

Shadowrun Nosferatu

Shadowrun Nosferatu Carl Sargent and Marc Gascoign

1

Why the frag is Knight Errant swarming all over the place? Serrin wondered, rubbing his sleepy eyes and squinting into the June sunlight. Uniformed security had sprouted up on the grass around the campus library like mold on a rotting peach. Not breaking stride, the elf headed straight for the group blocking his path to the building's entrance.

"I'm sorry, sir," the security goon said indifferently. "No one is admitted to this area today."

"I've got all my passes," Serrin offered, halfway toward reaching into a jacket pocket for his plastic. His hand froze in mid-air as one look on the goons' faces told him not to put his hand anywhere near any of his pockets. "I'm sorry, sir," the man repeated in a bored tone of voice. "Block C is closed today. Haven't you heard?" "Haven't I heard what?" the elf said irritably. "The Beloff Research Laboratory is being inaugurated at two o'clock this afternoon. By Andrew T. Small in person." The man's voice betrayed just the merest hint of contempt at mention of New York's mayor.

"Great," Serrin muttered, turning on his heel. He wandered off to the nearest canteen, bought a garishly headlined Times from the vending machine, and sat down to read it over a cup of soykaf and a Danish. No one read a cheap tabloid like this for news in 2055, but even its wild sensationalism couldn't distract the elf from his irritation. The grimoires he needed to consult were under the most highly restricted access, and this was the only place in the world that had them. The most he'd been able to get was permission for a week's access to the magical collection

here at Columbia, and now he was going to lose a whole day of it.

His gray eyes meandered over the top of the newspaper to the girl who'd parked herself down across from him. She had the fresh-faced look of the typical university student, but Serrin wondered about the brief flash of something hard in the brown eyes gazing at him from beneath her dark curls. Her datajack was

silvered and her nails were polished to match, but the metallic lip gloss was a little too flash for his liking. Yet he could also see that on her it looked good.

"You a mage?" she asked abruptly. He nodded. "One of the parapsych profs?"

He smiled and shook his head. "No, just doing some research." He reached into a pocket for his cigarettes, offered her one.

"You can't smoke in here," she said, with a little laugh. "We social outcasts have to take it outside." She picked up her cup and headed for the door. Stealing a brief look at her long, smooth legs, Serrin got up and went limping after her.

"What're you working on?" she asked as he sat down beside her on the grass. She'd already lit up, the smoke from her menthol cigarette rising lazily into the already warm morning air.

"Um, magical defense," he said, adding his own plume of smoke to the humid, heavy air. Her eyes narrowed a little and he regretted having given himself away so readily. Not that anyone couldn't have figured out what he was after simply by scoping out the grimoires he'd been consulting in the library.

"Against who?" she asked, leaning back on one arm as she watched his face.

Serrin shrugged. "No one ... Or at least not that I know of. Let's just say I'm a little bit paranoid."

"Then New York's just the place for you. But you're not a native, are you?" She cocked her head and studied him for a moment. "I'd say your accent is West Coast, somewhere north maybe? Seattle?"

Smart girl, he thought, enjoying himself thoroughly. Despite the heat, it was a beautiful summer morning and

she was almost as lovely. The mage barely noticed the passage of time as she gradually drew him out like a fisherman reeling in a difficult catch. The security goons twitched from time to time, perhaps wondering why the elf and the young woman lingered so long doing nothing while the sun rose high in the sky

toward noon and then beyond.

The mayor's official cortege arrived on schedule, even a bit early at five minutes to two. By then, the stars of Columbia's parapsychology department had begun to assemble in front of the new research building on a dais festooned with ribbons of red and silver. The stairs leading up to the new building gleamed as if they'd been scrubbed twenty times during the night.

Serrin and the girl wandered across toward the gathering, which apparently hadn't attracted much of a crowd. Despite the fact that the mayor of the city was making an appearance, the Rotten Apple's media snoops obviously had more exciting stories to cover.

"What's he doing here?" Serrin wondered aloud. "I mean, the mayor can't be too worried about the parapsychology vote."

She grinned. "I've heard that some of the money to construct these new buildings came from foreign sources—including one that's megatight with a vote he does need."

That caught Serrin's interest, and he was just about to ask what she meant when Mayor Small, surrounded by a phalanx of grim-faced bodyguards, emerged from the safety of his Phaeton and advanced toward the applauding academics.

Long afterward, the mage still could not pinpoint what had alerted him. It wasn't his spell lock to detect enemies, which wouldn't have homed in on an assassin whose target was somebody else. Nor was help from any other magic, for Serrin had no spells going. Trying to run spells in the middle of a place crawling with Knight Errants wouldn't have gotten him more than an abrupt but efficient escort straight off the campus.

No, the way it happened was like a smooth tracking shot in slo-mo. The hazy-edged tan whirl of an Arab face,

a gleam of metal, a masked aura, and a rush of adrenaline. The Knight Errant goons must have caught Serrin just as he was casting his spell for a magical barrier, because all at once several of them were pointing their Predators straight at him. It was at that moment other magical energies swam into focus along with his own.

The bullet never did hit Mayor Andrew T. Small, but deflected away as Serrin's spell defeated its course, sending it shattering into a high window of the

new

research building. The sound of breaking glass came slowly, as if from a long way off. Small hit the ground while three of his bodyguards piled on top of him like three linebackers sacking a rookie quarterback. The goons staring at Serrin seemed unable to focus, confusion written all over their faces. The Knight Errant mage who'd stopped them from filling the elf with lead barked an order, and they slowly let their raised weapons fall.

Serrin watched the terrifying, unstoppable line of their aim drop from his own body, then, in a sudden burst, everything resumed normal speed in a great rush and roar of noise. The lone gunman had been overpowered by street samurai among the crowd. A squad of Knight Errant's finest leapt for him, eager to save what little face they could.

Serrin was first bundled to the ground, then hauled to his feet again and forced into a tinted-window limo. A coat was clumsily flung over his head as the car sped away. The elf huddled in his seat, barely breathing, barely moving. All he could do was hope and pray that his reflexes hadn't gone and got him into deep and serious drek.

"I apologize for any rough treatment, Mr. Shamandar," the man in the sharp suit told Serrin. "It's just that we were trying to optimize your debriefing. You'll appreciate the need for a full security-implication assessment of events."

Yeah, sure, Serrin thought Warily. I stop the mayor of New York from getting smoked and all I get for my trouble is eighteen hours of nonstop interrogation. I don't

even know where I am. He crossed his arms and gave the nameless suit his best "Well, what now?" look.

"I am authorized to make you a discretionary payment on behalf of the mayoral office as a reward for your public-spirited actions," the suit said as he produced a credstick with the imprint of City Hall. As the man handed it over to Serrin, he gave the elf one of his oiliest smiles.

Serrin was slightly mollified. Just how much more mollified he was prepared to

get depended on the size of the reward. And, well, ten thousand nuyen ought to buy a fair to middling degree of mollification.

"We do not believe there's any risk to you of reprisal," the suit continued after Serrin had examined the stick. "The department is confident that we're dealing with a lone assassin."

Serrin almost laughed. With all the powerful magic that had obviously been masking the gunman, he'd been acting alone about as much as had William Springer, the man who'd assassinated President Garrety and never been caught. But that was apparently what the mayor's office—and Knight Errant—wanted him to believe, so he pretended to buy it.

"I'm just glad to have been of help," Serrin said blandly. Pocketing the credstick, he turned to leave the blindingly lit, windowless interrogation room. Flanking him now on either side were two Knight Errant trolls, each one holding one of his arms as they marched him to the limo parked in front of the security installation. Beside it, a dark-haired girl was arguing with a few more Knight Errants who were about to manhandle her off the premises. It was the same girl he'd met the day before, sun gleaming off the silver jacks in her temples even at this hour of the morning. Jerking his arms free of his burly escorts, the elf rushed forward to intervene.

"Hey, it's chill!" he said as one of the Errants poked her in the ribs with a nasty-looking Predator. "I mean, we were just leaving anyway."

"Let's go," she said simply and opened the door of her Jackrabbit. Something told him just to get in and let himself be driven away. Her smaller car simply looked more human, more inviting, than the corporate limo. It was only later that Serrin realized how little a night without sleep had done for his instincts.

"The vidcasts didn't get your face," she said when they were settled into her apartment somewhere in suburban New Jersey. "I think you got lucky, Serrin Shamandar. I doubt the Damascus League got enough of an ID to come after you—even if they wanted to, which isn't my guess they don't."

"Damascus League?" What in slot did they have to do with this?

"That's the word on the street. Maybe Small's been getting too chummy with the Jewish vote lately. Standard hazard for a mayor of New York."

Serrin tried to remember what had happened in those split seconds in front of the beribboned dais. Through the blur of images, he realized he'd forgotten something else.

"Look, I'm really sorry," he said sheepishly. "I can't even remember your name. They didn't let me sleep and I guess my brain's temporarily on hold," he apologized.

"Julia. Julia Richards," she smiled, seeming not at all offended.

"Uh, why did you come to pick me up? I mean, what's it to you?"

"You're very welcome," she said tartly, then turned and flounced away into the little cubbyhole of a kitchen, from which the pungent aroma of coffee soon announced that it wasn't soy, but the real thing. Still feeling churlish, Serrin got up to follow, grimacing at the familiar pain stabbing all the way down his damaged leg. Turning, she saw the look and her irritation changed immediately to concern.

"Forgive me," he said. "My manners seem to have gotten as rusty as my brain. I appreciate your turning up. But you can't blame me for wondering why."

She filled two cups and set them a tray, which he gallantly took from her. Accompanying the coffee were bagels, and Serrin thought the smoked salmon and cream cheese slathered over them might be as real as the coffee.

"Well, it's not that often that I get to meet the man who saves the mayor of New York from being assassinated," she said teasingly. "If that didn't make me interested in you, I don't know what would. I also wondered what kind of person could see something Knight Errant couldn't. I figured you must be a real wizard. Someone special." Her tongue flicked across her perfect lips. "That good enough for you?"

Serrin couldn't reply for a large mouthful of chewy bagel. Swallowing it with a hefty gulp he managed to mumble something about not being special at all.

"Maybe ... maybe not," she said lightly. "Where are you staying?"

"The Grand Hudson," he told her. Julia's eyes widened a little at the mention of such an expensive hotel.

"Why not lay low here for a few days? Just in case. Going back to Columbia might not be a good idea just now. I could get what you need from the library. I've got all the necessary passes and I know some of the librarians."

Sensation ran down his spine, part-thrill, part-fearful distrust. Everything had been happening so fast, so out of the blue. He was too exhausted to stop and think. Julia Richards was young and pretty and he was probably safer here in the wilds of suburbia than back in Manhattan. Anyway, what did he have to lose? Not much, he knew. Doing things because there wasn't much to lose had been Serrin's modus vivendi for some time now. It made decisions so much easier. True, he was a shadowrunner, with the same well-honed instincts for danger and survival as any other of his kind. But even a veteran runner and elven mage could make mistakes when suffering the effects of extreme fatigue.

"Uh, you sure?" She nodded; no pressure. "Well, uh, that would be great," Serrin said. Then quickly added,

"I've only got a few more days in New York." He was trying to let her know he wouldn't become a burden, but also wanted to make sure she understood he didn't stay anywhere too long. He tried his best to stifle a yawn, and failed wretchedly.

"What you need now is some rest," Julia said, giving him another of those smiles. "The spare room's that way and to your left," she told him.

Serrin bid her good night, even though it was only ten o'clock in the morning, then made his way toward the back bedroom, limping even more than usual. The little room was dark and deliciously cool, furnished simply with a bed, a bedstand, and a chair. Not even bothering to remove his clothes or his boots, Serrin sank gratefully onto the bed, punching the pillow up under his head just the way he liked it. He fell asleep almost instantly, and didn't wake until five that afternoon—and only then because Julia shook him gently awake to the sight

of more freshly brewed coffee on the bedside table. He was halfway through his first cup when she slipped into the bed beside him. Real coffee or not, the other half-cup was instantly forgotten.

Serrin stayed for three days. By day Julia was away from the apartment, returning later with the books he wanted, having somehow won permission to take them out overnight. At night they drove back into town, wandering mostly around the East Riverside neighborhood, where she took him to the Metropolitan Opera and to restaurants where they dined well and expensively. She always paid her half of the tab, a fact that should have made Serrin wonder, but didn't.

Meanwhile they talked as endlessly as on that first day in the morning sun outside the library. In the course of their conversations Julia confided that she dabbled in writing and was an aspiring actress. From what she described, he made her as one of those eternal hopefuls hanging round the fringes of the arts, doomed to disappointment like most of the rest.

The only thing that seemed other than wholly harmless about Julia Richards was her collection of books on the

occult. Possessions, hauntings, apparitions, all the standard themes plus a good few more. She'd taken some courses in parapsych, and showed him the working version of a ghost tale she was writing. Surprised to find it so readable and well done, Serrin thought the girl had an old-fashioned knack for creating scenes with the disturbing hint of unseen, unknown, unknowable presences lurking just on the edge of the reader's perception.

"This interest in ghosts ... You intending to hunt them professionally?" he asked, more jesting than serious.

"Oh, just an old hobby," she said, waving her hand to show how minor was its importance, and left it at that.

But from that time on Serrin felt that everything changed. It wasn't anything in particular that was different. There were no scenes, no major misunderstandings,, just a shift in mood, in tone. Even when they made love, he knew her heart wasn't in it. Though he tried to paper over the subtle rift between them with friendly conversation, the mage grew uneasy.

"I think I'd better be heading back home," he said at last, thinking of the Chinese proverb that both guests and fish stink after three days. If he left

tonight, he'd avoid that fourth day. "It looks like I'm done with my research, which I couldn't have finished without your help. I won't forget it." He was scrupulously trying not to get too personal.

"Yes, well, it's been fun having you here," Julia replied, sounding as if she genuinely meant it. Serrin was confused, unsure of what deeper emotions might be roiling beneath the surface. He kept the rest of his goodbye short, trying hard to avoid her eyes.

She offered him a ride to the airport, but he declined. A lift to the library, however, he did accept, because he still needed to follow up on one or two final points before returning to Seattle.

"Thanks again," he said, climbing out of the car on a street near the library. "And don't forget. You've got my number. If you ever need anything, don't hesitate. Call any time."

Julia looked away for the merest split-second and he wondered what on earth he had done wrong now. "Sorry,"

was all she said, before jerking the car out of neutral and pulling off. He shook his head, picked up his carrying case, and headed toward the library.

Two hours later he was just finished copying out some of the material he'd come for when he heard the announcement for closing time. After hurriedly checking the flight schedules on one of the library computers, he decided on the midnight shuttle, which would give him time for a decent dinner somewhere downtown. He didn't feel like pressing his luck in Chinatown, so he chose a Thai place off Times Square. Hell, he thought with amusement, maybe I could tap the shoulder of one of those Knight Errant slags who hang around down there and get him to pick up the tab.

Within five minutes of sitting down at his table in Little Home Thai, Serrin suddenly felt like everyone in the place was watching him. Glancing around furtively, he saw two men in suits appear in the doorway, press a wad into the head waiter's hand, and stride across to his table. He almost panicked, but forced himself to reason that these couldn't possibly be a couple of avenging assassins. You don't get iced for preventing someone from being killed, he told

himself. Or do you? At least these two didn't look like Arabs ...

"Mr. Shamandar," one of them said with a heavy dose of fake sincerity as he sat down uninvited at the table. "I'm Dan McEwan of the Times and this is my cameraman, Randy Simmons." Simmons, grinning like an embarrassed hyena with an outdated mustache, nodded a greeting and hefted a camera from around his neck. "We'd really like to take some pictures for a feature on you while I just ask a few questions. We'll try not to interrupt your meal at all."

Serrin was about to growl, "Frag off," then realized he wanted more in the way of explanation. "What's this about anyway?"

"Why, your act of heroism, of course," McEwan said, almost leaving a visible trail of slime on the carpet. "The whole city is still buzzing with it, even after three days. You know, the mystery mage with the haunted eyes?"

The vidcasts didn't get your face, Julia's voice said at

the back of his mind. In panic he shielded his face with a red napkin and ran for the door. Haunted eyes, my ass, he thought.

"Just get me out of here!" he snarled to the troll driver as he leapt into the back of a yellow cab two minutes later. By now, it seemed like at least a dozen photographers and media reptiles had appeared on the scene. He tried hard not to think about how foolish he must look with the sweaty, ragged remnants of a paper napkin pasted onto various parts of his face. "JFK. Take some detours. Don't worry about the meter."

"I love people who say that kinda stuff, chummer," the troll grinned, then shot off like a devil rat chipped up on

BTL.

There didn't seem to be anyone waiting for Serrin at the airport when they arrived, but he guessed that somewhere there had to be a hungry stringer roaming around looking for him, just in case. A quick check of the flight board told him there wouldn't be another domestic flight going out for another thirty-five minutes. And nothing to Seattle for two hours.

"What's the first plane out of town?" he snapped at the woman behind the British Airways desk.

She gave him a startled look and said, "What? Anywhere!"

"You scan it, lady," he said, looking around.

"You in some kind of trouble?"

"I'm not going to hurt you," Serrin said wearily, his eyes tracking her hand as it ducked under the desk, probably reaching for the security button. Then he noticed the tabloid sitting there.

"I'm just trying to escape the reporters," he said, pointing to his face plastered all over the cover. She looked at the picture, then back at him, her eyes widening and her jaw dropping open.

"Frankfurt or Cape Town. Ten minutes," she said as he swiped her Newsday up for a better look. Julia had somehow managed to take some photographs of him seated on her little balcony, relaxed and almost smiling. One of the pics had suffered the attentions of a talented image transformer; the sleazy tabloid apparently had no scruples

about polishing up the drek it published. Serrin Shaman-dar might not be looking too good, but the picture was still recognizable.

All his shadowrunner's instincts were screaming that it was time to get out of town and stay out until the whole thing died down some. He just wished he'd brought along his phony ID so that he could have reserved a ticket for Cape Town as himself and then actually made for Germany under the false name.

"Frankfurt, I think." From there maybe he'd make another hop on to Heathrow, where he'd be able to look up some of his Brit friends; it was certainly a more inviting prospect than a visit to the Azanian city. "Can you get me out of here in time?" he pleaded.

"If you run like crazy, you might just make it. The last call just went out; gate seventeen."

"Lady, I can run like crazy when I need to, trust me." He flung her the City Hall credstick and dumped his suitcase on the conveyor belt. Then he was off, head down, sprinting for the departure gate. Halfway there, he almost tripped over a light metal briefcase, which went spinning away. He glanced up at its owner, an iron-faced man with short hair as gray as his own and a triangular scar on the left side of his chin. Shades concealed cybereyes. Serrin mumbled an apology and something about a terrible hurry, but left the task of retrieving the case to its owner as he continued his dash for the boarding gate. Reaching the gate, fumbling for his passport, the elf had no way of knowing that the man's cybereyes were equipped with a state-of-the-art cyberoptic portacam, which had already shot thirty frames of him.

Serrin just made it to the last boarding bus. As it crossed the tarmac he gazed out over the gray and distant skyline; the coming rain promised to cool New York's hellish humidity to within tolerable limits long enough for the city's denizens to sleep. He stepped into the plane, found his seat, and sank back against the plush upholstery, unrolling the tabloid as furtively as if it was pornography.

Julia of the dark eyes and lovely smile had used just about everything he'd ever said to her, and she'd done her

homework too. No wonder she'd become uneasy toward the end. The scoop had almost everything: his murdered parents, the leg shattered during his stint with Renraku, the Atlantean scam, even the story of how he and Geraint and Francesca had helped solve the gruesome murders in London last year. It was seamlessly stitched together, and what must have gotten her a really fat bonus was the personal poop. No wonder everyone had been staring at him in that restaurant. The media had given the attempted assassination of Mayor Small a barrage of coverage, but Serrin hadn't been watching much trid and so hadn't a clue what else anybody might have said about him by now. But certainly not this intimate, private stuff. Maybe he should be grateful to the tabloid's editors for giving their hungry readers a feast to last them at least until the next three-day wonder showed up. Who knew what they'd do if deprived for too long?

Reading on, he was also grateful she'd spared the revelation of any bedroom secrets ... then, oh drek\ Wrong again. He just hadn't read far enough. Serrin felt a desperate and wretched sadness, not because the story was savage or brutal, a hatchet job or full of complete lies— but because it wasn't. Maybe he'd have found some consolation in cursing her as a lying slitch. But even that she'd stolen from him.

In his impotence Serrin wanted to tear the pages into a million tiny pieces and throw them out the window of the plane. Instead he stuffed the tabloid roughly into his jacket pocket, then wearily sank back against the seat to

try
and get some sleep.

He hit Frankfurt at ten in the morning, local time, jet-lagged as always after a continental hop, even a short one. Copies of Newsday seemed to be everywhere in the terminal, endless racks of red-edged portraits mocking his attempts at escape. In his over-excited state, the elf decided to keep on moving.

He took a cab to the rail station, which was alive with travelers, all of whom seemed to be either eating or else thinking about it. He saw people ordering croissants stuffed with every filling imaginable, gulping down soykaf and ordering rolls oozing with schinken, pickles, pink beef sizzling fetidly in pools of fat, and salads bathed in mayonnaise thicker than a troll's arm. Such a diet didn't seem to produce many thin Germans, and Serrin worried that his tall elf slenderness would make him too conspicuous. About the best he could do was pull his collar up around his neck and duck his head down into it while he stood waiting in the ticket queue. So preoccupied was he with trying to hide his face that it wasn't until he was almost to the front of the line that Serrin realized he had no idea what would be his destination. Frantically, he looked up at the huge, ever-changing indicator beneath the concourse clock, an enormous thing of iron and brass.

The first train showing was for Karlsruhe. Studying the string of destinations along the way, Serrin settled, for no particular reason, on Heidelberg. He asked the clerk for a one-way ticket—first class again, for the isolation and anonymity—and headed for the indicated platform.

Crusher 495 was one of the most popular bars in the Barrens, the poorest, most godforsaken district in the

whole urban sprawl that was Seattle. The troll finished his soda water and chuckled over the magazine again, flicking it to and fro in his huge hands. The bar stool beside him creaked as a grizzled, gray-haired ork, weary from another day working the roads, parked his butt down next to him.

"Hey, Ganzer. How ya doin'?" the troll said. "Not too bad, Tom. Same as always. Janus chummer, get me a beer, will ya? Whatcha got there?" The ork turned Tom's magazine over to take in the cover.

"Slot me if that isn't Serrin," he said, looking up with an expression of puzzlement. "Looks like he got some facial work done since we last saw 'im."

"Not likely," Tom said slowly. "Serrin never wanted any metal in the meat. Wouldn't go anywhere near a scalpel. Why would he change now?"

The ork drained half his glass and said nothing. It wasn't tactful to talk much about metal in the meat to Tom. It might only get the troll sermonizing again.

"He saved the mayor of the Rotten Apple from getting shot," Tom said. He knew Ganzer couldn't read.

"That so? Well, as the tortoise said to the army helmet, guess we all make mistakes ... But, frag, we haven't seen Serrin in-what? Five years?"

"Five years and two months," the troll said slowly. "I don't forget."

Ganzer wasn't in the mood for tales of Tom's old shadowrunning days right now. The stories always seemed to end up with the interminable saga of how the troll quit boozing for good, and the ork didn't want to hear about temperance. He wanted a bellyful of beer. Ganzer decided it was a better idea to change the subject. "Say, I hear you're a real hero over in the Jungles these days."

Tom shrugged, but couldn't help a smile to think that the lot of some of the squatters down there might actually improve. "Yeah, well, getting the mayor to throw some grant money their way made him look good too. Now that the detox has gotten the soil up to growing crops acceptable for animal feed, some of those squatters can start

earning enough money to buy themselves somethin' to

eat."

Tom gazed reflectively around the dingy bar, with its boarded-up windows, scarred furniture, and murky atmosphere. The ceiling might once have been white, but smoke from an untold number of cigarettes had long ago turned it a brown only a millennium of sunshine could have achieved—if sunlight had ever found its way in here. The Crusher was still enough of a meeting-place for orks and trolls

to get hit by Humanis policlubbers now and then, though it had been six months since the last firebomb attack by the anti-metahumans. Tom knew about every one of the attacks, since he always got called in to help out afterward. A Bear shaman was often the best many folks too poor for medical insurance could

hope for.

A heavy hand slapped him on the back, and he turned to see another ork, Denzer, smiling down at him. The joke that went around the Crusher was that Denzer was a troll stitched into an ork's skin, and he was almost big enough for it to be true. He flicked the greasy black hair out of his eyes, and Tom gave him a friendly growl.

"Buy you a soda water, Tom? Hey, the mayor's running around like he just won the next election. Nice work,

chummer."

The troll smiled again and let himself feel good about it all. No matter how wretched were the Redmond Barrens, it was his home and he was doing what he could to put something back into it after all those years of being on the take.

He looked around once more at the hard-worked and care-worn faces. Seven years ago, he'd have killed anyone in here for a few hundred nuyen. Now, what was left of him loved these people. From the Plastic Jungles, with their legacy of chemical pollutants all the way down to the street markets of the Bargain Basement. And, down in the Jungles, the seed money grant his group had been able to extract from Redmond's mayor, Jeffrey Gasston, was going to make a real difference to thousands of them. I owe you for all that, chummer, he said silently to the face on the magazine cover. Whatever did happen to you?

* * *

He'd chosen Heidelberg almost randomly. Now, after two days, Serrin was beginning to think the choice had been inspired. The city was quiet, even now, in the tourist season, and looked as though it had barely changed in more than a century. Small white boats still drifted lazily down the Neckar, and people still shopped at the street market where he'd bought a sample of neckarfroschen, one of those hand-made green ceramic frogs, a curious, goblin-like creature with

a quizzical expression on its face. The market—with its jars of homemade preserves, stalls of feathered hats and drinking steins, fish and fruit and schinken, the ever-present dried ham that was obviously a local specialty—was as straight out of the nineteenth century as the rest of the town.

Wandering the streets, Serrin stopped on his way up the narrow one leading to the hilltop castle and gazed idly into the window of a confectionery shop. Some colorful little boxes caught his eye and he bought one, only to find a distressingly heart-shaped chocolate biscuit inside. Accompanying it was a tiny piece of paper, which said that these were "Student's Kisses," sweets sent by one student to a potential sweetheart whose chaperone prevented any more direct expression of ardor.

We've come a long way, Serrin thought bitterly. Nowadays, your sweetheart boffs your brains out for three days, then sells you to the tabloids. He turned left into the Marketplatz and idled on to the Haupstrasse, hunting coffee and fresh-squeezed juice in one of the innumerable cafes.

Maybe I should visit the university, he thought idly. Finish some of that work on masking techniques I was trying to do at Columbia. Oh, what the hell, I've had enough work for a while. Let's go see what Frederick of Bohemia left us on top of that hill.

Kristen ran like crazy away from the multi-colored markets and stalls of Strand Street to disappear into the crowds of Lower Adderley, where she picked her way toward Heerengracht and the waterfront with her scavenger's prize. Today she'd gotten lucky, coming upon the

scene just as the police surprised the steamers in the act of grabbing the wallet from a man they had doubled up on the ground.

Kristen wasn't given to thieving, the police were too hard on that, but she knew when something could be had for nothing. While the police took up the chase in the opposite direction and a couple of bystanders bent down trying to help the groaning victim, she'd gone straight for the shoulder bag still lying on the ground where it must have gotten flung in the scuffle. Snatching it up, clutching it tightly to her chest, she was sure nobody had seen her as she made like a devil rat for the Sisulu Markets. But with her height and headful of tight curls, Kristen wouldn't really feel safe until she got there. All she could do was pray that the effects of her morning's dagga weren't too obvious;

the weed had been strong, flighty, brightly mellow.

The builders had modeled it on San Francisco and Sydney, or so they'd said when developing the derelict industrial wasteland of Cape Town's waterfront. And maybe it hadn't turned out too badly after all. The waterfront was her home, one of the few places in all of the Confederated Azanian Nations where you really weren't likely to get shot just for being the wrong skin color, religion, or meta-type. For Kristen, being half-Xhosa, half-Caucasian, that meant a lot. Down here, all she had to worry about was racial prejudice, and not murderous intent.

She gazed idly out at the huge rusting hulk of the oil tanker beached permanently on the sands of the shallow coastline. Some twenty thousand people lived in the gutted remains of that ship, a ragged army of homeless. Many of them labored on the breaking crews that went out each day to work over the junked ships towed into the bay, huge derelicts whose faceless owners had sold them for scrap to the city council. Using nothing more sophisticated than hammers, the tanker people broke their backs pounding up those hulks for the metal. They got peanuts for the scrap—just enough to subsist—while the city fathers reckoned the price they paid for the abandoned ships cheap if it kept twenty thousand social misfits from

preying on the tourists. Kristen knew one or two of the wreckers, but still hadn't fallen so low herself.

Kristen grinned as she sat down with some kaf and a plate of blatjang, picking at the chicken with one hand while going through the bag with the other. Eighty UCAS dollars, fives and small change; the man must have been using it for small purchases in the markets. No doubt he'd left his plastic and most of his documents back in the hotel security box. Standard tourist precaution, she thought. But eighty bucks suited her just fine. It would feed her for weeks, even buy her a hotel bed. Better still, she could also get high on it for a month.

She looked around to see if anyone was watching, if it would be safe to leave the bag and leave. Uncertain, she pretended to be searching for something, a recalcitrant lip gloss maybe, in its obscured depths. The first thing she pulled out was a magazine, which she dropped carelessly onto the table, and had just begun to fish around in the bottom of the bag when the picture on the magazine's cover caught her attention.

Kristen suddenly felt very cold in the seaside warmth, an unusually balmy, twenty degrees Celsius on this winter day. She wasn't acquainted with more

than

a handful of elves—dangerous, proud-crazy Zulus come to bad times in this city—people she knew well to avoid, with their doubled contempt for her mixed race. She had never seen anyone like this elf in her life, of that she was sure.

But the image seized her, and wouldn't let go. She flicked the tabloid's pages, saw him seated smiling in the sunshine, then turned the magazine sideways to look at him another way. She knew she'd never seen the bugger. She was also certain she'd known him all her life.

Maybe she'd seen him on a movie poster or on a plug-ger for a rock concert, or maybe on a police poster or something ... Frag it, she thought, I wish I could bloody well read. Who is he?

As if on cue, the Javanese man rounded the corner of the waterfront, the white of his flowing clothes drifting in the breeze like the clouds scudding toward Table Mountain, and gave her a cheery wave of the hand. She gestured him over, waving the magazine rather foolishly above her head.

"Nasrah, you want to earn a few bucks?" she asked brightly. He raised his eyebrows and smiled.

"You trying to sell me something again, Kristen?" "No, all I want is for you to read to me." He gave her a slightly sideways glance, drew a pair of battered glasses from a pocket, and barely had them perched on his nose before she almost pushed the magazine straight into his chest.

"Here. Start here. Tell me about him."

The wine shop was open late.

Serrin remembered that his Welsh nobleman friend, Geraint, had told him that if ever in Germany, he should try to find eiswein, the extraordinary yellow wine made from grapes rotted on the vine after the first frost had crystallized their liquid into a supremely concentrated fermentation. He took the bottle back to his hotel room, which suddenly filled with the scent of fruits and flowers the moment he uncorked it. Serrin poured himself a glass, then raised the cold wine to his lips and tasted the delicious sweetness as the nectar slid down his throat as smoothly as water dripping from an icicle. He was astonished; nothing he'd ever known had tasted like this. One glass would never be enough.

He woke with a start just after midnight, knocking the empty bottle away as he stretched his arms and yawned wide enough to almost crack his jaw. Hungry now, and sure he would need some exercise before being able to sleep again, he used his night key to let himself out onto the street, passing by the church, making his way through the scattered university buildings toward the bars, where he would still be able to find food at this hour.

The tiny alleyways around the university were deserted, barely lit. Suddenly, panic gripped him as his spell lock screamed with its knowledge. Looking around wildly, the elf was sure only a threat to his life could set off such a warning. He threw up a barrier spell just as the

first heavy dart struck the wall behind him with a brutal crunching sound.

A red spot had also appeared on his chest, an IR rangefinder, and Serrin risked an instant of astral perception to find its source. High on the roofs above he glimpsed a second figure, shadowy and silent, melting out of the shadows to his left. He slipped out of astral in double-quick time and decided to try to take out one of the fraggers with some heavy hitting. No sense in doing things by halves.

As he cast the spell, hellfire lit up the roofs above and a curtain of flame roared around the gunman, ruining his second shot. The man screamed and toppled, his burning body hitting the cobbled streets with a ghastly thud. The rifle that fell from his hands clattered along the street, and a cascade of ammunition also rattled down the rooftops and onto the street. Serrin heard voices in the distance and someone shouting, "Polizei! Bitte, polizei!" The second man was a meter away from him. Serrin could see hand razors snaking from his fingers, discolored blades glittering even in the faint light around him. Jerking himself backward, he found himself suddenly backed up against a wall.

The man grinned. He was almost anonymous in his long, shapeless coat, and Serrin guessed there must be cybereyes under his shades. There was a grim appropriateness about his hunting hat, but another feature clawed at something in Serrin's memory: a triangular scar stamped into his chin. He knew he'd seen it somewhere before, but had no time to wonder where.

The razor claws ripped the mage's arm just as Serrin hit his assailant with a mana bolt, pushing hard with the force of it at the man's psyche and being. His attacker grunted and doubled over as if someone had just kicked him in the guts, but Serrin knew the force he'd put into the spell should have done a lot more than that. He leapt past the man and ran like the wind for the Hauptstrasse. Just as he was about to round the corner, the sound of running feet coming at him from the front made the elf halt and back into a shadowed dotirway to cast an invisibility spell. Despite the danger and the adrenaline pumping

through his veins, Serrin felt weak and drowsy, a sign that he was burning up far too much magical energy. Half a dozen drunken students teemed past him, advancing on where Serrin had just left his assailant.

Waiting frantically for them to pass, he noticed something small and metallic gleaming faintly on the ground. He picked it up, thinking he'd dropped it. Then came the wail of sirens from the west of the town, and Serrin had to wait for them to pass before tottering unsteadily back to his hotel. His arm stung like crazy, although there was little blood on his jacket. The wound was barely a scratch. Spirits, he thought, the bastard poisoned me!

He barely made it back to his room, he couldn't call BuMoNa, because he hadn't bought any health care coverage upon arriving. Neither did he want to call the German police, who were sure to wonder about poisoned wounds and blazing bodies in the streets of peaceful Heidelberg. The elf cut a strip of cloth from a spare shirt and bound his left arm with a tourniquet so tight the arm was white within seconds. Then he stuffed everything he could into his suitcase and called a cab. He knew this was crazy, that he was taking an absurd chance with his life, but with the venom making him unable to think straight, his actions were born out of sweating, pallorous fear.

"Hauptbahnhof, danke," Serrin managed to say to the taxi driver, waving enough nuyen in the man's face to buy himself salvation from the sirens, or so he hoped. He got lucky; the ork just grunted, and the car began to slip quietly along the riverside, left through the Bismarck Platz and west into Bergheimerstrasse, leaving the flash of blue lights behind.

Arriving at the train station, Serrin stumbled out of the cab, hoping the driver would take him for just another drunken tourist. Dragging one foot after another, he approached the big board showing the train schedules, and studied it briefly before slotting his credstick into the automatic ticket dispenser. His brain raced: Get the Essen express, change at Mainz for Frankfurt or go through to Bonn. Buy a ticket for Essen in case the police track me. Get off halfway there. The machine must have exhausted

its misanthropy for the day because it finally coughed up his ticket without any of the usual harassment.

Serrin just barely managed to get into the first class car before finally passing out. The wound burned like fire and his throat was dry as dust. Horribly, he felt his muscles stiffening, his breath ragged and gasping. Spirits, he thought, I'm having a seizure. They stuck me with some fragging paralyzing neurotoxic or something. He tried to get to the door of the car and shout for help, realizing too late that death wasn't the smartest way of avoiding the German police, but his leaden limbs refused to obey his brain and he slumped helplessly into the corner seat. His eyes rolled backward in his head and he collapsed.

Serrin was awakened by the conductor as the express pulled out of Koblenz. His arm throbbed and his mouth felt like a parakeet had been living in it, but his heartbeat seemed normal and the only other lingering symptom of the attack was a tight, knotted stiffness in the muscles of his arms and legs. While fumbling in his pockets for the ticket, Serrin's hand rattled something metal and he hurriedly coughed to cover up the sound. Once the conductor finished looking at the ticket as if it were something he'd been unlucky enough to step in, the elf waited for the man to move on up the aisle before pulling the metal object from his pocket. It was a cartridge, the kind used for medical injections. Empty now.

Trank shot, Serrin thought. Odd that I don't remember picking it up, but it explains why I only feel as stiff as hell. Those claws must have been full of tranquilizer too. That means they wanted me alive.

Though the thought should have been reassuring, Serrin found it even more terrifying than someone wanting him dead.

He stared wretchedly at the oncoming glare of the glittering Rhine-Ruhr megaplex and wondered who the hell could be after him. His head swam with images from dozens of Z-grade movies of killers on trains, but his spell lock wasn't giving him any warnings of immediate danger. He tried to figure out what someone might now expect him to do, to second-guess anyone trying to track him. With a start, he remembered the scarred man from JFK and realized that the hit must have been ordered while he was still in New York; from there they'd followed him to Heidelberg. That had taken some doing,

surely; tracing him to Frankfurt would have been easy, but on to the university city?

It has to be a magician, he thought. Someone who could trace me astrally. A magician who wants me alive. The thought hit him like an ice-cold shower.

He got off the train at Bonn and took a taxi directly to the airport. Pushing coins desperately into one of the battery of concourse telecoms, he cursed the broken slot that should have taken a credstick for the call. The number he called was in the heart of London.

"Yeah?" The screen showed the face of a sleepy blonde rubbing her face and peering back at her caller's gaunt visage. She didn't like the look of him at all.

"Is Geraint there?" he pleaded.

"Hey, whoever you are, term, it's five in the morning and--"

"It's urgent. Tell him it's Serrin."

"He's not here," she said smugly. "He's in Hong Kong on business. He'll be back in two days. Can I take a message?"

"I'll call back," the elf said curtly and hit the Disconnect. London was close, and a friend who was a member of the House of Lords might be worth having. But for the moment he was still alone and twitching in the middle of the night in an unfamiliar airport thousands of miles and an ocean away from home. His hands were shaking even worse than usual. No one seemed to pay him the least attention, however. Looking around, Serrin saw the standard fare of all airports at five in the morning: the beginnings of the business commuter traffic

headed for Brussels or Strasbourg; jilted lovers red-eyed and morose;
sleepless
and angry people denied their flights by some incompetent engineer or
air-traffic controller; drunks and chipheads laid out on benches airport
security hadn't yet gotten around to cleaning up. Dimly, Serrin remembered
some
phrase from an English poet: Isn't life a terrible thing, thank God? But God,
if
he exists, couldn't have created airports, the elf thought glumly. Drek, I
should just get on the next plane back to UCAS, to anywhere they can take me.
So
what if

what somebody's probably expecting me to do? What other choice have I got?

He approached the British Airways desk, getting ready for his standard
"first
plane home" spiel. He was getting good at it by now. But even as the thought
came, Serrin felt the beginnings of a smile tugging at his lips. Seattle!
Home-of sorts.

He pushed his suitcase onto the conveyor at a gesture from the girl yawning
behind the desk.

"Mr. Shamandar," she said suddenly, while routinely checking his documents.
"There's a message for you. It was delivered a couple of hours ago—I nearly
forgot."

He took the envelope, then made a hash of trying to open it neatly with his
shaking hands, almost tearing the single sheet of white paper as he pulled it
out.

Mr. Shamandar, it read, you would find it profitable to investigate the
identity of the instigator of your meeting with a certain party this evening.
Especially if you studied others in the same position.

It was written in Sperethiel, the elven tongue. Which gave his guts another
quick loop-the-loop. "Who gave you this?" he demanded gruffly. "I'm sorry but
I
don't know," the girl replied, stifling another yawn with her elegantly
manicured hands. "I wasn't on the desk at the time. You'd have to ask Frieda,
but she won't be back on duty until tomorrow night—and your plane is boarding
in
fifteen minutes."

As he trudged to the departure gate, trembling hands groping for his ID,
Serrin felt like a pawn in the midst of some dangerous cat-and-mouse game. In
itself that wasn't so unusual. He'd already been scragged royally by life
enough
times before, but this had a certain starkness to it that he was beginning
not
to like at all.

Slot, he thought, I'm just getting old, that's all. The elf ran his fingers through his short graying hair and wondered what kind of protection he could buy once he got back to Seattle.

Squinting at the magnificent bloody sunset and the black clouds whipping in from the Atlantic, Kristen stretched her legs and pulled the wrap tighter about her

shoulders against the rapidly cooling air. She was happy with life right now: dollars in her pocket and dagga and drink in her bag, a smile spreading over her face at the thought of dancing at Indra's all night. This couldn't last, of course, it never did; but her luck tended to come in runs and maybe the mugged tourist's bag was the start of such a run.

She meandered down Main as the dull glow of the streetlights grew into a glare, past the plastic and chrome tourist traps of Vesperdene and into the warren of streets between Main and High. The first few big drops of rain sloshed against the sidewalk, promising Cape Town's usual evening drenching. All day Table Mountain had been wearing a shroud of hazy clouds that must have concealed the fifty-kilometer view it offered from its peak on a clear day. Hissing at the rain, she ducked into one of the malls, a whirring blur of neon, trid, video, and colorful humanity.

To her dismay, she walked straight into some lekker-boys laughing their way out of a bar. Cheaply dressed and absurdly proud of their garish clothing, they were as vain as peacocks and unpredictable as hell. The slag who seemed to be at the head of the pack looked at her disapprovingly while preening the lapels of his jacket. The others formed a circle around her before she could react.

"Don't like kaffirs dirtying up my threads," he snarled. Kristen winced at the insult, once spat at blacks by whites and now directed at mixed-race people, usually—in one of history's little ironies—by blacks.

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean it. Didn't see where I was going. Let me help." She clumsily reached out a hand to wipe at his jacket, but he gripped her wrist painfully and stared deep into her eyes. Kristen had the horrible certainty that this bugger was high on something not very pleasant, then she heard a metallic click behind her. She didn't need to turn around to know it was a knife.

"I ain't got nothing'," she whined, then suddenly remembered the money she was carrying. Even worse than the physical danger was the prospect of losing her treasure so soon after finding it. "Only some dagga. I give it to you, you leave me alone."

The man sneered. "She give us dagga, boys!" A faint swell of derision rose around her. The grip on her wrist tightened and the ganger twisted it a little. Kristen had to bite her lip to keep from yelping in pain.

"Maybe we want something else," he leered, dragging her close and opening his mouth in a broken-toothed smile. His free hand was rising to grab at her breast just as a much larger one seized his shoulder. The world-weary face of a black troll loomed above him.

"We don't want no trouble here, boys," the troll boomed in a deep voice. "Police were round last week and we don't want to see them back again so soon, do we? Run along and play somewhere else, you skollies." The lekkerboy turned and with a cool gaze took in the stun baton in the troll's other hand. Slowly he released Kristen, then made an obscene gesture as he led the rest of the gang off into the night rain, shoving aside anyone in their way.

"Thanks, chummer," Kristen managed to say, shaking worse than she should have. She got in and out of a dozen scrapes like this every week. Maybe that dagga was a little stronger than she'd thought—or maybe it wasn't strong enough. "Hey, Muzerala, is that you?"

"You betcha ass," the troll said, not given to much in the way of polite conversation.

"I thought you were working at Indra's. Thought I'd see you there tonight," she replied. "Hell, I need a drink." "I guess you can come in," the troll told her, gesturing to the little bar whose entrance he'd been guarding. Then he shrugged and said, "I had a little disagreement with Indra. She owes me something like three hundred rand in back pay and wouldn't pay up. So I did a little damage cost her that much and more. Won't be seeing me around there for a while."

Kristen parked herself on a bar stool and ordered a beer. With a chaser. The

barman looked dubious until Muzerela gave him a nod. "She just had a mess-up with some skollies. Needs a drink," he said. Scowling, the barman rudely pushed a glass across the bar. She didn't waste any precious dollars on him, paying instead with

what was almost the last of her rands. She needed to find Nasser and cut a deal on the bucks.

"Any chance of work?" she said rather pathetically to the troll. The bar was almost empty, which just might make the humiliation of rejection not quite so painful. A place like this wouldn't hire a mixed-race girl any more than it would normally serve one. Still, the troll just might have something, somewhere. But all she got was the offer she should have expected.

"Your face wouldn't fit," the troll said. "Nothing personal. My brother could always find you work, though." "Huh. Thanks but no thanks. I'm not down to that yet," she said, gulping down the beer fast. If the bar owner appeared, it might not be healthy for Muzerela that he'd let her in, especially since he hadn't been working here long. Kristen finished her drink too quickly and headed for the rest room.

Three minutes later she was back on the streets. She'd smoked the joint even faster than usual, and it hadn't been a good idea. She had to get to Indra's, dance away the effects, find Nasser on his late-night rounds and change her money. Then pull a fade fast before word got around and someone decided to slice her up for the money.

Looking up at the street sign, Kristen didn't have to read it to know that the street was named High. She was just chuckling at the appropriateness of it when the face of the American elf drifted into her mind. She was still disturbed by seeing it on the tabloid, and she longed to be able to read the words and try to figure out who he was and why he could seem so significant to her. It was then she saw the two men in the shadow beyond the streetlight, collars raised against the rain that had driven most people off the street. Something told her she wasn't going to be walking any further along High.

By the time the suborbital landed in Seattle, it was late afternoon. Serrin awakened from his doze and stared out the window at the haze shimmering all the way from the runway to the terminal. Great, he thought, limping his way

toward
customs, that's all I need. Sweltering heat.

By the time he picked up his bags, he'd decided to get a room at the Warwick.
Last he'd heard, that luxury hotel had begun to specialize in unobtrusive security for corporate clients who expected a little more than the norm. The rates would be exorbitant, of course, but he was too

exhausted to care.

After a taxi deposited him at the hotel's elegant entrance, Serrin had no difficulty getting a room even without reservations. He asked to have his bags sent up, then took the elevator up to the small suite. Once inside, the door safely secured, he sat down on the edge of the perfectly made bed to work out his next move. But rubbing his chin reflectively only made him realize how badly he

needed a shave.

In the bathroom, Serrin tried not to look too closely at the face staring back at him from the mirror as he wet his skin, then he stopped suddenly and laid the razor down on

the sink.

Maybe a beard wouldn't be a bad idea, he thought. Even with the stubble, I don't look much like that Newsday photo anymore. No one seemed to recognize me down in the lobby. Why should they? New York's week-old news isn't going to raise much of a fuss in Seattle. No, scratch the beard. He made a first pass with the cool steel of the blade, the familiar act of shaving relaxing him enough to ponder the situation calmly.

I need some muscle around me, at least for a while, Serrin reasoned. Then I can try to find out who's after me. He toweled his face, ran a bath, and ordered some sushi from room service.

Stripping off his clothes and rubbing at his painful leg, Serrin wondered why he thought of Seattle as home at all. He hadn't lived here for more than a couple of months at a time in the last five years. And the number of people he could call friends wasn't more than a handful. Besides, he realized guiltily, he hadn't made much effort at keeping in touch with them. Worse, a few calls

soon
informed him that his two best hopes were, in one case, out of town, and in
the
other, had upped and relocated to Nagoya.

He'd just bundled himself in the hotel bathrobe when his food arrived.
Staring
glumly down at the white and pink chunks of fish resting on their bed of rice
and hints of vegetation, the elf wondered why he'd ordered it. "Um, wine too,
I
think," he mumbled. "Red or white?" the waiter asked. "Bring me a bottle of
anything red from Australia," Serrin told him, then laughed just for the hell
of
it. "And two packs of Dunhills." He searched his pockets for some money, then
handed the man a twenty. The waiter shrugged; it wasn't a bad tip. The elf
was
obviously some kind of chiphead or dope freak, but he didn't seem likely to
offer any trouble.

After the food, mostly uneaten, and the wine, wholly consumed inside thirty
minutes with a side order of three hungrily consumed cigarettes, the elf
considered making some more phone calls but decided to sleep instead.
Pleasantly
lulled by a haze of alcohol, he checked the news service pages on the trid,
but
the index contained no entry for Serrin Shamandar. That was enough for now.
He
yawned prodigiously and just managed to crawl under the covers before falling
fast asleep.

"Where did you turn this up, Magellan?" Jenna asked, her gaze turning
pensively out across Crater Lake, her long elven ringers poised like mantis
legs
on the sheaf of paper in her lap.

"One has contacts," the male elf sitting opposite her

said casually. He knew the green eyes turning to him from the splendors of
the
Tir Tairngire countryside were hard and cold, but by now he'd learned how to
face them down and keep some secrets to himself. He also knew she considered
him
too valuable to be pressed too hard.

"You have eyes and ears in the councils of the O'Briens?" she said,
astonished. Jenna paid Magellan well, but he was going to deserve a bonus for
this. If he'd somehow managed to worm his way into the secrets of the elves
of
Tir na n6g, he was a priceless resource to her. The elves of that faraway
country held most of their Tir Tairngire fellows in contempt, and it was
almost
impossible to learn anything of what they were up to. Unless one was Eهران
the
Scribe, of course. But he wasn't about to circulate whatever he knew to the

other Princes of the Tir Tairngire High Council. Especially not to her.

"It cost me," he said simply, evading her question. "Call it a hundred thousand."

"Agreed." She wasn't going to quibble about the price. This was dynamite if the SES scientific evaluations were

correct.

"You will not breathe a word to any other Prince," she said, her tone almost brutal. "I have to think hard on

this."

"Have I ever betrayed your secrets?" he said, finding the courage to shoot her a challenging look.

She looked away quickly. "No. Forgive me. It's just that we can't risk a fool like Laverty finding out about something this big. He'd send a squad out to destroy this-precious thing. That would be unthinkable."

"There is more, Jenna," the male ventured. "The intelligence report on the German is correct. He is exactly what they say he is. I have made other inquiries." His little finger crooked itself around the long fluted stem of his glass, and he swirled the red liquid around inside the wide, deep bowl.

"No doubt that cost you also," she smiled. The warm glow of what this magical discovery might mean was beginning to permeate her now. The ultimate power of life and death was being offered to her and the thrill was almost too strong to bear.

"Another thirty thousand for research," he said, making a dismissive gesture with his free hand. "Cheap at twice the price."

"I've also learned that he has certain special requirements that aren't easily satisfied. That have led him to kidnap certain rare individuals who can meet those requirements. Apparently his agents botched one such attempt very recently. It looks, of all things, as if the local police stopped two of his hit squad for some minor traffic violation and so they never got to the right

place
at the right time."

The two elves laughed at the absurd irony. "The target was a mage, as before. I haven't had time to do much research on him, except that he was the one who recently rescued the mayor of New York from being killed by some mad Shi'ite. Three-day wonder stuff. He's disappeared for the time being, but he's got to re-surface again one of these days."

"Find out more about him," Jenna ordered. "We don't want any loose ends."

"There's one complication," Magellan said slowly, realizing that Jenna must not have heard or read about the mage, or else she'd know this one important fact herself. "He is an elf."

"Ah," she said, her hands tightening for just an instant into fists. "Now that does rather complicate matters. Maybe. All right, but we must still find out everything we can about him. Maybe he'll just be glad to have gotten out of this alive, and won't do any snooping around."

"I'll get on to it right away," Magellan said, draining his glass and getting to his feet. He was about to turn toward the door when her expression stopped him.

"Later," she ordered. "You should know by now what the scent of power does to me."

"I was wondering about that," he said with a sly smile. "Let me make two calls to get the other matter started. Then, uh, the water pool?"

"I think I'd prefer you as my servant," she said drily. "Make your calls later."

Serrin woke at seven in the morning after thirteen hours of sleep. He felt less hung over than he had any right to, but it wasn't until he'd drunk half a liter of the steely mineral water on his bedside table that he paused to take a breath. His eyes caught the red winking of the telecom as he set the bottle down. A few taps on the console told him that a call had been received at his message-forwarding number and relayed through to the hotel. For a moment he couldn't even recall having made those arrangements, but then he gave up trying to remember. When he saw who it was had called him, he returned the call right

away.

The suave features of the Welshman smiled back at Serrin from the screen. "Good morning, Serrin," his friend breezed in his BBC English accent. "I hear you've been to Germany. What's up?"

"I'm back in Seattle now, or I wouldn't have gotten your message. But they told me you were away for a couple of days."

"Got back a day early. Business concluded earlier than expected," Geraint said simply. "A doddle, old boy. Now, what's the problem?"

The elf paused for a second, not sure where to begin.

"Look, do you want me to call you back with a sampling monitor? To check whether your number is compromised, as I think you might say. We prefer bugged over here."

"I don't think so," Serrin replied uncertainly. He hadn't even contemplated the possibility until Geraint mentioned it, but the thought was evoking all the paranoia of the previous days.

"Come now, aren't you a hero in your native land these days? Read it all in Newsday. Hope there was a decent payoff in it," the Welshman joked.

"No, it's more serious than that," the elf said, then quickly ran down a summary for Geraint.

The Welshman listened carefully, waiting until he was sure Serrin was finished. "How can I help?" he asked finally.

"I don't know," Serrin's usual early-morning mental constipation was refusing to budge. "When I was in

Frankfurt, I thought of hopping over to London, until I found out you weren't there."

"Only the delicious Elizabeth," Geraint said mischievously. "Don't worry. She's at Harrods buying some ghastly floral material or other. It won't last, it never does. It's doomed, thank God."

"Look if you need some help tracing the source of your problems, I've got a friend over there could help. His name's Michael Sutherland. Brilliant decker. He could find out the exact value of Fort Knox in less than five minutes." Serrin gave the Welshman a look of disbelief.

"Well, all right," Geraint conceded, "I exaggerate; maybe it would take him seven. We knew each other at Cambridge. I heard our friend Francesca is away in Saudi, so he's the best option. I can call him and make sure he charges you only the minimum. Hell, I can do better than that; I owe you."

Serrin couldn't quite figure that one out. He hadn't seen Geraint face to face since their extraordinary experiences in London the previous year. They'd unmasked a Jack the Ripper clone and got themselves deep into an unholy mess. Everything had worked out all right in the end, but Serrin had noticed something strange about Geraint afterward, an evasiveness, even a faint air of guilt. Serrin trusted Geraint with his life, so it didn't worry him. He guessed that anything strange in his friend's behavior must have to do with the infinitely subtle and treacherous web of British politics. Indeed, Serrin was just as happy not knowing about it if Geraint didn't want to tell him.

"I'll give you a number," the nobleman said, reciting off a telecom code that indicated a classy Manhattan address. "Wait a few hours, though. I'll call him first and remind him of a few favors he owes me. How about getting yourself some muscle? I can't really help you in that department, not Stateside. Or do you want me to send Rani over maybe?"

Serrin smiled. The Punjabi ork was someone you could count on if things came down to the wire. But it hadn't got that bad yet.

"First let me check out some more faces and names here," the elf said. "But thanks. I really appreciate this."

"It's the least I can do. Look, if you get into really deep drek there's always my castle in Wales, right? I'll make sure the staff is on permanent alert for you until I tell them otherwise. Hire a fraggin' private jet and I'll pick up the tab," the Welshman said. The curse words sounded almost comical in his accent.

"I hope it doesn't come to that. But thanks—again. And I'll give this guy Sutherland a call after I've done a little checking around locally," the elf said. The smiling face of his friend evaporated as the connection was broken.

Serrin tapped in a local number, and the sleepy face of an ork swam into focus on the screen.

"Hey, Gulrank, I need some protection," the elf said simply. Subtlety would be lost on the samurai.

"Can't help you," the ork said in a tired voice. "Got a month's fee up front from an Intelligencer guy doing research on some lowlife stories. Sorry, chummer." He was about to hit the Disconnect when Serrin spoke urgently to catch his attention.

"Gulrank, I've tried John and he's out of town. Torend too. He moved to Japan. I'm running out of names, chummer, and I need this."

The ork paused for thought. It took some time.

"You could try Tom," he said slowly.

"Spirits! You mean Tom's still around?" The possibility hadn't even occurred to Serrin. The troll had been so hell-bent on self-destruction that Serrin had almost given up on him after the last of his endless binges. It had been so long since anyone had seen or heard of him downtown, that Serrin had simply assumed his friend was dead. In that instant, he realized that he'd deliberately avoided trying to find out about Tom because the thought of his death had been just too painful.

"He's changed," the ork said. "I don't know if he'd do muscle work anymore. Walks the way of Bear these days. Dried out, the works. Still down in Redmond, but I hear he's doing the green number and saving people from the

machine. Hell, you ain't seen him since way back, right? You don't know this stuff." "I had no idea," the elf said, astonished. "He talks 'bout you sometimes," the ork said slowly. "I guess you kept him going long enough for him to save himself. Or so he says. You could do a lot worse, chum-mer. You got a friend there, which means you don't have as many worries as you think."

With that the screen went blank. Serrin immediately called down to the desk and ordered a cab for Redmond for nine sharp. That gave him time for breakfast, the first cigarette of the day, and enough spare minutes to figure out what the hell he was going to say to Tom after all these years.

Feeling that the luck was still with her, Kristen retreated into the darkness on her side of the street, her mind racing as she watched the two unmoving figures across the way. The men had their hats pulled down over their faces, but the shadows hid them even better. It was obvious they were up to no good, but Kristen thought maybe she might profit from whatever it was. Didn't her luck always come in runs?

Minutes passed, with almost no passersby braving the rain to change the scene, and she began to wonder what the frag she was doing. Her head spun with the effects of the soft drug and she had to make a special effort from time to time to keep her vision focused.

"How much, honey?" a well-oiled voice leered from over her shoulder. "You do special services?"

She turned to the man, his acne-ridden white face garish in the shop lights to his left, the edges of his repulsive grimace hidden in the shadow that also hid the hand seeking to curl itself around her rump.

"Frag off or I'll suck you in and blow you out in bubbles, you brainwipe," she spat out, sending him scuttling off in the direction of one of Carrag's pornotoriums. On her way down to Indra's, Kristen must have wandered closer than she'd intended to the edge of Cape Town's red light district. But now Indra's could wait. Something was about to go down right here. Every one of her instincts

was screaming at her. The air was almost unbearably still, ear-splittingly quiet. And even on such a rainy night there should have been more people on the streets. It was almost as if some trid director had given orders to clear the streets.

Then it happened. As two men came striding down Chepstow, one slightly ahead of the other, the rear man suddenly fell soundlessly, only a muted airy hiss from somewhere above and behind him giving away the location of the assassin.

The other two men, the one's she'd been watching, moved in perfect synchrony, one slamming a fist hard into the leading man's guts as the second brought a balled fist up under his jaw. Doubled up and then sent flying backward, the man didn't stand a chance. With precision timing a limo purred up Ocean View, the door opening as the two men dumped the body into the back and then piled in after it. They knew what they were doing; the limo fired up again immediately, then moved smoothly up the street and turned onto High, headed no doubt for the Strand.

It was perfect, like a scene from one of her favorite vids. Feeling like a player in a drama, Kristen walked across the almost deserted road and looked down at the body they'd left behind. She had his wallet in seconds, then saw the small metal box lying on the sidewalk glistening with rain. A couple of other pedestrians had just appeared, but with no gangers in sight, Kristen had all the time she needed. With the night's spoils safely in her bag, she continued on toward Merriman.

Serrin had had to cool his heels for hours after his arrival in Redmond. Word was that Tom was down in the Jungles, but somehow the elf didn't want to meet him there. It seemed almost like an invasion of privacy. The elf passed the time browsing through the bazaars of the Bargain Basement, avoiding the more obvious manifestations of Mafia and yakuza business enterprises, buying a pair of clamshell brooches as much out of boredom as anything else. Come five in the afternoon, he made his way to the old haunt.

"Well, well, whatdya know?" Janus said when Serrin came through the door of Crusher 495. "You some kinda bad penny, turning up again?"

The elf smiled ruefully. "Been a long time, chummer."

"Sure has. But we been hearin' all about you on the trid," the barman said, his smile making his face curl up like a cat's after cream.

Serrin shrugged, looking around at the old familiar places. He recognized some of the faces and the place still smelled the same too, a pungent, not unpleasant scent of beer and sweat.

"Hear you're some kinda hero these days," came an ork voice from the shadows. It was only partly a challenge.

"I'll make you guys a deal," Serrin said. "I get the beer, you forget the drek, okay?" The hubbub of enthusiasm aroused by his offer told Serrin he was even more at home than he'd expected.

He was halfway through his beer when the sudden hush told him that Tom had arrived instants before he felt the ham-sized hand on his shoulder.

"Hear you been looking for me," the troll said in the same tone he might have used with a friend he'd last seen yesterday instead of five years ago. Serrin swiveled round on the creaky bar stool and looked up at his old friend. It was a moment of great wonderment as the elf sensed almost viscerally that Tom was changed, utterly and irrevocably. A kind of transformation Serrin had never experienced and reckoned he never would, though he had the power to recognize it. He picked up his glass and ordered a beer for the troll.

"Nan. The usual, Janus," Tom said cheerily. Wrapping his huge fist around the glass of mineral water the barman served up, he guided Serrin to the seclusion of a quiet corner.

"I guess we got a lot to catch up on," he said for starters.

The ID in the wallet said the slag was from the Loop district. Nothing special, not the real money of Castle or Buitenkant, just a company man. The plastic told her he worked for Kruger, drove an Elektro, was smart enough not to carry an organ donor card, and had managed to talk his way into more parking permits than seemed reasonable. Normally, Kristen would have taken the credit card and sold it to some tsotsi at the docks, but not this time. The police would be investigating this murder and she didn't want to find herself sitting in a jail cell waiting for the special treatment they reserved especially for a mixed-race suspect.

After removing the rands from the wallet, she wiped the synthetic leather and the plastic cards clean of any fingerprints, then tore some pages from the tabloid and wrapped them around the wallet. She dumped the soggy pages in a trash bin at the junction of Merriman and Ocean View, making sure no one was watching, and then headed west. But Kristen didn't feel much like dancing anymore, and she cut back through to High, toward Western Boulevard, where she could find a coffin hotel for the night. Even with her newly acquired wealth, she begrudged the handful of rand she had to dish out, but that was just her old survival instincts.

Sitting down on the creaky bed, she realized how terribly tired she was. She pulled up the coverlet to inspect what was underneath, finding clean sheets

and
no more than the usual quota of stains on the mattress. Best of all, there
didn't seem to be any bugs, though that didn't mean she wouldn't be visited
by
the usual roach or two. Somehow, it wouldn't have felt right without them,
though Kristen hoped they'd be the smaller variety. Pulling off her leggings
and
blouse, she was about to try to get some sleep despite the flickering of neon
through the thin curtains when she caught the glint of light on the metal box
lying among her things on the floor. She picked it up and examined it.

It looked like a pocket computer, a miniaturized laptop, though it wasn't
any
bigger than her own hand. There weren't any numbers or obvious symbols on the
tiny keys, but she had no idea how to use such a thing anyway. Idly, she
pressed
a few keys out of sheer curiosity, hissing as she caught two with one
fingertip
touch.

The small screen on top of the box suddenly lit up and a message appeared
on
it. She couldn't read the words telling her that a deletion process was in
operation, but she guessed that something bad was happening from the tiny
skull-and-crossbones icon at the left of the screen. Then she pressed the
entire
keypad, desperately hoping that she wasn't ruining the thing. A string of
identical symbol-pairs ran across the screen left to right and the light
behind
the screen winked out.

Frag it, I've broken it, she thought miserably. It might have been worth
hundreds. But, what the hell. I can't complain. This hasn't been such a bad
day.

She threw the inert box into her bag and took out some long cigarette
papers
and the last wrap of dagga, then smoked herself some immunity against the
wake-up effects of the glaring neon blinking on and off outside her window.

"I did come back a couple of times," Serrin said defensively. "You know ...
afterward." He didn't know what to expect from Tom, but the quietness of the
huge figure seated opposite was as startling as the mineral water he

was sipping. Back in the old days, the troll would have been finishing a
second pitcher of beer by now.

"I know. You came down in June and September of 'fifty, but I hadn't
changed,"
the troll said gently. "Guess you thought it would be a mistake to try to
pick
up the pieces. Shock treatment doesn't work if you're not prepared to go
through

with it."

"Something like that," the elf said. Somehow, he didn't want to let himself off the hook. He could remember the scene as if it were yesterday, the troll lying almost senseless with drink in a vomit-splattered room, Serrin standing over him, screaming impotently at his friend. Then the elf had walked out and slammed the door, never getting close in person again except to pass through now and then to inquire after Tom. At first it was because he couldn't take the pain of seeing his friend destroy himself, but later it had been the shame of having abandoned him.

"Don't worry, chummer. It's not that heavy. You couldn't save me. Nobody could have. But I think you kept me alive long enough for it to happen." The troll grinned suddenly. "Frag it all, nobody else would have carried me off and locked me up in some hellhole to dry out for a month. Craziest dumb thing I've ever known anyone to do."

"It was the best I could think of at the time, apart from buying you a new liver—but you were too full of implants and metal anyway," Serrin said, then realized the clumsiness of his words. If Tom was now a Bear shaman, every piece of cyberware in his body would be hateful to him, an alien presence reminding him of a past he'd rather forget. Wouldn't it? The troll seemed to read his mind.

"It's all still there," he rumbled. "The smartgun link, the reflex job, the muscle implants. Never had the money to remove 'em, and it's dangerous anyway. I just gotta live with it. I'll never be able to run with Bear; more like limp along. But it don't worry me too much."

Serrin saw a ghost of pain in the troll's eyes and knew damn well that Tom lived with it every minute just like

the well-oiled old blues beginning to crank out from the battered speakers around the bar.

"But how did it happen? Do you want to talk about it?" Serrin had half-forgotten he was here to hire someone who'd saved his neck in the Barrens years ago. It was a different person before him now. He wanted to know who Tom had become.

"It's hard to describe . . . Don't have those fancy words," the troll said slowly. "You remember Anna?"

The elf nodded. Tom had been head over heels for the crazy, wild troll woman who fought for the folks in the Jungle day and night and then one day been caught in the crossfire of some senseless gang fight. That was when the troll's drinking, always heavy, had exploded into binges of days at a time when he'd go through enough beer and whiskey to kill half a dozen men. Most people had figured he'd stop sooner or later. After all, it wasn't like they'd been a hot item or anything. Anna had never been anything more than friendly to Tom, who was quite a bit younger. But the drinking didn't stop. Instead it got worse and worse.

"Once I thought I saw her again. Early in 'fifty-one. I went ape, chasing after her, thinking she'd come back from the dead. I had a belly full of booze and a heart full of desperation and when I sobered up, I saw things awful clear. Anna never loved me, and I'd been drowning myself in drink over a dream."

"Anna cared for you," Serrin muttered. "That ain't the same thing. I realized I'd been a fool, and there wasn't anything left. Worse than that, I'd killed a lot of people for the money."

"Not when I knew you, you didn't. I never heard of you icing anyone who hadn't taken a shot at you first," Serrin said, surprised.

"Some things I don't get public about. Anyways, you know how bad it got. After you left, I stayed barely alive for a few months, and then it got real bad. You don't want to know the details." The troll hunched forward over the table and looked Serrin in the eyes. It was desperately uncomfortable for the elf, but he was spellbound by the troll's whispered words.

"Found myself face down in a gutter in the Jungles

without a cent in my pockets. I got up and killed someone

for the small change in his pockets—the price of a bagful

from a liquor store. Chummer, I drank so much I didn't

have DTs; they had me. Back in the gutter somewhere, I

don't remember. I do know, damn well, that I was going
to die. I was falling down a black tunnel and didn't see
no light at the end of it. It was hell, chummer. Now, you
know and I know we got some fancy words for what's out
there in the astral, and there ain't no demons or devils.
But there's something we might as well call hell, 'cause
you know that's what it is if you ever go there. That
what's left of your soul will burn there forever."

At that moment Serrin felt that Tom was a shaman, that he had at least something of the Power. It was there in the look on his face, in the unmistakable aura around him. The troll had changed indeed.

"That's when Bear appeared. Between me and hell. Took me into her arms before I died. Like I say, I don't really know how to talk about it. I pick up fancy words from smart folk now and then, but I can't stitch them together into something that does justice to it somehow.

"Let me try to put it so you can feel a piece of it," the troll went on slowly. "In a way that would make sense to you. Imagine you get wrapped up in someone huge, and warm, and simple and kind. Imagine she says to you, you have pain in you because your parents were blown to bloody pieces out of the blue when you were eleven years old. You got to ID them in the morgue because state law says ID gotta be done by a blood relative if possible, and you were the only one to hand. You got pain every day because your leg's mangled up. And you don't forget about that blind girl in Lafayette when you went back there hoping it could be home again, and you got pain from that too."

"How the hell do you know all that?" the elf said almost angrily. He was sure he'd never told Tom the whole story about his parents or anything about the one love of his adult life.

"Don't matter. Important thing is, you're feeling the hurt right now, so you can understand me. Now, these

pains you're always going to carry around. You don't have any choice. But imagine this presence says to you, you know you can't change these things. You might try to forget, but if you do, you're just impoverishing yourself. And lying to yourself. And it don't work anyway. But then she says to you—and you know it because it pours into you like a flood—that you don't have to hurt so bad. You know you can trust yourself a bit more than you do. And you don't have to hate yourself so much anymore. "But it's scarier than anything you can think of. Because you have to open up to her, chummer, and there's every little lie and deception coming back to you, everything you ever did to someone because you were cowardly or afraid; that, mostly, rather than when you really used someone deliberately, because Bear doesn't often take someone really into that. Every humiliation you ever suffered, every time you were vulnerable and got fragged over, every time you tried to use your sensitivity and love and it went to waste, just like it does so often, and you ended up with nothing but yourself and it seemed like another piece was chipped away and lost forever. You fall into Bear's arms on an ocean of hurt, Serrin. It's too much for anyone to handle, I promise you.

"Then she holds you tight and it heals you, brother. I don't really have any fancy words for that at all."

The troll's huge hands wrapped themselves around those of the elf. "And, you know, I see you need something of that. You wouldn't shake like you do if you didn't. But I ain't no preacher and I ain't gonna push you," Tom said with an edge of sadness to his voice.

Serrin couldn't speak. It was all he could do just trying to keep his emotions under control. He wasn't used to having everything brought to the surface so quickly.

Tom leaned back and finished the last of his mineral water. "But it ain't that you turn into a perfect specimen or nothin'. I still got some of my illusions. These days, I do a lot of work for the folk down in the Jungles and beyond. Just like Anna used to. So I suppose there's still some drek in my head, chummer. The thing is, if you're not so damned hard on yourself all the time it's a lot easier to be worth something to someone else."

"Yeah," the elf replied, slowly, still shaken. "There might be something in

that."

"Well, that's my life in five minutes." The troll suddenly broke into a grin.

"Now it's your turn. What are you doin' looking me up after all this time? Mind,

I can wait if you don't feel like saying right out. We can just chew the fat awhile if you'd rather."

Serrin found that prospect too intimidating. "It's pretty simple, Tom," he said. "Someone's got a hit out on me. I'm almost certain it's a magician.

Among

other things, I need a bodyguard, and someone suggested looking you up. But I guess that's not your kind of work these days."

The troll rubbed his chin and stood up. "Hmmm. Maybe, maybe not. The money could be useful to a lot of folks down here; I live cheap. Pass on anything extra. I owe you one, I reckon. Let me buy you a beer and you can tell me more.

I ain't going to say no to an old friend before he's said his piece. Anyway, I

want to hear about you these past five years. We been hearin' some weird drek,

Serrin. All about you bein' a hero and last year hangin' with them kings and queens in England ..."

Tom ordered two more of the same and was halfway back to their table when the

doors opened and someone who obviously had never been in Redmond before walked

through them. Every head turned to look at the man.

He was just over six feet, very lean, with tanned skin and the kind of mop of

bleached blond hair that had gone out of fashion in the days when people realized that sunlight gave you cancer. It was the clothes that had everyone really staring, though. Legs the length a fashion model would have killed for were encased in perfectly creased gray flannel pants, ending at real leather shoes that must have cost more than anyone in the bar earned in a month. The silk shirt was perfect, and the tweed jacket combined eccentricity with elegance. The silk cravat, with its gold pin, topped the whole thing off. Everyone gawked and wondered where this creature could possibly have come from.

"Good evening," the man said in an impossibly perfect English accent. "Such a

charming place. Barman, I'd be

most grateful for a cold beer, and can you tell me where I might find Mr. Shamandar?"

No one spoke for a few seconds. Then Tom looked at Serrin and laughed.

"Hell, I'd better go and get him before someone else does," the troll chuckled. "It's a miracle he made it this far alive. We'd better make sure he gets out that way too." He went over to the newcomer and put an arm around his shoulder, pointing to Serrin's table.

"Over there, chummer," he said. "Man, you are one crazy fragger coming in here like that. They must be lining up to mug you on the way out."

"Really?" the man said, seeming wholly unconcerned. "It wouldn't have been very wise of them, old boy. I possess a truly awesome reaction speed with a Predator."

"Are you for real?" came an ork's snarl from somewhere behind them.

"No, dear fellow, of course I'm not for real. I'm an Englishman from Manhattan. What could be more preposterous than that?"

Ignoring the continuing stares, he shook the hand of Serrin as the elf stood up. Then he sat down while smoothing his pants to preserve the creases. That done, he placed his hands palms-down on the table with the air of someone for whom everything in life is a business meeting.

"I'm on a retainer. You forgot to call, so I tracked you down. That way, you don't lose my exceedingly expensive time. So, let's see ... you need help with a problem. Someone trying to kidnap you. Give me the details and we'll sort it out tonight."

"How the hell did you find me here?" Serrin asked, amazed.

The man gave him a boyish grin. "You don't want to know. Let's just say it's my way of showing that someone's on board who knows what he's doing."

"This is a thoroughly charming place, of course, but might I suggest something a little more private?" Michael proposed. "How about supper in my suite at the Madison?"

Serrin looked at Tom and nodded. "That might be best. Tom, will you come with us? Please?"

The troll drank up his second glass of mineral water and shrugged. "Ain't got no pressing business tonight. I'm kinda hungry after a day's work, too."

"That's going to cost you," Serrin grinned to the Englishman.

"Not me, term," he smiled back. "Our mutual friend Lord Llanfrechfa is picking up the tab. He told me he'd just made a killing in some talismonger trading on the Pacific Rim, so he's feeling well-disposed to magicians in difficult circumstances. My cab is still waiting. Shall we go?"

With a final thank you to the bemused barman, the Englishman turned and led them out into the last of Seattle's daylight.

Over dinner, Serrin gave Michael the full story. The Englishman didn't eat much, but he was clearly amused, even pleased, as Tom polished off enough for all three of them. Serrin watched the man's eyes, which were never still, their gaze constantly shifting from one point to another. Michael looked like the kind of person who wouldn't understand the meaning of the word relaxation if he looked it up in a dictionary.

"Not a lot to go on," he volunteered as Tom plunged into a heaping plate of meringues. "But there are some obvious things I can check right now. First, we can see if

the Damascus League is displeased with you for your public-spiritedness in saving the mayor. For starters, I think I'll try German military intelligence, if that isn't an oxymoron. The Israelis tend to be rather difficult to crack, so I'll move on to them only if I have to."

Serrin looked at Michael with newfound respect. From what he'd always heard deckers say, Israeli security was an invitation to brain-fried suicide. No decker in his right mind would want to try to penetrate their matrix.

'Then we'll put through some calls to Bonn to see if we can learn something about how that message got to you at the airport. Let us hope the mysterious Frieda can provide some startling revelation. Frankly, I'd be very surprised if we came up with anything there. Next, I'll check on the incoming flights to JFK just before you left there."

"Why?" Serrin asked as Tom stuffed the penultimate meringue pastry into his mouth and chewed it noisily.

"Because of the scarred man. I'd say it's more likely that he had just arrived himself than that he'd followed you there. Checking incoming flights might narrow the range of possibilities. Even allowing for connecting foreign flights expanding the field of possible foreign embarkations, looking at the incoming flight schedules may tell us something. At the very least, we could provisionally eliminate some possibilities."

"Um, what exactly is it that you do?" Serrin asked him. The way Michael was virtually taking over the whole operation was almost alarming. He was going to have to learn more about this Englishman before he would feel comfortable with that.

"My dear boy, I'm a facthound. I am paid disgustingly large sums of money by various persons and organizations to discover things that their own personnel haven't been able to."

"Sounds dangerous," Serrin said dubiously.

"Not at all. I'm too valuable for my employers to consider killing me. Of course, they do know that from time to time I might crack something they wouldn't want known, and pass it on to other employers, but I don't

have anything to worry about for at least a couple of years yet."

"Why's that?" Serrin was starting to feel like his mission in life was to pump out ever more questions.

"Because that's when I'll probably be over the hill and less valuable than I am now," the man said serenely. "Then I'll probably retire to some ghastly little country estate in Scotland, grow conifers, marry someone called Morag, and produce two-point-seven horribly over-intelligent children. Possibly." He sat back and rubbed at his lips with his index finger, half-concealing a sardonic smile.

"Anyway, that's not important now. Let's get back to the matter at hand. We know—as far as anyone can know—that someone wishes to abduct you. It does not seem likely that this is for ransom, right?"

"I don't have that much money. I don't have relatives with any money, either,"

the mage replied.

"So there's some other reason. If we want to take this message seriously, then that reason applies to other people also. The message referred to 'others in the same situation.' The question has to be, what does your mysterious informant mean by that? I would be inclined to take the most obvious thing about you: the fact that you're a magician. Of course, it could be because you're an elf, but then that's less statistically discriminating. We'll keep that as a back-up option. But it might be both: that you are an elven mage. Which greatly narrows the field. So, I'll have to get to work looking at cases of elven mages kidnapped in, say, the last year. Then work further backward if I get too few positive cases."

"Surely that will take you an age," Serrin wondered.

"Oh, hours" Michael replied, quite seriously. "I'll have to get back to Manhattan to do it. I have a remote here, and I can fire up the smart frames for the obvious stuff, but I need my Fairlights for this. As I'm sure you'll appreciate, I don't move them around."

"Fairlights?" Serrin was astonished, not least by the plural. Any decker he knew would have killed his own mother to get his hands on just one of the most advanced cyberdecks on the market. To even dream of owning

more than one was somewhere between hallucinatory and criminal hubris.

"Not the standard variety," Michael replied airily. "I had to spend a year upgrading them. Excuse me a moment." He headed for the bathroom of his suite.

"He's too clever," the troll grumbled as the door clicked behind the Englishman.

"I need that cleverness," Serrin said defensively, thinking that the troll felt inferior to the racing-car speed of Michael's thoughts. Again, Tom sensed his feelings.

"I mean that he doesn't have much of a heart, that one," the troll said quietly. "I'm not sure I would trust him. It's all a game to him."

"Tom, if he finds out who's trying to get me, I don't care too much how he does it." Serrin replied drily. The troll shrugged his shoulders and picked up

his porcelain coffee cup, scowling in disdain at its ridiculously small size. Very carefully, he filled two cups and set them out for Serrin and Michael. Then he flipped up the top of the silver coffeepot, poured some milk into it, and raised it to his lips.

"Will you come with me, Tom?" Serrin asked again. "I'll probably have to go back to New York with him, but I'm still shaken up and scared. It's not that I distrust him, but I've only just met him. You, I know. Please."

The troll finished the contents of the coffeepot and licked his lips. "You gonna pay me?"

"Three hundred nuyen a day. If we get into real danger, we can renegotiate."

"It's not for me," the troll added. "It'll all go back into Redmond."

"I know. Thanks."

There wasn't time to say more before Michael re-emerged, fastidiously wringing his freshly washed hands.

"There is a problem with going back to New York," Serrin said to him. "I mean, I'd like to, but—"

"Definitely," Michael interrupted him. "I'll need you there to answer all kinds of questions when the data starts coming in. You're worried about being recognized, right?"

"Maybe it won't be a problem. Hopefully, I'm not news anymore," the elf said.

"Well, no. But with all that stuff in Newsday, think of the options! The book! The trid! The smisense—well, no, not that, I shouldn't think. But we can't ignore the New York media's desire to wring dry every last dollar from something before they go on to exploit something else. Some little chancer may still find you a worthwhile target for harassment, but I've got an idea." He beckoned and Serrin followed, uncertainly. Michael threw open the doors of an absurdly large closet.

"I only have what I threw into a suitcase," Michael said apologetically.

Staring at the number of suits and shirts, Serrin thought that this was excessive if Michael thought he was only going to be gone from home for a single day. This collection looked more like the traveling wardrobe of some bubble-brained simsense star.

"I know," the Englishman grinned. "It's my only vice. I can't be bothered with fast cars, I don't fry my brain with chips, drink, or dope, and since you think Englishmen don't know how to have fun, I don't bother with women either. Better for the image, old boy. Now, I must say I think you would look ritzy in those tweeds. You're the same height as me and even thinner. And, I think, the fedora would be a nice eccentric touch. The deerstalker would be a safer bet, though. No one would ever recognize you in that!"

A deep rumbling chuckle came from the huge frame lurking in the doorway behind them. By the time Serrin had placed one uncertain hand on the lapel of the tweed jacket, Tom was almost helpless with laughter.

Kristen was awakened at ten, having seriously overslept. Thundering blows on the door told her she'd have to pay fifteen rand for another night if she didn't get her butt out of the room within five minutes. She also realized to her dismay that she wouldn't even have time to wash up before getting kicked out. She pulled on her sweaty clothes and hissed at the ork as she opened the door. He raised an arm as if to cuff her, but she ducked under and scooted into the street.

As she started on her way, the first thing she remembered was the little computer, or whatever it was. She hoped she hadn't totally slotted it up while playing around with it, but all she could do now was try to get it to Manoj. She bent down to rub at a bug-bitten ankle, yawning in the sunshine. She needed kaf and this would, after all, be a good time to scrounge some from Manoj. He wouldn't be busy yet.

By the time she reached the Longmarket warren, the streets were crawling with tourists. Walking here, she'd done a lot of thinking about what had happened the night before. There were certainly enough maybe's. Maybe she'd left a fingerprint on the wallet before dumping it. Maybe the police already had a lock on her for the killing. They'd certainly fingerprinted her enough times. Oddly,

it wasn't the uniformed police who worried her. It was the plainclothes stinkers hunting pickpockets and muggers among the crowds who did. Keeping her head down among the throng, she shuffled down the refuse-strewn back alley to the rear door of Manoj's shop. She knocked once, then pulled at the doorknob and stuck her head around the side of the door.

The usual mix of smells greeted her: sweat, incense, the residue of the oil lamps Manoj burned to save electricity, a bundle or two of lemongrass or drying proteas. The shop's owner was behind the counter, using his mix of subtle harassment and persuasion to extract a few extra rand for some trinket or other.

"From the San people, the real bushmen, madam. They exist in only a few enclaves near Namibia these days and it's very difficult to obtain such fine work now. They allow so few of these fertility charms to leave their lands."

The obese white woman in the horribly inappropriate pink-checked gingham elbowed her equally overweight husband, who was mopping sweat from his lobster-complexioned brow. "Oooh, Chuckle," she cooed in an American accent. "Look-it's a fertility charm!"

Kristen smiled and slipped past them, heading for where Manoj kept the kettle and coffee in a tiny room no bigger than a wall cupboard. He wouldn't be able to bag her out now, not in the middle of a sale that was obviously going well, so she got cheeky and slid a hand across his rump as she went by. His eyes widened a little, but otherwise he didn't react at all.

By the time the couple had waddled to the door and squeezed their way out, clutching their worthless piece of junk, Kristen had two cups of scalding soykaf ready. Manoj had probably paid some sweatshop worker a few rand to stitch up the fertility doll as part of a batch of fifty or so, which he'd then sell for forty, fifty rand apiece. He was clever, yet he never managed to get rich. His shop was always being broken into, three times in the last year alone. And who could get insurance in this district? Once, the premiums had simply been too high, but now the insurance companies simply refused to issue it. That was why Manoj was careful not to leave any money on the premises after he closed up for the night. And after the last beating, he'd found himself a cheap room where he slept rather than risk being here when the tsotsis called.

"You got a nerve, girl," he growled at her, accepted the offered cup and

taking a sip of the dark bitter liquid.

"Got something this morning," Kristen said brightly.

"Huh. Is it curable?"

She chuckled and took the tiny computer from her bag. Manoj looked interested in spite of himself.

"Can I go upstairs and wash up?" she asked as he turned the little box over in his hands. Taking his grunt for a yes, she clambered up the rickety steps to the dusty, disused room with its cracked washbasin. The pipes groaned as they always did whenever anyone turned on the faucet. Manoj had been letting Kristen use the place for freshening up ever since he'd quit living here, and so she kept some clean clothes here as well. He wouldn't let her sleep in the shop, though, but she didn't blame him for that. He'd never be fool enough to let someone stay here who could just as easily run downstairs to unlock the door for any thieves who might slip her a few rand for the favor.

By the time Kristen rejoined him downstairs, fresher and feeling much better, Manoj had the guts of the thing dismembered on a table top in the back of the shop.

"Huh. Can't find anything wrong with it," he said, putting the pieces back into the case in a way that suggested that they were going in exactly in the same way they'd come out. "It's slotted up, though. First it spewed out a list of names and some IDs, but now it won't do a fraggin' thing."

She picked up the small coil of paper that had scrolled from the tiny printer he'd connected to the device.

"Look, girl what you getting me into?" he said almost angrily. "One of these names here, it's the guy who got kidnapped last night down by Ocean View. What do you know about that, honey?"

Kristen wanted to bluff her way out, but she paused just an instant too long trying to look innocent. She'd hosed it.

"Look, Manoj, I just picked it up off the ground, yeah? It was lying by the other guy's body. The one who got scragged. Frag it, you know me better than to think I'm into scragging people. Me?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "Who else knows about this?"

"No one. I brought it straight to you," she said miserably.

"Well, I ain't gonna buy it. You know there ain't much I won't handle in the way of stolen goods, but if it's been within a whiff of a stiff, then you can forget it." He almost slammed the last small screw into the casing and shoved it roughly back at her.

Kristen was almost to the doorway on her way out when his tone softened.

"Look, maybe we can do each other a favor. I was on the lookout for somebody to run me an errand anyway. Get the bus to Simon's Town and fetch something for me, yeah?"

She turned round and looked at him with a wide-eyed smile. There was going to be money in this.

"Take that to my half-brother John. The white one, you've met him," Manoj said with only a little bitterness. Like her, he was of mixed race, but being half-Indian rather than half-Xhosa, he didn't face quite the same

scale of problems as she did. He still got more than enough to be resentful, though.

"Here's the address," he said, scribbling something on the top leaf of a notepad. "Oh, frag it, I forgot you can't read. Look, get a cab at the bus station and show the driver this, got it? No, better still, I'll tell you and you memorize it, yeah?"

"I can do that," she said happily. Being illiterate, she'd had to learn to.

"He might buy this for junk value. The parts might be worth something to him, I don't know. Anyway, he'll give you something to bring back with you, you

got
it? Fifty rand for you when you get it back here. If you don't come back,
girl,
you end up in the harbor—after I've dealt with you. You scan?"

Drugs, probably, she thought. It wasn't much money for risking five years
in
Parliament. The city had converted the old Houses of Parliament into a prison
twenty years ago, but that irony did nothing to make the idea of spending
time
there any more pleasant.

When he'd finished reciting the address to her, and she'd proved that she
could parrot it perfectly, Manoj mused over the printout for a moment.

"Strange collection of names here. Some big cheese from Vienna, someone
from
London, England, some weirdo with an elven name from Seattle. All over the
place. Huh." He was about to crumple up the piece of paper when, on impulse,
Kristen stopped him. It was impossible, obviously, but she had to know.

"The elf. What's his name?"

"Serrin Shamandar. What's it to you?"

Kristen felt like she'd been kicked by a Ramskop buck.

"Jack squat," she managed to lie, picking up the piece of scrunched paper.
"I'll get this to your brother. Be back by nightfall."

"You'd better be," he growled.

8

When they crawled in, bleary-eyed, at breakfast time the following morning,
Serrin and Tom were astounded by Michael's fifteenth-floor apartment in Soho.
The Englishman looked as dapper as usual, unaffected by sleeplessness. Serrin
felt like a shop dummy in his ridiculous clothes, but Tom assured him that he
looked really flash. Serrin hadn't turned round fast enough to see the smile,
never suspecting Tom had a talent for sarcasm.

Michael had six rooms, half the building's top floor. Two of them were
filled
entirely with cyberdecks and associated tech, machines cannibalized and
rewired
until they looked like something from another planet.

"It's a bit Heath Robinson, but it works," the Englishman said as he swept

in
and flicked on the lights. Serrin noticed there weren't any windows, at least not in the rooms he could see.

"What's Heath Robinson?" he asked.

"An artist who designed ridiculous machines that looked like they might work."

"What, you mean, like, Rube Goldberg?" Serrin asked.

Michael gave him a smile. "Yes, folks, it's that old 'One nation divided by a common language' time again," he chuckled. "Anyway, you two can catch some sleep if you want. I've got work to do. I think Gerald will have finished the business in Germany by now."

"Gerald? Who's he?" Serrin demanded irritably. It was becoming tiresome the way this Englishman always seemed to be so far ahead of it all.

"Gerald's a smart frame. I like to give them names after designing them. Anyway, I got Gerald off to his stuff last night with the remote while you were changing

clothes. I must say, old boy, you look spiffing in them." The troll sniggered.

"A smart frame working from here? Spirits, isn't that risky? Surely there'll be trace IC in a military system," Serrin said doubtfully.

"That's why Gerald was re-routed through BIG in Dallas/Fort Worth. If the Germans trace him, they'll think it was someone in the Texas corp who's been snooping on them. From past experience I know that Gerald can infiltrate BIC and that they won't be able to trace him. I'll download what he's got. By then, Tracey should have finished analyzing flight schedule data and setting up options for MP checks," Michael replied smoothly.

"Don't even ask about Tracey," Tom whispered to Serrin.

"Chummer, what is there that you can't do?" Serrin asked caustically.

The Englishman paused to think for a moment. "I wouldn't want to try busting

into Aztechnology in Aztlan, old boy. Not unless someone gave me a million up front and I had a top-notch team of paramedics sitting around me at the deck. Apart from that, and one or two of the hush-hush Japanese sculpted systems, I'm not intimidated by anything, really.

"Geraint says I'm a controlled hypomaniac. That's when he's being nice. And if you ask him after his latest affaire d'amour has gone down the tubes, he'll probably say that I'm crazy," Michael said. "But if I do something, it gets done. Now let me order out for some bagels and let's see what we've got here."

Even on a cool winter's day, it was an unpleasant ride out to Simon's Town. A bus that was supposed to carry only sixty people was stuffed with nearer to a hundred, and the interior was hot, sweaty, and stifling. At first Kristen thought she was seated among half a dozen jockeys headed for the ostrich races, but soon she realized that they were just wannabes, kids hoping to attract the attention of the right person at the track. They chattered and laughed and pointedly ignored her, which suited her; she stayed quiet and just waited, increasingly miserably,

for the trip to end. The ride took nearly two hours, the bus crawling around the western coastline before it veered east past Da Gama Park on the way to the broken-down old naval port. Next time, she thought, I'll make Manoj give me the extra rand for the train.

The big old houses on Main Street had long since decayed into a warren of ghettos. Azania didn't maintain much of a navy these days and more than half the people of the town were unemployed, most of the rest having to commute into Cape Town itself to find work. The few who were lucky, or trusted, enough to get work as gem-stone polishers in Topstones lived in their own arcology, far from their fellows down the hillside. There were too many empty eyes in the streets looking for people whose money might buy them a few hours of oblivion in some wretched indulgence or other.

Kristen was carrying the heavy knife she'd brought from Manoj's place, not an item she would normally touch in Cape Town itself, where she could get two years just for its presence in her bag. Right here, right now, though, she was glad to have it. All the way to the villa, set back off Main Street by a fringe of security railings and heavy flowering bushes, she got more and more paranoid.

By
the time she rang the bell at the plain gray gates, she was desperate to be
off
the street. The gates swung slowly open just long enough to allow her
admittance, then immediately snapped shut behind her.

Then she walked up to the front door which was opened by a lean,
gaunt-faced
white man holding a heavy pistol leveled at her chest.

"Drop the bag and put your hands on your head," he ordered. She complied at
once. Keeping the gun, and his eyes, trained on her, the man sank down onto
one
knee to open the bag. He pulled out her knife, spat at her, and kept it in
one
hand as he told her to retrieve the bag. She did so very slowly.

"Thought you'd cut me up for the goods, huh?" he snarled at her.

"Look, chummer, I'm just the errand girl," she said wearily. "I walked down
Main Street to get here. What kind of idiot would do that without a blade?"

He nodded reluctantly and edged back into the hallway. "You better come in.
I
ain't going to just pull everything out in plain view of anyone keeping their
eyes open," he said. Sighing, she followed him in, being careful to move
slowly
and deliberately.

The man put the knife down on the table and, keeping his eyes on her,
walked
over to a desk and picked up an old, crudely made radio. Carrying it over to
her, he stuffed it into her bag.

"It's in there," he said. "Tell Manoj he can keep the radio. It still
works."
For a moment he almost allowed himself a smile and then thought better of it.
"Tell him the other half of the money had better be here by tomorrow morning
or
he's going to get a visit from some men. Now, buzz."

Kristen wasn't yet ready to abandon the chance to make some extra money.
"I've
got something Manoj said you might want to buy." The man laughed derisively,
but
that didn't put her off. "In the bag. A computer."

He extracted the radio again and put it to one side, then removed the small
box. The fact that he didn't stare at it like it was something that had just
crawled into a hole and died was promising.

"Let me scope it," he said. "But you'd better come with me. I ain't trusting you to sit in here."

Still watching her like a veldt hawk, he led her into the back room, where he told her to sit opposite him at a work table. He laid the gun down within reach and flicked the tiny power button on the computer.

"Manoj couldn't get it to work. He said maybe you could use the parts," Kristen told him. He unscrewed the casing and checked the insides.

"Nothing really wrong with it. I could use some of this, maybe," he said coolly. "Give you a hundred rand for it."

That was chicken fodder, really. But even though she didn't know what the little machine was worth, Kristen wasn't in much of a bargaining position. She'd learned that a small gain now was better than the possibility of a big gain later, so she decided to take the money.

"Sure. If you help me with one thing."

"Huh?" he grunted. She pushed the unfurled printout at

him. "One of the names on this list. Serrin Shamandar. Any way of getting more information?"

He looked at the digits on the paper. "There's a telecom number," he said. "Why ain't you tried it, stupid?"

"I can't read, stupid," she snapped, stung.

"Look, I'm not making any calls to someone I never even heard of," he said. "Some people have permanent traces that switch on as soon as you call 'em. If you want to talk to this bugger, get someone to make the call for you when you get back home. Use a public phone."

If I can find one that hasn't been fragged, she thought. The only ones still working were in parts of town where Kristen's dark skin would be out of place and make her look as suspicious as hell.

"Look, it's only a phone call," she said miserably. "He's not going to come

looking for you all the way from Seattle just because somebody calls him from Cape Town, is he? Twenty bucks I can pay you."

"Where did you get dollars? No, I won't ask," he said drily. "All right. You get half a minute, that's all."

He entered the code on his telecom, cutting the visual channel. The whine that came back left him grinning.

"That's no phone number, gal. It's a fax. Words only. You want me to type in a message? Cost you ten bucks a half-minute."

Kristen didn't want him to know what she was going to say. She didn't even know what she wanted to say. She tried to think of someone she'd trust enough to do it back in Cape Town. She got up to leave, but he leveled the gun at her.

"Twenty bucks, you said."

She threw him half of that. "You made the connection, but I didn't get to talk. Half rate," she said, staring defiantly at him. He sniffed and looked away from her.

"Have it your way. Take your knife and get back in one piece. Manoj will be really slotted off if you don't make it." He unrolled a couple of fifties from his pocket and exchanged them for the fives on the table.

By the time the gates had closed behind her and she'd run the gauntlet of eyes along the highway again, Kristen

wasn't looking forward to the bus trip home. She was carrying a five-to-ten sentence in her bag and was ten dollars poorer for nothing. Even with a hundred rand, by the time she'd bought a drink to survive the ride home she'd have spent almost as much as she was supposed to get paid for this trip. Kristen sighed. Well, that was the thing about luck. Sometimes a run of it ended just too soon.

"Lunch time, you chaps," came an infuriatingly cheerful voice. "You've had three hours' kip. Sleep any longer and you won't sleep tonight. Come on, you missed the food by time it got here."

Serrin opened his eyes and yawned. Rolling off the bed, he went burrowing into his case for his toothbrush. He was just heading for the bathroom while the troll snored thunderously on when Michael stopped him in his tracks.

"Well, it's not the Damascus League who's after you," the Englishman told him.

"German info is that they wanted to scrag Small because he's cuddling up too close to the Jewish vote. They've got a list of targets, but you're not on it.

You will also be pleased to know that Renraku, Aztechnology, HKB in London—who,

I gather, have a special interest in you—and a handful of other power-players might be keeping tabs on you, but with little in the way of homicidal intent."

"You mean you've cracked the surveillance files of Renraku? Aztechnology? Are you for real?" Serrin gasped.

"Of course not. I have a few contacts, that's all. Asking them to confirm that

you're not on anything above zero-priority level isn't calling in such a high-level favor. By the way, Frieda in Frankfurt remembers a completely anonymous man in a chauffeur's uniform. Average height, average build, shades,

peaked cap. long coat. No identifying characteristics whatsoever. She said he had a sexy voice, though."

"Great," Serrin grumbled. "Next time some drekhead tries to shoot me I'll remember to notice that."

"So we've established some negatives. Now Tracey's

doing her stuff on missing mages. Separated by race and tagged for corporate

politics, obviously. She's doing the easy stuff now, but I think I'll jump into

the pool and do the difficult ones myself while you're having lunch. I wouldn't

want to leave her to the mercies of British IC, for instance. Digging into the

heavier corporates for unre-ported losses might be tricky, too."

"Don't you ever sleep?" Serrin wondered.

"I don't need more than three hours a night. Not since I started meditating twice a day. Ten minutes of that is as good as two hours sleep, believe me.

I've

got an overactive dopaminergic circuit, Geraint tells me. He once made me pee

into some flask for one of his bloody experiments to test for some metabolites

or other when we were at Cambridge. He did chromatography and assays on it and told me that, depending on how I handled it, I'd be either one of the best deckers in the business or a schizophrenic."

Serrin looked at Michael long and hard. "You're a freak," he said finally.

"Yup," Michael smiled happily. "Most people say that to me inside an hour of meeting me. You're very polite for a sep. Got any English blood in you?"

The elf shook his head and made for the shower. By the time he'd emerged from it, shaved and bathed and happier with life, he heard Michael and Tom in earnest conversation.

"No, you're wrong," Michael was saying animatedly. "We need a hell of a lot less emotion in people. The better educated, more intelligent, more analytical people are, the better they can see the bulldrek all around them and start thinking about it."

"You don't need to think to know that some things are wrong," the troll said simply. "It's something you've got to feel. If you don't feel, you ain't got any sense of right and wrong."

"Sure, but—" Michael broke off as Serrin wandered back into view.

The Englishman looked faintly sheepish. "Sorry, old boy. I'll get back to the grindstone. I've been having a fascinating discussion with Tom." He got up from the table and headed for the second work room, fingering the datajack on his temple. "Excuse me. As we Brits are prone to say, I may be gone some time." He closed the door behind him.

"He's weird," sighed the elf.

"Are all these British like that?" the troll asked.

Serrin laughed. "Not entirely. Not all the time. But he's good at his work. He's doing what we need."

The troll grunted and made some comment about lunch.

"We could raid the freezer, or we could head for somewhere in town. I'm a bit paranoid about going out. We'd be safer here."

"I need the fresh air," Tom complained. "Anyway, I've seen his fridge. He only eats food without anything in it. It's all skimmed this and no-calorie that. A troll could die of starvation up here."

"Well, I guess nobody would recognize me in those ridiculous clothes," Serrin sighed. "I'll keep checking astrally too. I've already been doing that."

"I noticed," the troll said.

"I think I remember seeing someplace where you can get all the pizza and pasta you want for ten bucks, even if you're a troll. As long as you're with someone who isn't. That way, twenty covers you and the other guy," the elf said.

"If you've got your Predator, I've got my Room-sweeper," the troll sniffed. "I got an empty belly too. Now, where is this place?"

9

The alert from Tracey surprised him. Most of the frame-decking had been pretty simple, but this time Michael was getting a message that the Zulu Nation system he'd tried to get into was an expert system. That spelled danger. The only reason he'd checked it was because a flight from New Hlobane had arrived in JFK fifteen minutes before Serrin had fled for Frankfurt. Which intrigued him. The schedule for European and Japanese flights was exactly what he'd expected to find, but a direct flight from the Zulu capital into New York's JFK was not. That startling fact stood out like a grain of grit in vaseline. Now the frame was telling him these Zulus had some serious design work in their police systems.

Serrin and Tom were still out, so he rigged himself up with a cardiomonitor and respiratory analyzer and jacked in. Appearing in the virtual reality of the Matrix as a professor, complete with gown and mortar board, he gripped the violin case that carried his machine-gun attack utility and headed out the long route of datalines across the Atlantic.

The frame had already ferreted out the SAN number for the Zulu system, so he knew where to go. What he didn't know was whether there was any system alert; Tracey would have disengaged before finding out. He switched to evasion mode, minimizing his chances of being detected until he could determine whether any alarm programs had been triggered.

The system access node appeared to him as a circle of grassland hemmed in by broad-leaved, thick-barked trees swaying slightly in some unknown breeze. The sleeping lioness wasn't a surprise, though he didn't like her proximity to the rope bridge across the stream in the distance. Even more worrisome was the vulture sitting peacefully in one of the trees. He had no way of even guessing what kind of construct it might be.

Inching forward he felt the familiar tug at his senses. This was a sculpted system, of course, custom-designed and much more difficult to maneuver than a system using standard icon imagery. He assumed that it wouldn't be too difficult to force this system to accept his persona, the icon by which he existed in this illusory electron world, but that vulture seemed ominous. Not because of what it was doing, but precisely because it wasn't doing anything. Scanner program, he guessed, but he wanted to be sure.

What it turned out to be was a lot worse than that.

He let fly the little bird of prey, the hawk that was his analyze program, to circle above the vulture while he stayed where he was, keeping an eye on the lioness. The analyzing hawk came back with some conflicting signals. Trying to make sense of it, he concentrated on seeing through the hawk's eyes.

The wings of the vulture showed a bizarre patterning, each feather with a pattern halfway between a simple spiral and a feathered fractal. Its eyes scanned everything at an impossible speed, not so much flitting around as zooming.

He had to admit it was wiz: an infinite-regress element. It was, of course, a detection program, and was entirely self-referencing. In a sculpted system, the damn thing knew exactly what was allowed in here and what wasn't. If he tried to overcome the reality of this system, it was going to squawk. If he tried to defeat it, it had an infinitely self-checking algorithm that would actually respond to its defeat. And if he tried to defeat the algorithm ... Michael got dizzy just thinking about the possibilities.

And this was just at the entrance to the system? What else did these cobblers have in here? He allowed his persona to change, accepting the slight disorientation that would bring. Now appearing in the form of a tall, spear-bearing Zulu, he strode forward to the bridge, and

switched to bod mode. In a system like this, any specialized mode of operation left too many relative weaknesses for his liking.

He took a chance on a smoke program, needing to quickly defeat the defenses of this first node. That would penalize him too, but Michael had enough confidence in his own skills not to worry overmuch. A swarm of noisy parrots filled the scene just as the lioness awoke and opened her throat to growl. Frag it, he thought, I took her for killer 1C, but it's another detection program. Surely?

Michael quit the attack program and engaged a sleaze instead. Instead of the infinitely unfolding plastic wallet of passes and permits and wads of bills, which was the program's usual image, his spear became a tribal charm, an intricate gold and silver design wholly unfamiliar to him. The lioness looked at it and yawned, a rippling growl coming from deep in her throat. Sweating a little, he edged past her toward the bridge.

That bridge has got to be barrier 1C, he thought. And he had the horrible feeling that it was probably pretty active most of the time. Try to cross that bridge and he'd find himself surrounded by killer giraffes or something. He brought the hawk to him to check it out.

The bird set one foot uncertainly on the bridge. Now that he knew it was barrier, Michael engaged the sleaze program again to get past it undetected. Neatly, the spear changed again into a snake, undulating its way across the bridge, its body touching only alternate wooden planks. Carefully taking the same route, the warrior icon followed it.

The jungle clearing beyond was standard fare, as were the tunnel-like pathways cut through the thick vegetation beyond that. This was the SPU, and down those pathways were the dataline junctions, he figured. The hawk told him there was nothing in the SPU itself; the clearing was empty.

He called up Tracey and sent her down one dataline while he trod carefully along another. He was risking sensor mode now, needing to check the databanks at the end of the passages for information on missing persons. There was, of course, a fair chance that what he was after would

be much further along in the system, but it was a chance he had to take. It depended on how the system was organized. The worst case was that the sensitive entries had been deleted entirely from the missing persons file and relocated elsewhere in far more heavily defended databases. No matter. His analyze programs could detect any trace of a deletion from way back, and if that was how they'd arranged things, taking lessons from the Israelis, he'd know about it.

He got lucky. The oranges in the citrus grove were what he was after. He recalled the frame and switched back to bod mode again, minimizing the risk. There, wallowing peacefully in a pool beside the orange trees was a very, very large hippo.

What the frag is that? he wondered. Tracey, appearing as a warrior like himself, opened her bag and released the browser program. The octopus-like creature floated happily in mid-air and began testing fruits with its avalanche of tentacles, picking off what it needed and flinging them into the bag.

A split-second before it happened Michael knew something was wrong. Watching the hippo had been a mistake; it was only a decoy. The ground behind him turned into a swamp as a tar pit program activated; in the meantime a multitude of thin black serpents sped toward him at an unbelievable rate through the swaying grass.

His reaction speed hit Mach 2. Black mambas, huh. Fastest thing without legs and poisonous as hell. Black 1C. If he jacked out now, he'd lose everything and would never get back in. He'd faced this one before. That was why he'd slapped those monitors onto his body.

Adrenaline never raced through him like it did on these rare occasions. Michael knew he didn't have long before he would be automatically disconnected by his own deck. He whirled his spear around in a circle just above ground level, hanging tough. There were hundreds of the fraggers and he could feel his core body temperature spiking as his heart began to pound wildly. The frame was already executing a sensor-triggered withdrawal when the shock hammered through him and he was flung bodily across the room, the ripped-out wires quivering over the side of

the table. Michael twitched in delicate spasms for a moment, then lay still.

"Hey, Manoj, you got to do this for me. I nearly got boxed down there, chummer. There were skollies all over the streets. You sent me into a bad place, man. That number is only to make a call to a fax, whatever that is!"

She'd done her job and it was nearly closing time at the shop. Manoj was tired and irritable after a hard day getting a lot less joy out of his trade than usual. He just wanted to get the frag out and sit down to some pickled fish and rice. This stupid slitch was a pain in the butt, and he said so.

"Ain't got no fax machine," he yelled at her.

"Yes you have. I heard you tell Nasrah last week," Kristen said triumphantly. "You told him about it like you'd just jazzed the prettiest girl in Sisulu!"

"Yeah, well that sure ain't you!" he grumbled, throwing a fake slap at her. She ducked the deliberately mis-aimed swipe. "Look, don't you go telling nobody. If the wrong people hear, it gets stolen. I can't afford another bust-in."

His key ring chinked as he attended to a padlock beneath the counter. Pulling out a heavy paneled drawer, he bent over to switch on the fax. Lights glowed on the console.

"Now, what you want to say?" he growled. "Keep it short. And I'm charging you, mind. Costs you by the second."

"Just say, um, Dear Sir--"

She tried to parrot something from formal letters she had read aloud. Like the one that informed her the City Council was discontinuing her social security payments because she'd been caught begging and hawking. That one had been a real hoser.

"Quit the fancying around. Every word costs money. Keep it short, like I said."

"Okay. Say, 'I seen your name in a list from a computer of a slag got killed."

Two other people on the list are already dead.'

"What?" he said sharply.

"Look, zip it. I know it's only one dead, but this way he might listen to me.

Besides, it could be two by now, for all we know. Hell, it could be all of them!" Manoj didn't even bother to point out that they didn't know that anyone

had been killed at all; the name he'd recognized was that of a kidnap victim. But time was short and the girl was determined. He knew the look.

"All right. I'm typing that in," he said needlessly as his fingers flew across the keyboard. "Now what?"

"Please call me on--what's your number, Manoj?"

"No you don't," he said firmly. "This is nothing to do with me. No way."

"Please!"

"Frag off. I said no."

She hissed and spat at him, but he wouldn't be budged. He'd got himself a machine with a re-route function, making it hard to trace anything back to him, and he wasn't going to give that away by giving out his code.

"Look, Kristen, why don't you just say you'll call him again this time tomorrow and give him a number then? That gives you time to find a public phone or something. Best thing to do."

"All right," she agreed weakly. What did she know about his drek? She could just about handle a telecom, tapping in numbers whose position on the console keys she'd learned by heart. But typing in letters? That would be impossible.

He finished the message and pressed the Send button. A few seconds later, the machine let him know the fax had been safely received.

"There, it's done. Go and make me some kaf and then you're out," he said grumpily.

"I can't sleep here tonight?" she said miserably. "Slot, I'm so tired. And I've been running your number all day. Come on, chummer."

"All right," he sighed, locking the drawer again, looking at her suspiciously.
"Just don't try fooling with this, hear? No trying to pick the lock and fragging it up."

"Me? Pick locks?"

Manoj hadn't been sure whether she could or not, but that wide-eyed innocent look she was giving him was a

dead giveaway. If it didn't have to do with something she'd already done, then it was something she was thinking of doing.

"Why are you doing this, girl?" he asked her as they sipped their soykaf, the front door locked and the shutters pulled down. "This slag in Seattle. What's it to you?" "I don't know," she said truthfully. "Is it a bit like, you girls get a crush on a rocker sometimes? See posters spread all around and fall in love with him? Or those girls thinking that some song has the words written specially for them?"

"Maybe it's a bit like that," she mused. She hadn't really thought it through. Thinking through her feelings wasn't one of Kristen's sharper skills.

It was at that moment that the first sledgehammer smashed through the back door. Manoj hadn't yet pulled the metal bars down: it was always the last thing he did before leaving the shop. Instantly, he dropped to his knees and pulled at something covered in sacking at the very base of the counter. Kristen saw him drag out the antiquated shotgun even as she was pulling the knife from her bag.

The door splintered off its hinges. Two of the gang almost fought their way through it, but Manoj caught them both with the first barrel. One slumped forward, the left side of his body streaming blood. The other one fell screaming back into the darkness.

"You fraggin' scum. You want the other barrel?" Manoj shrieked. There were still figures out there in the street that was dark as pitch. They must have knocked out the street lights before hitting the shop.

The butterfly knife whirled in from the darkness to hit him in the side of the throat. Kristen screamed as Manoj staggered backward, blood dappling the trinkets and brooches, the angular face of the ribboned Xhosa mask on the wall almost comically bisected with a thick red line. She knew Manoj was mortally wounded when he fired the second barrel, something he would do only if he had nothing left to lose. She bolted for the stairs, with just enough time to grab her little bag, wrap a cloth

around her hand, and smash the single small window in the room.

The street was five meters below, but just as Kristen was struggling to force her way through the groaning frame, she felt rough, hard hands gripping her legs. With a mighty effort of will, she just managed to draw one knee forward and then kick backward with every bit of her strength. The kick hit hard, followed by the sound of a pleasing groan, but she overbalanced and toppled downward even as the hands released her. Rushing up to meet her was the pale stone of the street.

10

The old monastery nestling amid the conifers was truly beautiful. Even in the summer, misty haze swam around it from the ferns and grass, saturated by mid-afternoon rain and now gleaming in the evening sunlight. The Rolls-Royce purred along the gravel drive, throwing up a splatter of stones. As the car came to a halt outside the building's arched rear doors, two men in blue suits stepped out of the shadows almost in synchrony. One of them, darker and smaller than the other, entered the monastery as the door opened before him. His fellow joined the peak-capped chauffeur busily making preparations to deal with the occupant of the auto's customized rear seat.

"His Grace will see you now," the butler said to the dark-haired man, who ignored him and stepped up to the library doors, where he knocked and waited for the familiar voice from within. The summons soon followed.

He entered and went over to stand before the figure seated at a desk in front of huge arched windows completely covered with heavy drapes. Luther sat browsing through a dusty tome in the candlelight he always favored here. His entirely bald head lifted almost imperceptibly. He stared at his returning servitor, as if silently bidding him make his report.

"It is done, Your Grace. Lothar will be making the preparations now. Everything went perfectly, sir."

"Good, Martin." Even just those two words betrayed the strangeness of his voice. The inflection of the name was subtly wrong, somehow, but any listener would have had difficulty pinpointing exactly how. The words came as if from some voicesynth that fell just short of perfect

only because its maker had deliberately not completed the final adjustments.

"I have missed you," Luther said, letting the book slip from his hands.

Martin Mattheus felt a wave of relief ripple through his body. In more than a century of serving this great man, these words were the closest to anything resembling sentiment he'd ever heard him utter. It was more than he deserved.

"There is much work to be done," Luther said simply. He stood up, running his hands with their crooked fingers back across his brow and pointed ears, smoothing his sleek skull. "You must take care of the downloading from the Nongoma field trials. I need the last of the data tomorrow. It is regrettable that I was forced to take such drastic measures."

Panic began to well up in Martin. As yet, Luther had not punished anyone for the bungled kidnapping. He must be biding his time. Martin hadn't been part of that, but he knew perfectly well that once Luther's icy rage had built to the point of physical action, he would delight in adding caprice to his sadism. And, after Heidelberg, Luther's anger would be growing. Two serious failures in a month would call for a victim, maybe more than one. The crucial moment would come when Luther had fed, when his energies were high and he burned. But then, surely, Martin would be at one with the computers and databases and Luther would not come looking for him.

"When you're done, return here," Luther said forbiddingly, his tone momentarily increasing Martin's anxiety. Fortunately, his next words allayed those fears.

"I think we shall have to monitor the Americans," Luther went on. "I doubt they will do anything out in the open yet. But they may well send some kind of spy. Most likely, they'll try to deck into our matrix systems. I wish to review the security with you."

"Yes, Your Grace," Martin replied gratefully. It would mean more work, but it would also keep him safe, not least because he would be able to lock himself into the computer laboratory and justify his seclusion on security grounds. The locks wouldn't stop Luther, of course, but if

he came after Martin in fury they might slow him down enough to cool his rage. Martin knew all the signs of a frenzy building in Luther, and he could see a mighty one coming over him this night.

"Will that be all for now, Your Grace?" he said hopefully. Luther dismissed him with a wave of a hand. Martin bowed as he left, then scuttled away down to the old crypts.

Luther coughed drily, smoothed his suit and adjusted his black tie. He had a funeral to go to, after all.

Michael came around, trolls hammering on the anvil that was his head, just as the door opened. Serrin and Tom found him on his knees, still trying to get to his feet. His eyes were bloodshot and his pallor deathly. Tom raced to help him, hauling the limp body up under the arms, lifting him with ridiculous ease.

"Don't make a song and dance about it, old boy," Michael joked weakly. He felt the healing hands of the shaman gripping him, power flowing through the troll. The weakness faded, and the pain in his head dulled to a throb rather than the violent pulsing with which he'd awakened. He took a deep breath and shook his head to clear his senses.

"I'm all right. My software for automatically taking me out of the circuit has to be the best on the planet," he said. "Crikey, but that system was running some serious 1C. There must be something they really didn't want me to find. Now let's see what that is."

"Wait a minute," Serrin said. "Take a rest. You've only just come around. Get some coffee down you first."

Michael shook his head. "I don't need to deck in again. All I have to do is use Norman through the I/O and download it." Serrin and Tom smiled at each other.

"Don't you think that giving names to your frames is a bit, um, eccentric?" Serrin chuckled. "It's not as if they were real people, you know."

"They've got more personality than some allegedly real ones I know," Michael snorted. "Especially in New York. Of course it's eccentric. I'm bloody English, after all. I'm supposed to be eccentric; it's in my contract." Sit

ting himself down, he began tapping in his instructions through an ordinary console, the wires from the Fairlights now unattached and dangling.

Printouts churned from the array of machinery as Serrin made his choice between Kenyan and Costa Rican. The African blend seemed more appropriate somehow. By the time he carried the tray into the room, Michael had generated yards of facts and figures. As he scanned through them eagerly, his face became more and more perplexed.

"I don't understand this. Half this drek is irrelevant. They beat my browse program! All I managed to collect was a pile of junk. Oh great, some Umfolozi schoolkid reported missing by concerned parents. What is this drek? And why would anyone want to go to such trouble to coat it in 1C?"

He sat back, eyes cast up toward the ceiling. Serrin could almost see the neurons firing.

"There has to be a buried codesort in this. No way would a database lump all this stuff together. There has to be some limbo coding or something," he muttered.

Tom shot Serrin a puzzled look by way of a question. Serrin gave him his best "I don't know what the frag he's talking about" look by way of a reply.

They couldn't stop the Englishman from jacking back in, distrusting his smart frames now, after their initial failure. Five minutes later, he jacked out with a big smile on his face. The printout churned out just three entries.

"Cunning little code. Uses a recursive—" Seeing the looks on their faces, he stopped short. "Ah, sorry. Let's just say it's cute, as you seps would put it."

"Seps?" Tom asked, just the hint of annoyance rising in his ocean-deep

voice.

He was unfamiliar with the English slang term for Americans. Serrin, knowing the derivation, didn't think the troll would take it too well. It wasn't what anyone would call complimentary.

"It's not important right now," the elf muttered.

"Interesting. Two of these kidnappings date from 2054 and, according to Zulu intelligence reports, have clear corporate links. But I don't think that's what we're after. Corporate abductions of company men aren't what we're

dealing with. Which leaves us only one. Exactly, um, twenty-three days ago. An attempted kidnap of a mage named Shakala in the Umfolozi Domains. Crikey. That's serious business."

"What are the Umfolozi Domains?" Tom asked fretfully. He couldn't follow half of what Michael was saying, but the Englishman always seemed to enjoy giving the details when he asked.

"Natural environment. An old wildlife reserve. Ever since the Awakening, it's become largely undisturbed terrain occupied by paranimals and semi-nomadic tribes. A lot of metahumans among them. Thing is, the mages among those people are powerful. Trying to kidnap one of them seems an extraordinary risk. Far more dangerous than trying to snatch Serrin off the streets of Heidelberg."

"So why do it?" Serrin queried.

"Good question, but one I can't answer right now. For one thing, I want to see what else the frames may have dug out of the other databases. For another, there aren't any notes in this file which might account for it. The intelligence analysis says there's no evidence of corporate involvement. The attempted abduction was, apparently, filed as a report by a government mage who just happened to be conducting some astral surveillance in the right place at the right time. No profiles of the kidnappers, though. Curses."

"You shouldn't call them 'the frames'," Serrin whispered with a smirk. "The children might be listening."

Michael ignored him and made preparations for plowing through the rest of his data. A beep from something in Serrin's jacket pocket startled him, and he groped for the downloader. Depressing the display button, the elf read the message while Michael looked on expectantly.

"There's a fax for me back in Seattle," he said. "I have a message forwarding number. If there's something there, it lets me know."

"Expecting anything?" Michael asked.

"Not really. Let's look into it so I can read it off. I could do it line by line on the screen, but if it's a long message, that'd be really tedious."

Michael had the short message printed out in seconds.

He handed it to Serrin without looking. The elf read the words and turned even paler than usual. He passed the sheet back to Michael without comment.

The Englishman then read the message aloud for Tom's benefit. Not sure whether or not the troll could read, he didn't want to embarrass him into having to admit it. The shaman took note of that.

" 'I seen your name in a list from a computer owned by a slag got killed. Two other people on the list are already dead. I will call you at this time tomorrow and give you a telecom code to contact me.' No name, no ID. There's an incoming fax number, obviously."

"I'm getting rather paranoid about anonymous messages," Serrin said.

"Let's trace the incoming number," Michael said, repairing to his array of machinery to begin his trawling.

Serrin and Tom didn't talk much during the brief time Michael conducted his electronic search. They'd had enough time for that over coffee and Serrin's cigarettes in the restaurant. The elf knew Tom was unhappy in this strange city, disliking it greatly. He was no street shaman, and even if he had been, he wouldn't have liked the streets of Manhattan. His only comment was that the place lacked any heart or kindness.

"Rerouted, of course," Michael said with a gleam in his eye when he was done.

'The original message was sent from Cape Town. Now, that's a coincidence, isn't it? Two shots at the Confederated Azanian Nations inside ten minutes. I'm tracing the address and the owner now. Ah, here we are." He worked on as he talked, his frames doing the donkey labor. "Now, let's see what we can find out about Mr. Manoj Gavakar. Obviously, he's a Cape Indian, but is he a mage or is he ..." His voice trailed away.

"What've you got?" Serrin asked quickly.

"The message was sent nine hours ago. Mr. Gavakar's premises were burned to the ground within an hour of that. His body, or rather a body assumed to be his since it's in such a state that ID is pending, was found inside. That's in the public newsmag, so it isn't classified information."

Serrin looked at the Englishman, horrified by the implications of this information. Tom was leaning forward, hunched, thinking. Up to now, the troll had been operating purely in response to Serrin's paranoia. He hadn't felt really involved. But this was closer to the bone. Being present through all these developments made him feel that something was surely going on after all.

"Makes me think of that old saying: Just because you're paranoid don't mean they're not out to get you," the troll said.

"Or, like the saying goes now, anyone who ain't paranoid ain't paying enough attention," the Englishman said drily. "But this isn't paranoia. There's a charred corpse in Cape Town which definitely proves that. But all we've come to now is a dead end, literally. For the time being.

"We've got to search the databases for everything we can on Mr. Shakala, our Zulu mage, and anyone else we can turn up," he said, getting to his feet. "It's going to be a long night. Excuse me for a while. I need to get some rest. See you in half an hour." Michael retired to his bedroom, where he dropped into a well-upholstered armchair, closed his eyes and sank into the calm of meditation.

Kristen somehow dragged her bloodied and bruised body to Indra's back door. It was a miracle the police didn't pick her up on the way, what with all the blood on her clothes, but she kept to the dark back-alleys and secluded ways as she stumbled across town. She was badly shaken, and thought maybe a rib or two might be broken, but the blood was mostly from deep grazing than anything truly serious.

When the bouncer saw her, wild-eyed and bloody, he was about to throw her bodily back into the garbage-strewn alley until she screamed at him to fetch Indra, that this was family business, life and death. The ork hesitated and snarled a message into the intercom, keeping her at bay with some choice insults until the elegant Indian woman appeared in person. At that point he fell into sullen silence.

"Tsotsis killed Manoj," Kristen managed to say and then almost collapsed against the ork bouncer. He recoiled in disgust, but at a sharp word from Indra he dragged her into the back room.

While gulping down some harsh brandy, Kristen gave Indra the best description she could of the killers. She was aware that she was describing the Xhosa killers of an Indian to another Indian, and that she herself was half-Xhosa. It gave matters an edge she didn't like at all, but it was the same one she'd lived with for all her days. She just never got used to it. Kristen didn't know whether Indra would be grateful, since Manoj was one of her infinitude of cousins, or whether she'd beat the drek out of her.

"You can stay here. I'll get someone to see to you," Indra said emotionlessly. "Take her upstairs, Netzer. Put her in one of the girls' rooms."

"They're all busy," the ork said huffily.

"Then tell one of the customers his twenty minutes is up and kick him out," Indra said sharply. "I'll call Sunil," she told Kristen. "Go get cleaned up."

"Thank you," the girl said gratefully, forgetting that she actually had enough money to get a room where she could sleep safely tonight.

An hour later she had to be awakened when the soft-voiced old man arrived. She knew Sunil, though she could rarely afford his treatments. His gentle hands checked her over thoroughly, then he turned to Indra, standing impassively in the doorway of the garish whore's bedroom.

"The ribs are bruised but not broken," he said, adopting the traditional doctor's manner of talking about a patient as if she were somehow deaf or an imbecile. Even street docs still did that. "Everything else can be cleaned up with a little antiseptic. I think she might need a stitch or two in that torn earlobe."

Kristen hadn't even been particularly aware that her earring was missing until he mentioned it. Her hand went up automatically to feel it, but she managed to stop it before her fingers actually touched the open wound.

"I can pay," she said weakly. He nodded and looked at her expectantly. She reached into her bag and took out some dollars, but by the time he looked satisfied, her treasure had been reduced by more than half. The luck truly was beginning to turn sour. But the price was fair, and she knew, as he asked for hot water and took his own antiseptic from a tattered old bag, that she could count on being patched up and clean by the time he was finished. But all of a sudden she was angry about her torn earlobe; her ears were small, delicate, and perhaps the prettiest feature she had.

Then again, maybe things couldn't be all bad if she could afford to worry about her looks at a time like this. As she watched Sunil hook some gut into his needle, Kristen clenched her teeth and waited for the pain.

11

Kristen slept long, almost until ten, her body craving sleep to recoup from the exhaustion of her injuries and the strain of all that had happened the night before. Waking up stiff and groggy, she raised an arm to rub her eyes, then groaned at the pain in her ribs now that the effects of the sedative had worn off. She blinked and looked around, at first not remembering where she was. Then it all came back to her. This was Indra's place, though Kristen was surprised the Indian woman hadn't turfed her out by now. She fumbled her way out of the unfamiliar surroundings of the bedroom and tottered downstairs.

The club was not yet open for its midday business, and Kristen found Indra and her girls breakfasting. The girls looked haggard, even in their gaudy robes and wrappers, and an eerie red light permeated the dingy interior of the club, which reeked of last night's smoke and sweaty dancing. It was the kind of place where anyone without a hangover would wonder why on earth he didn't have one.

"Come and eat," Indra commanded. Kristen wouldn't have been able to face the rich food on Indra's plate, but there were also poached and scrambled eggs and toast and pitchers of orange juice and pots of soykaf on the table. She didn't need a second invitation.

"We found them," Indra told her, with grim satisfaction. "The boy in yellow-Netzer knew him. And we've evened the score. I am pleased that you came to me."

Kristen hardly remembered blurting out her description of the gap-toothed kid who'd chased her up the stairs of Manoj's shop. That yellow jacket had probably been the one thing of style or worth the kid could call his own after he'd blown his money on booze and dagga and street

girls. His only possession of value had been his death warrant, and not in the usual way of Cape Town's streets. Indra would have been able to call on a hundred family members to deal with the tsotsis. It was the reason no one ever tried to rob the club.

"Eat all you want. When you're healed up, I could take you on," Indra offered.

Not wanting to offend this powerful woman, Kristen chose her words carefully. "Thank you, Indra. I'll keep that in mind," she said. "But maybe you can help me in another way. Do you know someone who might be able to do me a favor? I can pay." It was the necessary underlining to any request for help.

Indra's black-lined eyes narrowed a little. She knew it was the girl's clever way of asking her for help, and she was wary.

"What is it you want, girl?"

"I just need to make a call. To someone with a fax machine. I want to leave a message for him to phone me, and I need a number where he can call me back."

"Who is it?" Indra asked suspiciously.

When Kristen answered, "An American," the Indian woman looked even more suspicious. Kristen couldn't think of any clever way of justifying the request, except for the one ace she had to play.

"I called him from Manoj's last night. Manoj said it was all right to use his number for the return call. Now I can't do that anymore. I need another

number."

Indra looked uncertain. If it had been chill with Manoj, maybe it wasn't so great a risk. Then, suddenly, she smiled.

"All right, girl. Netzer, he's got one of those hand phones. Picked it up from some drunk causing trouble, beating up on one of the girls." Which meant the ork had in turn beaten the slag senseless and taken everything he had, including the phone. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind your borrowing it for a while."

Indra was obviously amused at the prospect of ruffling the ork. Maybe Netzer had got on her bad side for some reason. Kristen didn't care as long as they gave her what

she wanted. That Indra also allowed her to use her fax was just a bonus.

Serrin was awakened by the bleeper in the middle of the night. He'd reprogrammed the unit to alert him whenever an incoming fax was received, and quickly got out of bed to lock the unit into Michael's fax units. The message chuntered out. This time there was a number to call—and a name. It hadn't come exactly twenty-four hours later, but then he hadn't expected to hear anything at all. Manoj Gavakar was dead, after all.

He tapped in the telecom code, but when he connected, got only a girl's voice, not her image. Excited and breathless, she spoke with an African intonation that made her dark-skinned in his imagination. He had to ask her to calm down and speak slower.

"You're in danger. Someone is trying to kill you," Kristen said more quietly.

"Kill me?" he said, thinking she must have misunderstood something. It was a snatch, not a hit, that he feared. But maybe she'd heard or seen something more. And that list she'd mentioned, he wanted to find out what was on it.

"The names," he went on. "Can you read them to me?"

There was a pause. "Just a moment," she said uncertainly, somebody else will have to read them to you. After a short delay another woman's voice came over

the line. She reeled off half a dozen names, which Serrin frantically scribbled down. It was the fifth one that sent ice down his spine. Shakala, the Zulu mage.

"Kristen, this is important. Do you hear me?" he said urgently when she was back on the line. "Tell me what you saw."

She gave him the story of the kidnapping and he realized that she'd gotten confused. She'd thought the man who'd been shot was the target. The crucial thing to Serrin was the man who'd been snatched. She remembered his name from the news, and it was one of those on the list. Serrin underlined it.

"Can you come here?" she said simply. Serrin paused; he hadn't even contemplated that possibility.

"Kristen, why are you doing this?" he asked, suddenly suspicious again.

"I saw your picture in the paper," she said. That was no explanation. Not, at least, one with any logic behind it. Michael would certainly have sniffed at it.

"I don't know if I can," he said slowly. "I have friends trying to help me find out what's going on. They have a lot of searching to do. I don't know where we're going next."

"Oh," she said, conveying a world of disappointment in that one small syllable.

"Can I call you again at this number?" he asked. "I don't think so. It's a friend's phone. I don't have one," the voice came back. "It's not easy."

"Is there somewhere I can find you if we do come over?" Serrin asked. She gave him the name and address of Indra's club and told him to ask for her there.

"Look, I'm grateful for this," he said. "Really grateful. I'd like to reward you in some—"

"I don't want your money," she said angrily. "That's not why I called. I want to see you." Then the line went dead.

Serrin cupped his fingers around his nose and breathed

hard into his hands. He didn't know what to make of this.

Michael had joined him by now, looking ready for

work once more. Serrin told him about the call, and gave

him the list of names.

"She got this from some kind of pocket computer?" Michael asked.

"Sounds a bit dubious, doesn't it?" Serrin said. "People get careless. One of the kidnapppers could have dropped it in the struggle. These things happen. I could probably find out a lot if I could get hold of the list. Why didn't you ask her about it?" Michael complained.

"I didn't think. Frag it, it's the middle of the night and this came out of the blue. Gimme a break," the elf grumbled.

Michael pored over the list once again, then began to thumb through the printouts from his many trawlings of the world's electronic databases. He yelped with delight when he found the first match.

"Hey! Got one. Two, with Shakala. This one's from Banska Bystrica."

"Where the frag—"

"Slovakia. Don't even ask me to pronounce his name, because I can't. We'll start digging with him. She's got something. She must have seen the people who tried to get you. Did you ask her about Scarface?"

The elf looked guilty.

"Oh, term, you are one dozy dweeb," Michael growled. "Call her back."

"I can't," Serrin explained.

"Great," Michael said. "You don't find out anything that really matters and we can't get back to our mystery girl. Just brilliant."

"I got the names," Serrin countered.

Michael rubbed his face. It wasn't quite early enough for a shave, but late enough to feel just a little uncomfortable without one. "Okay. Sorry. It's just that if I—

"I know. But we can't all be bloody perfect," Serrin said, annoyed with the man. "Especially two minutes after waking up."

Michael's expression changed. "I'm sorry, Serrin. You're absolutely right. My humble apologies. Do we have any way of contacting her?"

"An address," Serrin offered.

"Then either we send someone or we go there ourselves," Michael said. "You've been to Azania before, haven't you? So Geraint's bio said."

"I spent three months in Joburg when I was nine years old because my parents were working there," Serrin told him. "I can't remember much about it except that it was as thoroughly unpleasant as any big UCAS city."

"And nothing like Cape Town. Or Umfolozi, for that matter. Oh well. But what about Tom? Would he go?" Michael's tone of voice changed a little. Serrin didn't think the Englishman regarded the troll as anything but an accessory.

"We can only ask," Serrin replied. "Let's sleep on it and decide in the morning."

"After I've done some more homework," Michael grinned. "Lots of lovely databases to rifle." He prepared

to jack in, rubbing his hands at the prospect. "Come to me, my little data packets, I'm not going to hurt you."

"Just don't get brain fried," Serrin said lightly, though it was no jest.

"Zero sweat. If I get into anything unpleasant, I'll call," Michael assured him. As the Englishman tuned into the chatter and imagery of the matrix, Serrin returned to his dreamless sleep. In the corner, Tom snored on.

While Serrin was dropping into sleep again on one side of the Atlantic,

another elf gazed out at the gray eastern waters of the same ocean on a beautiful morning. The long grass, the slate rocks and hard stone, the trees struggling to survive the whipping winds, glowed with life under the brilliant sun on such a day. He lay back to luxuriate in it.

He could not risk putting any watcher spirits close to the mage even though he wanted to know if Serrin had been actively pursuing the people who'd tried to kidnap him. He had other priorities. The mage's flight to New York, and the company he was keeping, said that he intended to do something. Niall guessed that he'd found the right pawn after all. Having Mathanas leave the message had been crude, but perhaps effective.

What he did learn from his watchers was that Luther was not pursuing his quarry any further. He'd done the same thing in Azania. Once things got botched, he simply disposed of his own pawns. Niall didn't know exactly how Luther was selecting his victims, but he could make an educated guess. Protecting the next in line wasn't something he could concern himself with, painful though it was to think of what would happen to them. Luther's hunger had grown to extreme levels, and that was simply unknown for one of his kind. It meant he was almost burning up with the intensity of what he was doing.

It was the thought of what Luther was doing that suddenly made Niall shiver even on such a warm and magnificent morning as this—that, and the fact that if he revealed his interest by making any overt moves he'd be destroyed out of hand by his own flesh and blood. Almost all his magical energies, and those of his allies, were

directed at keeping him hidden. To turn against the will of the Danaan-mor, the real power in the land of Tir na n6g, was heresy, treason, a betrayal of infinite and eternal proportions. It just happened to be the only right thing to do.

12

The sound of a troll lumbering around the bathroom woke Serrin just after eight. Tom wasn't the quietest being on the planet. His gargling could easily have been taken for a major plumbing disaster.

Michael was knee-deep in paper by the time Serrin had finished the coffee-making ritual. The Englishman was almost oblivious to his presence until he sniffed liquid breakfast. Seeming almost to snap back into the real world,

he
looked around him with some distaste.

"That's the problem with three males in an apartment," he observed. "Men
get
so damn untidy."

Serrin decided to ignore that in favor of more important matters. "How's it
going?" he asked. Tom had joined them now, bearing the remains of the
fridge's
contents in various assortments on plates. The waffles looked unappetizing
despite the last of the preserves the troll had heaped on them. He munched
cheerfully on several as Michael ran down what his long night's work had
yielded.

"Well, the girl's list has names that I didn't have, and not just the
bugger
who got snatched in Cape Town. That's not so surprising because obviously I
can't search the entire damned globe. What is crucial are the three names that
I
did find. Two of them were kidnappings, in Slovakia and Greece. Both elven
mages, no corporate ties. No data on the kidnappers, no witnesses of any
value,
both vanished without trace. The third is Shakala, and he's still alive.
Reason
one for going to Azania: he's the best first-hand witness we're going to get.

"Now it gets more difficult," the Englishman sighed. Leaning back a little,
he
fiddled with his blue silk tie. "Of

the names I didn't have, I learned that one was an elf mage from Finland
and
the other two human mages, one from Vienna and one from Munich. So if these
people are linked, they're not linked by being elves. The link, so far, seems
to
be that they're all mages. Right?"

Serrin and Tom nodded. So far, so good.

"But the other two; they're a problem. Both German. One from Dresden, one
from
Koblenz."

"Our kidnapper likes Germany, it seems," Serrin observed drily.

"Yes, but neither of them has been kidnapped."

"Maybe the kidnappers haven't got around to them yet," Tom suggested.

"Right. Absolutely," Michael said, really getting warmed up now. "That's the first thing that occurred to me. But there's one simple problem with that."

"Which is?" Serrin asked.

"Neither of them is a mage. One is a very ordinary medical technician working for BuMoNa, the state medical system in Germany, and the other is a blue-collar worker for IFM. That's Internationale Fahrzeug-Und Maschinenbau-Union Ag, to you and me."

"Ah," Serrin said limply. He couldn't think of any snappy rejoinders, not at this time of day.

"Have you tried to warn any of these people?" Tom asked the Englishman.

"I didn't want to do anything until I'd talked to you two."

"I think we should contact them at once. They're in danger," the troll said.

"Wait a minute. We don't know that for sure. The only kidnap cases among the names on this list are mages. These others aren't mages. We can't just go around phoning people up and telling them that some crazed kidnapper may be hunting them down on the basis of a piece of paper we've never seen."

"We can't just leave them in danger either," the troll smarted.

"We don't know they're in danger. We can't be sure the girl even got the names right—she can't read, after all. Anyway, what if we're wrong? We'd be frightening these

people for nothing. And besides, what could they do? Go to the police and tell them that some Englishman in New York has told them, on the basis of a phone call from a girl in Azania to an American she's never seen and doesn't know, that they're in mortal danger? Don't be ridiculous."

"Which means that if they were rich enough not to need the police, you'd tell them because they could afford to take care of themselves," Tom said angrily. He

glared at Michael.

"Tom, we really can't be sure," Serrin said gently. "And Michael is right about one thing. The police wouldn't take any of this seriously." Not to be mollified, the troll stalked into the kitchen, his exit soon followed by some loud noises of cleaning up. At first it sounded more like he was breaking dishes and throwing silverware, but the noises gradually reverted to a more normal clatter while Michael and Serrin pondered what to do next. By the time the troll was back, still glowering, they had the beginnings of a plan.

"Tom, if we're going to warn these people, we'll need a whole lot more to go on," Michael said. The troll didn't argue; he just crossed his arms and waited for more. "We should go to Azania. We can find this girl, and maybe talk to the Zulu mage. If we could find out more, we'd be in a much better position to do something. We might get descriptions, more data from the computer the girl found. Who knows?"

"For me to just keep searching the world's systems might only muddy the picture further. For the first time, we've got some clear leads to follow up. I know it seems wild to go flying off to the other side of the world, but we've got two witnesses and a computer that might produce something important. Far-fetched as it seems, I think we should go."

Tom thought about it for a few moments, then nodded. He wasn't as yet ready to forget that Michael had dismissed his concern as ridiculous, but the Englishman's reasoning made sense.

"Do you know the girl's race?" Michael asked.

"She's not white," Serrin said. "At least, I don't think so."

"Does it matter that much?" Tom asked.

"You haven't been to the Cape Republic before, have you?" Michael retorted rather sarcastically. "It's about the last place on earth where a person's metatype doesn't matter much, Tom. Well, not unless you're a Boer, but then everyone hates those fraggers anyway. What counts there is whether you're Anglo-white, Euro-white, Xhosa, Indian, or Zulu, though there aren't many of those. If you're Xhosa, depends which tribe you're from. And God help you if you're mixed race."

"Why?" Tom persisted. As a troll he'd encountered his own share of racism, and knew that most of his ork and troll chummers had suffered the same. The

relevance of this different, older, discrimination wasn't clear to him.

"If she's black, odds are she's a Xhosa. If we go on to Umfolozi, we wouldn't be able to use her as a native guide. Drek! Sorry," Michael cursed himself, "that was patronizing. You know what I mean, though. This stuff is a time bomb down there. It's not like metatype doesn't count. The Humanis line goes down big with the Boers, and the Zulu elves are just as fierce in ruling their domains. We'll have to be careful.

"That said, there's a direct flight later today into Cape Town. Do we want bookings?"

"He's making no moves, though?" Jenna said anxiously. Serrin was a complication she hadn't banked on.

"Apparently not," the ginger-haired male said calmly. "But the company he's keeping is a little unexpected. The troll, well, he's a big dumb lump of meat. No surprises there. He's a hired bodyguard. They knew each other in Seattle some years back; ran the shadows together. But the man, Sutherland, is an exceptional decker. I think one of your own Princes might be able to confirm that," he smirked.

At that, Jenna gave him one of her icy stares. It wasn't Magellan's job to know more about the politics of Tir Tairngire than she thought prudent. But he used an ace in the hole to cover himself.

"It's the surveillance that's surprising," he said, playing with his fingernails. He didn't say any more, not yet. In their old game, he wanted her to ask for what he had and she wanted him to tell her without being asked. It was their little ritual of seeing who would break the silence first. This time, for once, he won.

"What surveillance?" she asked sharply.

"Someone is conducting astral surveillance. At a very safe distance. Sutherland's apartment has some pretty good hermetic protection; he wouldn't pay that kind of rent without getting magical security that's good and tight. Really tight. So, our snooper is keeping well away. He's damn clever."

"How do you know the surveillance is of Serrin?" she asked.

"I don't. But it wasn't there a week ago. As it happens, an associate happened to scan the area on an entirely unconnected matter. It seems rather a coincidence if it isn't aimed at him," Magellan replied.

Jenna knew he was lying, or skirting the truth. Magellan had no associates, but must have been personally snooping the area on some mission about which she knew nothing. But duplicity and dissimulation were such a core part of their relationship that as long as he dared not refuse her demands, she didn't care what other mistresses or masters he served.

"I would hazard a guess that he's trying to find out who was behind the attempt to kidnap him," Magellan said.

"What are his chances?"

"Impossible to say. Frankly, I don't see what he's got to go on. Without knowing about the other cases, he couldn't begin to find out. But perhaps, if one started by checking on kidnappings of other elven mages, he might get an accurate list. Surely, though, one or two must have disappeared without Luther being responsible," he grinned. "No, I don't think anyone could figure it out. Not unless they had an edge somewhere along the line." "And we don't know if he has," she said, staring out over Crater Lake. Crystalline light gleamed off the water.

"Not unless you want me to arrange for a break-in," he laughed.

"Hardly your most intelligent suggestion," she said irritably.

"A jest. If I were given to such things I wouldn't be sitting talking with you now. No, I think we wait. If he moves, then I follow. If he doesn't move, it means he doesn't plan to do anything. If he doesn't do anything, we have no problem. QED."

"The logic is watertight. Unfortunately, logic is unlikely to dictate his behavior," Jenna observed drily.

"But you agree?" he asked, probing for what she wanted.

She considered, silently and at length. Finally her answer came.

"Yes, I think I do. It's more important that we give our attentions to Luther.
This elf mage is only a fly. We need not concern ourselves with him."

"Unless he spreads his wings and flies like the wind," Magellan said, absurdly pleased with stretching her metaphor.

"Unless he moves. Yes." She didn't stoop to humor. "If he does, go after him. And without being seen. I'll deal with Luther."

He didn't bother to tell her that he had his own ways of following Luther's activities.

The courier appeared within an hour after Michael's frantic calls, made from the privacy of his bedroom. When the package of fake IDs arrived, Tom and Serrin weren't pleased.

"What's this? I don't like fake IDs," Serrin complained. "Not to a country I don't even know."

"Look, term, if there's someone trying to snatch you, do you really want to travel under your own name? On a flight schedule even a seven-year-old with a Radio Shack could deck into? No, chummer. I know Cape Town. This will pass just fine. Hell, a monkey could get through with this, but it's up to you. You want to travel as a sitting duck, be my guest. I'll travel separately under one of my usual fakes."

"One of them?" Serrin said, astonished.

"False identification is not the exclusive province of professional criminals and company men, you know. Not that there's much difference between the two anyway. I have some truly excellent fake IDs courtesy of a couple of megacorps I could mention," Michael said proudly.

"Is this chill, Serrin?" Tom asked uncertainly, looking at the papers and plastic before him. He'd never been outside Seattle, and he hadn't a clue what to think about all of this.

Serrin examined the IDs, the passports and visas and medical chits and all the rest of it. "Looks pretty good," he said grudgingly.

"It's the best," Michael said. "Trust me. There's a sub-orbital flight at nineteen hundred. Gives us plenty of time. I assume you'll want to take some magical precautions against anyone discovering our departure, Serrin. That should give you enough time. With the time difference, we get in just around dawn local time. But that's still not too late to get a taste of the night life; it goes on well past then. I don't know what's your fancy, but whatever it is, you can find it in the Cape."

"Yeah, I bet," the troll said sadly. "Kids dying for a handful of chips or a bagful of white. Women half-dead at twenty on the streets. The kind of thing I guess you don't see up here."

"You won't find me in those places," Michael shot back instantly. "The only bad habits I've got are spending too much on clothes and computers. Go and find someone else to blame. I didn't know about you two, that's all."

"Hey, let's keep the bickering down to sensible limits," Serrin pleaded. "We've got our hands full trying to find out who's going after all these people, right? Let's keep that in mind." Then he left the room, saying he was going to pack his bags.

Tom tried a last glower at Michael, but he knew he'd been unfair to him and the other man wasn't about to back down. Making more noise than was necessary, he followed Serrin out. Michael considered packing one of the Fairlights, then settled for the Fuchi instead. He wasn't given to taking million-nuyen risks on the road.

Dusk had long fallen when the elf's watcher spirits informed him of the little group's departure. Though Serrin had his usual masking engaged to magically disguise their exit, Niall saw through the subterfuge. The very cleverness of it told him the elf had guessed that it was a mage who'd tried to kidnap him. It didn't take long to discover where Serrin and his two companions were headed.

"It's probably the first step along the path," Niall said to his companion. For a moment, the ghost of a smile played over Niall's face at the pun, a play on words that Serrin, like most elves from beyond the shores of Tfr na n6g,

would not have understood. The elven form at his side said nothing at all.

"He is gone to Azania, then," Niall said almost sadly, even knowing that he couldn't have hoped for anything better. Serrin would have not found his quarry yet; he would still be struggling. He might need some help. Niall considered his options, and decided to let it be. His pawn seemed, at least, not to be making any false moves.

"Rindown?" he asked his companion. It was almost rhetorical; Niall knew where he had to go now. The blasphemy had gone far enough. Now he needed the help of the one being he could turn to to cover his tracks for the final stages. They would be some time in coming, the elf knew, but the Fool was never one to consider things in haste. Niall wouldn't be able to cajole, to plead, even to beg. All he could do was be himself and trust in his sense of lightness.

The spirit knew, as it always did, what was going through his mind.

"You weren't given this life for it to be easy," it said simply.

The elf smiled at that. Then he looked away, and the lines of pain were visible around his eyes. They were always his betrayal.

"It's just that I wish I didn't feel the beauty of things so much," he sighed, the wind ruffling his hair as he stared out at the moonlight shining on the waters. "That's what makes it difficult at times."

"You are rather self-pitying today," the spirit said in a very matter-of-fact way.

Niall laughed, his mouth curled in a wry smile. He got to his feet and glanced around himself in a wide circle. Maybe it was, after all, just water against stone, the endless struggle of the irresistible sea against the immovable rocks below, nothing more. If he hadn't known that he'd seen the same scene for so very long, in ages before he had been called to the Center, it would have been easier to believe it. It was the sea calling him back to those happier, easier times that he could not ignore.

"I must go," he said quietly. "Protect me. Hide my trail from my enemies."

The spirit nodded assent. Niall drew his cloak around him and bowed his head against the promise of rain from the darkening clouds the eastern Atlantic brought in its airstream. He still had many preparations to make.

"Look," Michael told the troll. Serrin had fallen into a restless doze induced by the wine served to the suborbital's passengers; Tom had expressed disbelief at the poor excuse for food served up with it, and unable to take refuge in the alcohol, had stayed awake. His excitement was obvious. As the aircraft descended, Michael saw the first promise of the sun, and knew what Torn would see.

"This is beautiful," he said simply. "I don't care what any scientist says. You don't see this anywhere else in the world. Not like this."

The red orb insinuated itself into view, but almost as a hint, a suggestion rather than a reality. The edge of the sun was there, but it as yet was only a phantasm in the sky. Then the ring hit the horizon.

Light flashed around the world like the inspiration of hope to the desperate. The gentle blue of a new day rose in the thinnest of lines, traced out in a yellow-red shadowing, resolute and irresistible. The troll was stunned by it; no sunrise seen from the surface of the earth had ever looked like this, no matter how glorious.

"Busy old fool, unruly Sun, why dost thou thus, through windows and through curtains call on us? Must to thy motions lovers' seasons run?"

Tom looked at Michael; he hadn't understood a word. Michael grinned at him.

"An old English poet, dear boy. Can't help remembering the lines when I see the sun like that."

Tom leaned back in his seat, contemplating the Englishman. His eyes bored into him, but Michael just sat casually toying with his plastic mug of old, cold soykaf. The sounds of deceleration and imminent landing jerked Serrin into wakefulness, breaking the silence between his fellow passengers.

"Looks like we may have avoided the winter rains this morning," Michael said cheerfully. Serrin grunted and rubbed his eyes, despising people who were cheerful at this hour of the day. The aircraft's huge tires hit the runway with

a disagreeable bump.

"Let me talk us through immigration," Michael said earnestly.

"I hadn't planned on anything else," the elf said drily.

The cab got them to Indra's just about the time almost everyone else was leaving. The ork bouncers told them the place was closing, but the combination of Michael's clothes, accent, and money persuaded them otherwise. Swathed in cinnamon and silvered yellow, Indra herself appeared to check them out personally, half-smiling at their appearance.

"I know this is rather unusual, madam, but we'd be very grateful if we could stay here for, say, two days," Michael said politely after introducing himself.

Indra was just turning away when he mentioned the willingness to pay. She changed her mind swiftly.

"I don't know why gentlemen like you would want to stay here instead of an expensive hotel," she said, addressing Michael and Serrin while pointedly ignoring Tom. "The rooms are clean, but nothing flash."

"Precisely," Michael said, a smile insinuating itself at the corners of his mouth. "However, we aren't here to sample the delights of your, er, employees. There's someone we want to see, who told us we could find her here. If you could send someone to fetch her, quietly and discreetly, of course, we would naturally pay well for such a service."

"Yes?" Indra prompted, meanwhile gesturing to the orks to begin carrying the bags up the stairs. In moments the squeals of girls unwillingly being turned out of their rooms filtered down after them.

"Kristen. Kristen Makibo. She's an, er, friend of ours. She called us from here," Michael explained.

Indra looked them up and down. "That girl has friends like you?" she said disbelievingly.

"Most certainly. Mr. Shamandar here is her godfather," Michael said quite seriously.

Indra burst into laughter and patted him on the shoulder as she ushered the group in.

"Godfather? Mr. Sutherland, you shouldn't tell such wicked lies to an old woman. That girl ain't got no ordinary father, nor mother, and sure as anything there aren't any gods holding cards for her."

Michael raised his hat to her, smiled mischievously, and headed up the stairs.

"She's over at the doc. I'll have her here within the hour," Indra said determinedly. Michael guessed she'd give the girl a grilling before turning her over, and said it was urgent.

"Say fifteen minutes," the woman agreed as he passed her a wad of bills. Having spent less than expected to grease the eager palms at the airport, he was feeling generous.

"And a gin and tonic, I think," he said finally.

"It's an act, Tom," he whispered to the troll as they headed up the creaky, uncarpeted stairs. "She expects it. I know how to play my part. It's just the way things are done sometimes."

"I don't understand you," the troll said by the time they got upstairs.

"You haven't spent much time with Brits, have you?" Michael didn't waste a minute waiting for an answer. He was eager to unpack and hang up his clothes, and he just knew there wouldn't be a trouser press in the place.

13

Dismayed at the condition of his room, Serrin still wasn't sure whether he agreed with Michael's idea about staying here. True, it would be the last place anyone in his right mind would consider looking for them—unless that someone had access to the phone and fax numbers that had brought them here. Later, he would want to cast some magic to conceal them, but he'd have to be careful about spellworking in case Indra went off the deep end about such things. He didn't sense any magic around the place, but he also didn't know much about Cape shamans and mages—and he certainly didn't want to take the chance of giving offense if Indra did have one on tap.

Michael was halfway through his drink when the ork bouncer practically threw the girl into his room. So this was Kristen. Her appearance was appalling, with the crude stitches in her ear and her clothes covered with dried blood. Her hands also showed heavy graze marks and she looked like a frightened child expecting a beating for some guilty secret. Which, he suddenly realized, wasn't so far from the truth.

"I'm Michael," he said. "Serrin will be here soon." He was trying to be soothing. "I'm sorry if you suffered some rough treatment being brought here." She just stared at him, trembling slightly, neither speaking nor moving.

"Please sit down," he said, smiling. "We've come all this way to find out what you know. It's important."

That seemed to help. No one had ever made Kristen feel significant in any way until this moment. Looking slightly less terrified, she sat down slowly in the rickety

chair next to the table by the window, but still didn't speak.

"The pocket computer you mentioned, the one where you got the names. Do you still have it?" he asked. She was halfway through shaking her head when Serrin appeared in the doorway, apparently not noticing the presence of the girl.

"Michael, you must be out of your mind paying to stay here. When I put my shirts in the cupboard, the top shelf collapsed and I got a faceful of whore's underwear and a couple of roaches. Frag it, can't we stay at--"

His voice trailed away as the Englishman shook a finger reprovingly at him.

"Watch your language, old boy. There's a lady present."

As Serrin took a step into the room and looked around, it was his paleness and the gray eyes that she recognized. The slope of his forehead. The limp in his movement, the bad leg. Then she realized that she could have seen the eyes, the pallor, the brow, in the photograph. Nasrah could have read her the detail about the leg. But she couldn't have known the way he moved from words and pictures on paper, and yet she did. She knew exactly how he favored his one good leg, how

he
tried to compensate, because she recognized it. And that truly frightened her.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, "I didn't mean—

"It's all right," she managed to say, her own voice sounding distant and faint
to her ears.

As he came into the room, Serrin was disturbed by the brief, uncanny
sensation
that he'd lived this exact moment somewhere before. But the feeling was
short-lived, no more than fleeting. Her appearance was so startling, like
she'd
just been in an argument with a truck.

"I'm Serrin Shamandar. We spoke," he said. "Have you been here long?"

"Just got here. Sunil was checking my stitches," she said.

"Are you all right?" the elf said, alarmed. "Is it anything serious? We
can—

"Stop fretting," Michael said coolly. "Kristen was able

to walk in on her own two legs. I don't think she's going to keel over
imminently.

"But we should find somewhere safe to talk," he said, looking
disapprovingly
at the open door. "Kristen, we could do with coffee and some real food, but
let's go somewhere we can talk without being overheard. Do you know a place
like
that?"

She smiled a little. "It's still a little cold at the waterfront, but we
could
sit outside and it'll be quiet. Won't be many people around. I don't have
much
money, though," she said a little defensively.

Spirits, Serrin thought, she thinks we're expecting her to invite us to
breakfast. His heart warmed to her.

"Not to worry," he said quietly, smiling at her. Suddenly he was aware of
how
intently she was staring at him, for all the world like someone studying a
portrait in a gallery, searching for something hidden.

"We'd better worry about it," Michael said laconically. "We've got a hungry troll to feed, for one thing. Let's get Tom and finish the introductions. Then we'll go and talk. There's a lot to find out."

Kristen changed her mind as they were leaving Indra's. Suddenly, she didn't want to take them to any of her usual haunts on the waterfront. Part of her wanted to show off in front of her chummers on the street, but that might only stir up resentment against her later on. Some of the harder cases might not look kindly on an uppity kaffir girl afterward. So, mischievously, she took them by cab to one of the plush places off the Strand. The money there would find her offensive, but with the company she was keeping today they wouldn't dare try to throw her out. As they walked along past the flower market, she stopped to buy a tiger lily orchid, an absurd extravagance. She put it in her hair, over her untorn ear, as if it were something she did all the time, using her reflection in a shop window to position it just right. At least my face didn't get ripped up, she thought. I don't look too bad.

When they finally sat down to eat, Michael ordered most of the dishes on the breakfast menu, daring the staring waiter to say anything about Kristen by simply being

as polite as hell. They were seated in a secluded corner that offered both quiet and privacy. By the time the coffee, juice, cereals, and toast arrived on a silver tray, he'd learned what had happened to the computer. He tipped the waiter generously to stop his glaring at the girl, then ordered bacon and eggs for Tom, who was staring at the healthy stuff on the tray as if it were a dead rat.

"You know where to find this man again?" he asked the girl. She nodded.

"But the machine will be in pieces by now," she said sadly.

"Maybe, maybe not. It's worth a train ride down the coast to find out." He tucked a linen napkin into his shirt collar to keep any errant preserve off his tie.

"I've got this," she said brightly, drawing out a ragged and dirty scrap of paper from her bag. She handed it to Serrin, who looked through the names,

then
passed the sheet to Michael.

"There are more names than the ones you gave me on the phone," he said to Kristen.

"I couldn't get them all read out," she said a little worriedly, as if afraid she'd missed something important.

"It's fine," Serrin reassured her. "It just means we've got more than we thought."

"There are some odd code symbols here too," Michael said slowly. "More than just names and numbers. But you say the computer got glitched up somehow?"

Kristen explained again how she'd played with the little box and how it had suddenly seemed to malfunction. She also had to explain that she couldn't read the messages flickering on the screen, and she felt bad about that. It showed, all too obviously.

"Ain't nothing to be ashamed of," Tom told her after chewing the last of the bacon. "We live in one of the richest countries in the world and half the people there can't read nor write their own names. If nobody gives you the chance, it ain't your fault. Don't make you stupid."

By the time they'd breakfasted, Michael had gotten everything he could from the girl. Her account of the kidnapping and killing made Serrin nod at the remembrance of some details, but she couldn't give any close-up descriptions of the men who'd made the hit. There was no way of knowing if it had been the same people who'd tried to snatch him in Heidelberg, and he said so.

"Heidelberg?" She was confused. "But I thought you only just came over here. From America. You were in Azania a few days ago?"

Now Serrin looked confused, until Michael explained it to him. "You've forgotten your time in Johannesburg, term. Part of the megaplex is the old town of Heidelberg to the south. There's a Middelburg out east too. Easy to get mixed up.

"Look, I'm going to get to work on this stuff," he continued, tucking the paper into his top pocket. "My deck's over at the Hilton in the hotel safe. I didn't want to leave it at Indra's. I took a room over there as well so I can work, and it's a place we can hole up if there's any trouble at Indra's. Not that I expect any, of course. Come on, Tom, we've got work to do."

He gently kicked the troll in the shin under the table. Surprised, Tom gobbled down the last of his muffin and stood up beside the Englishman.

"You're not going to get picked off here," Michael said, looking around at the crowds growing along the street outside. "See you for lunch and a lovely siesta afterward, I think. Later!" Before the elf could respond, the Englishman had taken Tom's arm and they were out through the doors and into the street.

"What was that all about?" Tom asked.

"She spent the entire time looking at Serrin," Michael explained. "She wants to talk to him. We're the extras. We got what we wanted. Now let's leave them alone."

The troll was looking away, and Michael followed the direction of his gaze.

"Ah, the mountain," he said quietly.

"What's up there?" the troll inquired. He could see that the huge, flat-topped peak was a place of power. Anyone with a shred of talent would have registered that.

"The Rain Queen. The dragon Mujaji. If you want to go up top, you've got to be very careful and very polite and not go anywhere you're not supposed to. The shamans up there are weird people. You can take the cable car up, but keep quiet and stay to the roped-off areas."

"Hmmm," Tom grunted. "You didn't ask the girl about the mage. Urn, Shakala?"

"For a very good reason," Michael said, fiddling with his tie. "She's Xhosa. Mixed race. It's not polite to ask about a Zulu."

"I don't get it."

"If you lived here you would—or else you'd be dead," Michael retorted.
"Take
the Rain Queen for starters. Xhosa myth says she protects them against their
great enemy, the Zulus. She sends torrential storms to ruin their crops, to
make
it impossible for their armies to march on the Xhosa. In her earlier
manifestations as a woman, she played the Boers and Brits off against each
other
too."

"I still don't scan. Is she a dragon or a woman?" Tom asked.

"Both. The Xhosas distinguish between the Great Spirit of the Rain Queen
and
her manifestations. Both the woman and the dragon are manifestations of the
same
thing. But she's theirs and she protects them against their enemies. No Zulu
would be allowed to set foot on that mountain."

"I want to put my feet on the ground up there," the troll said slowly. The
sense of power drew him, despite this sinister and forbidding tale.

"Then do it," Michael replied. He hailed a cab and gave the driver
instructions.

"The Hilton, please. Then please take my friend to the cable terminus for
Table Mountain."

Martin had finished the last of the analyses by the time the steel trunks
arrived. He was stiff across the shoulders from hours hunched over the work
station, and his eyes were sore from the night's ponderings of printouts and
screen displays. But the data looked pretty complete; the PET scans and NMR
data
from Azania were producing results that confirmed each other very closely.
There
just wasn't enough in the way of an elven sample. Curious of Luther to be
squeamish about that at this stage, Martin

thought. Especially given what his hunger had demanded he do of late.

The phone from upstairs told him of the arrival. Excited, he almost knocked
over his swivel chair as he raced for the door and up the stone steps of the
old
crypts. When he reached the hallway, its beautiful mosaic floors were
half-hidden by the trunks. What they contained wasn't that big; most of it
had
to be padding and packaging to protect their fabulously valuable cargo.

"His Grace instructed us to call him as soon as these arrived," one of the
footmen said hesitantly.

"Take them to the east wing. I shall unpack them and call him. I will take responsibility," Martin said. He had no idea whether Luther would want to be disturbed right now, but didn't want to take the chance. It would require a couple of hours to unpack everything, and the more time he gave Luther to calm down the better. Besides, he knew that Luther wouldn't want to sit fretting for two hours while this stuff got unpacked.

The footman hesitated still. Someone else taking responsibility was only acceptable if he could be certain that Luther approved. It did not do to disobey orders.

"Just do it. And use the trolleys. If you drop any of them, you'll wish you were dead," Martin snarled. Delaying no longer, the men scurried off to find trolleys for the trunks.

Martin left them to it and returned to his subterranean haunt to issue the last order to the Azanians. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too messy. It would cause a furor, for a while, but it could all be disguised as an accident easily enough and no one would investigate that closely, not immediately. He had run the simulation enough times, and he knew exactly where a cigarette butt dropped beside the right leaking pipe would do the job. It was time to cover their tracks.

Kristen was able to make two coffees last an hour, learning everything about him that she could. Serrin, however, could barely keep his eyes open anymore. Ten o'clock here was three in the morning back home, and jet lag was as unfriendly as ever. But she was unwilling to

let him go, her questions a torrent, and he was too tired to be careful in his replies.

Finally, he held up one hand, as if defending himself from yet another onslaught.

"I've got to get some sleep," he pleaded. "I'm bagged." He called for the bill. She looked guilty, but was unable to control her great excitement. Completely on impulse, she suddenly leaned forward and attempted to straighten the fraying knot in his tie. Almost reflexively, he raised one hand to stop her. Fingers touched.

His hand registered something like a static shock while his heart seemed to

tighten like the feeling he got from too much coffee and one cigarette too many late at night. Startled, he found himself looking into her deep brown eyes, so full of concern for him. It didn't feel like a warning of falling in love, though Serrin's memories of such things were foggy. It felt more important than that; something better, more durable.

She didn't say anything and he didn't ask. He wanted to sleep on it and think it over. When they got back to In-dra's, he determinedly resisted Kristen's attempts to fuss over him.

"I'm going to shower," he said tiredly. "If you want, you can use Michael's room. He won't be back for a while. Um, if you want to stay, you're welcome." He realized that he'd barely asked anything about her, so intently had she interrogated him.

"I got time," she said simply and went off to find him some towels. Serrin sat down on the bed, shaking his head and wondering what on earth he was getting himself into.

"You took a risk by coming here. Even with Mathanas along," the young elf reproached Niall. Seated on one of the largest stones among the castle ruins, the morning just risen around them, he watched idly as a small group of leshy played in the ivy-covered trees at the foot of the slope.

"That's why I need your help," Niall explained. "I am bound to my own place. I cannot move without the Families knowing it. But there are things I will have to do,

places I must go. Events are moving rapidly now. They have brought the seed from Azania, I think. It will not be long before Liitair takes the final steps. Once it is released ..."

The flaxen-haired young elf sat quietly, rocking to and fro almost imperceptibly. "Are you so sure this is your task?" he asked.

"I cannot sit idly by and allow it to happen," Niall replied.

"Is it more important than your life?"

"Certainly," Niall said without hesitation.

"Is it more important than the calling of your Path?"

"It is more important than all of my lives," Niall said softly. He had thought long and hard about how to say that. When it came time, speaking the words was much simpler and easier than he'd expected. How easy it was to nullify his own being.

"Indeed that is so," said the youth imperturbably. "But I have other visitors who say this is the Ascension." He didn't tell Niall what he thought of that.

"It is wrong," Niall said passionately.

"Are you so much wiser?" the youth said, idly picking at a blade of long grass.

"Lutair is a poisoned spirit," Niall argued. "The Ascension will not spring from one such. He extinguishes the very lives he intends to exalt. That alone is proof that he is a false spirit. If Liam were still among us, acceptance of this evil would be inconceivable."

"Ah, so you know Liam's mind," the youth said cheerily. "Then everything must be so clear to you. Others of us, of course, are not so presumptuous."

"That is not what I meant," Niall pleaded. "Can you help me?" He didn't want to play cat-and-mouse with the Fool any longer. Time was growing too short for his elaborate games.

"There will be a storm tonight," the Fool said with a complete lack of concern. Niall knew what he meant. In the physical world, there would be torrential rain, thunder, lightning, to be sure; but the Fool meant the doineann draoidheil, the terrifying surge of uncontrollable magic that broke into the world at the sacred places, unpredictably and violently. His heart sank as he understood what help the Fool was prepared to offer; only the deliverance of the storm itself. It would be left to Niall and whatever spirits he could find to help him to draw down the power itself.

"Rathcroghan," the Fool said. "At the Palace of the Medb. There will be few of your Family there, I think. Enough to object to your presence, however. On

the
other hand, they might wisely choose to take refuge from the storm."

Niall knew better than to beg for anything more direct in the way of assistance. Few ever found the Fool in such a generous mood. In his own way, he was a renegade from the same hermetic order Niall had long left behind him, but it didn't do to push too hard. He had pointed Niall to the solution, drawing on the awesome forces of the storm, and now it was left to the mage to take that counsel into himself and use it.

Realizing that his chances of surviving the night were a lot poorer than fifty-fifty, the dispirited mage returned to his spirit and began to plan how to evade the housemages of his Family. Once the storm had begun, they would not dare to approach him. Providing, of course, that none of them was insane enough to be channeling it for his own purposes.

Niall began to tell his ally spirit what to do if he died that night. It wasn't morbid. It was just playing the probabilities.

14

The Xhosa shaman stared at Tom; he almost had to crick his neck to look up at the troll, but he kept right on staring. Tom didn't know whether it was a challenge or a ritual, whether it was hostile, friendly, or neutral. But he kept his mouth shut and stayed where he was.

The Xhosa man took something green-yellow and gleaming from a pouch at his belt. Continuing to stare up at the troll, he slipped the impossibly thin snakeskin gloves over his stubby fingers and then touched the troll just below the sternum. As if feeling for some flow of energy, some rhythm of life, his hands were drawn to Tom's ribs and down to his right hand. The shaman hissed, sensing the smartgun link and the muscle replacement, but he did not retreat as he looked down at the huge hand, as big as his own skull. Then the shaman lifted his eyes again, boring into the troll, who stared back.

Tom still didn't say anything. He didn't feel anxious, despite the shaman's disapproving sound. The shaman waved his arm to another Xhosa, who sashayed over to also examine the troll.

The shamans spoke in the Xhosa tongue, then one of them took Tom's arm and led

him toward the rope, toward the wildness beyond the paths. They might have been leading him to his death, but the troll wanted to trust them. He could feel the power they carried within themselves. Mutely, he followed.

The brittle, crumbling rock felt like fire beneath his feet. The air seemed to grow hazy and oppressive, humid and hard to breathe. He felt his gait growing unsteady as they took him to the edge of the mountain, rising high over the Atlantic and Indian oceans meeting in the endless azure, infinitely far below. His head swam, and he could feel himself falling.

Loud banging at the door woke Serrin with a start. He jumped up and managed to get his pants on before the banging threatened to turn into a full-scale break-in. It was only Michael.

"Wake up, lazy bones," the Englishman said. "You've had five hours. Any more and you won't sleep tonight, and then you'll feel even worse tomorrow."

"Where's Kristen? Where's Tom?" Serrin yawned.

"Isn't he here?" Michael asked, worried. "Damn it. The mountain can't be that interesting. Kristen's around and about downstairs."

"Get anything from the names?" the mage asked, tugging on a clean shirt.

"Only more consternation, old boy," Michael said. He briefed the elf as he finished dressing. "Three more people. European. One mage, very much unkidnapped. One worker in the Squeeze, of all places, and one doctor somewhere in Saxony. Not one of them has been touched. I'm running some framework on them, but I can't see anything obvious linking them together."

"Hmmm," Serrin grunted.

"I've tried age, race, sex, criminality, social status, occupation, all the obvious things. There's something I'm missing," Michael fretted in a tone that said he wanted to get back to it. Serrin said as much.

"Yes, well, that was the idea," Michael replied. "I think I might stop off at the cable terminus and see if I can find Tom first. There's something you ought

to do, too."

"Like what?" the elf asked.

"Take Kristen shopping. Buy her some new clothes. She doesn't have much, and half of it's bloodstained, which'll only get her stopped by the police. Who would probably add a few new stains in the process.

"Tell her it's by way of thank you for helping us. She's got some pride for a street kid. She'll be angry if she thinks it's a hand-out. And whatever you do, don't offer her any money. She'll never forgive you."

"Do you think it's safe to go out?" Serrin asked anxiously.

"I don't think you're going to get kidnapped in broad daylight in the main shopping plazas. From what I've learned, the kidnappings have almost always taken place at night and/or in some secluded spot. These people aren't taking stupid risks."

In the cab over to the mountain, Michael pored over the lists. The single coding separating some of the names on the list from the others had him baffled. It had to mean something, but he'd yet to discover what it was. The problem was that all the obvious things were getting him nowhere. It was puzzling that only one of the names was a woman's, but that didn't seem to mean too much. Nothing distinguished her from a handful of other ordinary people on the list. And who the hell would want to kidnap someone from the Squeeze, London's most deprived and desperate district? Hell, just trying to get information about such people was almost impossible. Half of them weren't even in the British government's databases. Some of these names ruled out ransom as a motive, but the fact that none of the kidnapped persons had ever been returned already told him that. Not to mention no police records of ransom demands, though that might be due to no one informing the police because of fear. But, no one?

He gave up on it. To his great relief, he saw Tom clambering out of a cable car just as the cab drew up to the terminus. Giving the driver some notes and shouting for him to wait a few minutes, Michael leapt out and approached the ambling troll.

"Hey, you had us worried. Serrin's going to feel better if he gets his

bodyguard back," Michael began and then stopped.

The troll continued walking on past as if the Englishman wasn't there. Michael grabbed at his sleeve and, slowly, Tom's head turned. He looked at Michael as if seeing him for the first time, then nodded his head slightly and followed him to the cab.

"Are you all right?" Michael asked anxiously.

"Never better," Tom said imperiously and pulled at the cab door to open it, nearly wrenching it right off its

hinges. He looked down at his hands stupidly, as if not believing that they worked like that.

"If you weren't dried out I'd suggest you get a skinful," Michael said. He was feeling a little nervous. Sharing the back of a cab with a very powerful and apparently disorientated troll might be a little dangerous.

"I don't think so," Tom said quietly. Testing the door with the gentleness he would have given a babe in arms, he opened it very slowly and climbed inside, ignoring the driver's oaths about having to pay for the door if Tom wrecked it.

Michael followed him in and looked at the troll intently. Tom just sat their placidly, hands folded into his spacious lap.

"Home, I think," the Englishman said to the driver. "Don't worry. He's harmless. Really."

The cab pulled away from the curb and sped them back to the sprawl of the city.

Kristen was delighted by the suggestion that she get some new clothes with the money Serrin gave her. Shopping was a pleasure she'd never been able to indulge much. Taking care of the practical things first, she bought strong boots and a weatherproof reversible jacket and pants that looked like they'd last more than one winter. Then they ended up among racks and racks of lingerie, which was the only place she could buy any underwear, and Kristen was glad Serrin couldn't

see
her blush. It was one good thing about not being white.

She touched the silks, with their fabulous softness and sheen, the sheer luxury of them. Useless to her, of course; if she wanted such things, she could always go to work for Indra. Of course that probably wouldn't get her more than some fake-satin substitute; Indra's girls weren't that high-priced.

Glancing up at Serrin, Kristen had a moment of pure panic to find him no longer at her side. Alone in this store, she'd be stopped and searched as a shoplifter simply because of the color of her skin, and she couldn't remember whether she had the receipts for everything in the bag he'd gotten for her. If not, and if he didn't turn

up soon, she could look forward to one hell of a beating for it.

Then Serrin was at her shoulder, bearing a handful of silk squares and scarves.

"They're pretty. I saw you liked silk, and I wanted to get something for you myself," he mumbled. "I know they're not very useful, but they're pretty." He drew out the length of one scarf and held it up against her head to see how it went with her coloring.

She beamed at him. Unable to restrain herself, she hugged him tightly round the waist, not caring that people in the shop were looking at them with angry hatefulness.

What Serrin felt perplexed him. It wasn't the usual fear of losing something he cared about. What really confused him was the feeling that this was safe. If he'd stopped to think about it, he'd have realized the absurdity of the idea, but for once he wasn't thinking. He just put his hand on her head as she tucked it into his chest, feeling the tight wire of her hair through the silk.

Then she backed away and looked around, frightened. "We'd better get out," she said urgently. "People will be upset."

Not understanding, he followed her to the register, where he paid for the silks, attended by a vinegary-faced man who handled the elf's money like it had some disease or other.

When they got outside, she floored him with her words.

"You're going to go. You're leaving," she said sadly. "These things are to say good-bye."

"No, they're not," he said emphatically. "I don't know what comes next, but we're not going anywhere."

He should have said, not yet. But it didn't even enter the picture at the moment. He hailed one of the familiar yellow cabs and headed for the Hilton.

The scene when they arrived there was startling. Tom was sprawled out on the long chaise lounge, staring quietly up at the ceiling. Michael was jacked into his Fuchi, twitching almost maniacally. His hands were screwed so tightly into fists that they were virtually white.

"Yes! YES!!!" He jacked out, his pupils dilated with

the thrill of it all, lips drawn back into a smile any dentist could have used for an advert. He stood up on his chair and sprang into the air, turning a perfect somersault and landing square on his feet. He raised his arms into the air and let out a window-threatening whoop.

Serrin and Kristen looked at each other and broke into uncontrollable laughter.

It was the increasingly familiar mix of despair and exultation that had him in its grip. For one so long used to unfeeling, mastering it had come slowly, learning to hold and focus the energies so that they poured into his mind and brain. He had two, three days of sleeplessness coming, a brilliant flash of utter self-absorption, when he released that energy. Luther also knew he had to hold it for longer than usual, and that irked him.

He had approached disposing of the elf with the same regret and determination as always. Knowing the bad karma this would earn him, he saw it as his own sacrifice when he fastened himself to the screaming body and leeches the life out of it, the hot blood pouring over his face and hands, the last agonies of his victim reverberating around the mausoleum in an echo that would be detectable forever. Luther knew the masking wouldn't last very much longer.

There had simply been too much blood and death here, too many pairs of eyes widening in the realization of a fate worse than death, too much sheer terror and horror for the magical background count not to be building and building beyond even his ability to mask it. Time grew short now. But when the Ascension comes, he thought, I will be a hero to my people. My sacrifice will not have been in vain.

He only half-heard Martin's words by the time he got to the east wing. Everything was here; all the samples he needed. He was desperate to begin his work, but he turned away from them, asking where the other material was.

Martin pointed to the flickering screen. His pawn had done well for him. Two locals, or some wretches drawn from further afield in Bavaria or across the border. A Moroccan, he judged, probably a Marseillais. Martin had done well to use that wretched and forlorn city for the victims he needed; even the Chinese might have come from there. The fate of these victims would be quite different from that of others brought here before them. A dozen of them stood, shackled, helplessly awaiting their fate.

"I could attend to it, Your Grace," Martin offered. "I can bring you the results."

"No," Luther said slowly. "I will be concentrating too strongly to see them then. We should do this together, Martin."

"Thank you, Your Grace. It is an honor," Martin said, feeling both humble and proud at the same moment.

"It is indeed. Poems and songs will be written in honor of this," Luther said, his sense of humor breaking through the blood-filled fire in his head. "Your name will be part of that."

Failing to see through the mockery, Martin took the leather case and began to fill it with some of the samples.

Luther wiped the last clot of blood from the side of his mouth and waited.

15

"It was so obvious," Michael lamented. "I was just daydreaming and it came to

me. I was thinking about the one woman on the list. I just thought, hey, if all the non-mages were women, that would even up the numbers between the sexes—well, almost—which would be neat. Tidy."

"I don't entirely follow," Serrin admitted.

"I like things tidy. I believe the world is basically tidy, if only you can see it properly. But of course this isn't the time to discuss metaphysics." Michael was speaking so quickly that Serrin was glad the thread of his argument got lost now and again. It made it easier to pick up what mattered. But he was still waiting for the conclusion.

'Then it came to me. They're almost all men, right?"

"So?" Serrin waited.

"Then I realized these others haven't been kidnapped, but their spouses have been. They're all married. Oh, that applied to the woman too; her husband was taken eleven months ago. That's the coding digit; it's present for every case where the spouse has been kidnapped. So! Ridiculously simple. Just a decoy. One would hardly think it worth the bother, except for the fact that such a simple thing is so easy to overlook. It worked with me, after all."

"Fine. That links them together in one way. But why these people?" Serrin asked.

"Oh, that's something else. The kidnapped people aren't mages, so that doesn't do it. Indeed, we've even got a mage whose wife has been kidnapped and he hasn't been," Michael continued.

"Great. That sounds mystifying," Serrin said.

"Right. Now, let's look at this as a time series. It goes,

almost linearly, from non-elven non-mages to non-elven mages to elven mages. That tells me that these people have something else in common which must relate to this progression. Something which is more common in elf mages than in human ones, and least common of all in ordinary folks. Maybe."

"So why not go right to the best source of it? Why not go straight to the elf mages?"

"Yes, that's the interesting part. There are two possible explanations for that," Michael said smugly.

"One is that mages are too visible," he went on. "Pick off a dental technician and no one's going to go ape. Pick off a mage and people get interested. Too interested, maybe. I mean, look at us for a start." "Makes sense so far," Serrin agreed. "But that wouldn't explain why human mages go before the elves. No, we need something else for that. The answer's a negative, of course." "Don't speak in riddles," Serrin pleaded. "He means that there aren't any ordinary elves on the list," Tom said suddenly. "I seen it too."

Serrin stared at the troll. He still wasn't moving, and Serrin had taken him to be in some world of his own.

"No, don't worry. He hasn't had a vision or anything," Michael said excitedly, eager to continue with his remorseless dissection. "He means that when I showed him and explained it, it felt right to him. Now you've got my head and his heart saying we've got the answer. Can't argue with that."

"Would you mind explaining it to me, then?" Serrin asked grumpily.

"Sure. There are no ordinary elves. Whoever is conducting the kidnappings avoids taking elves. And there are no other metahumans involved. So we're dealing with something rare, something unknown outside of humanity and elves. And it's rare as hell. Otherwise, we wouldn't be going halfway round the world with this list."

"What is it? Do you know?" Serrin asked him, certain that Michael was about to regale him with the answer.

"It's an extremely rare allele of a blood grouping. Very rare classification. Forget OAB and Rhesus and all that

stuff. This is a one in a billion job. Well, not quite, but almost. Now, it so happens that this allele is tucked away on a chromosome segment very close to one of the major gene foci implicated in metatyping. The medical evidence suggests that the allele is incompatible with non-elven metatypes. Trolls, dwarfs, orks can't be born with it. There's a lethality effect. The fetus won't go to term.

"Every single person on this list has the RA-17 allelic form. Including you. The one unknown is Shakala. There is no medical data for him. Oh, and the Squeeze case. No data there, of course."

"So how could his kidnappers know?" The elf was beginning to take it all in, but very slowly.

"That, dear boy, is what could take us right to them. They couldn't have got the data from any available database. They must have had some direct contact. Once we know what that was, we've got a straight line to them."

"But what if they had a decker as good as you? Couldn't they have gotten the information then?" Serrin asked, his head still trying to keep up with Michael's brainstorm.

"Wouldn't do them any good. Look; Shakala has got to have the RA-17 allele. That's an obvious inference, right? All the others on the list do. But that information isn't on any available database. Hence no decker could have found it originally, when our kidnappers were building up their list of targets. It must have come from some direct source, some archive, hard copy maybe." The Englishman almost seemed to turn up his nose at the idea, as if it was a direct insult to the community of deckers generally and himself in particular.

"There is something else. Given that our kidnapper avoids elves, I'd guess that he is an elf. I don't doubt that the people abducted have been killed. He's squeamish about killing those of his own race. They're the option of last choice. The fact, by the way, that there are no ordinary elves is explained quite simply. There are no known cases of any elf with the RA-17 allele not having magical ability, not according to the medical sources I've been able to get at so far. It's postulated that RA-17 greatly increases the probability of being magically active. It fits

beautifully. Oh, and before you ask, although the RA-17 is a single allele,

it only arises as a result of complex polygene forms elsewhere. Hence the rarity."

"But why are they taken alive if they're then killed?" Serrin tried to reason, ignoring the genetics.

"Because they must have value to whoever it is that's taking them," Michael said slowly. "It isn't money. It's not their genius-level intelligence either. It must be something directly to do with the allele. With the blood group."

Serrin felt slightly sick for an instant. "What are you telling me?" he managed to say. "We're dealing with a slotting vampire or something?"

"Something rather nastier than that," Michael confirmed. "I don't think garlic, Hail Mary's and hows-your-fathers can stand up to this one. In fact, if I'm right, he cannot exist. Which is why I'm waiting for Professor Richard Bruckner to call me. This should be interesting. I'll record the call and get Geraint to pass it along to one of his Oxbridge men in white coats. I don't know enough about this to verify it myself."

"In the meantime, I'll investigate the ongoing paperwork for visas to the Zulu Nation. There shouldn't be any problem. It's the lack of shots I'm worried about. You can catch any one of a tremendous range of exciting and colorful diseases in Umfolozi and we won't have much in the way of protection against them. Tom says he can deal with most things, even things he doesn't know about yet. I still want to do my homework on emergency medical care, though. It could get interesting."

He was still flying, buzzing with it all, "Kristen, you're going to have a problem in the Zulu Nation, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess so," she said miserably. "But I'd be useful to you."

"How?" Michael asked bluntly.

"I know how to avoid button spiders—the really dangerous ones. And the giant scorpions. I know which plants are safe and which aren't. I know what to buy to protect your skin against insects and to keep the bees off you if they swarm. I know what's smart to wear and what

isn't." She would have gone on, but he stopped her, smiling.

Half of it just wasn't true, and to come through she'd have to call in some favors and get a lot of help and advice really fast. But she didn't want to see these people disappear from her life as quickly as they'd entered it. And, while she hadn't been able to understand anything of what Michael had said, she had caught the word vampire and, crazily, that had excited rather than frightened her. She knew too much from the trideo and nothing about the reality of them.

"But you don't have a passport, do you?" She shook her head. "And only the basics in the way of an ID?" She nodded.

"Know any fixers who can fit you up with a good passport fast? Like, in a day?"

"Why don't we just get her a real one?" Serrin asked. "She's entitled, surely."

"Fine. And wait three weeks. Even with palm-greasing, a few days at the very least. That allows plenty of time for any interested parties to find us here and maybe even figure out what I've been doing if they have a good enough decker. We don't know what's shadowing us," Michael retorted.

"I haven't been able to find anyone yet," Serrin said, thinking of his watchers and astral surveillance.

"Which could mean that there isn't anyone only because they just haven't gotten to us yet, or else there's someone who's so good you can't see him. Either way, why sit here like a duck with a carton of orange sauce in its beak waiting for the guy with the gun?"

"Very colorfully put," Serrin said sarcastically.

"Quack," Michael grinned. "So, do you know someone, Kristen?"

"I think so," she said, "but it won't be cheap."

"Not if it's any good, it won't be," Michael replied. The telecom beeped; he went and took the call in the bedroom.

"We need to go to Umfolozi to find the other mage they tried to kidnap," Serrin told Kristen. "He may be able to help. If he knows, or saw, something, if we can

find out why they tried to take him, then we may get to the truth of who tried to kidnap me."

"I know that," she said slightly impatiently.

"How difficult will it be for you there? I just don't know about these things," Serrin mumbled.

She hissed. "Zulu people don't like Xhosa," she said angrily.

"But we're white. Won't it be worse for us?" he said, genuinely puzzled.

"Are you kidding? The OV's are the best friends the Zulus have," she said. She was really only parroting what she'd heard about the proud eastern nation and the Oranje-Vrystaat. Never having been anywhere near either of those neighboring states, never having learned any history at any school, it was only what she'd heard on the streets. But she knew about the Zulus she'd seen in Cape Town, and they liked mixed-race faces about as much as she liked having her faced rubbed in drek.

Michael half-emerged from the bedroom, the portacom clutched tightly to his ear. "Many thanks, Professor. This really does help with my dissertation. Yes, sir, I'll make sure to give Professor Malan your regards. Thank you again, sir. It's been most helpful." He flicked the off switch and threw the phone back on the bed. He smiled at having so successfully passed himself off as a Witwatersrand postgraduate.

"That's the guy who isolated the Bruckner-Langer HMHVV strain," he gloated. "Says it isn't totally impossible for a metahuman to have the strain and somehow survive. It's never been known, but theoretically it's just possible. It would depend on, um, compensatory RNA-stabilizing polygenes and something to do with the CS-cascade system in immunology." Michael, for once, looked as if he wasn't entirely sure that he'd learned something properly. To Serrin, it was almost a

relief.

"So our man—or our elf, to be more accurate—could, just possibly, exist after all. When you have eliminated the possible, the impossible that remains is obviously the answer. It's simply a question of showing that it can happen, as Holmes would have said."

"I don't think he did say it quite like that," Serrin complained, searching out the brandy in the fake mahogany cupboard.

"Oh, box it. Just because you've got my deerstalker hat doesn't mean you can spoil all my fun," Michael mocked him. "Now all we have to do is to find our target. An elf nosferatu. Since I doubt that he lights it up in neon, we may have some way to go. Hopefully our Mr. Shakala can tell us something that will put our feet on the path."

"We should go. Back to Indra's. I can't risk my deck there, but I don't want to stay here any longer than necessary. This place is just too obvious," the Englishman concluded, beginning to lock up his case. "Take the brandy with you. I might even take a little snifter myself. I've had a good day."

He paused and gave Serrin and Tom a sly grin as he picked up the deck with a grunt. "By the way, Bruckner says that if such a creature existed, it's quite likely that he might have special requirements in the feeding department, though he couldn't be precise about the details. Now isn't that interesting?"

He was halfway out the door. Serrin took Tom by the arm as the troll made to follow him.

"You're very quiet, chummer," he said quietly. "What were you up to all day? Not a dereliction of duty, surely?"

The troll's soft brown eyes turned to him. "Just something I had to do," he said non-committally, then followed Serrin out the door.

Magellan realized far too late that they had gone. There had been no activity in the apartment during the morning and his watchers had told him nothing. Finally, he did the simple thing and changed into his uniform in the shoddy little hiding hole he'd rented for almost nothing.

Ten minutes later, a nondescript Knight Errant security man knocked at the door of Michael's Soho apartment. When a second loud knock brought no reply, the man took a wafer-thin metallic card from an inside pocket and clipped it to the side of the retinal-analyzing maglock. After a second or two, the lock registered a positive ID and the door clicked open.

He hadn't been able to disengage all the alarms; even

just the attempt to do so would have been impossible, and would have alerted security. The motion sensors detected him in the doorway and the wailing alarm howled in protest.

"Drek," he said in a voice that gave him away as an elf rather than a man. He made it to the service elevator in seconds and bypassed its deactivation with another gizmo, using it to speed down to ground level. When he got there, three large security guards had LMGs trained on the door.

"For chrissakes get up there," he yelled. "There's some fraggin' mad ork with a bomb. Says he's going to blow the top floor off. Tox, I'm outta here, man!" He ran for it. The security men were uncertain just long enough for him to get to the corner before a spray of gunfire told him they thought it would be more convenient if he halted in his tracks.

He made it to the autopark before they did and leapt onto his bike. He was away and down the ramp before they had time to shoot, which they couldn't risk doing anyway, not with the possibility of incoming traffic. He saw the barrier coming down, and the metal wedges coming up out of the road surface. He took a chance and hit the bump, crouched so low on the bike that he was able to shoot through with his head a few centimeters beneath the barrier.

As he made his way into the anonymity of downtown Manhattan traffic, Magellan was angry at himself. He'd botched it, and now the elf would know that someone was watching, after all. But he also knew the birds had flown the coop. He set his mind to figuring out how to discover where they'd gone. They might be able to change their names, but not their metatypes. Airlines had to list passengers

by metatype; a plane designed for a capacity of four hundred humans couldn't get off the ground with four hundred trolls on it. One elf male, one human male, one troll male, and let's hope they didn't take some patsy along for a free trip just to make up the numbers. But it was going to take time, too much time. He didn't want Jenna to know, and he had a horrible feeling she was going to call for an on-the-spot report before too long. Time to make sure my telecom develops a problem, he thought.

Luther looked at them on the endless bank of screens. By now, the drug was in every one of them, coursing through their veins, through the blood-brain barrier. Its infiltrations would already have reached every part of their bodies.

"The orienting reflex data," Martin said appreciatively. "Entirely normal. But the voluntary element of the late OR—completely flat. It looks perfect. Muller's initial data can't be faulted. This is a straight replication. It's incredible. It works for all of them. There are no racial differences."

"Show me the burn test again," Luther said simply. The video replayed before his eyes, the people withdrawing their hands from the hot iron, expressions devoid of any fear. That couldn't be faked.

"Purely reflexive. The distance of retreat is proportional only to the degree of burn damage. There isn't any emotional response at all. Look at the steroid and sympathetic outputs," Martin urged him. Flowing lines with rising and falling curves were superimposed on the film of blank faces.

"It looks right," Luther agreed. "This leaves only the scanning work. Set them up, Martin." He was fighting to control himself now. It would take at least two or three hours to conduct the sensitive NMR and PET scans of the brains of his subjects, precious time he begrudged before he could take this chemical and weave it into life. He couldn't waste effort preparing them for the scanners himself. He kept his pawns for just that kind of donkey work.

The mages who usually patrolled the site had long since retreated from the coming storm. Safe in the warmth of the mansion, they would be a mile away from

the stones and rock of Rathcroghan in the howling winds of the night. Niall was alone save for his ever-present guardian.

He felt Mathanas' cloak spreading around him, the powerful masking of the spirit hiding his presence from any scrying. Soon, the storm would be so strong that the sheer power of it would hide him anyway.

He lashed a length of rope around one of the smaller, pillar-like rocks and knotted it around his waist. The physical force of the storm was threat enough in itself. It might be calm only a few miles away, but here the hurricane-force winds would be capable of knocking him over like a feather if he didn't take this simple precaution.

Niall had always dreaded this time, just as anyone of his Order would. A mage who died trying to take into himself the uncontrollable energies of the storm would be lost in limbo. None knew what fate he might meet, what unknown plane he might be flung into, what eternal ordeals he might suffer. He had not expected to have to face this for many, many years; perhaps never in this lifetime.

He had taken every precaution possible, cast every spell of defense and contingency he could call upon without draining himself. Now he could only wait for the surge and hold onto the enchanted golden vessel as tightly as to life itself.

The shrieks growing in the wind were as tormented souls, felt as much as heard, ripping right through him. He hardly felt the rain driving into him in the teeth of the gale as the sounds grew louder and nearer. It was as if the

Wild Hunt itself had been raised in all its implacable madness.

As the force of it grew, lightning forked above him and the rocks began to glow with a blue nimbus of energy, pure power flowing into and through them. Wisps of raw magical energy drifted lazily between them, a ghostly spider's web of power weaving itself around him. He summoned every last ounce of will and determination and drew the pattern toward himself.

As he held the cauldron, it felt as if razor blades were being driven under each fingernail, into the bones of his fingers, carving deeply into every sinew and ligament of his wrists. The pain was unbelievable, unimaginable, unbearable. He'd never dreamed that a body could hurt like this. There was no habituation,

no release, no swooning, simply an overloading of sensation that grew and grew, ripping into him, tearing now into muscle and the long bones of his arms, rippling across his shoulders. As the elf bit hard into his tongue, trying to keep from screaming, blood dribbled from his mouth. His useless hands clung to the little gold cauldron and he tried to force the power down into it, out of the agony of the body and into the vessel, driving down this anguish.

The searing sensation arced down his spine, through every vertebra. He felt himself forced back against the rock, knobbls of rock sticking into his spine and ribs, fighting for every breath now. The spider's web grew white, pulsing, filled with wild, crackling energies.

Then he saw it. Nothing had led him to expect anything like this. An amorphous cloud of mist, blown together within the shrill whiteness, began to form into a larval, writhing form many meters in length. The worm-like thing struggled with its absurd, grotesquely under-sized arms to drag itself toward him, a great sucker-like mouth opening and closing in a grisly peristalsis. It radiated despair to him, wretchedness, the impossibility of what he was trying to do, the infinite release of abandoning the struggle against overwhelming pain and allowing the spirit to flee the tortured flesh.

For a split second it almost overcame him. But Niall's despair changed within his own mind to an image of an

endless chain of despairing humanity, a vision of what would happen to the world if Lutair was not stopped. His emotions changed to rage, and he forced the creature away from him with an effort of will beyond anything mortal. Impotent against him, the thing retreated back into whatever nightmare realm had spawned it.

Niall now felt himself rising above his own slumped body, not so much forced into the astral as ascended into it. He saw the whole of the pattern around him and drew it down, through the focal point within himself, concentrating it, filling the cauldron to overflowing. It shone like the bright Dagda's own, but around it the darkness of the vengeful Morrigan herself grew and cloaked his body like a black glove.

Then, like feeling the sun break through the clouds and begin to warm his face, he felt the presence of the spirit with him once more, searching for

him,
supporting him. He snapped back into his body, and was astonished at his own state. There was no pain, despite the blood on his hands and face. Not even any sense of fatigue. Within himself, Niall felt only power. It made him want to run forever, to go shouting down the stars with the sheer joy of it all, and at the same time wanting to be still, quiet, to save it, hoard it, to always feel like this. Blood mixed with salt as tears trickled from the aching corners of his eyes. He knew how very close he had been to death, and worse.

"Hold this," Mathanas whispered to him. "You are very vulnerable now, because you feel so strong. This is not the time to act."

The spirit held him and he felt pain return to his body. It was making him aware of the damage he had suffered, using its powers of healing on him; but making sure that Niall was not so intoxicated with his power that he became oblivious to the danger he was still in. He groaned as sensation returned to his chest and every breath felt like a tearing of his rib muscles. Even the touch of Mathanas, choosing to materialize himself just enough for the healing, was painful.

"Yes, I understand," he gasped. "Where can we be safe?"

The shimmering face of the spirit seemed to smile almost playfully. "You have asked me that these last six years," it said.

"This is no time for jest," Niall said huffily, aware that he was on the point of breaking into exultant, joyful laughter despite the painfulness of his chest. He began to untie the ropes, groaning again with the effort. Somehow, he was going to have to walk away from here. Even with Mathanas' powers, that would not be easy.

"I should have been an Arab sorcerer from the Arabian nights," he grumbled. "A flying carpet would be extremely useful right now."

"How do you know you weren't?" Mathanas shot back. The spirit was obviously in a flighty mood today. Niall wondered how the storm might have affected it; it was something he hadn't given enough thought to before.

"Let's worry about that later," Niall said, taking his first steps.

"I cannot change the terrain here. It would be detected," Mathanas said as the elf almost stumbled over the small stones littering the ground. "It would leave a trail."

"I know," Niall groaned. "And it's four miles to the car." He looked down at the cauldron, quite ordinary to the untrained eye, screaming with power to anyone who had the talent to penetrate its magical cloaking.

"Then again, having come so far, what are four miles?" he said in a voice far more cheerful than he felt.

The spirit followed him. It knew better than Niall how the delayed shock would affect the elf, who would need everything Mathanas could give in the form of concealment until he was able to rise and use the power he had gained. Mathanas loved Niall, feared for him, drew power of his own into that cloak around the cauldron. Within days they might yet be utterly destroyed.

"Frag off," Serrin growled sleepily, throwing a pillow at the door. If that fraggin' Englishman doesn't stop banging on the door, he thought angrily, I'm going to strangle him.

"Look, come on. The flight's in two hours. Be a good

elf and get out of bed," the sniggering voice came from outside.

Serrin hadn't gotten much rest. Pumping music had kept him awake half the night, and clicking roaches most of the rest of it. Michael's idea about staying here might have been fine in theory. In practice it had turned out to be bad news. The clock said it was nine in the morning, his body told him it was still somewhere around midnight. And somewhere in between those times, Serrin remembered, was the commonest hour of death from natural causes, when the body just gave up on the struggle. It felt like it, too.

He felt slightly nauseous as he dragged his legs out of the bed and sat up. He wasn't entirely sure why; he'd drunk little and eaten still less the night before, happy to sit and listen to Kristen offering scraps of her past history, almost incredulous that he could possibly be interested in it. And, in all honesty, it was a small life; a drunken father, early abandonment, drifting and

scavenging. In terms of significant events, it wasn't a footnote on a page. But she described people in ways that made their faces come alive in his mind's eye and she seemed to lack even a shred of bitterness or malice. Even when dismissing someone with that back-of-the-throat hiss she had, it was to mark them as an individual to be avoided for the sake of survival and never as an object of revenge or even a grudge.

There hadn't been as long to talk as he'd have liked; she had to get the passport—which looked like a decent enough fake, though Serrin doubted it would pass muster back in UCAS—and unbeknownst to him, get a crash course in the hazards of the bush.

Halfway through brushing his teeth in the sterilized water from the jug beside the sink, he relented and opened the door. As usual, Michael was immaculately groomed. For that too Serrin could have strangled him.

"Everything's arranged. I've booked one of those tourist packages, camping in the veldt, that kind of thing. It'll give us the chance to ask questions when we get there. I've hired vans along the way as well. If we ever need to make a run for it, we'll have transport arranged. Here's

your copy of the paperwork," he said, stuffing a wad of paper into one of Serrin's back pockets.

"Fangyur," Serrin said through the toothpaste. He rinsed out his mouth, avoiding the tap water as Michael had urged him to do, then picked up a towel and headed for the bathroom. Opening the door without checking for occupancy first, he suddenly found himself with his arms full of the mostly naked girl stamping her way out of it. Startled, he began to mutter some apologies just as Kristen arrived at the top of the stairs.

The girl flounced past him, leaving him looking mortified. Michael creased up with laughter behind him.

"I didn't know it was occupied," he pleaded.

"So was Norway in the last World War and it put up a bit more resistance than you did," Michael shot back and vanished into his room, leaving a clear corridor between Serrin and Kristen. She hissed down the stairs at the girl, then glowered at him. He took refuge in the bathroom and drew the latch against

her.

What the hell is this? he wondered, wetting his face and working up the soap. I'm thirty-five years old and she's half that. It's not lustful, not on my part. Is it a big-brother thing? Why does it feel like I've always known her when I don't feel that way with most of the people I have known for a long time?

Why the frag did I just cut my face?

The morning passed in a whirl of preparation, packing up, checking all the papers twice, then spending the inevitable extra hour hanging around the airport for the delayed flight.

This certainly wasn't any suborbital. More like the pride of Federated Boeing's 777A fleet, circa 2020. All that was missing was an ad for International Scrap Recovery Inc. adorning its tail.

"Oh swell," Serrin said miserably. "Did you dig out any data on aircraft disasters out here?"

"Yes, but I didn't want to worry you. There's a much higher chance of being murdered for your wallet on the cross-country trains anyway," Michael said coolly. Not sure whether or not the Englishman was joking, Serrin

picked up his hand luggage and ambled through the heat haze toward the van offering to convey them the last hundred yards to the waiting flying coffin. It seemed singularly pointless. He could have walked it in a minute, but instead had to sweat it out for twenty inside the superheated van interior waiting for the last of the puffing tourists to board.

Then they were walking toward the plane, Kristen gripping his arm as they reached the collapsible metal stairs up to the hatch. It suddenly hit him that she couldn't have ever flown before, and he led her by the hand to a window seat beside him. In front of them sat Michael and Tom. As the engines began to roar to life, Michael craned his head around the side of the seat.

"Oh, and we got the medical kit delivered," he said. "All the usual things and one or two specialties. We have Kristen to thank for that; her doc did us well. Didn't overcharge, either." He turned back to the front and she smiled happily. Kristen didn't have much idea of where she was going or what these people

were seeking, but her new clothes felt just fine and she hadn't ever expected a chance to fly.

The plane jolted into movement and accelerated with agonizing slowness along the runway. Serrin wanted to close his eyes against the mounting panic, but he had to try to seem relaxed for Kristen's sake. Her fingers, stub-tipped with nails bitten almost to the quick, were dug deep into his arm. She was terrified.

With all the elegance of an expiring hippopotamus, the plane finally lifted off the ground with a groan, then rose steeply into the clear sky. Seatbelts unclicked all around and suddenly Michael turned around toward them again, his face a mask of fear.

"Look out! Terrorists!" he hissed. There was a sharp bang from just ahead, the sound of a gun going off. Serrin threw his body over Kristen, looking wildly around for the gunman. Michael's face turned to an evil smile as he raised the neck of the bottle toward Serrin, a little wisp of gas still curling from it as the first foamy bubbles began to pour out over the sides of the neck. His other hand proffered paired champagne glasses.

"You bastard," Serrin growled at him. "I might have had a heart condition all you knew."

Michael hesitated and gave the elf a long, knowing look before Serrin finally took the glasses, blushing a little, leaning forward so Kristen couldn't see his reaction. The Englishman filled them and sat back to sip his own.

"Are all Englishmen champagne addicts?" Serrin asked, trying to think of a suitably childish revenge.

"Obligatory, dear boy. It's one of life's little ironies that even though, as every decent Englishman knows, the French are the most dastardly and treacherous nation of bounders in the history of the world, we buy three times as much of their fizz as any other nation does. More than they do themselves these days, but that's because they're too lazy and indolent to be able to afford it," he replied cheerfully.

"You're a clone. Of Geraint," Serrin groaned.

"Not quite, term. Not quite. I don't have that romantic Celtic thing. At Cambridge, he made out and I made computers. Anyway, enough of that. Read the tourist brochure. Make sure you can identify all the poisonous critters."

By the time the descent to New Hlobane came, Serrin had assumed his familiar dozing-in-flight posture, with Kristen, light-headed from champagne she'd never before tasted, tucked against his shoulder. Michael craned around at them again and nudged Tom. Turning to see their peaceful faces, Tom smiled. Michael looked thoughtful, even a little sad.

"I don't know how this is going to end up, Tom. I don't know what illusions she's got. He doesn't know himself well enough to figure her out," he said fretfully.

The troll looked at him uncertainly. He tended not to like this man who was so sure of himself, so quick with a smart answer to everything, so seemingly devoid of instinct. All of which Michael had sensed from the very beginning.

"Give me a break, Tom. Just because I don't wear my heart on my sleeve doesn't mean I haven't got eyes to see and ears to hear. I just do what I'm good at, and that's this," he said, tapping his temple with a finger.

That made the troll uncomfortable. Maybe that's me too, the troll thought, trying to be good at something and disliking someone because he's so much better at his craft than I am at mine. And if that's it, I'm being small.

"Sorry, chummer. I just take some time to get used to very different folks, that's all," the troll mumbled.

"I noticed. But sometimes I wish I could do some of the things you do," the Englishman said.

Tom was perplexed. "You're slottin' me."

"Well, on second thought, maybe not," Michael laughed. Tom realized that he'd never want to do what this man did for a living either, and began to laugh along with him.

It didn't take him long to check things out. Manhattan had plenty of private investigators only too happy to take nuyen for plowing through airline passenger lists, information that was only minimally protected in airlines' matrix systems anyway. Magellan found himself with four possibilities for an elf, a human, and troll; flights to Nogoya, Moscow, Cape Town, and Aztlan. Cape Town stuck out like a sore thumb. It surprised him that they hadn't gone directly to New Hlobane until he remembered from Sutherland's profile that the man had spent time working in Cape Town. Magellan reasoned that Sutherland must have chosen that as a first stop, maybe to look up some old friends, perhaps to get some extra muscle for help when they got to the Zulu Nation. He slipped the encrypter card into his telecom and called Jenna, telling her he was going to shadow them. She said little, was probably in one of her more pensive moods, judging by her curt brevity. He made a reservation for Cape Town and amused himself with the thought that he could always report them to the authorities for traveling with forged IDs. Thompson, Randolph, and Swiftwater, indeed!

With a couple of hours to kill, he checked through his own fake cards and chose the best of them. He also carefully packed the platinum credsticks and a fistful of high-denomination bills into a hidden briefcase compartment. They'd be discovered by customs, of course, and he would go through the ritual of smiling and greasing the palms of the pleased Azanians who would pretend that there was something illegal about importing credit or notes. After checking once more to see that he'd packed everything he might need, he called for a cab and waited.

New Hlobane International wasn't what Serrin had expected. He had vague memories of Johannesburg as a grimy, depressingly Americanized city with atrocious poverty in its satellite towns and enough crime to make New Yorkers feel at home. But the Zulu airport, the drive to the city through suburbia, and the rising skyline of New Hlobane itself had a quite different air. Pietermaritz-burg, as it had been known before the Zulu people renamed it and made it their capital in the accords of 2039, even seemed to have chromed industrial plants ringing it. The country was rich, that much was clear; and if there were pockets of poverty, they were damn well hidden. The impression of elegance and style he'd gotten at the airport was strengthened by the sight of the spacious boulevards of the capital city.

"This is amazing," he muttered to Michael. "So much for stereotypes of

underdeveloped nations."

"Second highest per capita income on the continent," Michael said matter-of-factly. "Tourism is a huge industry, because it's safe here. No bandits and poachers to shoot you out on safari. They've got coalfields the size of Nebraska to the north, and the King owns half of PWV into the bargain. They've invested their money well. You'll find a surprising number of Swiss banks with branches here, and not just in New Hlobane either."

"PWV?" Serrin couldn't remember what the acronym stood for.

"Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vaal. The big industrial plex. Pay attention! I thought you'd been here before. It's only the administrative and judicial capital of the Confederated Azanian Nations, after all. It's the one thing that holds them all together, the Cape Republic, Zulu Nation, Oranje-Vrystaat, the Trans-Swazi Federation. No one was prepared to give up the PWV to anyone else."

"Sorry," Serrin apologized vaguely. He was too busy taking in the lobby of the Imperial after the cab ride from the airport. "Is this just the tourist stuff?" He was impressed. The wall hangings, tapestries, and batik-like prints looked good enough to be worth a lot of nuyen.

"Mostly," Michael said. "Any animal skin is fake, of

course. The Zulu Nation is very tough on that one. Poaching carries an automatic death sentence. Being out in the wilds with an unlicensed weapon gets you a minimum twenty years. Death, if they reckon it's a hunting weapon. One of the little quirks around here is that it's less dangerous to have an assault cannon in the bush than to have a grotty little rifle, at least as far as the law is concerned. Heavy weaponry ruins the skins."

"What about rhinos? Aren't they hunted for their horns?" Serrin asked.

"Where've you been for the last thirty years? The only rhinos alive are in zoos, term," Michael replied. "Or on disk."

He ambled over to the reception desk. Kristen almost had to be dragged along with Serrin, having already received some distinctly hostile looks.

"Thank you so much," Michael enthused as he took the key cards for the rooms, "it's so good to be here. The coach is at ten o'clock tomorrow? Excellent."

You're so efficient. Thank you again."

"Pass the sick bag," Serrin muttered as they headed for the elevators.

Michael gave him a sardonic smile. "We're tourists, remember? Behave like one. Divide your IQ by your boot size and just act unnatural."

"Kristen's a tourist?" Serrin asked. It didn't seem terribly plausible, somehow.

"Well, sort of," Michael said as the elevator doors swished open. "You haven't checked all the IDs, I see."

"What do you mean?" Serrin said suspiciously.

"She's a distant cousin, old boy. That's what her ID says. It was my idea," Michael replied smoothly.

"What?" The elf was flummoxed.

"It was the logical thing to do. What better reason for a Cape Town girl to be accompanying a bunch of foreigners. Anything else would look suspicious. I'm afraid one of my male relatives, some licentious old rake or other, must have enjoyed a brief dalliance in the Cape at some time and now I am overjoyed to have discovered my long-lost relative," Michael grinned.

"It's all right," Kristen assured the frowning elf. "He asked my permission to do it."

"Look on the bright side, old boy. If you weren't an elf I'd have had her down as your daughter," Michael sniggered. Avoiding the elf's swat at his head, he ducked out the elevator doors as they opened to deposit the little group on the fifteenth floor.

"I've got to go catch up on some research. See you later," Michael said as he set off along the carpeted corridor.

"I wanted to ask you something about that," Serrin called after him. "I wondered—that is, Tom and I had a word—I wondered if we, that is you, could identify the other people who might be possible targets. Those with the right genetic makeup."

Michael opened his mouth to begin a reply, and then sighed. "Sure, there must be people I haven't come up with yet. There's a good reason I can't do that now. If I tried to get into the medical databases of every country on the globe, someone would eventually sit up and take notice. So far, I've only checked those on Kristen's list and those from the countries with flights into JFK around the time of Serrin's departure. Which leaves about eighty-five percent of the planet unaccounted for.

"Someone is going to start hearing alarm bells if I set my frames to doing everything. And what if it turned out to be the person we're looking for? We don't want him to find us first." Michael sliced a finger across his throat, melodramatically but not without some impact. "Sorry, chummers. What feels right may not be the smartest thing to do." He didn't wait for a rejoinder, but slotted his key card into the door and vanished into his room.

"I guess he's got a point," Serrin sighed. The troll looked darkly at him and mumbled something inaudible before stomping off to his own quarters.

Kristen looked uncertain, not sure what to do with the little plastic card. Serrin showed her how to use it, realizing that staying in a hotel was another thing she'd never done before.

"It's automatic. Just slide the thing in. It has your identity and a code number on it," he said as the door

hummed back and the card popped back out of the slot. "Go ahead and enjoy yourself here. Drink the bar dry if you want to. You don't have to pay." Then he began limping down the hall to his own room. "See you for dinner. Just knock if you want anything."

Five minutes later, there was a soft tapping on the door. Serrin left the trid news service flickering on the screen and opened it to let the puzzled-looking girl in.

"Can I talk to you?" she said, parking herself on the huge bed in a way that said she wasn't taking no for an answer. Looking at her, he was struck by the fact that she was barefoot, her toes curled up, pink soles contrasting with the

polished brown of the upper sides of her feet. It was an incongruous perception.

But then Serrin always tended to see details when he wanted to avoid the big picture.

"I don't really understand what's going on," she said.

Serrin shrugged. "I wish I could say that I do," he told her. "I've been trying to figure out how a bungled kidnapping got me halfway round the world inside less than a week. All I wanted to do was some quiet research in a library somewhere—and now all this."

"Why did you bring me with you? What use can I possibly be? I never expected to see you anyway. Why didn't you just up and leave without me?"

The directness of the questions hurt. The elf was acutely aware that a life like hers was eminently disposable. Street kids disappeared every day, in London, Cape Town, Rio, Seattle, any city you could name. No one cared about them, or their fate. The best chance of survival often came with gang membership, but that usually ended up with the kid dead or maimed in a stabbing or a Shootout anyway.

"It just didn't feel like the right thing to do," he said lamely, preferring not to think about his own experience of losing his parents at a young age. It wasn't just the usual disappointment and hurt of goodbyes. There was a lot more to it than that, but he'd never delved much into that whole bundle of confused and powerful emotions.

"Why didn't you ask me in right away?" Kristen said,

stretching out a little on the bed. He didn't understand what she meant.

"You haven't made a pass at me," she said coolly.

The elf hesitated. He knew that if he said the wrong thing, it could ruin everything. He decided to wait until he had more of a clue about what she wanted him to say.

"Should I have?" he asked.

"Everyone else does. You're rich, you wear fine clothes, you stay in

hotels.

Your face was on the cover of a magazine. When people like you come dockside, there's only one reason. Usually."

He wasn't sure whether there was any hostility lurking in all this. He was very uncomfortable, aware that despite his greater age and experience of the world he was suddenly at a major disadvantage. Trying to buy some time, he lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. To his surprise, he managed an immaculate smoke ring with the final stages of the exhalation. He sat down beside her.

"I don't know about everyone else. It's not that you aren't pretty. It's just that I got burned recently," he said, and then told her about what had happened with Julia Richards. He felt somewhat relieved. It was getting him off the hook.

"But it's not just that," he blurted out. "I don't know, I really don't. I feel like I've known you a long time, which is just plain crazy. And I don't mean that you remind me of someone else." It flashed through his mind that in some way that wasn't quite true, but he was too confused and uncertain to say that. "I care for you, but it isn't sexual. Somehow. Oh, spirits, I don't know."

He gave up on it and sat with elbows on his knees, balled fists on either side of his chin, looking down. Then he smiled and turned to her.

"But you do have the cutest feet," he laughed, trying to break the tension somehow. She chuckled, letting her toes play with the carpet. She got up, stood before him, and grabbed his forearms with her hands.

"Let's go dancing," she cried, taking Serrin utterly by surprise.

"What? In the middle of the afternoon? Hell, I can't dance. I've got a shot-up leg, Kristen."

Her grip tightened. "Let's just do it," she begged.

"Oh, what the frag," he said, smiling broadly. "Let's go dancing." She took him by the hand and led him through the door.

"I had a word with one of the tour people," Michael said quietly to Tom as they sat at the lace-covered table. "Gave them a few bucks. We'll be able to get into the less, er, authorized places. I didn't want to mention any names, just

told him we were looking for some authentic shamanism, not just the tourist stuff. Of course, he'll think that we just want the next-to-tourist stuff rather than the real thing. But it gives us a start. I'll drop this Shakala's name later and see what reaction I get."

"Hmmm," the troll replied. He knew Michael was making an effort to keep him involved, keeping him up on everything that was going on. But Tom felt almost superfluous. He was here as Serrin's bodyguard, but still hadn't needed to raise so much as a fist. Michael seemed to be doing everything that needed doing. Not that he'd have expected someone with such an obsession for control to be any other way.

He looked around toward the doorway, saw Kristen and Serrin coming in behind a liveried waiter struggling with an indecently large soup tureen. As soon as the limping elf came into view, he noticed something different. From this distance there was no way Tom could have seen the details, but he sensed them anyway. The lines around Serrin's eyes were less strained, the tremor in his hands virtually gone. Though he was limping a little more than usual, he seemed almost, well, carefree.

Kristen and Serrin came up to the table, sharing some whispered words that left them both smiling. Serrin made to pull out a chair for her to sit, but she gave him a reproachful look and he left her to it, sitting down opposite her.

"Have a good time?" Michael asked innocently.

Serrin looked sheepish and told him what they'd been doing.

"You should have told me. I'd have lent you a tux," Michael smiled.

"No need, old boy," Serrin mocked him. "The waltz isn't the favored dance around here. I don't think I'd look good in one anyway."

"You'll see how you look in khaki tomorrow. For all the technology of this wonderful century, nothing has replaced it for trekking in heat," Michael replied. "Now, let's eat. Apart from the pumpkin, which is habitually boiled into submission, everything looks good. Oh, avoid the farmed hippo. Texture of old boots and it tastes greasy and fishy."

"But is the crocodile as good as Louisiana gator?" Serrin asked.

About the time his quarry was turning in for the night, Magellan landed in Cape Town, where it took only a couple of hours on the street to find out what they'd been up to. They'd flashed in, picked up some street girl, and taken off again. Magellan hardly needed to inquire where, though he checked with the airport just in case. Then the Tir elf booked a room for the night in a suitable anonymous airport hotel, needing to snatch a few hours of sleep before his flight to the Zulu Nation. Serrin was getting warmer now, and if he got to the Babanango plant, he might get too close to the truth.

What will he do with it, though? Magellan wondered. I don't want to kill him, not one of my own blood. And the decker, he's too smart to be fooled and lied to. Spirits, the decker just might be good enough to make the trace, to find out who owns the plant, and then he's just one little step away from the heart of it all. Luther will destroy him first, but that's not what worries me. If he finds out the truth, he'll make sure that everything he knows will automatically be relayed to someone else in case anything happens to him. He's got some friends who can cause real trouble. Damn, maybe he's even told someone already. The English lord? That journalist who splashed the elf all over Newsweek? No, not yet, surely. He isn't certain enough. One thing I can be sure about is that he's overcautious. He'll want to know more before he blows the whistle.

Fretting, Magellan tried to sleep in the early hours, but

his brain buzzing with plans and schemes kept him awake almost until dawn. He overslept and missed his flight, cursing himself for not requesting a wakeup call. Then he remembered the one person in the Zulu Nation who owed him a favor. He made the call from the airport. It was only a contingency, might not be necessary after all, but the price was fair and a pack of Zulu samurai were always useful. Maybe his earlier idea would turn out to be the correct one after all.

Feeling a lot better, he picked up his tickets and made for the departure gate.

18

Serrin tottered off the plane at Nkandla feeling very groggy. Mistakenly, he'd thought the luxurious coach had arrived at the Imperial to take them to the

Umfolozi reserve, but all it did was deposit them back at the airport. The plane, which made the 777 they'd flown in earlier seem like the height of luxury and safety, wasn't any make Serrin recognized, and had little better than bucket seats inside. The flight was less than sixty miles, but it might have been to Mars for how long it seemed. Serrin had never heard of clear air turbulence before, and suspected it was an invention to disguise the fact that the plane was in the process of falling apart. He only barely managed to retain the contents of his stomach during the trip. Michael had told them they were going to one of the less popular, more out-of-the-way campsites, but he hadn't expected the transport to be quite so awful.

Michael was appallingly unflappable, resplendent in khaki shorts, shirt, walking boots, and a pith helmet. With his thin white legs and knobby knees, he looked the perfect English tourist. The zinc cream smeared over his nose and lips, added to a generous dosing of lighter sun block over every inch of exposed flesh, looked more than faintly ridiculous. He was clearly loving every minute of it.

"If you haven't sprayed yourself with repellent, now's the time to do it," he said cheerfully, squinting through his shades along the red-brown dirt strip that passed for Nkandla's runway. "And don't forget to spray that talc inside your underwear. Sweat chafing can take off a layer of skin in hours out here, even in dry heat. And Tom,

even though you're a troll, in this climate you need sun block. Really. Trust me."

Tom grunted and hurriedly attempted to extract some of the cream from his plastic bottle as the jeeps roared into sight in a great cloud of dust. He managed to deposit roughly three-quarters of its contents into his huge hands and began busily smearing himself. The heat of the brilliant yellow sun was intense enough for him to feel even through a skin thicker than anyone else's around, black or white.

Serrin looked around at the handful of other people along for the safari. Most of them, he was pleased to see, looked as absurd in shorts as he might have if he hadn't opted for long khaki pants instead. Two Americans, a trio of dumpling-shaped Germans, and a pair of Japanese; the standard mix. Only Kristen looked as if she was at home here, neither uncomfortable nor out of place. The half-dozen touf guides pointedly avoided speaking to her, though they were short on conversation anyway. Ruanmi, the leader of the group, was the one who'd done

almost all the talking, but most of what he had to say consisted of the standard warnings and reminders to sign the usual disclaimer forms.

After piling into two of the jeeps and roaring off northward into the heart of the reserve, the group had to hang on for dear life. The seatbelts in the jeeps certainly weren't there to provide safety in the event of a crash; their main function was to stop passengers from being hurled out as the vehicle raced across the bumpy plains.

"Shaman lions east," Ruanmi yelled to the convoy. "Single male with two, three females. One of the females has young, a pair of cubs. Twins, I think." He dumped himself back into his seat after delivering that announcement. Serrin, meanwhile, couldn't figure out how the man succeeded in standing up in the wobbling jeep. The idiot attempting it with his fabulously over-priced camera in the vehicle directly behind them had been lucky to fall backward into the vehicle rather than onto the rock-hard surface they were traversing.

"They create illusions?" Serrin asked anxiously to Ruanmi. He didn't know what the Awakened lions were

capable of, though he seemed to remember that detail. Ruanmi grinned and fingered the collar of teeth around his neck.

"They will not harm us," he said. Serrin had already sensed power in the man, and concentrating now, he could sense that the spell focus was powerful. Intulo, the other shaman, was always silent, and from his apparel Serrin guessed that his totem was Crocodile. He didn't want to think about that too much. He was much more comfortable with Ruanmi, whose mane of hair proclaimed him as a Lion shaman as strongly as his proud walk and the freak golden speckling in his brown eyes. The shaman seemed not to dislike Serrin, which was a relief to the elf. Maybe he knows I love cats, Serrin thought with an inward chuckle.

Despite suffering from the effects of the endless bumping, Serrin still had enough wits about him to be impressed once they reached the razorwire perimeter of their campsite. The elephants, wildebeest, and flocks of birds scattered across the plains and waterholes were a dramatic sight, not least for their sheer numbers. The blood kites had alarmed him, but, again, the shamans protected them from any harm posed by the dangerous creatures. He was irked, though, to find that he needed the help of the African man to get out of the jeep, his bad leg completely drained of any strength. Kristen had just leapt out behind him, and he felt like an elderly invalid as he struggled to get his boots

down onto the dust-dry earth.

Tents had already been pitched for them, the site men surrounding the camp with their LMGs glad to see the relief column. They shook hands with their replacements, speaking animatedly in the Zulu tongue. Though Kristen could not understand every word, she bristled with barely disguised anger at what they said about her.

Ruanmi gathered them together in the center of the camp for a repeat of the standard warnings. The razorwire already spoke of the injunction not to leave the camp unaccompanied, but the guide was savoring the task of lovingly describing all the venomous insects and small reptiles of the area and which antidotes to use against the poison of each and every species.

"We know there are two nagas in Unlanga River just east of here, maybe one-quarter hour away," he said. "We make a blind nearby so we can take their pictures at dusk. Four of you only can make this trip; others interested can try again tomorrow. No guarantee nagas will be active, but we see adults more often now that young have left the territory to go out on own. And nagas not so fierce now there is no need to protect their young."

Serrin was only too happy to let the enthusiastic Americans and Japanese take Ruanmi up on the offer. It would have been a pity not to let such expensive cameras fulfill their function in life, after all. Michael sidled up to him, and to his astonishment he saw that the Englishman was carrying an HK227 submachinegun in his right hand like some veteran soldier of fortune.

"Told you we'd be better off out here with something that can't be taken for a hunting weapon," Michael said, smiling. "And you don't need a license for one of these things on an accredited safari trip. I thought Tom might feel more comfortable with it. He tells me he has an Uzi back home, but I've always thought the H&K a better weapon myself. Besides which, Ruanmi couldn't get us an Uzi in the time we had."

By coincidence, a couple of sharp reports not far away made Serrin jerk his head away in surprise.

"That'll be dinner," Michael said, picking at a fingernail. "They offered to take us along to go deer shooting, but I'm rather squeamish myself and you don't look in any condition for hunting right now. Tom didn't seem all that interested either."

He reached into one of the saddlebag-sized pockets in his long khaki jacket and pulled out a pistol, handing it to the elf.

"Do you have an entire armory in there?" Serrin asked.

"Not quite, old boy. But you should give that to Kristen. She's probably never used a gun, so let's hope she can at least point it in the right direction if necessary. Just tell her the most important thing might be to hold it and look like she's done it before."

"Do you think we're going to need them?" Serrin said anxiously. "I mean, this place looks pretty safe to me."

"I was rather thinking about when we leave it," Michael said without even blinking.

Serrin looked down at the pack that had replaced his habitual suitcase. Somewhere beneath the bottled water, which he carried in case the camp supply became contaminated, medicines and sprays to augment Michael's cache, tinned food for emergencies, and the other clutter he'd been forced to bring along, lurked his clothing and clean-up kit. Then he looked longingly at the improvised shower rigged up near the trees. The shade cover looked as good as the prospect of washing up felt.

"Which is my tent?" he asked, glancing around.

"We're sharing. I suppose I'd better go with Tom, even if he does snore. Crikey, what with roaring and growling animals all night it probably won't make any difference," Michael laughed.

Serrin fought his way through the tent's netting-covered flap and found Kristen inside, having already dismembered her pack over the groundsheet.

"Do you mind sharing with me?" he asked. "I could sleep outside if you want privacy."

She laughed at him, "Sure, and get eaten by mosquitoes. Don't be silly." She scooped her things into one half of the tent, leaving the rest of the area clear for Serrin. He struggled to extract his towel from the bag, then made for the shower. He passed two Zulus lugging what he took to be a small antelope

through
the camp gates, and saw that a fire for the roasting had already been started
inside old rusted steel drums. His stomach told him antelope charred on the
outside and bloody in the middle wasn't what he wanted right now or at any
later
time, and he turned away, grateful he could at least look forward to a shower.

Michael had to wriggle under the tent flap to wake them, since the cloth
was
fastened from the inside and he didn't want to make any noise. In the low
light
of his torch, he saw them lying together, her arm around his chest. They
looked
extraordinarily peaceful. He felt almost guilty having to shake the elf's
shoulder.

"Huh? What?" Serrin half-yelled. Michael motioned him to be quiet, then
spoke
urgently.

"We're going. Ruanmi has made a contact. Shakala will see us. Ruanmi says
the
word is he's a very temperamental fellow. If he says yes now, you go now,
because tomorrow he might feel different. Get your stuff together. As quietly
as
you can."

Serrin rubbed his face and was glad that he'd repacked most of his bag.
"What
time is it?"

"Just after four. It won't be light for a while. It's apparently about
eight
miles from here. Just out of Babanango. Come on, let's move it."

Kristen grumbled at being awakened and simply turned over to go back to
sleep.
Serrin had to shake her vigorously before she grudgingly opened her eyes. It
was
ten minutes before they were out into the surprising chill of the African
winter's night. Tom and Michael were already piling into the jeep.

"I cannot go with you," Ruanmi told Serrin. "I must stay in camp all the
time.
Nholo will take you to Shakala. He comes right back, though. You must find
own
way back, except he go back for you same time tomorrow. If not we tell the
others you got eaten by the king," and he made an extremely realistic,
throaty
lion's growl, then chuckled quietly to himself.

"Thanks, chummer," Serrin said drily and belted himself into the back seat.

With Tom hogging the front seat, he had to squeeze into the back with Kristen and Michael. The jeep's headlights lit up, revealing a miasma of huge-winged moths and buzzing insects. Serrin fumbled for the repellent spray in his bag, but he had no time to get it before the jeep started off on its bone-crunching journey. After that, getting anything out of anywhere was virtually impossible. The elf only hoped that they'd be moving too fast for anything to bite him.

Martin knew the signs of Luther's growing fury all too well; the tension was palpable. The work was so exacting, so precise, so inevitably strewn with tiny mistakes ruining the perfection Luther craved. The molecular probes simply didn't have the precision, not with the techniques available. A dogged scientist would simply have scatter-gunned every possibility and weeded out the

failures, but then such a person would never have been able to make the discoveries Luther had. He knew exactly what he wanted, and Nature's stubborn refusal to give it up enraged him far beyond the bounds of reason.

Martin hadn't been at the monastery during the Rage of '42, when Luther had slain every single living person in the place. Martin's job had been to cover that up, fabricating the fire that had destroyed much of the old building. He didn't think he could get away with such a trick again. Time was short now, Luther was very close, and he had to take the risk Luther himself had refused because of the proximity of the victim. Luther was oblivious now, not needing food, drink, or sleep, only dimly aware of anything happening outside his laboratories. Martin would not be missed. If Luther went berserk, one last crazed feeding might just return him to his senses.

19

Their driver was obviously nervous, afraid even, when the jeep jerked to a halt. He almost pushed them out. Promising to return the next night if they hadn't arrived back at camp, he pointed out the way to them.

"Half a mile, that way. If you hear the cheetahs cry, walk on. Don't shoot." Eyes wide with apprehension, he hastily turned the vehicle around and sped away.

"Keep that H&K hefted, Tom," Michael said, directing his flashlight ahead of them. In his other hand was a Predator.

They didn't see the cats, only heard them, but it wasn't the growling they'd expected. Rather, the short, high call of the cats was more like a protesting meow. It certainly didn't seem to compare with the roaring of the lions.

Treading the savanna carefully, they almost didn't realize that they'd found Shakala until they looked closer at the trees looming into view against the clear, starlit sky. The branches seemed oddly twisted, almost into a woven helter-skelter shape, a copse of them lined up like the arms of veldt soldiers. Glittering yellow eyes looked down at them from vantage points high overhead. Then, as much by instinct as anything else, given the silence of the footfalls, they realized they were encircled.

One of the elves stepped forward from the advancing phalanx. Though he was obviously tall, lean, and strong, it was impossible to see his exact form. Only the lightness of the belted loincloth and the cape around his shoulders demarcated him from the night which otherwise blurred with his immaculate blackness.

Michael let the gun fall slowly to his side and the others followed his cue. "Shakala said he would see us if we

came," he said quietly. There were too many spears not to be damned polite here, and those were just the obvious weapons.

"We were not told there would be a kaffir," the man said viciously. "There will be a price to pay for that." The group with him advanced another step, only yards away now, perhaps forty or fifty strong. Kristen cowered beside Serrin and tried to look as small as possible. The elf was shaking, aware that there were shamans with this group, sensing their power. They would be far more dangerous than their spears if this came to violence.

The Zulus stood silently around them, staring them down, deliberately letting the tension build. Then, from the trees before them, a figure sprang fully thirty feet to the ground, landing perfectly on all fours and then rising to his seven-foot height, folding his arms and surveying them with fierce intelligence. Power screamed from the Zulu elf; Serrin was confused, sensing the aura of a mage but seeing him dressed in the unmistakable trappings of a cat shaman.

"Shakala, I presume," Michael said with the hint of a nod. The elf ignored him at first, turning his eyes to Kristen.

"Be glad this is no sacred place, kaffir, or I would rip your throat out," he

growled. Then he turned to Tom, at whom he gazed long and hard. Sensing that this was some kind of staring-down contest, the troll looked back into the Zulu's eyes, refusing to yield. The elf's face hardened for an instant, and then a playful smile spread over his angular face. The expression might have been that of a cat playing with its helpless prey.

"We've come to ask for your help. We know that someone tried to kidnap you. It's possible they may try again," Serrin began. Since Shakala had ignored Michael, he thought it best to speak up.

Shakala's eyes turned to him as soft light spread around from objects some of the Zulus were carrying. They weren't torches, or didn't seem to be; Serrin thought he felt the aura of magic on them, but he was locked into the shaman's gaze. Despite the situation, Serrin couldn't help registering the beauty of the man. With that aquiline

nose, the high bones of his face, the elegance and proportion of his hard body, he looked like a prince.

Shakala laughed. It was an extraordinary sound, tinged

with the high call of a cheetah at the beginning and with

the growl of a lion as it faded away.

"No one will try again," he said derisively. "And why

should I help you, little mage? What do I care about

you?" "Nothing," Serrin said quietly. "But the same people

also tried to get me. And others have been taken, and

killed. It's possible they might come back for more of

your people. We just don't know."

He wasn't lying. For all he knew, that might be true.

Shakala stared as if trying to ferret the truth out of Serrin.

Still not replying, he abruptly turned away and pointed at

Tom.

"I may speak with him," he said. "Perhaps. If I do not just kill him first. He is either very brave or very stupid

to come here with Mujaji's mark on him. What I am inclined to think"—he flashed his brilliant, sadistic smile again—"is that he is probably very stupid. Either way, he will not leave with the mark upon him."

Tom stood his ground, unflinching. He didn't know just what the shamans of Table Mountain had done to him. He had been shown the stone and the ocean, felt something of their immanence within him and marveled at it, but he hadn't realized that it could be sensed by other shamans. Bear had not changed inside him; she had not shown any displeasure at what had happened. The elf was gesturing to him, leading him into the circle of trees. Half the surrounding elves formed a circle around them, the others ringing Serrin, Michael, and Kristen. Weapons other than spears were visible now as metal gleamed in the gentle light.

"This is my place," Shakala cried out. "I am prince here. Beware princes, troll, for they are less easy to placate than kings and they take their sport far more seriously." It would have sounded pompous, even ridiculous, had the Zulu elf not looked so striking and beautiful in the barely illuminated darkness.

Tom had met some Cat shamans in his time. They were

unpredictable, capricious, and vain, often cruel but sometimes gentle and protective. Shakala didn't seem to be of the latter variety. The troll didn't know anything about Cheetah, but Shakala's words seemed to say that it was a more dangerous totem than Lion. Shakala was going to make sport with him. The troll knew that if he hosed it here, they were all dead. He begged Bear not to send him berserk if Shakala taunted him too long, too hard. When his weapons were taken by Shakala's retinue, he had only himself to depend upon.

Before his eyes the elf's form began to change. His hands became heavily clawed, furred paws. His head changed into that of a cheetah, its powerful canine teeth gleaming, yet the troll could still make out the elf's own features against the animal's face. This wasn't an illusion. Tom was bewildered. Was Shakala a shapeshifter taking elven form and now changing it? No, he didn't sense that. Was he perhaps masked? What was this creature?

The Cat shaman padded around him, now and then stopping to crouch and let

out
a low growl. The troll also moved in a circle, walking backward, always
keeping
his face to Shakala. Then the Cat shaman broke into a sprint and raced around
to
the troll's flank, clawing him hard enough to draw blood. It was only a
scratch,
but it stung Tom, who realized his adversary was far too swift for him.

Shakala rolled over at the end of his sprint and lunge, then was back on
his
feet in a single movement.

It's like a homicidal ballet, Serrin thought, unable to tear his eyes away
from Tom. Kristen had meanwhile buried her face in his shoulder.

The Cat shaman circled and sprang once more; again the troll was too slow,
taking a raking wound to the shoulder. A third attack, after another circling
ritual and strike, left him with a flesh wound at the back of his left leg,
the
cheetah's favored hamstringing. The wounds were still superficial, but Tom
felt
the anger rising inside him. Please, Bear, no, he begged. If I strike at him,
he
will kill me. He will have my friends killed.

He had to exert every shred of his will into holding back the growing urge
to
pounce on the cheetah as it lay

in the grass now, quiet and still. Tom knew the creature was inviting him
to
strike, and his desire to leap on to it, then squeeze the life out of it with
his powerful arms, was growing by the second. The next instant the cat
pounced
straight at him and raked at his chest through the flimsy khaki, leaving a
bloody arc of stripes across his flesh.

Shakala retreated again and lay on his back before the troll. It was the
classic submissive gesture of a cheetah, back legs curled up and ready to
defend
itself by rolling into a ball and hiding its underbelly if attacked. He was
provoking the troll to attack as persuasively as he could. Blood roared in
Tom's
ears as it spread across his shirt. He summoned every ounce of will into
forcing
himself to remain still.

They remained that way for one endless, eternal minute, the stain of blood
spreading slowly over the troll's chest, the Cat shaman saying to and fro
very
slowly, waiting for the troll to strike. Tom balled his fists and bit on his
tongue, trying to focus the pains all through his body into resistance. He

did

not close his eyes, but still stared at the waiting cat. He longed with every ounce of instinct to crush his tormentor, lying so invitingly in the grass. He

fought that longing with everything better than instinct that he possessed.

Shakala got to his feet very slowly and advanced. He stood directly in front of the troll and stared up at him. Serrin shook with fear, desperate to help Tom with some spell, some strengthening of his will, but knowing all too well that the eyes of the shamans other than Shakala were on him. All he could do was pray.

Shakala put his paws on Tom's shoulders. Rivulets of blood came from the marks the claws made as they penetrated the troll's flesh, and still the troll did not waver. The cat's head reared back, then he spat in Tom's face.

Tom roared and wrapped his arms around Shakala. The huge biceps of the troll, gleaming with blood, strained as he crushed the body of the elf, squeezing with all the focused rage of his torment and humiliation.

But there was nothing there.

High above him, the great cat leapt from a tree and landed on the troll's back, knocking him to the ground. It

sank its muzzle into the nape of Tom's neck and bit down hard.

Lying under the cat's furred body, Tom's fury evaporated like veldt dew in the sun. He felt huge paws around him, but they were those of Bear and not Shakala, protective arms holding him close and safe. There wasn't any more pain. The bite was not deep; he was not being killed. He curled up, feeling his huge body so ridiculously small in Bear's embrace.

Shakala got up from him, blood on his muzzle and paws. In an instant, the cat form faded and the elf who had greeted them re-appeared. He looked down at the troll, staring hard, completely ignoring the others.

For one horrible moment, Serrin thought Tom was dead. But he'd taken no more

than half a step forward before two spears were at his throat and a gun barrel at his back. Shakala did not move a muscle.

"Take them away," the Zulu elf muttered with a wave of his hand to the warriors surrounding Serrin, Michael, and Kristen. "Bring them back at noon." Spears directed the three of them away, into the trees.

"He moved. I think he's still alive," Michael whispered to Serrin. "By God, what have we got ourselves into?"

Serrin didn't want to think about it. He was only too aware that he was the one who had brought Tom here. If the troll were still alive, it was impossible to guess what might be the effect of the ordeal and humiliation. If it hits him the way love did, Serrin thought, I've just cost him his life in a way far worse than being killed by that madman.

The troll came to his senses just after dawn. His wounds were healing even without the application of his own meager power. He was lying in a clearing, the red ring of dawn on the horizon and a bright and brilliant morning chorus of birds and insects all around him. Shakala sat beside him, simply an elf now, but his whole posture intent. He offered Tom water, bread, dried meat, oranges. The troll skipped the flesh and ripped the orange apart. The elf smiled.

"You are weak, but you use everything you possess,"

Shakala said. "Your body is spoiled for power, but you are greater than you should be. You are wise, but you will not be shamed too far. This is my place," he said, "and you respected that. I am surprised by you."

The troll grunted. "I don't know much about your ways," he said finally. Shakala was obviously prepared to talk with him, but there were limits to how friendly he could be with someone who'd taunted and wounded him repeatedly.

"I will not allow the mark you bore here," Shakala said angrily. "I burned it from you. Now you have my mark for my enemies to see."

Great, Tom thought, that should be real handy if we have to go back to Cape Town. The Xhosa shamans ought to just love that.

"We came because we're trying to keep people from being killed—and we need help," Tom said quietly. "The men who tried to steal you. They also tried to

kidnap my friend. We know something about who they serve." Shakala sat and waited.

"We believe he is a nosferatu. A vampire, a bloodsucker," Tom added, uncertain whether this shaman would know the word. Come down to it, Tom wasn't entirely certain himself. "He takes only certain people. They have something special in their blood which he needs to feed on."

Shakala's eyes narrowed. "How do you know this?" he said quietly, taking a strip of meat into his hands and ripping it apart.

"Michael, the man with us. You did not speak with him," Tom began.

"Ha!" Shakala snorted. "He has no power. He is an empty shell."

"Possibly." Tom didn't really want to argue that now. "But he was able to use computers to study the medical histories of the kidnapped people." Then the troll remembered the thing that had puzzled Michael.

"We came also because Michael said that there was no history on you. Nothing on any official computer he checked. He didn't understand how the people could have

found you. How could they have known you had the right kind of blood?"

Shakala was thoughtful, chewing on his meat while Tom felt himself becoming drawn to the elf in spite of himself. The Cat shaman had more power within him than Tom felt he could ever know, and his languorous beauty was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was hard to dislike someone so physically perfect, even after the previous night.

"It could be done by magic," Shakala said slowly. "Perhaps. By ritual magic."

"It could," Tom agreed, "but that would take a very, very long time. And unless they had something of you, it would be virtually impossible. Is there anyone who—

He stopped in mid-sentence. He'd been about to ask Shakala whether someone might have a piece of him—hair, blood, something that he had once owned and that was precious to him—that could be used for ritual magic. But that was like

asking someone to reveal their greatest weakness, the means by which they could best be disabled, attacked, killed. It wouldn't be the smartest thing to ask this elf, so he stopped himself from blurting it out. But the elf knew anyway.

"There is something," the elf mused. "Blood. When I was a child, before the Zulu Nation was born, there was an epidemic here. There were not enough Awakened to deal with it. They used drugs to treat it as best they could. They took blood samples to find out whether the drugs could be used safely. The drugs were dangerous; some died from taking them. An allergic reaction," he said, looking slyly at the troll.

It was a neat counterpoint. Tom had touched on a possible vulnerability of the elf, and he had touched on Tom's own. Like all trolls, Tom suffered from a severe allergy—in his case, to silver. Like the elf, he would never want anyone else to know the precise details of his weakness.

Looking pleased with himself at the troll's reaction to his barb, Shakala continued. "The blood was returned years later from the old hospital. We Awakened beings could not permit it to remain in the hands of others," he

said, "But perhaps records were kept. That would be the one possibility. That would be one way someone might learn."

"Wouldn't that be on a computer?" Tom asked.

"Somewhere. But which one? Would it be one your friend, this man, has searched?"

"I don't know. Probably not," the troll replied uncertainly. "But I don't know much about computers myself."

"Do we need to know?" Shakala said.

We. It was the first time he'd used that word. Tom felt as if the elf was giving him respect at last. He may be greater and more powerful than I am, the troll thought, but he is still a shaman and he too serves and acknowledges something greater and more powerful, in turn, than himself.

"This hospital. Is it still there?" Tom asked, more relaxed now.

"Yes, but it is now used as a laboratory," Shakala said slowly. "They grow many unusual plants there. It is masked with powerful magic and protected by many warriors. Those who work there are brought from outside the Nation."

"You can tell us where this place is?" Tom asked. He was desperate for the right answer, but the one he got wasn't exactly what he'd hoped for.

"I will take you there. If they have my blood in their machines, and they have used it to try to kill me, then I shall destroy them," the Zulu said, the calmness of his voice making the words even more chilling.

"Ah," the troll said.

"Tom!" Serrin shouted in relief. "Hey, chummer, is it ever good to see you!" He tried his best to embrace the troll, but his arms couldn't quite make it around the huge torso. "Are you all right?"

"We've spoken," Tom said, shrugging off his friend's concern. He didn't have words to waste reassuring the elf that he was healed. It should have been obvious. "Things are going to get complicated." Keeping it brief and to the point, he repeated what he'd learned from Shakala.

"Well, if the information is on a private database, I

wouldn't have got it," Michael said. "I checked governmental sources and medical company databases, and the latter only when I had to. "Depends what kind of hospital, too. If it was a charity, for instance, I wouldn't have checked into it. The same if it's been taken over by a corporation." Something nagged at Michael, something lurking at the back of his mind, refusing to reveal itself. Tom's story certainly explained why information on the Zulu hadn't turned up in his searches. Something else, he thought. Come on, you deckhead, there's something else, what is it ...

"The problem is that he intends to use his warriors to destroy the place," Tom said, explaining Shakala's logic.

"But there's no point. The same information could have been duplicated elsewhere. His blood-group information could be in half a dozen places around the world by now. It's not going to do him any good to destroy this place. Hell, you can't use blood group data for ritual magic anyway, can you? Don't you need the blood itself?" Michael fretted.

"You're right. Everything you say is rationally true," Tom said with a rueful smile. "But you try telling him that."

"Did he get any ID on the people who came after him? How did the attempted kidnapping even get public? There aren't any media hacks out here. And what-

"Hey, slow down, chummer," the troll protested. "The hit team came in a chopper, apparently. He lost two of his people, but his warriors didn't draw any blood so Shakala couldn't use ritual sorcery to track them. He got hit with a trunk shot, but enough of his people turned up fast enough to keep the kidnappers from carrying him off. Shakala did get a look at one of them, though. A white man. Guess what? He had a scar on the left side of his chin. Shakala says there was something, something 'wrong' about the guy's aura. He can't be precise because the bullets were flying too fast and heavy for really precise astral perceptions right then."

"So it's the same man, the same outfit," Serrin mused. The description proves it. If you didn't tell him what I saw, that is."

"Come on, I'm not that dumb," the troll protested. "No, he said it right out."

"How did he do that stuff when you grabbed him?" Michael asked. "One minute you had him, the next he's in the trees above you. You ought to learn that trick, Serrin."

"I wish," the elf said fervently. "You said he was a mage. But he looks like a shaman. I see both. Maybe the usual classifications don't apply out here."

"Well, anyway," Tom said, "the reason the incident made the news was because a government minister was in the area at the time. Photo opportunities in the game reserve, tourist stuff. When they heard gunfire, the snoops and photographers with the group lit out after a real story. Just a lucky break."

"Are they going to kill me?" Kristen blurted out at last. She was terrified by the threatening body of Zulu men.

"No, I don't think so," the troll chuckled. "Shakala's happy enough. Seems he took a dislike to the Xhosa shamans putting some kind of mark on me. All that ritual last night was him replacing it with his own."

"Some ritual," Serrin protested.

"Yeah, well. I think I learned something from it," the troll mused.

"I suppose it's a bit like lemurs," Michael said a little uncertainly.

Serrin looked completely dumbfounded by this remark, "Lemurs?"

"Well they scent mark. If it's their territory, they piss on it to say it's theirs. If they come across some intruder, they mask his scent with their own. Sort of." Michael was finally succumbing to the effects of sleeplessness after a restless night, and realized he'd managed to talk himself into trouble.

"So you take me for a tree to be pissed on?" Tom said, faking anger. He was actually amused, realizing that for once the Englishman had been caught off-guard. The troll intended to make the most of the opportunity.

"Well, no, I mean, it's the concept of the thing," Michael said lamely.

"You dumb fragger," Tom growled, grabbing the Englishman by his jacket and hauling him a foot off the ground. "You don't know drek."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—" Michael began.

"Lemurs don't live in Africa. They're South American. I know; saw it on the trid once. If you're going to get me pissed on by something, then you should make damn sure it belongs out here, you dumb Englishman," Tom laughed, setting Michael back down on the ground.

Serrin was about to join in the laughter when he saw reinforcements beginning to arrive. The spears had looked nasty enough, but sixty of these Zulus armed with SMGs and assault cannon opened up whole new vistas of mayhem.

"I just hope there's still some kind of evidence left by the time these boys are done with it," he said hopefully.

20

After a two-hour trek through the midday sun, their nerves were seriously on

edge. They gripped their guns in slippery hands, while the sweat poured off the rest of their bodies. For Kristen, the most important thing was whether she'd be able to keep the weapon when all this was over. Having a gun would be a real edge back home. Getting enough money to eat was always a problem; only the boss gangs were able to afford guns.

"Smoke, look," Michael said, pointing ahead, above the treeline. "That's where we're headed to."

A cry of frustration went up from the scouts slithering through the trees and bush cover. Everyone broke into a run to catch up with them.

The buildings were by now mostly smoking ruins. There was no sign of life, and a pall of thin smoke hung over the whole scene. From the look of things, the torching must have occurred at least a day ago.

"We're a little late," Michael said drily. "I doubt we'll find anything here. But it's quite a coincidence, don't you think? The owners must have known someone might come calling."

"But who are they?" Serrin wondered.

"I'll find out when we get back to New Hlobane," Michael said determinedly.

Shakala strode up before them, anger on his face. "You come, and then this place is burned down. Is that just a coincidence?"

"I hardly think so," Michael said. "But do you not think, Prince, that if someone went to all this trouble to destroy the place it must be because it was important? Because they feared what you might find?" he used the title without mockery. The elf seemed placated, or at least to be thinking it over.

A sudden wailing cry rose up from somewhere ahead in the smoke haze. Two of Shakala's men came running up to him, one whispering in his ear with cupped hands to prevent the visitors hearing. Shakala uttered one word and gestured for them to follow.

"What did he say?" Serrin asked Kristen, whose reaction of surprise indicated that she must have gotten the gist of things.

"He said 'dead man.' No, wait, not dead . . . How would you say it ...?" She searched for the word, found it. "Zombies."

The Zulus dragged the two figures they had found before Shakala. They were Zulu men, thin as rakes, clad in rags, and the reactions of the scouts said they weren't local people. The men had visible sores on their bodies, and the leg of one showed a ghastly patch of gangrene.

"That's no zombie," Michael whispered to Serrin. "Not any kind I've ever heard of."

"So, now you're an expert on zombies?" . "No, but—" Michael's reply was cut short by Shakala's taking the head of one of the men in his hands and shaking it violently. The wretch offered no resistance, and except for the grimace on his face, showed no reaction at all. Shakala released him, uncertain.

"Do you know anything of this?" he demanded of Tom. "He is not possessed by any spirit." The troll shook his head.

"He has no soul," the elf stated. "But the body—it is alive. He is not undead. He has a disease and will perish."

The pathetic man fell to his knees and sobbed. "Master, master, tell me what to do. I do not know what to do. I have not been told." It would have been pure bathos but for the ghastliness of the man's appearance. Flies buzzed hungrily around the rotting flesh of his leg.

"Your Prince commands you to tell him what you have been doing," Shakala said, without even the slightest trace of pity.

"Gathering the flowers, as I was told."

"Where do you come from? Where do you live?"

"But here," the man said, plainly confused. "I live here."

"Where did you live before?" the shaman demanded. The man fell mute. Either he

didn't understand the question or he simply couldn't give an answer. He fell to sobbing again.

Serrin turned away from the sight. "It must be some kind of drug," he mumbled to Michael. "Something from the plants. Alkaloids or something. I don't know much about that kind of thing."

"Neither do I. But have you noticed how defoliant's been sprayed everywhere?"

Serrin turned back, looking at the red soil all around. There were no telltale stains, but now that Michael mentioned it, he could see that the grass around the spot stopped at a definite line. Someone had sprayed the area precisely and exactly.

"Why? Because of us? They're scared of us? Michael, if I know how to do one thing well, it's watch my back once I've been warned. My watcher spirits would have told me if we were being followed. And Shakala would have known it, too. That elf's primed with power. He'd have known if anyone was tracking us here."

"Maybe they took their cue simply from us coming to the Zulu Nation," Michael reasoned. "They needn't have followed us all the way here. Besides, are you so sure your own watchers are that good?"

"By all the spirits," Serrin suddenly cried out, abruptly breaking the thread of their talk. "Are we idiots?"

Michael looked askance at him, waiting to hear the reasoning behind the outburst.

"You said a nosferatu? Don't creatures like that have pawns they control? Zombies, more or less? Some of them, at least."

"So, they have pawns. Like these men. Then why does he need a place like this, meddling with drugs maybe, to make them if he can create them anyway? What does he even need them for, out here?" Michael asked.

"Slot me if I know," Serrin said miserably.

Michael was about to speak, but froze at the shrill scream coming from one of the men they'd found. He

was reacting to Shakala's probing of his mind, or what was left of it, by magic.

"I don't think he's going to get anywhere with that," Michael said. "We can pick through the ruins if you want, but I'll bet you a thousand nuyen to a button spider's rear end that we won't find anything.

"But now we know more. Whoever came for Shakala also came for you. They must have had the information on his blood group, and they must have had access to this place—probably even owned it for it to have been torched like this. I'm going to find out who did own it. And you've always got your lady reporter friend back in New York to ask about things that suck blood in the night." Suddenly, the Englishman's face broke into a half-crazy grin and he snapped his fingers in triumph.

"And I just realized what's been bothering me ever since we got here. One of the names on the list was from the Squeeze, back in London. There's no official data on people there, either. But there's corporate data. And there's only one corp that goes into the Squeeze for its workers.

"Now all I have to do is find out who's got a stake in this place and has access to the database of British Industrial's workers. It's a double verification. We can pin it down exactly. I can get some help from Geraint ..." His voice trailed off. "Oh, drek," he concluded.

"The bugger's a junior director of the company these days," he said wretchedly. He already guessed who must be handling the ownership rights, and he also knew that trying to deck into their system would be more or less equivalent to personally signing his own death warrant.

Magellan had made it to New Hlobane well before Serrin and the others went sifting through the ruins at Babanango, but it took time for him to catch up with their trail. Finally, enough money spread around found them. He also learned that the Englishman's cyberdeck was still stashed at the Imperial. He'd surely come back for it, which meant Magellan had no need to traipse into the veldt after them. But once he learned where they were headed, he was sure they'd find the plant. What he didn't

know was that Luther had ordered its destruction before they ever got there.

The elf almost panicked. They'd find the evidence; the plants, the drugs, the zombies. The research files. It was unthinkable. Hoping against hope that none of it had yet happened, he called the number from his own hotel room. "That number has been disconnected," the robotic voice informed him. Magellan looked askance at the telecom screen and sat back, staring at it dumbly for a moment. He knew the number wasn't in any directory. Jenna had her own ways of finding it, but disconnected? He tried the operator and told her, in the smoothest voice he could muster, that it was an emergency and he had to get through to the number.

"I'm sorry, sir, but the number has been disconnected," the voice came back with a firm insistence. Magellan slammed his fist on the table and cursed loudly. Then he called up the trid news pages, but found nothing about the Babanango facility there.

Had Luther already wrapped things up there? he wondered. Surely that wasn't possible. Unless, unless ... unless he's got everything he needs.

Magellan felt shock ripple through him. Jenna hadn't believed Luther to be that close. Neither had he.

Was there anything left, he fretted, any kind of evidence?

Sutherland will trace Luther. He's good enough. He'll

find out who owned the place. Luther's got to be stopped.

He'd been thinking of calling Jenna until he discovered

that Luther had already abandoned the research facility.

Now he had other calls to make, a trap to spring.

Niall had slept almost twenty-four hours straight, sweating feverishly, moaning as he lay tossing and turning. He woke with dark circles under his eyes, unrested by his tormented sleep. His mage's senses showed him his ally spirit, unmanifested to mundane eyes, at the entrance to the cave.

"Where am I? How long have I been here?" he groaned.

"A day and a night," Mathanas told him. "You are safe

enough here. We have not been followed. No more than usual, at least. We are well concealed. You need not fear."

"What do the watchers say?" Niall asked him. They were his own summonings, but the spirit's powers concealed them even as it was able to see what they saw, learn what they knew.

"They are still in Africa. I sensed a strong shamanic presence with them. The watchers did not follow," the spirit said. "It was too dangerous. They would have been discovered. The group was at Liitair's research plant, but they have left now. The place has been destroyed. Not even the aura remains."

"Lutair would not have done that because of them," the elf mused. "He doesn't know about them. I'm sure of it." Mathanas said nothing.

"He must be very close now," Niall went on. "He must have destroyed the place because he no longer has need of it. All the research has been done. It may be that we have no more than a few days left. Less, perhaps. We must be gone."

The words were much more than they seemed. Niall was referring to abandoning his homeland, everything he loved about the magic and wonder of Tir na n6g, the loss of everything he still had. Mathanas felt the mortal's hurt keenly.

"Not yet. We must be sure that none can follow," he said.

"But we don't have time," Niall protested. He knew Mathanas would want him to spend vital hours on ritual magic, masking himself through a web of deceit and confusion to mislead anyone in pursuit.

"It must be done. You did not venture the storm to take power against Lutair alone," the spirit said soothingly. "That is within the cauldron. What lies around it needs strengthening also."

"Mathanas, will you promise me something?" Niall asked, his voice placatory,

allowing the spirit to see his acquiescence. Mathanas waited to hear him out.

"If, when we find him, if he is to take me to the living death he plans, will you kill me first?"

"I am unable," Mathanas replied slowly.

The elf shrugged. He had not really expected any other reply.

"Well, I suppose we'd better get on with it," he said miserably. "Daingit, I need something to eat." The ridiculousness of it struck him, almost making him laugh. "Here we are, with a focus most Awakened on the planet would kill for, and I can't create a bowl of bread and milk to sustain me. That is truly absurd."

The spirit smiled. "I'll see what I can do."

They made it into Babanango in the late afternoon. Shakala said little to any of them, save to Tom. The shamans were still wary of each other, and when they stood together they were like bucks agreeing not to lock antlers, Tom deferring to the elf's ownership of the terrain and Shakala accepting the troll's presence. But a tension still crackled between them, and Serrin wasn't sorry when Shakala left them, assigning a few of his warriors to escort them to the outskirts of town.

By the time they found a cab to take them to the airport, he was feeling fairly drained. Michael had tagged the New Hlobane flight and was busily paying whatever it would take to get them on it. The decker was past fatigue, experiencing a second wind that had him eager to get back to his Fuchi so he could go decking for what they needed. Serrin grabbed a bottle of fruit juice and ran through the gate just in time to board the plane, Kristen close on his heels.

"That was a damn lucky stunt," Michael commented. "If we hadn't made this flight, it would have meant staying overnight. That, or ride all night by bus. We need to get moving on this one, term."

Serrin merely grunted agreement. He was too busy preparing himself for another ordeal aboard another of the flying rustbuckets that constituted local air transport.

"Look, if this place is so rich, how come they can't afford decent aircraft?"
he complained above the noise of the engines.

"We're tourists, old boy. You win some, you lose some," Michael replied rather off-puttingly. "Besides, almost no one gets eaten on safari anymore, so maybe this

is how you even up the odds, huh? You can't cheat the odds, matey."

"You're frizzed," the elf shouted at him.

"Of course. It runs in the family. Barking mad for generations," Michael yelled back. "I mean, why the hell else would I be here?"

Serrin sat back and didn't say anything more. He dozed off and didn't wake until yet another descent jerked him from sleep with the thump of rubber hitting tarmac. He couldn't keep track of how many times he'd felt that in the last few hectic days and nights. He looked around sleepily at Tom.

The troll sat impassively, a faraway expression on his face. Serrin realized that it had been hard for the shaman to resist attacking Shakala sooner than he had. Bear was vicious when wounded. Serrin had seen it only once, a Cajun woman from his Lafayette days. A soul gentle as any he'd ever met until she went wild after getting slashed in a bar fight. Even a pair of ork samurai had run for their lives.

The weary little group straggled into yet another airport, collecting their baggage and heading for the row of cabs almost robotically. By the time the taxi driver delivered them to the center of town, Serrin felt almost hyper-alert. He was tired, but not sleepy, and he needed some distraction.

"I think I'll hit the town. Michael, what do you think?"

"It should be safe," the Englishman said carefully. "It looks as if our quarry has bolted. We're chasing him now, not the other way around. Just stick to the safe places—if you can figure out what they are."

"We did some wandering the other day. Spirits, was it only two days ago?
I'm
losing track of time."

"Just be sure to be back in bed for your cocoa by half-past ten," Michael
chuckled. Ignoring Serrin's injunction that he go slot, the Englishman
climbed
out of the cab at the entrance to the hotel and paid the driver.

"Can I come with you?" Kristen asked Serrin.

He grinned and took her hand. "Sure," he said with a mischievous grin.
"Let's
go and have some fun. Catch

you later," he called to Michael and Tom as the cab pulled away with him
and
Kristen still in the back seat.

Tom looked worried as he and Michael entered the lobby. "Don't like it,"
the
troll fretted. "I'm supposed to be his protection, but I can't go with them.
I'd
be in the way."

"You could hail a cab and tell the driver to follow them," Michael laughed.
"Just like in the trid. Hang easy, chummer. They'll be fine."

"Meanwhile, term, I've got some work to do. After dinner I'm going to track
down whoever owned that place. What about you? You can sit in if you want. I
don't expect any problems, but I wouldn't mind having you around on the off
chance I do run into some bad 1C. I could use someone to pull the plug if
steam
starts coming out of my ears."

The troll smiled. "Can I get room service?"

"Eat the place out, matey. Be my guest." Michael smiled at him, more at
ease
with the huge troll now. He guessed that Tom felt he'd done something
important
by getting them Shakala's help. Perhaps the troll wouldn't be so stand-offish
with him now.

"Where's all this going to end up, I wonder?" Tom said in the elevator
after
Michael had reclaimed his deck from hotel security.

"God knows. Ask Nostradamus," Michael said.

"Who's he?" Tom was truly puzzled.

"Middle linebacker for the Seahawks," Michael replied, laughing at his own joke while the troll looked on, uncomprehending.

"Seriously, Tom," he said. "I haven't got a clue where all this is going to end up. Honestly. But give me a few hours and we'll be another step closer."

Serrin knew he shouldn't have risked the spicy beef strips at the club. He'd been happy enough listening to the music, enjoying a drink, laughing and talking with Kristen, and just generally observing the scene. Now the food wasn't doing his digestion any favors.

;' 'Scuse me, Kristen," he said, getting up from the table. "Be back in a minute." His guts were telling him

loud and clear that he needed to get to the men's room fast.

Too busy groaning in discomfort, Serrin didn't register the magical warning from his spell lock fast enough. He'd just entered the cubicle when the door to it was suddenly kicked open and two hard-faced men with Predators stood staring menacingly as he struggled to get his pants up. They gestured him to put his hands on his head, a request with which he wasn't in any position to argue. A gun held to his back, he was led past an astonished group of men at the urinals and out to a back door; not through the bar, but through the back of the building, past the crates of empty bottles littering the rear. Waiting just outside the door were two more men with SMGs.

Slot, Serrin thought, I shouldn't have taken the chance of showing my face in town tonight. Now that they know we've been out to Umfolozi, they're going to dispose of me damn quick.

He considered a suicidal last spell, trying to take out as many of them as possible, when he remembered that Kristen was still in the bar. When he never came back, she'd beat feet to Michael and Tom. Perhaps it wasn't over yet. When he thought of her, the idea of self-immolation lost its appeal anyway.

The pair of muscleboys forced him into a waiting limo at gunpoint and then the auto sped away along the highway.

"Don't try to shout or scream at the robot, no one will hear you. The doors and windows are soundproof as well as bulletproof," said an elven voice coming from the darkness-shrouded figure sitting on one side of Serrin, opposite the gunman who'd forced him into the car.

"Robot? What robot?"

"Sorry, mage. Local term for traffic lights. Guess you haven't had time to pick that one up yet." The elf leant forward to the driver; in the brightness of a passing streetlight Serrin saw the details of his lean face. That red hair wasn't common among American elves, though his accent was pure Tir Tairngire. Tir Tairngire? The name of that elven enclave had never showed up on Michael's

lists. Serrin suddenly began to wonder about this in a way he wished he'd done a lot sooner.

"So I've got the right blood type," Serrin said very cautiously. The other elf reached for a button with his right hand and a glass barrier hissed upward, separating them from the driver's compartment.

"I think I might enjoy it if you talked a little more," the red-haired elf said, grinning. On his left side, Serrin felt a gun-barrel pressed into his side. "But not here. Later, somewhere else. If you reach into the compartment in front of you, you'll find a small plastic cup with a blue liquid in it. Tastes quite pleasant. I suggest you drink it. It's merely a sedative. Something to make sure you won't be able to remember what route we'll be taking to our destination.

"So be a good boy and drink it," the distinctive elven voice continued with a harder edge. Serrin had no choice. Within two minutes, the street lights seemed to become a dazzling kaleidoscope, and then everything was swallowed in a darkness black as pitch.

21

His head felt truly dreadful, like a migraine or the fog of a terrible cold. It was late, he knew, but the drug had apparently played havoc with his system for he felt his heart pounding faster than normal. Oh well, he figured, standard interrogation procedure. Keep me awake when my resistance is low.

Serrin sat up on the cot to find himself in a room that was bare except for the makeshift bed, a table, and a rickety chair. Lit only by a naked bulb on the ceiling, the place would have made a barracks look like a gaudy Turkish brothel in comparison. The red-haired elf sat with his elbows resting on the back of the chair, legs splayed indolently to either side. He broke open a pack of cigarettes and offered one to Serrin. The mage hesitated.

"Oh, come on," the other elf said. "Go ahead. If I wanted to drug you, I've got some friends outside who'd just love to help me out."

Serrin took the cigarette. His own brand. He accepted a light from the elf and breathed in the smoke.

"Who are you?" he asked him.

"I think I'm the one who'll be asking the questions, wouldn't you say? But you can call me Magellan. You've been causing some trouble, I'm afraid. Oh, before you consider doing any flashy stuff with your magic, I'd advise you to forget it. We've spread a powerful magical damper around here. You wouldn't be able to get off the feeblest little squirt. There are also half a dozen big Zulus with a variety of exciting weapons outside, so you don't have a hope in hell of getting out of here."

He was confident, Serrin realized. Maybe too confident. And didn't even seem to be packing a weapon.

"Trouble?" he asked.

"Well, let's put it this way," Magellan said, pouring himself a glass of red wine from a bottle sitting next to the ashtray on the small table, "you've been trotting around the globe a lot lately. Which, I'd guess, must have something to do with that business back in Heidelberg."

"Why don't you just ask me what you want to know?" Serrin said, then wanted to kick himself for being so dumb. He should be playing for time, but the after-effects of the drug were playing havoc with his ability to think

straight.

"It's more a question of my finding out what you do know and what you don't,"
Magellan said evenly.

"And what depends on that?" Serrin asked.

"Stop playing games, fool. Somebody tried to snatch you, but you got away first. So now you want to find out who called the hit, and get revenge on him."

"Right on time," Serrin said. Things weren't really as simple as all that, but
Magellan seemed to have everything so scripted that he decided to go along to see where it would all lead.

"You got the troll for muscle and Sutherland for brains. The decker does some
investigating into missing mages. Clever but predictable. You start putting pieces together and find someone else who escaped a snatching. You make it to the Zulu Nation to talk to him. Tell me why you hit Cape Town first. I want to
hear that."

Serrin judged that Magellan didn't actually know, and his heart skipped a beat. This elf wasn't one of the original kidnapppers, he was sure of that. He was working for someone else. It also meant he genuinely needed to know some things.

"Michael said we should go there first because he knows the city. We picked up
some weapons and some medikit stuff. We needed that out at Umfolozi."

"What about the girl?"

"Look, Michael knows this brothel, says no one would ever find us there. The
girl, well, she's a little bit of a looker, right? I enjoyed myself." Serrin hated himself for those words, but it was a story Magellan might just buy.

If Serrin could keep some of his cards close to his chest, he might yet have a
chance in this poker game after all.

Magellan looked at him intently. Serrin met his gaze and didn't flinch.

"So you jazzed around a little," the other elf said. "That doesn't explain

why

you took her along to the Nation? If Sutherland's been there before, he knows that her Xhosa face would make her about as popular as a garlic pizza to a vampire."

The analogy was deliberate, Serrin was sure. He gave a slight start, deliberately, to clue Magellan that he knew that part of the puzzle.

"She said she knew about the local critters. Button spiders, poisonous snakes, that kind of thing. Said that would be useful to us."

"Hah! What would a kaffir know about the wilds of Umfolozi?"

"You got me," Serrin said, "but that's what she told us." He spoke with a forcefulness based on the fact that he was actually speaking the truth.

"Guess

she liked the money and thought it might be a kick to go along for the ride."

Magellan looked long and hard at him, then nodded. "All right. So you find Shakala. What does he tell you?"

"He saw enough to describe one of the kidnapppers. The description matched someone who'd also come after me. Guy with a scar."

Magellan nodded again. He poured a glass of wine for Serrin and the mage took it, sniffing it suspiciously.

"Didn't I already tell you that if I wanted you drugged--"

"And I heard you, loud and clear. But what I ate played hell with my guts back at the club and I don't think either one of us wants to see me zooking it all up right now."

Magellan leaned back slightly and laughed. "Serrin, I like you. I really wouldn't want to kill you unless I have to."

"Thanks," Serrin said, risking a sip of the wine.

"I mean it," Magellan insisted. "Not someone like you. But it all depends on where we go with this conversation."

Someone like you. The other elf gave those words a peculiar emphasis that

made

Serrin wonder if his survival would depend on figuring out exactly what Magellan meant by that. And he'd have to be figuring it out at the same time he was thinking hard about every word he uttered. A bead of sweat formed on his brow and trickled down to his eyebrow.

Michael had barely jacked in to begin his work before the sound of the girl frantically hammering at the door forced him to jack out again double-quick. Sobbing uncontrollably, she ran in and flung herself into Tom's arms. It was several long minutes before they were able to get the story out of her.

"Try to think, Kristen. Please," Michael said exasperatedly, ignoring Tom's hostile glare. "We can't help Serrin unless we know exactly what happened. Listen to me. Think carefully ... who followed him into the men's room? Did you see anyone unusual, anyone you might be able to recognize again?"

She shook her head and started to cry once more. Michael was desperate to keep her talking, but had to back off and leave her weeping in the troll's arms. By the time he'd poured a drink and got the urge to shout at her under control, she was finally managing to mumble some more details in response to Tom's gentler queries.

"So you're sure he didn't come back into the club? That probably means they went out a back door from the men's room. And if you didn't see anyone unusual follow him in, they must have hired locals to do the job. And that means, almost certainly, that someone at the club knows what went down. We'll have to ask some questions."

"What about the police?" Tom asked.

"Not an option. We're traveling on fake IDs, remember? That plastic got us through immigration, but we can't risk anyone looking too close," Michael said. Then something occurred to him.

"Tom, that spell lock of Serrin's. Have you ever handled it? Could you trace him, astrally?"

The troll shook his head. "Slot, man, you don't go

around handing out your locks for another magician to play with. Besides, I don't have the skill to trace him." Tom shook his head sadly again. "I just

can't do it."

"But you've got to try. There are lots of his things here. You've got a link."

"Even if I could, it would take many, many hours. Face it, chummer. I just can't do it," the troll said wretchedly. He knew only too well his own limitations as a shaman.

"Tom, you've got to try," Michael pleaded.

Tom breathed in hard and cast his eyes down at the floor. "All right... I'll try, I'll do what I can. But it ain't gonna work," he said. He let go of the girl and plodded slowly toward the door. "I need to be alone. Peace and quiet," he said, then shut the door behind him.

"Kristen, you're going to have to take me back to that club. But first I have to ask you something," Michael said, not sure how to ask the question without offending her. "Did you get looks from people? For being a Xhosa?"

She nodded.

"Then it will be better if you don't come inside with me. I'll have to go in alone. If I spread enough money around, I might learn something. They may be hostile to Serrin if seeing your face reminds them too strongly of who he came in with, right?" He tried to say this gently, then added, "It's just a fact of life, kid."

"Don't I know it," she said miserably.

"But if it wasn't for the description you've given us, we'd have nothing to go on. You've already done your bit."

They took the elevator down to the street and hailed a cab, which Kristen directed to the club. Michael got out, then paid the driver and told him to take Kristen back to the hotel. Too agitated to sit quietly as they rode along, Kristen began to search through her bag for the key card to her room, coming up with two instead of one. She sat looking at them blankly for a moment, then suddenly remembered that Serrin had given her his to carry in her purse.

By the time she got back to the Imperial and was riding

the elevator up to her room, a plan was already beginning to form in her mind. Sure, it was crazy, but she'd seen where Serrin kept his things and if there was enough money and if she could just figure out how to make the transfers ...

Michael was back from the club within an hour. Money had bought memories. Of four men, members of a known street gang, and the part of town they claimed as their turf. He was puzzled, though. This wasn't how the previous snatchings had been carried out against Serrin, or even Shakala in this same country. A gentle knock at Tom's door told him the troll was still deep in reverie, trying to trace the elf. He was contemplating disturbing him, since he'd gotten his own trace of a kind, when Kristen suddenly burst out into the corridor.

"I think I know where he might be," Michael told her. "Trouble is, there could be an entire street gang around him."

"That won't be a problem if you can find ten thousand nuyen," she said cheerfully, sashaying past him into his room with a grin. He closed the door behind her and lounged against it, looking at her intently.

"What have you done?" he asked. She told him.

"You don't seem to like Humanis much," Magellan probed. "I hear you helped out in a few paybacks."

Serrin tried to work out where this sudden change of subject was leading. And he was also still cogitating over that phrase: someone like you. An elf. Me. Him. The kidnapper at the top of the pile. Elves.

"Got to protect your own," Serrin growled.

"Damn straight," Magellan said, with just a little too much wine in his voice. Then he again made an abrupt shift.

"Let's see what else you know. Sutherland's identified the ownership of the Umfolozi plant by now?"

"Ninety-nine percent," Serrin lied. "It was the British connection. The medical databases not on official computers. That's what helped him narrow

down

who had ready access." Another point scored. Another way of

tricking Magellan into believing he knew much more than he did.

"Clever. I hadn't thought of that," Magellan mused. He got up from his chair, stood up as if to pour another glass of wine and suddenly whipped around, grabbing Serrin by the lapels of his jacket.

"Who else knows?" he hissed.

Serrin had expected that. "We've made arrangements," he said coolly.

"Which are?"

"Do you honestly think I'm going to tell you? Suffice it to say the information is filed away for transmission to interested parties should anything unforeseen happen to us."

Magellan spat, muttering something that sounded like "drek." He'd bought it. For the first time in this long night, Serrin believed that he was actually going to get out of here alive.

"Who? How?" The red-haired elf shook Serrin bodily.

The mage faced him down. "So I'm supposed to sign my own death warrant by telling you? Michael isn't just good. He's brilliant. You won't find any trails. Anyway, what makes you think we're foolish enough to leave it only in electronic form?" he said calmly.

Magellan let go of Serrin and it was obvious he was thinking hard. Probably thinking it was worse than he'd feared. That Serrin knew almost everything—and maybe even did know everything. Killing him—even killing all of them—would be futile now. What Serrin had told him was enough. Them searching through non-official databases—that was Sutherland's brain at work. Magellan had only one card left to play now. But he would take a long time working himself up to being able to do it.

"Well, then, let's talk about our people, Serrin."

The plex was just so fragging big, and the troll had no idea where to

search

as he roamed astrally through the sprawl. Sure, he knew what he was looking for, but the haystack was so huge and the needle would be well-hidden. To find the elf, Tom's astral body would actually have to enter the very room where Serrin was. He

couldn't just try to magically assense his location through whatever walls were hiding his friend from view. With a million buildings in the city, that would take forever.

There had to be a trace, he knew. From the spell lock Serrin used for detecting enemies. But, try as he might, hovering inside Serrin's hotel room attempting to pick up a trace of the locked spell got him nowhere. Serrin was simply a far more powerful magician and his masking hid the trace from the despairing troll.

An astral visit to the club had been equally useless. The auras of the people there were the same unpleasant mix the troll would have expected in a similar place anywhere in the world; aggression, lust, violence seething under the surface. That was never all, of course, and so Tom tried to seize the rare good energy; excitement, joy, a little love here and there, but there was nothing of Serrin. He began to work his way around outside. Still nothing.

Serrin, where are you! Tom felt a bleak sadness come over him. It wasn't just that the elf was gone, lost to him. The troll had also sensed the bond between the cynical, troubled spirit of the mage and the forlorn girl. He saw that they loved each other, but just hadn't figured it out yet. That Serrin might be dead, dying, that the possibility of love would be destroyed before it ever blossomed hurt Tom deep, deep down.

In the midst of these mournful reflections, the troll suddenly—and to his utter astonishment—suddenly felt a bite at the nape of his neck and he remembered Shakala. His astral body froze. He let himself become completely empty, just waiting, not feeling anything much except an awareness of himself.

It was pure instinct that led him now, led him straight to the dead zone.

22

Michael was just about to knock on Tom's door, which opened even before his knuckles made contact with it.

"I know where he is," the troll said, but he didn't look particularly elated or pleased with himself.

"Me too," Michael said slowly. "We're on our way downtown now. To pick up some heat."

From the way the girl was smiling, Tom knew she must have been the one to fix it. He wasn't going to ask how any more than Michael had demanded details of him.

"You guys take more rides than Karoo jockeys," the ork driver said as they piled into his cab. Then he studied the address written on the scrap of paper Michael shoved in front of him.

"Hey, I get triple rate for going there," he growled. "And you pay for any damage done to the engine, right?"

"You got it," Michael said and waved some money at the driver as the cab sped off into the night.

"You know our people are special," Magellan urged. "You were born knowing that."

"Depends on exactly how you mean it," Serrin said, still playing for time.

"Come on. You're a mage. You know perfectly well that magical talent is more common among our people than any other race on earth."

Serrin nodded. He also knew that in some places the percentages were even higher; the ancient lands of Tir na nOg, for one. But by now he'd figured out where this train of thought was heading. To get out alive, he would have to tell Magellan what he wanted to hear and then

figure out a way to feed it back to him later as his own opinion.

"And the places we control ... they work. The Tirs, right here in the Zulu Nation, and everywhere else where our people are running the show. We protect the land, the environment. We've even used our magic to restore it from the ruin in which humans left it in so many places. Our technology's cleaner, safer, better. We know how to do all this for everyone's benefit. Everyone, right?"

"It would be hard to argue with that," Serrin said.

"And we elves have been here before, and most of all, we know that. Or some of us do. We take care of the world better because we know we're coming back. Not like humanity. They think they can poison the water, poison the air, dirty everything up because they don't care about the future. Just the here and now. They figure they've only got this one time around and so they'll use and abuse everything they can and frag everyone else, frag the future."

Magellan was practically shouting now.

He's obsessed, Serrin realized. He won't be able to tell illusion from reality, lies from truth, at this point. All I have to do is agree with him.

"It's true. You see it every day," Serrin said with some feeling, though he didn't think any particular race had a monopoly on thinking the world was made for them and the rest of creation be damned.

"Just think, Serrin, if we elves had control of the whole business. The whole wide world. We could really start cleaning it up, really make it work right. Like it used to be. Serrin, it's what the world needs and, and as elves, it's our destiny."

"I've always wished it was so," Serrin lied, knowing it was what the other elf wanted to hear. Magellan was kneeling on the floor beside him, virtually seeming to beseech him.

"You don't have to wish for it anymore, brother. It is. It is." No trideo evangelist had ever sounded more convinced.

That left Serrin with only one final thing he needed to know.

The streetlights had been shot out long ago and most of the buildings had collapsed into rubble. The place, which looked like the forgotten ruin of some war zone, was utterly unlike anything they'd seen in Azania until now, and the contrast was shocking. The cab crunched to a halt.

"I'm not going any farther," the ork driver told them. "I ain't replaced the

bullet-proofing on my front side yet. Look, why don't you just let me take you somewhere nice, okay? Chips, dope, girls, boys, you name it. I know where it is. You're crazy fraggers to come down here."

"Are you absolutely sure about this?" Michael asked Kristen, drawing his Predator. She nodded.

"I don't know why I do this," he said distractedly, handing the driver his money. "Look, chummer, will you wait somewhere reasonably close? A bonus of five hundred if you'll wait for one hour. If we don't come back, check the Imperial tomorrow morning. You get half that just for being here, even if you don't pick us up."

"You get killed, I don't get nothing--while I sit here for an hour like a devil rat just waiting for the trap to snap," the ork replied.

Michael handed him another bill. "Down payment. Where will you be?"

"Two blocks back, before that last robot. That's as close as I'll get. Anyone takes a pot-shot at me and I'm gone."

"Deal." Michael opened the back door and Tom and Kristen piled out with him. The cab sped off, wheels screaming as it careened around the corner.

"He doesn't much like it around here," Tom joked.

"Me neither," Michael said, only partly reassured by the SMG in the troll's hands. "Kristen, if this doesn't work out, we're going to have macro trouble here."

"I told you. Indra has a cousin who has another cousin and the money was enough. They'll be here."

Exactly on cue, a group of figures began to take shape from out of the darkness of the surrounding street. There were a dozen of them, more or less. They weren't armed with weapons of any real quality, but they had enough. It

was the assault cannon that finally reassured Michael, and the pistol under his nose that made up his mind for him.

"Ten thousand, buttbram," the dwarf snarled at him. "Everything up front. You pay for any street doc work afterward. Anyone gets scragged, that's five thou per. For the family."

Well, it's the family that got us this crew, Michael thought. Even if I have to pay for it twice over, it's probably worth it. He handed over the envelope.

"Every last cent," he said evenly. The dwarf counted it slowly, his expression saying that he'd have loved to find it short of the full amount.

"So, where is this place?"

"This way," Tom said. He was drawn to it as easily as if someone had marked it with a neon sign.

"Let's say, let's just imagine," Magellan waxed on, "that there's someone who can make it happen. Let's say he's got a way of guaranteeing we elves can have it all. Let's just imagine that for a moment."

"I can't," Serrin said. He rubbed his hands together as if anguished by the disappointment of it. "I mean, how? That's what matters, isn't it?"

Magellan's eyes flared with suspicion for a split second. Serrin stared directly at him, as if desperate to say, yes, yes, it's good, it's what I want, I just wish I could believe in it, and I could if only I knew how it could be done. Believe me.

"Let's say," Magellan said slowly, "that there's a way of changing humans. Making them quieter. More docile. Easier to control. Something that could eliminate the stupid violence in them. A pacifier. No more war. No more destroying everything we build. Let's imagine that."

"A drug," Serrin wondered aloud.

"Better. A permanent fix. Forever. In the genes, brother."

"But I can't see—"

"You don't have to see! All you have to do is believe," Magellan cried out. "It's true. It's real."

"I do believe you," Serrin said fervently, thinking it wiser not to express any more doubts. "But why am I

here? What has all this to do with finding out who tried to kidnap me? I mean, that's all I was after."

Magellan nodded, biting his bottom lip, obviously trying to decide what to say next.

"Look. The elf who tried to kidnap you ... he has certain needs. Special requirements. You know all that. Do you think he likes what he does? Do you think he wants to kill his own? Oh, brother, it pains him. It's the last thing he wants to do. But he has no choice. He's burning up, he's got to feed, and there aren't many left. It's his last option. God, how he must suffer."

Serrin didn't know whether to laugh or scream with rage. Him suffer, whoever he was?

"But why try to stop me from—

"Because you want revenge. But that you can't have. Mustn't have," Magellan whispered, his face centimeters away. His eyes had a wild look, his face now a grotesque mask. He had underestimated Serrin; he'd thought that Luther could easily dispose of the elf mage if he got too close, but Serrin and his friends had moved too fast. What else had they arranged? "He's the wonder, brother. He's the one who did it, don't you see? He's so close now, it's only another day or two more. It's nearly time ... He's the one who's got—"

The detonation threw Serrin against the wall and sent Magellan flying across the floor. Serrin's head slammed against the concrete so hard that his vision blurred; he could just barely make out Magellan dragging himself to his feet and stumbling for the door. Too groggy even to stand upright, Serrin was powerless to stop the red-haired elf as he grabbed the door handle and staggered out into the darkness. Gunfire crackled outside, and another cannon round hammered into the building somewhere behind him. Serrin half-rolled, half-fell off the bed and tried to drag himself underneath the metal frame for cover.

Then he heard a familiar voice screaming "No!" just as the Zulu samurai appeared in the doorway. The Zulu had a machine gun in his hands and was looking around wildly, any moment about to spray the room with fire. Serrin tried to cast a barrier spell around himself to ward

off the hail of lead, but the pain in his head wouldn't let him. Frag me, I'm dead, he thought dully.

The Zulu had his finger three parts back on the trigger when the side of his neck suddenly exploded into a bloody flower, the red petals of flesh lazily unfolding themselves as his blood gushed up onto the wall. The gun rose upward in an unsteady arc, some of the bullets striking the ceiling, then ricocheting around the room. Serrin covered his head and prayed. When he heard the smack of the body hitting the floor, he opened one eye and looked out at the carnage.

This time it was a dwarf in a flak jacket who was forcing his way into the room. Nut-brown, grim-faced, he too was looking around for Serrin. Even more startling was that the dwarf was obviously Indian. By now, though, it wasn't the dwarf Serrin was seeing anymore. It was the girl slumped in the doorway, beginning to shake violently and still holding the pistol limply from her right hand.

"Here," Serrin called to the dwarf who pivoted to point his Roomsweeper at him. Serrin knew he wasn't going to get shot. He just wanted to get to her.

Kristen fell half to her knees, dropping the gun and starting to vomit just as he came up alongside her. Lifting her under the arms, Serrin hauled her up, hugging her so tightly he could hardly breathe. She couldn't speak. A trickle of vomit dripped from her mouth onto his sleeve.

"It wouldn't make a smash-hit movie," the Englishman observed to the troll as the pair of them also entered the little room. Tom's huge hands were already busy getting a tourniquet around Michael's half-useless arm, which had saturated his sleeve with blood. The troll was sure he could heal it up pretty good, though. Better than he ought to be able to, maybe.

"But ain't romance wonderful?"

Tom just managed to get his arms around Michael before he fainted.

Michael got a slap patch to make sure Tom's healing did its work fully, and then their new allies told them it was time to get out of town fast. The gang that had

brought Serrin here had chummers, and they'd come looking. But they found no further clues in the building where Serrin had been held—and not an elven body in sight.

"Bastard got away," Serrin muttered.

"Like we're going to. Word is probably already out at the club," Michael said faintly. "Not to mention on the streets. A cab, James, and take me home. To the airport anyway. We'll send a messenger for our things from the airport. I don't think it would be too smart going back to the hotel ourselves."

"No," Serrin said, "That would be too suspicious. Tom and I will go. The gangers won't be able to trace us there."

"It was more that Magellan guy I was thinking of," Michael said.

"I'll take my chances," Serrin said grimly.

"Well, we'll all go together then. I don't think splitting up is a good idea either. Haven't you figured that out after tonight?"

"Will you be able to make it?" Serrin asked him.

"Sure. I've just lost a little blood, that's all. My arm's fine, really. Crikey," Michael sighed, "those 'family' guys cleaned me out of every last cent, but they were worth it. It's been a while since I've been in a real fight. It's as much fun as you can have without a datajack."

"Yeah, but where are we going to find a cab around here?" Serrin said. The derelict house where the team of Indian samurai had left them wasn't exactly a premium pickup point for any money-seeking taxi driver.

"Good question," Tom said. He ducked his head away from the glassless window frame as headlights headed up the road outside. Inching his head back up

again,
he peered over the rotting wooden window sill.

"We just got lucky," he said and walked outside. A minute later the rest of them had also staggered out to the car.

"What the fragging hell made you come along here?" Tom asked the ork.

"Well, I saw the Maharana boys heading out this way. Gussed maybe they were coming to give you some help.

Reckoned you'd get out in one piece if they took care of business. I wanted my five hundred," the ork grunted.

"It's sitting in hotel security at the Imperial," Michael said. "Look, get us there and to the airport and you can double it."

A thousand nuyen for a cab ride, Serrin thought won-deringly. But what the hell; it would get the cab moving.

"We can clean up at the hotel," he said. "We can't just try and catch a plane out of here looking like this." His own clothes were torn and dirty, while Michael's jacket was splendidly technicolored with blood. "You won't even get into the hotel lobby looking like a portable massacre."

"Just go in, clean up, and bring me my stuff. I'll change in the cab," Michael groaned. He leaned painfully forward to look at Kristen, who was seated on the other side of Serrin from him. She seemed to be sleeping, tucked into the elf and not moving.

"I guess we're taking Kristen," he said quietly. "Her IDs aren't going to be much use getting her into New York, but somehow I don't think you'll want to go without her."

"No." That was final. "But why risk New York?"

"Point one: I want my Fairlights. Point two: I think I'd kill for a delivery from the all-night deli by now. Point three: you've got a friend there who just might know the mysterious elf Magellan was talking about. Your occult-freak

lady
snoop, remember?"

"Two out of three isn't bad," Serrin said affably as he fumbled around for a cigarette. The streetlights flashing by bathed his gaunt face in sodium streaks.
The cab was back into civilization by now.

"Not to mention the fact that we're now dealing, apparently, with two sets of people who have an interest in kidnapping or killing you. Or maybe three, actually, if you consider that a small race war is probably about to break out down here. And Magellan's still loose out there. You said he sounded Stateside; he may have tracked us from there. No going back to Cape Town, term. It's a direct bolt all the way home to the Rotten Apple, old boy."

"But what about Kristen's passport? Will it get past immigration?" Serrin already knew the answer.

"About as much chance as a snowball in hell," Michael said grimly. They fell silent. The solution had already occurred to the Englishman, but he wasn't sure how he was going to sell it to Serrin.

"There's one thing we could do," Michael said slowly. "She's got her own ID, amazingly enough. The real thing. You need it when the police hassle you on the streets, she told me. No passport, obviously. And that's the problem. It would take days to get one and we just don't have that time. But ..."

Then he finally told the elf what he had in mind.

"Look, you can't be the one to do it," the Englishman argued when Serrin protested. "I mean, it would be too difficult under the circumstances. A bit, um, premature. No, I didn't mean that. You know what I mean. I think. But / could do it. I'm naturalized. Dual nationality."

Serrin stared at him, wide-eyed.

"This is going to cost Geraint a bloody fortune," the Englishman lamented. "I mean, I never thought it would happen like this."

Serrin still stared furiously at him.

"Don't look at me like that," Michael snarled. "Think of the favor I'm doing you, you ungrateful swine."

Serrin still didn't say so, but he knew Michael was right. There was no other way. Attempted bribery wouldn't get them any further than a hefty jail term back in New York. And it would, indeed, take far too long to wait for official paperwork in Cape Town. Only a day or two more, Magellan had said.

"But how are we going to manage it?"

"Bet you Indra will know someone," Michael said. "She seems to know everyone. Let's just hope she does."

When they got to the hotel, Serrin took off his filthy jacket and handed it to the Englishman before he and Tom went in.

While he waited, Michael shook the sleeping girl. "Wake up, Kristen. This is important."

"What? Where are we now?" she said sleepily. He

went on shaking her, ignoring the protest from his bad arm.

"Listen carefully to me. I have a proposition for you."

"Let's pray the Dutch Reformed Evangelical Church is good enough," Michael said as they staggered out onto the runway in Manhattan's late dawn.

The last eight hours had been a blur. It had been so long since they'd had a good night's sleep that they hardly knew what day it was. Later, the frantic phone calls, the paperwork, the endless wait at the airport, the bizarre scene hurried through almost under the noses of immigration, getting their photos lacquered onto the cards, the restlessness of the suborbital flight.

"God, that plastic had better get us through here." Michael took a deep breath and put his arm around Kristen, the pair of them heading for immigration just ahead of Serrin and Tom. The bored official took one look at Michael's ID and ushered him away into a side room.

Michael had thought the only way to be sure about getting Kristen back into New York was to use his real, genuine, documents. His ID would be scrutinized too closely for him to risk a fake, no matter how good it was. Now he had to sweat for twenty minutes before the official even arrived to speak with him.

"So you married a distant cousin, huh?" the man said, not looking at the Englishman, holding the identity card as if it might communicate leprosy if kept too long. "George, put this drek through the analyzers. And his passport. Hit them with everything we've got.

"You don't sound much like an American to me," the inspector said flatly, folding his arms across his chest and glaring at Michael.

"Dual citizenship, my friend. Qualified two years ago. It's absolutely kosher." Shattered with fatigue, Michael held on to the optimistic thought that they were checking him, and the card, and not Kristen's ID. At least, so he hoped.

The man just grunted and waited. It was another fifteen agonizing minutes of silence before George, the other interrogator, returned. He handed Michael's passport and the car to his superior.

"It checks out. Visual ID on the girl; that's her. It's all in order," he said.

"Fine. Now work the girl over," the first man said nastily.

"Please," Michael said desperately, "I want to get my wife home. We're distant cousins and our families are very close. I'm an American citizen. I've been traveling a long way and I want to get home. Also, maybe you noticed that one of my traveling companions is Mr. Serrin Shamandar. Maybe you've heard about him saving the mayor's life down at Columbia the other day. We've been waiting more than half an hour while you checked on all this, and now you tell me you're going to keep us even longer. I'm sorry, officer, but I must demand the opportunity to put a call through to the mayor's office. And might I also have your name?"

The man looked at him with utter hatred.

"It's true about Shamandar," George muttered. "The elf came in right behind

him. I recognized him."

Michael could have kissed the man for that, though George's superior looked more like he wanted to kill him. "Okay, Mister Sutherland, I suppose you can go now."

Michael walked out of the room with his heart hammering in his throat, then grabbed the hand of Kristen, who'd been kept waiting outside. In the distance, they saw a troll sitting with his fourth cup of coffee and an elf with far too many cigarette butts in the ashtray beside him.

The little group staggered wearily out of the terminal and found a taxi. As Michael gave another driver another set of instructions, he felt dissociated, as if his own voice were a robot croaking through its voxsynth.

"Home. Crikey, I never wanted to be back so bad," he muttered to no one in particular. He glanced over at Serrin as if trying to focus his eyes.

"I guess I should say thanks," Serrin said. "Hell, no, I do say thanks. You're full of surprises, you know."

Michael sat back and fixed the elf with a glacial stare. Then, in a perfectly pompous, truculent English accent, he said, "I say, old boy. Get your hands off my wife."

23

Niall had always known that, one day, he'd be glad for his flying lessons. The Fiat-Fokker Cloud Nine amphibian had sat disguised for months, looked after by one of the handful of people the elf could trust. Upon arriving early that morning, he recognized the man through the heavy mist.

"Thank you, Patrick," Niall said wearily. "You have watched here awhile. You can go as you will now. You'll be looked after, though."

"Take care with you. I know what is at stake. That is, I know something," the man said quietly. "I know what the wrongness is. I don't understand why it is being allowed to happen."

"I cannot tell you that," Niall said sadly. The man had waited and watched for him all these many long weeks and months, not knowing just why. "If you knew, they would kill you. If I told you more, it would be like putting a knife through your heart here and now."

"Well, then, that is an end to it," the man said without any rancor. "You had best be moving. It will be fair spucketing soon enough."

Niall smiled and shook the hand of his helper. Then the man faded away into the mist and the elf made for the wharf on the shoreline.

He knew at just what height to fly, virtually skimming the surface of the gray Atlantic, to keep from encountering the Veil, the magical barrier of illusion protecting the Irish coast of Tir na n6g. The illusions didn't trouble him, but the possibility of detection did. Though he knew the coordinates where fluctuations were most likely, he would never get through undetected unless he drew on

the power of the cauldron—which he also needed to conserve for the confrontation with Lutair. But I'll never get anywhere near him if I don't get through the Veil, he thought. Summoning as little of the vessel's power as he thought he could risk, he headed for the barrier and onward, across the tip of southwestern Britain and on to Brittany.

Serrin finally woke up at ten that night, after nearly sixteen hours' sleep from which an earthquake wouldn't have roused him. He felt ghastly. His bad leg throbbed like a jackhammer and his head seemed to be throbbing in time with it. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, then began to cough long and hard, spitting into a handkerchief. One day, he thought, I really am going to give those damned things up.

He had to shield his eyes against the lights in Michael's workroom, dimmed though they were. Sitting with fingers poised above his keyboard, the Englishman was immaculate again in a double-breasted blazer, cavalry twill pants, and Italian leather loafers. The cord from the Fuchi was slotted into the silver of his datajack, making Michael oblivious to anything but the electronic reality of the Matrix. Tom was sitting nearby with Kristen standing behind him, braiding the troll's freshly washed, lustrous black hair. Having never seen Tom's hair loose, Serrin was astonished that it fell almost to the small of the troll's

back. He was still gazing in wonderment at the sight when the printer on the desk next to Michael disgorged a scrap of paper. Serrin ripped it off and read it.

Don't forget the lovely Julia, it read.

Confused, certain that Michael couldn't be registering his presence, Serrin's thoughts were interrupted by another printed message churning forth.

There's an IR security monitor in your room, dummy. It was programmed to print these messages out through a printer relay when you opened the door after waking up. Now go and see your lady reporter friend.

"What time is it?" Serrin asked. "Hell, what day is it?"

Tom told him. Kristen smiled shyly at him; unconsciously, the elf scratched a little at the graying stubble on

his own head. Tom had an unchallengable superiority on that score.

"Well, why not. If I get kidnapped again, just send for the cavalry like before," he muttered, getting to his feet.

"Not this time," Tom said firmly when Serrin explained what he intended doing.

"This time, I'm coming with you."

"So am I," Kristen said fiercely, hurrying up her work. She looked very different now. Though she was dressed in a silk shirt of Michael's that was too big for her, Serrin thought she looked especially fine. She'd also hit the drug store, he guessed, noticing that she'd made herself up some. Then he was annoyed at himself. We're up to our ears in drek, he told himself angrily. What's the matter, Serrin? Can't you keep your mind off the ladies and focused on business?

"No. Better stay with Michael," Serrin told her. "If he gets into trouble, he'll need somebody to pull the plug on that jack mighty fast. Has he told you anything about—"

"Yeah," she said. "I know. Don't worry. Go and get it done."

The strength of her voice and the determination in her tone told Serrin that more had changed than just her appearance. He very much wanted to stay and talk with her, but that wasn't possible. If it was true they had a day or two, most of one day had already elapsed. She finished braiding and stood back to admire her handiwork. Then Tom turned around and smiled at her, thanking her as he got to his feet.

"The good news is," Tom said as they rode down in the elevator, "we don't have to take a cab. Michael trusted me with his car keys."

"Is he all right?" Serrin fretted. "I mean, he took that bullet wound. Can he really risk running the matrix right now?"

"It wasn't bad. A flesh wound. He lost some blood, but he got some kind of shot once we got here. Erythrocyte enhancer," Tom said, uncertain of the words. "Iron, all kinds of drek. I fixed him up too. He's fine now."

"Shouldn't we phone the lady first and see if it's all right to come over? It's getting a little late."

"Frag that!" Serrin said with feeling. "I'm not worrying about the social graces. She didn't."

"She may be out."

"Then we'll break in," the elf said simply.

That, however, was not necessary. The door opened almost immediately after they arrived at Julia's apartment and knocked loudly on her door.

"Julia, you owe me one," Serrin said to her through the narrow gap in the door allowed by the heavy steel chain. "Something tells me you just might have a friend who knows a friend who could help me out with some info I couldn't find in any library—but don't even think about getting another story out of this one."

Michael jacked out of the Zulu Nation system damned fast when the black 1C threatened. He could get the rest, he was sure, from international

registries.

What he had now was enough for a very good start.

Giving himself a few minutes' rest while gulping down some coffee, he was acutely aware of the girl sitting cross-legged on his sofa. The cold realization had already hit him that with that card, officially authenticated by UCAS immigration, in her bag, she was probably legally entitled to a straight fifty per cent of everything he had. At the time, it had seemed logical, the only thing to do. Damn it, it had been logical. It had also been the stupidest act he'd ever committed in his life. Michael didn't like the idea of logic and stupidity going together. Now he really couldn't think what to say to her. Burying himself in work had seemed the only thing to do.

And he'd found exactly what he'd expected in his little matrix run. The owners of the Babanango plant were a tiny firm called Amalgamated Photosynthetics, registered as a subsidiary with HKB, Britain's financial conglomerate. That meant HKB acted as a forwarding address for the real owners. For this service, the megacorp took either a fixed fee, or a percentage, depending on what their shark-skinned accountants decided was the best deal. HKB had a special division devoted purely to such leasing deals, but it was not part of the British-based corporation—not so far as international law was concerned. It existed somewhere among thirty underdeveloped countries which took the crumbs HKB threw out to them and didn't ask questions. Trying to get into the divisional system to find out who had a piece of British Industrial and at least most of Amalgamated Photosynthetics would be plumb crazy. HKB had more IC than nature had needed to sink the Titanic. Michael knew he couldn't do it. He also knew that if he didn't, they were never going to find their quarry. Unless of course Serrin's reporter friend had a precise fix, but that would be too much like counting on sheer good luck.

"Why did you do it?"

He swiveled around in his chair. "What else could we do? We had to get back here. There were at least two groups trying to take Serrin out back in Azania, maybe more. He wouldn't go without you. If we'd tried to use your fake IDs to get you into New York, they'd have had you on a rustbucket straight back to Azania the instant we arrived in Manhattan. And we didn't have time to get a passport officially."

"But you don't even know me."

"Well, not much. Maybe it had something to do with you rounding up all

those
Indian samurai. Without them, Serrin would be dead now. Maybe I was just a
little over-grateful. I wasn't really thinking straight. I'd lost a fair bit
of
blood, apparently."

Kristen lit one of Serrin's cigarettes, not that she liked them much. She
missed the potency of what she was used to. She decided not to ask him,
again,
why he hadn't let Serrin be the one. All he would say was the same thing
about
not wanting to ruin things for them. He'd also told her about divorce, how
easy
it would be after the statutory year together.

"I won't take anything," she said quietly. She curled herself up into an
almost fetal position, looking for all the world as if she was about to cry.
He
got up and went to sit down beside her, slipping an arm around her narrow
shoulders.

"What am I doing here?" she said, choking back hot tears. "I don't know
anything about this city. I can't live

here. And now I got a fraggin' husband? Me got a husband I met four days
ago.
Is it four?"

"Slot me if I can remember," Michael said, giving her a somewhat dazed
smile.
She dropped her hands from her face, looking halfway between bursting into
tears
and helpless laughter. His smile tipped the scales in favor of the latter.

By the time her hilarity had calmed down, he'd poured himself a gin. Then
he
saw from her expression that she'd like one too. He dumped in ice from the
bucket and topped it with limed tonic.

"What about me? How am I going to explain it to my family? Of course, by
now
they've decided that I probably like boys, getting to my age and still
unmarried."

"Do you?" she asked him.

"Hell, no. I love computers."

She poked him in the ribs, surprisingly hard. He fought hard to keep the
mouthful of drink down.

"I do love him," she said suddenly and emphatically. Michael felt uncomfortable again, didn't know what she was going to say next.

"I know," he said almost sadly. "He loves you too." He couldn't think of anything more helpful.

"Then why doesn't he want me?"

Michael thought for a moment. "Urn, well, I guess if I'd had to run from tabloid snoops, been shot at with trunk cartridges, traveled to a half-dozen countries in a week, been kidnapped, nearly blown away with a machine gun, had to rely on a bunch of people I hardly knew, and then ended up learning that some crazy vampire elf mage was about to bring Armageddon down— whichever way that's going to be and we haven't figured it out yet—I probably wouldn't be thinking much about romance, either. I mean, that's a drekload to worry about." He was silently praying for Serrin and Tom to knock at the door right now.

"But how can I know what he really feels? Is he going to change?"

Michael got to his feet. This was really too much for him. "Kristen, remember those sacred vows. That half-defrocked Boer gave us a pretty traditional variety. You

promised to obey your husband, I'm afraid. Terribly incorrect politically. But that's what you said. So, you ask Serrin when he gets back; I know him even less well than you do. For now, girl, keep quiet and let me get back to work." He wagged an admonishing finger at her in fun; she just smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

Michael prepared to jack back in. He wasn't going to wait for Serrin and Tom to return. Confronting HKB's defenses would at least let him do what he was good at. Then, cursing himself for his stupidity, he retired to his bedroom and made the call to London.

"Geraint, old boy, can we get an encrypted line?"

"Sure." The Welshman's rich voice greeted him with the old familiarity. "How's it going?"

"You owe me a fortune, term. Wait until you see my bill."

Geraint sighed, running the fingers of one hand through his dark hair. "Is it finished, then? You're through?"

"Not quite. Listen, old friend, I need some help."

"Fire away."

"You're not going to like this," Michael warned him.

"So?"

"I mean, you're really not going to like this," Michael stressed. Geraint waited, his face on the screen expressionless. "I've got to find out something about corporate ownership of a certain subsidiary. HKB is handling it through the corporate licensing division."

"I can't do that," Geraint said. "Everything's traced. Not a chance."

"You don't have to deck into their system to do it. There are records, hard copy. You're a director, after all. This little corp is obscure and poses absolutely no threat to HKB's interests. The information wouldn't be sensitive in any way."

"I'm afraid, old boy, that everything in those files is sensitive information. If it wasn't, people wouldn't pay us to handle anonymous ownerships," Geraint said drily. "They pay us precisely to make sure that no one finds out."

"Geraint, we're on to something big. To borrow an old line of the Dame's, this ain't rock and roll, this is genocide." Michael then gave his friend a rundown of what they'd learned and seen.

Geraint had finished his first cigarette and was halfway through a second, lit from the first, by the time Michael fell silent.

"We don't know exactly what this elf is up to. Except that he's concocting some kind of drug, and it wipes humans out. That's you and me, old boy. Fancy turning into a zombie?"

"You don't know that for sure," Geraint said nervously, but sounded dubious about his own statement. "Strath, this is more than my own life's worth. Decking into HKB records."

"But you can do it," Michael insisted.

"I need four hours. I've got to cover my butt somehow," Geraint said. His face had turned very pale now.

"You've got my number."

Michael wouldn't need the double-check on the Squeeze connection now. Which saved him a double-dip into the 1C.

The telecom beeped at half-past two, then the image of Geraint's face came on the screen glowering at Michael.

"I'm going to Hong Kong for a few days on business," the Welshman said quietly. "I've fixed it so someone else will take the rap on this one. I don't want to be around when it happens."

"Well?" Michael urged him.

"The company's registered in Vienna. You'll have to deal with the Viennese matrix; I wasn't going to try to find out who owns the damn thing from the HKB files," Geraint muttered, and gave him the address. He didn't even wait for thanks or goodbye, breaking the connection as soon as Michael had written down the details.

The Englishman was about to jack into his deck when Serrin and Tom came into the room, back from their visit with Julia Richards.

"We've got two possibles," the elf said urgently. "One in the Ukraine and one outside Regensburg. Julia's got a friend who's still scoping it for us."

"The company that owns Amalgamated Photosynthetics is based outside Vienna," Michael told them. "I'm about to go hunting for the owners. If we get a match to a name, or a location, then we know."

"Then what are we going to do?" Kristen asked.

"That's a bloody good question," Michael told her. "We'll be damned lucky if we can come up with an answer."

Luther rampaged through the corridors, bellowing like a minotaur, smashing everything around him with inhuman strength as Martin watched him on the closed circuits. Luther had foreseen this, of course; he had sealed the laboratory behind himself to make sure he didn't destroy his precious work. Now he was wholly out of control, blood raging in a torrent of fire through his body. When he was done smashing the serried ranks of statuettes and busts, he finally caught sight of the young mage.

Luther threw himself onto the young man, like a hyena pouncing on a fallen member of the herd. Jaws clamped like a vice on his throat, one clawed hand gripped for the ribs, the other for the mage's chest, over his heart. The man screamed, writhing, unable to bring his hands up to defend himself. They twitched in their bonds at his back. Luther's canines struck the carotid and salty blood filled his mouth, running down over his chin as he sucked greedily at the warmth of it. He drew his face away from the man's throat and gazed into his eyes.

Forcing the mage down to his knees and then prone onto the floor, he crouched over him. The young elf's face was distorted into a living death mask, his eyes wild and unfocused. Luther knelt over the body and drank in his victim's terror and fear as eagerly as he had the blood. The man's deathly fear and panic excited him, fed him as surely as the blood did; he loved the leeching away of a living soul, drew power from it.

Luther struggled to hold back the ravenous beast inside, savoring every second of exultation and pleasure the dying gave him. Then the hunger burst like a disintegrating dam and he tore the elf's throat apart, hands clutching

either side of the lolling head. He fastened himself to the neck, the blood saturating his hands and chest. The rich crimson flood held the last of the agonies of the dying mage, life-blood filled with death-fear, the delight of it overwhelming him. Luther's body spasmed like a huge, pallid leech rippling with peristalsis as it gorged itself.

Martin came to him as he lay whimpering beside the corpse, wiping great smears of sticky blood from his face and hands. Luther's hands shook uncontrollably. Martin took a handkerchief from his breast pocket and tended to him as lovingly as any mother to her newborn.

"I knew, Your Grace," he said softly. "I knew it would be necessary. Now all will be well."

Luther looked at him with a momentary incomprehension. He coughed, a choking heave from the back of his throat, and his eyes glazed over. He vomited dark, sticky blood onto the floor, retching horribly. Martin put his hands under the other elf's arms and dragged him to his feet, holding him upright until he could stand on his own again.

"Ah, Martin." Luther was calm again, or at least in control of himself. "You always provide."

"Will you bathe, Your Grace?"

"There is no time," Luther said, irritably picking at the clotting viscosities on his sleeves and collar. "It is so very close. Perhaps by noon. The first batches after nightfall. The helicopters should be here by dawn tomorrow. We can begin distribution then."

He looked down at the ruined corpse. "Who was he?"

"A local mage, Your Grace. I know that it was risky taking him, living so close to us," Martin said, answering the look in Luther's eyes. "But time is so short, Master, and we couldn't get any of the others in time."

Luther walked away. He hated what had happened. He was used to coldness, rare feeding, years without the hunger. And when he fed he usually indulged in slow torture, protracted suffering, extracting all the terror possible. He loathed the coarseness of this new burning within him, felt soiled and disgusted by the bestiality of what it forced him to do.

The consolation, of course, was that he was less than

twenty hours away from forever eliminating useless humanity from the face of this beautiful world.

Michael could scarcely believe his senses as the octopus icon happily stuffed data packets into his bag. Of course; he relied on the HKB link to preserve the anonymity. The security was given to stopping anyone linked to the Azanian company. His registration here in Vienna was absolutely open. Bioenergetica Archival. Vienna address. Check it out in the public database.

He whipped through the dataline junctions and past the SAN, sleazing his way past as he so loved to do, racing onward, his analyze program plunging into the street directory. Now, let's get out and download, he thought, jacking out almost before he'd put the frame to work.

"That's a message forwarding number if ever I've seen one," he growled as the paper managed to make it out of the printer without being torn in half by his eager fingers. "It hardly matters, though. Here's our name. Luther von Hayek."

"Bingo," Serrin said. "The Regensburg name."

"What did your lady friend's friend give you on him?"

"Luther von Hayek, born seventeen November twenty-ten, son of Luther and Mathilde von Hayek in Miinchen, at a private medical clinic. Educated privately in Regensburg. His mother died in twenty-eleven."

"Very convenient, that," Michael commented.

"Father died in twenty twenty-eight. Luther Junior was privately educated by home tutors. No university education recorded. No existing photographs. Luther is believed to be elven, though any details of UGE or goblinization are lacking. Birth certificate doesn't record any metatype, but that isn't unusual, given the date. Interestingly, his birth certificate states that his father was born in Kralovice on 4.11.1956. Unfortunately, a fire destroyed all records there in twenty-twelve. Most convenient again, isn't it?"

"Where's Kralovice?" Michael asked. "Poland?"

"No. That's Katowice, isn't it? Our place is in the west of the Czech Republic. Just across the border."

"So, no records for Daddy then."

"No. Explains the name, though; it's Czech rather than German, except for that 'von.' Mind you, Julia's chum-mer has tabs on a Luther Hayek, citizen of Zvolen—in Slovakia—circa eighteen-ten. The most interesting thing about him is a privately published pamphlet, author one Jesuit of the parish—if Jesuits have parishes—accusing him of necromancy and vampirism. No firm evidence of a link. The name isn't that unusual. It could be just a coincidence."

"So why's she got our Luther down as a bloodsucker?" Michael asked. "I mean, it can't be common knowledge, that's for sure. I can't imagine the Marienbad Council has an entry in their local tax office saying, 'Make sure we get the full dollar from the vampire up the road next week'."

"Look, the woman who gave Julia this stuff needed a lot of calming down before she was willing to give it up. It also cost me a hefty cred transfer. And you should have seen how scared Julia looked to be passing it. Julia's contact asked her three times whether we had her name or ID. One time of telling her no wasn't enough," Serrin said. "That lady was definitely not lying." "I'll go along with that," the troll added. Michael looked at them and shrugged. "Look, she gave us the name. You confirmed it. It sounds like she did her homework properly," Serrin said. "And we know exactly where this Luther is?" "Owns a monastery outside of Schwandorf. Just up the road from Regensburg."

"So, we've got our man. Or our nosferatu, rather. Now we've got to analyze what we think we know." Michael took a deep breath and ruffled a wad of virginally white vellum, reaching for a pen. "Let's go through it one step at a time."

They mulled over all that had happened, every piece of the jigsaw they'd gathered together. It took less time than Michael would have expected. It was what they were going to do with it all that worried him. One possibility, especially, sent a chill of fear down his spine, "If this is the same guy ..." Michael mused. "What do you mean?" Tom asked.

"I mean, what if there's only been one Luther all this time. From what little we have it looks like our modern-day Luther Junior was hardly ever seen—private tutors, all that stuff. Sounds like it could be the same Luther."

"If he's a nosferatu, why not?" Serrin pondered.

"Well, if he really is an elf that must mean that he was born one. Back at the tail end of the nineteenth century, or even earlier, in Slovakia. It's possible, I gather; we know about spike births, but it would have required the mana at an incredible level for such an early birth. It's not going to be a picnic if his magician's talents reflect that fact."

They were silent for a moment or two.

It was Michael who broke the silence. "Now, exactly what did Magellan say about Luther's little surprise?" he asked Serrin.

"I can't remember the precise words. Something about it being in the genes. A permanent fix."

"So, not drugs then," Michael said. "A genetic fix. But how could that be done? He can't go around rewiring the DNA of every human being individually."

"There'd have to be some kind of vector," Serrin suggested.

Michael went white. He hadn't any background in molecular biology, but he'd helped Geraint with some of his work in it when they were at the university. Enough had rubbed off on him to know the language of the discipline.

"A virus. A retrovirus," Michael managed to say. "Works back into the DNA. He's got a viral fixer. Something that won't affect metatypes."

The printer chattered behind him as he was mulling all this over. He almost didn't bother to look, but, stymied in his thoughts, he ripped off the paper for something to do. His eyes widened as he read the text.

"Tracey's been busy. I should have checked her out earlier. Three more kidnappings of mages have been reported while we were running around the globe. One in Beijing, suspected gang involvement. One in Atlanta, suspected corporate involvement. One in Regensburg, motive unknown. Yesterday. Well, well."

"I'd say there's absolutely no doubt at all now," Serrin muttered.

"This Luther is getting hungrier. But that doesn't fit the nosferatu pattern," Michael said, having read through Serrin's scribbled notes on the undead. "They feed only rarely. The last six kidnappings that seem connected have occurred within a period of seven weeks. Why don't you call Julia and ask her to talk to her friend again and find out what that could mean?"

Serrin was back with a reply within minutes. "She says she's not a hundred percent sure, but that this would only happen if the nosferatu was storing, or using, a very high level of power. It would fit Luther, if he's burning the midnight oil over this research, if he's really consumed by it. Oh, and she says don't ask for anything else. She's disconnecting the line for now." Having seen Magellan's near-mania, Serrin thought this fit, and he said so to Michael. The Tir Tairngire elf was apparently not working for Luther, but the two shared a kind of madness that linked them somehow.

The Englishman nodded wearily. "So, what are we to do?"

"The authorities?" said Serrin hopefully.

"Wonderful. Let's go and tell the German police that a dangerous nosferatu is kidnapping mages and concocting a world-killing virus up at the monastery. Do you think we've got enough evidence to substantiate that? We don't have a single hard fact. All we have is our own testimonies. We don't even have any proof that Luther was involved in the kidnappings. Nor can we prove that he's a nosferatu."

Serrin knew Michael was right. "I can't argue. Well, then, what?"

"Maybe Magellan was wrong," Michael said hopefully. "You said he was a loony."

"Luther's doing something extraordinary," Serrin pointed out. "Otherwise, he wouldn't be feeding the way he is."

"So, then, what do you think?"

Serrin stared back at Michael, who wore an expression of utter helplessness. He'd built an almost airtight plot,

but it didn't have an ending. He didn't have a clue how to finish it.

"Do we have any contacts in Germany?" he asked. He was wracking his own brain.

"No," Michael said. "Assuming you don't, Tom?"

The troll smiled. He'd been happy to let the brains do the work so far, but he appreciated Michael's not forgetting that he was there. Then he shook his head.

"But if we had to go somewhere to raise some dust without any contacts, Germany would probably be the best place in the world," Michael continued, still thinking feverishly. "Berlin. We go to Berlin."

"Why?" Serrin asked.

"Because it's a madhouse. Complete anarchy. We won't even need passports to get in; nobody ever checks them. And there'll be plenty of people we can recruit for help. Metahuman policlubs, for one thing. But we've got to have something better than a tall, tall tale." Michael paused as though thinking for a moment.

"No, we don't," he said suddenly. "We just need a tall, tall amount of money. All we have to do is find the right street shaman. Someone who could come with us and assense Luther's place. Someone who can tell the local samurai that we're right, that there's something really bad there. That might convince a samurai to take the job. Surely. We've got to hope." He went to the telecom and tapped in a code to London.

"One last thing before you vanish eastward," he said to Geraint when the connection was made. "You'll be getting my bill in due course, but I need a payment now."

"How much?" the weary Welsh voice asked.

"I think a couple of hundred should do it."

"You're bothering me for two hundred?" Geraint said incredulously.

"Two hundred thousand, old boy. Nuyen. You can make the transfer to the usual number."

"What?" Geraint was incredulous. "Ship me the Empire State Building and we'll talk about it." He was about to break the connection when Michael played his ace.

"We need it. Wouldn't want HKB to know who's been

into their hard copy and told someone else about a certain ownership, now would we?"

Geraint looked like thunder. "You slimy fragging bastard! I'll kill you for this."

"No you won't. Then HKB would definitely get to hear all about it. Come on, you're worth millions. Do it."

"Serrin, are you there?" Geraint demanded. When he heard the elf's voice, he asked him if this was a stunt.

"No, old friend, it isn't. I don't know exactly why Michael thinks he needs so much, but we really are in Grade A megadrek here. It's no stunt, believe me."

The sincerity in Serrin's voice calmed Geraint down a bit. He went back to talking with Michael.

"All right," he grumbled. "But you'll be working for me six months for this, you little swine, and I won't forget this blackmail until hell freezes over."

"Call it a mutually advantageous arrangement," Michael said. Then added, "It's a deal," before breaking the connection. Within minutes the money was in one of his accounts, a fact he verified at once.

"You wouldn't really have ratted on him, would you?" the elf asked. Geraint was a good friend.

"Of course I wouldn't. When he stops to think about it, he'll know that and

calm down. But we needed the money. I don't have that much in liquid assets," Michael told him. "Hell, don't worry about it. We used to do a lot worse to each other back in our schooldays, old boy."

"I suppose we should book flights to Berlin, then," Serrin said. He was feeling slightly disorientated. It was six in the morning, but it felt like the middle of the afternoon. The middle of the afternoon on a day after one of the world's most horrifically extreme binges on most forms of self-abuse known to man.

"I'll get the credstick transfers ready so I can pick up the money at the airport," Michael told him. "If we leave right away, we'll be in Berlin by early afternoon. We can get some sleep and then go buy everything we can lay our hands on in the evening. And visit Mr. von Hayek tomorrow at dawn. Just when the sun comes up, heh-heh."

The Englishman groaned as he rose from his chair. He

was stiff and his left arm still throbbled with a dull ache. Serrin lit a cigarette and coughed.

"God, does your body feel as bad as mine does?" he asked the elf. "I ache all over."

"Snap," Serrin replied with feeling.

"Ever get a massage from a troll who really knows what he's doing?"

"Sounds appalling," the elf replied with even more feeling.

"Does it? One hour after he's pummeled your every muscle into burger meat you feel like death. You sleep some, you wake up and then you feel like you could run a marathon. I don't usually need it, with my meditating, but I've been skipping my sessions for days and I think we should call out the Troll Roll for a service call."

"Terrific. I can't wait," Serrin said laconically and coughed again.

"Oh, and just one other call," Michael said quietly, walking into his bedroom.

They didn't listen in.

Niall landed the plane at Saint Malo and fumed for half an hour while he waited for the right official to turn up to examine his papers. Nantes or Paris, he wondered, which was quicker? It had to be Paris. He could fly to Munich from there. But that was the obvious route, and they might be following him ...

Stop being paranoid, he told himself. It's got to be Paris. I'll never get a direct flight to Munich from Nantes, even if it is almost a hundred miles closer. I can make Paris by noon, Munich by four, probably, and then Schwandorf by six. I could do it tonight.

No you can't, Mathanas let him know. You know how much time the rituals will take. You won't be ready until the dawn. Let it happen at sunrise. Luther will always be a little less than his best at that time. You know, too, that assensing the place and examining the defenses will take hours. It cannot be rushed.

An hour delay might mean the crucial hour's difference, Niall pleaded. It might be the hour during which he finally sets the thing free.

Mathanas considered, and told him that that was a

chance they'd have to take. Niall drained a credstick and changed it for francs and marks in bills at the bureau de change. He bought himself a ticket for the Paris shuttle, then headed for the platform.

On the way he caught sight of his reflection in a mirror. The change of clothes Patrick had prepared for him was rustic enough that he resembled a French farmer heading off to some mindless political protest or other, though his own dramatic features gave the lie to that. Tucking his hair down into the collar of the almost shapeless jacket, he stooped to hide his face and disguise his height. Then he shuffled on, slouched and with his head kept down, out onto the bare concrete of the almost deserted, litter-choked train platform.

Serrin argued with Kristen while Michael packed and Tom returned to his own room. He begged her not to come with them. She wasn't trained in using a gun, she would be at risk, it was crazy. She was furious.

"I used it well enough before," she protested, which was true enough. If she hadn't gotten that head shot right, he'd have been drilled through by the

machine-gunner back in New Hlobane.

"But this is going to be different. Very, very dangerous," he said.

"So? I want to be there," she insisted. She had a way of tapping her right foot on the floor when annoyed, something he hadn't noticed before. If not for the tenseness of the situation, he'd have found it desperately endearing.

"We'll have plenty of muscle with us," he said.

"You ain't got no one yet," she pointed out. "I won't let you go without me. Maybe I might have to pull the trigger for you again." She smiled happily. It was her trump card and she intended to get maximum use out of it.

"And don't forget," she went on, grinning hugely, "I got two men in my life to take care of. There's you, and there's my husband." Serrin couldn't help but laugh; she'd won the argument.

"All right. But, promise me you'll stay way back. You cover whoever's going in, but you stay out."

"Promise," she said with a taunting grin, one that said, well, she'd do her best, but ...

The troll lay on his bed, huge feet hanging over the end of it, looking quietly through the window at the early New York sun. With hands cupped over his belly, he dug the fingers of his left hand into the smartgun link he could feel below the skin of the other.

Damn it, if I hadn't ruined my body with metal, he thought, I'd be a much better shaman. But it's too late to go back and undo it all now.

Reflections seemed to rise up in his mind unbidden. What's going to happen to me? I'm twenty-five years old. I got chosen by Bear. Everybody knows that doesn't usually happen to street people. The street shamans I know, most of 'em go with Rat, a few with Dog—the better sorts—and I've run into a few Cat folk. But Bear doesn't often show up in the city. Yet I don't feel out of place there ... here. Strange ...

His mind flashed back to New Hlobane. Without the slightest chance of

finding

Serrin, he'd done so. And he'd accomplished it by trying to do absolutely nothing, just being empty and still. He couldn't make sense of that. Tom had spent his whole life trying to do things: running the shadows, killing, stealing, drinking in the bad old days, working in downtown Seattle in the better ones. Anything he'd got from life, anything that had any meaning for him, he'd gone out and actively sought to get, or at least tried to.

But he felt there was something real bad at the end of all this. Sure, he listened to the Englishman's arguments and facts and took it all in. But Tom didn't feel facts. He could only feel what he could tangle with.

I ain't tangled with this nosferatu thing, but I can feel its badness from thousands of miles away, he thought. Tom couldn't image what he would do when they got there. Just have to wait and see, he supposed.

His daydreaming was interrupted by a knock at the door. "Troll Roll is here. You need a workover?"

The red-haired elf trembled as he waited at the airport. He'd survived by a miracle, though he couldn't be sure whether there really was such a thing.

If she finds out ... Maybe he believed me. Maybe he's seen the light, he's a brother, he can't betray us, he just can't. That would be blasphemy.

If I go back to Jenna, she'll have me killed. Worse. She'll rip my mind apart to find out what really took place and then ... his mind flashed to the nightmare portrait of Jenna back in Tir Tairngire. Her beautiful face, but on her body the thorns and the endless blood. She could do that to me.

I've got to get to Luther, he realized. I have to warn him direct. Phoning is no use. Not from here.

Magellan raced to the ticket counter to change his destination.

25

Michael was delighted to find that, by chance, George from immigration was lurking around the departure checkpoint at JFK.

"You again, huh," the man growled. "You really seem to get around."

"Honeymoon, chummer," Michael beamed happily.

"Sure. With those two coming along as bridesmaids, I suppose," he sniffed, looking Serrin and Tom over.

Michael laughed at the man's feeble joke. The good humor got them through with little more than a cursory check.

"Let's hope he's still here when we get back," Michael said. "I don't want to go through all that drek again."

"We could always go to Cape Town afterward and get Kristen a real ID," Serrin said.

Michael whirled round, a beatific smile on his face, and threw his arms around the elf, hugging him tight. Serrin winced. His body still felt like it had been hammered with a meat tenderizer after the troll masseuse had done her work.

"I love you, you're a genius," the Englishman babbled.

Serrin looked at him, uncomprehendingly.

"From Cape Town, we can hit Bop. Sun City. It's a stinking drekhole, but there's something there I'd totally forgotten about until this moment."

"Which is what?" Serrin asked, trying to figure out what this crazy Englishman was bleating on about.

"Quickie divorces. Valid for any marriages within the Confederated Azanian Nations. I read about it somewhere," Michael said delightedly. "If both parties are present and in agreement, just pay the fee, and prestochange, no more mister and missus. Automatic." He raced off into one of the shops, returning in minutes with an indecently large bouquet of roses. They looked as if they might be real, but silk wasn't a bad substitute. He half-forced them on to Kristen and got down on one knee before her.

"Darling, will you do me the honor of divorcing me?"

The girl almost fell backward laughing, but Serrin thought her beautiful wide smile had never been so lovely.

"Well, I don't know, Michael. That's a big decision for a girl. But, yes," she laughed, "I do."

Michael smiled as he got to his feet, dusting off his hands to show a job well done. "Now, let's go and blow that bloodsucker into the next universe."

As they made their way to the departure gates, the troll turned to Serrin.

"You got some crazy friends, chummer," he said happily.

"Yeah, he is kind of strange."

"And she's beautiful," the troll said quietly.

Serrin felt his heart skip a beat. It hurt to think that they were about to plunge into something that was as powerful as it was infernal. They didn't know if they'd still be alive tomorrow and yet he was dragging Kristen straight in it. For one moment, he wanted desperately to turn around, to walk away, to say this isn't our struggle, let someone else do it. But he knew he couldn't. There wasn't anyone else.

Niall bought a wristwatch in Paris. He looked at the gold Fuchis and the rest of the gleaming trays filled with absurdly overpriced ostentation for people who wanted to advertise their wealth, then settled on an economical Korean model. He hardly needed it to know what the time of day was, however. He always knew that from the sun and moon, from the feeling inside his own body. But, for some reason, maybe superstition, he thought he needed one.

He felt alone. Mathanas was gone from him, away in his astral form, investigating their route, assensing for

any pursuers, drawing on his own energies for what lay ahead. Niall sat in a sidewalk cafe along the Champs Elysee, skewering a garlic-coated snail from its shell and sipping what the French laughably referred to as beer. It tasted

like
a mix of bad British lager and something extracted from the bladder of a
devil
rat, but at least it was cold. He set the fake stein down on the table before
him and wiped the foam from his lips.

I am truly an idiot, he thought. Who comes to France and orders beer!
Serves
me right.

The wristwatch told him he still had thirty minutes before the train to
Charles de Gaulle airport and the flight to Munich. He ordered a Cointreau
chaser and drained the glass in one gulp.

Here's to the next life, he thought philosophically, and then went to find
a
cab to the airport. He'd abandoned any surveillance of the Americans well
before
this; it was too late for them now.

They made Berlin by four, feeling better for the naps they'd taken in
flight.
Serrin, in particular, was happily surprised to find that Michael was right
about the massage. Some of his muscles even felt like they might be on the
verge
of relaxation.

Serrin had never been in the city before, but hadn't really believed
Michael's
description during the flight. Surely no place could be so chaotic. It was
just
too plain dumb, and Germans were too sensible.

Except in Berlin, as he realized once they got there.

Immigration barely looked at their IDs; the inspectors merely threw a
glance
at the covers of their passports, smiled at the marriage registration, and
offered Michael congratulations in a tone of voice that suggested they'd
recently got lucky intercepting the importation of something both interesting
and illegal—and chipped or imbibed most of whatever it was.

The airport was Babel rebuilt to feature runways. The concourses seemed to
be
filled with street-theater freaks, jugglers, puppeteers, Dadaist mime geeks,
religious lunatics proclaiming the end of the world next Monday, Wednesday,
or
Friday depending on the cult, burned out

chipheads, street girls, street boys, street whatever's, and drunks.
Occasionally, passengers like themselves did their best to weave their way

through the human detritus blocking their path. Security, such as it was, seemed totally oblivious except where outright violence was threatened. Serrin's little group hadn't gone ten yards without being offered girls, boys, expansion of consciousness by guru or pill, redemption by mail order, and membership in societies and organizations catering to every inclination imaginable and a few that weren't.

"I've never been here before," Serrin said as Kristen clung to him, "and I'm never, ever, coming back again."

"Oh it's not so bad, chummer. It's just that the Free City has abandoned pretty much everything worth having from the last six thousand years of civilization," Michael grinned. "But the beer's good. And the place isn't all like this. Of course, some of it's worse. Most of it, if I were to be truthful. But the Metropolitan, where we're staying, that at least is an oasis of sanity. Well, it's got security anyway, which is what we need. And we can get things here we couldn't get anywhere else in the German Alliance. We've got a busy evening ahead."

Serrin was hugely relieved when they reached the hotel, where Michael had booked them a four-bedroom suite. The trid screen on the wall of the salon was the biggest he'd ever seen.

"This is class," he admitted reluctantly while Michael burrowed into the fake mahogany bar for beers. "I think we've got three options," the Englishman said, forcing the top off a bottle and taking a long drink.

"One: we find the most efficient-looking mercenaries money can buy before midnight. We've got to move that fast. Taking any longer will give people more time to start checking us out more closely. Not a complication we want. I can spread enough money around to buy us quality, but let's face it, you can't pay anyone enough to risk his life against a nosferatu."

"A nosferatu mage," Serrin said.

"We don't know that for sure," Michael replied. Serrin's look told him to take some things on trust.

"But mercenaries might cut and run," Michael continued. "Which wouldn't be very convenient for us. That leaves us two other possibilities. One I've

already
discounted, but I'd like to mention it so you can follow my thinking."

He's back in form, Serrin thought. He has that hypo-manic glint in his eye, and I think he actually believes his line that Englishmen are almost bulletproof.

"Forgive me for this one, but it's Humanis."

Tom was half-out of his chair when Michael, genuinely afraid that the troll might deck him with a watermelon-sized fist, waved him back.

"I said I'd discounted that. It's just that the master race would die willingly to deal with the problem we've got. We might not even have to pay them. Come on, be fair, you have to admit they'd be motivated."

"I've put about maybe a dozen of those guys into the ground over the years and I'm not ashamed to say I've never lost a minute's sleep over it," Tom growled.

"That leaves us a third possibility. There's the Ork Liberation Army. I should say the Ork Anarchic Commune, the Wardogs, half a dozen of 'em, but it's the same thing. Orks are a quarter of the population here. The real activists divide into two groups. One bunch, the ones I've mentioned, are hard guys, but they protect what they've got and work to get a bigger slice. They're organized, so there's a general ork policlub. The other bunch are the ones to avoid. The Horde. They just like killing anything that doesn't look like a big, bad ork. The trick is to recruit from the former and not from the latter."

"Can we do that?" Serrin wondered.

"There's a bar, the Meld In, in Grenzstrasse. Ironically enough, it's a hangout for Berliners who actually want to improve relations between metatypes. Won't find any Horde members there. But we'll find everyone else. Now this is a tricky one. We need types smart enough to be enraged by the idea of what Luther's doing, while avoiding the ones so over-motivated that they'll want to rip our heads off first."

"Why orks, specifically?" Tom asked.

"Just because they're the most numerous and best-equipped muscle available here. But, slot, if there are

dwarfs, trolls, or anyone else willing to come along and help us out, the more the better. The other good thing about orks is that they'll keep it to themselves."

"And what about me?" Serrin asked. "We're going to ask them to blow away a megalomaniacal elven racist, and here's an elf asking them to do it. Isn't that going to look rather suspicious?"

"No," Michael said slowly. "Not if they see you're really there with Kristen." Avoiding Serrin's uncomfortable look, he continued. "Look, let's do a quick inventory on ourselves. One troll. One elf. One white man. One black woman. Are we a plausible group for furthering some kind of racist plot?"

"Probably not," Serrin agreed.

"No. We're actually not an unlikely collection of folks to oppose that very thing."

"Maybe it would be better if Serrin didn't actually go along to meet the orks. Your logic is right," Tom told Michael, "but life isn't logical."

"More's the pity," Michael said dryly. "No. I don't want to deceive them, even by omission. We go in on this together. That's what we'll be asking them to do."

"What about a compromise? Maybe I arrive a little later at this Meld place? Without me around, it might be easier for you to prepare the ground," Serrin offered.

"Good idea. Now, let's start making a shopping list of what we're going to need in the way of hardware. Sadly, not even in Berlin can we lay our hands on a tacnuke— not in the time we have available to us—but apart from that we've got enough money to get what we want."

Michael began to unpack his cyberdeck from its travel case. "I think I should also investigate some places less well-known than Meld In. Shouldn't take more than half an hour.

"While I'm doing that, maybe Tom could hit the place and just kick back, have

a drink, be seen. Then, when we go back, it will look like we've sent someone to scope matters out and that we like what we heard. When the time comes to parlay, it might get us some respect, like we know what we're doing."

"Makes sense," the troll said, getting to his feet. "Where is this place again?"

Michael gave him the exact address. "Hang around for half an hour maybe. Try not to look obvious, like you're checking everyone out."

"Look, chummer, I may not be smart, but I'm not dumb either," Tom retorted.

"Sorry," Michael said sheepishly. "I'm just a bit twitchy, that's all."

When Tom had gone, Serrin questioned Michael as he was rigging up the Fuchi.

"Look, why should you go along on this? You're no samurai."

"I'm a damn good shot with the Predator, though. Come on, I live in New York. It's basic survival instinct, old boy. Anyway, I intend to stay behind the front line. Isn't that the same deal you made with Kristen?"

Serrin looked ruefully at the Englishman. Once again, he'd proven to be one step ahead in his guesswork. It would be nice if he would only guess wrong now and again.

Michael readied himself to jack in. "Now, let's find ourselves somewhere to buy things that make pleasingly big explosions."

Despite some initial qualms, Tom immediately felt at home in the bar. He'd hardly gotten through the door before various people had forced at least a half dozen pamphlets into his hands, each espousing the virtues of racial co-existence in all its many-faceted glory. He judged that the capabilities of the eager, but innocuous-looking, clientele probably didn't match the grandiose ambitions in the pamphlets. Somehow it seemed wrong to sit in a German beer cellar with a mineral water, so he ordered a stein of the alcohol-free variety. Back in UCAS, alcohol-free beer tasted like devil rat piss, but surely that couldn't be true in Germany.

The troll's eyes widened as he took a gulp, then studied the half-empty

stein.

It was excellent. Yeast and hops, barley and something indefinable hit his taste buds. He was just pondering ordering another when all hell suddenly broke loose in the doorway. Shock waves rippled through the bar and Tom was hurled off his chair. He hit the ground hard, dazedly taking in the faces and metal and fire sprouting around the door, the screaming in German and the hefting guns ready to follow up the concussion-grenade hit. Broken glass and shards of furniture flew around him. He dimly felt one or two cuts on his arms, but nothing hit him in the face.

The Roomsweeper wasn't the right weapon under the circumstances. He should have had a pistol for standing outside and dumping heat inside rather than the other way around, but he rolled with it, took aim and emptied the clip in the direction of the doorway. He could only hope that everyone originally within it had been blown far enough by the shock wave to be out of the arc of fire.

Smoke obscured his view by the time the clip was empty. Gunfire chattered all around, echoing off the walls, deafening everyone. Half a dozen bleeding bodies lay, some at horribly unnatural angles, on the floor. Looking up, Tom saw a female ork swaying and muttering as she cast a spell. Then a bolt of fire ripped through the doorway and hurtled into the street outside. The effects weren't visible through the smoke, but the screams were audible even over the yelling and shooting inside the bar.

Welcome to Berlin, Tom thought. He'd been told it was anarchy. Michael wasn't kidding.

Someone had managed to slam the bar door shut and was drawing metal bolts the thickness of a troll's arm across. Noting that the door was lined with metal on the inside, Tom guessed that they must be used to raids here. Unfortunately, there was a distinct lack of communication among the besieged, because while the elf was busy bolting the door, a hefty ork with an SMG had just smashed a window and was pouring machine-gun fire into the street outside.

Managing to get onto all fours, Tom looked up again, breathing heavily. He found the female ork watching him. That she was a Cat shaman was immediately obvious. Tom had no need to do any assensing. Her black eyes widened as she looked at him, and then she started to shout. He could barely hear her, still mostly deafened, but what difference did it make? She was probably speaking German, so he wouldn't have understood a word of it anyway.

Grabbing him by the braid, she yanked him upright. She started to shout to him, but when he mumbled, "Sorry, don't understand," and looked at her helplessly, she simply pointed to the back of the room. Two orks had already opened a trap door in the floor, and most of the bar's clientele was pouring through it and down the stairs. Tom got up and followed them.

Michael sat quietly in the Tarantel, sipping his Gewurtztraminer, looking around for a plausible candidate to approach. This unassuming little bar was rumored to be the principal hangout for arms dealers from all over

Europe. Among those present, the Brits and Arabs would be the major players, here to make deals in the millions. The South Americans looked like their probable customers. Wearing suits as classy as his, they were hardly what he was looking for. He had deliberately dressed to look like one of the big boys, thinking it would permit him to make the approach rather than having to field a lot of queries. But that wasn't the way it worked out.

"Is it possible I might be able to interest you in something?" a lazy voice came from behind him. The voice might have been taken for German by some, but Michael guessed the man was more likely an Austrian. Maybe Czech. Whatever. All that mattered was what he had for sale.

"Possibly. I am not interested in items on such a scale as you might imagine," he said coolly.

The man sat down next to him at the nondescript bar. The plain wooden tables and chairs revealed nothing particularly unusual about the place, but the six troll security guards inside and outside the door gave a better indication of the Tarantel's selectivity.

"Well, perhaps that is to the good. I prefer not to deal with suppliers of bulk commodities," the man smiled. His beard hid most of his face, and his eyes were invisible behind shades that Michael judged a little too ostentatious even for this group. His paunch said that he shouldn't wear trousers quite so close-fitting, but the silk shirt was understated and his tie a plain dark blue under the well-cut blazer.

"I'm interested in obtaining basic supplies for a number of people," Michael said, sipping again. "And one or two less basic items."

"Sounds as if I might be able to help you," the man said. "You can call me Walter."

"And you can call me James," Michael replied. "I would like to deal with the unusual items first, unless you'd prefer otherwise. I'm not exactly sure how many of the basics I shall need, but I could firm up any arrangement a little later this evening. Do you have the basics really available?"

"Mr. James," the man replied, "I have an excellent

range of off-the-rack basic items suitable for most occasions."

Michael grinned and began to contemplate his shopping list. He didn't see the red-haired elf in the shadows, and wouldn't have known who he was if he had. He'd never seen Magellan before.

The elf sat very quietly, stunned by the unbelievable good luck of it. His eyes never left the Englishman's back.

Tom did not, by and large, enjoy sewers. He'd investigated a few of Seattle's at closer proximity than he'd cared for and they weren't to his liking. Those in Berlin weren't much different.

The Cat shaman had stayed fairly close by, keeping an eye on him. Various clumps of people had disappeared in various directions, and Tom noticed that the groups were divided, for the most part, by race. So much for improving relations and integration, he thought glumly. That put him in the middle of a group of a dozen or so orks. The Cat shaman turned to the ork who'd enjoyed himself machine-gunning the street.

"Gunther, we have a visitor, if you hadn't noticed," the shaman said in delicately accented English. The ork looked Tom over with some dislike.

"Rather dangerous using that thing," she said, pointing to Tom's pistol. "You could have killed some of us."

"You'd all been blown away from the door," Tom replied. "It wasn't that dangerous. What, you wanted me to stop and take a body count first?"

She looked at him warily. He guessed she'd already assented him, but couldn't

guess what her reaction might have been. Cat shamans weren't predictable that way.

"What were you doing at Meld In?" she asked. "You seemed to be looking the place over. Why?"

"That's a long story," he said carefully. "Who were the people who attacked you?"

"Kreutzritters. How you say, religious fanatics. Disposing of heretics," she sneered. "They usually prey on people like you, though. They haven't dared strike at us

before. They're going to pay for it, and sooner than they think.

"But, tell me, who are you and why were you in the bar?"

Tom told her his name and wondered how to begin the tale. "Look, this is tough. I came to see if I could buy heat for something very, very important. The money's no problem."

From the sneer on her face, Tom realized that his appearance wasn't that of someone who had a few hundred grand to spend.

"I have friends. I came alone to see what I could see. If I saw good things, we'd all come back and do some talking. Believe me, we've got the money," he said.

"Who you after?"

"A racist. A madman. He's got to be stopped," Tom said rather lamely.

She looked dismissive. "Berlin's full of them. You just met one bunch. What's so special about yours?"

"What's special is that he doesn't come armed with guns and grenades. He's cooked up a virus. A plague. A plague that leaves his race alive and destroys the rest."

"We hear stories like that all the time," the ork shaman said. "Another bunch of bulldrek. Why listen to this one?"

"Because my friends have a six-figure offer that says you ought to consider the job."

Gunther gave Tom a long, hard look. Tom guessed that they wanted to believe him. Who wouldn't?

"All I ask is that you meet my friends. We can talk," Tom pleaded. "The money comes up front too."

"We can talk," the shaman said slowly. "Head down Grenzstrasse to the end. Gunther will be there. The polizei will be gone if we wait a while. Say, in an hour and a half?"

"Should be fine," Tom agreed. "Now, how do I get out of here?"

When he got off the plane in Munich, Niall bought a large-scale map of Bavaria, hired a car, then began trying to navigate city traffic. The latter was an experience he

wasn't enjoying at all. It had been a long time since he'd done any driving outside of rural Tir na n6g, and the sheer number of autos and trucks all around him made him sweat. He kept to twenty miles an hour while looking desperately around for signs telling him how to get to the autobahn for Regensburg. Then, poring over the map at a conveniently red traffic light, he realized there wasn't one.

I should have flown to Nuremburg, he thought miserably. Now it looks like I head for Ingolstadt, and take the road from there. That looks the fastest route.

His wristwatch told him it was half an hour later than he'd hoped. Then a blaring horn told him he ought to get the car in gear and move.

He just missed crashing into the Westwind as it braked in front of him, his mind too full of how to disguise any final approach, how to use the cauldron's stored power, what elementals or spirits should be conjured and summoned, how to discover what guards and barriers Luther had ...

But if Niall was going to try to get anywhere in one piece, he'd have to stop thinking and start paying attention. All the planning in the world wouldn't do him any good if he became a strawberry stain on the road. Carefully, he

crawled
the vehicle through the choked traffic jams of Munich, following the signs
for
Ingolstadt.

"Fine," Michael said quietly. "The patches are good, which makes me like
the
deal. Pity about the respirators, though. I would have gone high for that."

The man shrugged his shoulders. "Anti-viral I can't do. No one has that
kind
of thing to hand. Give me a week and it could be done, but that's very
specialist. What you're getting will filter out gases and bacteria, and that
usually only comes with the big money deals."

"Okay. We agree to sixty-five for the specialist requirements. You can have
them for us by ten tonight?" The man nodded agreement. "You've got my number.
Call me at nine-thirty to arrange a pick-up point. Now, the small matter of
the
deposit."

"Fifty per cent," Walter said flatly.

"High for a sixty-five-grand deal," Michael retorted.

"If I reneged on deals and took off with the money, I wouldn't be sitting
here," the man said. "I'd be a dead man. In my business, cheating people
doesn't
pay. Rip them off now and then, sure, but not cheating. I work on
percentages.
No percentage in that."

Michael grinned. "Well, look, say a deposit of thirty in round numbers. I
got
credsticks charged in tens. That square with you?"

"That'll do. A pleasure doing business with you, Mr. James. When I call,
you
let me know what numbers of basics you need, the pistols and armor, and we'll
agree on a final price, right? I only need thirty minutes to round those up.
Like I said, it's a pleasure doing business with you."

The man finished his drink, picked up the folded newspaper in which Michael
had discreetly placed the credsticks, and left without another word. Michael
paid the bill, then collected his cashmere coat, and also headed for the
door,
intending to hail a cab.

Unfortunately, he never got that far.

As he fell, dimly aware of what was happening to him, he clutched at his coat pocket and squeezed the little metal card inside it. The last phone call he'd made from New York had been worth every last cent. Behind him, the elf vanished into the shadows of the back alley, fleeing from the shouts and screams, desperate for a door to get through, any damn door in sight.

He found one.

Tom was prowling up and down in the suite at the Metropolitan, waiting for Michael's return. Time was beginning to get short. The printer connected to the Fuchi began to chatter. Serrin looked at the troll and waited for the paper feed to deliver the pre-scripted message to him.

Hi there. I'm afraid something nasty has happened to me. If this is triggered, it means the BuMoNa medical service has picked me up. Getting insured was the right move. You 'II have to contact BuMoNa to find out where I am and whether I'm still alive or not. If I'm dead, it was

nice knowing you all. By the way, all the money is in bills and credsticks in the laminated suitcase.

Disbelievingly, Serrin tapped in the number of the German medical service. After an initial inquiry, he was reduced to a string of mumbled yes's and no's. Finally, he hit the Disconnect key and stood dumbfounded, not knowing what to do.

"What's going on?" Tom growled. Serrin still hadn't told him what the printed message had said.

"Michael's in intensive at a hospital downtown. Shot in the back, kidney rupture, the bullet went through the spleen. Systemic shock. Spinal damage a possibility. Hit on the sidewalk outside the Tarantel."

"Fragging hell," the troll muttered.

"They want his next of kin," Serrin said quietly. Their eyes turned to Kristen. She sat uncertainly, biting on her lower lip.

"Kristen, I think you've got to go to him. If he can speak at all, maybe we can find out what happened. Tom, you and I will have to make the meet," Serrin

said, his voice steely. "If we don't meet your ork, it'll hose everything. Kristen, can you manage this? Yes?"

She nodded and got slowly to her feet. "I'll do what I have to," she told him.

"So will we." Serrin felt alone, even with the others there. Until now Michael had been the planner, the one always on top of it all, and now that task had fallen to him. He also felt keenly that the Englishman might well die because of him. But Serrin didn't feel guilty. All he felt was icy anger.

"Let's get a cab," he said to Tom as he headed for the money in Michael's case, "and then let's hire every last fragging gun we can get our hands on."

27

The cab carrying Serrin and Tom curbed-crawled Grenzs-trasse twice before Gunther chose to reveal himself, motioning for them to get out of the auto. They paid the driver, pulled up the collars of their coats, and stepped out onto the sidewalk. Serrin didn't like the weight and feel of the credsticks in his pockets, and he was desperate to hear from Kristen about how Michael was doing.

"Your friends are a bit thin on the ground, man," the ork said to Tom as he led them across the street.

"One of them just got hit in the back after buying weapons for you guys—if you're taking the job," Tom replied. "He's in intensive."

"You bulldrekkin' me?"

"Sure. I come here with tens in sticks and bills and we're bulldrekking you. We even shot up our own man, right? You want us to take you to the hospital so you can see for yourself?" Serrin snapped angrily.

"All right, all right," Gunther said. He ducked into a back alley and motioned them to follow as he rapped on a slogan-splashed door. It opened and he disappeared into the gloomy interior.

Following him in, Serrin wished that orks were more prone to using deodorant. The six samurai and the woman, the Cat shaman Tom had mentioned, were waiting

with a variety of unimpressive pistols leveled at them as they entered. Their dirty jeans and frayed jackets confirmed for the eyes that they gave jack squat about personal hygiene.

"Now you tell us everything," the shamam said. "You lie and I'll know it. You're masking," she said to Serrin,

"that might cover you. But I can read him just fine. Now give it all to me."

"Two things first," Serrin surrendered, knowing he really didn't have much choice. "One, we had a friend shot up real bad about thirty minutes ago and I need to make a call to find out how he is. You can enter the code, verify that it's legit. Second, well . . ." He paused and ran his fingers through his hair. "This is going to be one long crazy story. You probably won't believe half of it. All I can say is that we can pay you a hell of a lot of money to come with us and scan it for yourselves. Meaning you," he said, meeting the shaman's intense gaze. "You can assense the place when we get there. It's just outside Regensburg. We want to make the hit at dawn."

"That can be done if we start out before midnight," the shaman said casually, turning to Tom. "We've got time to hear you out. Now talk, troll, and make it good."

"You can only see him for a minute," the nurse told her. "He's asleep now, resting. He's very poorly still. Please try not to disturb him." She scowled suspiciously at the marriage registration. This scrap of a girl certainly didn't look like a suitable match for the wealthy man who'd purchased the best coverage money could buy. His clothes, and the money inside them, didn't speak of someone likely to marry this African waif. But the girl had the ID and the doctor had agreed to let her see the man.

Kristen was scared. The police had spoken to her only briefly here at the hospital, but they were obviously puzzled that Michael had not been robbed, which eliminated the obvious motive for the crime. She hoped desperately they weren't going to tail her when she left.

"How is he? Is he going to be all right?" she ventured.

"Doctor Kohler can tell you that. He'll talk to you afterward." The nurse ushered Kristen into the room. "Take care not to disturb him. He needs to rest."

Michael's appearance was shocking, even though she was glad to see he was

alive at all. Tubes were sticking out of his nostrils and arm, with a drip rig and the electronic technology of intensive care providing the usual

dehumanizing stage for the patient. His body was wreathed in a semi-transparent plastic cocoon, a light pink fluid filtering through it. She thought she could see a couple of places where it was hooked into him, processing body fluids, oxygenating him, calibrating the serum levels of painkillers and keeping the level constant, though of course Kristen had never seen anything even remotely like this before and had no idea exactly what it

did.

His eyes opened. She couldn't hold his hand, sealed away from her as it was. She kissed him on the forehead and brushed away the hair stuck damply to his brow.

"Hi," he said, his voice little more than a croak as she lowered her ear to his mouth to hear. "Listen, it's vital. Record it." She dug into her bag for the little portable disc player and recorder that he'd bought her. A ghost of a grin passed over his face at the sight of it.

Then Michael told her when to expect the call and told her Walter's name. "Serrin take all the money to the samurai?" he managed to ask. She told him no, most of it was still there.

"If Serrin can't call himself, you'll have to make the meet. Take the marriage ID." Another painful smile played over his lips. "You know where the money is?" She nodded and told him to be quiet, to rest now. The nurse was hovering in the doorway.

"Hey, kid, if I die you're going to be a wealthy woman," he said, and coughed.

"Don't you dare say that!" She wanted so much to hug him, to throw her arms around him and make everything right. But the most she could do was touch his lips with her fingertips before the nurse ordered her to go.

Kristen stood alone in the corridor outside, smelling the eternal disinfectant reek of the hospital all around her, holding on to her bag, refusing to cry.

"Frau Sutherland?" She turned to look at the doctor; a dapper man with a fashionable haircut and something that in a different age might have been a dueling scar on his right cheek. Not on the chin, she was glad to see, remembering Serrin's description of the man who had tried to kidnap him. He looked like the kind of doctor who probably paid more attention to pretty young nurses than to patients.

"How is he? What's going to happen?" she blurted, feeling so helpless.

"He is stable, Frau Sutherland, that much I can say. Your husband's injuries are not fatal unless there are unforeseen complications. He will undergo exploratory surgery tomorrow and we have a trace on a donor for a kidney transplant. The spleen damage is more serious, but his insurance covers a prosthetic implant that should fulfill almost all the functions of that organ."

Kohler looked very pleased with himself, but only for a moment. "Unfortunately, we aren't sure whether he's taken spinal damage. Fragments of the bullet have lodged very close to the spine. Some we may not be able to remove even with microsurgery because it's simply too dangerous. We won't know until after the surgery tomorrow morning."

"Will he be—" She didn't want to say the words. Paralyzed. Crippled. Confined to a wheelchair.

"As I said, we won't know anything until tomorrow and perhaps not for another twenty-four hours after that while we wait for the results of the diagnostic tests. If you wish to remain here in the hospital overnight, we have facilities. The insurance covers it."

"I can't," she blurted out and saw his shocked reaction. "I mean, Michael was going to meet someone—um, family relations. I will have to tell them. And there are friends."

"Of course," Kohler said, his voice expressing as much disapproval as his expression. "We have the number of your hotel. We'll call if there's any change." He gave her directions to the exit.

Passing under a clock in the lobby, Kristen looked up to see that it read 19:40. All she could do now was hope desperately that Serrin would call back to the hotel in the next two hours.

"No details on Mr. Sutherland are publicly available," the robotic voice informed him from the telecom. "Infor"Spirits, I'm his best friend. I only want to know if he's alive or dead, dammit," Serrin yelled, then forced himself to calm down. "His, er, wife was intending to visit him. Can I speak to her?"

"I cannot confirm or deny that any of Mr. Sutherland's relatives have or have not been in attendance on him at this time," the voice droned back. "Thank you for your inquiry." With that, the connection broke.

"I can't fraggin' believe it!" the elf shouted. "I mean, is there some special archipelago somewhere in the world where they breed people like that?"

"Kristen will be back at the hotel," Tom said calmly. "Call her there."

"No more calls." The shaman, who'd given her name as Mathilde by now, was adamant. She took the portaphone away from the elf before he could key in the hotel number.

"But, look, Michael was cutting a deal for weapons and armor. We've got to find out what he got," Serrin pleaded. "We may have to meet someone. A date he made and can't keep."

"Then you'll just have to make do with what we've got," Mathilde said emphatically. "And you've got a lot more convincing to do. So far, from what you've told me, you're in Cape Town because you've been scammed by a woman reporter in New York and then someone tried to kidnap you in Heidelberg. Now you run into some street girl thinks you're Darkvine or something just 'cause she's seen your face in the paper. Sounds like a crazy, bored fool running round the world chasing the shadow of his own butt to me."

Another hour, with the complete story, didn't change anything. The orks simply passed from skepticism to the borderlands of plain hostility. Serrin realized that he and Tom just didn't have any evidence. No hard facts. No proof.

"The bottom line," he said, "is that it's ..." He paused for a few moments doing some mental arithmetic. Allow Michael a hundred for his deals. If it was more, Serrin could lay his hands on enough to make up the difference.

"It's a hundredThousand on tfte deatTArhundredThousand^

mation is never released except to immediate kin."

for you guys. That assumes a minimum of, say, fifteen samurai. And you, Mathilde. We got to have someone there to check it out and confirm it."

"A hundred thousand deutschmarks?" She was incredulous.

"A hundred thousand nuyen," he shot back. "Two hundred thousand deutschmarks."

"This guy can't be for real. That's the kind of money only a heavy-hitter would get for scragging half the Berlin Council. If anyone cared enough," Gunther said. "I'd kill for that much. Frag, I'd blow my own fraggin' head off for a hundred thousand."

"That's a flat payment. It buys us people willing to go all the way on this one. You know and I know that we could buy drek-hot mercenaries with that much. But they aren't what we need. We've got to stop this guy," Serrin pleaded.

"Oh, and you can keep everything and anything Michael might have bought. If his deal can't be cut—and that'll be your fault—we could go higher than a hundred grand. But then we'd want more bodies."

Mathilde was thinking hard. Serrin and Tom saw that the samurai looked to her for leadership. She was smaller, less tough, than any of them, but they seemed to follow her lead. Apart from Gunther, the others had barely even opened their mouths.

Tom got up to stretch his legs. The little chair was giving him a hard time.

"Mathilde, can I have a word with you? Privately, I mean," he said gently. He thought he heard the sound of a safety catch being released.

She looked at him and waved a dismissive hand to the samurai. "Sure. But no tricks. You hear any bad noises, boys, smoke him."

She led the troll into the front room of the rundown building. The ceiling had a gaping hole in it, and water trickled down from upstairs, dropping onto the floor from a light fixture with a carbonized bulb fused into it. Crouched slightly against the far wall in the fading light from outside, she waited for

him to speak his piece. Mathilde really did look feline in the shadows.

"I know the story sounds crazy, but now you can get into my mind. I'd be surprised if you didn't see a mark on me," he said to her. She crouched a little further; he knew she'd registered whatever Shakala had laid on him.

"I'll try to relive it. Try to daydream it. Try to let you enter into it," he said. She nodded and waited. The troll sat on the wet floor and closed his eyes.

Anger started to rise in him as he pictured the way the Cheetah shaman had taunted him. He tried to vision it clearly, and then the memory of the cuts and wounds came back for real. He half-panicked as the anger rose, wondering whether his own imaginings were going to send him beserk. He forced his will down on the emotion, stifling it, but then it just took him over.

He was lying face down again, the cheetah ready to sever the vertebrae of his neck. But he let himself go totally empty, everything flooding out of him, leaving only calm and serenity. He saw himself talking to Shakala afterward, as if floating above and looking down at himself in conversation.

Then something new took over. He was standing at the site of the ruined, burned-out, defoliated research plant. The zombies shuffled up to him, arms outstretched, faces blank and agonized in the same paradoxical instant. As they approached, a wave of emotion rolled over him from the smoking buildings like a slow-motion tidal wave. Rooted to the spot, he couldn't turn and run.

Emanating from some kind of cold presence he couldn't identify came contempt, cold hatred, a bleak nihilism so engulfing that for a dreadful instant he thought he was going to die. What made it so awful was the absolute impersonality of it. It didn't give a speck of dust for him. It didn't even notice him. It just rolled on its way, bleaching and razing the life and soul out of anything in its path.

He vomited then, shaking in a cold sweat. He hugged himself, wrapping his arms desperately around his own chest, then forcing himself back against the wall to reassure himself that he was really in this room, that he could feel the dampness of the floor, that blood still flowed in his body, that he was still alive. Across the room,

Mathilda's face was a mask. She didn't move for a full minute while he continued to hug himself in an effort to control the violent shaking.

"You found something bad," she said, voice almost a whisper. "I'm not saying I believe the story. But I know you're for real. I think we can make a deal."

She got to her feet and came over to Tom, who wasn't able to get up. She opened the door and called in some of her orks.

"I think we got work tonight," she told them as they helped Tom to his feet, supporting him until he could stand on his own.

"Can I make that call now?" Serrin pleaded.

"Yes," Mathlilde agreed. "But keep it short."

Maybe he believed her and maybe he didn't. But talking by telecom let her actually show him the money.

"Okay, lady, maybe we can cut it. I heard about the shooting on the trid. Seventy-five was what we agreed," the man said. "He paid me thirty down, forty-five to come. I got the full inventory. Now, you want some basics to go with it. We're talking another deal here."

"Sure," she said. She'd planned this out, with nearly two hours to do it. All told, in money and credit there was a hundred and forty in Michael's room. Subtract the forty-five, allow an extra seventy for Serrin to pay the samurai, and that left only twenty-five thousand to spare. She'd spent a moment wondrously contemplating such a huge amount. A week ago, she'd never seen even a fraction of that in her whole life. Now she had to act like she handled such sums every day. But at least she knew the actual figure Michael had agreed to and that the dealer was lying about the price. He was squeezing an extra ten grand out of her, but she was keeping the knowledge as an ace up her sleeve.

"Run me through the full details of the inventory again," she said.

"My dear lady, is this some kind of trap? If it is—

"Come on. you got your deposit, didn't you?" He looked mollified; her heart had begun to race the moment

it looked like he might call off the deal. She gulped down her relief.

She was amazed that she could remember so much from the small talk of the few samurai she'd met in Cape Town. Not that she'd ever have expected to put it to use like this.

"We'll need pistols and ammo, obviously. And full armor jackets," she said, waiting for his response, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

"I got Ares Viper Silver, madam," he grinned. "The very best. Only a thousand per a full clip."

"Discount for bulk."

"How much muscle are we talking about?" he shot back.

"Say fifteen," she said. Serrin and Michael had said they'd try for at least a dozen samurai. Just as well to add a few extra. Fifteen thousand she couldn't afford. She had to haggle him down.

"Thirteen."

"Twelve. Throw in four spare clips for each one and we'll call it thirteen."

"Four each? You're crazy, lady, that would be fifteen hundred alone."

"Thirteen five, max."

"Fourteen, lady. Maybe call it thirteen five if you want to be real nice to me when we meet? Depends how good you are," he leered. Kristen thought this slag didn't sound anything like the smooth operator Michael had described. The bastard thinks he can talk to me like that 'cause I'm black, or maybe 'cause I'm young, she thought. Or maybe he's just another woman-hater.

It's like being back home, she thought, repelled by the man's expression. She said she'd give him fourteen if he performed an anatomically impossible act she described in loving detail. He laughed.

"Lady, I like you. You got a good attitude. Let's say thirteen five for fifteen Ares Vipers with four spare clips apiece. Now, for the armor jackets ..."

After the haggling was done, they fixed a meeting time of ten-fifteen. The problem was that Kristen was overdrawn, with a total bill of thirty grand. She couldn't get him down any lower.

"There's one last thing," she said. "You lied about the deal. It was sixty-five; thirty up front and thirty-five to come. You shouldn't make the mistake of underestimating someone just because of appearances."

The gulp was audible. She loved every instant of his pause for breath.

"Okay, lady. Apologies. Let's say I refund nine of the ten I bulled you about and keep one for the sake of my reputation. Now, where do we want this stuff delivered to?"

Frag it, she thought. I can hardly have a band of samurai wheeling in crates of grenades and ammo into the hotel lobby. What do I do? Only one idea came to her.

"The Meld In. That's where. Let's make it for ten-thirty. That gives me a little time to finalize all the details."

"You better be there, dear lady. That's sixty-six grand you owe me."

Kristen punched the Disconnect key and fumbled for one of Serrin's cigarettes from a new pack. I've got to get down to that place and find someone, she thought. Otherwise, I'll be alone, sitting on over a hundred thousand nuyen worth of heat.

Anyone with an eye to the main chance is going to slit my throat and take the whole slotting heap. Serrin, where are you?

She was out the door and into the elevator by the time the telecom began to beep. She never heard it.

28

"No answer," Serrin lamented. "We probably just hosed the deal. Great." His anger wasn't mitigated by Ma-thilde's sudden change of heart.

"We'll just have to go with what we've got," she told him. "Our samurai

know
how to take care of themselves."

"Yeah," Serrin moaned. He was just about to make an uncomplimentary comment when he realized a lot of eyes were on him, just daring him to say the wrong thing. He declined.

"What now?" asked Tom. He was still pale, still a little shaky, trying to figure out what had just steamrollered him.

"We meet some friends underground. Below Meld In," Mathilde replied. "Some of 'em have a stakeout there. Waiting to see if any of the Kreutzritters come back snooping. And it's just around the corner. We can call up anyone extra we need. Gunther, check it out."

They waited and a few minutes later the ork was back, saying everything was quiet on the outside, safe.

"That's it, people. Let's go."

The orks got to their feet in some semblance of military precision. They filed out through the back door, with Serrin and Tom shepherded into the middle.

Great, Serrin thought glumly, looking around him. These orks have barely any cyberware between them. That guy, Gunther, he's got a smartgun link by the look of it and maybe dermal plating. The rest of the bunch look like pure cannon fodder to me. Oh, frag it, if only we could have closed Michael's deal. Assuming he ever made it ... and Kristen. Where is she?

They'd just made it out the back of the bar when the van came very slowly around the corner. It was just another piece of traffic. They didn't pay any attention to it at first.

Mathilde whistled and four figures came melting out of the dusk as the van got closer. They had almost reached the group when the van stopped directly in front of the bar. Gunther readied his pistol. A half-dozen more orks followed his example.

"If this is some kind of trap—" Gunther snarled.

"No!" Serrin screamed as Kristen climbed out the passenger side of the van. "Friends! Freunde, dammit! Don't shoot or I'll kill you!"

She heard his voice and ran full pelt toward him, almost knocking him over when she threw herself into his arms, burying herself in him, hardly believing what she'd done.

"I got it," she yelled, almost jumping up and down with delight. "I did it. It's all in the van, but I spent five grand too much!"

Though she looked frightened about Serrin's reaction to that, his face broke into a smile wider than Tom's chest.

"You're wonderful," he cried, and hugged her tightly. "Hey, Mathilde, Gunther, take a look inside the van. Then tell me this isn't for real."

The orks were already moving toward the van, urging the driver to take it around to the back, away from any prying eyes.

"Michael," she said breathlessly. "He's all right. He's stable. They're going to operate in the morning. But ..." Her voice trailed away.

"But what?" Serrin had to ask her.

"Spinal damage. They wouldn't talk to me about it." , "Oh, no." The elf looked away, pain in his eyes, mouth creased, fists balled. "God, no." He turned to Tom as he held on to her, his eyes suddenly filled with determination.

"Tom, we've got to see this through."

The troll nodded and gripped the Roomsweeper, which had been returned to him. "Of course," he said. Orkish

chatter came from the back yard. Someone was getting very excited indeed. Tom smiled at Serrin just before the cheer went up.

"I think our chummer must have made a good deal," the troll said. "Let's go see what fireworks we get to play with."

Gunther was examining the missile launcher and the assault cannons while the rest of the orks were contemplating the booty in the crates as the van pulled away.

"The deal is you keep everything afterward. But that buys us total commitment," Serrin warned him.

"I'd go up against the gates of hell with this much heat," Gunther growled. He'd just seen the grenade box and the plastic explosives.

"You may have to," Serrin told him.

Mathanas, old friend, this may be our last night together in this world. It may be a long, long time before we meet again. There isn't anything in my soul you do not know. If tomorrow brings the end of me, then we will know each other again. We are old souls, you and I.

Niall roused himself from his reverie. He was long out of Munich, through Ingolstadt and Regensburg, and now had come to the owl-blessed forests outside Schwandorf. The conifers stood like sentinels, the forest not carpeted with the riot of vegetation he so loved in his homeland. With midnight near, Niall had completed the shrouding of himself, all the illusions and barriers and concealments, and he knew Mathanas had been weaving his own powers into patterns, changing the aura around them. The elf wasn't tired, even though he'd been awake for many hours. Energies beyond anything he'd ever dreamed were at his command. It felt like they could keep him awake and alert forever. He also knew the dangers of that seduction.

"We must scry the place now," he said to his ally spirit. "We must find the defenses. The weak link, if there is one. And without being noticed." It was the last part that would be the great strain; he could not risk Lutair sensing his approach. He had to discover everything about the magical defenses of the place without triggering any of

Lutair's magical alarms. For that might also drive him to release the monstrosity he'd created in an instant. The strike would have to be sure and swift, but that also required hours of painstaking probing, with most of the power diverted toward concealment. It would be like playing blindfold chess against a true grandmaster. The frustration of it would call for every ounce of calm, detachment, and self-control Niall could muster.

Shivering a little in the mild night air, the elf began to draw out the first glowing of power from the cauldron he carried.

The truck the orks had at their disposal pulled up at a discreet distance around the corner from the Metropolitan. Serrin went up to their suite, where it took him only a moment to pick up all the credsticks and cash they had left. He also made a transfer in the hotel lobby from his own account. Twenty thousand, he reckoned. We're five thousand over budget and we need some extra for contingencies. Whatever those might turn out to be.

They left their possessions behind. Taking them would have been like saying goodbye to Michael, which none of them would do.

Then the group made their way out of the city with sixteen orks stuffed in the back of the truck. They hit the autobahn for Ingolstadt and watched the glowing sodium illuminate their passage through the night.

One of the samurai raised a half-bottle of bad vodka to his lips, but Mathilde knocked it away before he could take a swig.

"Later. We're being paid more money than you've ever dreamed of and you keep sober, Grunnden."

The ork didn't so much as challenge her. He just watched the colorless liquid ebb away across the floor of the van, shrugged his shoulders, and turned to cleaning the Enfield shotgun with which he'd armed himself.

Though the autobahn surface was reasonably good, the truck swayed from side to side and frequently bumped them up and down during the ride. Serrin was beginning to tire, but he knew that, unlike the others, he couldn't risk a stim patch for the battle to come. It was just too

great a risk for a mage, the overstimulation possibly causing permanent deterioration of his skills.

"You want to play medic when we get there?" he asked Kristen. "We need someone to stay back and look after the medikit and stuff." She nodded silently. She wasn't comfortable crammed into this truck with this great army of males. Apart

from Mathilde, the ork samurai had only one female among their number.

"We're going to have a little trouble dividing up the gear," Tom said thoughtfully. "Only got respirators for half of us. That's not good."

"Yeah. Better make sure it's the machine gunners who get them. Michael bought enough ammo for them to blow away most of Schwandorf. We've got to make sure they get the chance to use it all."

"We got lucky with the heavy stuff," Tom said. "Gun-ther and one of the others have handled assault cannon; Gunther knows about missile launchers from his army days, I guess. Ain't no one really trained with explosives, though. You want to play that one by ear?"

Serrin met the troll's grin with a laconic smile. He'd realized too late that they didn't have any physical details of Luther's place. All they knew was that it was a monastery. If it had something as simple as electrical fencing around it, blasting in with explosives might be the only way to enter before setting off the dozen alarms that any other kind of forced entry would trigger. Two things they didn't have much of were subtlety and the ability to bypass surveillance. Sure, a high-explosive missile could do the job, but they only had two of them and couldn't afford the waste. Only/I Serrin stopped his train of thought. That was enough to blow up most of the damn building. Frag subtlety.

"We should arrive around three," Mathilde told him. "Plenty of time to scout the place before we go in. I take it you just want everything and everyone blown to drek?"

"That's the general idea," Serrin confirmed. "But don't we have to cross borders? I mean, isn't where we're going the, um, Marienbad Council? Aren't they going to check us out?"

"You kidding? Their security is a joke. They're a bunch of liberal-minded drekheads. If a tank convoy of armed terrorists turned up with nukes, they'd probably say it was an infringement of their civil liberties to refuse them entry. Just leave them to us."

Serrin looked at the huge array of armaments in the truck and realized they didn't even have a flask of coffee. He wondered whether they could risk stopping to pick some up. One of the orks cranked up a battered portable CD player and

the dubious delights of lumpen ork rock filled the crowded interior. The samurai began to tap their feet, almost in unison.

Serrin had to work hard to keep from laughing. The gang of them looked like a cross between a ragged militia and a bunch of cheerleaders. But even a bunch of cheerleaders weren't to be sneezed at, with the weaponry they were carrying.

Then it occurred to him that had Michael still been with them, he could surely have disabled the monastery's security systems by decking into their control systems. That changed his mood. He no longer felt like laughing.

Martin sat back and waited for this last night to pass. Luther was wholly absorbed in his work now, the first batches being prepared, enough for the precious self-replicating samples to be flown out in the morning. Then he saw the elven figure outside the gates on the monitors.

He was about to activate the remote machine guns, then decided against it. That might solve a problem but attract the police, an irritation he could do without. He flicked on the audio monitor instead.

"Luther! Luther! They're coming to stop you. To stop your work. Listen to me! It cannot happen! You must be ready for them," the elf at the gate babbled. Martin let him ramble on for a moment, then gave security orders over the intercom. It worried him that the intruder was aware of their progress. Martin intended to empty his mind to find out exactly what he knew.

The planes were halfway across the English Channel by the time the orks had left the van in a forest clearing

outside Schwandorf, but they couldn't know that. They got into ragged formation and waited for their shaman to finish her assensing.

When she was done, she turned to Serrin and Tom with a look like thunder. Serrin had already sensed the power of the place. One touch was enough. He wasn't going to get close enough to get burned or to alert any magical defenses.

"The barrier is very, very strong," she said. "But he cannot hide the badness of the place. Now I believe you."

She turned to Gunther and began giving orders. The armor-jacketed samurai began a careful infiltration of the forest in small groups, each with a short-wave communicator.

"They're going to see us coming," Serrin fretted. "They must have IR and stuff. Not to mention watcher spirits."

"They're your job. I didn't see anything that wasn't obvious. You can deal with them, can't you?" Tom replied.

"I can, with the ones I saw," the mage replied. "What worries me is that there wasn't anything stronger. It must be hidden. That damn barrier could be concealing almost anything. This guy's a mage for sure, and if Julia's scoop was right, he could be as hot as hell. Frag it, I could use a spell lock right now."

"Couldn't we all," the troll said sarcastically.

"At least with the binocs we'll be able to see what they've got from a way away," Serrin mused.

"Don't let you see through trees," Tom growled. "I think Gunther got it right. We don't get any closer than absolutely necessary, and just blow out the fence. Or the gates. I want to see one of them high explosives do its stuff."

"Should be fun," Serrin agreed.

"You got any doubts? I mean, about just frying everything in sight?"

"No. Not now that I've been here. Not with everything we know, and Michael in intensive. Not after the zombies. Not after what Magellan said. That's enough to make me want to destroy everything in sight."

"Yeah, me too," the troll said, though it was sad that he

should feel such a thing. "What say we shake on it, chummer."

They did, and Serrin regretted it. Tom was given to firm handshakes, which was fine if you were a troll. Otherwise, it felt like his hand was being squeezed by a metal clamp with infinite crushing potential. Then they shouldered their arms and headed into the darkness.

Niall was incredulous. The barrier was impossible to break. Even using everything he had, he couldn't invade Lutair's space. Trying to enter the building in astral form left him so drained that he'd fled, panicking. Once outside again, he felt his own power return to him. He re-entered his body and jerked into life, looking at the manifested spirit protecting his physical form.

"That isn't possible," he said. This was something he simply hadn't even considered.

"It is," the spirit replied. "If he knows your name. If he has something of you. If he has enchanted a barrier specifically against you. Then you cannot penetrate it."

"How could he possibly ..." His voice trailed off. "The Family. They have given him something. They must be working with him, actively. That must be it."

He sat with his head in his hands, despairing. His masking was so powerful that Lutair could not have detected him, but he was utterly impotent.

"No spirit or elemental I raise can enter either," he said desperately.

"Quite so," Mathanas agreed.

"Then everything is lost. I can hardly walk up with a pistol in my hands and wave it at the gates."

The spirit, distracted from its protective duty, looked around and smiled at him.

"Niall, perhaps someone else has exactly that idea in mind. Let us wait and see what happens."

Luther was still unaware of anything around him, so totally absorbed was he in putting the finishing touches on his preparations, when the gates of the monastery simply evaporated into thin air. Incredulous, Martin sat and stared at the few monitor screens that were still giving

him anything more than static. He tried to activate the gateguns and realized they were useless. The elf had lied. He must have been a spy, an infiltrator. He'd babbled about three of them, an elf mage and a troll and some girl or

other. But there was a whole damn army out there somewhere.

He didn't know what to do—whether to get the remaining pawns out into the open to deal with whoever was trying to storm the place or to keep them back for defense and attrition. He keyed in a message for relay to Luther's trid screen and sealed off the laboratory complex.

Machine-gun fire poured from the turret atop the monastery's east wing, lacing the forest with fire and a hail of metal. Not wasting time comparing the merits of various targets, Gunther had the launcher embedded in the moist soil of the forest floor and was sending the second missile on its way.

In a brilliant, deafening display of pyrotechnics, the entire front of the east wing was demolished. Glass and stone screamed into the air and rained down around the building. The samurai heading for the gates, or where the gates had once been, narrowly managed to avoid being crushed by what was left of the walls.

Tom was already heading in after them, assault cannon leveled at the main doors to the building. He raced past the remains of the gate guards, almost tripping in a slippery smear that turned out to be what was left of a guard dog. The combination of barking and gunshots from his left told him that any remaining canines were rapidly becoming extinct. Peeling off to the right, he took aim. Gunther, abandoning the launcher, had had the same idea on the other flank. The two shots hit the doors simultaneously, the wood and metal disappearing in a firestorm. It was impossible, in the mayhem, to see whether anyone was inside. The ork squad heading for the doors paused and lobbed in a couple of concussion grenades just in case, then quickly ducked down and covered their heads.

Continuous machine-gun fire from the HKs was streaming into the smoke-filled hall when the ground itself seemed to tremble. As Serrin watched, the second ork

squad raced away from the west side of the building, but they didn't quite make it to complete safety before the out-building collapsed in on itself.

Frag me, he thought. Those guys may not have had any experience with explosives, but that went off pretty well. He continued to survey the scene, looking for enemies the raging orks wouldn't see, anything emerging from the shadows. He hadn't cast a single spell in anger, knowing he had to hold on to every ounce of power he had.

Far below them, Luther saw Martin's message. He reacted slowly, drawing himself up out of his focusing, and then he saw the images Martin was relaying to him, the destruction of the buildings above him, orks storming the hall, in through the doors now. Two of them were mown down by the remotes covering the hall, but when the screens went blank, he realized they must be using explosives or grenades to blast their way through now. The fury and destruction of it snapped him into a cold, controlled rage.

Luther began his spellcasting. He'd been ready for something like this for a long time. The relay focuses were in place. It wouldn't ruin the barrier; no other mage could cast even the most trivial spell inside it.

Tom felt a chill of intuition flicker through his body. He screamed to Serrin to get inside the building, his voice slightly distorted through the respirator he'd donned. The elf hesitated, unsure; the orks who had gone in were lying riddled with lead from the automatic guns inside. Tom grabbed the elf and forcibly dragged him inside as the corpses erupted from out of the ground.

When one of the orks blasted the ragged, rotting figures lurching toward him with his shotgun, the thing exploded in a brilliant ball of fire, drenching the screaming ork in fire and acid. His fellow, ten yards behind, gawked in disbelief—until he discovered that these things didn't have to be shot up. They exploded of their own accord. He went down as a charred, blistered, reeking corpse. And then he rose up again, still on fire.

About a half dozen of the raiders were inside the monastery. They knew anyone outside was dead or as good as

dead, and the things now trapping them in here would surely come in after them. There wasn't going to be any escape.

Torn emptied a clip from his Panther assault cannon down the hallway. "Frag everything and ask questions afterward!" he screamed. Serrin saw blood on the troll's broad shoulders. He prayed it was only a superficial wound, or better yet, not even the troll's blood at all.

"Where the frag are we going?" Serrin shouted above the cacophony. With everyone wearing respirators, it would have been hard enough to communicate even without the hellish din.

"Frag knows. Just blow everything away." Tom wasn't really listening. He was berserking, Serrin realized.

Gunther was muttering something about a flamethrower being really useful as his clip emptied into an amorphous body of men ahead of them. Tom still had rounds in the Panther, and he used one. The shock wave nearly blew them backward, but whatever had been on the business end of the shot certainly wasn't like the corpses outside. The figures lay in a broken, shattered heap after the hit.

"Behind us," Kristen yelled as the first of the things from outside lumbered in after them.

"Don't shoot!" Serrin screamed to her, having seen what had happened when the outside orks had tried it. "Just keep moving!"

Tom switched to his H&K, hefting the machine gun and ripping an arc of bullets into the distance as they ran forward. From behind them came an appalling scream. Serrin turned in time to see one of the few remaining ork samurai staggering backward, his throat a brilliant red scar from ear to ear. The grinning dead thing with the garrote around his neck pulled harder and harder. Serrin hadn't the time to take in the concealed doorway the thing had appeared from before he drilled it through the forehead with a precision shot. Sometimes you just get lucky, he thought.

The zombie went right on grinning and yanked the ork's head clean off its body. Then the creature sank down on top of the headless corpse, twitching and gibbering, splashing itself in the fountains of blood pouring from the neck.

Serrin forced vomit back down his throat. Half-blindly, only needing to know that Kristen was still there, he raced after Tom and Gunther. Mathilde looked back at him and urged him on with a desperate gesture. The elf had to grit his teeth against the scream of pain in his leg.

They rounded the corner and ran straight into the path of Martin crouched behind his control rig. His shotgun disposed of Gunther with a blast that exploded the samurai's chest into a mass of bloody, ragged flesh and protruding shattered bone. But Tom had already leveled his H&K and blown Martin against the

far wall. A limp rag doll with a shattered torso, the body slid down the wall, smearing it with a huge streak of brilliant blood. It then lay slumped and broken on the floor, the head lolling almost comically to one side as a trickle of blood dripped from red-purple lips.

I can't risk assensing but I've got to find him, Serrin thought desperately. Where the frag is Luther?

Tom was hammering at the far wall, ramming his fingers into the elevator buttons. The elevator didn't respond.

"Stand back," the troll yelled.

"No! No! We'll never get down there if you blow the thing to hell!" the elf shouted at him. Mercifully, the troll hesitated. He seemed at last to be calming down a little. That made Serrin a lot happier. Sharing an elevator with a berserking troll wasn't the most inviting prospect in the world.

"Must be isolated," Serrin mumbled, trying to figure out the bank of displays where Martin had been working. "Where are the fragging controls?"

He looked over the console in dismay. There were thirty screens, mostly blank now, and enough keypads to keep him busy pressing them for hours. "Oh drek."

As the elevator doors hissed open, Tom was inside before Serrin had time to realize they were being operated from below. Worse still, everyone was inside before they realized it, thinking that Serrin must have something brought off a fluke at the controls.

Gas filled the elevator as it sped downward. Serrin desperately cast a barrier for them; if gunfire came streaming into the cramped elevator when the doors opened below, they'd be rats caught in a trap. Their respirators bought them safety until the doors opened. Then they poured out of the elevator and paused for half a second, trying to take in where they were. Serrin sensed Mathilde strengthening herself, magically boosting her reflexes, he guessed. He would have followed her example if he'd gotten the chance.

The passage led only one way, straight ahead to a pair of open metal doors gleaming with brilliant metal and glass. Tom had his machine gun aimed to blow away whatever was in front of him, but his finger couldn't even reach the trigger. They all stood, stupidly, frozen. Serrin could feel the immensity of

the thing, paralyzing his mind, holding him in its hand and amused by their hubris.

"Excuse me, won't you," the figure before the doors said. He removed the white coat he was wearing and handed it to a red-haired elf who slunk out of the room behind him on all fours. Magellan gibbered and preened in the coat like a child who'd just been given a new toy. Luther ran a hand back over his bald skull, then gestured at them to approach.

"Now, I feel better dressed to receive you," he said, flicking a speck of dust from his immaculate gray Italian suit. "Oh, except for that ork. I do find orks most especially distasteful, to be frank. Magellan, will you do the honors please?"

The elf dropped the coat and got to his feet, drawing a long knife from the inside of his jacket. Stealthily, as if creeping up on something unseen, he slunk forward and drove the blade clean through Mathilde's belly and up into her heart. She dropped to the floor in a lifeless heap. The elf pulled the blade out and licked it clean, cutting his own tongue on the serrated metal as he did.

Tom felt rage unlike anything he'd ever known. Furiously, it tore at the iron grip the nosferatu had on his mind and railed impotently against it. He could hardly see now, the anguish was so intense.

Their feet moved without their willing it. A shambolic, pitiful trio, they lurched forward into Luther's domain, aware of everything and able to do nothing but his command.

Niall watched the battle rage until Luther called the toxics from the earth. Toxic spirits bound into corpses, their fire and acid scorching everything, destroying anyone and everyone in their way. The magical barrier did not extend beyond the building itself. Filled with hate, the elf called spirits of the forest to rise up and destroy these abominations. He had his own power to summon things from the earth, and from the forests they advanced, destroying the toxic creatures, though several were themselves destroyed in the doing.

Niall shook with fury and impotence. He knew he could still not enter the place; the iron defense held firm.

"Wait," the ally spirit said slowly. "There may be something. There may be a way in. Wait, Niall. Hold to the power now. Take everything left to you, and wait."

The grip on Serrin's mind relaxed, infinitesimally. His mouth dropped slightly; he realized he could move his facial muscles as he wanted.

"Is that better? I think it would amuse me to talk with you," Luther said contemptuously. "Please sit down."

He made their bodies sit down on one of the benches. Then he walked up and down before them, strutting, for all the world like an august lecturer before a group of slightly dense students on whom he is about to squander some nuggets of his precious wisdom.

He took Kristen's chin in his right hand and bent down to kiss her. Her face muscles contorted, unable to move away from him. Moving along, he squatted on his haunches to meet Serrin's gaze.

"Quite a pretty one. Perhaps I might have my pleasure with her in front of you? Would that be amusing?"

Serrin would have given his life to be able to strike the thing down at that moment. His head and heart filled with black, bitter hatred.

"But, as you probably know, that wouldn't be of much pleasure for me," Luther smirked, getting to his feet again.

"You can ask questions if you like." Then he corrected himself. "No, from what Magellan has told me of you, that would be a waste of time. So, I will tell you what I have done."

"You fragging bastard," Serrin managed to get through his lips.

"Oh, do hold your tongue," Luther said irritably. "I don't have time to waste on trivial insults. In the next twenty-four hours the world will be forever changed— and you trouble yourself with insults? Be silent, I say." Serrin's mouth clamped shut.

Tom felt something within him break irrevocably. Later, he was never able

to
put it into words that others could understand. It was something like
plunging
over the summit on a roller coaster ride, at the point where your guts turn
inside out. The fury in him seemed almost to invert itself and in that
instant
he realized what the killing of Mathilde, and the threat to the girl, were
for.
He's feeding on hate, Tom realized. That's what he wants, to get our
emotional
energies as cranked up as he can, so he can take it all into himself when he
kills us.

He felt the fur on his back and the clamping at the nape of his neck. He
knew
that the meat body wouldn't work, but he was outside even his own mind. He
let
it go. It wasn't the same as before, when it had been passivity, surrender,
awareness of something else, awareness of Shakala or the call of a dead zone
where Serrin was hidden. This time, he emptied into nothing.

He felt himself dissolving. For an instant, he panicked, and then he just
totally let go.

"What is it?" Niall cried out. "It's inside. I can reach it!"

His astral body found the minuscule point of light and he wove a tiny
strand
of power to it, a thin pencil of light stretching into and through the
barrier,
drawing itself back to his body, through Luther's barrier, creating a breach
in
the shield wall. He went back into his body and called to Mathanas.

"Take it," he said simply. "Go in through it." He walked up to the
shattered,
blazing remains of the monastery, leaving Mathanas to weave his own magic. He
took up the cauldron and walked through what looked very much like the gates
of
hell.

"It is theoretically impossible, of course," Luther droned on. "It is not
possible for a retrovirus to infect the germ line. That's the point. A virus
that has the effect of destroying key neural systems, those involved in will
and
volition, that's easy enough. One that is engineered only to trigger such an
effect when the genome lacks the meta-type gene complex, that takes time. One
that also goes back into the germ line and affects all future offspring is
almost an impossibility. It took me nearly seventy years to create it.

"That's the wonder, the beauty of it. It will make humanity pliable,
will-less, automata in perpetuity. There is no remedy. Gene therapy wouldn't
work because the neural damage is irreversible. Oh, well, perhaps certain

neural substitution treatments might compensate, but they're tricky to handle and the expense is enormous. Not feasible for billions of people. Especially when no one left would want to do it anyway.

"The virus is irresistible. Stable, reasonably persistent, it lies dormant in a whole variety of mammalian vectors and is agreeably infectious. Samples will arrive with elven groups in twelve countries within six hours, though of course things are at a more advanced stage locally." He pointed to the small metal boxes sealed on a table before him. One, Serrin noticed, had not been filled. Yet?

"The next stage, of course, is to develop the virus to create variants that affect only certain metatypes. Then filth like orks and trolls can be pacified as well. Not that,

in the interim, they're going to be any kind of problem. They simply don't have the intelligence of elves."

His eyes were flaring with his madness. For all the coldness and self-control, Luther's inner fires were still alive. He stared at Serrin again.

"Oh, you fool. Why didn't you want to be part of this beauty? We can all be Princes now, we elven people. This is a joy, a wonder, a glory to behold. Now I know how the scientists felt when they saw the first mushroom cloud. I've been waiting nearly three centuries for my own people to be born into the world, and now I will lead them into the promised land."

He leaned back and clenched his fists, an expression of indescribable joy and peace on his face.

Tom couldn't scream as he needed to. Something was funneling into him, a burning fire that left him spinning helplessly in some place he didn't even know existed. It felt like his very soul was being shredded by diamond claws, his memories and emotions fragmented, his very personality rent asunder.

"I'm going to free the world!" Luther screamed and lunged toward Serrin, to sink his bared teeth into the elf's throat and drain everything of life and soul from him. Then he stopped, staring stupidly at the troll, his jaw dropping.

Metal was extruding, flowing like liquid, from the troll's skin. From his right hand came a stream of coldly molten, viscous steel dripping onto the floor. From the skin of the troll's arms and legs seeped what looked like liquefied meat streaked with metal, also dripping and dribbling onto the floor.

Luther was transfixed, unable even to comprehend what was happening as the spirit began to form from the body of the troll.

"No, you're not, Lutair." A quiet elven voice came from the doorway. "You are not the Creator."

Niall took the golden vessel in his hands and pointed it up to the ceiling. The immense spirit, manifested as an implacable elf, took hold of the power Niall released and channeled it into a glowing line of force, striking up against a hundred feet of earth and stone.

Earth and stone gave way. It simply vanished, leaving

a huge hollow shaft reaching up into the air above. Luther stood below it, unable to comprehend it. Far above him, air solidified into a brilliant mirror.

Streaming down the shaft came the reflected light of a summer's dawn.

Luther screamed, staggering away from the light. Blood welled up in his eyes and dripped from his ears and nostrils. From the elf's cauldron, rippling light poured around the base of the shaft, gathering up the sunlight and driving it into the nosferatu.

On its knees, the thing convulsed in choking coughs. It gagged up a great gout of black blood onto the floor before it, which hissed into the stone and corroded it. Flesh peeled away from the body, burning and steaming, its fluids vaporizing in wisps of acrid, stinking mist.

Niall stood over the decomposing remnants of the nosferatu and chanted in Gaelic-Sperethiel. It wasn't a dialect Serrin knew, but he spoke the basic elven tongue well enough to understand the gist. The elf was committing the remains of the soul to the Great Shining Spirits, calling on their protection and righteousness, calling down retribution on the soul, weaving gleaming chains of karma in which to bind it for many lives to come.

The remains of the body shuddered in one last great heave and then lay still

on its side. Only the skull and the great bones of the physical body remained within the ragged ruins of its clothes. Niall took a silver dagger from his jacket and drove it into the septum. The skull melted like butter where he struck it and then split in two. An appalling howl echoed around them before fading into an endless distance far above.

Serrin's gaze was still fixed, stupefied, on Niall's power, when his body registered that he was no longer controlled. He fell forward, unable to stop himself, not an ounce of strength left. He rolled helplessly, ended up lying alongside Kristen, looking up at Tom.

The troll was on his feet. The huge elven spirit was holding him, its arm around the troll's great chest. Tom's eyes and those of the spirit were locked in a lover's embrace. Warm tears streamed down the troll's face and he closed his eyes.

He couldn't remain upright without the help of the

274

Carl Sargent & Marc Gascoigne

spirit at first, the strength from the implants lost to him, until life and growth poured into the once-ruined meat body. From being like a child, helpless and unable to stand, Tom felt energy, growth, every joyful and wonderful thing about being alive stream through his body, heart, and soul. The dead and pain-filled places inside flaked away as the metal in the meat had done when the spirit had poured into and through him. For an instant, he saw the face of Bear on the spirit and felt the huge paws around him. It was like being reborn a second time.

Serrin's hand twitched. Somehow, he managed to find Kristen's and hung on to it for dear life. Then Niall's hands were on them both, healing and cooling, and they felt some semblance of strength returning to their bodies.

Serrin managed to get to his knees and look up at Niall. He wanted to say something, anything, but where could he find the words? He just squatted with his tongue rolling around inside his mouth. He couldn't have spoken even if someone had ordered him at gunpoint.

He didn't see the elf then. Kristen was on him, hugging him hard, kissing his face. She took his head in her hands and kissed him hard on the mouth.

"I think we should go," the elf said.

None of them could think about anything else as they made their way from the ruins. The effort of putting one foot in front of the other was great enough to demand every ounce of attention and willpower they had. Led by Niall and Mathanas, they somehow managed to negotiate the forest quicker than they'd ever have been able to on their own. Spirit power, Serrin managed to reflect. Movement. The spirit is altering the terrain.

It seemed ridiculously incongruous when Niall opened the door of the car. Cars belonged to the real world. They weren't ready to return to it yet. Tom sat in the front, rocking himself slightly to and fro.

"Let him be," Niall said. "He has much to come to terms with."

"Don't we all," said Serrin, almost to himself. There was so much they'd never understand. He turned to the other elf. "And just who are you?" he demanded.

NOSFERATU

275

"It is better that you do not know," Niall replied in a way that told Serrin he spoke true. "You might be killed for knowing."

Serrin was momentarily distracted by the sound of planes flying high above. Squinting into the sun, he was unable to see them through the car window. "Where has the spirit gone?" he asked.

"This place must be destroyed utterly," Niall said simply. "Mathanas is calling spirits of the earth to begin that. Then he will bring his own fire to raze all that is left."

"Look, just tell us who you are. From that accent I'd say you must be from Tir na n6g," Serrin pressed him.

"You must trust me," Niall said quietly.

"It isn't about trust. I have to know."

"I cannot tell you."

Serrin was about to protest again when Kristen put a finger over his mouth to hush him. She looked hard into his eyes.

"It doesn't matter now. We're alive. And we've still got to see about Michael," she said.

A look of pain passed over Serrin's face. "Of course," he said. "What's wrong with me anyway?" How could he have forgotten about Michael? He got out of the car. Incongruously, he badly needed to take a leak. When he ambled back from his selected tree, Niall was waiting for him outside the vehicle. They strode quietly away a short distance.

Niall was still watching him. "Some things I cannot tell you, but there are some things I must," the elf said quietly.

"I'm listening," Serrin muttered, then followed as the elf gestured that they should walk a little ways.

"The troll. He's how I was able to get inside. Lutair had a magical barrier that I could never have penetrated. We got in through the troll."

"His name's Tom."

"Tom, then. Look after him. He will be lost to the outside world much of the time for the next few weeks. When Mathanas channeled himself into him, he forced out all the rubbish in Tom's body. The metal and the implants. The things that would not let him go beyond his

own past. They're gone now. Mathanas re-grew parts of Tom's own body from what was left."

"By the gods, what is Mathanas?"

"Well, now, that would be a very long story indeed," Niall smiled. "Which brings me to my second point. You do not understand about you and the girl,

do
you?"

"Kristen. Her name is Kristen, and I'm Serrin. She's not the 'girl,' " he retorted rather petulantly.

"Yes, I know that. You do not see it, though, do you?"

"See what?"

"You have not been together very long this time, I know."

"How do you know? Wait, don't tell me. It's better for me not to know, right?"

Niall laughed. He took a silver flask of brandy from his jacket and offered some to Serrin. It was good; strong, rich, a real jolt he needed badly.

"More or less. I had been watching you, at one point. But that was some time ago, and it is not important," Niall continued. "But you and her; that is important. What did you experience when you first saw her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Think carefully. What did you feel when you first talked to her for a little while?"

"Urn, it was strange. It felt like I knew her quite well."

"Well, that is a start," Niall said. "But you have not made love with her."

"That's none of your fragging business, you—

"Don't be silly," Niall retorted sharply. "It is obvious to anyone from the way she looks at you."

"It is?" Serrin muttered, his annoyance mixed with puzzlement.

"Yes. She yearns for you, and yet you refuse to see it. There is a simple reason why you are unready. But I do not know how much I should tell you."

"That seems to be the usual story with you," Serrin said testily.

"I can let you know in two ways. I can give you just the details, or I can let you enter into it for yourself," Niall said. "Up to you. It is more than I ought to do."

"Just tell me," Serrin said, afraid of what this extraordinary elf might do to his mind. Niall seemed to understand that, but he made his own decision, deciding that the stubborn mage would not listen to words alone. He took Serrin's head in his hands.

Almost instantly the memories flooded over Serrin. He saw the skyline over the port with the sailing ships, felt the warmth from the winds over the azure waters, saw his own white robe, saw her beside him. He could hear no words, but he saw himself talking to her, jabbing with a finger as she wrote down what he was saying on a piece of animal hide, using a sharp reed as a pen. He had hardly registered the fact that she, too, was elven before the scene faded away. Then he saw himself alone, inside some gloomy straw hut in a damp darkness illuminated only by a beeswax candle guttering on the crude wooden table before which he sat. He sensed damp, smelly fur on his back, a hide covering him. An ornate iron plate and goblet were beside him, but he didn't take in much more of his surroundings. The wretched feelings just spun around inside him. / can't have her. She's been sold by her father into marriage with Declan and I can't have her. Do I kill him or do I kill myself?

Niall let go of him, leaving Serrin white and shaking again.

"It's a trick," he blustered. "You fragged with my mind. It's not real. None of it is real!"

"It was. Once you were her teacher. You felt it was wrong, a betrayal of your responsibilities. I think that is probably echoed in your being so much older this time; it has a similar inhibiting effect on you. Another time, she was taken into marriage against her will. It has always been difficult, but you have seen only two instances. She was hurt enough that she did not want to enter another cycle. Which is why she is human this time. It is a step backward on the path for her spirit, but it was a price she was ready to pay for you both. This time, it is possible. You need not be apart this time. You have been given the chance to make it right."

"I don't understand. What do I do now?" Serrin asked him.

"Even if I knew, I could not tell you. It is not for me

to walk another's Path. But if you do not return something of the love she has for you, you will be making it even harder for yourself next time." They walked back to the car in silence.

Just before he opened the car's rear door, Serrin said, "I can't understand this. I just can't get my head around it."

"Try forgetting your head," Niall said simply, and climbed into the front seat. The car pulled off, moving slowly down the hillside into the morning.

30

Serrin finished his coffee and looked out at the Manhattan skyline. It had been so much to absorb, and though he felt like he might know how to get there, he also knew he hadn't even started yet.

They were visiting with Michael. "Told you Englishmen were bulletproof," Michael joked. "I'm going to need a back support for some time, maybe for keeps, but everything's in working order."

He had already arranged the flight to Sun City, anxious to be free of the hospital. While Serrin, Tom, and Kristen waited for him to be strong enough for the flight back home, they'd spent much of their time sleeping long hours at the hotel. The physical and emotional exhaustion of the ordeal had taken an enormous toll. The Irish elf had driven them back to Berlin and then vanished. Serrin never did get him to reveal his name, much less where he was going or what he intended to do. Perhaps it was true, as the Irish elf claimed, that it was better for Serrin not to know his name, but that didn't change his fretting over being kept in the dark.

Serrin was now almost broke. He'd virtually emptied his accounts in order to give it to the orks they'd met in the bar. They had left so many dead, after all. Knowing the orks would refuse blood money, the elf had talked about their families. About what they believed in, their policlub, their rights. Persuasive

words had sent some of the money in the direction of relatives and some into education for their children. Frag it, it's only money, Serrin had thought at the time. With only a few thousand still in his account, maybe he'd have to start looking for gainful

employment as a corporate mage again. It didn't matter. He had to give them the money.

The situation with Kristen was the one he didn't know how to right. Though he'd tried to explain what the elf had revealed to him, she couldn't seem to grasp it even though Serrin was sure she believed him. That didn't surprise the elf. What had he ever really known about himself before being shown those deep, ancient memories? And yet it was still troubling. He was partly fascinated, desperate to know the who and why and where of it all, and partly repelled, not wanting to confront it. In some ways all this made him even more uncertain about how to behave with her. Michael, gently, tried to tell him that she was growing restless and unhappy, as though Serrin couldn't see that for himself.

He remembered Magellan's words about taking better care of the world when you know you're coming back. But for Magellan it had ended in obsession to the point of madness, an unshakable belief in an ever-returning master elven race whose destiny made them special. Serrin didn't want to be vulnerable to such delusions.

And then there was Tom, who was gradually returning to some semblance of normality, but spent more time lost in his own bliss, perhaps in profound contemplation of his new self. Serrin guessed that every time the troll moved, he must feel the wonder of it all. Every muscle movement would be a miracle to him. He was glad for Tom, truly glad, but where did all this leave him?

The elf, whose name he'd never know, had been the one to destroy Luther. It was true he'd said that the only way in was through Tom, but Serrin somehow couldn't get an emotional fix on that. But, one way or the other, they had left a long trail of corpses behind him and he didn't think he'd ever get over the horror and impotence of those final moments.

There was something else bothering him, too. Something intangible, amorphous, half-sensed or half-glimpsed, something that he couldn't really remember but which nagged at him, leaving him restless, tossing and turning in bed at night. It was as frustrating as if he'd forgotten his

own name. He was stirring the dregs of his coffee, staring mournfully at the cold liquid, when it came back to him.

Locally, things are at a more advanced stage, of course.

It wasn't that one of those metal boxes had yet to be filled. No, the container had already been emptied. Not everything was still there for Mathanas to destroy.

What had actually happened?

He hadn't heard news of any outbreak of zombie syndrome in Germany. So what did that mean, "locally"? Was someone else still sitting on the rest of the stuff?

No, that's impossible, Serrin thought. Isn't it?

Time for another trip to the library, whose computer systems were better set up to handle multiple searches than any home rig. First, he scoured the German media of the past week, then went through everything on retroviruses. He couldn't understand much of the technical stuff, but if he could turn up even a single lead— anything— something he might be able to take back to Michael ...

It was after ten that night when he paid for the printed abstracts, preferring hardcopy to a disk, and walked out into the night, lighting a cigarette as he went. Maybe I should look Julia up again, he thought. Maybe there's some other madman involved. What if Luther had already shipped some of that damned virus to another bloodsucker who also happened to be around? Hell, he didn't have the time to check on everyone, or everything, to which Luther might have had connections. I've got to talk to Julia, Serrin thought. See if we can't get through to that chummer of hers one last time; she might breathe easier about talking now that Luther is dead.

Julia wasn't home when he arrived by cab, which he kept waiting in that very event. He climbed back in and directed the cabbie to a downtown bar. The gnawing fear wouldn't stop, so he decided to try drinking it into submission.

He left the bar at two o'clock, unable to get drunk on the indifferent beer, and unwilling to pursue the comfort of something stronger. He waited in the damp

street for a cab, poring over the printouts in the dull streetlight. This

time, there wasn't even a tardy warning from his spell lock as the car pulled slowly round the corner. The masking was far, far too good for that. The gun was at his back as the car drew to a halt alongside him.

"Get in," came a voice as the rear door of the car opened. Something about the voice was familiar. Knowing he had no choice, Serrin climbed in.

"I think you should take a drink of this," the elf sitting beside him said.

"This is where I came in," Serrin said wearily and swallowed the sedative cocktail.

It wasn't Magellan, of course. Luther had pretty much destroyed what was left of him. The voice had sounded familiar because of the Irish brogue, but it wasn't the mystery elf either. When Serrin was shaken into wakefulness, he found himself sitting on a chair in a pool of light, an elf shrouded in the darkness beyond it. Flanking him were two other elves, with an air about them more sinister than Serrin had ever seen.

The berets and shades were obligatory, of course, but it was the weaponry that looked like nothing on earth. The weirdly fluted and shaped pistols perfectly fitted the hands holding them, and rifles even more distorted and bizarre stood against the wall at their sides. In the darkness he couldn't make out any details. Magic and power screamed from the figures in opposition to him. If the standing elves were samurai, they were of a kind Serrin could never have imagined. The power they radiated as tangibly as body heat to an IR scanner wasn't that of mere physical adepts. These were beings of raw power and force. They never moved a muscle.

"I do not think we will need to dispose of you if we can get our answers," the central elf said. "We only want to know what you have been up to. First, tell me what made you spend nearly ten hours checking out retroviruses in the library? What sudden inspiration gave you that idea?"

Serrin hesitated, trying to think up a plausible lie.

"If you lie to me, I will know it," his interrogator said.

I don't think I want to test the truth of that, Serrin thought glumly.
Better
take it on faith.

"I remembered something. I remembered that some of the virus Luther had made wasn't there. In his laboratory. I wondered what could have happened to it. I don't know much about retroviruses. I wondered if it might still be about. Latent, maybe, I don't know."

"Yes," the elf said. "And why go to the woman? The journalist?"

"To find out if there might have been any local connections to Luther. Someone who might have the rest of it. It was only a hunch; she had a friend who knew something about him."

"Fine. However, I think it would be an extraordinarily good idea if you stopped asking any more questions about this," the elf replied. Safety catches clicked. "Can I trust you to do that?"

"But if this thing is still out there ..."

"It isn't. We have taken care of that. Actually, you are quite correct. He had released an air dispersion just before you and your friends arrived. We countered with an anti-viral sprayed from our aircraft. A few farmers in rural Bavaria are a bit stupider than they used to be, but not so you'd notice. The virus has been totally contained. Oh, your ladyfriend was rather fortunate in getting away without being affected, but then maybe she's entitled to some good luck."

"But, medical tests ..."

"If any are made, all that will turn up are antibodies to something strange, nothing more."

"But Luther said the retrovirus gets into the germ line!"

"He was wrong." The voice was final.

"But you can't know that. Spirits, he ..."

"I tell you he was wrong!" The voice was angry and commanding. "Look, the reason I know is because the created genes he fused into the virus came from what we gave him. They came from the research facility in Azania. And the only reason I'm telling you is because otherwise you'd probably have Sutherland chasing down the suppliers of certain flora to that place, and we would

prefer that you simply forget that any of this ever happened from now on. Luther's scheme might have worked, just maybe, but fortunately it did not. He was wrong, but his obsession blinded him. It only worked in theory—his in vitro tests were successful—but he neglected the most crucial test of all. He never tested his virus on living humans."

"Then what were those zombies in Azania?"

"Look, you fool, the agent worked perfectly well for neural damage. But he didn't dissect the specimens as he should have, nor did he conduct the proper tests on germ cells. His lab findings told him the germ-line penetration would take some months, and he didn't want to wait that long. He was wrong."

"Then all this has been for nothing," Serrin said disbelievingly. "It was a chimera."

"Not from my point of view," the Irish elf said tartly. "I know where Niall is now. Luther's scheme flushed him out for me."

Niall. That must be the elf who'd come with the powerful spirit to destroy Luther and his monastery, though Serrin wished this wasn't how he was to learn his name.

"And now I can dispose of Niall. I also now know the attitudes of certain parties among other elven powers toward such a development. That is useful knowledge to me as well," the elf added.

"So, actually, I am not badly disposed toward you. Luther had become a burden to us in some ways. He had failed. Your destruction of his establishment left no evidence for anyone to trace back to us. And we never had to become directly involved ourselves. Except for sending in our aircraft, of course, but that cannot be analyzed after the fact. We did a little extra mopping-up of the local wildlife, but that, too, has been disguised. No, we will call this one a dry run and chalk up the good points. One renegade we can dispose of and one or two people we might talk to. Thus do we live and learn."

The elf rose to his feet, for an instant allowing his masking to drop.

Serrin was almost blinded. He was brilliant, this one; all the stars of heaven seemed to shine around him, satellites to the power of his being. This elf could crush him like a bug without so much as raising a finger, and Serrin knew it. This was a magician who could call on powers that would make even Mathanas seem puny in comparison.

"You will talk no more of this. No more inquiries, please. Should any of it become public it will warn people who I wish to flush out in private. Actually, it's a bit of hard luck in your case; our surveillance was coming to an end. We thought you had decided to retire to a quiet, simple life. We were due home this morning until Padraic here assented you burrowing away in the library."

"What will you do with me?" Serrin asked.

"Do? Nothing. There is no need. You know now, and perhaps that is a consolation to you in some ways. But we will continue to watch you from a distance. Obviously, I've taken a little of your blood. If you should cause any problems, we always have ritual sorcery for disposing of you in a variety of thoroughly unpleasant ways."

Serrin didn't doubt that for a moment. Game, set and match.

"One last thing," he said to the elf before turning to leave the room. "Luther did have something that worked in its own way. It wouldn't have done the whole job, but was still highly dangerous. Has it been destroyed?"

What was in his mind was that Luther might have gone only halfway. He had no idea whether the elf talking to him here would have wanted to see it go all the way. The other elf had spoken of the "we" who had supplied Luther. Had they wanted to succeed? Had they deliberately helped him because they wanted to keep tabs on what he was doing, but otherwise been opposed to him? Had it all been a stalking horse to flush out friends and foes, a scheme they had always known could never work?

The elf bowed slightly and smiled at him. "I will let you think about that,"

he said. "But as I say, do no more than that. Otherwise ..." He drew a line across his throat with his finger. "Not to mention the girl. Maybe you would risk your own life. But you wouldn't want to even contemplate what we could do to her. Then deliver what was left to you."

Serrin wanted to hate him, but all he could muster was a wretched, cornered, bleak feeling of resentment.

"There's also the troll, of course. Niall's spirit healed him. If he knew the truth, that he never destroyed anything worth the time of day, that his savior"—the elf grinned a little at the words—"was about to meet a rather unpleasant end, it could ruin his day. You would not want to do that, would you?"

"But Niall was right. You do have a chance with the woman this time. If you don't throw it away, you might even come to understand. In the long run." The elf came forward, into the light, and touched Serrin's head. He felt nothing, and just gazed up at him. The other elf had an eerie beauty, a face both androgynous and sexless, golden hair tied back, violet eyes revealing nothing, long-fingered hands with almost translucent skin.

"Take him away." The elf was gone, leaving only the two assassins to escort Serrin, blindfolded, up the stairs and into the car again.

He scrabbled for the spare key Michael had given him. It was nearly five in the morning and he felt completely gutted, entirely empty. He knew the truth about Luther, but the truth behind that was buried in a shroud of secrecy and deception. I have nothing, he thought. It's all dust and ashes. And I can't talk about it. Not least for Tom's sake.

He opened the door quietly, his hand searching for the light switch. A glowing yellow line below one of the other doors became a shaft of light into the room as Kristen opened the door. She stood in the doorway of the bedroom, leaning against the frame and looking at him. The silk shirt reached halfway to her knees, and she stood bare-legged, something close to despair on her face.

Serrin felt something on his own face where the elf had touched him, and instantly he was somewhere else. Far distant, on the other side of the Atlantic, centuries away, and he had just learned that she was lost to him, sold by her father into marriage with a hateful and brutal righ, and the pain of it ripped through his heart and guts. He had to clutch at the door to remain standing.

Then he was simply himself again, looking at her.

Now I'm on the verge of throwing away what I would once have killed for.

Frag

it all. Luther. Magellan. Whoever has condemned me to wonder about all this drek. All the loose ends; I never did find the scarred man, though maybe he ended up just another nameless body somewhere in that charnel house at Schwandorf. I'll never know. And frag running from one place to the next, hanging around for only a week or a month or a season, then packing up the same

suitcase with the same handful of things, all just so I can keep on with the same old running and moving and running just for something to do. Yes, I'm twice

her age. I'm an elf, she's human. So what? It just means we'll grow old at about

the same pace.

Serrin threw back his head and laughed aloud at the prosaic thought. Then he

paused and wondered why he had let himself think so far ahead. He never did that.

Kristen took a few hesitant steps, stopped, then she was running to him, across oceans and centuries and so many other times, and he opened his arms wide

and found her, found her at last.

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