyes. *This is it*, Sean thought. *Today might be my last day on Earth.*

As if picking up on Sean's thoughts, Kestrel placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. When he turned to look at her, she smiled a little. "It'll be fine," she mouthed.

At this point the door to room behind the podium did open. Lofwyr stepped out, dressed as usual in conservative corp suit, his long steel-colored hair drawn back into a loose ponytail, his golden eyes still. All attention turned to him immediately. Kestrel's hand tightened on Sean's shoulder.

"I bid you all welcome," Lofwyr intoned, "to the final day of our Council meeting. I hope that all of you have had a chance to weigh the information you have been given and to reach a decision as dictated by your conscience, your knowledge of our laws, and any mitigating circumstances you feel apply in this case." He looked at Gabriel and Sean. "As I know there are those who wish for what is undoubtedly a trying and stressful time to reach its end, I will not waste time in speaking further. Let us begin the vote."

"How will they do it?" Sean whispered to Gabriel. "Alphabetical order?"

Gabriel shook his head. "No. The younger will vote first, followed by the elder, though not necessarily in order by age. And though he is not the eldest among us, as chair Lofwyr's vote will be last."

"Ah, so they want to give the older ones a chance to make a few alterations if the vote's not going their way?" Winterhawk muttered from the other side.

"Sadly you are correct," Gabriel told him. "It is likely that most of the younger ones will favor us, but many of the elders will not."

"Do you get a vote?" Kestrel asked. Sean looked surprised—it hadn't occurred to him that Gabriel might be allowed to vote on his own fate. He turned to his father.

Gabriel nodded. "I do. In the Council, everyone is permitted a vote. The accused votes first."

Lofwyr was speaking again. "Gethelwain," he called. "You will come forward and stand at the head of the gathering as the vote is taken."

"Yes, honored one." Gabriel stood and prepared to do as he was instructed.

"Don't I get to go too?" Sean whispered.

Gabriel touched his shoulder. "Not this time, Sean." His voice was soft. "They will determine my fate first. If I am spared, then you are as well. If I am found guilty—" He didn't finish the sentence, but Sean saw his violet eyes harden for a moment as if to say, *we'll see about what happens if they try to do anything to you.*

Sean nodded, reaching up to touch his father's hand for a moment, then letting it go. There was nothing he could do now—nothing but watch and hope and pray. He watched as Gabriel moved past his other friends, each one briefly touching his arm as he went by. Their faces were all grim; even Maya looked subdued. She gazed up at

Gabriel as he moved past her and offered him a single soft “meow.” He stroked her head and moved on.

It only took Gabriel a few moments to cross the hall and mount the dais next to Lofwyr, but it seemed an eternity to Sean. His father’s bearing was tall, proud, refusing to be intimidated by the dozens of eyes upon him as he made his lonely trek. On a whim, Sean glanced across the hall to where Minhailreth sat: her eyes were fixed on Gabriel, her expression worried, almost stricken. Her hands were locked together in her lap as if she were afraid that she had to hold herself from going toward him.

Sean noticed, too, that Neferet remained in her seat and did not attempt to go forward and stand with Gabriel. He supposed that he couldn’t attach too much of his human courtroom knowledge to dragon affairs—he guessed that dragons didn’t get to have their lawyers present when the verdict was handed down. He gripped the edge of the box, leaned forward, and waited.

When Gabriel reached the dais and stood next to him, Lofwyr addressed the gathering again. “We will begin the vote now. When I speak your name, you are permitted one of three responses: ‘Aye’ denotes a vote in favor of banishment. ‘Nay’ denotes a vote in favor of clemency. ‘Abstain’ denotes that you do not wish to vote on the matter. No other responses are permitted or acceptable. Be aware of the following: a vote of clemency will imply no punishment for Gethelwain or his son. A vote of banishment will bring about a subsequent vote to decide the fate of the dragonkin—if he is to be, as is our custom, exiled with his father, or if he will be allowed to go free, or be executed. An abstaining vote cannot be changed, so think carefully before abstaining. Further, you are not permitted to hold your vote until a later time; you must vote when your name is called. Is all of this understood?”

There were no words, but Sean got the feeling that a strong sense of the affirmative rippled through the crowd. Next to him, Kestrel moved a little closer, her hand on his arm. He shivered a little. This was it.

Lofwyr nodded. "Then let us begin." He glanced around the hall and then his steely gaze settled on Gabriel. "Gethelwain, as the accused you will have the first vote. How say you?"

Gabriel's own gaze didn't waver. "Nay."

Again Lofwyr nodded as if that were not any surprise to him. "Arleesh."

A young woman, stylishly dressed, stood and in a clear voice said, "Nay."

"Masaru."

This time it was a young Filipino man. "Nay."

"Perianwyr."

"Nay."

The vote continued in this way, with Lofwyr calling out a name and each dragon in turn stating his or her vote. Most of those in this early stage were 'Nay,' just as Gabriel had predicted. Sean didn't let himself get excited, though, because he knew that there were more elder dragons than younger ones, and their voices would carry more weight.

"Minhailreth."

Sean tensed as her name was called. If they were going by age then she was young but not as young as many of the others. He didn't know how old he had expected her to be: it was impossible to tell, especially when they were in human guise.

Minhailreth looked directly into Gabriel's eyes as she spoke. Her voice was strong and clear: "Nay."

"Hestaby."

"Nay."

"Rhonabwy."

"Nay."

Sean was beginning to feel a little less stressed now as the 'Nay' votes continued to outnumber the 'Aye's. He'd been trying to keep a count in his head and although he was sure he wasn't accurate he suspected that the Nays outnumbered the Ayes by about 1.5 to 1. Not a great margin, but a margin.

"Neferet."

"Nay."

Of course—it would be quite a shock if Neferet voted against the one she had been defending.

"Hualpa."

"Aye."

Sean quickly looked at the Hispanic gentleman who had spoken. Hualpa's face was set in a stonelike expression, not pleased, not disturbed.

"Shaozu." It was the man whose people had kidnapped Sean—the one who had discovered them in the restaurant and set off this whole situation.

"Aye."

The names and the votes continued, and an icy grip began crawling its way up Sean's spine as vote after vote began to come back "Aye." He looked at Gabriel, but his father stood silent and unmoving, his face unreadable as his fellow dragons continued to determine his fate. Then Sean glanced, for the first time, at Kestrel. She had a tiny pocket secretary out, down below the level of the box, and was using it to keep track of the vote. Right now it stood at a tie—just as many Aye votes as Nays. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Kestrel's face was grim. There weren't that many other dragons left to vote—and the oldest among them had yet to speak. Sean could only see a tiny handful who had not yet cast their votes.

Lofwyr's face showed no emotion as he continued to recite the names. "Lung."

"Aye."

"Ryumyo."

"Aye."

Sean held his breath. This wasn't going to work. After all this, his father was going to be banished and he was going to be killed. He just knew it. He —

"Alamais."

All eyes turned to the dragon Gabriel had identified earlier as Lofwyr's brother. He was dark-haired, cold-eyed, and impeccably dressed. There was silence for a moment as their eyes met, and then Alamaise said almost in the tone of a challenge: "Nay."

There was a brief undercurrent of surprised conversation for just a few seconds, but the gathering settled down again at a look from Lofwyr.

Kestrel made another tick mark under the 'Nay' column.

"Ghostwalker."

Attention fell on a slightly stocky, powerful-looking man with light blond hair and piercing blue eyes. Sean's own eyes widened: he had read the story of Ghostwalker's entry into the Sixth World, which had occurred only a year or so after his own, and had eagerly followed news stories of his activities. This was one of the oldest dragons currently on Earth.

Ghostwalker did not look at Lofwyr, but at Gabriel. He studied the young man for several seconds, and then cast his vote: "Nay."

"That's surprising," Winterhawk murmured. "He's always been a traditionalist."

"Maybe he just doesn't want to screw up a good kid's life for one mistake," Ocelot suggested.

Kestrel let her breath out slowly. "It's a tie," she whispered.

"Who else has to vote?" Winterhawk whispered from the other side. Ocelot leaned in to get a look at the pocket secretary.

"Don't know. I don't know who all is here."

There was a sudden silence on the floor as Lofwyr stopped reciting names. After a moment, the dragon spoke again, his expression grim: "The vote stands at a tie, with only one vote remaining: my own." He turned to Gabriel, then back to the group. "I—"

Sean was moving before he thought. "Please!" he called out, vaulting over the low railing of the box to the floor.

"Sean!" Kestrel and Gabriel called simultaneously, starting to lunge forward from their respective spots, but they had no effect on the young man's actions.

"Please," Sean called again. "Before you cast the last vote, I want to say something!" He looked around desperately at all the faces, noting that most of them were hostile but not caring. Adrenaline coursed through his veins now, driving him forward.

Lofwyr regarded him like a bug that had landed in his dinner. "I do not believe—"

Sean looked imploringly into the dragon's eyes. "Just hear me out, sir," he begged. "I promise I won't take more than a couple of minutes. But I have to say this." He did not look at Gabriel as he spoke, but he could feel his father's eyes on him nonetheless.

Lofwyr stared down at him for several long moments: the golden eyes pierced him as the dragon's scrutiny went on and on until Sean thought he might scream in frustration. Then, suddenly, Lofwyr nodded once. "The Council grants your request, dragonkin," he said. His voice was strong but carried no emotion. "You have two minutes."

Sean took a deep breath, trying to quell his shaking and the pounding of his heart. He looked up at Lofwyr standing next to his father on the dais. "Thank you," he said. His voice shook—he knew they could hear it but he did nothing to stop it. "Here's all I want to say. I'm the one who's causing all the trouble here. I'm the one who's not supposed to be alive. I want to live—of course I do. I'm only eighteen. Up until recently I thought I was just a normal human kid, with a normal human life. I guess I would have found out otherwise in a couple of years, but that isn't the way it happened. I'm not even supposed to be here. But even worse than if you decided that I really *shouldn't* be here—even worse than that would be wrecking my father's life over one mistake."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "I don't know these people—my real parents—very well yet. I only met them a few days ago. But I can already see what kind of person—what kind of *dragon*—my father is. If the things that people have been saying are true, and it sure sounds like they are because nobody's challenged them, he's done a lot of good already and has a lot more to do. He's a dragon—an immortal—and he's barely an adult yet. Do you think *I* want to cause him to be banished from his people for the rest of his life, before he's even really had a chance to enjoy it?" Sean paused a moment, feeling sweat dotting his forehead and tears forming in the corners of his eyes. "I'll admit it—I'm scared right now. I'm more scared than I've ever been in my whole life. I don't want to die. Especially not now, after I've found out what kinds of things I can look forward to as a dragonkin. But I'd rather die than see you ruin my father's life because of me. If you can't forgive him for what he did, then I guess you'll just have to get rid of me and eliminate the evidence. No more dragonkin, no more crime, right?"

"Sean, no!" Gabriel hissed from his place next to Lofwyr. He moved forward, but Lofwyr stopped him with a hand to his arm. Although Sean didn't look, he could hear gasps not only from the box where his mother and his friends sat, but from a couple of the dragons as well.

Now Sean *did* look at his father. His eyes were streaming tears now, but his voice wasn't shaking anymore. "Dad, all my life I thought there was something more to me than what I knew. Now that I know it for sure, I'm not going to let them destroy you because of me." He turned back to Lofwyr. "Please, sir—if it'll save my father...just..." He spread his arms out and met the dragon's eyes. "Go ahead and do it."

There was dead silence in the hall. No one moved, no one spoke—all their eyes were on Sean and Lofwyr, facing each other across the space of a few meters, and on Gabriel, standing nearby and unable to do anything but watch in horror.

Around the hall, the dragons leaned forward in their seats. None dared to speak or even whisper, to intrude on this sudden unexpected and emotionally charged situation. They merely sat, waiting, their anticipation nearly palpable in the still dry air of the stone room.

For several moments once again, Lofwyr regarded Sean. His face held no more emotion than it had before; in fact, he gave no indication that he had even heard Sean's words. His only motion was to slowly remove his hand from Gabriel's arm and to draw himself to his full height. Then he deliberately removed his gaze from Sean and directed it outward over the hall. His eyes studied the rows of seated dragons without lighting on any one in particular.

When at last he spoke it was a single word, a word that carried through the hall with the full force of the Great Dragon hidden in the guise of a mere human:

“Nay.”

24.

An hour later, Sean finally did pinch himself.

He stood in his room, his hands pressed against the holo-window, staring once again out over the false view but not seeing it at all. His mind hummed with emotion: happiness, relief, disbelief, and confusion raced around his head and had been doing so since they had left the hall. He still couldn't quite believe that it was over.

He was half dragon, and he was going to live.

His mind kept going back to that moment after Lofwyr had cast his final vote—the vote that had lifted the cloud of dread that had hovered over Sean since the moment when Shaozu had arrived at the Golden Dragon Restaurant the night he had first met his father. For several seconds everyone had just stared in silence: some in surprise, some in shocked disbelief, some in outrage. Then from the box where he had been seated there had come a cheer—started by Kestrel, it had been quickly taken up by Ocelot and then Winterhawk. Then it had been minor-league pandemonium as all of them had left the box to run over and pull him into happy embraces. He'd looked at Gabriel then for a moment: his father was still on the dais next to Lofwyr and hadn't made a move to come over, but Sean could see the relief and happiness shining in his eyes.

It was over.

Most of the dragons had left quickly after the vote was cast; some of them spoke to Gabriel, but none to Sean. He didn't mind. In fact, right at that moment he was surprised to find that all he wanted was a little time to be alone, to digest everything that had occurred and come to terms with it. Kestrel and the others had thought his request to go off and change his clothes before rejoining

them odd, but Gabriel had understood. Sean could see it in his eyes.

So now here he was, alone in his room while the others waited for him up in the main hall. He took a shower, got out of the unfamiliar suit and back into his beloved jeans and leather jacket, and spent the last few minutes just wandering around the suite in a daze. He supposed he should head out and meet up with the others, but—

“Sean?” The voice in the doorway was soft behind him. Gabriel.

His father.

Sean turned. Gabriel still wore the suit he’d worn at the vote; his expression was hard to read. “Hi.”

“Do you mind if I come in?”

Sean shook his head. “C’mon in. I’m just—” He realized he didn’t know exactly what he was doing, so he spread his arms and shrugged.

“I understand.” Gabriel came over and leaned on the edge of the room’s small table. He sighed. “Sean, I wish you hadn’t had to go through all of this. I wish I could have spared you.”

Sean turned back to face his father, noting how serious he looked. “It’s okay,” he said, and as he said it he knew it was true. “At least it’s over now.”

Gabriel nodded. “Yes. It is over.” His expression got even more serious. “You should not have done what you did, you know.”

“Why not? It worked, didn’t it?”

“We will never know that,” Gabriel said soberly. “It is possible that Lofwyr planned to vote as he did all along. Probable, in fact. I doubt that you could have swayed him had he chosen otherwise.”

Sean pushed himself off the window and moved to perch on the edge of the bed. "But we'll never know. Maybe it did help."

"I would not have allowed you to do it."

Sean started to say something, to protest, but as he did it occurred to him that it didn't matter anymore. He shrugged. "It's over now. There's not much point in going over it at this point, is there?"

Gabriel paused a long moment, then sighed. "No, I suppose not."

"Besides, from what I hear you would have done the same thing, wouldn't you?"

This time Gabriel didn't answer. Instead, he changed the subject. "The others are waiting. Would you like to join us? The spirits are preparing a light lunch before we're due to leave for the airport."

Sean nodded. He looked up at his father. "Are they all gone? The dragons, I mean?"

"Most of them. Many of them had pressing business that this Council meeting interrupted."

"Who's still here?"

"Aside from our own group—Neferet and Uneke have remained, at least for a short while."

"What about Minhailreth?" For the first time, Sean smiled a little.

Gabriel returned the smile. "She is gone. She apologized, but she had to return to her people. We have said our goodbyes. She asked me to tell you she is very proud of you and hopes the two of you might have the chance to meet formally some day. She was impressed by your courage." He paused a moment, and when he spoke again the words sounded almost reluctant: "As was I."

Sean ducked his gaze. Even at this point, an hour after the vote was done, he still didn't know what had possessed him to make his impassioned speech. He

certainly hadn't planned it. He'd been as surprised as everyone else in the room when he'd left his seat and jumped over that railing. All he knew was that it had been almost a physical compulsion that had driven him to do it—a feeling that all of these people, especially his father, had made great sacrifices for him and it wasn't right for him to allow those sacrifices to be in vain without even trying to help. Even if the vote had gone his way without his plea, he knew he would never have felt right about himself afterward. "So," he said after an awkward silence, "What happens now?"

Gabriel didn't answer right away. He pushed himself off the edge of the table and began pacing the room. "You are no longer in any danger from the dragons. All of them know you and it is the will of the Council that you be spared, so you have no need to worry that you will be harassed any longer."

"Even the ones who voted against us?"

Gabriel nodded. "All of them know that to defy the will of the Council is a grave matter indeed. If it were ever proven that they did so, they would find themselves in deeper trouble than we faced today."

"So this isn't a banishment offense?"

"It would be up to another Council to decide, of course, but the punishment for directly defying such an edict would be significant."

Sean nodded slowly. "Okay. All the same, though, I think I'll try to stay out of their way. Some of those dragons looked like they wanted to fry me where I stood."

"A minority, but yes," Gabriel said. "A wise decision, I think." He nodded toward the door. "Come. We can talk further at lunch—the others are waiting for us."

Sean nodded. "Yeah. Suddenly I'm hungry again." As Gabriel turned to cross the room, he said quickly, "Dad?"

The young man turned back, tilting his head questioningly.

"Thanks. This is all pretty strange and I'm still getting my head around the fact that I'm not just having the world's most convoluted dream, but I appreciate what you've done. You didn't have to do it, but you did."

"Of course I had to do it," Gabriel said softly. "You are my son." He smiled a little. "But I would have done it regardless of obligation. I'm honored that you are my son. I could not be more proud of the man you've become."

Sean felt a slight blush rising on his cheeks and ducked his head to hide it. "C'mon," he said a little gruffly. "Let's get down there before Ocelot eats all the good stuff."

"So you've done it. I knew you would—it was just a matter of the particulars." Winterhawk grinned as he finished putting together a plate of meat and fish for Maya.

The dining room was deserted now except for their party, who were seated around a large table in the center of the room. Spirits flitted around filling water glasses and carrying off empty food trays, nearly unnoticed by those at the table.

"Damn straight," Ocelot agreed. There was admiration in his tone. "That was quite a stunt you pulled, kid. I don't think I'd've had the guts to stand up to all those dragons that way."

"Yeah you would have," Sean told him. He had just arrived and taken his place at the table between Gabriel and Kestrel. He looked around at all the faces, including Neferet and Uneki, who were regarding him proudly. "Hey, listen—would it be okay if we didn't talk about that anymore right now? Now that it's over I'd like to concentrate on what's coming up, not what's already happened."

Gabriel nodded. His eyes showed approval. "I think that would be fine." Next to him, Kestrel's eyes were shining with love and pride. She hadn't said much after her war-whoop cheer following the vote's end, but she hadn't needed to. Her face showed everything that needed to be said.

"So then," Winterhawk continued. "What *are* your plans for the future, Sean? Still planning to start at Georgetown in the fall?"

Sean sighed. This was something he hadn't had time to think about in quite awhile, and now that the immediate threat was past he hadn't the faintest idea what he wanted to do. "I don't know," he said at last. "It doesn't seem quite—right, after all this. But I don't know what does."

"You've got time," Ocelot said. "Not like you couldn't take a year off—or more—to figure out where you want to go, if you want to."

Sean nodded, then looked at Gabriel. "Did you mean what you said about my having powers?"

Gabriel inclined his head. "Now that you know your true nature, I will of course remove the spells that hide your natural dragonkin abilities, and help you learn to use them if you wish."

"I'd like that," Sean said gratefully. "I mean, having powers like that is great, but I don't want to end up fireballing some poor slot at the mall because he grabbed the last Irina Azure sim."

Gabriel started to say something, then smiled and shook his head. "No, that wouldn't do at all."

Sean chuckled, but then grew serious again. He looked around at the others: Ocelot, Winterhawk, Neferet, Uneke. "I *will* get to see you guys again, right? You aren't going to just disappear back to where you come from and drop out of sight?"

Ocelot grinned. "Try to keep us away, kid."

Winterhawk, too, smiled. "I think we've all got a vested interest in keeping track of your progress, my friend."

Kestrel nodded. "And as for me—I've been out of your life for eighteen years, so I think we've got a lot of lost time to make up for." She looked at Gabriel. "Right?"

"Indeed," Gabriel agreed solemnly.

Sean smiled. Leaning back in his chair, he looked around the sumptuous dining room. Almost of its own accord, his hand reached up, his fingers clasping gently around the golden dragon he wore around his neck. His mind flitted over images: the Hunters, high school, Bainbridge, his old home, Jay, Althea, *Sensei* Watanabe—all those people and things seemed like they had been part of him a lifetime ago, but nonetheless he still felt a warmth from the memories. Yes, his life had changed—probably more drastically than those of most 18-year-olds around—but now that he had the whole story he didn't feel like he was closing one door and opening another. Instead, he perceived his life more like a tapestry, or maybe like his beloved old leather jacket: the past was woven there, painted as a background that would color everything that was to come in the future. The present and everything he had to look forward to would be there too, adding its colors, blending with what had been to create the picture. He looked around at the faces of his friends again and realized it was going to be a beautiful picture indeed. Strange, but beautiful.

He wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

Epilogue

Sean looked around in awe. If there had ever been any doubt in his mind that his father was indeed a Great Western Dragon, the sight of the vast array of caverns that formed his lair was doing a good job of putting that doubt to rest.

It was two days after the end of the Dragon Council trial, two days since they had left Zurich and flown back to the UCAS. It had been a busy two days. Ocelot, Winterhawk, and Maya had taken their leaves to return to San Francisco and London, both of them promising that they would stay in touch. Sean, upon returning to Seattle, had contacted Jay to let him know he was still alive, though he hadn't said much about what had happened. "Did you find 'em?" the dwarf had asked.

"Yeah. I found 'em."

If Jay had noticed the strange, wistful look in his friend's eyes, he hadn't mentioned it. For once in his life, the hyper-curious decker had caught on that this was an area where he shouldn't pry. He told Sean that he was going to remain in Seattle for awhile and hadn't decided if he would return to attend MIT&T. "I've got your number," he said. "I'll call you and let you know what I decide."

They didn't stay in Seattle long after that. Sean put his phone away and went out to the front room of the sumptuous suite he was sharing with his parents, where he found Gabriel standing near the window watching him. "So," Gabriel said softly, "are you ready to put the last piece of the puzzle into place?"

Sean smiled as anticipation skittered down his spine. All he could do was nod.

"So..." Sean asked tentatively, looking around the huge cavern with its strange signs and sigils carved into the floor. "...how does this work? Does it take a lot of time, or do you just—I don't know—wave your hand over my head and it's done?"

"It doesn't take long," Gabriel told him, "although there is a bit more to it than simply waving my hand over you."

"It took a long time to do in the first place," Kestrel added. "Hours."

"You were there?"

She nodded, grinning. "Of course I was there. I was kind of involved, after all, even though my role in the ritual was pretty much just to stand around and admire all the pretty colors."

"It won't take as long to undo," Gabriel assured them. "Remember, Juliana—when I performed the ritual the first time, I was taking care to hide any traces of Sean's true nature. It is usually easier to reveal than it is to hide." He paused a moment, then looked at Sean. "I thought perhaps, though, that before we begin I might prove to you what I have asked you to take on faith all this time. Would you like to see my true form?"

Sean stared at him. It hadn't occurred to him to doubt Gabriel—too many things had backed up his story for it ever to enter his mind that the whole thing might have been an elaborate hoax. He nodded, smiling. "Not that I don't believe you, but—sure."

Kestrel smiled. "Might want to stand back, then. He's not exactly a pocket-sized dragon." She gently took Sean's arm and steered him backward until both of them were standing in the mouth of the cavern. Sean glanced at her face and saw that she was beaming with love and mischief. He wondered if he'd ever be as comfortable as she was about casually hanging out with dragons.

When they were situated, Gabriel moved into the center of the room. Sean was still getting used to seeing him dressed in faded jeans and leather jacket instead of the fine suit he'd been wearing when they first met. In this new casual outfit he looked even younger than ever, and all the more like Sean's (slightly) older brother than someone who could be his father. It was weird, but Sean didn't mind too much, given that it was by no means the weirdest thing that had happened recently. This one didn't even rate.

"Ready?" Gabriel called. He was looking rather pleased with himself, his eyes twinkling in the soft glow of the cavern's walls.

"Go for it," Sean called back. He felt a little tingle of anticipation run up the back of his neck: this was it. His father was a dragon and now he was going to get to see that fact firsthand.

There was a pause and then the air seemed to shimmer around Gabriel for a moment. His body fuzzed out like an image on a trid with a bad connection, then appeared to dissipate, growing larger and more substantial as it went. His head grew and elongated, his slender human form lengthening and filling out, his smooth skin changing to golden scales. By the time the transformation was complete, Sean was looking up at the massive, golden form of a young Great Western Dragon. He took an involuntary step backward, gasping, and didn't even feel Kestrel grab his arm to steady him.

"*I am pleased to meet you, my son,*" the dragon said. His voice, unlike Gabriel's spoke in Sean's head—the words formed there even though there was no sound. "*I am Gethelwain.*" There was a formality to his words, but Sean could also sense the gentle amusement he'd come to associate with his father's human voice. His eyes, huge

and glowing, were the same shade of violet as his human eyes.

Kestrel gently urged him forward. "Go on," she whispered. "He doesn't bite."

Sean took one look at the dragon's fangs, which were almost as big as he was, and hoped she was right. Even so, though, he wasn't afraid. As he stared up at his father, who had lowered his head down to be closer to Sean's level, the primary emotion he felt was awe. *This is my dad...*

He moved forward until he was standing next to the dragon, only a meter or so separating them. He could feel his father's presence: not just his size, but something else—a feeling in the air that pressed him, danced around him, tantalizingly close but too far away to identify.

"Is something wrong?"

Sean started to answer in his mind, then smiled and shook his head. "No—nothing wrong. I just—feel something."

The dragon tilted his head in an oddly humanlike gesture. *"Felt something?"*

Sean nodded. "Yeah. I can't quite explain it. It's kind of like—pressure. Like there's something weird about the air. It's not a bad feeling, just—weird."

Gethelwain's luminous violet eyes shifted to Kestrel for a moment, then back to Sean. *"Indeed,"* he said at last. *"Then perhaps it is for the best that all of this happened now."*

"Why?" A little thrill of dread flitted across Sean's mind. Was something wrong after all? "Is this bad?"

The dragon chuckled; it was very strange hearing someone chuckle inside your head, Sean decided. *"No, not bad—but it could have been inconvenient for you if it wasn't discovered. You see, I think some of the magic I put on you to conceal your nature is beginning to—slip."* He paused a moment and then almost seemed to smile, though it was

hard to tell in the draconic face. *"What you're feeling is the flow of mana. When the spells are all dropped, you will be fully in tune with the magical forces that suffuse the world."*

"You're probably feeling magic stronger here because Gabriel's in his true form," Kestrel put in, moving closer. "Not that I'd know, but they tell me that when he's not concealing, he simply *radiates* the stuff."

"Juliana is correct," Gethelwain told him. *"The concentration of magical energy here is very high – not just because of me, but because of where we are."*

Sean nodded, and then something occurred to him. "So," he said slowly, "could this be the cause of some of the strange feelings I've had most of my life? Like sometimes knowing when something was going to happen, or what somebody thought of me, or that kind of thing?"

"Very likely," Gethelwain agreed. *"I do not believe a masking of this type had been attempted in a very long time, so we were essentially making things up as we went along. It is entirely possible that the concealment was slightly imperfect, allowing you to experience occasional – episodes."*

"Astral bleed-through," Kestrel offered.

Sean nodded. In truth he was somewhat relieved: before he'd hit puberty he'd always chalked up the occasional weird instances as signs of the magical abilities he knew he would manifest when he grew old enough. After that had been taken from him, he'd begun to wonder if he wasn't simply mildly insane. He'd stopped talking about the instances to his parents and friends and just hoped that they wouldn't do him any lasting harm. Now, several years later, he realized with excitement that his first hypothesis had been correct after all. It had just taken a little longer. "So—" he said, fighting to keep his voice casual, "—can we—you know—do the ritual now?"

Kestrel chuckled. "My, you're anxious, aren't you?"

"Well, wouldn't you be?"

Gethelwain shifted position and raised his head. His mind-voice still held amusement. *"Of course, my son. I will not make you wait any longer."* Without warning, his body shifted and rippled again, and in a couple of seconds the leather-jacketed young man stood before Sean again. "Come. We'll start right now."

Sean stared, still marveling at the speed and fluidity of the transformation. "Uh—yeah," he managed.

Kestrel ruffled his hair. "Don't worry," she assured him. "You'll get used to him. He's pretty strange, all right, but he's great at parties. And you haven't even *seen* his Godzilla collection yet."

In the space of only twenty minutes, the mood in the cavern had changed: where it had been lighthearted, it was now silent and serious—not somber, but just filled with the feeling that something important was about to happen and there would be no place for levity until it was completed.

Sean, nervous, lay on a stone platform in the center of the cavern's huge sigil-carved circle. He'd taken off his jacket and entrusted it to Kestrel to hold for him; she stood off on the sidelines and watched with quiet anticipation and just a little worry showing in her green eyes. The stone of the platform was hard but not cold: Sean was surprised to find that it radiated a slight inner heat that was not unpleasant. His head rested on a thin pillow. Gabriel had instructed him to try not to move any more than necessary.

He watched as his father moved around the circle. Gabriel's lips moved as he whispered things that Sean couldn't hear—he wondered if they were magical words of power or if he was just reminding himself of the order of the ritual. After all, it had been eighteen years since he'd done it last. The thought made him smile in its absurdity: dragons didn't forget their rituals. Did they?

Apparently Gabriel hadn't, though, as he looked over at Sean and smiled. "Are you ready?" he asked softly.

Sean took a deep breath. He felt like he was getting ready to step over the edge of a cliff – but that in doing so he would be finally spreading his wings and taking flight. His mind flitted back to that long-ago time when he'd stood on the edge of the Bainbridge High School gym roof: he'd wanted to fly then. Now he was going to do it – figuratively if not literally. "I'm ready," he said.

Gabriel nodded. He glanced over at Kestrel, back at Sean, and then began pacing the circle. Around him, the cavern's lights dimmed until the only illumination was provided by the glowing sigils and some dim points of color high up on the walls. These latter points flashed rhythmically, slow and steady. In his position Sean had a good view of them: he found them pleasant and mildly hypnotic. He felt the last of his apprehension draining from his body as the air around him began to crackle and hum. His mind drifted.

When he became aware of his surroundings again a few seconds had passed – Gabriel wasn't pacing the circle anymore, but was instead standing next to the stone platform. He looked down at Sean and while he didn't smile, Sean got the impression of anticipation and pleasure in his eyes. *He wants this as much as I do*, Sean realized suddenly.

Gabriel was still whispering. Sean craned his ears to hear, but the syllables made no sense to him. Soft, sibilant, the words of a beautiful but unknown language surrounded him, filling his ears and his mind, relaxing him. He was barely even startled when Gabriel pulled a small knife from his pocket and nicked his own wrist, bringing up a small well of bright red blood that crackled with energy when it contacted the air. Still whispering, Gabriel touched his finger to the blood and extended it,

making a mark on Sean's forehead. The spot where he touched tingled oddly—it was a strange but not unpleasant feeling, not unlike the first tingles that come when your legs are asleep and the blood has begun to flow back to them. Sean watched as Gabriel sealed the tiny nick with a glance, his heart thundering with excitement. This was it—he could tell. Whatever was going to happen was about to occur right now.

Gabriel switched smoothly to English, so smoothly that for a moment Sean wasn't even aware that he could now understand what his father was saying. "My son," Gabriel said softly, raising his hands over Sean's body, "Born in secret, hidden away, kept from your true heritage for your own safety—today you will come into the light. There will be no more hiding, no more misdirection—You will know your true name, and with it will come your power. Are you ready, my son?" The violet eyes burned into his like two flames.

Sean nodded. He could feel his heart pounding in his ears now. "Yes," he whispered.

Gabriel smiled and put his hand on Sean's forehead. "Then it will be done. I give the world—*Gethanian*, son of Gethelwain and Juliana."

As the sound of Sean's true name hit the air, the mild tingling he had felt before became a humming, an electric thrum that coursed through his body, screaming down his nerve passages, suffusing every part of him. He opened his mouth to say something but could not. His body rocked back and forth with the force of the magic that was surging through him: his eyes tingled with a slight burning sensation, his muscles shook, his body seemed to be consumed by a gentle but powerful fire from the inside out. The spot on his forehead where Gabriel had touched it with his blood felt like a current was being run through it. A small moan escaped his lips, but it was not a moan of

pain—rather, it was the sound of Sean’s realization that he had been in a cage all his life and now, finally, he was being set free. Around him he barely saw the lights flicker faster, the colors racing around the cavern, the triumphant look on his father’s face. He felt like he was being reborn.

It was over almost as soon as it had begun. After only a few moments the lights stopped flashing, the tingling feeling settled down to the faintest of tremors, and Sean’s heart quieted to something close to its normal rhythm. He looked up and saw his father smiling down at him. “Is—is it over?” he asked tentatively, not trusting his voice.

Gabriel nodded. His eyes were shining with pride. “It is over, Sean.” Kestrel came over and stood next to him, brushing his damp hair off his forehead with the side of her hand. Her smile was even wider than Gabriel’s, her eyes twinkling.

Slowly Sean sat up. He thought for a moment that he didn’t feel any different and was about to say so, but then he realized that the traces of the tingle were still with him, more as a mental impression than an actual physical feeling. He also realized that he could see faint but colorful nimbuses of energy pulsing around both his parents—especially around Gabriel, whose nimbus extended at least a meter away from him and almost obscured Kestrel’s. His eyes widened. “Are those—auras?”

Gabriel chuckled, and his nimbus—his *aura*—settled down to only slightly brighter than Kestrel’s. “Sorry. I forgot I wasn’t masking fully.”

I can see auras now, Sean thought with wonder. He swung around so his legs hung off the edge of the platform and looked down at his body. He didn’t look any different, at least not the parts he could see. He sighed in relief. “I was afraid I was gonna grow hair or scales or something,” he said. He hadn’t wanted to mention it to

his father, but the fear had been there in the back of his mind all along.

Kestrel grinned. "Sorry, kid. It looks like you're one of the mild ones."

"What does that mean?" Sean looked around for something he could use as a mirror. "Did something change?"

Gabriel nodded. "All dragonkin have some physical characteristic that marks them as different, as I think I told you before. Some are more extreme than others. You were quite lucky, it appears." He raised his hand and a small mirrored surface appeared in it. He held it up to Sean. "Take a look."

Sean was almost afraid to look, afraid of what he might see, but he was too curious not to. He looked at his reflection and gasped, not in fear but in startled pleasure. His "change" was very apparent: his eyes, which had looked like a normal human's eyes in pale ice blue, were now a solid violet the same color as his father's. His pupils had gone from round to slitted like a snake's –

—like a dragon's.

"Wiz..." he whispered with near-reverence. He thought of the burning sensation he'd felt in them, and remembered he'd felt the same in his muscles. He pushed himself off the platform and stood up, looking down at himself. "Is there – anything else?"

"Not obviously," Gabriel told him. "But you've always been an Awakened being – the masking just hid that, not only from the world but from you as well. Now that the masking is gone, you'll be able to use your powers."

"We'll just have to figure out what they are," Kestrel said with a grin.

Sean looked at Gabriel. "Do you – have any idea?" he asked.

Gabriel shook his head. "No, but I have a suspicion. You told me once that you've been particularly good at athletics ever since you were a small child, yes?"

Sean nodded. "Yeah—I've always been good at sports, especially martial arts. Everybody told me I had a knack for it. I thought I was going to be a physad."

"I think you might realize that dream after all," Gabriel told him. "The magic that surrounds you seems to be of a full-body nature, more physical than mental."

Sean could hardly believe what he was hearing. "You mean—?"

"I think so. We'll have to do some testing, and you will no doubt develop other abilities as you grow older."

"Will I learn to cast spells?" Sean asked, smiling in anticipation. This was almost too good to be true: not only did it sound like he was a physical adept after all, but maybe even more? He didn't know what to say.

"Probably." Gabriel was looking pleased. "Let's take our time, Sean. You've got all the time in the world to learn what the future holds for you. If you like you can remain here with me as long as you wish, and I'll do what I can to help you."

"I'd like that a lot," Sean said, nodding. Then he remembered something and frowned.

"What?" Kestrel asked. She handed him back his jacket.

"Is something wrong?" Gabriel tilted his head in question.

"No..." Sean shrugged back into his jacket. "It's just that—I'm supposed to be starting at Georgetown in less than a month."

"Do you still want to?" Kestrel asked.

"That's just it. Like I said before—I don't know. I feel like—everything's changed. Like I'm not even the same person anymore. Do I even *need* to go to college?"

"That's up to you," Gabriel said. "The only change in your abilities mentally is that dragonkin are slightly more intelligent and perceptive than normal humans—I think you might have experienced some of that already, so I doubt you'll see a major change. But still, if there's something you want to do with your life that requires college, you might consider going."

"You don't have to go right away if you don't want to," Kestrel said. "You can take some time off, figure out what you want to do—"

Sean thought about it for a moment, then shook his head. "No...I think I *do* want to go. That is—" He looked at Gabriel hopefully "—that is, I think I want to go to college, but not to Georgetown. Awhile ago, back before the trial, Winterhawk said you might be able to pull a few strings and get me into Dunkelzahn University. Is that true?"

Gabriel looked amused. "I do have a few connections there," he admitted.

"I've got the grades," Sean said hastily. "It wouldn't be like you'd have to sell me to them or anything. It's just that I've already been accepted to Georgetown and—"

"Don't worry," Gabriel assured him. "If that's what you want to do, I'll take care of it. It won't be a problem."

Kestrel tousled his hair. "Can't say I'm unhappy about it—I'm living in DeeCee now, helping Gabriel out with his little project, so it'll be nice to get to see you once in awhile. When we're not off to Azania or somewhere investigating magical carnivorous fungi or something."

Sean laughed. "Sounds good to me. Maybe after I get out of school I can help out too. Somehow I don't think I'm planning to end up as an accountant."

"If you did," Kestrel told him, still chuckling, "you'd be the world's most dangerous accountant. And I don't mean because of your mean double-entry bookkeeping."

Gabriel shook his head and sighed in mock exasperation, but his eyes were twinkling. “You know,” he told Sean softly, “I have been looking forward to this day ever since you were born, and afraid that it would never come. I’m very proud of you, Sean. Never forget that.”

Sean ducked his gaze. “Thanks,” he mumbled, suddenly shy. Then he looked up and met his father’s eyes, remembering everything that had happened in the past few weeks, thinking about how his old life seemed more like a dream than it ever had before. He knew he should go back to Bainbridge and take care of selling the house—he knew now he would never be returning there, except maybe to visit occasionally—but for now it didn’t seem important. What was important was that he was eighteen, he was the son of a dragon—and he had the world there before him, ready for whatever he wanted to challenge himself to do. He felt like he was finally himself after all the years of being someone else without realizing it.

He was Gethanian.

It was a good feeling.