

KINGDOM  
OF  
ASHES

BY  
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Kingdom of Ashes

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## *Running*

Cory's mind wasn't working right, but that was fine with him. He didn't have to think very hard to know that his legs were killing him, that his lungs felt filled with broken glass. He didn't need to think to know that the two of them were in trouble. Their feet fell against the dirty sidewalks and dark, gritty streets, an echo of hail, or angry drums. The girl's name was Mary. And he was covered in blood.

Hand in hand they ran. Lightless, oblivious houses swept past them. Cory's wet shirt grew cold in the March night air. His fingers were sticky. The stickiness pulled his mind out of panic and broke through the wall of fog that desperately tried to obscure the obscene memories that were coming into focus. He killed those men. Tore them apart. With his bare hands.

Dizziness and nausea resurged. He stumbled. Mary's young, pale face swam into focus. Wide, scared eyes over a sharp, determined chin. They had met only minutes ago.

"Keep running," she said. They did. Through scraps of yards between sleeping houses, down crazy-angle alleys, across deserted parking lots. They passed a humming, illuminated laundromat. Kept going. Sirens called out from a long distance behind them, then faded.

Help, Cory thought. They needed help. Terry. The name vaulted into Cory's mind. His roommate. Terry would know what to do. Cory's free hand got into the pocket of his silver racing jacket, now stained with tacky, murderous evidence. Terry answered on the second ring.

"Terry... I'm... in trouble," Cory managed, his chest burning, his legs numb with pain.

"What? What kind of trouble?" Terry's smooth, straight voice twisted with alarm. "Are you all right?"

"I'm..." Cory broke off, suddenly in doubt. How could he be all right? The security men had been armed. Stunners, a gun. Hadn't there been shots? "I'm okay. I think... I mean, I... killed some people." He had said it. As if under a spell, Cory couldn't run anymore. Mary broke away from his grasp, then turned around.

"Where are you?"

"I... I don't know." Cory gasped. "I don't know what happened." His chest rocked. He began to sob. "Terry. Please. I need you to help me."

Terry's voice came back at him, cool and measured. "I will help you, Cory. But I need to know where you are." Cory looked for street signs, found them. He told Terry the intersection. "All right," Terry continued. "There's a railroad bridge at Butler Street, about half a mile north of you. Do you think you can make it there?"

"Yeah. Okay. We'll be there."

"We?"

"Yeah," Cory looked at Mary. "A girl. The one they were trying to take."

There was a pause. Cory couldn't tell if Terry was there or not, couldn't hear Terry's breathing.

"I'll be there to pick you up in five minutes."

“Are you sure your friend is going to come?” Mary asked. How she wasn’t winded, Cory couldn’t know. Mary was a small girl, a teenager of indeterminate age. She could be fourteen, she could be eighteen.

“He’ll come,” Cory managed. He simply wanted to curl up beneath the tracks and die. Everything hurt. The world swam and his stomach clenched. The surety of his crime solidified in Cory’s mind. He was a murderer. Or something worse. Some kind of monster. He remembered the way he had screamed as his hands dug into their faces. As if he had enjoyed it. His hands had felt different, alien somehow. Heavy.

Cory looked at his hands. They shook.

“Thank you,” Mary said at last.

“I couldn’t just let them take you. Why were they after you?”

A white compact car drove up.

“Is that your friend?” Mary asked. Cory suddenly remembered that Terry didn’t own a car. Adrenaline surged and overtook Cory’s weariness. But it was Terry. Cory grabbed Mary’s hand again, and they approached from the shadows beneath the bridge.

“Get in the car,” Terry said. “Leave your cell phones here.” Terry’s face left no room for argument. Cory and Mary threw their phones to the concrete and got in, Mary in back, Cory in front.

Terry turned around in the driver’s seat and looked Mary up and down. Something about it felt invasive to Cory. It was unlike Terry. So improper, so akin to lecherousness. Mary looked back at Terry with a blank face. Something passed between the two of them, but Cory couldn’t tell what.

“These men, they were in a van,” Cory heard himself say. “They jumped her, tried to kidnap her, you know?”

“Who?” Terry replied.

“Pro-Gate,” Mary answered him. Cory saw a flicker of fear pass over Terry’s face.

“You really know how to pick them, don’t you Cory?”

“We have to get out of here,” Cory said. “There were sirens. The cops will be back there by now.” But Terry didn’t move. He and Mary were locked in, and the air in the car grew heavy.

“Who are you with?” Terry finally asked the girl.

“Blackguard,” Mary answered.

“You’re too young,” Terry challenged.

“It’s not me,” Mary stammered, backpedaling now. “It’s my brother, Max. He’s a Sergeant Major with them.” She looked away. “I’m not in anything.”

“What?” Cory said. His voice sounded far away from him. But Mary’s answer held meaning for Terry. He turned back around and put the car into gear. It was only then that Cory noticed that there were no keys in the ignition.

●

Cory didn't pay attention to where Terry took them. His mind slid out from under him, and he tumbled. Those men, he thought. I killed them. I'm a murderer. And I did it with my own two hands. I'm covered in them... Panic welled up in his guts. He shook in the passenger seat as streetlights swept past, uncaring.

As if from down a tunnel, Cory heard Terry's voice calling him back.

"Cory. Are you all right? Are you sure you're not hurt?" Terry glanced back at Mary, seeming to distrust the mirror. "He didn't get hit, did he?" Then back to Cory. "Cory. You are going to be fine."

"Fine! How am I gonna be fine!" Cory exploded. "Jesus fucking Christ! There's something wrong with me! Fuck, Terry, I ripped those guys apart! I didn't even have hands! They were something else." He held his fingers in front of his face. They were tacky and smeared in what looked like rusty tar.

"You've never done that before, have you?" Mary asked from behind him.

Cory was too flabbergasted to make words come. Somewhere along the line, Cory had fallen into another world where what he had done could pass for normal. The heaviness of this realization crushed into Cory's skull. Mary hadn't been shaken by what he had done. He hadn't scared her. It was the men with the van, the close call, that had done it. And Terry. He didn't seem shaken by it, either.

Terry. Bookworm-type, straight laced and cool, like piano keys. A little older than Cory. Respectable, worked at the U of M library. And now, apparently, at ease with driving a gore-covered, freshly on-the-lam felon.

"No," Terry answered flatly. The surety of it shook Cory back.

"Why?" Cory demanded. "Have you?" He tore around in the seat and glared at Mary. "Ever tear a man limb from limb? Why the hell are you two acting like this is normal?"

"I've never done that," Mary said quietly. She looked out the window, uncomfortable. "I do other things."

"Don't worry about it right now," Terry assured him. "Cory. We'll talk about this later."

Resigned, Cory faced forward, and wordlessly watched as the city swept by.

●

Terry took the long way to the Southside. He cut east first, then south to let 94 pass above them in the ramshackle no-man's-land near Midway. Then west, across the river, south of the dealers, pushers, and hustlers on Lake. The Honda ground and sputtered all the way. They stopped on a forlorn side street lined with skeleton trees that hadn't heard it was the end of winter yet. A brick and stone building stood on a street corner, next to a feral vacant lot. The second story looked like abandoned apartments, with plywood sheets where windows should be. On ground level was a bakery, the display windows made of plexiglas, backed up by metal bars.

Terry waved his hand and killed the engine. It died gratefully. Somewhere a dog barked. Terry held still in the driver's seat and tilted his head. Listening. Thirty seconds went by. A minute.

"Okay," he whispered. He motioned for them to get out, and they went around back. There were three rusty cars lodged into a tiny parking area. Broken glass ground underfoot. A security door stood ajar, propped by a cinder block. Wide, worn stairs led up into the dark. A hallway opened up in both directions. To the right, then left, where a single naked light bulb dangled by a frayed cord. The door looked stout and old.

Terry walked up to it and put his hand against the doorknob. There was a hollow buzzing in Cory's ear, and the door made a grating sound as it unlocked.

"What did you just do?" Cory asked.

"I opened it." Terry gave a small smile and led them in. There was a small flash of yellow light as Terry lit a candle, then another. The room swelled with a warm glow. There were chalk circles and foreign words tangled in geometric shapes on the floor, and burned down pools of wax where other candles had died. The air smelled musty and heavy with mold. A bare mattress lie in the corner, half covered by a sleeping bag.

"It's not much," Terry said, "but it will work for tonight."

Cory slowly walked about in the cramped apartment. In the next room he found a dusty, grime-caked kitchen, littered with pizza boxes and spent beer bottles. Two bent folding chairs hovered next to a cheap wooden table. Mary let out a sigh in the living room and lay down on the makeshift bed. Terry sat Cory down in what passed for the dining area.

"What's going on?" Cory asked him.

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't know."

Terry leaned in closer. "Just tell me what you remember," he persisted. "Really, you are going to be fine. There's nothing wrong with you. You're just going to have to trust me on this for now. You do trust me, correct?"

Cory nodded, but a part of him wasn't sure.

"Okay," Terry said, "so tell me what happened."

It was like a spell. Cory found he could calm the boiling memories. They fell into line neatly. Cory began.

"I was headed home after bar close. Walking along, and I saw her running down the alley across from me. She tears across the street, and this van comes up from the other way and skids across the intersection and stops. These three guys get out, and two are in security uniforms. Found out they were Pro-Gate later. And they chase her down."

He paused and looked at Terry, who remained passive. He was listening.

"I don't remember deciding to help," Cory said. "I just was there, passing the van, when they shot her with one of those dart stun guns and she screamed and went down. I yelled something and they turned and just shot me with one, too. No warning, no nothing. I mean, they weren't guarding a building or anything, and it wasn't a mallplex. No jurisdiction, they were just guys. So, bang, he pops me. And I remember getting really mad. And I don't get mad, really."

"But he shot you with a stun gun?" Terry asked.



“Yeah, he did. Then things got a little fuzzy. I started screaming, but it’s like it wasn’t me.” Cory looked down at himself and shook. He willed himself to stop and wrapped his arms around himself. His voice came out a whisper.

“My body changed. Like it was a dream. I had something like claws, and felt, well... really strong, and fast. Everything was slow motion. I was some kind of monster. They didn’t have a chance. One of them pulled a gun, a real gun. He shot a bunch of times, but he couldn’t hit me. I was just too fast.”

Terry squared his shoulders and gave Cory a solid look.

“You’re not a monster,” he said.

“So, what the hell am I, then?” Cory asked.

“Gifted,” Terry replied. “Like Mary or myself. I thought you might become one of us, but I want you to understand that I didn’t expect it to be like this for you.”

“So what did you expect it to be like?” Cory felt his face heat in anger. “You thought that this might happen to me, and you kept it to yourself? How the hell is that fair, huh? How could you keep me in the dark?”

“Listen,” Terry soothed. “I didn’t expect this. Becoming what we are, it’s sometimes disturbing, but rarely dangerous. And it isn’t usually as drastic as what you experienced. You might be one of the Others. Gifted isn’t the only kind of elevated being out there.”

“Fine,” Cory snapped. “You didn’t think I’d be something horrible, you thought you had time to break me in or whatever, fine. But what about the three guys I left in the street? Is that kind of thing the usual fare for you people? Christ, Terry, I thought I knew you.”

Terry chuckled. It wasn’t menacing; it was light-hearted, almost gentle.

“I’m sorry for my apparent moral ambivalence. I’ve led an interesting life. And it’s hard for me to feel outrage when the so called victims are agents of the Order, out on a snatch-and-grab hunting for teenager Gifted girls. They got what was coming to them.”

Cory suddenly felt cold.

“What’s the Order?”



Terry left them on their own for a few hours. The instructions were clear: stay put, no phone calls. Before he left, Terry sat Cory down at the table.

“The people who are after you now,” Terry told Cory, “they’re not the police. They’ll scour for you, and anything connected to you. Your job. Where we used to live. People you know. Email accounts. Everything. They don’t play fair, and they don’t discriminate.”

“So they’re looking for you, too?” Cory asked him.

“They will be.”

Cory’s head spun.

“We live underground now, no exceptions.” Terry continued. “So no going in to work, and no trying to get in touch with anyone you care about. Not unless it goes through me, understand?”

Mary wanted to get a hold of her brother, but Terry didn't trust her. It was that simple, and he told her so. He'd be back by 5:00 am, and she could leave if she wanted then. She agreed, but grudgingly.

Terry never asked why she had been being chased by Pro-Gate, or the Order, or whoever they had been. Cory somehow knew that if he had, Mary would have bolted as soon as Terry had driven away. He was headed back to the apartment to get what they 'couldn't be without.' Cory handed him a list.

Cory's list was:

*address book – night stand top shelf*

*motorcycle key – in change bowl on dresser*

*photobox – on night stand*

*watch – in change bowl*

*CD player and CD book – bookshelf*

*leather backpack in closet*

Nausea and fear kept Cory awake. Mary slept lightly on the sleeping bag. Every time a car passed by in the street below, Cory started, and imagined the worst. A patrol car. A SWAT team. Government agents flashing badges, guns drawn. Finally, at dawn, on the filthy, stained floor, sleep took him.



Cory dreamed.

It was a dark, heavy thing, a dream about immense shapes that moved beneath the surface of an angry, black ocean. He was alone at sea, and the night held no stars or moon. The waves rolled him, helpless. Cory was a strong swimmer. He kept his head above water and tried to get his bearings, but it was impossible.

Far beneath him, monsters of the deep began to appear. He felt them before he saw them. Sleek, peaceless shapes, so large they shifted the flow of the foaming water - like alien whales, or beasts that never should have been, and should have gracefully disappeared before the ascent of man from the cradle of civilization.

I'm going to die, Cory thought.

Things that might have been prehistoric sharks broke the surface, then dove back under before Cory could look at them. Water stung his face like bits of hungry rock. A powerful wave crashed over Cory's head. He struggled to come back up for air.

Salt stung his eyes. Wretched, thunderous sounds yawned from the ocean floor, a song of death and discord. Suddenly, Cory felt a pull on his legs, and he went under.



A hand on his chest. Cory woke with a gasp.

"It's me," Terry said. Cory sat up on the hard floor and rubbed his eyes.

“Fuck,” Cory said.

“It’s ten in the morning,” Terry continued, as if he hadn’t heard Cory’s curse. “Thought you might want a change of clothes. You hadn’t mentioned anything, so I made do with your wardrobe. You’ll probably want to wash up, first.”

Cory pushed the remains of the dream behind him and took in the room in the harsh daylight. It didn’t look any better. Cory decided that he preferred the dive by the more forgiving light the candles had given it.

“Coffee,” Terry said, and handed Cory a take-out cup. Cory drank greedily. When he had drained half of it, Cory got to his feet and paced slowly about.

“Where’s Mary?” he asked.

“I sent her on her way,” Terry responded.

“Oh.”

Terry gave him a meaningful look.

“Is there anyone I should get a hold of for you?” Terry asked. “Anyone who might help you out, and can look the other way about your newfound outlaw status?”

Cory shook his head in the negative.

“I thought not,” Terry went on.

“Terry, look,” said Cory, “I’m sorry for dragging you into all this. Really, I am.”

Terry just looked at him with his steady eyes.

“The girl, Mary,” Cory said. “What were they going to do with her? If I hadn’t been there to... stop them?”

Terry turned around and surveyed the room. “She’d be dead. Not right away,” he quickly added, “but soon enough.”

“So I did the right thing?”

Terry didn’t reply.



Cory washed himself as best he could. There was no hot water, but Cory found a large pan in the kitchen and heated water on the gas stove, which mysteriously worked. He caught himself shaking, and stared at the rusty smear caught beneath his fingernails. Get a grip, he told himself. One step at a time. You can get through this.

He finished and washed the red-tinted water down the foul drain. Terry waited for him in the next room. He didn’t show it, but Cory imagined that Terry was anxious. How could he not be?

Terry, throwing his lot in with a guy he’d only known, what, a year? And been room-mates with for such a short time. Terry had just turned his back on his job at the university, like turning off a switch. Ready to cut and run from a normal life at a moment’s notice. What kind of person was Terry, anyway?

The kind that was “Gifted,” whatever that meant. That was used to things like what happened last night. Nausea welled in Cory’s stomach at the thought. He imagined he heard the echo of a man’s scream, and shook it out of his head.

## *Awake Now*

They drove out of the city.

Terry had “acquired” the car, Cory guessed, the same way he had with the car from last night; it seemed that Terry didn’t need keys. It was a dark blue Cavalier this time. They went east on 94, over the long bridge and the wide, penetratingly blue Saint Croix river, and into Wisconsin. Cory kept quiet the whole way, and Terry hadn’t seen fit to bother him. He hid behind his sunglasses and slid his hands over the wheel. Past the windshield, high, feather-light cirrus clouds flecked the bright blue, glorious morning.

Twenty minutes further, Terry pulled off the interstate and into the parking lot of the Get Lucky Diner. It looked like the usual truck stop fare. Cory had seen plenty of these in his day, back when he raced motorcycles for Octane. The thought of the familiar movements of truckers and waitresses and locals put Cory at ease. They went inside and, following a chalkboard’s instructions, found their own booth. It was a cramped food joint, and covered in fake wood paneling. Black ceiling fans spun white plastic blades. The air was heavy with the scent of bacon.

The booth had a black, glossy table. There was a haphazard pattern of white worked in, below the surface. It looked like a sheet of ebony glass, caught in freeze-frame at the moment of being shattered, the image blurred from a moment of nightmare. Two cups of coffee were set in front of him, and a grizzled waitress took their order. Cory looked up and across the table at Terry, cloaked in Terry-thoughts. A minute of silence crept by, then two. Terry took off his small, round sunglasses and neatly set them beside his coffee.

“I’m thirty-four years old,” Terry began. “I don’t look it. I look like a college student, a senior perhaps, who belongs in a library, straightening the periodicals section and scanning the computers for late accounts. I look like a regular, quiet citizen, who does what he’s told and dutifully pays parking meters. Unassuming. Reserved. Below notice.”

Terry went on. His voice remained level, as if he were discussing the weather. “I don’t look like someone who has summoned bear spirits the size of houses from atop Devils Tower, or like a traveler to other realms where hooded monks, with metal gears for flesh, watch over every book that has ever been written, or ever will be written. I don’t look like a ritual magician who can set your mind on fire from halfway across town. I don’t look like a being who can read that obese man’s perverse thoughts, about what he’s going to do when he gets back into his truck.”

“But I can do all of those things,” Terry continued. “I can do all of those things, and the mundanes have no idea. And until I told you, you had no idea, either, because by-and-large, all of your life, you have lived the life of a mundane.” Terry leaned forward. “That’s over now. You are one of us, and not one of them,” Terry gestured. “The faster you absorb that concept, all the way into the marrow of your bones, the better.”

Cory didn’t know what to say, so he drank his coffee.

“Gifted are rare, but not as rare as you’d think,” Terry said. “And they’re not the only kind who can do things.”

“What kind of things?” Cory asked.

“Magic, for starters,” said Terry. “It takes a lot of careful practice, diligent instruction. But ritual magic works. It can accomplish effect upon the world.”

“So, a ritual...?”

“I’ll show you one sometime,” Terry said. “Something basic and easy, that can’t hurt you too much if you do it wrong. But there are more immediate, and essentially natural, things that we can accomplish. Such as the things you have done.”

“I don’t know how I did any of it,” Cory said. “It’s pretty much a nasty blur.”

“The first time is always the hardest,” Terry said. “And I think your situation is a bit special, to be honest. Remember when I said there are Gifted, and there are Others. I’m willing to guess that you are one of the Otherkind.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Cory.

“Gifted, like myself or Mary, are pretty close to normal human beings, all things considered. Some Otherkinds are from a farther source out there.”

“Such as?”

“The worst examples,” Terry said, “are things like Vampyres. It’s not like how it’s portrayed in film or literature, but perhaps these references are close enough. And there are demons, and the Undead, and spirits who look like men. Animal people, who might have been the cause of the werewolf myths. Beasts from legend. Many things.”

“Well, why can’t I be like one of you?” Cory protested. “Why do I get tossed in with all of the walking horror-fantasy movies?”

Terry sighed. “Don’t make it out that I’m responsible for what you might be. I’m simply deducing from the evidence before me.”

“Well, fine,” Cory said. “What are you going on?”

Terry paused as the waitress made her rounds. The coffee cups were topped off, and she said their food would be out soon.

“When Gifted come to full awareness,” Terry said, “it’s akin to taking psychedelic drugs for the first time. Their eyes are fully opened to new possibilities. They glimpse the fantastic in themselves. Sometimes they stumble into some early, undeveloped abilities, and accomplish something tangible, even without knowing exactly what they are doing. The point is that although most Gifted’s becoming is impressive to them, they generally don’t do something so dramatic as modify the structure of their own bodies and put down three trained Terishor agents.”

“And that means?”

“Terishor?” Terry said. “The Order’s enforcement arm. If the Order’s empire was Rome, Terishor would be the Praetorian Guard.”

“Okay.”

“A Gifted probably couldn’t do that,” Terry said. “He wouldn’t have the juice. But an Otherkind might.”

“Why?”

“It’s like there’s a cosmic trade off,” Terry suggested. “Otherkinds have weaknesses, but also have obvious strengths. We’ll have to explore yours further, in order to narrow the possibilities.”

“So, something like, a Vampyre is strong or pretty or lives forever, except that they burn up in sunlight?” Cory asked.

“Something like that,” Terry responded.

“So what do you think I am?” Cory asked.

“At this point, I’m fairly certain you’re not a Vampyre.” Terry said, and indulged in a small smile.

Their food arrived, and they ate it. It was standard breakfast in a truck stop, pancakes, hash browns, bacon, eggs, and sausage. It was the kind of meal that Cory’s ex, Heather, would have called a ‘heart attack on a plate.’ She never did like the realities of life on the road.

Terry told him about various Sects and Factions of beings like themselves, who worked their influence over mankind with tools that normals couldn’t see, or believe in, or both. He talked about meta-rituals that took months or years to perform, and required the coordinated efforts of dozens of ritual experts; meta-rituals that made the work of national PR campaigns look like simple games, and could infect the subconscious minds of millions. Terry described another half of the universe, called Maya, that normal humans couldn’t get to, and that contained a realm for every kind of myth, legend, or idea.

Terry told him about Vales, places of power that bridged this world and the Maya, and about Dreamtimes, events when mystical energy overflowed and concentrated in large scale, widely attended experiences like Mardi Gras in New Orleans, or New Years Eve in Times Square.

Terry told Cory about the Order, who controlled the government and the corporations, and Terishor, the Faction within the Order whose agents Cory had killed.

Terishor, which was the supernatural version of the FBI, the CIA, the NSA, and all the rest, all wrapped up into one. Terishor, who was the military and police arm of the most powerful Sect in the world.

Terishor, who was hunting the two of them, even as they finished their coffee.



A television screen. Moving image, face done up in unreal pixels. She had plastic-perfect hair, too-white teeth in permanent smile. Words scrolled beneath her – sports scores, stock markets.

“Authorities continue to search for a suspect from last night’s Pro-Gate raid at the West Wood Apartments in Minneapolis. Security forces arrested six suspects for illegal weapons, drug possession, and conspiracy to commit terrorism. All are members of the Red Hand, an alleged radical anti-government group. No Pro-Gate officers were injured in the raid.”

Mary’s face was conjured to appear in black and white, alongside the smiling talking head.

“The at-large suspect is Mary Trimbell, an eighteen year old Caucasian woman from Minneapolis. She is considered armed and extremely dangerous, and was last seen in the Dinkytown area shortly after last night’s raid. Anyone with information regarding Mary Trimbell’s whereabouts should call the Counterterrorism Hotline. A reward is being offered for information leading to Mary Trimbell’s arrest.”

“And now to Jim Wahpeck, in Washington.”

They moved every two days, from one Twin Cities neighborhood to another. As he had promised, Cory followed Terry's instructions. No credit cards. No phone calls. No going downtown. They avoided the interstates when they moved, and stayed off of buses and trains. Cameras, Terry said. Terishor had face-recognition software, voice-recognition boxes installed at the phone companies. They had to stay below the radar. The two of them hugged close to the underground, away from the city lights.

Somewhere along the line, Terry began smoking cigarettes.

"You smoke? You don't smoke!" Cory said. In a ridiculous way, the idea of sensible Terry smoking was a catch in Cory's mind. Living day-to-day, no regular lifestyle, on the run, this somehow worked in Cory's brain. There was a rhythm to it, and boredom was the only true downfall. Cory found that he didn't miss his job as a deliver driver for Hartigan's, and he really didn't know anyone in Minneapolis, so the drastic change of pace didn't bother him.

But the change of Terry's status, from non-smoker to smoker, was unsettling.

"It's an old habit," Terry told him. "From a long time ago."

They cut each other's hair short. Today they lived in the damp basement of a dilapidated pink house in Columbia Heights. Cory dyed his hair black – Terry was now a bleached chlorine blonde. It was nearly a week since that first night. Terry went out at odd hours, and Cory spent his time indoors, reading yellowed, dog-eared books that Terry had in seemingly endless supply. Cory read about Egyptian magic, New Age witchcraft (and its older forms), about Native American shamans, and the secret history of the Order of the Golden Dawn. He liked the "Journal of Eddie Motherfucker" the best; it was down to earth, street-level survival type stuff, but for Gifted. He did his best to wrap his head around the theoretical stuff in the other books, but most were too wordy or vague. Eddie was as sharp as a switchblade.

*"Places to avoid: Government buildings, any bank, any national corporation, anywhere that is patrolled by private security. Gated communities that actually have gates and guards. All military areas. Anything to do with NASA. Masonic Lodges. Megachurches. Why? Because these are Order favorites. Any Vale you might find here is not worth knowing about. Terishor shoots first and hides the bodies, and is in charge of holding back the barbarians at the gates. And the barbarians, my friends, are us. (Journal of Eddie Motherfucker; page 84)"*

"We have someone to meet tonight," Terry told him. "Mary has an older brother in the local Collective. Remember she talked about someone in the Blackguard? He wants to help us."

The Collective belonged to the Free Societies, a hodgepodge of Factions that tried to get on in the world, and stay out of the Order's way. Even for the Free Societies, the Collective was a grab bag. Every area had a different Collective. Some were like biker gangs, and some were like hippie communes.

"What is the Collective like around here?" Cory asked.

"Punks, for the most part," Terry said. "A few artists and musicians, but most hail from the disaffected segments of this city's counter culture."

"What's Mary's brother's name?"

"Max," said Terry.

●

Cory slept before the meeting.

Nightmares chased him awake, demon-images of stock black-and-white pictures, called up from across the great photo landscape of history. He saw suit-and-tie investors throw themselves off of skyscrapers above a grainy, washed-out Wall Street. He saw columns of grey clad soldiers march lock-step in public squares, beneath banners and dry bits of paper confetti. He saw Dresden in flames. He saw Hiroshima. Cory dreamed of Kansas farm boys bleeding to death in flooded rice paddies. He was pursued by television screens, by Kennedy's head rocking in a black convertible. He saw unreal stick-people with distended bellies in the African desert. Crack addicts in Los Angeles. B-52s over the center of Baghdad, cracking open their bomb bay doors like metallic rib cages.

●

The Sanctuary Cantina was a hole-in-the-wall bar built into the back of a brick warehouse in South Saint Paul. As they approached, the Mississippi churned muddy and black to the east, laden down with earth and melted snow. The sky was heavy with rain clouds; it kept the stars and full, pregnant moon at a distance. Shards of broken green beer bottles met their boots in the narrow, winding alley. The sign above the Sanctuary's door was done in small-scripted red neon. Terry reached out and put a hand on Cory's elbow.

"Let's stop here a moment," said Terry.

"What's up?"

Terry paused and seemed to collect his thoughts. Cory waited for him to sort out whatever it was. Terry had been doing this a lot lately. Losing himself in his own space. Cory gave him his time and looked about in the dirty alley, and pondered the door.

"This place we're about to go into is a Vale," Terry began. "I know I've given you some basic, academic information about Vales, but this is going to be your first one experienced as..." he broke off, momentarily embarrassed.

"As whatever it is that I am," Cory offered.

"Sorry," Terry said. It seemed to hurt Terry somehow that he hadn't been able to understand Cory's change, or even be able to identify what he had become.

"So," Cory said, "a Vale, then?" He turned back to study the entrance.

"A Vale," Terry repeated. "This place was once a speak-easy during the Prohibition years. Its place is buried deep in the city's subconscious. This speakeasy is remembered by Saint Paul's collective memory, and is empowered by it. You might be able to feel it out here, if you concentrate enough."

"What is it supposed to feel like?" Cory asked. He squinted at the door. Nothing.

"It's a presence," Terry said. "Like knowing that someone is watching you. It's like a vibration, or a sound that is too low in frequency to actually hear, but you feel it in your chest. I once knew a magician who played music, and she described supernatural energies as sounds that she could see."

Cory tried, but all he saw was the door, and all he heard was the passing of a heavy truck in the distance. Beyond that, the low hiss of the freeway.



“Not a thing,” Cory said.

“It’s a talent,” replied Terry. “It takes time to develop. Inside the door you’ll find a small lounge area and a bar. Toward the back, there’s another door, this one green, set into a red brick wall. Behind this door is the portal across the Mirror.” Terry paused.

“I’m with you so far,” Cory assured him. Terry curtly nodded.

“Across the Mirror,” Terry continued, “we’ll be in the Vale itself. We’ll be in the true Sanctuary Cantina. The only beings you’ll find there will be elevated beings, such as ourselves. No mundanes. If anything happens, you must go through the green door in order to make it back to the physical world. If you go in any other direction, you’ll enter the Shadow of the city, or go even deeper into Maya. Do you understand?”

“Yeah, got it.”

“Any questions?”

“I think I’m good,” Cory assured him.

“Then let’s go,” said Terry, and they walked the rest of the alley to the door. Terry’s fingers found a small silver button set into the door recess. A rectangular panel slid back in the door, and a wrinkled face looked them over.

“I’m on Andy’s list,” Terry said. “This is a friend of mine.”

The face grunted and the panel slammed back. There was a deep, reverberating ‘clack,’ and the door opened. They went inside. As Cory stepped across the threshold, he was slammed by the sensation of water crashing into his forehead. He blinked and almost stumbled, and Terry subtly steadied him, as one might do for a drunk friend.

The bouncer to their immediate left smirked at Cory’s troubles. The man wore a leather suit jacket and blue jeans, and looked far too old to deserve his broad, sturdy frame. He resumed reading his newspaper, beneath a small light above the door. Cory’s head cleared.

The room was cramped and dark. Tight pools of white light spied down on three wooden booths to their right. Past them was an ancient phone booth, all shiny, polished black wood and glass. Cigar smoke hit Cory’s nose. The ancient and crooked bar had room for ten, no more. A pair of old men in grey noir suits leaned over the pool table. Jazz piped in from hidden speakers overhead. To the back, Cory saw three doors, one to the left, one to the right, and a green door, center, rammed into the red brick.

The bartender was a young fellow, a teenager, really. He had a baby face and the suffering look Cory had learned to associate with sales clerks at slow malls. He leaned forward over the bar, cigarette in his left hand over an ashtray.

“Newbie, huh?” the bartender asked.

“Yeah,” Cory managed. He could almost see straight again.

“Don’t worry, everyone goes through it.”

“Thanks,” said Cory.

“You guys thirsty?” he asked.

“We’re just passing through,” Terry answered.

“You and everyone else,” the bartender said sourly, yet without malice.

Terry and Cory stepped to the green door. The sensation had morphed into a buzzing in Cory’s ear, like the singing of cicadas in summertime. The door seemingly projected the sense of having an electrical charge. Terry pushed it open and disappeared into the shimmering fog

that remained in the rectangle of the door frame. After a single heartbeat, Cory followed. A brief flash of vertigo erupted in Cory's stomach as, he presumed, they stepped across the Mirror and into the Vale.

It felt like breaking the surface of water, over in a blink.

The music was louder here, and the smoke thick and blue. Noise. People in a bar. Green lights behind bottles lining the back wall of the bar, to the right. Wood and scratched brass. Cory had trouble seeing it all, overwhelmed by the torrent of sight, sound, taste, touch. Everything was bigger, brighter, heavier. The colors were full, and burned into his retinas.

Terry found him and directed Cory to the bar, where two open stools waited for them.

"Are you okay?" Terry asked him.

Cory nodded and tried to get a grip on himself. He leaned his elbows on the bar and put his forehead into his hands. The bar beneath him felt rock solid and reassuring.

"It'll pass," Terry said. "Probably feels like you're drunk, or stoned, or both. The spinning and sensory overload will fade. After a few more times into a Vale, you won't even notice it anymore."

"Why is it like this?" Cory managed.

"Vales are where the metaphor and the physical meet," Terry said. "Vales are threshold places. All your life, you've only known the mundane world, Incarna. This is your first exposure to what the Maya is. In Vales, Incarna bleeds over into Maya."

"So this is what the Maya is like?" Cory asked.

"No," Terry answered. "This is the combination of Incarna and Maya. The Maya itself is further in."

Cory exhaled and looked up. He saw his own reflection looking back at him, behind bottles of whiskey, in the bar mirror. "Then what is the Maya like?" he watched himself ask.

"Meaning made real. Where unconscious belief has mass, density, and space. Where places you thought were imaginary are actual places you can reach, if you know how to get there."

The bartender arrived. He had a smooth face, marked by wrinkled, knowing eyes. His black suit and tie seemed to absorb light.

"Gatz," greeted Terry.

"Hey Tom Grey," he answered. "What do you know?"

"Long time," Terry said.

"Yeah, real long," said Gatz. He eyed Cory with a tilted look. "Who's the fellow?"

"Friend of mine," Terry answered.

The bartender assented, and a quiet understanding passed between the two. Cory heard a low buzzing sound snake out from Gatz' forehead, like a chorus of flies.

"You know," said Gatz, "there were some uniform types out looking for you at the High Life last night."

"Which flavor?" Terry asked. Gatz leaned in closer and lowered his voice.

"Terishor," he said.

"Yeah," Terry said. "I'm not surprised."

"Sanctuaries are always open for you, you know that," said Gatz. "If you're in some kind of

trouble, I can ring up a Shepherd, see if we can get anything done. But we're neutral ground. If you've gotten yourself into some hot water with the Order, there's only so much we can do."

"I know the score," Terry replied.

"Yeah, you do," said Gatz. "So who's the friend?" He inclined his head at Cory.

"Cory," Terry said. "He's new to the game, so I'm showing him the sights. This is his first time in a Vale."

"And you brought him to my humble establishment for his first time?" Gatz said, eyes sparkling. "Tom, I'm touched."

"Hey, we're here looking for someone," said Terry.

"Oh?" Gatz remarked. "Who is that?"

"Max, in the local Collective," Terry said. "You know him?"

"Yeah, I know him," said Gatz. "He's over there, big guy in leather and chains." Terry slowly turned to look, and Cory followed his gaze. Max was stationed at a small round table, with high stools set around it.

He was a solid, mean-looking fellow, the kind of guy who might smash his bare fists into brick walls when he got mad. He had an ancient black leather motorcycle jacket on, weighed down by chains strong enough to tow cars with, and spiked buttons that had been sharpened into actual points. Big boots, steel capped, size twelve at least, and more chains and buttons wrapped around black jeans.

As soon as they looked at him, Max had them in his sights, and gave them a cold, attack dog stare. Terry inclined his head ever so slightly, a small nod in Max's direction. Max waved them over.

"Thanks, Gatz," Terry said.

"Sure. You boys be careful with that one."

They went over. "Which one of you is Cory?" Max asked, just on this side of a growl.

"I'm Tom Grey, and this is Cory," Terry said. He stuck his hand out in greeting, but Max was already moving, a fast man for all that muscle, leather, and wraps of metal. He had Cory in his arms in a single heartbeat, the spikes jabbing at Cory's chest.

"I owe you," Max said huskily. "She means everything to me. My little sister. Anything you need, you hear? Anything." And Max pulled away, suddenly embarrassed, and found Terry's hand and pumped it vigorously. "I'm Max" he announced. "Maximillian. I'm a Sergeant Major in the Blackguard. Sit down, drink with me."

Cory caught Terry's face still recovering from his initial alarm. He had his mask back on within a blink, and reestablished his cool aura a moment later. They joined Max, and the punk poured them amber beer from a glass pitcher in the center of the table.

"So, Mary got you men into trouble," Max began. "She doesn't like to listen to her big brother. Says I try to protect her too much. Not enough, I say. I won't be letting her out on her own like that for a long time, I'll tell you what."

"Is she all right?" Terry asked.

"Fine, fine," Max assured him. "Just a few bumps and bruises. And a good, hard scare. You, Cory, she said you fight real good. You ever want to join my Collective, you just have to ask."

"Thank you," Cory said. He concentrated on drinking his beer. Terry picked up the cue.

“Maximillian,” Terry said, “could you share with us what you might know about the men who were after her? We’re under the impression that they were tied to the Order somehow. Maybe Terishor. They were Pro-Gate agents?”

“Yeah, it’s some messed up thing,” spat Max. “She was at some kinda meeting with some Gifted she knows at the U of M. Well, some of them were Gifted. Most were probably just political types, mundanes, you know? Some kind of underground magazine. You ever heard of Angry, Young, and Poor? That’s the one.”

“All right,” Terry said. “I follow.”

“So, Pro-Gate shows up,” Max said, “and said they had a warrant to search the place. They have a security jurisdiction for the University, so the kids all freak out. I mean, they’re college kids. They’ve been drinking underage, they’re stoned, and here’s the cops. Bye bye soft future and scholarships and all that. And Josh, it’s his place, and he’s the magazine publisher, so he tries to hold them off at the door. But they show him the warrant, and he lets them in.”

Max took a long drink and whipped his mouth with the back of a scarred hand.

“So, this one kid, Reggie something-or-other, he really freaks,” Max continued. “He slams one of their guys against the wall, trying to rush his way out. And so they all start fighting. They mace a bunch of a kids, and someone’s got a stun gun, and the kids are throwing down. And one of the Pro-Gate cops loses his face mask, and it’s a kid Mary knows named Martin. This Martin kid, he used to come around, talking it up that the military fucked him over, and he was some kind of agitator in the group, trying to get them to blow stuff up and take it to the next level, all that shit. So, he’s an undercover corporate cop, and Mary saw him, and the other kids saw him, too.”

Max continued with grim plodding. “So Josh loses his mind. He’s been betrayed, and Josh is Gifted, so he can, you know, really throw down if he wants to. He hits a guy from across the room with a kinetic blast, hard enough to crack the pig’s chest plate. Sounds just like a gunshot. And so Pro-Gate starts shooting back.”

“Oh, fuck,” Cory exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Max said. “Fuck is right. So it’s hail of bullets time. My little sister in all that.” Max shook his head sadly, then went on. “She goes out the back window, somehow doesn’t turn herself into grated cheese from the glass, or a road pizza from the three story fall. And she runs her ass off, and Martin, the undercover pig, he and a backup van go after her. ‘Cause his buddies are back in the apartment, trying to make it look like they were raiding these dangerous militants so they can spin it all, and if Mary gets away, there’s a witness.”

“That’s when our friend here saw Mary getting chased,” Max said with a mean grin. “Tore those assholes right on up. And not a mark on him. That’s hard core, man.”

“So, it was a Pro-Gate bust gone wrong, then?” Terry asked.

“Seems like,” Max said. “So we’ve been all on alert against Terishor, in case they want to come into our turf and try anything funny. Got Mary all safe and sound. Meanwhile, news has been making reports that these kids were part of a group called the Red Hand, some kind of domestic terrorist group, er, thing. Which no one has really heard of, except on the news.”

“What the hell were they trying to do?” Cory asked. “Setting up college kids so they can bust them? I thought the Order was like the government, but worse.”

“Well, ya, that’s them,” Max growled. “Always gotta fuck with us peasants. Not happy with their elite little communities and all the money and power. Got to push us harder into the

dirt somehow.”

“I don’t get it,” Cory said.

“It’s like this,” Terry explained. “Peaceful protestors show up to do a march. Undercover agents, usually FBI, will infiltrate the group, either at the march or, preferably, ahead of time, and try to get the protestors to break the law. If they can’t worm their way into the leadership ranks to pull it off, they’ll just slip agent provocateurs into the march day of, and throw some rocks at the riot police.”

“Or firebombs,” Max sniffed.

“Either way,” Terry said, “the authorities can look justified in breaking up the protest, or the dissenting group. It’s part of the general COINTELPRO program of keeping political dissidents under control. And this is just the mundane arms of government, like police precincts coordinated by the FBI, and, occasionally, the CIA.”

“Yeah, they do it enough,” Max said, “they can just keep on rolling back our freedom, and make it more of their happy New World Order police state. They’re not above killing civilians. These are nasty, hollow fucks. They made Mary’s friends out to be the local branch of the Manson family, so they can get the okay to expand their power and authority. They did a whole block-to-block search for contraband the three days after the shooting. Grabbed about a dozen kids and took them in for questioning. God knows where they are, now. Made it a national security issue, so no lawyers or anything. These kids might be in Gitmo by now, with electrodes jammed up their asses, singing like canaries. That’s the Order fer ya.”



“Gatz,” Terry said, “I’d like to use your special phone. Can we work that out?” They had sent Max on his way, after two more pitchers of that golden beer. Terry didn’t seem to be showing any effects, but Cory felt numb and happy. The earlier strangeness of the Sanctuary Cantina had left him, and he was actually, somehow, enjoying himself. He and Terry were back up at the bar, standing before Gatz.

The bartender paused and considered Terry’s request. He let his hands find the glasses and whiskey bottle, his eyes never leaving them. He poured without thought, and set the shining liquid in front of them. Cory started to grab for his, but Terry held stock-still, so Cory waited. Gatz and Terry were working something out, and he followed Terry’s lead without understanding what it all meant. Then Gatz reached down and poured one for himself, and held it in the air, smiling. Terry took his up, and Cory joined the two of them in a silent toast. Then they drank. It went down cool and thick past Cory’s teeth. His belly turned warm.

“Go ahead, use the phone,” said Gatz.

“Thanks, Gatz,” Terry replied. He turned to Cory and whispered, “Just wait here.” Then Terry went further into the place, past jostling elbows and suits, and punks in leather with gleaming metal spikes. Cory followed him with his eyes, to a shiny, brushed steel phone booth, its windows tinted nearly black.

“So, I’m Gatz,” Gatz said. He extended his hand. Cory shook it. “I’m a Monitor, and this is my place. That makes me part of Bacchus, in case Tom Grey over there hasn’t been taking care of you right. You know, you don’t seem like a newbie to me. I can feel the juice you’re putting off from ten feet away. That’s a lot of power for someone new to have. And Max, he’s no stranger to movers and shakers. He seemed to treat you just like one of the boys, like you belonged.”

Cory considered what to say. Terry seemed to trust Gatz, but if Gatz was testing him somehow, Cory didn't know how he might pass. At last, he settled on careful honesty.

"Well, I'm not faking anything," Cory said at last. "I'm still trying to figure out what happened to me, and what it all means."

"You know, you seem a bit familiar to me," Gatz answered him. "I never forget a face." He leaned close and examined Cory's eyes.

"No, really, I don't think we've ever met," Cory said. "I'm a delivery driver for Hartigan's... or at least I was, up until a few days ago. People sometimes recognize me from that, running around downtown in a truck."

"It's not that," Gatz said. "I'm not sure what it is." Another customer got Gatz' attention, and he stepped away. Cory sighed and took in the room, as much as his senses would let him. He was getting better. Now, the Sanctuary Cantina merely seemed like a scene in a vivid David Lynch movie, where the colors seemed unnaturally bright, and the shadows were seething and black. He looked over at Terry's silhouette in the phone booth, and wondered why Terry had a second name, Tom Grey, and what it might mean.

Terry finished up his phone call and came back to him. Gatz returned to his place before them.

"Another round?" Gatz asked.

"Sorry, friend, but we have to be going," Terry said. "What do I owe you?"

Gatz smiled a small smile, a thing of secrets.

"On the house," said Gatz.

"Thanks, Gatz," Terry said. "We'll be back when we can."

"You fellas take care," Gatz said. "Nice meeting you, Cory."

They went back through the green door. Stepping through the shimmering air, Cory again thought of water and surfaces. The small, dirty bar on the Incarna side seemed hollow, faint, somehow. He had the brief vision of a room made of paper and thin wood, like a cheap movie set. He blinked, and the vision passed. They were back in the real world after all.

The young bartender glanced up from his cigarette. The two old men were gone, their pool game forgotten. The bouncer remained engrossed in his newspaper.

"Back so soon?" the bartender asked.

"Short trip," Terry replied. "Like I said, we were just passing through."

They went to the exit, and the bouncer reached over with his giant hand and threw the sliding lock back, all without glancing up from the print. Terry opened the door and they went out into the alley. The door slammed shut with metallic finality.

"So, Tom Grey," Cory said.

"Old name," Terry said. "You get used to it, after a while. People change their names, use aliases, that sort of thing."

"Is it your real name?" Cory asked.

"No," Terry replied.

"Is Terry?"

"No, not that one, either," Terry said.

"There's a lot I don't know, isn't there?" Cory asked. Terry didn't respond. They continued

down the alley. “Who did you call?”

“An old friend,” Terry answered. “In Chicago,” he added. “So, did you notice what he did, at the bar when he was talking with us?”

“I felt him do something, but I didn’t know what it was,” Cory said. “I figured it had to do with telling if we were lying or not.” Terry looked up with a snap of surprise, and Cory knew that he was right. “It took effort for him to do that, didn’t it? He doesn’t do that for every person that comes in. He couldn’t afford to. He’d burn through all his juice in a dozen people, at best, and be empty for hours. So he thought we were important enough to burn juice on.”

“Right,” Terry said.

“So, was it you, or me, that he was interested in?” Cory asked.

“I don’t know,” Terry answered. “Might be me, if he was curious what I’ve been up to for the last year or two. Might be you, walking, pumped-up enigma that you are. Might be the combination of us two.”

“You know something?” said Cory. “You’ve changed. I mean, you’re changing right before my eyes. I always thought of you as this kind of quiet bookworm who doesn’t mind an occasional drink in college bars, you know? When we first met, and I was on the racing circuit, I thought you seemed a bit out of place with all the characters that were into that lifestyle. But now I get it. You as Terry didn’t fit in at all. But you as Tom Grey, whatever that means in the long run, that makes sense. Tom Grey seems like the kind of guy who knows adrenaline junkies and outlaw highway racers. Terry just doesn’t. I mean, even the way you talk is different.”

“That was kind of the point,” said Terry. “There are ways to find people, magic rituals. Divinations. And the more you know about a person, the closer they are to you, the easier it is to find them. So if you want to hide from someone, you have to do what it takes to become someone else.”

“Oh,” Cory said. “How do you learn all of this stuff, anyway?”

“First things first,” Terry said, “you have to live long enough.”



Cory dreamed.

He was driving through the gentle, glacier-smoothed Wisconsin hills. It was fall. The trees had given up most of their leaves, and the rush of brilliant, burning colors had already given way to the dull, dead specter of winter on the horizon. Cory recognized the car’s console as belonging to his Mustang, the last car he’d ever owned. This was senior year, Cory realized. I remember this.

Next spring, Cory thought. That’s when I’d sell the car to get the last of the cash I’d need for the Ghost. His dream motorcycle, the one he’d eyed countless times at Jake’s Sports Center, the bike’s lines all hungry, predatory, alive, a sculpture of metal and rubber and fiberglass that took the shape of desire in Cory’s heart.

Cory rounded the curve and slowed at the thrust of oak and pine trees that marked the house. He pulled the Mustang into the asphalt driveway and coasted to the side of the house, where a dark Lincoln rested in the shade. Cory shut the car down and grabbed his duffel bag and suitcase, and made it to the door. He found his set of keys and put the correct one to the lock. It was the country and most folks were trusting, but John Brozeck felt

strongly about keeping his doors locked tight.

Cory got inside and dutifully toed his sneakers off in the entryway.

“John?” he called. No answer. Cory set his bags down and edged out of the light jacket, and hung it up in the closet. He moved into the living room. On the coffee table presided the National Review, Policy Review, and the Weekly Standard. A floorboard squeaked from the kitchen. “Mister Brozeck?” Cory tried again.

“I thought that was you,” John replied. Cory pinpointed the voice in John’s den. “Didn’t Jack come with you?”

“I left ahead of him, sir,” Cory reported. “But not too much, I don’t think. I’m kinda surprised I beat him here.” Cory moved through the living room and toward the den. He heard John close a desk drawer.

“Ah, good,” John said. “He should be along shortly, then.” Cory stopped in the den’s doorway and looked in. John wore his glasses today, and the twin monitors reflected in the glass. He still wore his suit from the office, but the tie was gone. John looked up and caught Cory with his sharp, blue eyes, set into a hard face and smart haircut, the color speckled with grey. “How are your studies?” John asked. Cory let out a breath.

“Okay, I guess,” Cory lied. John watched him for a second, then put on a small smile.

“Good to hear,” John said. “I’m close to finished, here. Why don’t you take your things to your room? We’ll give Jack a little more time to catch up before we worry about dinner.”

Cory’s room was precisely as he had left it three months before. Posters of grunge rock bands, motorcycles, and bikini-clad girls covered the walls. A bare desk, shelves of cassette tapes and compact discs, two dressers with their tops covered by a thin sheen of dust. Cory put his bags on the bed and unpacked. When that was finished, Cory lay on top of the bed and put on a pair of headphones, and let the harsh guitars and wailing vocals assail his ears.

This is the closest thing I’ve had to a home in... forever, he thought. Cory’s social worker had told him that he was supposed to live at the school full-time, but Cory figured someone at the school was covering for him. It sure as hell beat bouncing around foster homes; that had been the worst. Everyone either up to their eyeballs in religion, or tiptoeing around his “feelings” over what had happened to his mom. Still, spending the holidays in the empty school made him lonely. The last five years had been different.

Cory heard a knock at the door, and pulled the headphones off.

“Yeah?” Cory asked.

“Hey,” Jack said. “Ready to go eat?”

“Yeah, man,” Cory replied. “What took you so long? I thought we were gonna have to take away your nickname.”

Jack Quick, Cory and the rest of the guys called Jack. He’d earned the name last spring, during a late-night, multiple car road trip. Mikey, Bap, Cory, and the rest of the clique from the school had packed into their cars and hauled clear to Beltwater in about forty minutes, each car wired with a CB and radar detector, trading jokes the entire way. Jack had been the driver of the lead car, and had set the break-neck pace. To Mikey and Bap, it had been just the kind of ballsy, take-no-prisoners move that pulled weight in the group. Cory had been in the passenger seat with Jack, and knew it wasn’t pure bravado. He had seen the whiteness of Jack’s knuckles, and the way he chewed his lip as he scanned



the darkness, cut by the headlights over the surface of the highway. But Cory was a loyal friend. He never said anything about it.

“Har, har,” Jack made a face. “Picked us up some liquor for later tonight.”

“Yeah? Good deal.”

“Figured we’ll head out when we get done with Dad, say hi to the locals, find a party to crash,” Jack went on. Cory smirked.

“You mean,” Cory said, “you want me to do the talking, find where the action is for us.”

“Hey man, whatever,” Jack said dismissively. “You’ve got the pretty-boy eyes. Just save one of the hotties for me this time, okay? I swear, your old man must have been George Clooney or something.”

“Thanks.” Cory felt a mild flush hit his face, but it wasn’t about him. Cory always felt a piece of uncertainty whenever Jack put himself down.

“I’m just sayin...”

The three men went out to the chain pizza place that night. John drove them in his Lincoln, and Cory rode quietly in the backseat. Outside, a slight rain began to fall in the chilly air.

Cory and Jack had a lot in common, and had been fast friends in Harrison-Langeley. They both liked motorcycles, sports, and war movies... the more realistic, the better. They spent their first summer together elbow to elbow on the living room floor, watching video rentals of Hollywood’s treatment of the last hundred years of warfare. Cory and Jack also had grown up without moms... Cory had lost his when he was five, and Jack’s mom had died having him.

Once inside the restaurant, they were seated right away. John settled in and started what Cory recognized as the traditional ‘How is my son doing’ session.

“How are you doing in Chemistry?” John asked. “You said you were having trouble with it.”

“Yeah, my teacher is a real pain,” Jack said. “It’s like he doesn’t think I have other classes or something.”

“You have to apply yourself, Jack,” John said pointedly. “This is your senior year. You can’t afford to not apply yourself. College admissions look at your final year, too.”

“Yes, sir, I know,” Jack replied. “It’s just so much to, like, try to keep straight. I mean, I don’t know how I’m going to keep this B average. I really don’t. With this Chemistry class, and History... I really wish you’d have let me take Art and Advanced English.”

“Those aren’t real areas of study,” John said evenly. “Not for someone who wants to go places. Leave those for the liberal wash-outs who want to sit on their asses their whole lives.”

“Yes sir,” Jack said quickly, and nothing further.

John Brozeck had high hopes for his son, Cory knew. Hell, he might make it into one of the big Ivory League schools. Jack was a lot smarter than he let on. But he needed constant structure around him to get him to succeed. Left to his own devices, Jack drifted.

“How about you, Cory?” John asked him. Cory froze in mid-bite, the warm cheese sticking to his chin.

“Sorry?”

“What do you want to study? In college. What do you want to do with your life?”

College isn't going to be cheap for you. You don't want those loans you're going to have to take out to be for nothing. You need to figure your plan out now."

Cory chewed deliberately, and noticed that Jack was looking at him funny. Cory swallowed.

"Well, sir, I..." Cory began, "I guess I really don't know yet."

"That's no way to live, Cory," John chastised him. "You don't want to drift through life in uncertainty. Get it straight, and get working on it, soon. You might not have a father to make proud, but you have yourself. You have to live up to your full potential."

Hours later, Cory drove himself and Jack through the streets of Greenwood with Jack's beer and a bottle of Canadian Club whiskey in the trunk. Teenagers huddled in tight circles on the corners, sneaking cigarettes, or drove endlessly around the Greenwood loop, up Main, then down Cedar, left at Third, then Mayfield, then back up Main...

"Hey," Jack said. "Sorry about what Dad said before. About you not having a father and all." Cory felt heat go red on his cheeks. "It wasn't right," Jack went on. "He didn't have the right to say that."

"Fuck," Cory replied. "Maybe he does have the right. The last few years, he's pretty much taken me in, you know? Best dad I've ever had."

"Still," Jack pressed on. "He's not your father. He shouldn't talk to you like that. You're a guest in our house. And there'll always be a place for you with us, too."

"Thanks man," Cory replied. "I know."

A dark thought ran through Cory's brain, and he tried, too late, to cut it down. You get jealous too easy, Jack, Cory thought. You worry too damn much. About what people think of you, what people think of me, comparing us all the damned time. The only reason John never adopted me is because of the way you'd react...

Stop it, Cory demanded. Stop thinking that. He's like your brother. He's the best friend you've ever had. Just stop it.

Jack's head snapped to the side as they passed a cherry red Chevy, parked in front of Sally's Diner.

"Hey, was that Lizzie Halverson?" Jack asked. "Dude! Pull over. I think that was Liz and that hot brunette friend of hers, what's her name?"

"Melissa?" Cory offered. He pulled the Mustang over into an open parking spot, and let the sweep of traffic continue downstream without them.

"Yeah, fuck yeah, Melissa," Jack said. "I'd love a piece of that sweet ass, hey? Let's go over and say hello."

Cory let out a breath and said, "Okay."

## *The Black Hole*

Terry never needed a clock to tell him what time it was. It was an edge in his life, in more ways than one. For instance, he didn't need to use an alarm clock to wake up. Instead, he could rise to consciousness in the slow, even wake of his own dreams. It usually took about four minutes from the time Terry realized he was waking up until he had full control of his body and mind. He could snap awake, of course – if a strange sound permeated his sleep, or if something shot above the horizon of his supernatural senses, like an emergency flare. Unless one of those rare occasions arose, Terry used those four half-awake minutes to ready himself for the daily onslaught which waited for him.

This was the case today.

The last of the dream landscape departed, and the fragments drifted away like leaves. I am waking, Terry thought. All is well. Begin the ritual.

Terry dimly registered that the air smelled stale and used, and he felt warm and flushed. His lower back was sore from how he had twisted it as he slept. He put this knowledge away. He began.

There are very, very few mages who can perform magic on the edge of sleep. Ritual magic is unforgiving. The forces that one taps into follow their own rules, governed by the tenants and principles of the path. Breaking these rules is dangerous, even for ritualists with decades of experience. Each moment of ritual practice requires intense concentration. Imagine walking a tightrope. Above a bed of upturned razor blades. While blindfolded.

Terry followed the Pure Chaos School of magic. It was the newest branch of magic, with barely a generation of use. It was free form and personalized, and mages such as Terry could find many ways to fit existing training and beliefs into the wide, malleable framework. Still, learning how to make dream magic work had been difficult. The hermetics couldn't do it, the witches didn't like to do it, and no one else had been there when Terry had needed to learn. So he had taught himself how to walk that tightrope, even though he was dreaming.

He would have gone completely insane twenty years ago if he hadn't.

Terry began by calling attention to his own state of consciousness. He repeated the mantra, which seemed childish, now, but had served him well all these years.

"Here I am. I am dreaming. I can make anything happen. Here I am. I am dreaming." He repeated this, over and over, until the words lost their meaning and all that remained was the sound. His dream-sanctum formed around him, a small bedroom that may have belonged to a young boy with a fondness for dinosaurs and robots, with an earthen floor and a hole in the ceiling that revealed a starry night sky.

Terry reached down beneath his feet and pushed his hands deep into the mud he found there. It was cool, grey mud, the stuff of extinguished camp fires and nightmarish riverbeds. And as he applied the mud from his hands to his face, Terry reached inside himself and wove the tendrils of power into a usable form.

With each touch of his cool, caked fingers, he wrapped the power around his face. He molded his face of mud and pushed it deep into his skin, until he was no longer exposed. Then, with his mask in place, the misplaced remains of other people's emotions couldn't penetrate

him. He wouldn't be rocked deep in his chest when he sat in a chair in which a crying teenage girl had just sat. He wouldn't feel the simmering rage from a driver in the next lane, stuck in rush hour on the freeway. Terry wouldn't be tilted from simple, child-like joy to the raw lust that rolled off the skin of sex-starved soldiers, or thrust deep into pits of depression that could open up at his very feet, at the places where suicides had left the guardrail of a bridge.

As Terry finished the spell, he came to full consciousness. He opened his eyes.

Cory lay next to him on a second foam mat. The young man appeared troubled in his sleep, with his breath coming fast and sweat on his forehead. The basement felt unsteady, somehow. They would move again, tomorrow. Perhaps the next day. Cory seemed to Terry like a person hunted, perhaps even haunted. The Becoming was much harder on Cory than he was letting on. Terry couldn't imagine what it must be like, being born to the full wonders of the world under the twisted, wretched karma of blood and death. He shivered.

Terry paused a few moments to watch Cory in his darkness, caught in dreams. Terry pondered. Then, having made the decision, he pushed mana into his eyes and called upon the ability to touch upon Cory's thoughts. Bright colors erupted across Terry's vision and he looked down upon Cory's face. Deep things swam in those lights, and Terry reached his hand down to touch upon them. There was a white flash as the turmoil in Cory's psyche slammed against Terry's mental wall. Even through the thick shielding, Terry winced. Nightmare. No, it was worse than that.

Something was there with Cory, in his dreams. Something foreign. Terry tore his hand away and pushed himself back. He came up hard and fast with a heavy shield, his most powerful, ready for psychic attack or assault from the spirits, or ghosts, or an Astrally projected person who had stolen into their hideout. Nothing happened. Terry threw more power into his eyes, this time to open up his sight to the Astral Plane. There was no one there.

He looked back down on Cory's sleeping face, twisted in fear. Whatever it was, it was inside him. Something dark lived in Cory's dreams. Terry shook his head with weariness. Another mystery. Another reason to find more help, and fast. He didn't want to lose Cory to the Order, and he sure as hell didn't want to lose him to whatever that thing was, hiding in Cory's heart.

It was 9:00 am, or very close to it. Terry got up and dressed, and shaved his face in the harsh, fluorescent light of the bathroom. He worked to calm himself. He told himself that Cory wasn't under attack from the outside, that there was nothing he could do to protect him right now. A ward against spirits wouldn't matter. A protection circle wouldn't help. Whatever it was, it was already inside Cory's defenses, like a virus. To purge it, Terry would need to know more. There would have to be testing, divinations, and research. And to get to that point, he and Cory would have to get some distance from the Order.

Terry needed to start swinging deals with some of the Factions of Gifted in Minneapolis. They needed a safe place in the Maya to hole up in.

The bathroom didn't have a shower, but at least the water worked. Small miracles. Terry penned a note on Post-it and stuck it to the bare light switch near the door.

*At a meeting, back by noon. T.*

●

The morning was gorgeous. Mid-forties and climbing fast, without a single cloud visible in the bright blue, endless sky. A light breeze brought with it the calls of sparrows. Terry walked to Hiawatha and turned north, to face the Minneapolis skyline. The light rail hustled past him on the opposite side of the busy, divided street. At Lake Street Terry paused and lit up a cig, and looked wistfully at the tall downtown buildings, over a mile away.

A habit, he told himself. Ever since 9-11, he had found himself memorizing skylines. Big Karl would understand. Internally, Terry smirked at the thought. When he had called him from the Sanctuary Cantina, Karl had actually experienced a few seconds where he didn't have anything to say. His usual flood of raving banter had taken a pause as his world shifted to accommodate the notion that Terry, after all these years, could still simply reach through the phone lines and talk to him again.

A dark tangle of emotions snagged Terry out of the past. They buzzed in his ear from Terry's left, and he glanced over to see a grizzled man, dressed in rags, shambling up Lake. Homeless, by the look of him. The black snakes of his sick aura ducked and wildly flung, and hurt Terry's head even through his empathy shield.

"Hey," the word dripped from him. "Hey, man, hey, hey man, I need a quarter to get on the train..."

Terry tuned out his words. The man was coming closer, close enough to smell, to make out the wreck of his skin beneath three-day whiskers. His emotional pattern was cut and ruined with a virus-history of damage, abuse, addiction. He was a nasty piece of work. Terry didn't know if whatever it was in Cory's dreams had weakened Terry's emotional wall, and he wasn't about to test it. If this mess of a human being got any of his psyche's wreckage past Terry's defenses, then Terry was in for a hell of a day. The very thought of it made Terry's bones ache.

Terry imagined he saw black tentacles of harm reach up at him out of the wretch's chest, seeking Terry's heart-space. He fell into his training. Psychic combat.

For the second time in less than an hour, Terry threw up his psychic shield. He held it in place with his mind, ready to deflect any stabs at his consciousness. Terry didn't know if the man was Gifted or not. In the moment, it really didn't matter. A completely mundane person could hurt your mind if they were cracked enough.

Over the top of his shield, Terry slit his eyes behind his sunglasses. He conjured a mental bolt, a simple command wrapped in a full metal jacket of a dire threat, and sent it at the staggering man, GO AWAY, as hard as he thought the ruined man could take.

The beggar jolted as if slapped, and stopped in mid-step, unsure of what had happened. Before he could regain his bearings, Terry slipped wide around him and speed-walked across Hiawatha, west along Lake. He didn't want to hurt the man. It was self defense, not a run at the guy's fragile identity. He put the beggar behind him with long, straight strides.

I got lucky, Terry told himself. I should have pushed him harder. I have to remind myself, holding back can get me into trouble. If he had been stronger, or a Gifted, or possessed... he would have kept coming. If he had touched me, physically touched me, he could have blown through the shield. I could have collapsed. I could have blacked out again, like Seattle. I could have...

Calm, he shouted inside. Calm. Be still. Balance. Center. Calm. Terry's breathing evened out, and he watched the people he passed on the sidewalk with sly cat eyes. The light wind was soothing on his face. He realized that he had dropped his cigarette, back on Hiawatha. He lit

another and kept moving.



The sign for the Black Hole hung over a black steel door set into a plain grey stone building. The windows were opaque with glossy black paint, save a narrow strip at knee level just above the ledge. Terry paused and looked north, and savored the last of his smoke. The Minneapolis skyline looked back at him, and the sun reflected against the thousands of windows on the tall steel buildings' faces. Brilliant swaths of orange and yellow pinwheeled and glanced away, and the sky above them seemed darker, fuller, than before. Abruptly, Terry turned and dropped the cigarette into a trash bin, and walked into the Black Hole.

The café was almost empty. It was dimly lit, and rows of empty black-painted tables sat, forlorn and dismal. Above them presided high-resolution photographs of exploding stars and fractal impressions of radio waves. Natural light crawled into the room from somewhere above. The sunlight was somehow broken up and funneled along fiber-optic cables, which glowed as they snaked down the walls. The ceiling, high above his head, was dotted with tiny lights meant to resemble star constellations. A small assortment of candles adorned the café counter. Trance techno piped in through hidden speakers. Terry removed his sunglasses and slid them into a pocket.

The barista was in her mid-teens, with spiked black hair, too much eyeliner, and gnawed, silver fingernails. She had a baby-doll face, tensed, preoccupied. Terry looked a layer deeper, cautiously. Blue hues, sadness, stress, confusion. Boyfriend. Boy problems, that was all.

"Hi," Terry said.

"Hey." She didn't bother looking up.

"I'll take a dark roast, in the largest size you have."

She came up with his order, and he tipped three dollars.

"Could you point me in the direction of the smoking section?" he smiled.

A stubby finger pointed the way.

"Thank you." He followed her direction and went down a ramp, deeper into the old building.

Terry's contact was leaned back into a muted grey couch on the far side of the smoking lounge. Dim red light glowed from the ceiling. Splashes of greenery hid beneath a coffee table and behind two other couches and an antique chair, arranged into a loose and wide conversation pool. Terry pushed power into his eyes and looked at her, obvious and hard. A high and positive electric charge hung about her head and shoulders like a blue-white veil. It held a strong, well-rounded intensity. In Terry's eyes, her presence positively burned in the otherwise empty room.

It was a calculated risk. She'd feel his use of power, of course. Terry's gamble was that the Bacchanite would be put off balance by the move, and not attempt to read him too closely in return. Terry had burned up nearly half of his juice that morning already. If she decided to play games with him, he was going to be hard pressed to come up with enough reserves. Bacchus wasn't above such games, or at least some of its members weren't.

Terry didn't know much about her, and he didn't want to find himself enthralled by some social fixer who had designs on ensnaring his heart and adding him to a harem of fawning followers. Terry returned his attention to her physical form as he approached. She wore a reflective silver

clubber jacket over a revealing cherry-red vinyl top, a tiny black skirt, red thigh-high leggings, and tall black boots. Golden hair, long and wavy, hung to her shoulders. Green eyes. She turned and stood when she saw him enter.

“Hello,” she smiled.

“Good morning.” Terry immediately began parceling out aspects of his attention. He took in her posture, her facial expressions, her scent beneath her perfume. He noted the hint of a tattoo barely visible tucked into her top, upon her left breast. He saw her eyes unabashedly looking into his, unwavering. He stayed neutral, easy, ready to react at the first hint of emotional gift or mental attack. Nothing yet.

“Hi, Tom Grey?” she asked.

“I am,” Terry replied. “And you are Priestess Waters?”

“Just call me Ellen, please,” she said. She stuck out her right hand. It felt soft and warm as he shook it. He let a portion of his guard down, but kept his face even, his eyes watchful. “Won’t you have a seat?” she offered.

“Thank you,” Terry replied. “How is Dell?”

“Oh, same as always. Worked up about this or that.” Ellen sat down on the couch and made room for him. She crossed her legs and angled her body at his.

“She knows what she’s doing,” commented Terry. He glanced at Ellen with his inner eyes, and pleasantly remarked at her warm aura, soft yet strong, the color of a peach. She wasn’t faking her friendliness, at any rate... unless she could fake her aura.

“Before we get started,” she said quickly, “I have a small confession to make.” He waited her out. Ellen paused for effect, and Terry briefly wondered what kind of social training Bacchus initiates received. He wondered how much that culture and the Japanese geisha had in common.

“Originally, this assignment was to go to someone else,” Ellen said. “When I heard it was you, I had the duty directed to me.”

“Why is that?” Terry asked. He knew it was some kind of gentle trap, but he went along with it anyway.

“I knew you from around, before,” Ellen said, “when you had longer hair and ran around with those Liberty racers. I was still just a Sister back then, barely past my initiation, so I wasn’t allowed to pursue you.”

“I see.” Terry smiled inwardly. It wasn’t often that one got to watch a well trained seductress in action.

“I like this look better,” she bit her lower lip. “It suits you. Less urban scruff, and more urbane old Europe.” She smiled full at him again, and Terry wondered how long a mundane would last against her. Half a minute? Three minutes? He remained silent.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I have the information you requested. Did you want to get right to it?”

Terry pondered. “If you don’t mind.”

“No problem.” She reached into her right jacket pocket and came up with a shiny cigarette case. Terry followed suit and lit hers, then his. “Thanks,” she said, and leaned into it. She removed a hand-sized sketch notebook from the left pocket and opened it to the first page.

She smiled and looked back into the sketch pad. “Pro-Gate still denies the loss of any of its agents. As you initially believed, Terishor is active in Pro-Gate’s operations, both here and

at Pro-Gate's headquarters in New York. Our information leads us to believe that all three men were taken to a private medical facility in Edina, which is strictly off the books. They were listed as DOA."

"Names?"

"Martin Dryne, Oliver Anderson, and... Paul Barnes. Both Anderson and Barnes were the Terishor rank of Agent, but we think Dryne was either a Sergeant or Watch Sergeant."

"Okay," Terry registered. "So what were they doing targeting college kids?"

"The local Collective seems to believe that Dryne was an undercover agent, looking into Joshua Decker's activities," Ellen said. "He was in a loose anarchist circle, and put out an indie magazine called Angry, Young, and Poor."

"That's what I heard," Terry said. "But it seems like a pretty big move to bring in Terishor agents, instead of just working through mundane Pro-Gate proxies. Why put a Watch Sergeant on an assignment like that?"

"Well," said Ellen, "have you ever heard of the Red Hand?"

Terry paused to think about it. "No. Not before all of this."

"I'm not surprised," Ellen responded. "No one has, at least not up until three months ago. None of the radicals in Uptown, and no one in the fringe political scene had heard of them."

"Go on," said Terry.

"Then," continued Ellen, "in January, out of the blue comes this Red Hand deal, and Channel 9 does a story on them as the new face of the radical grassroots Left."

"So they're a fake," Terry said.

"Seems like," replied Ellen.

"Who is running them?" Terry asked.

"We don't know," said Ellen. "As of right now, the Red Hand is completely underground. It might be a false flag black ops group, run by the FBI or Terishor. It might be a legit anti-Order Circle, made up of Gifted that we haven't heard of, but have been making trouble for Terishor somehow on the sly."

"Seems pretty unlikely," Terry commented.

"But not impossible, if they were properly motivated," said Ellen. "Still, everyone we've checked with says that Josh Decker, and his anarchist magazine, were not involved with the Red Hand."

"So Terishor made a mistake?" Terry exclaimed.

"It might be," said Ellen. "Or, possibly, the Order simply is trying to make the best of a bad situation, and tied the Decker people to the Red Hand because it was a convenient way to spin the outcome."

Terry took a deep drink of his coffee.

"Is Decker alive?" Terry asked.

"Doubtful," said Ellen.

"If he's alive, where are he and the rest being held?" asked Terry.

"We don't know," Ellen said slowly. "It's a brick wall."

"It's a false flag in the making, isn't it?" asked Terry. "Either the Red Hand is a Terishor



false front, or it's not. Either way, Terishor has the ball and is running with it, making the Decker incident out to be the excuse they need to wage some kind of a crackdown."

"Well, that's what Dell thinks," Ellen confided.

"Why would Terishor go to all the trouble of making up a group of militant radicals?"

"I guess that depends," said Ellen, "on what Terishor is trying to make happen."

Terry sighed.

"Who are the big names in the Order in this area?" he asked.

"Off hand, I don't know," she answered.

"I'd just like to know who the decision makers were on this."

"That's... going to be close to impossible," Ellen stumbled.

"And if anyone starts making noise that they are a part of the Red Hand," Terry said, "I want to know about it immediately."

"So you'd like to continue this arrangement?"

"Yes," Terry answered. "Consider this an ongoing assignment, with our current contract upheld until I say otherwise."

Ellen's cheeks flushed. "That's... very generous, Mr. Grey. If you don't mind me asking, how does a man such as yourself afford this amount of leverage?"

Terry ignored the compliment. "I also want Dell to arrange a safe haven for myself and my associate in the city's Shadow. A Citadel hardened against scrying, Divination, and the like. And not attached to a Vale. I want it to be hidden." Terry finished and leaned back into the cushions of the seat. He watched Ellen make notes in her sketch pad. When she was finished, she looked up at him, her face now set into the task.

"I'll run this by Dell and have answer for you this afternoon," Ellen said. "Are there any other considerations for the location? I presume you will not want any security detail on site?"

"No, nothing like that," said Terry. "I want quiet. Discreet. I'm sure Bacchus has such places in this city."

"I'm sure we do," Ellen agreed. "Is there anything else you'd like me to take care of?"

"I think that will do nicely, Ellen," Terry said.

She tilted her chin and smiled at him. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you."

Terry stood, and she was quick to stand up with him. He stuck out his hand, and she returned the gesture, and snuck a fast kiss on his left cheek.

"Goodbye," he said.

"I'll let you know as soon as we have something available."

"Please do that," Terry answered.

"I will," said Ellen. "We will."

Terry turned, straightened his coat, and strode out.

He wove his way around the ebony tables and through the smell of freshly ground coffee beans. He got the sunglasses on before he hit the door, and found himself out in the sunlight. Without realizing it, his hands grabbed a cigarette and the lighter. He took the smoke deeply into his lungs. Started south. He wanted some eggs for breakfast.

He heard the door to the Black Hole come open. Felt the twinge of rosemary in the aura

back there, just over the peach, and a hint of roses. Terry smiled in spite of himself, but hid that smile away before she caught up to him and spoke.

“Uh, Tom?” asked Ellen. “Can I bother you for another light?”

“Sure,” he said. He cupped his hands around her face, to block the wind for the tiny flame.

“After the arrangements are made,” she said softly. “Tonight. Do you have any plans?”

“No,” Terry heard himself say.

“Would you like any?”



Bacchus came through in record time. By three that afternoon Ellen had left Terry a voicemail on the temporary account he had set up the previous night. The new place was set into the northern edge of the Twin Cities Shadow, a smallish turn-of-the-century home deep in the trees surrounding Long Lake, just north of the 694 loop. The area was peppered with small Vales centered in parks, and one Vale slumped below the 694 and 35W cloverleaf, among the trash and graffiti.

They were out of the way on the forgotten edge of the city.

Long Lake was one and a half miles long, and in most parts about two football fields wide. At the middle, however, the shores caved in and barely one hundred feet separated the banks, due to a jutting crook of land. It was on this jut that Bacchus maintained a hideaway. To the east sprawled the two hundred acre Long Lake Regional Park, sandwiched between Long Lake and Rush Lake, and beyond that, the 35W Interstate. A busy railroad track split the park, and led the assault of gravel pits and industrial buildings onto its southern lip.

It wasn't much of a park, Terry thought. At least not on Incarna side, where the rush of traffic and trains bound for the Iron Range to the far north were ever-present, and the streets were crammed with expensive, too-similar looking homes. It was a half-forgotten playground for upper middle income families, set in the kind of neighborhood that might have been a gated community, but wasn't. The Vale itself was set in the trees within the park, near the edge of the water. It wasn't guarded.

The doorway was suspended between two gnarled, leafless oaks. Through them, the Vale itself was merely a small clearing surrounded by a circle of trees over dead grass and fragments of snow. It was the kind of spot teenagers with sleeping bags might steal away to, in the sweaty July of their sixteenth year. Beyond the clearing the rest of the Shadow waited.

As Terry had explained, Shadows were projections of cities into the Maya. They were dreamlike, loose representations of what people collectively thought, felt, and remembered about a place. The Twin Cities Shadow was like the physical version, but only roughly. Most of the neighborhoods were in the right places, but the streets twisted in strange ways. It was the Vales that kept everything familiar. Vales held their prominence on both sides of the Mirror, and kept the two versions of the world from sliding away from one another.

In the Shadow, Cory thought the lake seemed deeper, the water clearer. Many of the houses that crammed around the water in Incarna were simply gone in the Shadow. The trees were taller and solemn. The sky above was a bright, almost obscene blue.

“This is pretty damn nice up here,” Cory said. “Reminds me of Wisconsin, the little country lakes near my hometown.”

“Parking is going to be a problem,” Terry answered. “We can’t get a car through that doorway. We’re going to have to park way around, either north or south of the park land, because they’ll tow us out of there if we keep a car overnight. Then walk through here, and then back around the lake to get to the safehouse. It’ll be nearly two miles of walking each way.” Terry pointed across the short divide of water to a two story house, a small mansion, really, a Queen Anne Victorian surrounded by a hedge wall. “That’s the place.”

“Well, it doesn’t look like we’re roughing it anymore, anyway,” Cory said brightly. “Maybe we can build a bridge to it?” In the end, there was no need for a bridge. A creaky rowboat awaited them at the shore, beneath a camouflage net.

They landed in the house’s back yard, and pulled the boat up onto the lawn. Setting foot on solid ground, Terry saw the house’s wards flare up in his mind’s eye. It was a Citadel, all right, a home turned fortress by way of long lasting rituals. The iron skeleton key was beneath a small, hollowed out gargoyle statue, just as Ellen had said it would be. Terry unlocked the back door to the house and they brought their bags inside.

It was sparsely, yet tastefully furnished. Bacchus had arranged for water and electricity, too, with whomever ran the utilities in the area. Probably the Merchants, or some independent Gifted group who just wanted to earn an honest buck. They got settled, which didn’t take long.

“So, here’s the deal,” Terry said. “While we’re here, we’re pretty much safe. I can’t afford this kind of place for too long, but we’ve got a few weeks, anyway. Now, this Citadel, it’s got some pretty decent walls. It’s going to be hard for someone to find us, unless they’re really, really trying. It would take some serious Divination to break through here, okay?”

“Okay,” Cory said.

“But that doesn’t mean we can let our guard down,” Terry warned him. “There’s still the good old fashioned ways of tracking people. The Order doesn’t like the Maya much, but they fly spotter aircraft and drones, and they run patrols. And there’s a lot of cameras, downtown, Shadow or no.”

“You really think they’re going to run door-to-door, looking for us out here?” Cory asked.

“They will if we get their attention,” said Terry. “You killed some of their men. They’re not going to forget it.”

“I suppose not.”

“Other things to keep in mind,” Terry continued. “Out here, we’re pretty much on our own. There’s no police, no fire department. The Halveyans have a group called Division 8, which are like a police force, but they’re too spread out to get anywhere fast. And there are some dangerous individuals that live over here. The only people out here are Gifted, or Others. Basically, anything alive is some kind of supernatural being. That makes it pretty empty here. There might be, let’s say, five hundred Gifted over here in the local Shadow?”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” Terry said. “And spirits, if they come through a Vale, are physical, here. Over in Incarna, there’s two Planes, the Physical and the Astral?”

“Right,” Cory said.

“Here, there’s just the one Plane,” Terry said. “So a spirit can get right up on you, over

here.”

“So what you’re saying, basically,” said Cory, “is that this is kind of anything goes ghost town?”

“What I’m saying is it’s important to keep our heads down,” said Terry.

Cory sighed, then nodded. “Okay,” he said, “got it.”

“I’m going to be heading out for the evening,” Terry said. “More Bacchus business. You going to be okay here tonight, on your own?”

“Sure,” Cory replied. “I’ve got a lot of reading to do, anyway.”



Terry came awake, fast but not yet panicked. A flood of recall assailed him – leaving Cory behind at the Bacchus house, getting back across the Vale in the park, back down into Minneapolis. Errands in small shops, used clothes, food, flashlights, supplies. A car, five hundred dollars, used, and a twelve gauge shotgun and a 9mm Smith and Wesson, from a pawn shop that didn’t do background checks.

Then the club. A warehouse party, Bacchus run, three hundred people grooving on Euro Darkwave and Trance, on the western edge of downtown. And Ellen, dancing, and he telling himself that this, too, was part of the bargain, somehow, that it was what she wanted out of him. Deals or no, Ellen was in it for him, not her Faction.

They had taken a cab to her place, her lips on his in the backseat, loose and numb from the drinks. Her apartment draped in darkness like velvet, her hands hungry for him. The soft sheets in her bed. She slept gently next to him, turned away, so he could look down on her smooth back and delicate neck, beneath her golden hair. The thick scent of sex clung to the both of them, and hung heavy in the room.

She was a lovely creature, he thought. Young, heady with passion. Dionysus would be proud of his Priestess. Even now, the memory of her body against his, grinding, moving deliciously inside her, made him stir with renewed desire. He let the thoughts continue, not willing to shut them down just yet. The simplicity of the moment made it very tempting to dwell in it all. Here he was, a man, next to a beautiful woman, happy in the easy pleasure of spent need. No complications. No Order. No anything.

There was a sound beyond the apartment wall. The shuffling of feet.

The creak of well-aged hardwood floors. A faint jingle of keys. Sound of lock coming undone. The door closed, and the footsteps muffled and fell away. And then silence. Straining, Terry made out the gentle bubbling of the aquarium in the living room, as it pushed air past tiny, rainbow colored fish.

His internal clock told him it was 4:15 am. It would be getting light, soon, and his empathic shield was nearly eroded by the hours. Already, Terry could feel the warm emotional heartstrings seeping out of Ellen’s chest, seeking his. Why hadn’t this alarmed him in his sleep? He leaned over and lightly kissed her brow, and took in the scent of her hair. She’s dangerous to me, Terry thought. She is too readily plying past my defenses, and there’s some part of me that already belongs to her.

He slid out of bed, slow and easy. Out into the hallway, he felt the cold of the hardwood floor reach up to his bare feet. He passed by the kitchen. The refrigerator hummed and hissed,

and through the windows, silver-blue light came into the apartment from the round, watery moon. Terry continued into the bathroom and quietly shut the door. The tile was so cold as to be numbing. He stifled the urge to shiver and glanced at his face in the mirror.

His eyes were fine in the dark. He had no need to reach for the light switch. Her scent hung on him, unmistakable. Terry sighed. He thought he could hear Karl scolding him, even this far from Chicago. Karl would have berated him for his carelessness, for getting attached when he had no room for it on his plate. Karl, Terry realized. I could really use his help in all this.

No, Terry pushed the thought away. There's too much dark history back there.

He relieved his bladder and washed himself. He scrubbed his face with the cool water, and wet back his hair. Back down the hall, into her room. He snuck back under the covers and put his arms around her waist. He kissed her neck, then her cheek.

"Hey there," he whispered.

Ellen made a small noise, then snuggled back into him.

"Listen," he said. "I have to get going."

"No," she chided him. "Stay. It's cold out there. Not summer yet. You can stay. It's okay."

"Sorry, really. I've got to go. Cory still needs looking after."

"Just a little while longer," she said, and turned in his hold to press her breasts into his side.

"I..." he began, but her lips and tongue were on his neck, then ear, and her hand slid to his hip to grab him tighter. He thought he said something, then, but didn't know what it was. He pulled back into her. Her sigh became a lower, fuller sound, and then she was on top of him, and he didn't care about anything else.

Rising, rising, into the fullness.



The taxi brought Terry up to Anchor Park, where the used Oldsmobile was parked. It was 5:20 am. The sky to the east still seemed dark, but Terry could make out the first rays of the coming day, past the horizon. He paid the driver and got into the car. Under the seat, he found the 9mm. He pulled it out and felt the pistol's heaviness, the sureness of the weapon in his careful hands. It was going to be Cory's gun. He'd need one, there in the Shadow. Terry put the pistol back under the seat and patted himself down until he found his cigarettes.

Her scent clung to him, heavy and damp. He rolled down the window and smoked, and tried to think about Cory's mess. He wasn't the usual Gifted, that was for certain. And whatever it was inside him, like a dual spirit, needed to be figured out, and soon.

Terry finished the cigarette and flicked it away, and started the engine.



Cory dreamed.

He was back in Wisconsin, on the day that the racing recruiter had found them. There they were, the four of them, he, Jack, Mikey, and John the Baptist, tearing up and down the rolling

hills on their motorcycles. It was an exercise in wind and noise, in the snarl of engines and the fury of young aggression.

The world blew past Cory's helmet visor, a blur of speed. Budding trees and fields of new grass became a hurricane of fertile shades of green. The sky above was an ocean of haphazard blue. The sun shone down on the valley, and the boys rocketed beneath it, over two wheels and an iron belly full of hell.

Cory ground the Ghost's throttle high and sure over each gear, and cranked and wrestled the mass of the bike's weight easily, as if it were a part of him. There was joy in this. It was the simple joy of youth and excitement, far from the regular demands of school, finals, college applications, the future.

Cory realized he was dreaming. He felt a momentary separation from the scene, and watched himself ride. This was the day, he thought. The day I beat Jack Quick, and the day that everything changed. Later, at the bar and grill, the recruiter, Stetson, would amble up to them and make his offer. Cory would go on to the racing circuit after graduating from Harrison-Langely, and Jack would go to college.

The sense of being overhead vanished. Cory fell back into the dream. The road ahead of him snaked out like a frozen, black river. The tail light of Jack's Banshee blinked on as he rolled into a corner. Cory was gaining on him. He was coming up on Jack. The Banshee darted to the left and behind the jaunt of hillside and trees. Cory rolled into the corner in pursuit, pouring on the throttle. The Ghost snarled and surged in response.

Cory cranked low over the Ghost and brought the machine hard into the turn. The road whipped up a steep, blind hill, and swung slowly to the right. Cory planted his tires just inside the faded yellow double lines and gunned through third gear. Brown and black arms of Wisconsin trees flew past. The wind whistled and pushed against him. He came up over the hill and saw Jack pulling away on the sweeping right. The Banshee was a cornering machine, and the Ghost was better in straightaways.

The road dug left, ahead, and Cory saw Jack take his Banshee into a tight line, sure and solid. Cory poured on the juice. He had to make every chance to catch up count. To the left, the rear tire threatened to tear away out from under him. The corner ended, and Cory was straight up and down to the world once more, trees lining the road. He was getting closer.

Here it comes, Cory realized, again aware that he was in a dream. That corner. I almost forgot about it. Here it comes.

Cory cranked the throttle open. The Ghost surged beneath him, animal, manic. His eyes bore into the back of Jack's helmet, coming closer. Cory blinked, and realized that Jack had the brakes on, panicky, and disappeared to the left. A whip-lash turn. Cory was going too fast. He braked as smooth as he could, didn't want the tires to skid. He couldn't let them lock up, not if he was going to make the turn...

And at the last moment, he saw it, the loose, sandy grit in his lane. The ditch to the right fell away from the turn, and a rusty barbed wire fence, stone, and trees lay in wait.

He wasn't going to make it.

Cory remembered gritting his teeth and laying into the corner anyway, instead of doing what he should have done. He should have laid the bike on its side and controlled the crash. He should have thrown himself free and tried to land on something soft. But he hadn't done that. He'd tried to make the turn, even though he knew he couldn't.

I wonder how I lived through that, Cory thought, as he watched the spectacle go slow motion.

Cory saw himself flare with energy, throwing juice the way he'd seen Terry do it, his racing self streaming light from his eyes, his skin, like a body on fire. Cory watched the man on the bike look down at the road as it came up to his left kneepad, and the man on the bike pushed the road away with a glance. The bike held its line, even as the tires screamed that they were breaking away. Sand and bits of rubber tore free and flung themselves into the ditch. Cory looked on in amazement as scorch marks remained on the asphalt in the bike's wake.

I don't remember it like that, Cory thought. Is that how it happened?

Cory returned to his place as the rider, the bike's engine snarling, bellowing, a thing unleashed. The tires finished their panicked call and dug into the road. The corner fell away behind him. The valley opened wide, with fallow fields of thin, yellow grass hung on either side. Jack and the Banshee glinted, nearer still.

Cory rolled the power back on and pursued down the gentle hill. He tucked in and let the wind flow over the top of his helmet, off the armor on his back. It was a long, straight shot to the crossroad. Maybe, just maybe.

Jack's lemon-and-lime jacket loomed ahead, hyper-real. The fine points of brightness on the bike stood firm. Cory thought he could even make out the pattern of the rear tire's tread. Slow motion, again. The color drained away. Fine bits of the world dragged past his visor.

The distance closed, faster now, the difference between the two bodies in motion becoming ever-clearer. Thirty meters. Twenty. Ten.

Cory saw Jack's head twitch once to the side, for the mirror mounted above his left hand. Cory saw Jack's eyes, tight slits of steel, angry things.

And then Cory was past.

An eighth of a mile ahead, County Road W. The finish. Four seconds ticked by at a hundred and twenty miles per hour as Cory widened his lead and blew through the intersection.

Cory and Jack let off their throttles and slowed to a liquid crawl. It took a long time to bleed off the speed, not using the brakes. Half a minute behind them, Mikey and John the Baptist finished their runs. Cory pulled off the road and onto a gravel turn-around. Jack followed him, and dug the brakes out of frustration, skidding and kicking up rocks.

Is this how it really happened, Cory wondered. Is this just a dream?

Cory and Jack killed their engines. Jack dismounted and tore off his helmet. Briefly, Cory thought that Jack was going to take a swing at him. He stiffened, his eyes wide. Then Jack extended his hand, and Cory shook it.

"Nice run," Jack offered.

"You too," said Cory.

"I don't know how the hell you did it," Jack said. "Fuck. You know, sometimes it's not fair, how good you are."

"It's a fast bike," Cory said.

"It's not just that," Jack said, looking back at the others as they approached. "Other things, too."

"What do you mean by that?" Cory asked.

"Never mind."

*Revel*

The morning was bright and clear. Cory woke to the smell of coffee. He rolled out of his sleeping bag and threw on some clothes. It was cold in the Bacchus house. Terry had a fire going in the living room fireplace, but it was too small to put serious heat into the floor.

“Sleep okay?” Terry asked him.

“Not bad,” Cory said, yawning. “How did last night go?”

Terry paused before he answered. Then he said, “Pretty well, I think.”

“So, what are we going to do, anyway?” Cory asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” said Cory, “is this what it’s going to be like for a while?”

“Depends on what we find out about you,” Terry replied.

“Still a mystery, eh?” Cory managed a smile. “Is there coffee left?”

“Yes,” Terry said. “Cup over there, by the sink.”

“Thanks.” Cory poured into the ArtWorld ceramic mug and took a few sips. Terry sat at the bare dining room table and mulled something over.

“The last few nights,” Terry began, “there’s been something visiting you in your dreams.”

“What?”

“I’m not sure what it is,” Terry said. “It’s not a spirit. You’re not being possessed. And it’s not with you now, when you’re awake.”

“Did you sense this last night?” Cory asked with alarm. Terry sighed.

“I wasn’t here last night,” he said. “I just got in a little while ago. Did you have another nightmare last night?”

“No, for once,” said Cory. “I had a dream about back home, back in my high school days.”

“Well, the two previous nights, the presence was there,” Terry said. “And I don’t know what it’s doing with you, and that bothers me.”

“You and me both,” Cory said. “Christ, why didn’t you mention this?”

“Because there’s nothing I can do about it,” Terry answered. “I tried a ward, but it didn’t stop it. There’s nothing there when I try to affect it. But I can see it there, the presence.” Cory shook his head. He felt afraid.

“So, okay...” Cory said. “So, what next? Any ideas? I mean... what the hell, man?”

“Bacchus,” said Terry. “We’ll try our luck with them. I don’t usually want to get in too deep with a group like this, and there’s likely to be complications, besides. But they’re strong in this city. I’m trying to leverage a meeting with one of their seers. Maybe they can figure out exactly what you are, and what that other thing is.”

“All right, sounds good,” said Cory. He was glad Terry was there to make sense of it all.



“I’m trying to get a handle on what exactly you are,” Terry said.

“Okay.”

“From what you did your first night, we know that you’re some kind of Other,” Terry said. “Regular Gifted can’t do what you did.”

“Right,” Cory said. “We kind of hashed this out at the diner.”

“I’m still working through the possibilities,” Terry said. “You certainly have a lot of power at your disposal. And you’re not something all warm and fuzzy.”

“Yeah, I know. I mean, I kind of knew that.”

“So,” Terry said, sighing. He reached for his cigarettes. “Some possibilities.”

“Okay,” Cory said.

“Therans. The animal spirit people. They’re like werewolves, after a fashion,” Terry explained. “But Therans aren’t either or, in the way that werewolves are thought of. They’re not men half the time, and monsters the other half. They’re integrated beings. But it doesn’t seem to fit,” Terry exhaled.

“What else?”

“You’re not Undead. And you’re not a Vampyre,” said Terry, “or you’d be half starved by now. I’ve never heard of any of the Fair Folk living in cities, unless it’s deep underground, so you’re not one of those.”

“Okay, I follow,” Cory said, nodding along.

“And that pretty much wipes out the usual suspects,” said Terry. “If you had enough Native American blood in you, we might consider some of the local legends.”

“But I’m about as white as they come.”

“Right,” Terry agreed. “And beyond that, we’re down to some pretty rare breeds. And I still don’t know where your dream visitor fits in. And there are supernaturals called Dreamers, but they’re essentially glorified artists and belief benders. Not physical.”

“So, why not a Theran, again?” Cory asked.

“You’re too calm,” replied Terry. “They lean animalistic. They have animal spirit ancestors, and it shows. You’re too much of a man, a human man. After the Bacchus seer takes a shot, we’ll try some things to narrow down what that visiting consciousness is. Maybe make direct contact and have a little conversation.”

Cory felt a chill at the frustration, even anger, that snuck through in Terry’s voice. It was then that Cory realized how much Terry wanted to make him safe, and how ready he was to maim or kill to drive any threat away.

That night, they headed out to meet the Bacchus seer.



Terry drove. Streets whipped by them, illuminated by streetlights and the glow from occasional coffee shops and restaurants.

“I’m kind of glad you bought a car,” Cory said, breaking a long silence. “Felt kind of bad, driving around in stolen ones.”

“It’s just smarter,” Terry said. “No one is out looking for this one. Just remember, the

Minneapolis PD is still looking for you. State Patrol and FBI, too.”

“Which I still don’t get,” Cory said. “Why are the mundanes after me? Officially, none of those Terishor guys dressed up as Pro-Gate guards died. None of the stuff that happened in the street with Mary is part of the story. So why am I in trouble?”

“You hurt the Order,” Terry replied. “They’ll make you pay for that. But if you must know, your official arrest warrant says that you’re a suspected Red Hand member. Armed and dangerous.”

“So, what should I do if they come after me?” Cory asked.

Terry thought about it.

“Run,” he said. “Find a Vale, and get across to the Shadow.”

“So the guns are only for on the other side?”

“If possible,” Terry said. Cory hadn’t exactly taken to his new pistol with gusto, but he obviously wasn’t against the idea of a gun, either. “They’re just a precaution. Remember, there’s no good guy cops, really. Division 8 can’t be everywhere.” Terry flicked the ash of his cigarette against the edge of the open window. “They’ve got a precinct in Saint Paul, but only have half a dozen or so officers.”

“The Gifted don’t dial 911?” Cory asked.

“No.” Terry said. “Our problems are our own.”

They rode for a few minutes in silence. Cory spent the time straining his senses, trying to feel for Vales as they wove through the streets. Occasional flickers flashed by, but that was all, until the car slowed and entered an old neighborhood of local shops and refitted brick buildings. The hum Cory felt told him they were near. Finally, Terry slowed and found a place to park. He shut off the engine and turned to Cory.

“This is a Bacchus Vale we’re going to,” Terry said. “I know it’s been hard these last few weeks. This is a place you can feel safe. Have some fun tonight. I hear these people can really party it up for Spring Equinox.”

“Are you worried about my first impression with these people?” Cory asked. “I don’t want to get plowed or anything...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Terry said dismissively. “Just be yourself. I’ll handle Bacchus.”

“Anything I should know?” Cory asked. Terry sighed. “I can take it,” Cory said. “You don’t have to...”

“Yes I do,” Terry interrupted. His voice was mild, but Cory felt the heat behind it. “You’re my responsibility. And right now, I don’t want you worrying about what these people think of you, or how they’re going to try to fit you into their world. You don’t take orders from these people, all right?”

“Okay,” Cory said. “Okay, Terry. I got it.”

“Just...” Terry started, then stopped. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “They mean well. They really do. But Bacchus has a way of ensnaring you. Their passion about life can be infectious, and so can their worldview. But it’s not for everyone. And you shouldn’t feel that you have to do anything to try to get into their good graces. We’re paying these people very well for their services. We don’t owe them anything, outside of being well-behaved guests.”

Terry got out of the car, and Cory followed him.

There was a line to get in. It was an art gallery called Slip Dimension. They stood on the sidewalk, surrounded by chic dressed hipsters and the thick odor of clove cigarettes. Laughter and movement swept them toward the old, worn doors, beyond which was a wall of dancers and music. Neon and strobe lights flashed and wailed on top of an avalanche of heavy techno, the bass throbbing. The weight of mystical power was palatable. To Cory, it seemed as if there was an electric current running through the air.

They waited as the doorman checked ID's and waved people on to a girl in a leather corset and red skirt, who worked an ancient metal register and handled the cash. The doorman wore a black t-shirt which read "Boing, Boing" in white lettering. The going rate looked to be thirty dollars a head.

When they got up to the bouncer, Cory felt a mild thrum of power. He was Gifted, or something like it.

"Sikes, right?" Terry addressed him. The man blinked at him. "Ellen Waters said to give you my name when I got here."

"Okay, hold on," Sikes replied. He reached over to the table next to him and grabbed a clipboard. "Name?" he asked.

"Tom Grey," Terry said. Cory quietly shook his head. He still wasn't used to Terry's other name.

"And he is who?" Sikes asked. He looked Cory up and down, like he was calculating whether or not Cory's jacket would fit him.

"He's with me," Terry said.

"Okay," Sikes agreed, and let them pass.

They dove into the crowd. Most stood near the walls, talking loud over the music and sipping from plastic cups. Couples grabbed at one another on couches and love seats. The center of the room was converted to a dance floor, where a hundred scantily clad bodies ground and pulsed to the merciless beat. Men danced with men with women with women, and at a passing glance Cory had trouble telling where one person ended and the next began. Thin, runway models made out, and only wore body paint and sweaty desire. The entire crowd felt thick with pheromones, and Cory's senses constantly rang with the presence of Gifted.

"Wow," Cory breathed. Hot flares seemed to erupt in Cory's mind. It's from their abilities, Cory realized. Each time someone does something, molding the fabric, I can feel it. And they're just going nuts with it, like it's part of normal behavior at a party. So this is what it's really like.

He caught a young woman imbuing herself some kind of illusion, in a sweep of dazzling lights like a wave of stars. When the wave subsided, it seemed as if he was looking at her on a movie screen, with perfect color, depth, and life. She had recast her beauty into something unreal, but few seemed to notice the lights, even though their heads began to turn and look at her and admire. Cory smiled at the secret.

He turned to say something to Terry, but he had disappeared. After a minute, Cory spotted him in a swarm of people at a makeshift bar. Terry saw Cory and nodded, then worked his way over with two red plastic cups in hand.

"What are we drinking?" Cory shouted.

"Absinthe, if you want to," Terry returned.

"Never tried it."

"If you've ever wanted to," Terry said, "now is the time." He handed the cup over.

Cory drank, and let the bitterness wash down his tongue. "It's strong," he offered.

"Yeah," Terry said. "So, what do you think of the place?"

"I like it," said Cory. "I really like it. Do, uh, Gifted get together like this often?"

"Some of them do," Terry replied. "Don't get too attached," he warned. "It's a party. Everyone is putting on faces to look their best. They're just like everyone else, when you get them out of the spotlight. Even movie stars and big time artists can be petty, or rude, or jealous. Or any other dark thing that humanity can offer. Gifted are just like regular people, only more so."

"Yeah, yeah," Cory said. "But they look damn good doing it."

Terry patted him on the shoulder. "Go have fun. I have to find our contact. Ellen." Then he was gone, swallowed by the revelers.

Cory drank from the cup as he wandered the party, and let the sights flow over him. The heat of the room made its mark, so he dropped his coat off in a corner that drowned in discarded clothing. He found a staircase which led down, and took in a second dance area bathed in black light, hemmed in by couches and throw pillows. A nubile pair had sex in the back, slow and uncaring that anyone could see them. Dancers pressed and jostled him. A tight group to his left roared with laughter as they stripped and attacked each other with glow-in-the-dark paint. A Japanese girl in a vinyl bodysuit pulled his face down and kissed him, then spun away to the dance floor. Cory smiled at her in aroused disbelief as she disappeared before his eyes, her voice glittering with a crystal laugh. He went back upstairs, where the music was more to his liking.

Cory found himself on the dance floor, and moved his body to the beat. He had been to a few industrial clubs while on tour, and to a handful of raves, though he never quite felt confident in his dancing. But his head was clouded and happy, and he just didn't care tonight. Time dissolved. Cory's sense of where he was, or even who he was, or the stress or worry or terror of the last two weeks dripped away under the constant barrage of sound, texture, image, and taste.

He got a second drink, something blue with vodka in it. "Hey," a stubbled beatnik gasped at him, "you want any?" A wet joint came his direction. "My name's Miller. You new here?"

Dissolve to...

"You're cute," the Japanese cat-girl hushed, as she nibbled his earlobe from behind him on the couch. "Lay back. Don't worry. I won't bite."

Wait, Cory thought. But you're a cat. I can't kiss a cat. It just wouldn't be right. But then she purred at him, and everything was perfectly fine.

Dissolve to...

"Yeah, I guess you could say that," Cory answered. "Never been to one of these." His head felt funny, somehow. He made an attempt to focus on Miller's face.

"Well, don't you worry about a thing," Miller replied. "I'm old school with these kids. Hey, you should talk with my girl, Kristen. She's a connected girl. Anything you want, she can get it for ya, okay?"

"I'll try to keep that in mind," Cory said.

Dissolve to...

Blue girl. Hair made of water. Dress like slinky sky-diamonds. Very sad. Very blue. Blue eyes, blue, everything, blue, blue, blue. By the wall, quiet, small, watching. Who was she, Cory wondered. And what does she see?

Dissolve to...

It was raining outside. Tight drops, sporadic flashes of discordant white. Beautiful, beautiful. The water got inside, it smeared on their faces, and trickles ran down the back of their throats when they laughed.

Dissolve to...

Things are out of order, Cory thought. Things must be out of order, going in circles, around, around, around. Was I drugged? Did I go through to inside the Vale? I don't understand...

Dissolve to...

Back to kissing, her tongue strong yet soft, tiny mouth, pursed lips. Body firm against his, the music behind him, leaned back, cushions smooth and bland to his numb fingertips. Hungry, gasping for breath, her name was Kit, she said. Kit. It was important to remember. Cory tried to remember.

Dissolve to...

Cory remembered something. He sat on the edge of a leather couch, surrounded by the beautiful and young. He'd forgotten about Heather. Just thinking about her made him ache, and filled his chest with a cold and torn feeling. She would have liked these people. She was the social one, when he was the one from small town Wisconsin and who hadn't done much of anything.

They had talked about getting married. This was before the accident, before the crash and the scar on his shoulder, and the end of his racing career.

Why did she come to mind when he was least able to deal with it?

Cory blinked, and tried to hold down the tears. His throat hurt from the effort. He wanted to curl up and disappear.

Dissolve to...

Miller had made a very funny joke. Cory's sides still hurt from laughing, as if they were bruised, red, sore. He threw his arm around Miller's shoulders. "Listen, this is what I mean," said Cory. "Those straight types, they don't know what they're missing. It's like seeing the face of God, you know?"

And Miller was like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what you mean, they just haven't seen it the way it could all be..."

And Cory went on, he said, "It's not like they hate us. It's not like they don't have fucking souls, you know? They just don't get it, they don't understand. We live in a world that they can only dream about."

"Too true," Miller said sadly. "Poor fuckers."

"Have you ever killed anyone?" Cory asked to him.

"No, no one," answered Miller. "No one except myself, the parts that I never liked anyway."

Dissolve to...

Outside, on the sidewalk. It wasn't raining. Or maybe it hadn't rained yet? Somewhere inside, Cory knew he was experiencing things out of order. It made it hard to think. He wondered where Terry was. He wondered if he was the only one who was going a little bit crazy that night.

Then Cory saw himself and Terry out on the sidewalk. He was back in time, from when Terry had talked to the bouncer and had him check the clipboard.

He watched as the other Cory and Terry got past the bouncer, then paused and looked in at the bodies, at the sweat, into the storm of color, wound into silver threads.

We never did that, Cory thought. This isn't how it happened.

The other Cory and Terry said some things to each other that Cory couldn't hear. Then they turned around and walked away.

Dissolve to...

Dancing, on the move, he recognized this one, it was his favorite song. It sounded like trains going by, or trucks on the highway, or on the Ghost, roaring over the Montana flats. The music was in him, it had sonic fingers pried into his skin, and they pushed and pulled him. He wasn't himself anymore. He wasn't anyone. Anonymous, at last. But that wasn't him, that wasn't him. He had to find himself. Had to find Cory.

Dissolve to...

The blue girl approached him slowly. She moved like a drop of water; she fell through the crowd at him, step by step. She didn't look Cory in the eye. He realized he knew that if she looked, she would dissolve, and no one wanted that. She had something in her hand. She gave it to him, and was gone. Cory opened it, folded, a piece of paper. Words. A poem.

Dissolve to...

Kristen wore red. Head to toes, red, red, and her eyes were black, like her hair, a long straight river of it. She had small hips, like a boy, and small round breasts – he could hardly tell she was a girl at all, from the shoulders down. Her face was... what was the word? Androgynous. Like Greek statues were. She could get him anything, Miller said. Anything at all.

Cory knew what he wanted. He wanted to be free of what had happened to him. He wanted to take back that bloody night. And he wanted to be free of the crash, and of his racing career, and of the hurt that Heather had caused him.

But what had the blue girl told him? Cory paused. It had been a warning, hadn't it? Or was it a poem?

Wait.

She hadn't given it to him yet.

Kristen was waiting. What should he say?

"I want..." Cory began.

Dissolve to...

"You're so different," Kit murmured. She pet his hair and he sighed. He had his head backed into her chest, his hands on her thighs where they came around his waist, from behind. "Are you human?" she asked. "There's something different about you. I can tell."

"Aren't we?" Cory returned. "Why can't we be human?"

She laughed her throaty, deep laugh, so crazy and low for such a small girl. "Because that's not what we are, my love."

Dissolve to...

He should find Terry. It's been a long time. It felt like next week, at any rate. Cory moved to the windows and saw his reflection there in the foggy, sweating glass, of hair gone wild, cheeks smeared with makeup, lipstick from wanton kisses. My eyes are so dark, Cory thought.

Dissolve to...

There was a whirlwind, a hurricane. Inside the art gallery. Cory watched it roll from body to body, like blood pumping, heavy, thick. Red blood cells, blue blood cells. Round and round. Cory followed the wave down the stairs, and the world went black and white and blue. Where was the door into the Vale?

Dissolve to...

Red meant stop, didn't it? Red girl, black hair. Kristen. The girl who could get him anything.

"I guess nothing, really," Cory said.

"Everybody wants something," said Kristen. "Some people just aren't honest with themselves. Or don't you know what you want?" She smiled, and Cory thought it was the kind of smile the devil might wear. He felt a chill in the back of his knees.

"I know what I want, or at least I think I do," said Cory.

"Go on, then," she said, and the smile was gone. Kristen held her breath.

"But it's not anything that someone can just give me."

"You're wrong," she answered. "I can give you anything. For a price."

"Maybe I'm not willing to pay it," Cory said. She stared at him, her face not giving anything away.

Dissolve to...

"We can go somewhere," Kit hushed into his ear. "Come home with me? I don't know what you are under that skin, but I'd really like to find out." Her legs squeezed tighter around his sides.

"I can't, I'm sorry," Cory said.

"You can't?"

"I'm here with a friend, it's important," Cory said. "There's something we have to do."

"But I'll be gone tomorrow," said Kit. She twined her small arms around his chest, and put her mouth close to his neck. "It's now or never. Don't you want me?"

He wanted to turn around and say, "Of course I do! I'm a normal man! Who wouldn't want to be in bed with such a pretty girl?" He wanted to take hold of her tiny waist and lead her out the door. But something held him back.

"I've got to find my friend," Cory said with regret. He dug his way out of Kit's hold and kissed her goodbye.

"I can't believe you're leaving me," she said. There was anger there, simmering below the surface.

"I'll try to get back," Cory said, "when we're done."

Dissolve to...

Cory read it near the windows, the fibers of the paper veined and thick. Cory thought the blue girl had beautiful handwriting. It had a lilting rhythm to it, a singsong meter, and he said the words out loud, quietly and to himself, as he followed the words down to the bottom of the page.

*-Other Court*

*They'll come for us and them and thee, when twilight comes for all to see  
They'll come for children snug in beds, and youths with laurels on their heads  
They'll come with spells to steal the light, and leave our world a blackened blight  
They'll come, this other court, you see*

*To turn our will and make us free -*

*Free to creep and crawl and steal, rut with beasts and fiercely feel  
This other court with blood gone ash, who joys to strangle, break, and lash  
Who pride to dance with seventh sons, who foul skins with devils' wrongs  
They'll come for us and make us theirs  
Our souls and hearts beyond repair -*

*They wrack our dreams with harsher chords, nightmare strings and magick words  
To turn us over in our sleep, with visions so we wake and weep  
This court of midnight, court of wrongs, their hymn a brooding specter's song  
We'll sing this as we spiral down  
To make our graves in sickened ground -*

*This other court will take us home, with dread desires and blackened bones  
They'll turn us into what they are, with minds like knives and fatelines scarred  
We'll laugh and shout and never die, find lovers in our heaven's skies  
This other court is what we'll be  
And on the morrow we come for thee.*

Dissolve to...

A hand on Cory's elbow. The sharp-faced man smiled at him, and commented, "It appears you've been enjoying yourself." Cory grinned back at him so hard his face hurt.

"There you are!"

"There's a doorway right behind you," Terry said. He gestured to the eddy of power behind Cory, in the middle of the dance floor. "A Dreamtime. No telling what it might be like in there."

"Oh, its not too bad," said Cory. Terry gave him a look that suggested otherwise.

"You've been inside?" Terry asked.

"I think so." Cory's head spun. His memories weren't working right. "Hard to remember, exactly."

Terry sighed. "I should have found you as soon as I felt it starting. It could have been dangerous for you."



Cory laughed. “Come on! It was fun! And there’s a lot of interesting people in there.” He remembered the cat girl, and felt a shiver in his stomach. Then a moment passed where he didn’t feel anything save a cool darkness, as if a shadow had passed through him.

“Are you all right?” Terry pulled Cory to a chair and looked hard into his eyes. Cory gasped for air. He couldn’t breathe. It had been the deep thing, the presence from his dreams. “Cory? Can you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Cory managed. The room spun and tilted with menace. “I just felt cold there, for a minute. Couldn’t see straight.”

“No,” said Terry. “That wasn’t it. Was it?”

Cory looked back into Terry’s face. Patient, demanding Terry. There was no give there, no purchase, no way around. Finally, Cory gave in and broke eye contact.

“No.”

“It almost looked like possession, Cory,” Terry said. “And now,” he continued with concern, “it’s gone. Astral creatures don’t do that, Cory. They can’t hide that way. Do you know more that you’re not telling me?”

“I’ve...” Cory began, then stopped. He caught his breath. “In those dreams you talked about. When something visits me. They’re dreams of the ocean, with things that watch me from below the surface.”

“What kind of things?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Cory answered. “Hell, I had forgotten about them, mostly. But they’re kind of like monsters. Sea monsters, you know? Things from the deep.”

“And that’s what it was like, just now?” Terry asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Cory said. He watched Terry’s face stiffen, and his eyes look at something behind Cory’s back.

“I don’t think you’re in a good place to meet with them, not tonight,” Terry said. Cory turned around.

Two women looked back at him from across the room. They stood still, and as the bodies moved about them, Cory had a mental image of statues in a whirlwind of crisp fall leaves. Dancers and music, and two beautiful pieces of stone. The image fell away, and Cory saw them truly, two beautiful, young women, one with pale skin and dark hair, dressed in a man’s Victorian suit and top hat, and the other with long blonde hair and a rich, red party dress.

“Who are they?” Cory asked.

“Bacchus,” Terry said.

“You mean the people we came to see tonight,” Cory corrected him.

“Don’t worry about it,” Terry said. “We’ll see them another time.” Cory shook his head.

“No.”

“You’re not doing this in the shape you’re in,” Terry argued.

“Yes I am,” Cory countered. “We’re not turning back. Look at me. I’m fine. And I might not know how Bacchus works, but I know how the game is played. If we back out, you burn political capital and lose face. If we want to deal with these people ever again, and we will... we should go forward. I should go forward.”

“Cory...” Terry said.

"I. Am. Fine." Cory stood up. Terry held his breath for a few seconds, and thought hard and fast.

"We'll do it your way," he said at last. "Let's go."

They walked through the crowd and joined the two women, who in turn led them wordlessly through an antique wooden door and into a hallway. The sounds of the party fell away, save for the ever-present dull crash of the bass from the music. They passed stacked boxes and racks of clothes, empty cases of beer, bright plastic coolers filled with ice, and heavy-duty equipment cases. The two women stopped at a second door, and one moved to either side and turned to face Cory and Terry. There was something oddly ceremonial about their movements, and Cory paused.

"Who seeks entry?" the blonde asked. She kept her eyes straight ahead, as if she were a world away.

"Two free men," Terry said. "He seeks answers, and I am his protector." It sounded rehearsed to Cory's ears; Terry had spoken a line. The sense of ceremony heightened in Cory's mind, and he straightened his posture.

The dark one pointed at Cory's chest. "Has he been anointed?"

Terry paused. Cory wondered if he was supposed to answer. He looked to Terry, who already looked at him. There was a question that hovered on Terry's lips. He didn't know the answer to the dark woman's question.

"Has he been anointed?" the dark woman asked again.

"You hadn't mentioned this," Terry said to the blonde. The dark one continued to speak.

"It's unwise to risk the furies with your questions," she threatened, "if you haven't partaken of the sacraments." She tilted her head forward beneath the top hat, her face sliding into flat anger. It was theatrics, again, Cory realized, but it was serious nonetheless.

"Um..." Cory said. He looked at the other woman, the lady in the red dress.

"Have you drank wine?" she whispered.

"I've drank," Cory answered, also in whisper. "Not wine, but other things."

"Have you enjoyed a woman?" she asked. "Or a man? Have you done anything sexual?"

"There was a girl," Cory answered. "Things got a bit physical."

"Song? Have you made music, or danced?"

"I danced," Cory said.

"Then you've been anointed," she whispered to him. "Say yes."

"Yes," Cory said to the dark one. "I've been anointed."

"Then you may enter," the woman in the top hat said. The men began to move. "Wait." She held her hand out in front of Terry. "Only him." She looked at Cory. "Your protector must wait outside."

"I speak for him," the blonde woman said.

"You do?" the dark one said.

"I do," she said. "I speak for him."

The dark one let out a breath. "Then the three of you should step inside."

They went through the door. The sound of the party completely died away. Cory found himself in a dimly lit office, or gallery lounge of some kind. It wasn't like any office Cory had

seen. The normal lights were off, and the room was illuminated by plasma lamps with purple-wave filters on them. There were three black leather couches, one on each wall, with a purple light in each corner. Shadows dripped above their heads.

Three figures sat in the room. A woman on one of the couches, next to a fully robed and cloaked figure. A well-dressed man in his early thirties sat on a second couch. All three stood, and faced the three who had entered.

“Mr. Grey?” the man asked. He looked sharp and tan, and filled out the charcoal suit with a muscular frame.

“Yes,” Terry answered. “I see it’s High Priest Morrow, now. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s been a long time,” Morrow said. “I’m surprised you were allowed in.” He turned to the woman in red at Terry’s side. “I suppose Ellen has something to do with this. It’s hard to turn one of our own Priestesses away.”

“Yes, sir,” Ellen replied.

“Very well, Ellen,” Morrow said. Each time Morrow spoke, Cory thought of the plates of major landmasses grinding together. Morrow gestured to the woman at his left, who looked like she belonged in television, typecast as some kind of eye-candy scholar. She had a smart black ponytail, round face, and slim body in a black turtleneck and slacks. “This is Shepherd Dell,” said Morrow.

“Hello,” Dell smartly nodded. Her voice was foreign and formal, but Cory couldn’t place it.

“And this,” said Morrow, indicating the cloaked figure, “is our Master of Rites, our Matrona.” The figure reached up and uncloaked its head, revealing a bestial mask of horns, fangs, flowers, and fur, the face bent up in a freeze-frame of a passionate howl.

Terry turned to Cory.

“This is Cory Williams,” Terry said. “He comes as a free man, with no ties. He comes seeking answers.”

“What does he seek to know?” the Matron asked. She had a soft voice, but something hovered beneath it. Her people, the Bacchantes, all shivered when she spoke.

“There’s something...” Terry began.

“Let him ask it,” the Matron interrupted.

Cory cleared his throat.

“I want to know what I am,” he said. “The night I became, well, whatever I am... I killed three Terishor agents. I’m not a soldier, not a veteran from Iraq, not a martial arts student. I don’t know how to fight. I didn’t have any weapons. But I killed them. They never made a mark on me.

“I still don’t really remember it,” Cory continued. “It’s all a red haze. And I’ve been having nightmares since then, of some kind of monsters, waiting for me. Or circling me, or just watching, I’m not sure. And something is in my mind when I’m having these nightmares, but it’s not some spirit, or a possession. We’ve checked.

“So I’m hoping that you can tell me what I am, really. I know there are creatures out there, different kinds of things. I’m not normal, we know that. I just want to know, so I can get on with remaking my life.”

“Let us go over what we know,” the Matron said. “Please. Sit.”

Morrow took over the meeting. “Gentlemen, please sit down. Dell, please begin your

report.”

“Yes, Sir,” Dell began. The beatnik girl picked up a PDA and tabbed the screen. “First point,” continued Dell. “The nature of the Order’s operation on the university campus, which ultimately led to the confrontation that caused Mr. William’s change. The Order’s local positions have recently seen a turnabout. The Dominus is one Arthur Lexington, of the Lacrutians. He is old money, we believe, from a shipping empire which dates back to the English colonial period. There is very little information available on this man.

“There is a strong House of Raeford presence, which we have been tracking for some time. Lady Callah Calibri is the First Scion, of the Hermetic School. She is both ruthless and powerful. She has gone through a great deal of trouble acquiring numerous occult artifacts of the region, many of Native American origins. She also has a deep interest in Egyptian mythology.

“The leading Terishor office has quietly changed control. A Walter Drake commands it now. He replaces Joseph Hatfield, the United Nations underwriter. There is no confirming information on Mr. Drake at all. He is an unknown quotient.”

“The other offices of the Order have diminished scope and standing, and have little import,” Dell finished.

“What are the known Order business interests?” Morrow asked.

“Business interests,” Dell said. “Wells Fargo, Media Channel Star, General Service Power, Quantum Prison Industries, and Pine Tree Investment, through which the Lacrutians own about half of the area’s software development, a third of major manufacturing, including the Stockton Company’s ammunition plant, and Midwest Farms Co. Of immediate note, Pine Tree also gives the Order access to Pro-Gate, Incorporated.”

“Media Channel Star owns which television and radio stations?” Morrow asked.

Dell had to check the answer. “Broadcast channels 4, 6, 9, and 12. Cable News 10. Four out of the seven radio providers – WPRW, WCLO, WRJN, and WNWS.” The names and numbers spun into Cory’s ears. So many...

“As for the Red Hand,” Dell said, “there is no further hard information. It must be a private action cell, which remains cut off from the other groups of its type in the area. Or it might be an Order plant. Either possibility gives the Order reason to invent the Red Hand’s presence on campus - which they certainly did, according to the Collective. There was no Red Hand activity on campus the night of March 6th. Following the Order’s bust via Pro-Gate, there would have been a lot of media to support expansion of Pro-Gates jurisdiction, more counter-terrorism across the board, and more control in the Order’s hands. Of additional note, I have found that Pro-Gate has begun a quiet new development in the Midway area.”

Terry leaned forward, and stared intently at Dell.

“Through a Pine Tree-controlled subsidiary, a large training and monitoring center has begun construction. Communications equipment installed there suggests it is planned to be a major, military-grade security center. The particulars of this site are found replicated in two other places – the Federal Monitoring Station for Washington, DC, and Safeway Industries, in Detroit.”

Terry sat back, sharp and hard. Cory didn’t understand the weight of Dell’s words, but he knew Terry. It all added up to something bad.

“Thank you for the background, Dell,” Morrow said.

“Respectfully, sir,” Cory said, “I don’t know what all of that means. But what does it have to do with me?” Morrow looked at Cory.

“These are the circumstances that shaped the moment you changed,” Morrow said. “You’re something special. We’re looking for clues, hidden in these details. A pattern that might reveal itself. The Order is rational, cold, and controlling. You came upon the dirty, immediate truth of it. You caught them trying to capture a girl who had seen too much, and, in their eyes, needed to be silenced. You raged at them,” Morrow smiled. “You literally tore them to pieces. Now, our Faction is a peaceful one, on the whole. But we hold a deep respect for passion, and for the beast that one can find in the hearts of men.”

Cory looked at the Matron, who had been staring at him, Cory realized. He saw her eyes blink behind her mask. She turned to Morrow and said, “Leave him with me.”

Morrow nodded. He stood, and Dell rose to leave with him. He looked to Terry.

“Everyone leaves,” Morrow said.

“I’m staying,” Terry countered.

“No, you’re not,” Morrow said. He widened his stance. “It might not be safe for you in here.”

“I’ll take my chances,” Terry said.

Morrow looked back to the Matron, questioning. A moment passed, but Cory didn’t see any signal or hear any words. Then Morrow turned back to Terry. “You accept, then,” he said, “that we are not responsible for whatever might happen to you.”

“I’m fine with that,” Terry said. He stood, and extended his hand to Morrow, who shook it. “It was good seeing you.”

“Be careful,” Morrow replied. He and Dell went to the door.

“Should I stay?” Ellen asked. Cory looked up, but she was asking Terry, not him. Terry shook his head. “Okay,” she said, and caught up with Dell and Morrow. The door closed behind them.

Terry stood behind Cory and put his hand on Cory’s shoulder. “If anything happens,” Terry whispered, “I’m right here.”

“Okay,” Cory replied. Terry moved to the wall near the door and sat down. He pulled a small box out from his pocket and withdrew a piece of chalk, and draw a circle around himself on the old wooden floor. Cory looked back to the Matron.

In a smooth motion, she stood up from the couch and dropped her robes, and stood naked before him, save for the savage mask. Cory felt his cheeks flush. He tried to look the Matron in the eyes, instead of drinking in the sight of her body, but it forced him to stare at the demonic, terrible, hungry face.

There was a flash of power in the woman’s chest. It erupted in the room like a shock wave. Cory heard Terry gasp and mutter a curse. A thrumming sound echoed in Cory’s mind. The room blossomed into red, burning light.

“You’re a proud thing,” Cory heard the Matron say. Everything grew fluid. The walls began to pulse to the same rhythmic time as the noise in Cory’s ears. “Very strong. Very old.”

She reached up and touched Cory’s lips with her fingers. He hadn’t seen her move to him. She was simply there.

“There’s a fire in you, my son,” the Matron said. “Fire, and flight, and a knowledge of the wind, and the skies. You are no animal-kin, no Theran. It’s something deeper and ancient, from a long time ago. There’s a myth inside you. A firebird. You are Mythica, from the spirit line of

the Phoenix.”

“My god,” Terry said.

“And what’s this?” the Matron asked. “Something else...” She edged closer and took in a deep breath, savoring Cory’s scent. She wavered, momentarily intoxicated. “Something hidden in your chest. A mark, a secret. Let’s see what that thing is inside of you. It looks like a diamond, a ruby, something so fine...”

A flood of power ran from the Matron’s eyes, down her arm, through her fingers, and into Cory’s face. There was a bolt of blue fire and a crack like a gunshot. Cory’s head snapped back, and he felt something swirling and dark rise out of his chest and engulf him. It snarled and spun, and made an animal noise. Cory heard himself scream.

“Hello there,” she said. “And what are you, exactly?”

The form took shape, a maddening swirl of scales, claws, horns, teeth, and wings. The Matron gasped and pulled back. The thing coiled, serpent-like, around Cory’s body and came to rest on his shoulders, then dissolved, holographic, and pulled inside Cory’s chest. It looked out with a massive, reptilian eye.

A ripple of energy shot from the mass of chaos and enveloped the Matron. It danced and rolled about on her skin. She paid it no mind, and began speaking in a language Cory didn’t understand or recognize. It had a guttural, harsh sound. His chest vibrated as the thing inside him spoke back.

“Terry, what’s happening?” Cory shouted. He looked over at him, and saw Terry’s face twisted in pain, and he softly repeated a mantra, over and over, a protection ritual of some kind. A blue bubble of power covered him, and mapped to the circle he had drawn on the floor.

“I am not your enemy,” the Matron said. “I mean you no harm.”

The creature inside him flooded Cory’s veins. He felt strong and sure. A reassuring warmth spread across his body. Suddenly, the Matron seemed quite vulnerable to him. Paper-thin, and containing no more power than a flickering candle. Cory realized, somehow, that he could snuff her out if he wanted to. The thing within him could do that.

The Matron said something, again, that Cory didn’t understand. Then she said, “Chaos. Serpent god. Element of Discord. War-bringer, Change-maker, I am not your enemy.”

The shadow of a massive claw erupted out of Cory’s chest. It reached through the Matron’s warding hands and tore the mask from her face. It fell to the floor and shattered. The Matron’s pretty features knotted into raw fear. She fell back and landed on the leather of a couch.

“No!” Cory screamed. He reached out and grasped a hold of the claw, and wrenched it back. There was the sound of tearing paper. The creature in Cory’s chest bellowed in shock and twisted violently. The room spun away.

Blackness engulfed him.

## *The Way Down*

Cory tore his way back to consciousness. He took in a wracking lungful of air, shuddering, and wrenched to his feet. He stumbled to the floor. His heart slammed in his chest. He was still in the dark room. Alone.

Falling. He had been falling. A dream. A twisted thing, a nightmare. There had been a great beast at the bottom of a massive cavern, bathed in a ocean of fire. A gigantic serpent. A dragon.

“Terry?” he called out. Cory got up on a leather couch and tried to steady himself. He grabbed for a water bottle on the floor and drank greedily.

“Terry?” He called again. He wondered if Terry might be outside. He had been left in here, lying down comfortably, Cory realized. After he had passed out.

The scene replayed in Cory’s mind. The Matron. The thing inside him, the claw as it reached out and ripped off her mask.

“Oh fuck, fuck, fuck...” Bacchus. He had attacked someone important in Bacchus, one of the only Factions in the city that had helped him. The people who owned the place he and Terry lived in.

His life was sliding out from under him.

First, it had been the wreck on the bike that had ended his racing career, that had smashed his shoulder and collar bone and shaken he and Heather apart. Then joblessness, listlessness, wandering with no money, no prospects.

Terry had found him. They had hit it off when they’d met during the Sunset Racing Series on the west coast, when Cory had spent the summer at a stable address. Heather had introduced them at a party. And then, a year later, Terry had pulled Cory out of the gutter and invited him to go back to Minneapolis. Gotten him a job at Hartigan’s Delivery.

It had been a life in limbo, Cory realized, but it was better than the fallout from the wreck.

And now there was this life. With strangeness, and dark corners and hard edges that Cory didn’t understand. It was like riding blind in the dark over unknown track, with dangerous shadows that chased him, just visible at the corners of his vision.

“There’s got to be something wrong with me,” Cory said to himself. “I just can’t seem to...”

He felt his throat burn and his eyes well up. He wanted to cut it loose, just have a good cry and be done with it. But he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t let himself go.

I’m not going to do this, he steeled himself. I’m not going to break down.

Cory took a deep, steadying breath.

I’m going to get my shit together. I’m going to go out there and find Terry and find out what the hell I’ve done to the Matron. And I’m going to make it right, make it up to Bacchus. And then I’ll go on from there.

“I’m going to figure you out, you motherfucker,” Cory said. “You can’t hide in my head forever.”



Terry told him the Matron was unhurt. She hadn't revealed to the rest of Bacchus what had happened in the room, and Terry had seen no reason to go against her desire for subtlety. Cory kept his mouth shut. He and Terry would talk later.

Ellen walked them to the car, and gave Terry a chaste kiss goodbye. It stuck out in Cory's mind, but he didn't say anything at the time.

Terry was silent on the drive back to the house. They parked along a row of hedges in the quiet residential area and began the walk to the park, and the Vale crossover point. The air in front of their faces fogged from the moisture in their breaths.

"So?" Cory finally asked.

"So?" Terry echoed him.

"So what did you see?" Cory asked. "What happened?"

Terry's face became like stone.

"You attacked her, or the presence inside you did," Terry began. "I saw you pull it back. You forced whatever it was back down and passed out. But the presence was still there, and she could speak with it. They had a conversation."

"What is it?" Cory demanded.

"It's an Element," Terry said. "A minor Element of Discord. An old one." Terry licked his lips.

"So it was hiding out in the Astral Plane?" Cory asked.

"No, it isn't," Terry said. "I figured out what it's doing. It's sitting in your mind through a kind of distance telepathy. That's why we don't sense it. It's hiding out in your unconscious. So it's not really there, in the normal sense. But it can act in and through you, even at whatever distance it's at. And it's sharing power with you."

"Is that normal?" Cory said.

"It's an Element. They can do things far beyond what we can, so it's difficult to say. But I suspect it reacts to your emotions, especially anger or fear. And when the Matron tried to dig around in your soul, it became defensive. Afterwards, they seemed to come to some kind of understanding. She didn't want to make a big deal about their little encounter. I think she has some kind of reverence for Elements of that Domain."

Cory let it all sink in. Bacchus wasn't going to be a problem. It was a big relief.

"When they spoke to one another," Terry said, "I heard it say its name."

"And?"

"Its name is Neco," Terry said.

"Knee-sew?" said Cory.

"I'll check around and do some research over the next few days," Terry said. "We'll find out more. But I think I remember something about it, from very old British lore. Some kind of dragon."

"That's what I thought it was going to be," Cory said. "When I was out cold, I had a kind of dream. I think I saw it. It said something to me. It wants something."

"That's not good," said Terry. "Elements like to meddle. They usually don't bother until



you're a lot more powerful, though. Then they try to get you to do their bidding in the world."

"But I'm all kinds of special," Cory spat. He had meant it as a joke, but Terry didn't laugh.

"A Mythica Phoenix," Terry said. "You might be the only one in the world. You know that?"

They were in the park, now. Wind hushed through the grass and trees, wet with dew. They left the sidewalk and headed into the trees, soaking their feet with frost.

"At least now we know," Cory offered. "That's something, right?"

"Yes," Terry said doubtfully.

A lull opened in the conversation. Finally, Cory broke the widening silence.

"Terry, you're the best friend I've ever had," he said. "I know it sounds corny and cliched and all that, but it's true. I just want to say thank you for sticking with me, teaching me. I'd be right and truly screwed on my own."

"I'm responsible for you," Terry said. "And, really, this is something I owe. People helped me when I needed it. I'm passing the favor along. It's good karma."

They reached the portal into the Vale. It seemed to wink at them in the darkness.

"You first," Cory said.

"No, you go first," Terry countered. "You're the rough-and-tumble one. If anything threatens you, I have a feeling that dragon of yours will juice you so high that you could take on a small army."

Cory laughed.

"I kind of like this version of Terry," Cory said. "You used to be pretty uptight."

Terry waved him off.

"Go on," Terry said. Cory stepped through.



A handful of days crept by. Cory kept himself in the Bacchus safe house and watched the strange Mayan clouds sweep the sky. Terry spent half the time away, chasing down leads and meeting with whom Cory presumed were local experts in Element lore. Still nothing solid to go on. And still no word from Bacchus.

Terry began training Cory in Hermetic magic. More books piled up on the coffee table in the living room. The words blurred and burned in Cory's eyes, mirage-forms in faded, yellowed paper. He stumbled through the hours as if drunk. At first, Cory thought Terry was simply doing it to keep him busy. Cory didn't blame Terry for worrying. Cory didn't know what to make of his Element situation, but Terry was troubled, and that was enough.



On the second day, they went back through the Vale into the woods.

"I'm going to show you what a spirit looks like," Terry told him.

"Is that... is that safe?" Cory asked. "To do here, I mean? You told me to stay over there, in

the Shadow or whatever, so that the Order couldn't find me."

"We won't be here too long," Terry assured him. "And it's important for you to see what I'm about to show you. I want you to be able to recognize it when something is in the Astral Plane, near you. If an Astral agent comes to find you, either in Incarna or back over there in the Shadow, I want you to know it for what it is. Ready to begin?"

"Okay..."

Terry had Cory sit across from him as Terry did some kind of calming mediation. Several minutes went by. Cory shivered in the early spring air. The birds crept closer and a train sounded. Terry let out a breath and opened his eyes. Then he lay back onto the grass.

"I'm going to project Astrally," Terry told him. "My consciousness is going to leave my body, and I'll be on the Astral Plane, while you and my body will remain here on the Physical Plane. I'll be able to see and hear you, but not very well. You probably won't hear or see much of me, but know that everything will be fine. I'll come back into my body after a short while."

Cory nodded gravely.

Terry closed his eyes and his breathing became deep and regular, but it wasn't the breathing of sleep. It was practiced and purposeful. Cory figured he could set a watch to it. After a few moments, Cory felt a kind of quickening in the air. It wasn't electricity. Something else. Terry crafted the power with his mind, and the ritual took shape.

Time passed and the energy grew in intensity. The birds grew silent, and Cory wondered if they somehow knew. The moment held its breath. Then...

It was a crack of power as everything fell into place, and there was suddenly this other thing next to him, a presence that hovered over Terry's body. It floated there, like a corpse in the water. Cory squinted his eyes, and thought he could make out Terry's face. Slowly, the form waved at him, and Cory waved back. Terry said something, but Cory couldn't make it out.

Cory examined Terry's body. There was a certain vitality that was gone out of Terry's flesh, and instead hovered within Terry's Astral form. The power, Cory realized. It wasn't stored in the body. It belonged to something else, whatever it was that made up Terry's nature, whatever 'Terry-ness' that now looked at Cory from the Astral Plane.

"Cool," Cory said.



On the third day, Cory realized Terry's purpose in wanting to initiate Cory in the Hermetic ways.

There was a rite bookmarked in one of Terry's books called Beneath the Prying Eye. It was a rite for concealing yourself from distance spying, which was the very thing Terry most worried the Order would do to find them. Beneath the Prying Eye would give Cory some measure of protection. However, the rite was not easy to perform, and ritual magic was dangerous. Mistakes, Terry said, can be costly, even deadly.

Terry was working Cory up to being able to perform the rite.

Cory settled into the calming routine he had learned. He sat crosslegged on the floor and emptied his mind of distractions. He closed his eyes and visualized the number ninety-nine, giant numbers glowing in the dark. He looked hard at the numbers, hard enough to imagine every curve, every space. Then ninety-eight. Then ninety-seven.

When Cory hit zero, he felt a shift inside of him. He was calm. He owned a newfound, clear control. A cool determination settled over him.

Cory went over to the pile of books and opened the unmarked, grey volume. Beneath the Prying Eye. He read it over once more. Oh hell, why not?

Terry was going to be gone for the whole day. Again. What else am I supposed to do? Might as well push ahead in this, Cory thought. I'm getting tired of waiting around, always waiting. If I don't get out of here, the tension is just going to build and build... I can do this, he told himself. I can do this, and then I can get back over to the real world for a few hours and not have to watch over my shoulder every minute.

What the hell. It's going to be sundown soon enough, right? That's what the spell suggests. Sunup or sundown. I'll do it and then head over. Just walk around. Maybe find a movie in a theater. Do something normal for a change.

It was an hour before dusk. Cory dug his backpack out of the corner and fished up the music player, earphones, CDs. He put Set666 on and plugged in to the heavy sound, and went back over to the coffee table and looked at the ritual again. He imagined himself doing it, going through the forms, making the energy move and shaping it. He visualized Terry doing it, and made mental notes of things he'd want to mimic. Then he found himself looking down at a pack of Terry's cigarettes.

Cory reached down and opened it, and found a tiny red lighter inside, next to five left-over cancer sticks. What the fuck. Why not, eh? It's not like I'm going to live a long time, anyway. Cory took the pack outside and sat down on the cold, textured concrete steps. In his ears, the song "The Road to Hell Rise to Meet Me" came up. It was an old favorite. If there was a soundtrack for Cory's first racing days, this song would be on it.

Cory pulled a cigarette out of the pack and sniffed it. The sweet smell filled his nose. The scent reminded him of Terry, of the last few nights of Terry explaining how Gifted society worked and chain-smoking into the night. Talk and talk and coffee and cigarettes. Cory lit it and smoked, and watched the sky to the west turn red, and the sky to the east go grey.

Then it was dusk.

Cory went back inside and found the candles. He sat down on the floor and placed the candles on saucers, one at each point on the compass around him. He pulled out the cigarette pack again and used the little red lighter to get the candles going. Then he began.

Cory whispered the words, repeated them and heard himself say them, until he lost track of what he was saying and just listened. He shifted his mind and imagined himself as a tiny pebble in a wide, fast stream. He made no ripples. The water flowed around him and didn't notice, there was too much else around, the jutting rocks, the foam, the sound. Cory imagined himself invisible and worked the energy into the shape of the words. He felt the fragility of the spell, the thinness of the working. How easily it could fall apart. Cory pushed through this and kept going. Forward. Just a little further. Further...

There was a rush in his mind as he finished the working and pushed it into the world. There was a single instant where Cory saw the ritual in its raw form, a shape like a geometric, abstract painting, hanging in the air surrounded by vague forms made out of smoke. The ritual locked into the smoke and the smoke shook and blew, then rushed back at the ritual, challenging it, questioning it, turning it over and over. The forces tried to push the ritual's shape back at him, to refuse it. Cory pushed back and made it stay. Reality relented and ceased its fight. The ritual

held. He'd done it.

Cory realized he was sweating hard and his pulse throbbed in his ears. He sat and waited, half expecting to feel the ritual effect tear loose and fly at him like shrapnel. But it didn't. Everything held. After a few minutes, Cory accepted his success and blew out the candles. He wrote Terry a note telling him not to worry, and left it on top of the open occult book that detailed the ritual. Then he dug in the corner and found the navy blue wool P-coat Terry had gotten at Goodwill. He put it on and left, walked around the lake, and crossed through the Vale into the cloudy March night.

Cory walked ten blocks and watched darkness, real darkness, creep in from the east. The streets hummed with hustling cars, and Cory saw teenagers weaving down alleys on bicycles, and a silver-haired couple walking a dirty white poodle. A passenger jet cruised overhead. It was real life, around him again. Birds sang and trains rattled by in the distance.

He stepped into a sandwich shop and got himself a turkey on wheat, and a cup of chicken noodle. It was fresh food, and simple, and good. Cory told himself to take his time and enjoy it. He casually listened in on nearby conversations and soaked it all in. This was the way life was supposed to be.

Cory ducked back out into the night and wove his way through old neighborhoods and overrun main streets, from small towns that had been gobbled up by the growing city of Minneapolis. He saw Going Out of Business signs on a lot of the shops, and houses with boarded over windows, too many. Litter hung in the gutter, untended. Lawns were feral and yellow.

It was then that Cory spotted the North Side. It was a late night dollar-theater, just the kind of place he had been hoping to find. The light from the marquee glowed happily as Cory approached. White light, red letters. "THE WARRIOR WAY." Over-the-top movie posters showed the battered hero on a fiery field of battle, being assailed on all sides.

Ah, irony, Cory thought. You fucker.

Cory entered through the glass double doors and paid his fee. The building was used and worn. The ragged red carpeting tugged at his boots. His clothes busily soaked up the scent of hot butter. He went into the theater and found a seat. Sticky concrete floors and creaky chairs. It was dark, and nearly empty. A couple of teenagers groped and kissed each other in the back row. An elderly man sat very near the front, and still wore his noir hat over thin, white hair. A few others, fellow passengers.

Cory lost himself in the silly movie trivia questions. Then the previews, and then the movie began to play. It was a 70's Japanese samurai flick. Heavy Technicolor dripped over subtitles. The katanas came out, and ninjas began to fall like hard rain. It was a pretty standard story, assuring in its familiarity.

Someone came late into the theater. The hairs on the back of Cory's neck tingled – a low vibration snaked up his legs from the hard floor. Leather creaked and sighed as the stranger moved, sure and easy. The springs of a seat complained, one row behind him and just to the left.

That's not good, Cory thought. Instinct flared in his head. Deep in his chest, Cory felt the Element stir. It was almost comforting.

Okay, Cory, here we go. He turned his head and looked. First, he saw the pistol, made long and unreal by the fitted silencer. Then, the red and black leathers, riding gear, motorcycle gear. Then, Jack Quick's happy face.

Cory lost the ability to think clearly. He felt his mind slip out of gear and just spin, seeking teeth to catch on and finding none.

Jack. Rolling with power, just like Terry. Jack was Gifted.

Jack. Haven't seen him since starting the racing circuit. It's been years. They hadn't parted well. Jack, jealous, Cory, somehow feeling guilty at his own success.

Jack. Pointing a gun at him.

"Put your hands on the seat ahead of you," Jack whispered. "Don't worry. I'm here to talk. If we wanted you dead, you'd be dead."

Flames surged in Cory's heart. Something in there wanted out, to tear and claw and break and burn. He swallowed hard to keep it all buried. Sweat rolled down Cory's sides in fast torrents. He reached forward and put his hands out like he was told.

"Christ, Jack, what the hell?"

"Surprised to see me?" Jack smiled.

"What the fuck? Surprised to see you?" Cory hissed. "You're pointing a fucking gun at me!"

"Ssshhh," hushed Jack. "Keep it down. It's pretty simple. After what you've done, this is just a precaution."

"Precaution against what?" Cory asked.

"I'm not stupid," Jack said. "I've read your file, what you did to those guys. That's not normal, Cory. You're not normal."

Dread filled Cory like cold water.

"What do you mean?" Cory managed.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Jack said. He leaned closer. "You tore those agents apart. I'm taking a big risk coming here, talking to you like this. Alone. It's not exactly something that they normally advise."

"Who's they?" Cory asked.

"Here's the deal," Jack replied, ignoring the question. "You come over to our side, we sweep that little incident under the rug. You join my unit. Mine and Dad's. Yeah, it's funny, ain't it? Dad was Gifted all along. Just waiting for us to flip over so he could send us in. You didn't think you really got into Harrison-Langely on a government grant, did you? That was Dad paying your bills, all along."

Realization crashed into Cory. He swallowed hard, and fumbled for a bearing on it all. Power rushed in to Cory's heart. It was from Neco, like a quiet promise.

I'm here for you, it said. I'm ready. Just say the word...

"You're Order," Cory said. He expected Jack to see the juice rushing in, but Jack was either power-blind, or Neco's might was somehow invisible.

"You're catching on," Jack smirked. "Good for you. So, let's have you come on over to where you were supposed to be all along, huh? We'll get you through training, though our little version of Basic, then you learn how to do the big things. I'm telling you, man, we've got some pretty incredible tricks up our sleeves. Way better than anything you might have figured out. And the pay scale is to die for. Anything I want, I can just walk in and buy. You have no idea what that's like."

"When?" Cory managed. "When did all of this happen?"

"Right after you took off," Jack said. "Remember, I went to a private college? Yeah, well,

it's kind of a secret college. Real private. That's where I got my head screwed on straight. Saw the light. And then they started teaching me things, training me. And they can train you, too. I know you, you'll slam right through those classes. And then we'll be back together again, like the family we were meant to be."

No, we won't, Cory thought. I don't know much about the Order, but they're not going to take in a freak firebird creature like me, and they sure as hell aren't going to let an Element of Discord in their doors.

"It's not that simple," Cory said.

"Sure it is," Jack growled. "It's real simple, if you want it to be. We pin what you did on that Terry guy, that's easy. You're shackled up with a real terrorist, you know that? He made bombs down in Chicago, some kind of student anarchist thing. A murderer. He's hiding a lot from you, stuff you really ought to know about."

Terry. They know about Terry. Oh, shit, of course they know. The apartment, records, they pieced it together. A flash of anger overran Cory's sight. They wanted to kill Terry.

Cory's instincts said to attack. To burn and maim, to slash at Jack through the seats, to kill the thing that threatened him. He wanted to, Cory realized. He wanted to go after Jack.

Deep in his mind, Cory heard the great beast's howl, echoing. The dragon wanted blood. It would empower him.

"Forget it," Cory said. "Maybe you get me. But I'm not handing you Terry. Fuck that."

"Easy, now," Jack countered. "Maybe you don't want to turn us down so fast. Maybe you want to think it over, while you duck from one shifty, shitty hiding spot to the next, worrying about black helicopters and Predator drones. Living out a miserable life on the run, squatting in Maya. What, you think we don't know where you live?"

Jack leaned back in his chair. He kept his voice low, but Cory could still hear it.

"This is your big chance," Jack said. "This is like winning the fucking lottery. We'll forget your past, and you get to come on over to the winning side. Get to live like a king, and do some good for the world."

He's actually enjoying this, Cory realized. The gloating. Having power over me. Cory swallowed the sick spit in his mouth.

"I can't believe you're doing this."

"I'm trying to let you save yourself, here," Jack said. "Think about it."

I could kill you right now, Cory thought. You have no idea. You have no idea what you're dealing with. He stifled the urge. His hands ached from wanting to become talons. No, no, no, Cory railed. Get through this. Be smart. Tell him what he wants to hear... Cory shuddered and let out a ragged breath.

"So, what?" Cory asked. "What do I have to do?" Jack glowed. At that moment, Cory thought he finally understood what it meant to truly hate someone.

"I'll make it as painless as possible," Jack assured him. "You mean a lot to me, buddy. You really do. Tomorrow. Noon. Call this number from a payphone." Jack pulled out a business card and set it on Cory's shoulder. "We'll come and get you, and set your life on the right track. You'll see."

Jack stood up, and kept the gun trained on him. He backed away, and made the shadows swallow him when he made it to the aisle. Cory winced at the ripple of power as Jack did it. He

counted to ten, then reached up and grabbed the card.

Hell, maybe I should.

Why should I fight this? Why do I have to live like this? Why can't I give in and have it easy again?

I'm sick of it. Less than a month in, and I'm sick of it. Living like a fugitive. Scraping by in the dark, not knowing what I am, not having a moment's peace.

On the screen, the actors went through the motions. People died. Women wept, and the men kept stiff, honorable expressions on their faces. He waited five minutes, then got out of the theater. Turned down a street, and just ran. Dark houses flew by, cars honked at him when he tore across their lanes, broke through yards, kept going. Finally, he stopped. His legs hurt him, and there was nothing he could do about it.

About any of it, he thought. It's all over.

Maybe they could help me, he thought. Maybe they'd take me anyway, put me to some good use. I could be a hell of a fighter. Maybe not a soldier, exactly. But there's got to be worse things out there than me. Things that the Order wants taken care of. There has to be monsters in this world. If there are things like me, then there are monsters.

I could do that. I'd feel good about doing that. I could be in the Order.

In the dim light of a Wallgreens parking lot, Cory pulled the business card out of his jeans. The phone number was written in pen on the back of a Wells Fargo card for a loan officer named Jack Wellington. Fake name. He found a pen in a coat pocket and dutifully copied the number onto his forearm. He went over each number twice, to make sure it wouldn't rub off. Then he tore the card into tiny pieces and let them fall to the asphalt, just in case the Order could use the card to track him.

When he slept that night, Cory was haunted by visions of the dragon. Now, in the dreams, the oceans were gone, and he was trapped in an underground of fire and smoke. Neco both terrified and pleaded with him, begged for help while it demanded war in its name.



Cory woke with a start. The bedroll was heavy with nervous sweat. It was still dark. A noise, a sound. Probably nothing. Probably...

He moved as silently as he could. Found the crumpled pants and got them on. There it was again. Something at the front door. Cory pulled the automatic out of his bag and racked a round into the chamber. Barefoot, he moved through the house, keeping his back to the wall, pausing at each corner.

A creak as the door opened. Close, very close. Cory crouched at the final corner. He flipped the safety off. Then he raised his left hand up to his face and stared hard at it, concentrated, pushed the energy there, and reshaped the pale fingers into long talons, the tips glowing red with the heat.

If it was the Order, they were going to pay. If it was Jack... he went around the corner low, ready.

But it was Terry, hands up, face white with surprise. Of course it was Terry. He let out a frightened breath. "Don't...."

“Sorry,” Cory said. “Sorry.” He lowered the gun and made the talon go away. He was suddenly ashamed of what he had done to his hand, and that Terry had witnessed it.

“What’s wrong?” Terry asked. “Are you all right? Cory?”

Cory let out a heavy sigh. His throat went tight.

“No. Bad day.”

And then he told Terry everything.



The next day. March 23rd.

Terry left at 9:00 am and headed north into the furthest reaches of the Minneapolis Shadow. He was on foot, and the miles came slowly, burdened by luggage and books. By 11:00 am he was sure that he was beyond the Shadow proper, and had entered into the greater Caerra, the Grass Ocean. Outside of city Shadows, the Maya became a generalized, blurred amalgamation of the entire region. In this case, the Grass Ocean was the dream of the great American Midwest. The sky became a deep blue, and the trees were gnarled and strong. Proud evergreens climbed hills and sheltered the last scraps of snow beneath their wide branches. Dead prairie grass from the previous year lay around cracked highways, overrun sidewalks, and occasional homes. When spring finally came, the land would be an assault of green.

He found a small lake surrounded by trees and stopped. He turned back south and saw the blurry edge of the Shadow. Here, Terry thought. Far enough away, but not too far. Far enough to confound all but the most serious attempts to scry him, thanks to the natural boundary of the Shadow with the Caerra. And he wasn’t a big enough fish to afford a Terishor search party to be sent into the wilds of the Maya. By and large, Terry was safe.

Now it was just a matter of what Cory decided to do.

Terry had told Cory to take the Order up on their offer. Cory hadn’t liked that. But it was the smartest thing he could do, even with the risk of the Order not liking his “kind,” or the Element-thing that was attached to him. Cory had an in with the Order, and the closest thing Cory had to family was in it, too.

He’d told Cory that joining the Order is what he, Terry, would have done, if he were in Cory’s shoes. Cory hadn’t liked hearing that, either. Was it true? Maybe. Sometimes, the idea of something steady, or of being on the side of the strong, could be awfully appealing.

“I don’t want to turn you in to them!” Cory had yelled. “That’s the price! You!”

So don’t give them me, Terry had replied. Broker your own deal. When they look for me, I’ll be long gone. Maybe they’ll take you on easier terms.

If John Brozeck really wanted Cory in there, he could get the job done. Probably. Depending on how much pull John had. But it was still a surer bet than going up against the Order. It was safer than saying no.

What if Cory walks away from their offer?

Right, Terry told himself. Like that is going to happen.

But what if? That’s what you want, isn’t it? You want him to tell the Order to fuck off, that he’d rather go fugitive than sign his soul over to the Order. You want Cory to value your friendship that much.



Selfish.

Stupid.

It's like the early days, all over again. The insecurities. The questioning. Remorse. Doubt.

But what if? What if Cory decided not to do it?

Well, I suppose we'd have to get the hell out of here, wouldn't we? And maybe Ellen would want to come, too? If only to keep an eye on Bacchus' little curiosity? But go where? Unless Ellen had some place to stash him, where...

Then Terry knew.

Chicago.

Big Karl.

Terry started working out the plan in his head. How to get transportation, who to call, arrangements, schedules, payments.

Chicago.

It could work. It could actually work...



Cory watched the minutes drag by. He had told himself he was going to consider the offer, if only for Terry's sake. Think it through, sleep on it. But he had thought it through, and he couldn't sleep, anyway.

Fuck the Order. Fuck Jack and fuck John, thinking they could pull the strings on him like that. Yes, he missed them, the way that John was always kind, had watched out for him, been the dad Cory had never gotten to have. And Jack, always there for him, right or wrong. Jack would have gone to the ends of the earth if Cory had asked him to. But this was different. Cory might owe them for being so good to him, but he didn't owe them this.

After Mom had died, he'd been all alone. Foster homes, pretend-moms and pretend-dads. Psych tests. Shrinks. Aptitude tests. And then a special school, they had said. A special school. He wasn't a worthless little boy after all. He got to go to a nice place, where they teach you important things and you get to grow up to be an important person.

Cory shook his head. It was all for this, Cory thought. John, you bastard. You shouldn't get to manipulate little kids like that.

Had John known? Somehow, had one of those tests or inkblots or medical checks revealed to John the nature of the thing that Cory would become? Was that what they had wanted, all along? Had John known, and only kept Cory around because one day he'd have an Element in his heart?

Well, Cory wasn't theirs anymore. He'd broke out on his own, and turned his back on their little plan to turn him into one of their programmed soldiers. He'd gone the other way, and ended up an outlaw instead. He was on his own, and he was doing just fine without them.

So, fuck 'em. The answer was no.

Noon rolled past. Cory packed his things. Terry had already done the same, Cory knew. No matter what, neither of them was coming back here. He left the house and started around the lake, to the Vale. Then he realized where he was heading, and stopped.

If the Order really was ready to swoop down on them, they'd surely have the closest Vale covered. And what good was the car going to do him, anyway? It was in Incarna, the real world, and being over there meant being where the Order was strongest. That's where their face recognition cameras were, and the police, and FBI, and everything else. No, if anything, Cory ought to stick to the Shadow.

But where would he go? And how would he get in touch with Terry? It's not like cell phones worked over here. Okay, he thought. I'll just follow the freeways. They won't shift around too much, so I won't get lost. I'll just have to wing it. And when I get somewhere safe enough, I'll find a Vale and cross over and call Terry.

And just hope the Order doesn't find me first.



Terry stepped through the Shadow-side back door into the Sanctuary Cantina. It was early evening, so the place was busy with the regular happy hour push. He caught Gatz' eye from over the bar and jerked his thumb back over his shoulder, at the payphone. Gatz raised an eyebrow but nodded. He slid his hand slid under the bar and worked some secret button.

Terry got in and dialed his emergency voicemail bank. And there was Cory.

"Hey, it's me," Cory's message said. "I said no. I turned them down. And, um... Well, I figure I can't go back to the old place, right? And no cell phones, you taught me that. So, uh, a meeting place? There's a spot we went to eat, the first day. We drove for a while first, that one. I'll head over that way, and check the other mailbox on here when I get there. So, let me know if you're coming, or if I'm on my own, okay? All right, talk to you later. Bye."

The message ended.

Damn. Incarna side. Terry checked his watch. He could be to the Get Lucky Diner in a half hour. He hung up the call and dialed a second number. The line clicked to life, and a raspy smoke-and-whiskey voice came on.

"Who are you, and what do you want?"

Terry reached up and jabbed the buttons 1, 9, 1, 3, \*.

"What? Oh, fuck, hold on. ..." There was a jumble of noise, a whirl, a piece of electronics juiced up. "Okay, one more time, friend, I got my receiver up."

Terry repeated the sequence. 1,9,1,3,\*.

"Okay, one sec." Static filled the headset, and then click, pop, click. "Okay, got it, go ahead. Night Watchmen, here. That's an old code you've got there. We're using voice recognition, now."

"Nice to see it still works," Terry said.

"We never forget," the voice replied. "So, what do you need?"

"His name is Cory Joseph Williams," Terry said. "Social Security number 399-77-4113. Went to a private academy called Harrison-Langely, probably some kind of Order prep school. Mother's name is Anne Lynn Williams." Terry sent some more info down the line. Date of birth, eye color, hair color, height, weight, Minnesota driver's license number.

"All right, what about him?" the voice asked.

"The Order is after him," Terry said. "I want to know what the government databases have

on him, and then I want you to wipe his record. As best you can, I want you to make him invisible to the mundane world.”



Corbel leaned against the Pro-Gate security car and smoked his unfiltered, hand-rolled cigarette. It was dark in the garage, and the air smelled like oil and sweat and bad language. Behind him, another car and a squad van waited, heavy with men and well-maintained equipment. Somewhere overhead, a military jet rumbled across the skies. Ironic, Corbel mused. It was probably a C-130, similarly packed with warm bodies and gear, just like the vehicles behind him. Headed off to some war somewhere, to do something dirty. He smiled to himself.

The phone rang at his hip. He thumbed the connection open.

“Corbel here,” he said. The earphone came alive.

“We have a green light to move against the target,” the man said.

“Yes, sir,” Corbel replied.

“This is a Prime Directive straight from the Dominus. Terishor is being kept out of the loop, so you will be acting without coordinated support. Do you think your team can handle it?”

Drake was the new Terishor First Scion, and as Station Chief was head of Operations. Obviously, the boss wanted to keep the rubbing out of the Williams kid a Lacrutians-only job. Which was just fine with Corbel. Terishor had no fucking tact, none at all.

“Of course,” Corbel said. He let the cigarette fall to the floor and ground it out with his heel. Corbel got into his car and flipped the dash screen on.

“Okay, transmit the orders to my car,” he said. “Where’s the kid? Oh, there he is. What, no eyes or ears?”

“No,” the voice said. “We have no direct surveillance.”

“Then how do we know he’s there?” It was some truck stop, just over the state border. Then he saw the indicator symbol. Location data came from the Temple of Pure Thought. The boss had pulled the House of Raeford in to do the surveillance. Magic, instead of Terishor’s tech. Well, if it worked, it worked, and that was fine with Corbel.

He chuckled to himself. The boss had pulled his witch in on this, just to be able to get around Drake’s obsession with capturing the kid alive. Oh well. The kid was about to become a dead kid. Then the big shots would have to find some other bit of office politics to bicker over.

“Tell Dominus Lexington that it’ll get done right this time,” Corbel said.

“I’ll do that,” said the voice.

“Corbel out.”

He fired the engine and brought his team channel up. “Green light,” he said into the microphone. “Let’s move it out.”



Cory sat in the booth and drank coffee, and waited. He’d gotten a cab ride from a Gifted driver all the way from White Bear Lake, and had found an untended Vale near a fountain in a

small park in Hudson. Cory passed the time reading from one of Terry's books that he'd found in his bag, tried to get used to smoking cigarettes. At 7:00 pm he went to the pay phone and checked his messages. He had had one.

Terry's voice. One word. "Coming."

He was actually coming.

Cory went back to his booth and watched the door.



Terry came off the interstate and scanned the parking lot as he pulled in. The car this time was a red Honda, trumped up by a teenager with a love for fast foreign cars. The Get Lucky Diner was half full, just getting over the supper rush. Terry got out of the car and felt a chill.

He stopped and looked around. No, nothing. Just a bad feeling, that's all. Whatever it was, it was gone, now. Still, better safe than sorry. He'd taken a risk jacking another car from Incarna side. Speed was what mattered, now. He had to get Cory back into Maya as soon as he could manage it.

Terry cranked power into his eyes and scanned the truck stop. His sight became awash in white silhouettes that let him gauge the power of each person through the window. Only one supernatural in there, and that would be Cory. Terry went inside and made a beeline to Cory's booth. Cory waved when he saw Terry come in, then frowned when he saw the look on Terry's face.

"What's wrong?" Cory asked.

"We should go," Terry answered. "We shouldn't be here."

The waiter approached, but Terry waved him off. "No thank you, we're just leaving."

"I was so glad when I got your message," Cory said. "I didn't mean to do anything wrong by coming here. I just thought that if I was far enough out of town, I could use a payphone..."

Terry pulled out a wad of cash from his pocket and tossed it on the table. And felt the hum of angry bees to his left.

Oh shit.

"Cory, get down!" Terry yelled.

"What?!"

"Get down!" Terry pushed power into his limbs, his nerves. The world turned to slow motion.

He saw them, men outside the windows, running their direction, almost to the door. Tactical gear, helmets, assault rifles. Behind him, Terry heard glass break. He glanced back as he cleared the pistol from the back of his belt. A big hole was missing from the window right behind them. Cory was thrown forward onto the table, a burst of red on his back.

Sniper.

They've already got them.

"Cory!" Terry went to the floor and pulled Cory down into the seat. Terry pointed the pistol at the entrance. He counted, one-one-thousand, two-one-thousand...

The first two got into the glass double doors. Terry started shooting. He hit one, who stumbled. The other brought the M-16 up and cut loose in Terry's general direction.

And then the room tore wide open, and rolling red flame screamed and burned.

Terry rolled right looking for cover. It sounded like everyone was shooting, now, and each shot was a thunderclap in the enclosed space. Glass shattered and people shrieked in animal panic. Black and grey smoke merged amid angry shouts. There was movement above him, and more shots, and a machine pistol roared in mechanized staccato. Terry saw the waiter spin and shower blood.

Something stepped over Terry and moved toward the door. Ribbons of red hate scorched the air and the front lobby exploded into flame.

Terry heard someone shout, "Fire at will! Baker Team, go!" His pistol was empty. He reloaded. He lost track of the angry thing in front of him, and only then did his brain start working right again. It was Cory. That thing was Cory.

Lights flickered, and there were more explosions, more gunshots, panicked now, huge roars of automatics. They came in an avalanche of noise. Grenades. The building shook. A man screamed, the notes wet and strangled. Black smoke kept pouring in, from where, Terry couldn't see. He rolled to his feet and dove, bodily, over the booth wall, for cover. "Cory!" he yelled, but he had lost him.

An elderly black woman knelt beneath her table, and held her hands clasped over her ears. Bullets tore holes in the booth behind him. Out of sight, someone shouted, "Oh, fuck!" and was drowned out by something bestial, something snarling and lunging. Terry looked up and saw a figure in black utility gear and combat harness sweep into Terry's aisle, pistol at the ready. Terry willed his muscles to move him. He pushed off the floor and rolled left.

The gun tracked at him and the man braced. Terry wasn't going to make it.

Something black bore through the air. It cut the gunmen in two, at the waist, then continued past in a blur of red, pink, bone-white, and horrible fire. The reek of burning meat and sulfur erupted in Terry's nose. Wetness stung his face.

An assault rifle shouted above the din of pistol fire and wailing men. Terry watched in disbelief as the storm of wreckage stopped moving and Cory stood in its place, his body a vision of blood-drenched madness. The animal – because Cory was no longer a man – twitched as everything around it ripped open in holes and splinters. It snarled and flung a talon through the air, and a gout of white-fire shot in the talon's wake and slammed through a window, and the air outside shook with heat and noise. The remaining windows blew in from the explosion, and peppered Terry's hair with shards of glass.

He crawled forward on hands and knees, and found the pistol that had once been pointed at him. The man who had held it was smeared, in broken chunks, along the carpet. "Cory," he yelled again, and he saw the monster go over a table and turn another figure to ruin. "Cory, we have to get out of here!"

His friend howled in reply, like something from a long gone, primordial time.

Terry saw a helmeted face rise up outside a broken window, followed by an M-16. Terry didn't aim. He just held the gun out and began pulling the trigger. The noise and muscle-pain kicked back, one, two, three, four, five. The face ducked below the window. Terry had no idea if he had hit anything.

Terry spun around in time to see a slim-faced man in black fatigues shoot him in the chest.

Terry lost track of things after that.



Terry looked up and saw Cory licking his hands. Cory turned and looked down at him, and gave a terrible grin.

Terry's chest wailed in torn misery. He couldn't breathe right. He could hear his heart whoosh in his ears, and watched the hole pump out blood with each dull thud in his ears. Then he felt nothing, until...

Cool air. It made him shiver. His shoulder was wet. His ribs felt funny. He tried to open his eyes.

The ocean. Something smelled like the ocean. He thought he heard the tide.

Low growl. It reverberated loud enough for him to feel it in his lungs. Hands, arms, supported him. Tires screeching. The blast of a horn. Someone breathing hard. It almost sounded like Cory.

The sound of wind as it blew through trees. Grass scratched the back of Terry's neck. He felt cold. Realization struck. He jammed the palms of his hands for the wound, to put pressure on the hole. But he couldn't find it. Sticky, red, everywhere, but he wasn't hurt. He turned his head right, and saw Cory's face, streaked with soot cut by a trail of tears. Blood clung to Cory's hair.

"Hey," Cory whispered at him.

"Hey," Terry answered.

## *Into the Night*

Things happened quickly after that.

Cory let Terry and Ellen move him from place to place, across the Mirror and back again, in a fog of faces and numbness and dreams of falling. Then he was in the backseat of a car, and the empty landscape told him they were in the Maya. Great vast spaces between the Shadows of cities, strung along America's nighttime dream of the highway.

At first, Cory didn't understand why Ellen wanted to come with them to Chicago. Bacchus should have been worried enough about ending up on the Order's bad side. Now that Cory was unmistakably the Order's enemy, Bacchus had a lot to lose by pushing on with him. But when Ellen came to get them, Cory saw the way she stared at the ruin of Terry's shirt, and then it clicked. Terry and her had a thing going.

Oh. Okay.

Ellen did the first stint of driving. It was a tricked out BMW, but whether it belonged to Ellen, or was a loaner from a friend or her Faction, Cory didn't know. The engine had a quiet growl, but could really put it down when it wanted to. The windows were tinted dark, and in the midnight hour, they might as well have been opaque. Chemical polarization, Ellen said. She could clear them with a switch under the dash. Every time they entered another Shadow, Ellen and Terry would perk way up and stare hard at the ramps and overpasses, and then drive like mad whenever another vehicle came near. Cory picked up pretty fast that the freeway in the Maya could be an unsafe place.

After a couple of hours, they got off the freeway and took a break. Ate store-bought sandwiches, chips, and other prepackaged fare that had been stashed in a cooler in the trunk. They rested for a while, but Cory couldn't sleep. He was raw, and sore, and numb, and his bones ached and his muscles wanted to quit. But he couldn't sleep.

Ellen drove them further on. Cory tried to pay attention to the way the Grass Ocean bent and rolled, tried to get a sense of what part of Wisconsin they were in. When Shadows of cities appeared on the horizon, he leaned close to the window and made out familiar sounding city names on bright green road signs. Many had Native American names, or holdovers from the French trappers of the long past fur trade – Waunakee, Oconomowoc, De Forest, and even Waterloo.

It reminded him of places that he used to ride through, in summertime, with Bap and Mikey and Jack. The memories made him feel sick, or lost, or both. During the long stretches where all three of them were wordless, Ellen's CDs throbbed and shouted, and held back the hush of the world outside. There was a gas station, about thirty miles from the Shadow of Madison. It took Cory by surprise, the idea of something so normal jutting out of the dream-scape. Terry took the occasion to get out of the car and put feeling back into his legs. A cloud of smoke haloed his head, punctuated by the flare of the cherry at the end of a cigarette. The glare from the gas station's white fluorescents became like mute ghosts against the BMW's tinted glass.

Then they headed south. Cory caught Ellen and Terry exchanging secret looks. He couldn't decipher them. The Wisconsin night greedily swallowed the car, the music, the meanings of things kept hidden from him. Cory lay on his back and looked up through the

rear windows.

“Hey,” he said. “Can you clear up the tint?”

“Okay, babe,” Ellen said. The glass went clear. Cory stared up at the cut of stars outside. The pins of light seemed dense, sure, and spectral. The moon was heavy and liquid, nearly full.

“Look at that,” Cory remarked.

“What’s that, babe?” Ellen asked him.

“The stars. Look.”

“Oh, wow,” she said.

“I’d forgot, you know?” Cory said. “How much they fill the skies out here, away from the light pollution. We used to unplug our headlights out here, sometimes, and just ride by moon and starlight.”

“They are beautiful, tonight,” Ellen commented. “We can see nearly everything, right now.”

They rode twenty minutes in silence.

“Can we pull over?” asked Cory.

“Why?” Terry interjected.

“Nature calls.”

“Okay,” Terry said.

Ellen slowed and brought the right tires onto the gravel shoulder. Cory sat up and slid out of the car. He paced twenty meters out, took a few steps into the ditch, unzipped, and let it fly.

He heard the door open and glanced back to see Terry get out. There was the flash of his lighter, and Terry’s face was briefly illuminated. It was cold, out there without the P-coat. Cory had left it behind somewhere, torn, full of holes, sticky and dark.

He shivered in the borrowed Ministry t-shirt.

“It’s nice out here,” Terry said.

Cory let out a breath and said, “Yeah.”

“Want a smoke?”

“Uh, sure. Gimme a sec.” Cory finished up and stepped back up onto the road. Terry fished the pack out of his messed up leather trench and handed it to Cory, who got one of the sticks out and lit it with the little red lighter he had stolen from Terry’s other pack. “What’s this guy like?” he asked Terry.

“Big Karl?”

“Yeah.”

“Well,” Terry sighed. “I’ve known him a long time. Old friends. He’s a little bit crazy, but in all the right ways. Political. You’ll like him. Everyone likes him. He’s the kind of guy who owns a room just by walking into it.”

Cory pondered the words.

“So you trust him?”

“As much as I trust anyone, which is saying quite a lot.” Terry looked up at the sky. After a moment, he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? For what?”



“This didn’t turn out the way I thought it would,” Terry said. “I thought, maybe someday you’d become Gifted, maybe not. I had a feeling about you... you get that way, after a few years of this, like you think you can pick out who will and who won’t turn out to be Gifted. But I never thought it’d go this way.”

“You’ve done more for me than anyone ever has,” Cory said.

“You’re my responsibility. I’m going to try to make this right,” Terry said. “I’ll find out everything I can about what you are, and about what that Element of yours wants with you. Back in the diner, you, uh...”

“I don’t think I was in control,” Cory said.

“What happened? What do you remember?”

Cory thought about it, and grimaced at the disjointed wash of images. He let out a mouthful of smoke.

“You yelled for me to get down,” Cory began, “and the look on your face, I got really scared. I don’t know why. But it was the worst feeling I’d ever had. And the dragon thing, I felt it here,” Cory patted the center of his chest. “It’s like it was saying, ‘don’t be afraid. Here, let me help you.’ And I kinda grabbed on to that. And then I got thrown forward, and it hurt, so I got mad. Then, well...”

“You blacked out?” Terry offered.

“No. I remember it. The dragon didn’t possess me. It just helped me do what I wanted to do. It wasn’t like someone else took over. It was me. And I wanted to do those things to those guys. I couldn’t stop myself. That’s what I mean when I said I lost control. I was just so angry.”

“It’s instincts,” Terry said flatly. “That’s just like how Therans describe it. Giving in to their instincts.”

“That’s kind of scary,” Cory said. “Me, not knowing what these things are, or how strong they’ll be, or what I can do. Because I didn’t know about throwing fire around until the second I did it.”

Terry looked at Cory. “We’re just going to have to figure out exactly what breed of Phoenix you are. It really sounds a lot like the way Therans work out. There are different kinds, like the Lerog. They’re the canine-type of Theran. But there’s Lerogs with fox heritage, wolf heritage, like that. There’s a big variety of firebirds in myth. We’ll just have to uncover which spirit heritage you’ve inherited.”

They got back into the car. Ellen turned up the stereo, and they were submerged in Trance techno. She flipped the headlights back on, and they flung themselves back at the darkness. In an hour, the city glow of Chicago stretched over the horizon to greet them, the moon set, and the stars bid the car farewell. Finally, dawn broke, and drenched the sky with light.

Terry directed Ellen through the sprawl that crept up in the windows. The small towns gave way to larger and larger hubs of buildings, culture, and commerce. Cory felt the car cross the border into Chicago’s Shadow, and the intensity of the steel jungle grew with each mile. Lone figures on the sidewalks became more frequent, and small bunches of long faces began to appear. Other vehicles began passing them, going the other way. Strange forms looked down from rooftops, or up from littered gutters.

“Lots of spirits here,” Terry commented.

“What?”

“Spirits,” Terry said. “Like I showed you, before, with the Projeciton rite. There’s one, the

swirling mass of debris? That's a spirit."

"Spirit of what?" Cory asked.

"Probably of junk, or maybe poverty," Ellen answered. "There are all kinds."

"You never really went into teaching me about Astral things before," Cory said. "Just that one demo."

"They're more of a ritual magic thing," Terry explained. "Magicians deal with spirits all the time."

"Shamans, too," Ellen said. "And Dionysus heathens, like me." She laughed to herself.

Ellen wound the BMW out of the knot of dark towers. The buildings shrank and aged, and the faces receded to the shadows of stoops and alleys. They passed a pack of unusually marked squad cars, and Cory froze.

"Don't worry," Terry said quickly. "That's Division 8. Halveyans, remember? Part of the Free Societies, like Bacchus."

Cory let the tension in his shoulders go.

The shapes of chain links, deserted blocks, and urban wilderness crept past. Then, the world changed again, and stacks of forlorn concrete apartments rose above the dilapidated houses. Out of these bloomed sex shops, strip clubs, 24-hour movie houses, and never-close convenience stores, in their ever-constant parade of fluorescent and neon. They had hit a busy Mayan neighborhood.

Cory saw milling herds of tired teenagers in leathers, mohawks, and trench coats, still circling after a long night. There were throngs of Asians clumped around low, sleek street bikes. Black kids piled deep in front of nightclubs, bathed in the heavy rhythm of a nightspot that didn't want to give in to the morning. Tribes of Mexicans blurred into quiet clusters of Native Americans. There must have been a hundred of them, intermixed with strange forms that must have been spirits, or other, stranger things.

"So many," Cory said.

"I suppose it is for you," Ellen said. "Chicago is a major hub for Gifted Society."

"How many Gifted are there?"

"Oh, maybe ten thousand over here, and ten thousand on the other side," Ellen said.

"In the world, or..."

"No, Cory," Terry said. "She means in Chicago."

So many. The thought of them all swirled around in Cory's mind. So many who could do magic, or bend reality around like hot taffy. He stared out the window. Terry gave Ellen directions, and she deftly cut through a pay lot and parked the car in a sheltered alley.

"We're here," Terry announced. "Five Corners."

"Well, you won't be bored, that's a sure thing," said Ellen.

"Guess not," Cory offered. He and Terry got out. The roar of the city washed over them. Ellen nestled the car next to a dumpster and joined the two men. They stretched and tried to shake the road from their limbs. A silver pick-up rumbled through the alley and beyond. Flocks of goth-punks fluttered among the parked cars, and their painted faces laughed and howled.

Cory stretched out his unnatural senses and tried to make sense of it all.

Terry blinked at him. "Feel anything?"

“No,” Cory breathed. “Not besides us. The rest gets drowned out. Like background noise.”

“We’re surrounded by Vales,” Terry said. “And a lot of Others and Gifted. That’s what it’s like, down here. Part of why this place will be safe for you to stay. There’s a lot to distract a distance viewer.” He turned and led them past a darkened video rental store and to a metal stairwell which lodged itself into a brick building. Through the windows that fell below their feet, Cory saw aisles upon aisles of CDs and records, and band posters stuck to a far wall. A clerk behind a cheap metal table tinkered on a laptop, next to a cash register. They ascended to a heavy, beaten wood door set into a landing, covered in stickers, band handbills, and pages of newspapers, fixed by tape.

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Terry tapped the buzzer. Almost without pause, a scrappy, thin boy with wild, disjointed hair threw the door open and pointed a revolver at their faces. “I said we don’t want any!”

Cory blinked in surprise. Terry held his hands out and blocked the doorway. Ellen froze, but looked more annoyed than frightened.

“Put that away,” Terry said evenly. “We’re expected.”

“We’re not expecting shit!”

“Yes, you are,” Terry corrected him. “Now, be a good boy and point that somewhere else. We’ve had a long night. I’m not in the mood.” The kid set his jaw hard, and Cory thought he might try something. But someone shouted from inside.

“Tom? That you? Tom!” The words were low and thick, from a throat made of bedrock. Huge hands appeared on the gun-wielder’s shoulders and casually moved him aside.

“Hi Karl,” Terry said. He smiled.

The man with the bear arms embraced Terry, hard, like he meant it.

“How the fuck are ya?” He turned to the side. “Ruby. Hey, come here. See this guy here? This here is Tom Grey, you great, insensitive, insignificant tit mouse! Yes, that Tom Grey. Now, you mind your manners. We’ve got guests in the house.” Karl pointed a toothy grin back at Terry, Cory, and Ellen. “Come in, come in!”

They were helplessly ushered inside. Karl plowed on ahead in his verbal, kinetic assault. Cory was nearly pushed into a chair. Terry and Ellen took cover on a torn, red vinyl couch. The living area was jammed with televisions and computer monitors, haphazardly balanced on end tables, entertainment centers, and makeshift shelves.

“Tom, does your crew want a drink? It’s a hellish drive. You – What’s your name, Marlowe? David the Fox? Grab a bottle for me and my friends here-”

“I’m going by Terry now,” Terry corrected him.

Big Karl paused in his whirlwind of talk and movement.

“What? Well... Nah!” Karl exploded. “You’re still Tom Grey to me. To us. Still Tom Grey to us.” He momentarily lost himself in thought. Cory tried to take in his surroundings.

Each screen played a different channel. News programs with talking heads and flying text, talk shows with serious-faced men, and music videos with Japanese VJs. Radio receivers plunged the room into a river of sound, and the BBC, ham radio operators, and shock jocks competed for attention. The words “war,” “markets,” and “nipple” came at once – and overlaid a sorrowful blues guitar solo while a droning announcer marked out weather reports, and called out, “Anchorage, cloudy, forty-eight degrees, Moscow, sunny, thirty-five degrees, Tokyo...” Karl regained himself.

“Now! Who are the two of you?” Karl inquired. He piled into a nearby complaining couch.

“Priestess Ellen Waters, Bacchus,” she said.

“Ellen? I’m charmed.” Karl puckered his lips and made a kissing sound. “Why, you’re just hotter than a pancake!” he exclaimed. “Come aboard our precarious ship anytime you like. We sail the seven seas of sanity, out here, and if I do say so, you appear the very image of levity and loveliness.” Then he looked at Cory and became still.

“Cory Williams,” said Cory.

Big Karl examined him quietly. “This is the one, hmm?” Karl chuckled at himself. “He don’t look like too much trouble. Got a funny halo around him, though.”

Someone came into the room and handed Karl a bottle of whiskey. He opened it and took a long swig, and tossed it at Cory. He caught it, and wondered where he had become so agile. Karl took up a fresh cigar from an ashtray on the coffee table in front of him, then patted at his pockets.

“Damn it, I’d lose my head if I could,” Karl bemoaned.

Terry leaned forward and supplied Karl with a light, then lit a cigarette for himself. The whiskey made it around.

“Big?” A thin, bespectacled man in a black noir coat knelt at Karl’s side. Cory thought he looked like a physics professor from a 50’s movie set.

Karl rolled his eyes. “What? Can’t you see I’m entertaining my guests, here?”

“The signing agent at the Pop-and-Munch demands a three thousand dollar rate for the product, and won’t pay the prearranged upon four thousand.”

Karl leaned back at the messenger. “Now, you tell little Johnnie that it’s four that we agreed on, and four it’s got to be. Tell him it’s four, or I’m gonna be over there in twenty minutes to knock up his little sister. Now, you go off and tell him.”

“Yes, captain.” The pallid face withdrew.

Karl turned apologetically back to them. “Acid,” he said, and shook his head sadly. “You’d think the stuff just cranked itself out of the lab, they way they complain.”

“I thought LSD had dried up in this country,” Ellen commented.

“It had,” Karl agreed. “It’s about to make a big comeback.”

“I see,” she said sweetly. “Nice to hear.”

“Anyway, now, what’s this all about? Tom?” Karl waved helplessly at the air. “What’s the deal? The Order?”

“Yeah, Karl, the Order,” Terry said. “Terishor has it out for Cory here in spades, and doesn’t much like me, either.”

“So what’d you do?”

“He’s a Mythica,” Terry gestured at Cory.

“A what?” Karl scowled.

“Some kind of phoenix or firebird,” Terry said. “You know how the Order hunts down Therans?” Big Karl nodded. “Well, they seem to hate the descendants of mythical creatures about three times as hard. But that’s not everything.”

Karl laughed. “But wait! There’s more!”

“Cory has had a benefactor in his life, for a long time,” Terry said. Cory looked questioningly at Terry, but he kept going. “Name was John Brozeck. He helped get him into a private school called Harrison-Langely, a sort of Order prep school. Pretty much adopted him. Then, years later, Cory flips and turns out to be a potent phoenix. Takes down some Terishor agents who were out on an unconnected snatch-and-grab.”

“Nice,” Karl said.

“I’m watching over Cory, he’s my roommate, I help him into hiding so we can sort things out,” Terry continued. “There’s some weird half-presence with him, you sensed it, too. I couldn’t figure it out. We went to see a Bacchus seer. Cory’s got an Element in light, but constant, telepathic contact.”

“Oh? Which flavor?”

“Discord,” Terry said.

Big Karl paused on the cigar and licked his lips. “Go on.”

“Couple of days later, his old friend from school tracks him down and says he’s in the Order, and he and the old man want Cory to join up.” Terry leaned forward. “Turns out the recent Order reassignments we’d caught wind of in the Twin Cities was John Brozeck being brought in as Terishor’s First Scion, but he’s going by an alias, Walter Drake.”

“So,” Karl scratched his head. “Dear old dad...”

“He’s not my dad,” Cory interjected.

“...comes into town,” Big Karl continued, “takes up an Order office under a new name, and brings his Gifted kid with him. And right about then Cory here, the wayward pseudo-son, not only flips, but is part phoenix, and has an Element of Discord riding around on his shoulder? And then things kinda get violent? That about sum it up?”

“That’s about it,” Terry said. Karl looked at Ellen.

“And where the hell do you fit into all of this?” he asked her.

“Bacchus liaison,” Ellen said. “We have an unspecified interest in Cory’s situation.”

“Unspecif...” Karl bit it off. “Well, I suppose,” he chuckled. “It’s good to know what the walking napalm dispenser is up to.” He sighed. “You two made every kind of news report, you know that? Some kind of terrorist attack on civilians, they called it. Red Hand. Your faces have been all over the airwaves.”

Cory felt a wave of hate and nausea.

“They attacked us,” he said quietly. “It’s a lie.”

“Hell, my boy,” Karl said, “it’s the Order. It’s what they do. Well, that, and run the world

like it's their own private factory farm." He took another hit off the bottle.

"He needs a place to lie low," Terry said.

"Gee, you think?" Big Karl laughed.

"Karl," Ellen said, "Bacchus will pay you to provide for Cory's protection."

"What now?"

"You've done this sort of thing before," Ellen said. "We'll pay double."

"Got it," Karl said. "Well, kiddo, looks like you're moving in."

"There's an addendum to the deal," Ellen said. Karl raised an eyebrow, and she continued. "We don't just want you to keep Cory under the radar. We want you to train him."

"Train him? What do I look like," Karl sniffed, "a community college?"

"Train him," Ellen repeated. "Treat him as one of your own. We know about some of your... shall we say, more militant activities? Bacchus wants Cory to become more familiar with this line of action."

"What the hell for?" Karl asked.

"That's the deal," Ellen said.

"But why?" Karl persisted. Cory leaned forward for Ellen's answer, but she held her ground.

"That's our business," she said.

Big Karl let out a huff and looked at Terry.

"We gotta talk," Karl growled. "Let's hammer this out in back, where we can limit the collateral damage."

"Certainly," Terry answered. He found his feet, and touched Ellen's shoulder in passing.

They disappeared further into the reaches of Karl's maze of moving images and lost voices.



Big Karl's room was a worried, cramped cell. Warehouse shelving kept a wall of computer servers, signal amplifiers, jury-rigged electronics gear, screens, handhelds, and other arcane technology from tumbling to the floor. Maps and newspaper articles plastered every flat, vertical surface which wasn't already reserved by a screen. Keyboards stuck out of walls, rested three deep on a coffee table, and hung, suspended by wire, from the ceiling. A floor locker and military cot rested in the corner. A wheeled office chair, held together by gaffer's tape, was the only other piece of furniture.

"What happened to the fighting fish?" Terry asked. He stood facing the wall of tech.

"It died."

"I liked that fish," Terry said.

"Not surprised. It was your fish." The edge seemed to have worn off of Karl's words. He sat on the cot, which creaked in reply. "Tom..."

"Terry."

"Fine," Karl said. "Terry. What the fuck are you doing? You've got some clueless walking

bomb out there. Just being what he is begs for trouble from the Man. And Bacchus? What's that about? Some kind of midlife crisis? It's not 1987 anymore." Karl sighed, and stared whimsically at his smoking cigar.

"There's something about him that I can't explain," Terry said. "I don't know what it is. But come on... a Mythica with an emotion-based telepathic link to an Element of Discord? That doesn't perk your interest?"

"That's not the damn point," Karl spat. "You're in over your head." Karl leaned forward. "You can't control him. Or even predict him. You don't know how to deal with an Element, and you don't have resources to deal with it, even if you had a clue of what to do. Which you don't."

"You're right. I don't."

"Which is why you're here," Karl said. "Oh, don't look at me like that. I get it. But it's not like this little operation here has suddenly gotten a ton wiser about high-end metaphysics. We're street level agitprop anarchists. Fuck, man, I don't even know how being a Mythica works. And, yeah, Discord sounds good. We even thought we had a shot at meeting an Element from that Domain, once, maybe get some pointers from 'em. Turned out to be nothing."

"You've seen the news," Terry said. "And I was there. He can put out a lot of damage. I don't know if that was him, or the dragon, or both, but he chewed through an entire Order squad. That had the drop on him. And then he put my chest back together, after a rifle round had gone into me. That's serious power."

"So what do you want?"

"I want you to make him one of yours," Terry answered. "The Order has decided to exterminate him."

"Pretty ballsy of that Brozeck fellow to want to bring something like Cory into the Order," said Karl. He raised an eyebrow.

"That's what I'm thinking, too."

"Why would the Order want that?" Karl asked.

"I don't know," Terry said. "I guess it doesn't matter, now. Cory told them no. Then they sent a murder team."

"So, why do you want to militarize him? 'Cause that's what it would be, if you let me teach him down here. You know that. I'd show him how to make bombs and do militia stuff."

"Yeah, I know," Terry said. "That's what I want."

"Is that what he wants?" Karl asked. Terry looked at him.

"This is the hand he's been dealt. If he's going to survive his first year, he needs protection and training by people who know about fighting the Order. And right now, you're the best I've got for that."

"I still don't know what he is," Karl said. "Or what he can do. Or what kind of baggage he brings. Can I trust him to decide against leveling my block tomorrow? 'Cause if he does, it doesn't sound like there's much I can do to stop him."

"No, there's not," Terry agreed. "But I'll do what I can. I'll track down leads and find someone who knows about his kind. You'll know as soon as I know." The big man thought it over.

"Fine," Karl said at last. "He can stay."

A hand on Cory's shoulder woke him up. It was Terry.

"Hey," Cory mumbled. The room was lit by ghostly television screens. "What time is it?"

"Quarter after seven," Terry answered him. He leaned in to the couch Cory sprawled on. "Ellen and I are leaving soon. We wanted to make sure we had the chance to say goodbye."

Cory sat up. He was in Karl's living area. The scraggy-haired kid who had pointed a gun at them was in the kitchen, hunched over a laptop. A British voice hummed from a small radio on the counter next to him. All else was quiet.

"You're leaving already?" Cory asked. He rubbed his eyes. "We just got here."

"Ellen and I have a lot of ground to cover, and the sooner we do it, the better," Terry said.

"Okay." Cory had known that he would be staying behind, but had thought Terry would have been with him for at least a few days. Cory saw Ellen by the door, waiting.

"I'm sorry to leave you like this," Terry said. "It's the best option right now."

Cory nodded soberly. "Sure."

"Take this," Terry said. His hands disappeared into his leather trench. "There's about nine hundred here." Terry handed a stack of fifty-dollar bills, held together by a rubber band. Then came a pack of Northern Lights cigarettes. Last was a silver zippo, with a black shamrock on the front. Terry stood.

"Thanks."

Cory was struck by a sense of finality, that he might not see Terry again. He tried to push the thought out of his mind. Terry looked back to Ellen and made a gesture, and she came over to Cory's makeshift bed. Her arms went around his neck, and her face was suddenly very close.

"Take care of yourself," she whispered, and kissed him lightly on the lips. Surprised, Cory returned in kind, hoping it was what was expected of him. When Ellen pulled away, Cory looked at Terry, embarrassed.

"Be safe," Cory said.

"We'll see you as soon as we can," Terry replied. There was a shuffling of coats, the door opened and closed, and then they were gone. It took Cory a long time to fall back to sleep. When he finally did, his dreams took him fast and deep.

Karl dwarfed Cory from across the table. A week had passed. They were in a train car, which had been retrofitted into a diner, many years ago. Somewhere along the way, it had become a small Vale. The restaurant stood waylaid, surrounded by grass and parking lots, far from proper rails. It was an IHOP – International House of Pancakes. They were open 24 hours, and were popular with blue-collar clubbers after 5:00 am, when even the late-night bars shut down, and teenagers of all colors, who had nowhere else to go during the predawn hours. By Cory's estimation, it was an hour before sunrise.

This IHOP was an assault of red and silver. It had shiny cherry vinyl booths, glossy fire engine red formica tabletops, and dark, rose colored carpets. Stainless steel bordered the windows,



the bench backs, the walk aisles. Gifted Goth kids, like rough sketches of black and white, lounged and played. There were a few bohemian types in the smoking side of the train – the scent of cloves overlaid the syrup, bacon, and eggs. A lone-wolf punk scowled in a far corner, all denim and spikes.

Karl was in quiet-mode. Cory let him brood, and wondered what the IHOP was like through the portal and across the Mirror, Incarna side. Probably much like the scene before him, he thought. Cory was getting used to Big Karl's occasional silences. Sometimes, Big Karl just went empty. He snapped his mouth shut and appeared to stare out into the ether. Most bystanders, especially normals, took Karl's fugues to be signs of schizophrenia, or in the very least an indication that the oversized man was off daydreaming about far away, vague things. Now, Cory knew the truth. Karl was never more aware of his surroundings than when he looked like his brain was out to lunch.

It just meant that Karl wasn't in the mood to talk. Cory afforded him the luxury of silence. Cory smoked his cigarette and drank his bitter coffee, and watched through the windows for their contact.

Karl told him on the first day with Terry and Ellen gone that Karl's apprentices (or lackeys, in Karl's words) learned by doing. Karl didn't take much stock in studying and talking and lecture-hall instruction. He preferred trial by fire. Cory was immediately brought in as a member of Karl's crew.

"First thing you got to do is make sure your trail is clean," Karl had said. "Since you came here by Tom Grey, we'll assume you've got some of that figured out. But, just in case, the rule of thumb is 'No Cells, No Cameras, No Cards.' The Three C's. Got it?"

"Yeah, got it."

"You live by cash or trade," Karl bulldozed on. "Nothing on the books. Forget about living rich or fancy – that's their trap, see? Nobody 'makes it big' without jumping through the Order's hoops, one way or another. You're an outlaw. It's time you started to think like one."

And that's when Karl got him into running drugs.

It wasn't always drugs, Cory corrected himself. Sometimes it was guns. And every now and then, it was a computer disc, or a pile of cash, or a letter that couldn't go through the post office. At least it wasn't coke or crack, he told himself. Most of the time, it was vials of acid. Occasionally pot. Once, mushrooms. There wasn't much in the way of the law to get in anyone's way, living in Chicago's Shadow. Division 8 didn't care about their activities. Still, there was always the chance of getting robbed. It kept Cory on his toes.

Karl came to life. "There he is." The large man animated at once. His eyes resumed their flash, and his face leapt into fullness. He reddened, smirked, and raised his eyebrows. Then Karl leaned over the table top in a conspiratorial way. "Say, we have to come up with a better name for you than 'new guy.' Got anything in mind?"

"Oh. I guess I haven't thought about it."

"Well, you get cracking," Karl said. He heartily patted Cory's arm. "The name makes the man. Or the clothes. Either way, you know? But for now, your name is Blue. Got it?"

"Blue?" Cory exclaimed. "You're naming me after a color?"

Karl looked wounded. "Well... yeah! That's not so bad, is it? It's not like I'm calling you 'Shitbag' or anything. What's wrong with Blue?"

Cory caved. "Christ. Nothing, I guess."

Karl leaned back and beamed. “Ex-cell-ent! I’ll have the boys print you up some business cards. Now, come on, let’s go. He’s not going to come inside for us.”

Karl got to his feet, and Cory stood in the aisle ahead of him. He decided if he was going to play a part for Karl, it was going to be a bodyguard, or something akin to one. They exited the train. Cool, nighttime air surrounded them. Cory picked out the late-model black Monte Carlo crossing the parking lot at them. The thirsty whine of a supercharger leaked out from under the hood. It had tinted windows, too, which made Cory think of the BMW Ellen had driven.

Cory and Karl walked to the Monte Carlo and allowed themselves to be bathed in the car’s headlights, which shut off as they got closer. Cory scanned the area and found nothing worth worrying about, then returned his full attention to the car. He wasn’t going to let anything bad happen to Karl. Not on his watch.

The dark passenger-side window slid down. “Hullo,” the husky, foreign voice said. “You the one called Big?” Cory glanced in. The man had black, greasy hair, thin sunglasses, and a mustache and soul patch. The driver was flabby, sweating, soft.

“That’s me, in the fleshy-flesh,” Karl chuckled. He rocked back and forth on his heels. “Are we all set?”

“We are set. But who is this with you? We are used to you being lonely.”

“Him?” Karl glanced at Cory and put on an innocent face. “Oh, he’s my hired killer. My walking, talking anti-tank weapon.” Karl put his teeth into a smile. “Nothing personal, understand.”

“Nothing personal,” the man repeated. He leaned forward and gave Cory a once over. “Offense not taken. It is dangerous world.”

“Perfect.” Karl reached into his coat, and pulled out a folded-over brown paper bag. “Here’s your lunch, junior.” The face studied Karl as he moved. Cory was aware that he couldn’t see the European’s hands, below the window. Karl tossed the bag in. The first man palmed the bag over to the driver, and waited as he opened the bag and examined the bundles of cash.

The two men exchanged softly spoken words, made up of hard-edged sounds. The passenger reached into the backseat and a grey-shelled plastic briefcase came out. Karl took it by the handle and stepped back from the car.

“Merry Christmas to you, too,” Karl said.

“You not check it?” the Eurotrash man asked.

“Oh, there’s no need,” Karl answered. He took a step back. “I know what’s in here. I can smell it. And,” he added the afterthought, “if it’s not, well, that’s what Blue here is for.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, he’s the shit.” Karl nodded to himself. “If anyone tries to screw me, I sent Blue their way to make all of their kids orphans. You boys have a good night.”

The window slung up, and the car jacked into gear. Cory watched it go, and tried the name ‘Blue’ on in his head.



Karl’s cell phone rang.

Well, not a true cell phone. This one was a low budget talisman, a magical device of plastic

and chips that did the work of a regular phone, but didn't need cell phone towers to work. And it could take calls from anywhere in the cosmos, either side of the Mirror, as deep into the Maya as he wanted to go. Even better, they were impossible to track or trace. Anywhere Phones, Karl thought. Get yours today.

He picked it up.

"It's Terry," Terry said.

"Hey, man, how are you?" Karl said. "It's been like two weeks."

"We're fine, thank you," Terry responded.

"You find anything out about Cory?"

"Yeah," Terry said. "How's he doing?"

"You know, he's working out okay," Big Karl said.

"I thought he might," Terry said.

"Yeah, so anyway..."

"Right," Terry said. "First, background check results. When Cory was six years old, all of his records entered the system. Before that, he didn't exist."

"Okay..."

"Birth certificate, Social Security number, medical records, immunization, all faked," Terry said. "They did it really good, too. Looks like the Order created Cory's identity out of thin air."

"Interesting," Karl mused.

"His mother died of a drug overdose," Terry said. "Suicide, when he was five. Her name was Anne Williams, but that was a fake, too. Her paper trail was done up earlier, by someone who did a good job, but wasn't on the inside of the system. Then, when Cory's records were shifted, hers were, too."

"So, okay," Karl said. "To recap, uh, Anne assumed a false identity, had her kid, and lived quietly for a few years. Then she offs herself. Her boy goes into state custody, then John Brozeck finds him and decides for some reason to take him in. So he has Cory's ID reworked, and then masks mom's identity, too?"

"Most likely," Terry agreed.

"What. The. Fuck?"

"Here's my theory," Terry said. "Anne is Gifted, or is an Edger, and gets involved with Brozeck somehow. She becomes pregnant, and gets scared. Maybe Brozeck doesn't want a kid, or maybe he's married and was having an affair - Jack, his son, is around Cory's age. So Anne leaves. But she needs to have Cory on the Incarna side of the Mirror, in case he turns out to be mundane."

"Right," Karl said. "Otherwise he'd be driven permanently mad before he got into kindergarten."

"Yes," Terry said. "That's my best guess."

"So, she dies, and Brozeck scoops Cory up and raises him like his own? Sounds like guilty-deadbeat-father syndrome to me. What else you got?"

"For the background, that's about it," Terry said. "The Mythica part. Firebirds or phoenixes exist in ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and Phoenician mythologies. Also Persian. Some Native

American. And also Russian folklore. So there's a lot of ground to cover. But, we've got a general idea.

"Most have the creature as being very long lived, able to regenerate, and only one can live at a time. However, considering how widespread the myth is, I think it's safe to assume that they just spread out a lot, or perhaps only one can live in a given geographical area at one time. Obviously, the powers of flight and fire control, and immunity to fire. Has a supernaturally powerful voice. Thought to be sent down by the gods to punish the wicked and bless the peaceful. And that's about it, until we get anything more specific."

"Could be worse," Karl said.

"Could be worse," Terry agreed.



"What's war?" Karl asked him. It was April 2nd, two days since the IHOP night. They were smoking in Karl's room. He had brought in a cracked leather Laz-E-Boy for the occasion, so there were two chairs. Cory was in the office roller, in front of a computer screen. Windows to news sites waited patiently for Cory's eyes.

"War?" Cory asked.

"Yeah, Blue. War. Tell me about it."

Cory stubbed his cigarette out in the ashtray next to his keyboard, then spun around. "I'd say that war is countries killing each other over politics or religion. Or money," he added. "Natural resources."

"Okay, not bad," Karl encouraged him. "It's not just countries. Nation states don't have a monopoly on violence. War existed when we were just monkey tribes fighting over watering holes. How are wars fought?"

"Well, weapons."

"What kind of weapons?" Karl prodded.

"Uh, guns," Cory flustered. He smiled self-consciously. "Tanks. Jet fighters, missiles..."

"Okay, there's a problem."

"Huh?"

"You're thinking of warfare in the old way," said Karl. "And you're too fixated on the killing part. Wars can't be fought without propaganda, or economic resources, or manpower, or a lot of other things. Have you ever heard of generational warfare theory? No? Never mind. It says that the way wars are done is constantly evolving. Makes sense, right?"

"Sure," Cory answered.

"Well, those weapons are part of the old way of doing war," Karl explained. He paused to puff on his cigar. "We gotta get you thinking about the new way, the Fourth Generation way. 'Cause if we put you in the streets with a shotgun, and send you up against the Marines, you're gonna die. That's 'cause most countries, and this includes the Order, can put more and better weapons into the field than you can. But you know what? It doesn't really matter."

"Sure it matters," countered Cory. "It means we can't fight them on open ground."

"Well, why the fuck would we ever want to do that?!" Karl shouted. "Their way of warfare, the state's, I mean, tries to maneuver enough firepower to bring it all to bear on the enemy. Which

works fine, if their enemy is stupid enough to be visible and holds still long enough to get killed. Do you know that the Americans dropped more bombs on Vietnam than were dropped by all of the countries in World War Two, combined?"

Karl stood and began to pace. He didn't have much room to do it, and Cory thought at any moment the man would smash into the shelf, the walls, or a hanging keyboard. Karl ranted on.

"The North won against the Americans because they used guerilla tactics. They hid among the population. They stayed spread out. And they knew they could win the war, even if they lost every major battle! Now, tell me, how did they win if we were killing them ten-to-one?"

Cory had no idea.

"They won," Karl said, triumphantly, "because they knew modern wars aren't about killing the enemy. Modern wars are about making the enemy not able to fight you. Or, even better, not want to fight you anymore. The Americans pulled out of Vietnam. They had the weapons to nuke the jungle into glass, but they didn't do it – they couldn't do it. Is any of this making even the slightest bit of sense to you?"

"I guess." Cory found another cigarette.

"All right. So you're with me that a guerilla army could defeat the world's most powerful military."

"Well, they did." Cory responded.

"Okay, let's talk resources," Karl steamed ahead. "What resources does the guerilla army need?" Karl chuckled to himself, and worked on his cigar as Cory thought it out.

"I think the guerillas obviously need soldiers, one way or another."

"Yeah, keep going," said Karl.

"They needed weapons."

"You're thinking too physical," Karl cut in. "The US had the Viet Cong outmatched in tangible resources. I'll grant that the guerillas need some hard resources, but they don't need to line up gun for gun and man for man."

"Okay, tactics," said Cory. "The VC were smart. They ground away at American forces' edges."

Karl raised an eyebrow. "And?"

"They tried to stay hidden in the jungle. And they blended into the people, in the villages."

"Okay, Blue, you're starting to get it, but you don't have all of it," Karl said. "So I'll help you out a bit. The guerilla army needs enough tactics to see the enemy's weak points, be able to hit them, and to stay small and hidden so they don't get blown away. More important than that is political resources. The Americans lost, not militarily, but because the political climate in the States made the war unpopular."

"Right," Cory hit on it. "The Sixties."

"That's right. The Viet Cong didn't have to win the battles in the jungle – they just had to hold on, pick at the American machine bit by bit. They did big attacks to hurt the Americans politically, not militarily. The Tet Offensive was to scare the Americans back home. Numbers wise, Charlie got his ass kicked."

"Okay," Cory nodded. "I think I see what you're getting at with all this. The Order is the US military, and we're the VC. And it's not a war about killing."

“A shooting war,” Karl sliced in.

“-as much as it’s a political, a cultural war.”

“That’s exactly it. Exactly. We have to turn the world against the Order, instead of killing all of the Order’s troops. And we have to do it while we dodge the big guns, because we can’t afford a standup fight. That’s the basic theory. Fighting the Order is a lot trickier, of course. We get to worry about Vales and dodging back and forth across the Mirror, that sort of thing. The Order gets Incarna, and we get Maya. And the real goal in Gifted wars isn’t just Vales, though you need those. It’s the paradigms that make the Vales. And those are made by what the people who live in those paradigms believe. Our wars are to influence what the normals believe. That’s why the Order hangs on to religion, science, and the media so tightly. Because those are the tools they need to control what people believe.”



*“Culture warfare is aimed at changing the ‘hearts and minds’ of the culture in question. This requires knowing the present state of the culture, knowing the desired end-product culture, and having both knowledge and ability to enact the change. At times, the ‘paradigm warrior’ will engage in activities which resemble, in whole or in part, surgical military acts. However, the value of these acts is not measured purely in tactical terms. On the contrary, it is the sociopolitical impact which matters. This is because the paradigm warrior does not want to kill his enemy – he wants his enemy to become him. (The Art of Tomorrow’s War, page 11)”*

Cory closed the paperback and checked his watch. It was 4:25 pm. He should get moving.

Cory slid the paperback into the inside pocket of his midnight blue armored racing jacket. He was still getting used to the feeling of shaped hard plastic on his forearms, elbows, shoulders, and lower back. It didn’t creak right when he moved, like leather does, but at least it was bike gear. He picked up the helmet from beside him on the park bench, then walked across the grass to the street. His boots felt snug and right against the asphalt.

The flat grey Katana-Ronin leaned patiently on its kickstand. Cory pulled the helmet on and found himself grinning behind the mouth air-vents. He swung his leg over the seat, got saddled, found the key and slid it home.

The motorcycle whine-growled to life. Ronins were lighter bikes than Ghosts were. They didn’t have the power, or the top end, either, but they were quick little bastards, and handled tight as could be. It was a solid setup for out-of-the-box city racing.

Cory plunged into the street. The Shadow of Chicago was busy today. It almost felt like he was in the real world, with actual traffic and pedestrians and open shop fronts and noise. There wasn’t a rush hour to worry about, though, or traffic cops, since Division 8 only bothered with serious crimes. He opened the Ronin loose and let the city dreamscape blur past.

Cory pulled up and slowed, and came over in front of the E-Leg-Tron Net café. He cut up onto the sidewalk with a rolling jolt. Mannequin legs formed a loose canopy over him, bolted to the brick façade above the café windows. Cory checked his wrist for the time.

E-Leg-Tron was a small Vale as such things go. Cory could barely feel it, even standing outside the front doors. He watched the street for signs of trouble and tried to keep from getting nervous. He checked the time again. The pickup still had a few minutes to get there. Cory pulled

his helmet off and lit up a smoke.

The trick to guerrilla warfare, Karl had taught him, was to be both surgical and subversive. “Never target civilians,” the big man had told him. “It never works. Terrorism is what repressive systems want... it gives them the excuse to crack down and push their agenda further. When we strike, we strike the enemy directly, and if we can, we do it where the public will never see it. Sure, sometimes you want to stage a big attack, but only hit the parts of the hydra that the public hates anyway. They’ll thank you for it, in their miserable little hearts.”

There was a small ping of energy from E-Leg-Tron; a Gifted had crossed the portal from Incarna. Cory perked up. Finally, it was his contact, an unshaven beatnik with a bulging, blaze-orange backpack over one shoulder. The grunt ran up and got the pack off.

“Hey, sorry man,” he said, puffing, out of breath.

“Yeah, I was getting worried,” Cory replied. He zipped up his jacket. The beatnik handed the pack over and Cory put it on.

“Okay, you’re all set,” beatnik said. Cory put his helmet and gloves back on, and fired up the bike. The Ronin responded happily and Cory buzzed onto the street, leaving the contact in his wake.

Hitting the Order on the Maya-side of the Mirror wasn’t really an option. The Order had Terishor heavies manning the walls of their Vales in the Shadow. With no mundanes around to offend, the Order utilized aggressive fire zones, bunkers, blast walls, and razor wire. It was common for Terishor to send a few dozen light machine gun rounds at any unknown vehicle or pedestrian that came too close. Sometimes they fired a few warning shots, first. Sometimes.

With that kind of general welcome policy, actually attacking Order strongholds in the Maya was essentially suicidal. Terishor had no problem with rolling out the heavy artillery if the defensive perimeter was threatened. Mortars, heavy rockets, autocannons, gatling guns, fully automatic grenade launchers, armored personal carriers, main battle tanks, attack helicopters... and that was from the list of mundane weapons. According to Karl, Terishor had power armor, self-directed robot gun platforms, insect attack drones, and light-bending stealth suits. No normals were in the Maya, so there was no reason for restraint. The Order had its technomagical war machines, and there was no balance to its military might.

Cory wove through the streets. Handmade signs, or graffiti tags, pointed the way to points of interest.

Humboldt Park, 2.5 miles

Funky Buddha 3 miles this way

Beware Order @ J Brown VA Medical Up Ahead

He pulled the bike around a crater left in the road from a recent artillery shell, and briefly wondered who took care of the street repair in this neighborhood. Then he was past and approaching his crossover point, a Vale with a doorway modded so he could take the motorcycle through.

He swung in to the old parking garage, the brick layered thick with grotesque murals, tagged names, and spray paint icons. The Gifted security guard waved at him from inside the armored booth and jabbed at the button to pull the metal gate open. Cory rode in and followed the reflective tape arrows. Cars lined the lot inside, shiny, dusty, expensive, rusted. All belonging to supernaturals, quietly hiding on the far side of the world.

Cory went through the hazy portal, across the Mirror into Incarna. He came out of the wall

and rode for the exit ramp, sweeping hard to the left, upward, into the sun. His pulse quickened. He was back in the mundane world once more.

Cory ducked and wove through the traffic at a brisk forty. It was traffic - real traffic - a wall of metal, plastic, safety glass, and rubber. Streams of side mirrors flashed by as he split the lanes, and took the bike over the stripped painted line. Startled faces darted to their windows. Cory snaked up through stopped Toyotas, Geos, and tall SUVs caught at a stoplight.

The Ronin whine-snarled through the gears. Urban renewal housing zoomed by on either side, punctuated by stop signs, telephone and power poles plastered with flyers, and the occasional, desolate tree. Small bodies playing street football scampered out of the way.

Cory cut a left at Johnson and crossed the overpass bridge. He stopped just past the end of the bridge and pulled over. He killed the motor and leaned the Ronin over to rest on its kickstand.

Cory kept the helmet on. He wanted to keep his face covered, in case a camera was on him. He removed the bike gloves and got into the backpack, and snapped on a pair of rubber gloves. Then came out the plastic case. Cory went over to the overpass bridge.

At the end of the railing was a two-inch square gap; the rail was hollow, and metal. Cory opened the case. The receive unit was a converted cell phone. The transmitter was in multiple pieces. Round tubes, wired together in a chain of four. Cory hooked the send units and receivers together, patched in the extended power supply, and sent the whole mess inside the railing, keeping the wire leads that came off of it near the opening. Then he putted the wires to the metal. Unless you were looking for it, you'd never find it. He was done in less than a minute. Packed up his things and climbed back on the bike. Got out of the area, nice and smooth.

Twenty minutes later, the bike and gear were stashed in a crumbling Rent-A-Spot storage garage. The tiny room smelled like oil, dust, and mold. Cory changed out of the clothes and tucked them into a Hefty bag, and left it next to the bike. Then he moved out on foot, wearing a black, thread-loose sweater, blue jeans, and asshole sunglasses.

He was back across the Mirror and to Big Karl's place in time for the six o'clock news.



On September 16th, in the year 1920, anarchists bombed the corner of Wall Street and Broad Street in New York City, using a hundred pounds of dynamite in a horse-drawn buggy. More than forty people were blown apart, and hundreds were hurt. The blast threw automobiles into the air and glass was shattered for half a mile in every direction. Newspapers declared the bombing an act of war. Ten thousand citizens were rounded up in the fear and paranoia. These "suspects," nearly all being recent immigrants, were accused of belonging to radical political groups and were deported. The earlier tide of criticism directed at the powers behind Wall Street was turned away. Remaining critics were accused of supporting terror and were silenced.



Fanfare. Electronic beeps, which mimicked the sound of Morse Code. The screen cleared, and a field of blue blinked in. The words flashed up: THIS IS CPNN NEWS. Dainty, homogenized music played under the announcer's excited, low voice. "CPNN News. It's six o'clock. Featuring Meteorologist Ariel Newman. Rick Harris in sports. Our dedicated team keeps YOU up to date.



And now, the breaking headlines, for April 14th, 2005, with anchorperson Tom Levey!”

Hard cut. A stern, grey-haired man, solid chin, dark blue suit, black tie. He stared at the camera and began to speak. Then the screen went blank. A hush fell over the war room in Karl’s place. There were a dozen of them there, Karl, Spindle, Marty, Denise. The kid who did the HAM radio stuff. The old web guru. They all held their breath. Cory did, too. It was their moment. And out there, on the Incarna side of Chicago, three dozen black box units came to life.

Boxes, just like the one Cory had set up. Boxes that jammed the airwaves. FM, AM, television. Five cable junctions across the city were possessed. Cars stuck in rush hour traffic lost their talk radio to the hidden demons in the overpasses above them.

The broadcast went haywire. Static filled the screen. Then text came up, along with a mean android voice, “You are being lied to!” Then Karl’s voice, no modulation, no disguise.

“All right, campers. It’s time to wake up.”

The team in the room let out a whoop and a holler. Drinks were raised and everyone shouted in mad glee. While Karl talked, clips of President Carlyle showed on the screen, with him giving the camera the finger. Then graphic shots of dead soldiers, dead civilians, maps of oil pipelines.

“War is a scam. Nothing truly important happens in the government, unless it was planned that way. They can say they were shocked. They weren’t. They can say they were unprepared. They weren’t. Everything happens for a reason. They’re willing to kill us to make us afraid. Once we’re afraid, they can make us do anything. Even invade a country on the other side of the world. We’re fighting a war in the name of big oil, big military complex, big police state. And the losers are you and me.”

Text from Goering at Nuremberg came up:

*‘Of course the people don’t want war. But after all, it’s the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it’s always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it’s a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, or a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.’*

Karl’s overdub kept on. “Here at home, they are tapping our phones and monitoring our emails. No warrants. No oversight. FEMA detention camps are in place in case we get out of hand. There are torture ships at sea, where ‘terror suspects’ are kept. People are disappearing, and the media goes along with it. Why? Because the major media corporations in this country are in on the job.”

Pictures of concentration camps, chain link fences, razor wire facing inwards. Faces of missing persons, one after another.

“They control the news. They control the voting boxes. They control the big companies, and we’re their cattle. If any one of us gets too mouthy, they can fire us, harass us, throw us in jail. And coming soon, political reeducation centers. Failing that, they can just kill us off, one by one. Forget about calling your Congressman. They don’t care. They don’t fear us, so why should they do our bidding? They let us protest, as long as we do it quietly, and on their terms. It helps with the illusion.”

Video of Seattle protestors breaking in windows. Corporate logos. Factory workers on an assembly line.

“If we group up, out in the open, and threaten the Powers That Be, they’ll kill us. Just ask the Black Panthers, or AIM. If we bomb and snipe them from the shadows, they’ll bring down Martial Law, and no one would have the balls to stop them. So our bombs will be information bombs. Our bullets will be headlines that tell you what is really happening. This is the voice of the revolution.”

Then their black transmitters went silent, and the screens and transmissions shocked back to the standard programming.

Hidden in the city, the now-silent black boxes waited for their next data stream. It would come in one week, another 90 second video. The download took a long time, going out on their own illegal cell phone network. Then the hotboxes would wait for the go signal, and they’d do it all over again.



Cory had the day off. He went to second-hand stores and bought some clothes. Businesses in the Shadow leaned toward barter. If cash was all a buyer had, the deal could probably go through... probably. Merchants upcharged anywhere from fifty to a hundred percent to deal with mundane currency. Using the American dollar meant that you had to go to Incarna to spend it. Gifted didn’t like using banks. Banks meant the Order, and no one wanted that kind of hassle.

Gold and precious metals were close to useless, too. Some Gifted could shift or create matter, and changing junk nickel to pure silver was relatively easy. Because of this there was no universal currency. Supernaturals traded in finished goods or specialized labor. Some areas used a local trading currency, where you could make deals based on “credit.” Karl had set him up with such an account. The seller would call up the broker, verify the transaction, and hand over the clothing. When the seller wanted to cash in, he’d check the broker’s available goods (traded in for credits), or services, and pick from the list of available ways to spend what they’d earned. And so on.

Cory found a cheap internet café and surfed the news, piped in across the Mirror. He spent an unseasonably warm April afternoon in the Shadow of Grant’s Park, and watched the girls pass by in sun-kissing attire. He found an Irish Pub, a Vale called the Drunken Fish, on Riverbee, where he filled his stomach and had a drink or three, and spent several hours reading. The sun went down.

The air cooled as night wore on. It became overcast and windy, and Chicago’s amber streetlights reflected off the bottoms of the ever-present clouds, and gave the world a dreamlike sky. Perhaps it would rain tomorrow.

At 10:00 pm the pub was healthily filled. The buzz and jumble of many Gifted in close proximity overlaid Cory’s senses and made him want to edge away. Some carried things that had been infused by magic, or even, rarely, Talismans. Wilder Gifted bent reality for entertainment, and paranoid types did their best to keep mental defenses up at all times, their minds behind shields of power.

Cory found himself in front of the pub’s portal, near the corner of the bar where the sightlines in the room were damn near perfect. Without knowing why, he stepped across into Incarna.

The crowded room was a mix of upper-scale college kids and quiet, older regulars. The younger faces were rosy and energetic flowers, while the older, greyer, and poorer half of crowd had the demeanor of wise, sour alley cats. There was a three-piece band on the low, shiny wooden

stage, lit by red-filtered spots – an acoustic guitar, an acoustic bass, and a flat, wide hand drum that Cory didn't know the name for. The air smelled full of smoke from cigars and hand-rolled cigarettes. No one had seen him cross.

Cory got himself a pint of cider at the bar and squeezed into a tight, two-person booth against the wall. It wasn't wise to be here, Cory knew. So why had he come over? He didn't know, and he sipped the apple beer and smoked in silence.

Above his head, grainy photos of patrons from years past smiled and cavorted. The band launched into a hearty, boisterous song about killing British soldiers.

Out of the corner of Cory's eye, he saw a movement that locked up his brain. Long, wavy blonde hair, narrow waist, model's legs, long, kissable neck. A clinging black dress that showed her off as she leaned over the bar and smiled at the bartender.

And then she turned and saw him, and the shock was unmistakable. She recovered first. She found an embarrassed smile and turned it into something coy, and walked over to where he was frozen. It was Heather.

## *Good Old Days*

Cory climbed the metal stairs up to the Fun House. That's what the guys called Big Karl's place, these days. The Fun House. It was a sweaty, smoky, stained beehive. The squat never stopped running, drinking, or screaming into the night. Whatever that drug of fast-and-dirty living was, Big Karl's place mainlined it. Karl had somehow cooked the junk of run-'til-ya-die youth until it was in a pure, undiluted form, and he sold it for cheap – hell, he gave the shit away – right out of his own living room.

Cory hadn't slept last night. He felt raw and numb at the same time.

There was a new sticker on the door today. Too big for a bumper sticker, all black, white lettering.

*Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will  
make violent revolution inevitable. - JFK*

Cute, he thought. Cory leaned on the buzzer. Ruby was on front door duty – he let Cory in. Ruby had been the one to first greet them when Cory had first arrived three weeks earlier. It was part of Ruby's job description. He was the guy who surfed Russian news wires, chain-smoked cigarettes, pounded black coffee, and pointed guns at anyone at the door.

"You look like shit," said Ruby. He was wearing his 'Fuck Off You Fucking Fuck' t-shirt again today. It must be Tuesday, Cory's brain mumbled. That's his Tuesday shirt. The Clash was on the closet stereo.

Cory replied, "Thanks. Asshole."

"Where ya been all damn day?" Ruby lit a cig and sat back down on the bar stool in front of the computer terminal by the door. "Big thought you might have gotten thrown in the drunk tank, you didn't come home last night. Either that, or Terishor finally got the balls to come Maya-side and bag your ass."

"Yeah," he grimaced. Cory patted himself down and couldn't find his cigarettes. Where did he leave them? Didn't he have them an hour ago, walking around Lakeside? He couldn't remember.

Ruby tossed Cory a spare pack.

"Sanks," Cory said. He lit up and collapsed into the living room couch. A half-dead bag of Doritos crunched and scattered. Both CNN and CSPAN glared at him. A third television played, in slow motion, a John Woo movie.

Ruby turned his head and shouted, "Hey, Karl!"

"What?" came the reply. "Tell those little bastards we already found God!"

"Nah, Blue's back!"

"Oh, shit. Well, that's different, then." The floorboards in Karl's room groaned as he moved.

"Hey, Ruby," said Cory.

"Hmmm?"

“How do you do it, man?” Cory asked. “How do you never fucking sleep?”

“I used to do ephedrine, all that natural ginseng crap, speed, coke, everything,” Ruby said. “When I came down I’d crash for days. Then I got into this little scene. Information is the new drug. It’s all I do, now. I don’t need to sleep anymore.”

Karl’s head loomed over the back of the couch. Cory hadn’t heard him approach.

“Where the fuck you been?” Karl said quietly. “Out getting laid?”

“No,” Cory deadpanned.

“You were supposed to be back on this morning. I’ve got a run to take over to Quinn’s.”

“Sorry, Karl,” Cory said.

“Don’t sorry me,” Karl came back. “Sorry Quinn. He’s the one been waiting.” Cory wanted to tell him about running into Heather, about what it did to him to see her again. How he felt excited and angry and nostalgic and sad. But he didn’t. Cory was getting tired of everyone knowing the ins-and-outs of his life. About him being different. About Neco. Everything.

“I’ll head right over,” Cory said.

“Atta boy.”

Cory finished his smoke and stabbed it out in an overflowing ashtray. Splashed some cold water on his face to wake up, and slammed a short cup of coffee. Then he got the backpack for Quinn and rode over on a knob-tired dirt bike. The drop was quick and easy. Quinn was a regular customer of the Fun House and had an ongoing account, so Cory didn’t need to worry about payment. Just drop off and go. The real risk was a hold up. Urban bandits could roll a courier and be long gone before help arrived, presuming Division 8 even responded to the call. Karl depended on Cory to be able to handle himself.

Cory couldn’t see straight by the time he got back. Everything was a blur. He stumbled up the stairs, as if he were drunk.

“Hey, how’d it go?” Ruby greeted him.

“Fine,” Cory managed. “Gonna sleep now.” He fell into the couch amid the chaos of the room and blacked out. He hadn’t even taken off his boots.

Cory had a little dream of walking disjointed, grey alleyways, cut like a maze, trying to find the way out to get a cup of coffee – he was so tired, in the dream.

He dreamed he was back on his ARC circuit bike, heavy in his silver Team Octane gear, and he couldn’t keep himself together on the turn. The wheels turned to mercury, and he slid off the highway and hit, slid off the highway and hit, slid off... again, again. Crash. Crash. Crash. A tumbling doll, a bit of crumpled clothing.

He dreamed that he was making the run to Quinn’s, and he was running way late. Days late. Years late. He wasn’t Cory anymore – he was a descendant, and Cory Williams was one of his distant, ancient ancestors. He got the parcel to Quinn’s, finally, after all these years... and Quinn was now a corpse who walked and skulked in the dark, thin and brittle, made of paper.

He dreamed that the 60’s had never happened, and that JFK was just a character someone had played on TV. World War Two had never ended, and life was a forever jumble of black-and-white news footage of bombers, tanks, burned out cities, explosions, dead bodies.

Heather. How can you do this to me? Why are you here, now? Why couldn’t you just leave me alone?

●

Cory cracked open an eye. Sprawled boys, no, teenagers, young men. Nearly draftable. Game controllers snaked from their hands to the large screen set into Karl's cheap entertainment center. A four player kill-all video game. Lasers and grenades buzzed and exploded.

Tired.

Cory rolled over and grabbed a couple more hours.

●

The couch shook. Again.

"Hey, Blue." It was Big Karl.

"Mmmghhwa?"

Bang. A kick.

"Blue!"

"What?!" Cory surged awake.

"Wake up!"

"I'm awake, I'm awake."

"Come on," Karl urged. "You've been asleep for like seven hours."

"Huh?" Cory looked around. The Love Boat and Hawaii Five-Oh beamed down at him, beatifically. Alt-rock surfer music played from the kitchen. "Hey..." Cory rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. Through the gaps in the blinds, he saw the sun was down. "What time is it?"

"Time to get up."

"Okay, man," Cory said.

"Got word from Terry," Karl said. "Let's get some food and talk about it."

●

Karl drove. It was an old model Ford Thunderbird, with a throaty, big block engine and wide street tires. The thing must have gotten about eight miles to the gallon. The car had a cracked, neglected leather interior – bench seats – and abused wood grain console. Cigarette butts bounced in the torn carpeting.

He took them out of the Shadow of the Red Light District and down into Southside. Just into the Capstone District, Karl pulled the heavy Detroit artifact into a long, narrow parking lot. The iron-and-brick building had a small neon sign at the street - Sterling's Steakhouse. The lot was filled with Cadillacs, Lincolns, BMWs, and Lexuses.

They got out, and Cory sniffed the air. It smelled like rain was coming, but you couldn't trust your nose in the Maya.

The sidewalk before the brightly lit, double glass doors was softened by a deep red carpet. A doorman in a black suit, red coat jacket with tails, and a black top hat eyed them neutrally as he opened the way. The walls and floor shined at them, made of fine, nearly black, deep wood.

Expensive glass and brass glistened and winked. Behind the reception desk stood a middle aged man in a charcoal suit, power rolling off of him in waves. Behind him, the power of the Vale hummed beyond a black curtain.

“Yes, gentlemen, do you have a reservation?” He narrowed his eyes and crinkled his nose, as if he smelled something amiss. “This establishment is reservation only.” Karl shrugged in his black vinyl coat.

“There might be something under Jenkins?”

The man swallowed and stumbled, “You’re Mr. Jenkins?”

“Uh huh,” Karl answered, with a light growl and a smile. He liked moments like these.

“Right away, sir.”

They were led beyond the curtain and through a waiting area to the Starlight Room. It had glass on two sides, and the ceiling was a domed skylight. The proud Chicago skyline stood in the distance beneath a thin bank of clouds. The private area was empty except for the two of them.

Their waiter arrived and took Karl’s wine order, then quietly withdrew.

“So, what do you think?” Karl asked.

“Nice place,” Cory said, looking about. “So why Mr. Jenkins? Am I missing something?” Karl tilted his head and looked up through the glass ceiling.

“Just a name,” Karl said.

“Doesn’t have a special meaning?”

“It’s what I use when I’m being a tad more legitimate than normal,” Karl said. “I like having spare personalities around. They’re useful.”

“And you have a name to get you good restaurant service?”

“Don’t fudge the details,” Karl replied. “Good eating is important.”

The wine came. Karl ordered soup for the both of them, and selected the steak cuts. He raised his glass of wine. It looked like liquid, ashen roses. “To our success. Blockade runners of the mind.” The wine was heavy, potent. Cory’s lips sang with it.

“We used to do this,” Karl leaned forward. “Grey and I. Not this place, mind ya, but we’d have our celebration dinners whenever we pulled a good one and got away with it. I guess it’s still tradition for me. You did good work the other day. Being a part of our pirate network setup.”

“I take it they didn’t disable any of them yet?”

“FCC still has their panties all in a bunch,” Karl chuckled. “But they haven’t found anything. It’s just a matter of time before the Order decides to get involved. But that’s the beauty of just using tech, sometimes. The Order doesn’t smell any magic, so it doesn’t get involved. Least not right away.”

“Cool.”

“So,” Karl raised an eyebrow. “What the hell happened to you last night? I thought maybe you got grabbed and were down in Gitmo by now, being raked over the coals by Terishor. You don’t do that... disappear that soon after a job.” Karl sniffed. “It looks bad. Like you’re a double agent, something like that. Now, I know that ain’t you, but you gotta understand that paranoia is the name of the game.”

“I know,” Cory said. “I’m sorry.”

“So what happened, eh?” Karl’s voice was softer. He was going to do this - get Cory to tell

him the story. Cory sighed and relented.

“I was over at the Drunken Fish, this Irish place?”

“I know it,” Karl said.

“Hung out for a while, then decided to poke my head on over and see what it was like, Incarna-side.”

“Okay.” Karl leaned forward. Cory sighed.

“I know. Stupid,” Cory said. “Anyway, it’s not like it was the Vale in the Mayor’s office. But, I know. Anyway, I’m there seeing how the other side lives, and I ran into an old girlfriend of mine.”

“Uh oh,” Karl said. “Sound of your voice, this wasn’t just some one-off thing. Serious old flame, right?”

“Yeah,” said Cory. “Pretty serious for a while, or at least I thought we were. I was kinda this motorcycle racing guy, and she was this marketing person for the circuit. And I was good, you know? So I was this rising star, and she was my girl. That’s how I met Terry, too. At a circuit party, just following Heather around like usual, having her introduce me to people and trying to make everyone look good.”

“So, I had a wreck that pretty much fucked my career,” Cory continued. “And if I couldn’t race anymore, I was off the circuit. And of course, Heather is all wrapped up in her job, she stays with it. I mean, we tried the long distance thing for like a month, but it just wasn’t her way. I can’t blame her. If she’d been fired, I’d have left her behind and kept racing.”

Cory stopped and took a drink of his wine. Karl waited quietly.

“So, that’s it,” Cory said. “Ran into her. What are the odds? And she’s not Gifted or anything, no power in her. Just a normal girl. And it still dropped me like getting slammed in the stomach.” Cory let out a small, unconvincing laugh. “So I came back through to the Maya-side and just walked around. Got as drunk as I could manage. Didn’t feel like sleeping, and didn’t feel like coming home. So I walked around.”

Karl let out a long breath.

“You, with your past, and you think this kind of a meeting is just a coincidence? You gotta play a hell of a lot smarter than that, Blue. Fuck!”

“What?” Cory exclaimed. “No, she’s not...”

“It doesn’t matter. It does not matter,” Karl said. “Gifted or not. Hell, she could be an Edger, there’s almost no way to tell. She could be an agent of someone, trying to draw you out. Hell, she might be mind-fucked, and not even know that she’s someone’s pawn. No more old faces for you. Not with your past. You hear me?”

Cory’s face flushed. For the first time in days, he felt Neco stir in his guts, and pushed the dragon back down. He almost said something, then thought better of it and closed his mouth. Silently, Cory cursed Karl for chewing him out.

“God, Blue, man,” Karl shook his head. “I’m sorry, but you just can’t do that. It’s pretty much like you come from an Order family, you hear what I’m saying? These people are big into family dynasties. If this Brozeck guy thinks of you as his kid, then that pretty much means he’ll never let you go. Either you join the Order, or you’re a mistake the Order needs to correct. He has to worry about saving face, man. They’re never going to stop looking for you, and they’re never going to forget what you’ve done.”



A long silence fell over the two men. The waiter returned with their soup. When he was gone, Karl started talking again, his voice easy and calm once more.

“Okay, probably, you’re fine,” Karl assured him. “Probably. Coincidences happen. Sometimes it’s not coincidence, sometimes it’s fate, and sometimes you’re just being fucked with by some pompous old spell-slinger who wants to mess with you. But you have to be more careful. Okay?”

“Okay,” Cory said quietly. He swallowed and finished pushing Neco and the anger away.

“Okay,” Karl repeated. “So, about the time you were on walkabout, Terry called me up. He and his little chicky found out some stuff. You ready?”

“Yeah,” Cory nodded. “Go.”

“Your Mythica family is Phoenix,” Karl said. “We knew that already. Trying to figure out what specific mythical spirit you’re from is the hard part. You got a Chinese and Japanese kinds, you got the Russian Firebird, Native Americans have the Thunderbirds. The Egyptian brand is called Bennu.” Karl took a drink and continued.

“The best lead they’ve got has to do with the blurring of legends from the Romans and the Celts. The Romans brought with them the myths of ancient Greeks, who already had a Phoenix myth, and they ran into powerful stories of the Celts about carrion birds and war goddesses that were birds. The main one was the Morrigan. She was big in old Britain. She had a bunch of powerful sons, and was named Coscar. He was a war bird of death and fire, and could regenerate and heal others. Sound familiar?”

“Well, okay, but I’ve never heard of a Coscar,” Cory said. “Or a Morrigan, for that matter. So it’s a forgotten myth?”

“The Roman invasions took place over two hundred years, and they never got beyond Hadrian’s Wall for long,” Karl said. “Then they hung around on the southern half of the island for, like, three or four hundred years. The Romans weren’t too nice to the Druids, who weren’t big on written records anyway. The legends of the Coscar were lost over time. It doesn’t matter. Somewhere in there, a Coscar and a human started a new bloodline. And here you are. Hell, maybe some of your ancestors rubbed elbows with King Arthur. How do you like that?”

The food arrived. The steaks were better than any food had rights to be. Dimly, Cory was aware that he was eating better than he had in years, but his mind was too busy chasing the news that Karl had shared. Terry was pretty sure he knew what Cory was. He wasn’t some kind of monster. He was a Coscar, a descendent of a kind of Phoenix. The knowledge gradually settled into a kind of bedrock around him. It was okay, now. Everything was going to be okay. His eyes welled with tears from the sudden relief.

A Coscar, that’s what I am, Cory thought. And as Cory silently tried on his new identity for size, Big Karl told his story.

“Well, it goes a bit like this,” Karl began. “See, I became one of the Gifted when I was just fourteen, in ’85. I was a runaway in Boston. School was hell, my folks were both split up and poor junkies anyway, yada-yada-yada. So I was a street kid, in a gang called the Hammertown Singers. And we were in this stupid fight with another gang, the Roaches. And low and behold, mid-rumble, I lose my mind and everything goes haywire.” Karl chuckled.

“Here I was, taking on three guys at once, looking like fucking Rambo on PCP, and I’m scared out of my mind. So after the fight, I just jumped ship and laid low. And after a couple of days, these pretty punk kids found me and put me back together. Most of ‘em were Dreamers, which are kind of like Gifted, but they can play with art and music and creative stuff in this weird

way. And they kept me sane and showed me the ropes.

“They took me everywhere with them, they had an Irish punk band they ran around with. Then I got hooked up with some hacker kids, these whacked out beatniks out in the San Francisco Shadow. Between them and some Harbingers in Seattle, I got into the whole deal. We broke into everything. Made some friends inside the Soviet Union just before it fell apart. Then watched the whole Iraq build-up, and the bullshit Carlyle was putting through to get his tidy little war. And that’s about when I met Terry.

“He was this little darksider kid in Seattle, hung out in Capitol Hill. He was into all that Crowley shit and Gnosticism, and I was busy hacking scrambled Air Force transmissions out of Baghdad, and it just worked. He got into all this ancient Babylonian and Sumerian occult stuff, and actually taught me a couple of tricks about what those crusty old bastards got out of the Tower of Babel. And so he got me wearing eyeliner and spiking my hair up, and I got him into anarchy and all that.

“So, things kept going. The Dreamer guys came back, and me and Tom, we bummed around with them. And they picked up this hot little singer from Wales. Kyla. And so the three of us, we all kind of hooked up. Goofy threesome thing. Hell, it lasted for a whole summer. Better than most poly things. We went to Philadelphia, and we set up a branch of the Night Watchmen in the Shadow, there. A kind of crossover thing between info-freaks and magic guys. They’re still around. I use them from time to time.

“But that was about as far as we got. We broke up. You think a couple calling it quits is messy? You ain’t seen anything. Everyone went a different way, too jealous and fucked in the head to stand seeing each other. Terry bummed around for a few years, I guess, then started over in Minneapolis. I got all anarcho here, and neither of us have heard about Kyla. Hell, she could be dead, by now.

“So I just sort of tucked my head down and got into fucking with the Order. Keeps me busy. Makes sense. They’re the worst thing that ever happened to this country. It’s pretty easy to hate them, to want to derail their trains and tip over their towers. With a lot more of it in the works. Big things coming. Big things.”

They finished eating. Their wine glasses were refilled, and Karl lit up a smoke. Cory followed suit, and left the Northern Lights pack on the soft tablecloth. “So, then,” Karl said with a raised eyebrow, “what’s your deal? What do you want out of all of this?”

“I don’t know, man,” Cory replied. “Guess I just want to get a handle on this Coscar thing, figure out why a dragon has a direct line into my head, where that whole thing came from. And get the Order off my case.”



The next few days, the Fun House began to change. At first, no one knew just quite what to make of it all: yellow post-it notes took over the screens, the soundtracks coming from the speakers got heavier and faster, strange deliveries of heavy wooden boxes, Karl fiddling with a HAM radio in his room. A wariness crept into everyone’s eyes and tension filled their skin. The kids didn’t come by to play video games anymore. The walls were stripped bare of posters, then covered with maps of the Chicago Shadow, and the Grass Ocean Caerra beyond it. The number of Fun House regulars was quietly trimmed.

The next day, Karl issued everyone left an AR-15 assault rifle. It was a heavy thing, all strange angles and cold metal. Cory cradled it in his lap and wondered just what the hell Karl was trying to pull this time. He looked around the Fun House, and saw the same kind of looks plastered about. They were split into three groups of fifteen guys, each. Cory was in the first group, and left within an hour in a small caravan, led by Karl in his T-Bird. They drove for an hour south to the Shadow of Salem, Illinois, and a site Karl called the Farm.

The Farm belonged to one of Karl's co-conspirators, a grizzled 'Nam vet named Jake. At first glance, Jake looked like a burnout from the 70's, with long hair, a week old scruff, and worn out Army Surplus clothing. But when Jake talked, Cory felt compelled to listen to the old man's instructions. He wasn't burned all the way out. Not yet.

"Line up," Jake commanded. "Eyes front, back straight, barrels to the sky."

"Now, you fellas listen to what Jake tells you to do," Karl ordered them. The Fun House gang stood in a line, facing Karl and Jake. "He's been there. He knows what he's talking about. If at any time you want to go, you can go. I don't want anyone coming up crying to me afterwards, saying I twisted your arm to make you stay here.

"Some of you might be asking yourselves, why didn't I let anyone know this was coming? Why the big change? I'll tell you this... I've seen the reports from Minneapolis, and Seattle, and DC. Big Brother is up to no good, and we can expect some big pushes across the Mirror into our territory within the year. So I want all of my people to know what to do when they come. I'm not a big fan of killing folks, but when Terishor comes knocking, I want to be able to knock back."

There was a low chuckle that spread through the men. Cory felt something dangerous and animal in them, and having the rifles in their hands, even knowing they had no bullets... they imagined themselves as soldiers. Put a weapon of war into anyone's hands, Cory thought, and they fall into playing the part.

One day became another. Drills, running, team exercises, weapon work. They were yelled at a lot. They ran through a junkyard obstacle course, and were forced to do things as a group, a team. When one person screwed up - ran too slow, cleaned their rifle wrong, recited a field mantra incorrectly - Jake made them pound out sit ups, push ups, or a flight of 100 yard sprints.

Cory didn't mind the work that Jake put them through. He'd kept in reasonable shape since the hospital, and had an instinctual knack for tactics. And he knew the drill. Basic training wasn't so much about teaching a soldier how to fight... it was to mold a man into something pliable, to break down his individual will, and to make him a part of a larger whole.

Jake handed out paintball guns and safety masks, and made them wage exercises on each other, five on a side. The dragon could barely manage to notice, and Cory wondered if its hold in his guts was weakening with time. His dreams evened out, and filled with rifle range memories, jogging in the heat, and the smell of men and cordite.

Weeks passed. The guys took notice of Cory's ease in the thick of things, and Jake noticed it, too. They made Cory the team leader, and when Karl came back to check on them he seemed happy.

"Kinda figured," Karl told him later that night. "What, with all that bloodline stuff crammed in your head. What do you think of all of this, eh?"

"It's like, sometimes I think I'm pissed at you for springing this on me," Cory said. "I mean, I doubt that Terry and Bacchus had this in mind when they dropped me off. But it's like it's easy for me. Some of the guys, like Ruby, they have a lot of trouble. But I don't mind. I'm good at it."

“Terry knows about the Farm,” Karl said. “I told him, last time we talked. He knows what I’m putting you through down here.”

“What’s he think of it?” Cory asked.

“He thinks that keeping you busy is a good idea,” Karl answered. “And he knows that you being up in the Twin Cities right now is a bad idea. Someone is looking for you up there. Scrying, and some Astral agents poking around, House of Raeford style.”

“You think I’m far enough away down here that they won’t find me?”

“It’s worked so far, kid,” Karl said.

Cory smoked as they walked back down the long driveway to the Farm. He looked at the white house with its peeling paint, the collapsed barn and silo, the rusting tractors in the back field. The snap of rifles on the range sent sharp echoes.



They approached the pumping station just before dawn. A light breeze made the dark grass ripple in the ditch around them, and the color was coming into the east. Dawn in the Grass Ocean was a splendid thing, a slow wash of impressionism come alive. Paintball guns clacked quietly against their protective face shields as they swept their weapons over the buildings before them.

Cory crept forward and signaled for everyone behind him to stay put and stay low. His point man, Spade, signaled with his left hand. No signs of the enemy. Lots of open ground between them and the buildings - plenty of space to get caught in, out in the open. Another ditch around the back of the station, and tall grass along a fence line to the right.

The second Fun House team was holed up somewhere in those buildings. They knew he was coming, and they knew his window of opportunity was closing with the arrival of the morning. They’d be ready. Even if Cory could manage to sneak half his men around along the other ditch and mount a two-sided attack, it would either devolve into a prolonged, ranged shootout, or they’d have to try to push out over the open ground and would get picked off. Cory couldn’t win this exercise with mundane tactics alone.

The range was too far for psychic combat. Psychics had to get close to have a chance, so the three guys Cory had with him that could do it would have to be brought in a lot closer. Then they could throw some illusions into the buildings, or maybe some basic mental confusion. Useful for room-to-room, but Cory had to figure out how to get them up there.

Cory’s best straight-up soldiers were those who could jack their own bodies above humanity’s physical limit. Phil and Mama could run twice as fast as Olympic sprinters, and they could lay down accurate fire while they did it. Rogers would be nearly impossible to shoot - he could bend space around himself, just enough to keep bullets from finding their mark. These three, Cory decided, would be his second wave, from around the back.

First wave was going to be his distraction and his sacrifice wave. Cory would have Spade lead this group... if anyone could manage to find a way through the defensive fire and actually do some damage, it would be Spade. Cory gave Spade five men and whispered his orders. Spade gathered his charges behind him at the edge of the ditch.

Cory brought Phil, Mama, and Rogers back out and around to the left, and found the ditch at the back. The tension in his limbs crept up to high volume. This was it.

He slowly pulled a flash-bang grenade off of his harness and removed the pin, and made sure the eyes around him saw him do it. Then Cory juiced his muscles with added strength, cocked his arm back, and threw the grenade as hard as he could. The dark fruit whistled as it sailed over the pumping station and landed just on the other side. White light bloomed and silhouetted the buildings, followed by a nasty roar.

From the front ditch, Cory heard Spade shout a battle cry and go over the top of the grass, providing his own cover fire. Others from Spade's position joined in, and the three buildings around the station answered with their own pops of fire. "Okay!" Cory yelled. "Go!"

He threw himself over the ledge. Mama was already out ahead of him, and ran a zigzag pattern across the open ground. She was halfway there before the first paintballs came down around her. Cory threw some rounds back at the window position that shot at Mama. Bright flashes of color sang into the building's wall. Several defenders responded to Cory's shots. Half of the rear-facing windows threw white flashes of vapor his way. Rogers got their attention and drew their fire away from Cory.

On the other side of the station, someone from Spade's first wave made it to the buildings and threw in cover fire and smoke grenades. Cory found a tractor tire in the dirt and skidded to his knees behind it, and started taking careful shots at anyone trying to catch Rogers with paint. He saw Phil appear at the base of the right-most shed and go in an open window. Muffled pops followed him.

The other side of the complex got hot and heavy. Third wave, Cory thought. Here they come. From the hail of fire, though, Cory knew they were in trouble. Not enough of the defenders had come his way to fend off the attack from the rear. That left too many guns facing his more vulnerable psychics. And if Cory lost his psychics, the final, room-to-room sweeps were going to be tough. He went left, looking for anyone from Spade's wave to meet up with... and felt the sting of a shot slap into his left shoulder.

"God dammit!" he exclaimed. The pain throbbed deep into the muscle. He had a nasty bruise coming to him. Heat rolled up behind Cory's eyes. He wanted to push on. He wanted to send power to the ends of his fingers and make his enemy pay. Burn them out of their houses, tear into their throats. No, Cory brought himself down. It's not real. Just practice. Calm down.

Resigned, Cory lay down and listened to the sound of battle as it continued on, without him.

That evening, Terry came to see him.



Terry looked thinner, somehow, in the dim light from the waxing crescent moon. Long shadows swept before their feet. It was just the two of them, and they walked along the collective, Mayan memory of an old country road. Crickets chirped from the ditches on either side, and fireflies hovered over the grassy fields. Cory carried his rifle - standard practice, away from the Farm - and he and Terry smoked. Cory was relieved to see Terry again, but his friend had a tight, worried expression that he couldn't seem to shake.

"So how's your dragon treating you?" Terry asked.

"It's been quiet," Cory answered. "Half the time, I forget that it's in there, you know?" He patted his chest.

"I think I know why," Terry said. "Bacchus has been hiding something from us."

"Somehow, I think we already knew they were up to something," Cory said. "It's not Ellen, is it?"

"No, she didn't know," Terry replied "But someone did. Maybe Morrow knew all along."

"Well, what?"

"Neco is in some kind of magical prison," Terry said. "The Order went through a lot of trouble to capture it. It probably would have been easier to try to find a way to destroy it.

"In 1982, there was a local group that called itself House Aruithinea. They claimed a long heritage of pagan and pre-Hermetic practices, with roots in the British Isles and parts of Germany. At the peak of their power in the Midwest, they had maybe a hundred members.

"Early that year, there was an unusual alignment of planets, seven of them, that may have marked increased activity of the Elements. Records of Neco's appearance in the area seem to coincide with this. There was also an increase in IRA activity, culminating in bombings in central London. It's likely that House Aruithinea members in America would have been sympathetic to the IRA cause, and were working to make attacks on Order held strongholds here.

"Neco became close to an Aruithinean leader named Chris Rhine. It could work through him, and they shared a telepathic bond. Chris was also known to have a great ability in creating and controlling fire, and was a respected military leader. You see where this is pointing?"

"A lot of that sounds like me," Cory breathed. "You think he was the same kind of Mythica?" Terry nodded.

"Coscar," Terry said. "It looks very likely." Cory felt a chill run through him. Terry continued, "Considering how rare your kind looks to be, I'd say that it's likely that Chris Rhine was your biological father."

"My father?" Cory asked, eyes unbelieving. "My real father?"

"It's too much of a coincidence," Terry said. "The timing seems right."

"So..." Cory struggled for the words. "What happened to him, then?"

"He died," Terry said. "In the fighting. There was an extended conflict in Maya, part of Aruithinea's guerilla war against the Order. The Order had a hard time dealing with them, since Neco gave Aruithinea a great deal of firepower. But once Neco was captured, Aruithinea - and Rhine - were exposed. They didn't stand much of a chance after that.

"Why the Order captured Neco instead of trying to destroy it, I don't know," Terry continued. "I'm working on finding out. But I think that Neco, imprisoned or not, has figured out a way to communicate with you. And it wants to empower you like it did Chris Rhine. I don't know why. Perhaps simply because you are familiar to it, because you remind it of who your father was."

"I really don't feel Neco down here," Cory said. His words sounded far away to his ears. "Is it just hard for it to reach me, this far away? Or..."

"That's my understanding," Terry said gently. "It has difficulty pushing beyond whatever wards the Order has in place. If you moved further away, I doubt Neco would have any effect on you at all. It's something to consider. From how I understand it, Neco's hand in Chris Rhine's life was as much of a burden as a blessing."

"Wait," said Cory. "What does this have to do with Bacchus? You said that Morrow might have known about all of this?"

“That’s right,” Terry said. “And not just because this is local history, and it’s important for Faction officers to know what came before their time. Morrow might have known, because Bacchus has been helping keep Aruithinea hidden. The people who know the answers we want have been nearby this whole time.”

## *Heat Index*

Jake and Karl rotated Cory's unit back to the Fun House. The plan was for two weeks of training, then one week at the Fun House, back and forth throughout the summer. Karl's activities in agitprop quieted down.

That June, Chicago started out hot, and shot for record highs. The walks to the corner convenience shop for smokes left Cory panting for water, and his lungs stung to boot. Then it turned humid, and everyone cooked in their own sweat and tried to find air conditioning. Cory ran his team through drills during the cooler nights, their footfalls beating a happy rhythm against the brick walls of overlooking, darkened buildings. When they rotated back to the Farm, Jake remarked on Cory's initiative.

Cory found himself becoming infected by the information virus that permeated Karl's people. He became addicted to the news, and turned to the keyboard, mouse, and screen to pass the hours when he was alone. He charted, with dull-but-rising alarm, the common unhappiness the general public coughed up in places like Detroit, the Quad Cities, Denver, and Cleveland.

The war kept plunging downward. Iraq, Afghanistan, the trouble in Venezuela. Israel went into Lebanon. Patriot Act II passed, and the Internal Affairs Security Department formed, a super-agency within Homeland Security. New York City and Detroit joined Washington DC as Walled Cities. Cement barriers topped with razor wire and machine gun posts grew up in the urban landscape, like thorny, angry weeds. Politicians debated the SIN card, a mandatory national ID, in the legislature. A limited National Draft was reinstated. The sabers were rattled toward Iran.

Television programmed for scandals and distraction, for Hollywood courtroom dramas, for kidnapped little blonde girls and Catholic priests who shamed little boys. But the common public would not be distracted. In coffee shops and on street corners, conversations turned to 'the troubles.' Old-world conservatives worried about gun confiscation. Liberals hated the war. The tax drain pulled the economy down.

The general unhappiness and uncertainty grew and festered, uncared for and untreated. The signs of the malcontent became more visible. Truckers pulled unofficial strikes and refused to drive. High School students dropped out at record rates. Crime climbed ever higher, and the police began to openly carry military weapons and gear. No one was happy. Like a forest starved too long by drought, America became vulnerable to the possibility of a spark. Historians, decades later, would make their entire careers upon how it all began to crest that unbearably hot summer.

Cory read the headlines as they appeared, day after day, week after week, and tried to imagine the country around him as it swirled and eddied.

Homeland Security Names New IAS General Director  
Terrorist Threat to Golden Gate Bridge Uncovered  
'Tens-of-Thousands' March in Washington, D.C.



The wars and occupations in the Middle East took their toll. The neocons cried out to any who would listen the importance of ‘staying the course.’ There were enemies without as well as within, who hated America with a supernatural passion and must be stopped, exposed, and “re-educated.” It was these enemies who would stop at nothing. It was these enemies who forced the nation to adapt to a ‘force-first’ military ideology.

Special Forces Are ‘Inside Iran’  
Dollar Slumps for Fifth Straight Month  
Union Strike Broken in Des Moines

This ideology spread to domestic operations, as well. The real enemy, the realer-than-real evil, was the unwillingness of ‘certain citizens’ to follow along with the government’s plans. Talk shows berated and belittled any who urged caution, reluctance, or, gods help them, resistance.

Operation Garden Shears Nets 4,000 on Domestic Terror Watch List  
IAS Thwarts “Legion of Liberty” Bomb Plot  
Madison, WI Antiwar Protest Turns Violent, Hundreds Arrested

The great mechanized economy was nearly tapped out. The cost of the Administration’s foreign adventures weighed heavily upon the people’s shoulders. Perhaps the march toward fascism was becoming clearer, and a few people realized what the end destination really was. Things began to turn ugly.

Boston Strikers Riot, 2 Killed  
ACLU Angered at Protestor Detention  
Anarchists Kidnap Senator Watkins  
Legion Sympathizers Rounded Up In Seattle  
Pro-Gate Secures Boston Precinct Contract

Legion was the first American domestic terrorist group to hit the stage. It appeared from within the earlier militia movement, strongest in the Midwest and West, and gave the Administration a face to put to their once faceless enemy. Crackdowns came swiftly. Retaliations against military installations and police departments answered.

Gas Riot Erupts in Denver  
Bomb at FBI Office Kills 3  
San Francisco Votes to ‘Resist’ IAS Procedures  
7 Legion Terrorists Die in IAS Shootout in Detroit

The price of the wars translated to many as rising prices at home. Well-intentioned, but ultimately uninformed members of the public sought to take out their frustrations on the gas stations themselves. ‘Domestic Unrest’ resulted. Legion took advantage of the chaos, and their anti-government movement spread. Others, like the mysterious Red Hand, began making the scene.

A dozen Red Hand members were captured in North Minneapolis by a joint Pro-Gate, IAS, and FBI raid, and paraded about on television. They were reportedly sent to Guantanamo for questioning. Cory wondered what had really happened, if Max or his people had been involved, if Bacchus might know. Karl and Jake grew edgier, and the sentiment spread throughout the Fun House members. Everyone knew that the national situation was coming to a head, and the Order's backlash, when it came, was going to be swift and harsh.

Cory was back in the Fun House at the beginning of August. Karl pulled him into his room, and shut the buzzing chorus outside his door.

"Word from Terry," Karl announced. "Somebody called House Aruithinea wants to see you, back up from where you came. Ring any bells?"

"Yeah. Terry told me about them, last time he was down," Cory said.

"And?"

"And he thinks my biological father was important to them, back in the day."

"What's this, now?" Karl asked.

"Terry thinks he's tracked down what happened to my dad," Cory explained. "Said he was a Coscar, same as me. He and Neco fought the Order. The dragon sought me out because I reminded it of my father."

"Got it," Karl said wryly. "And now this Aruithinea wants you to follow in your old man's footsteps. They wanna recruit you."

"Maybe they do," Cory said. "I don't know."

"Well, shit," Karl spat. "Of course they do. They want to use you go get to Neco. If they used to have it and then lost it, they'd want to get that kind of an ally back. Will probably dangle their history with your old man in front of you, too, try to bait you. Good leverage to get you to come along."

"Yeah," Cory said. "Maybe they will."

"So, you gonna go?"

"To meet Aruithinea? Yeah, I think I probably should," Cory said. "At least hear their side of the story, see how they're gonna spin it."

"So when do we leave?" Karl asked.

"We?"

"Well, shit, I'm not gonna let you go alone."



Cory entered the numbers into the throw-away cell phone. He sat on the park bench and listened to the sounds of traffic, and in his left hand he held a scrap of paper. It was Heather's phone number. The Chicago air was heavy with car fumes and the promise of a late night rain. He stared at her number on the phone display and thought it over. Then he pushed send and listened to it ring.

"Hello?" It was her.

"Hi, Heather, it's me. Cory."

"Oh, hey!" she said. "I was wondering if you were ever going to call me. How are you?"

"I'm fine," Cory said. "Listen, Heather, I'm leaving town tomorrow. I really don't know how

long I'm going to be gone. I might not be coming back at all, really. So, are you doing anything tonight? I'd like a chance to see you before I go."

"Um, tonight? I'm pretty free. Did you want to meet somewhere, or...?"

"I'm outside, on the corner," he said. "In the little park by your building." She laughed, and hearing her laugh made him smile, even though he didn't want to.

"So, why didn't you just ring me from downstairs? Just go over to the door and I'll buzz you in."

Heather lived on the fifth floor. The building was quiet and cool, cut out from the press of noise and humidity of the snarled urban world outside. The heavy carpet in the halls sucked up sound like the vacuum of space. The shadows of the building were long and soft, and the tight circles of overhead light possessed an aqua tinge. The elevator was silent.

Cory knocked on the door. It opened, and he was assailed by the vision of Heather fresh out of the shower, wrapped in a red silk bathrobe. A wave of jasmine incense escaped the apartment. Her sun-kissed hair was dark and wet, and her skin glowed from the recent heat of the water. She smiled at him and hung in the door, an expectant smile on her lips.

Cory heard Karl's voice in his head, saying something about coincidences. He tried to clear his head.

"So how did you manage to catch me just out of the shower?" she asked.

"Just lucky, I guess."

"Come on in." She closed the door behind him. "Have a seat, if you like. Do you want anything to drink?"

"Sure, why not?" Cory answered. He found his way into the living room. Oriental masks hung on the wall, and tall, thin houseplants aspired for the distant ceiling. Heather produced a low ball glass from the kitchen area, and poured Cory three fingers of Glenfiddich whiskey. She joined him on the soft black leather couch and handed him the glass, then plucked a half-filled wine glass from the coffee table and reclined, taking him in.

"And here we are," she said. "You know, I didn't expect you to ever call me. I guess I misread how you looked when you said goodbye. I guess things have changed."

Cory smiled in spite of himself. "I guess so," he said. "Heather... I don't think I'm going to see you again. I'm glad I ran into you. It made me think about what we'd had, and about how I'm different than the guy I was back then."

"Where are you going?" she asked. "You didn't really tell me much about what you've been up to."

"I can't tell you," Cory said.

"What do you mean, can't?" Heather stiffened. "Can't, or won't?"

"I won't," he said. "Just listen for a second, please?"

"Fine." Heather sighed. "Why did you want to see me, then?"

Cory tried to collect himself, and took a sip of his drink. It was smooth and strong, reassuring.

"I said a lot of things when we broke up," Cory said.

"Cory..." she rolled her eyes.

"No, just listen. It hurt a lot at the time. And yes, it felt like you were abandoning me. Yes, I

hated you for it at the time. But I'm a different person, now. I'm not saying all is forgiven. What I'm saying is that I'm over it, now. And I wanted a chance to say... to say goodbye, I guess. I don't hold anything against you. I understand why you did what you did."

"So you came here to forgive me?" she said. Cory couldn't read her reaction. He let out a held breath.

"Yeah."

"Okay," Heather said softly. "I know it wasn't fair. I just wasn't going to let my chance slip away..." The sentence faded.

Cory felt a numb charge of power roll over in the pit of his stomach. It spread through his limbs in a flash and pushed to the surface of his skin. He blinked in a moment of confusion, and looked at Heather, to see if she'd noticed.

She took a sip of her wine and swallowed deliberately. Cory was surprised to see her eyes wet, though she held herself together. He hadn't expected any of this to have all that much of an effect on her. She had always been the cool, collected one, and he the emotional one. Somewhere along the way, their roles had reversed. He didn't feel much at all, as if he were merely watching himself act out a part on film.

"I'm sorry, baby," Heather said. She moved to put her head on his shoulder, and touched his chest with her hand. "But I couldn't just watch my career slip through my hands. I wanted to make it work. I did. But I just couldn't..."

"No, it's fine," he whispered. "I said I'm done with that, now. You don't need to apologize. That's not what I want."

"So what do you want, then?" She kissed his neck, and he felt the heat from her face and tears. "Is this what you wanted to see me for? On your last night in town?"

"Heather, wait..." He pulled away from her and turned her to face him, his hands on her shoulders.

"Would you just kiss me?" she said. "You got what you wanted. You got to say those things. So just kiss me." Heather leaned forward, and Cory fell in to her embrace, her mouth, powerless.

The heat between them rose; chemistry dies hard. Cory's mind dissolved, but his body still knew what to do. Heather climbed on top of him, the robe open, her skin hot. She tugged at his shirt and he took it off. He got his hands back inside of her robe and slid his hands over her chest, and she pressed into him harder. Then she pulled away and looked at him with surprise on her flushed face.

"Why do you have this effect on me?" she asked.

"I don't know," Cory answered. Then he paused, and realized that he did know. The numb charge he'd felt, that was him. He'd done it without thinking. He had her under his power. Was this what he'd really wanted all along? Isn't this why he had come to her, to make her want him, to somehow make her regret what she had done to him?

Heather smiled, then, and the hunger in her eyes made Cory blush.

"Lets get you out of those pants, then," she said. Heather slid off of him and tugged his belt free. He untied his boots and loosened the ties, then toed them off. He stood, and she pulled the last of his clothes off of him. Cory closed his eyes as she took his erection in her hand and slid her lips over the end. As his desire rose, Cory knew the full truth - that he was guiding her, somehow, and that she was unable to resist doing what he wanted her to.

Heather stopped pleasuring him and looked up into his eyes, and Cory felt a perverse sensation of power. Then he laid down on the cool leather of the couch, and Heather slid on top of him. She pushed him inside of her and settled down against his body, her breasts brushing his chest, her pelvis grinding in a tight circle.

Cory licked his lips, and realized that he tasted wine. The passion rose and burned about them. The pace quickened, and Cory's neck grew hot and moist from her breath and gentle bites. Their voices rose together, quiet at first, then louder with the rhythm of their movement.

He felt as if he were being pulled out the back of his own skull, the heat and drive maddening. At last he climaxed, and felt Heather's muscles contract around him. She muffled her cries with her mouth deep in his neck. They panted against one another, immersed in the naked pleasure of the moment. Their breathing and heartbeats came back to them, and Cory recognized what he had done. Heather made a content noise and ran her hands through his hair. She propped herself up and drew him up in a deep, slow kiss.

A chill worked its way up Cory's spine.

What have I become?



Karl kept the T-Bird off the main routes. The Grass Ocean night blew by outside the window, the muscle car's throaty engine a dull roar. They stuck near enough to Lake Michigan all the way up over the Wisconsin-Illinois border, and into Kenosha, where they hopped on a cracked and flat 142. They stopped for gas every two hours, the lonely lights of outpost stores and truckstops beckoning them to quiet, surreal pit stops for the Gifted of the world.

At 11:30 pm Karl pulled in to a small bar called Whetty's. It had a gravel parking lot with a dozen cars. They were just past the Shadow of Paris, Wisconsin, where the unconscious memory of the city made its mark on Maya.

"Off-sale," Karl explained. "I forgot to grab a bottle of Jameson on the way out. I'll be right back. Gonna see if these redneck Gifted sell any good whiskey." He left the car running. Cory loaded the CD player with a live bootleg Nine Inch Nails and lit a cig as the music pounded in. Karl returned and got into the driver's side, and took a swig of the bottle. He handed it Cory's way. Terrible Lie came over the speakers.

The dream of the Midwest countryside flew by under cover of darkness. Family farms with peeling paint frame houses, rotted barns, and crumbling silos, abandoned to the entropic forces of nature. Once-red walls caved in over cement and piles of hay. Wetness and earth overtook the scent of manure and diesel.

"Look at that," Karl said. "Deer spirit."

Cory looked over in time to see the eyes reflect back in the T-Bird's high beams, yellow and startled. Spirits were good at finding abandoned or undiscovered Vales, and Cory wondered what forgotten grove or local secret spot had let the deer through.

Abandoned combines and John Deere tractors rusted on the hills. Cory and Karl passed the bottle back and forth and sang along to the music. The windows were down, and the wind and the fluted sound of the dual exhaust all mixed into one oversized, big-as-the-moon cocktail. They smoked and jived and got good and lost near Madison, drunk and not really caring.

They found the dream of Interstate 94 and took it to make up some time. They passed

beneath sporadic camera boxes and traffic monitoring devices, and an honest-to-god Division 8 police cruiser. They passed a private passenger bus, and every raised seat had a television screen pointed at it from a mount on the ceiling. Most were dialed into news programs – talking heads loomed and presided over the bus’ sleeping, road-weary passengers. A few showed images of blooming explosions and frantically scurrying fighters in desert camouflage.

“Think that’s getting live feed?” Cory asked.

“Probably,” Karl answered. “Groups like the Messengers are always setting up cell phone towers and TV and radio repeaters that feed signal across Vales. It’s not like AT and fucking T is gonna do it for us.”

It was 2:30 am by the time they rolled into the Tomah Shadow. The T-Bird was running on fumes, with the gas gauge needle decidedly below the safe spot on the ‘E.’ The truck stop was a Vale, Cory’s senses told him.

“So who owns this one?” he asked as Karl worked the pump.

“Truck stop? I dunno. Probably some indies. Just some guys. Most Trans-American truck stops are. Unlike all those big warehouse and distribution centers out there. This is the heart of the country when it comes to that shit.” Cory scanned out in the direction that Karl meant, to the distant search lights and barely visible guard towers.

“And who runs those?”

“Three guesses,” Karl said. “First two don’t count.”

“Serious?” Cory spat. “Fuck, we just can’t get away from these guys.”

“Hey man, the Order runs the world. Get used to it.”

“Well, what do they get out of it?” Cory asked. “The truck stops. I mean, I’m glad someone is out here, selling gas and smokes and everything. But doesn’t it seem... I don’t know, kind of below them? Supernaturals sitting behind a counter, working a cash register.”

“Look, kid,” Karl said. “It’s like this. It’s not all about politics. And it’s not all about paradigm warfare. Sometimes, folks just want to make a living. And waiting around for someone else to do it, maybe the Halveyans opening up some kind of welfare gas rationing thing... well, sometimes you just gotta do it yourself.”

They resupplied, then went inside and got a booth in the restaurant. Karl and Cory pounded back a pot-and-a-half of coffee, each, along with a cholesterol special breakfast of bacon, eggs, buttered toast, hash browns, and a pile of cigarettes. Around them sat Gifted teenagers, runaways, Cory figured, along with long-haul truckers, business types with weary eyes and threadbare suits, and what Cory guessed were the equivalent of local townies. When the bill came, it was nearly triple what one might pay in a mundane diner.

They finished up and rolled on. Cory napped after the Shadow of Black River Falls had faded in the rearview. They got off 94 and were on country roads again, and the rolling Wisconsin hills and the depth of the darkness lulled Cory into the realm of his unconscious. Crystal Method was on the speakers. The T-Bird hummed all around him, enclosed Cory’s body, kept him safe and drifting.

Karl shook him awake.

“Wha?”

“Gas station break. You want anything?”

“Where are we, huh?”

“Cornell. You want anything?”

Cory tried to clear his vision. The sky to what he presumed was the east was light blue and brightening fast. He sniffed and asked how far they were from Ladysmith.

“Half hour.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Cory piled out and went into the store, in search of caffeine and donuts. He stocked up and got back into the car.

“You know,” Karl said, “we’re not getting a great deal, with this Vale crossover business. Pretty much, we’re getting robbed. You sure this bike of yours is worth it?”

“Yeah, to me it is,” Cory replied.

“We can just find you another one already over here in Maya,” Karl said. “Look just like it. You wouldn’t even notice the difference.”

“I’d notice, man,” Cory argued. “I used to race these things, remember? This is my old bike. And I want it.” Karl waved him off.

“Fine, fine. Just checking. It’s fuck-all out of our way, is all.” He fired the car back up.

It was just after 6:00 am when they pulled into the Rusk County Fair Founds, just outside of the tiny Shadow of Ladysmith. Metal sheds and old wooden buildings surrounded the car in the early morning light. Karl crept the car forward until the Rail Station Exhibit sign came into view.

An old man in jean overalls and a flannel button-up shirt appeared and waved them over. Karl shut the T-Bird down.

“Howdy, I’m Clem,” the old timer said. “You the boys from Chicago?”

“That’s us,” Cory replied, getting out of the car. He walked over and shook Clem’s callused hand. “I’m Cory.”

“Well, all right,” Clem said. “You know, you don’t see a good piece of Detroit iron like that around much anymore. Sounds like she’s still running good.”

“Yeah, this bitch can still move,” Karl said.

“Well, the way across is back over here. You just follow me.” Clem turned and made his way beyond an old country schoolhouse. Beyond it, a long Soo Line train engine in brown and faded yellow, with a dozen cars behind it, stood silent on rusted tracks. Clem led them to a shed behind the train where the tracks disappeared beneath a huge swinging wooden door. Clem heaved it back, and Cory gaped at the huge Vale portal in the middle of the shed. It wasn’t just large enough for his motorcycle to come back through, or the T-Bird... they could haul the whole train through it, if they had to.

Clem came over to the car. “Well, there you boys go. That’ll be five hundred dollars going through. You can pay up the other five hundred when you come back over.”

Cory handed Clem an envelope with the money in it. Clem took the wad and stuffed it into the front pocket of his overalls, then walked into the cavernous shed. He made it to the portal and vanished. Karl put the car in gear and drove after him. The shed was larger inside than it looked from the outside. Huge metal tools hung on the walls, lined with greasy work benches and old signs. The car hummed and vibrated as it went across the Mirror. Ahead of them, Clem had the shed door open, and Karl took the car out into the mundane world.

Ten minutes later, they pulled the T-Bird off Sheep Ranch Road and onto a long, hard-packed

driveway. Pine trees lined the way into Von's compound, and beyond them, fallow fields pushed forth long, ratty grass. The sound of a train rolled in the distance, and Cory smiled. They passed abandoned, rusting automobiles, stripped of chrome, body panels, and glass. They came into a clearing where aluminum sheds the color of charcoal surrounded a circled drive, and nodded toward a green two-story farm house with peeling paint. A hunched old man sat on the front porch, wrapped in flannel and denim. He raised a hand in greeting.

Karl brought the car to a stop and the men got out. "Howdy!" the elderly mechanic called out.

"Hey!" Cory returned. A pair of German Shepherds barked and ran through the yard.

"Thought you boys might've gotten lost. I thought you were gonna be here at five."

"Well, that was the plan," said Cory. "We got turned around in the middle of the state and lost some time."

"No worries." He leaned forward in his chair and scolded the dogs. "Turbo! Knock it off. Turbo! Don't let them trouble ya. They're harmless."

"Von, this here is Big Karl," Cory made introductions. "Karl, Von. He did work on all of Team Octane's bikes back when I was in ARC."

"What's ARC?" Karl ventured.

"Anarchist Racing Circuit," Von replied. "Yeah, don't let my old face fool ya. These new-fangled outlaw sports fans have nothing on people from my generation." Cory and Karl walked up to the porch and joined Von beneath the overhang.

"He's serious, too," Cory laughed. "I've heard stories about Von that make ARC racing look like a July Fourth parade." Von extended his hand, and Karl shook it.

"Kinda retired now," Von commented. His blue eyes sparkled at the joke. "You boys want some coffee? Beer?"

"Beer," Karl smiled. Von reached to a faded red cooler at his side and came up with two bottles of Budweiser.

"Top of the morning ta ya," chuckled Von. "So! How have you been, my boy?" he directed at Cory. "They said you kinda dropped off the face of the earth."

"Yeah, a little," Cory admitted.

"Well, it happens. No big deal. I've gotten everything all set up, just like you asked."

"Man, that's great," Cory grinned.

"Come on, then," Von said. He grunted as he rose from his lawn chair and hiked up his jeans. "It's all over here."

Von led them to one of the prefab sheds. It was markedly cool inside the echoing building. Sixty motorcycles rested before them in every state of repair. There were World War Two-era military bikes, crotch rockets, 70's choppers, trikes of every make and model. Royal Enfields, Triumphs, Nortons, Gold Wings, and Motor Guzzis. There were twenty Hondas and Yamahas, four Katanas, a handful of BMWs and Suzukis, and a circle of Indians. Karl let out a low whistle and took a drag from the beer.

The Ghost stood near the sliding door, dusted off and gleaming. A footlocker nested near the rear wheel, and padded racing gear and a team helmet sat on the seat.

"Rebuilt your injection system with the port adjustment, added the extra light switch like you asked. Changed out the plugs. Rebalanced the wheels. Changed out your front brake. Coolant,



fuel filter. That about it?"

"So what do I owe you?" Cory asked.

Von told him. It amounted to about half the cost of what the parts should have been, and no labor.

"Von, come on," Cory protested. "It should be way more than that."

"Hush, you," Von crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Do what you're told." Resigned, Cory handed Von the cash.

"I always liked watching the way you rode, out there on my bikes," Von said. "Real shame about that crash. You ever think about, you know, coming back?" Cory laughed.

"Maybe if I'd have had the guts to jump right back in, when I got out of rehab," Cory answered. "But now, no. Don't think so."

"It's not my business, I suppose, but why the hell not?"

"Because I'm not a racer anymore," Cory said.

"Well," Von replied, "you'll always be a racer to me. And maybe riding this here bike again will change your mind. I hope so."

"Thanks, Von," Cory said.

Cory strapped himself into his old racing armor. It was heavier than he remembered, but the weight was reassuring. They loaded his old footlocker into the T-Bird's trunk.

"Ride safe," Von said. Cory shook Von's hand and got on the bike. It fired strong. Cory eased it down the driveway. Karl followed in the car. Von waved after them, and Cory headed back toward the fair grounds and the way back into Maya.



The Ghost ran like a dream.

Cory indulged the Ghost's speedometer all the way out of Ladysmith – seventy-five, eighty-five, down country roads and state highways, with corn fields pushing forth green hands to wave to him in the sunlight. By 7:30 am they got back on I-94. The Ghost rumbled and roared beneath him.

They stopped to stretch and refuel. The route was south to Eau Claire, then due west on Highway 29 through Menomonie and Spring Valley, all rolling green hills and blue sky. Each little city and town pushed up a small Shadow, and made Cory squint as he crossed the membrane into the Shadow, and then back out again within minutes. They went through River Falls, then north to the outskirts of Hudson, where they took a break at the large TA truck stop.

Heavy trucks and their Gifted drivers lingered there, at what Cory guessed was the last accessible Vale before Saint Paul. A train rumbled nearby. Five miles to the west, the Saint Croix river separated Wisconsin and Minnesota.

"Almost there," grinned Karl. He was two-fisting it, smokes and coffee.

"Yeah."

Karl smiled and let go of a lungful of smoke. "So what do you expect? When we get there and meet these critters?"

"I have no idea."

“Seems screwy to me,” Karl sniffed. “If they get all crazy on us, just remember we’ve got the guns in the trunk.”

“Sure, Karl,” Cory assured him. “Thanks, again, for coming with me.”

“Anytime.”

“Meantime, remember where you are,” Karl jabbed at him. “This is where your trouble with the Order started. Those guys are still around. And I don’t mean that Sect in general... I mean those actual guys. You killed some of their people, people that they knew and remember. If they catch wind of you, they’ll come hard and fast.”

“Yeah,” Cory said. “I know.” He wondered if John Brozeck was still here. If Jack Quick waited for him, somewhere ahead. Something in Cory’s gut told him that he’d see them again. He thought about Heather, and felt a flush of shame. It wasn’t right, what he’d done. He should have left, once he realized what he’d started. Should have, but didn’t. He was stuck with it, now. Bad karma. They finished their break and Cory got back on the Ghost in the morning sun.

They hightailed it across the bridge and rode up the dream of the Minnesota hillside. With the river behind them, Cory led Karl off of 94, and along the slower, quieter routes. They dove into the Saint Paul Shadow. Empty colonies of suburban tract housing coasted by, separated by waves of chain stores. They went north on Manning, and then west on 36. It was funny, trying to navigate a city Cory knew so well from his time as a delivery driver... the streets in the Shadow didn’t match up to the way it was in Incarna, the real world. He was in the approximation of the city, but that was all.

Traffic was light, but Cory found himself entranced. The last time he was here he had barely scratched the surface of what it meant to be an Other. Terry had kept him out of sight in the Shadow, and the interaction with Gifted Society had been minimal. Now he was his own man, and wasn’t such a wide-eyed newbie. And as he passed supernaturals in their cars, on the sidewalk, inside of homey shop windows, Cory felt a sense of wonder. All of this had been here, the whole time, and he had never known.

They went under 694 and through North Saint Paul. Cory was tired. He was numb and road worn, and sweaty, and his neck was thick with road grit. Still, as they rolled west, he noticed the bubbles of Gifted on the sides of the road. Some looked like regular folks, but they seemed to lack purpose. As if they were waiting for something to happen. They watched the traffic as it rolled by. Others, circles of young men in black leather and fatigue pants, stood warily. Cory wondered if they were part of a neighborhood watch, like Max’s Collective might be, or if they were just an independent group, or maybe a gang of sorts.

Ahead, traffic stopped and backed up, and 35E loomed. Cory coasted to a halt. He heard a rumble behind him, and knew without looking that the T-Bird was there. Things moved slowly, and minutes went by with limited progress. Something was up. Cory saw a pack of onlookers ahead on the wide median between west and eastbound. He popped the bike up over the curb and rolled up the median to them. Cory stopped and shut off the bike, and addressed a teenager punk in checker pants.

“What’s going on?”

“Might as well turn around, man,” the skater answered. “They’re not letting anyone through. Gotta go around or go back.”

“Who’s they?” Cory pressed. The kid looked at Cory like he had a third eyeball.

“Them, man,” he stressed. “They got the street blocked off.” He turned around ignored Cory’s questioning look. Cory gave up on the kids and walked ahead. He wanted to see for himself.

They looked like soldiers, but didn't wear any uniform Cory had seen before. A combination between riot police and marines, faces obscured by tinted masks, strange assault rifles at the ready. Black armored personnel carriers hung sideways across the lanes, behind roadblocks and lines of sandbags. They looked like they weren't going away any time soon. The closest soldier seemed to notice Cory's gaze, and shifted slightly toward him. In his mind's eye, Cory realized the soldier now had a clearer line of fire on him.

Cory backed away and got back on the Ghost. He rode to Karl's spot in line and squeezed across the front of the car, motioned for Karl to follow, and worked over to a parking lot entrance. They went through that, got onto a side street, and put a few blocks between themselves and the roadblock. They pulled over. Karl got out of the car and walked up to Cory.

"That looked like Order back there," Karl said. "Christ, kid, you don't have to walk right into their fucking arms!" A chill shook down Cory's legs and he looked over his shoulder toward the roadblock.

"Really?"

"Yeah," Karl spat. "Let's not go around tempting fate like that." In the distance, further west, sirens took up a plaintive call. From downtown Saint Paul the chopping of helicopter blades began to echo.

"What do we do?" Cory asked. "Do we turn back, or..."

"Something's going down," Karl asserted. "They don't like to stick their heads out in the Maya, this far from one of their Citadels or Vales. It's not us they're after. Just makes me wonder what the score is up here."

"We've only got a little ways left," Cory assured him. "Should we press on? We'll be there real soon."

"All right," Karl grinned. "What the fuck? Lead on."

They squeezed past to the north, through Little Canada, and slinked under 35E. They made it the last three miles without incident.

"How the hell did you get through?" Miller greeted them. It was just after 11:00 am. Cory got off the bike and Karl maneuvered the T-Bird into the small parking area next to the mansion. They were on Bennet Lake in northern Roseville, at the powerful Bacchus Vale where Terry and Ellen awaited them. Cory pulled his helmet off and pushed the sweaty hair out of his eyes.

It was a lavish setting. The house presided on the south side of the lake, where a lip of residential lots dipped its toes into the water, broken up by pine, oak, spruce, and sycamore trees. It was a three story at its central peak, and two story wings gave the impression of shoulders below a peaked, proud head. A small garden and greenhouse broke off from the circle driveway, which surrounded a small stone fountain, long conquered by statues of gargoyles and fawning satyrs. A 50's garage was nearer the street, a necessary embarrassment which was tolerated by the rest of the grounds. There were other cars in the drive – a sleek Jaguar, a scratched and a beaten BMW.

"What do you mean?" Cory asked.

"Terishor is closing off all of the major routes," Miller explained. "This side, and Incarna, too. Lots of nastiness bubbling over. Some kind of shootout with the locals, over in Northeast Minneapolis. They're even talking about a curfew tonight, for the mundanes. Lots of folks are pretty freaked out."

"We just ran into one roadblock, and it wasn't too hard to get around," Cory said. "They

must have been closing things off right behind us.”

“That’s a little unsettling,” Karl yawned.

“Well, hell, we’re just glad you made it in,” Miller said. “We hadn’t heard anything. We were worried that…”

“Cory!” It was Ellen. She ran up excitedly and threw her arms around his neck, kissing his cheek. “It’s good to see you!” Terry came out of the house after her, a small smile on his face.

“Hi,” Karl said to Miller. “Name’s Karl.” He stuck out his hand.

“Cool,” Miller replied. “Nice car, man. Why don’t you guys come on in, get some food in you, have a shower?” Cory and Karl were ushered inside.

The Vale was powerful and old, and Cory felt the hairs on the back of his neck come to attention. They were in a grand entryway. A massive, sweeping stairs dominated the room. Cory could feel the heart of the Vale as it radiated energy from an adjoining room on the other side of the stairs. Ellen took his hand.

“So, this is your first Bacchus Citadel you’ve been to, isn’t it?” she said. Cory nodded in assent. “We’ll have to give you a full tour, once you’ve had some rest.”

Cory and Big Karl were each given upstairs guest rooms. The finery of the place made Cory feel dirty somehow, as if he didn’t belong. He felt better after a shower in his private bath, having spotted other indications that he wasn’t the only blight on the otherwise upstanding environs.

There was the black and white photo of a heavy metal band that Cory had never heard of, and the lava lamp in the sitting area at the end of the hall. He found a framed ‘Make Art Not War’ poster in the closet, entrenched in hippie psychedelica, and a cheap switchblade in the bottom drawer of a prefab dresser. A pair of John Lennon sunglasses rested on a night stand. Cory fell asleep in the four poster bed.



He awoke to a knock on his door.

“Cory?” Terry called out. “Wake up. They want to meet up tonight. We’ve only got a couple of hours.”

“Hey Terry?” Cory said.

“Yeah?” Terry opened the door and looked in.

“It’s good to see you,” Cory said.

“Did Karl take good care of you down there?”

“Yeah,” Cory replied. “Yeah, he did. I feel a lot more grounded, now. Like I’ve got a chance. But I wish you could have been there.”

“It worked out better this way,” Terry said, his voice gentle and cool. “Things have gotten dangerous for us in the Twin Cities. It wasn’t a good place for you to learn your way.”

“Well, thank you,” Cory said.

“Sure. Why don’t you get ready, then come downstairs. We’ve got some catching up to do.”

Cory rolled out of bed and found his clothes. Downstairs, the others were gathered around a stoic dining room table, eating fresh hamburgers and drinking import beer. They brought Cory

up to speed.

House Aruithinea knew about Cory. They believed him to be Chris Rhine's son, and knew about Cory's mother. They said that her real name was Linda Marshal. Anne Williams was a name she'd made up later, after she'd gone into hiding. They knew that Cory and Neco had a link, but didn't know where the Order had the Element imprisoned. The idea of his mother having a different name disturbed Cory.

"So Anne Williams was an alias," Karl said. "She decided to jump ship after whatever happened, and needed a new identity to hide from the Order. And probably from Aruithinea, too. After all the trouble they'd caused her, it's no wonder she called it quits."

"How do you know it's a fake name?" Cory asked. "Just from what Aruithinea said?"

"We've known that for a while, man," Karl answered. "There were signs in her records, if you knew what to look for. We knew Anne was a fake. We just didn't know what her real name was."

"We're pretty certain that Anne was an Other," Terry said. "Her actions make more sense if she has an understanding of the Gifted. She was somehow involved with Rhine and Brozeck. We're not certain on the connections, but after Rhine was killed, she went into hiding. Her methods indicate a knowledge of how the Order operates. She knew some of the capabilities of those who might try to find her."

Cory's head spun. He felt a brief flash of anger, and there was a familiar presence in the back of his mind. The dragon was once again with him.

"So, okay," Cory began, "if she were Gifted, and was pregnant with Rhine's kid when he died, why would she run?"

"Maybe she was pissed," Karl offered. "Or she didn't trust them. Or she blamed them for Rhine getting killed. Who knows?"

"So my mom's name wasn't Anne?" Cory asked. He had a hard time believing it.

"No," Ellen answered. "Sorry, sweetie."

"And so my last name isn't Williams?"

"Does it really matter?" Karl asked. There was a steel in his voice that Cory recognized, and he sighed.

"No. I guess not. Is there anything else that you guys know about me that you haven't told?"

"For a while, we thought that Brozeck might be your dad," Karl said. Miller let out a sharp laugh. Cory took a steadying breath.

"Christ, that's rough," Miller muttered.

"And why did you think that?" Cory asked. He felt his face flash with dull anger.

"It explained why Brozeck might take you under his wing, after your mother died," Terry said. "Brozeck is a member of the Order. Anne was involved with an Aruithinean leader, one of the Order's enemies. It makes more sense for Brozeck to feel a responsibility for your well-being if he and Anne had an affair, and he thinking you might be his son."

"But I'm a Coscar, so that shoots that theory all to shit," Cory said. "It's pretty obvious, between Rhine and Brozeck, who my real dad was."

"Well, he might not have known at the time," Terry said. "We didn't know until this year. Maybe all he could figure is that you had potential, and he thought you might be his."

“Fucking unlikely, though,” Karl spat. “Guy like that, in the Order, he wouldn’t take chances. A simple paternity test from a blood sample, and he’d know Cory wasn’t his.”

“Yeah,” Terry sighed. “I know. I still don’t get it.”

“I’m going out for a smoke,” Cory announced. “Be back in a bit.”

Karl stood to follow him, but Cory waved him off. Cory went out into the Shadow. He took deep drags and cooled his head. He reminded himself that these were his friends, and they were trying to help him. Still, the secrets didn’t sit well with him. Cory could appreciate their desire to shield him from unpleasant truths, but he couldn’t stand that they had done it, all the same. He steadied himself as best he could. Then Cory went back in.

“Feel better?” Ellen asked.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Let’s move on,” Terry said.

Whoever the Red Hand was run by, they had become much more active since Cory had been in the city. The group had expanded its activities to include industrial sabotage, firebombings of IAS properties, and break-ins at Draft Board locations. All the more, the Red Hand looked like a truly dangerous entity, and the Order was only too happy to strike back at them in the form of mundane police raids, further crackdowns, excursions into the Shadow from their bases around the cities.

Groups like Max’s Collective were getting caught in the crossfire. Meanwhile, both mundane and Gifted anarchists, protestors, and related counter-culture tribes were raising their hackles and moving people into town. With the Order’s latest moves on both sides of the Mirror, some kind of blow-up was becoming likely. Morrow was urging restraint from his fellow Bacchus and had requested aid from Paldin and the Halveyans. These two Factions were hesitant to get involved.

“Figures,” Karl muttered. “Things go sideways, and no one wants to help.”

The Order was using the chaos to ramp up its influence, particularly in how much direct policing Pro-Gate was being allowed to perform among the mundanes. In addition, the Governor was toying with declaring a temporary state of emergency, to grant police and National Guard members the authority to perform house-to-house searches. The curfew had been called, and went into effect at sundown. Things in the Shadow were less controlled, but the threat of detention or even outright termination loomed, especially as one moved closer to downtown, corporate, or military areas. Whatever the Order’s end game, it meant business.

“So, long story short, is the Red Hand for real or not?” Karl asked.

“I don’t think so,” Ellen replied.

“What?” Terry seemed surprised. “I thought we’d gone over this...”

“Sorry,” Ellen held up her hands. “It just doesn’t make sense to me. It doesn’t feel right. It’s like they’re trying to pick a fight, and they are not reaching out to the greater community. Not to make alliances, to try to recruit... nothing. They are far too insular to be a popular front. The group is acting a lot more like a criminal organization, a mafia, than they are any kind of political movement.”

“But what about a deep cover group, sponsored from the outside...” Terry began.

“I know, that’s what you keep coming back to,” Ellen countered. “I just think...”

“Does it matter?” Karl stood up. “They won’t talk to you. You can’t find them. No forwarding

address. Either they're a setup for the Order, or they're too stupid to try and do this right. Only thing you have to decide is whether it's worth trying to stop them or not."

Discussion ground away. After an hour, the meeting broke up. Miller had other things to attend to around the Citadel, and Terry had a ritual he wanted to perform and needed privacy to do it.

"I suppose we ought to get your tour in, then?" Ellen said to Cory.

"I guess," he answered. When the two of them were out of earshot of the others, Ellen reached out and touched Cory's arm.

"How are you holding up?" she asked.

"I'll be all right."

"You sure?"

"Yeah," Cory said. "I'm sure." Three Gifted phased in through the Vale portal in the corner of the room. Cory looked up with a start.

"Oh, it's Karol," Ellen hushed. "Hi Karol!" Ellen waved.

"Hello, dear," Karol replied. The woman was short haired and a little older, and Cory thought Karol looked a little too severe, too purposeful, to be a member of Bacchus.

"Karol is in the Weavers," Ellen explained in a conspiratorial tone. "They work through social networks and patron programs. Behind-the-scenes kind of people."

"These are friends of ours," Karol announced. "Alfred and Ivonna. From one of the finest dance troupes in all of Russia."

Alfred was a short, wiry man with a thick jaw and piercing, grey eyes. Ivonna was a petite woman, a black haired beauty whose soft, dark skin seemed to smolder as she moved. Cory watched the two athletes with a raw appreciation for their well-honed bodies. Miller burst in with a beaming smile.

"Alfred!" he cried. "And who is this beautiful creature? Come in, come in. Wonderful to see you!"

"Miller," Alfred smiled, his accent rough and charming.

"This calls for drinks!"

Miller produced vodka from the kitchen and shots were poured and arrayed on trays. The rounds went by and the noise level rose. In short order, the other four were playfully teasing each other's libidos in a jumble of limbs on the couch. Absently, Cory fingered an empty shot glass as he and Ellen continued their conversation on the edge of the small party.

"Terry missed you a lot when you were gone," Ellen said. "He spent so many hours digging in those books, trying to figure out what kind of Mythica you were. I heard more about magic birds than I thought was possible." She smiled.

"I missed you guys, too," Cory said. "You know, I don't mind being what I am. I'd guess a lot of the different kinds of Others wish they were just regular Gifted, but I don't care. I am what I am, and I can deal with that. But I wish I hadn't started out the way I did. I really wish I could have ended up belonging to a group like yours."

"I know," Ellen said.

"But with my situation," Cory went on, "I know that the Gifted as a whole think I'm dangerous to have around, because of the kind of heat I could bring down on them with the Order. Just wish it hadn't all happened that way."

Miller took the Russians upstairs with drinks in tow, and Karol followed, blushing happily.

“Good night!” Miller called down from the railing. Ellen waved. Cory wondered which bedroom the four of them were headed to, and the thought reminded him of Heather. He felt embarrassment, especially with Ellen so close to him. Cory wondered what the others would think of him if they knew what he had done to Heather, a mundane with no defense against his powers.



At 11:30 pm Terry, Karl, Ellen, and Cory piled into the T-Bird and headed to the southern edge of the Minneapolis Shadow. To get there, they had to skirt Minneapolis to the north, then swing around counter-clockwise, sticking to local streets and ill-used roads. Minneapolis itself was dark, and smoke hung in the air. Distant helicopters and strange aircraft flew slow patterns in the night.

Finally, they rolled into a run-down residential area. A pale, nearly translucent being looked down at them from a barren tree, and Cory wondered what kind of spirit it might be, and why it had ventured from its native Astral Plane to the Shadow. Karl parked the car in a cracked parking lot, among rusting pickup trucks, dirt bikes, bicycles, and modded street-pro compact cars. Terry led the four of them to the church.

They passed in front of scruff-faced teenagers in black leather jackets and spiked hair, sitting on cement steps drinking beer. Far away, toward Minneapolis, an echo of a rifle shot called out. The rough-necks pretended to not notice, but something in Cory’s guts told him they were afraid.

Terry paused in front of the church’s ancient double doors. Live music escaped from inside. Terry climbed the steps and went in, and Ellen, Karl, and Cory followed. A bouncer watched as they entered, and Terry threw in a twenty dollar bill to a jar marked ‘Donations.’ Further in, they found the source of the music; a goth darksider rock trio performed on a makeshift stage in the center of the large chamber, in front of a Gifted audience of fifty. The noise level blasted to the arched ceilings. Cory followed Terry through a tight knot of dimly lit rogues who swayed to the hail of sound. The church had long been converted into some kind of twisted artists loft, and the walls were covered in splattered, bohemian tapestries. Behind the band, where Cory guessed the church altar had once stood, the Vale’s crossover portal winked and spun.

A teenage girl in fishnets and a torn miniskirt stopped in front of Terry, and they exchanged a few words that Cory couldn’t make out. Then Terry led them through the crowd and away from the small concert. They entered a brickwalled hallway that twisted, serpentine, into the lower levels of the church.

The hallway continued for another three corners, then opened to a large chamber with vines climbing the walls and curved ceiling. It was a simple room, with rough wooden pews on the sides facing a central raised platform, where a large stone basin of water stood. Beyond the basin, there was a passage which led out, into darkness. Six Gifted waited for them in the room.

The nearest was just to Terry’s left as they entered, and the figure moved quickly at them. His face was pale and made up of hard angles, his hair oiled back and dark, his eyes like slits. He wore a reflective pleather trench coat, and his right hand rested on the hilt of a long, thin knife. Panic flared in Cory’s heart.



He stepped ahead of Terry and called on his power. It flooded his skin, muscles, bones. The dark figure halted as if he had run into a brick wall, and he and Cory shared a look of recognition... the two of them were faster than anyone else in the room.

“Shit!” Karl yelled out, reacting too late. Terry caught his breath, and his hand went inside his coat.

“Cease,” a soft voice ordered.

“My Lady,” the man in the slick coat replied, and he withdrew to a far corner of the room.

“Please forgive our Lady’s bodyguard,” the woman spoke again. “These are dangerous days.” Cory turned and looked at the strangers in the room. Two women and one man stood near the water basin, and two more men were at attention at the far side of the room.

The speaker was a vision of black and white. She was tall, and her powdered face held delicate, aristocratic cheekbones. She wore a corset, skirt, and top hat, and carried a cane with a silver wing for a handle. The second woman was shorter than the first, with a face painted by a loving hand beneath brilliant, rich, red curls. Her body was fit for dancing, and her eyes commanded and saw everything, both at once.

The man next to them was middle-aged and broad shouldered, with dark hair and a full beard, speckled with grey. He wore black slacks and a fine green dress shirt beneath a tailored long coat. The last two men, at the back of the room, were young and fit, one with no hair, and the other with a long ponytail. They wore turtlenecks, jeans, and boots, and had assault rifles slung across their backs. The taller woman stepped forward and flourished with her cane, giving a slight bow.

“I am Bella DeMorte, courtesan and speaker for our Lady Paradise,” she said. Bella gestured at the younger woman with the brilliant red hair. Then Bella indicated the bearded man. “And this is Sir Matheson, her martial advisor.” Bella turned back to Cory.

Ellen stepped forward as she sensed opportunity.

“We are pleased to finally meet you,” Ellen said. “I am Ellen Waters, Priestess of Dionysus. Bacchus has a keen interest in the ongoing here, as I’m sure you’re well aware.” She motioned to Cory. “This is Cory Williams.”

Cory wasn’t sure what was expected of him, and felt relief as Ellen took charge of the meeting. Behind him, Karl took up a post between the bodyguard in the corner and Cory, and Terry became still and quiet, absorbing the details. Ellen continued the introductions for their party.

“This is Tom Grey,” Ellen said. “He has been working with Bacchus for many months now, helping us to understand Mr. Williams’ connection to the Element, and who was responsible for much of his early training.”

“Lady Paradise,” Terry greeted them. “Mrs. DeMorte.”

“And this is Big Karl,” Ellen gestured, “who has further developed Mr. Williams’ training in Chicago.”

“Hello,” Karl said. He sounded as if he were chewing tin foil.

“We are pleased to meet you all,” Lady Paradise said. Her voice was rich and full. Cory found himself wanting to stare at her beautiful lines, her sharp face. “Bella,” she nodded at her speaker. Bella took a deep breath.

“House Aruithinea extends warm salutations to you, the descendant of one of our most beloved,” Bella DeMorte said, speaking to Cory directly. “You were lost to us all of this time,

and House Aruithinea wishes to express its profound disappointment in not discovering you sooner. We are honor-bound to care for, raise, and teach the descendants of our fallen heroes. The Phoenix Lord is one that we remember with great songs and stories. For one that had done so much for our House, we have failed his memory in doing nothing to look after his son.

“House Aruithinea asks for your forgiveness in this, and humbly extends an offer to enter our ranks with the station appropriate to one of your line, along with the privileges afforded, so we might continue the tradition of alliance between our House and your own family line.”

Cory didn’t know what to say. He noticed the intensity with which Sir Matheson looked at him, and hesitated. Ellen took up the slack.

“Mr. Williams appreciates your most generous offer,” Ellen answered. “Generous, and unexpected. He wishes to contemplate the fullness of your gesture in private, so that he might give the prospect the grave consideration which it deserves.” Bella smiled at Ellen’s words.

“Of course,” Bella replied.

“If I may,” Terry said, “we weren’t aware of Mr. Rhine’s precise status within your House. Did he truly hold a Lordship?”

“The Phoenix Lord’s status within House Aruithinea was equivalent to that of an Earl,” Bella said. “Akin to Bacchus’ own members of the Council of the Vines, or perhaps a Major General of the Blackguard. He was a great hero to us.” Ellen blinked rapidly in surprise.

“So it appears,” Terry replied quietly. “Thank you.”

“Jesus...” Karl muttered.

“If I accepted this position as the Phoenix Lord inside your House,” Cory said, “I’d be some kind of general. So I’d be expected to fight the Order for you, as he did?” Ellen hadn’t expected Cory’s statement, and her face showed it.

“If that is what you chose,” Bella said. “You would be bound to raise an army and wage war upon our enemies, and to protect our people from harm.” Cory was surprised to feel anger climb up his skin.

“Mr. Williams merely wants to fully understand what it is...” Ellen began. Cory cut her off, his face suddenly hot. Neco’s power rolled into his voice.

“Sounds like you want me to single-handedly do the impossible for you,” Cory said, his voice loud and jagged. “The Order can’t be fought by a dozen people hiding out under a church! It doesn’t matter what kind of title you want to give me. Seems like the last guy who had this job didn’t have too easy a time of it.”

“It’s not like that, Mr. Williams,” Lady Paradise said. “Please. Give us a chance. Hear us out.”

The pledge knelt on the stone floor of the cave. Candles lit the chamber, throwing soft light against the smooth, water-worn walls. The air was cold and damp. The pledge wore street clothes, but Jack knew the man was a soldier. Jack examined the prospect. David Bryne came from a blue collar family of factory workers, a loyal citizen with a strong record. David was no gilded son, no star athlete or monied prospect. He was a grunt from a long line of grunts, who had busied themselves with bloody, nasty, demeaning hard work since they had arrived on this unforgetting rock called America four long generations ago.

David was a few years older than Jack. He was a large, muscled man, with big hands and a broad forehead. He'd served his country in Iraq, and had the countenance of a veteran. He'd go back, tour after tour, if that's what was wanted of him. Men like David were built to serve, and they'd grind through every day of their lives, ceaselessly, endlessly, until they caught up with an early, messy death or broke down after long decades of brutal abuse. David would never buck for a promotion. He'd never strike out on his own. He wanted to be told what to do. And Jack hated him for it.

"Rise," Jack said. The pledge did so, coming up two inches taller than Jack, eyes front, locked at attention. Jack made a slight signal and two assistants appeared out of the darkness, breaking their illusions of shadow. David gasped in surprise. The prospect was new to the world of the Gifted, and startled easily at the terrible, wonderful things that the Gifted could do. Things that, one day, he might be able to do himself.

The ceremonial aides roughly ripped the clothes from David's body. They unsheathed long blades from their belts and cut carelessly at David's jeans, nicking the soldier's skin and drawing thin trails of blood. Then they threw him to the ground and beat him with fists, heels, and finely wrought oak clubs. The scene gave Jack a chill, remembering his own trial, his own beating on a similar cave floor in a memory that drifted to him from what seemed a long time ago.

The pledge's hands and feet were bound with leather cords. He was blindfolded, and forced to drink from a metal cup of precisely mixed psychoactives. Two more assistants came into the chamber, and David was carried deeper into the complex. Jack followed the procession.

"You're going to die, David," Jack said. "We know what you've done. Every sin. Every crime. You're going to be judged. And then, you're going to die."

They threw him roughly to the floor of the next chamber. Incense burned, and masked guards in black robes, armed with spears, stood watch over the entrance. When the drugs began to take effect, David's blindfold and restraints would be removed, and as he tried to remain unaffected, on his knees in naked shame, his mind would start to unravel. He'd watch as couples would fuck on the floor next to him, and when ghastly painted forms would mark the cave walls with blood. He'd go numb from sound after the drums began thudding, from being kept awake as he lost track of time, as hours merged into days. He'd watch terrifying forms as they staged murders and rapes, he'd be tied down and forced to fuck a beautiful woman. Later, he'd witness what appeared to be her murder, and his psyche would continue to buckle and creak.

At last, he'd awake to find himself at the bottom of a rock-hewn grave, atop a carpet of bones. Half-mad, starved, delirious, brain synapses struggling to find their feet under the weight of the ego-destroying chemicals, David would climb out of the grave and pledge his unwavering fealty to Terishor. And he'd be told his secret name.

Immediately after, he'd be handed a naked sword, taken to a final chamber, and told to kill the person he found there. This scene wasn't stage dressing; the execution was for real. The man would be nude, bound and gagged, his body smeared in white powder, his hands red with blood.

What had the prisoner done to deserve death? Who was he? What was his name? He was the guilty, an enemy of mankind. That was all you needed to know. Uphold your oath. Preserve the fabric. Destroy the abomination.

Jack Quick knew that David would make it through the initiation. He knew it, because he had seen the look in the eyes of men who had failed. They had a weakness, a certain lacking that was hard to define. The others, the ones who would make it through, could gather themselves up and force their hand forward, could do the psychic trick of telling themselves it was okay, that it was necessary, that it was their duty, and that it was their price of admission into the vaulted society of the Order, and all of the privilege that this entailed. And they would force their hand to strike, and the sword would do its work.

But mostly, Jack knew that David was a good soldier. He'd follow through, because he was bred to follow orders. David didn't want into the Order because of the power that membership afforded. He wanted in because he thought it was what he was supposed to do.

Jack left the ceremonial space and changed into his normal clothes. From the depths, Jack heard the drums begin. It would be days before David was in the proper, malleable state for his initiation to be completed. Jack had a lot to attend to in the meantime. He walked the long maze of caves and tunnels. Slowly, the air became warmer and drier. His feet gritted against the stone. Small, soft electric lights showed him the way out of the unforgiving womb of earth. As he walked, he wondered what the initiation rites of the other branches of the Order were like.

Finally, Jack ascended the stone steps and went through the door, and emerged in the basement of the Grey Lodge. The two members in charcoal suits guarded the door and watched him pass without comment. Jack inwardly sighed at the sense of their power, these resolute guardians of Terishor. They were men like him, ascendant men, keepers of the secret old ways. He always felt a sense of fellowship and safety when he looked upon those who stood watch in Terishor's name.

One of the men cleared his throat and said Jack's name.

"Yes?"

He did not speak, but instead pointed to an adjoining lounge, often used by members for socializing after the ceremonies held far below them. Jack turned and strode through the door. It was his father.

John Brozeck was a tall, strong man, even crossing middle age, and he wore a common suit that belonged on a corporate middle manager. Jack didn't know why John dressed beneath his station, and when he had once asked the older man about his habit, John had remained elusive. As Jack approached the shadow of his father, John's radius of strength drowned out the resonances of the two guards in the hall. John Brozeck was a powerful figure, and the steeliness of his eyes could bore through a man and make him shiver.

Some of the higher ups in the local Order hierarchy knew that John was Jack's father. Some, but not all. John now used the name Walter Drake, within the Order and without. There was some bad history surrounding John from a long time ago, and he didn't want to drag with him a reputation he'd rather not have. No need to rouse old rivals by announcing to them that John had returned to active service to Terishor.

"Hi Dad," Jack said, and John's left eye twitched in mild agitation. But John refused to take the bait, and instead took in a steadying breath.

"Why is it," John asked, "that you show such an honorable, respectful face to your superiors and your men, but to me, in private, you can't resist displays of adolescent rebellion? You know my secret is important to what we're trying to do here."

"I've got to show you how much I care," Jack quipped.

"Used to be, you were a dutiful son at home. Out in the world, you were reckless, indolent. You flaunted yourself at school, with your friends. But at home there was peace. Now, everything is reversed." John shook his head in a show of sadness. Jack let the conversation thread go; it wasn't going anywhere interesting.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Cory is back," John said. Jack blinked in surprise.

"But..." he managed. "Nothing about it came across the network. And I hadn't heard anything from Raeford. You sure?"

"I'm sure," John replied.

"But how? How do you know?" Jack asked him.

"I know. And that's enough," John said. "He's somewhere in the Shadow, but his position is obscured by a Vale. We have to find him, and before Lexington's men do. After that shit they pulled..."

"Motherfuckers," Jack said. "What if they had killed him? He belongs to us."

"He won't go down so easily," John said, his voice hinting at pleasure. "He gave Corbel's men quite the black eye."

"And they have no business pulling operations like that within our jurisdiction!" Jack Quick spat.

"There's nothing we can do about it," John said. "Not directly. We can't countermand the Dominus. Lexington has the right to order forces directly against Sect enemies."

"Even if they are going to botch the job?"

"Even if they are going to botch the job," John agreed. "Good break for Cory, though, that the Lacrutian's private security people ignored our approach profiles on him."

"Otherwise, he'd be dead," Jack sniffed.

"Possibly," John countered. "The dragon is powerful, and can act through Cory in ways that are hard to predict."

"Anyway, Cory's not an enemy," Jack argued. "He never has been. If Lexington would just listen to us, let us try to bring him in..."

"He's not going to listen," John Brozeck soothed. "It's up to us to do this. We have to go over Lexington's head. It's for the good of the Sect." Jack paused to consider what his father had said, then nodded.

“So how do we proceed?”

“You just keep doing what you’re doing, and keep an ear out for Lexington’s ‘secret team,’” John said. “You leave Cory to me. We don’t have very long to work with, either.”

“Why? You mean beyond having to beat the Lacrutians to him?”

“Right,” John said. “Because the ward on the Element is breaking down. That’s how it was able to empower Cory in the first place. Cory’s little dragon is trying to get free, and it can already project a lot more power to him than it ever did before.”

“So why doesn’t that witch ensnare Neco in another magic cage?” Jack asked. “Isn’t that what Raeford is here for? To take care of this shit?” John sighed.

“If she could stop the Element’s progress, don’t you think she’d have done so by now?” John replied.



Cory found himself above the lake of fire. He was on a small ledge that jutted out over the vast expanse of hell. Far below him, beneath rolling clouds of soot and ash, the monster circled.

*Hello, Phoenix-blood.*

As in his earlier dreams, the dragon spoke directly into Cory’s mind.

“What do you want, Neco?”

*I want to get free of this place. I chafe against these walls. Set me free, and I will make you as a god. Fight for me in your father’s name, and I will help you destroy your enemies.*

“Why?” Cory’s voice rose in the roar of the wind. “Why didn’t you tell me about my father? And who says I’ll fight for you? For you, or for anyone else?”

*You will. It’s your nature, Coscar. It’s why I became the patron of your family line. You hate the secret kings who stole the land of your ancestors. You hate them, and want to break their throne.*

“You don’t know anything about me!” Cory argued. “You know nothing!”

*I see inside you, Coscar. You cannot hide your heart from me.*

“You’re just as bad as they are!” Cory shouted. “You just want to control me! You say you want to help me, keep me safe from my enemies? Empower me? You just want to use me like a tool, just like they do.”

*They? You mean these men?*

And Cory saw in his mind’s eye the faces of John Brozeck and Jack Quick.

*This one, the traitor to your father’s honor? Who trapped me in this cruel prison and left your father to die at the hands of cowards? And his young brood, this vile, poisonous thing? Who once called you brother, but now...*

“That’s enough!” he screamed. “That’s fucking enough!”

Silence overcame the massive tides of molten metal below. The chamber descended into quiet.

“They’re the only family I’ve got left,” Cory managed. He fell to his knees. “I know. I know what you’d have me do to them. And I just can’t, okay? I just can’t.”

It was August 8th, two days since the meeting with Aruithinea in the converted church. The dream with Neco had been last night. Cory broke down and told Terry, Karl, and Ellen about it. It made him feel weak and foolish, having to spill his guts to his friends like that. He'd need to be stronger than that in the future, he warned himself. Cory had a feeling that he'd need to be made of stronger stuff in the times coming ahead.

They talked about it. About Aruithinea's offer of accepting Cory into their fold, and turning him into some kind of military leader charged with fighting the Order. About what that would mean, in the long run. Never having a chance at a normal life in Incarna ever again, at least not in any friendly Western countries. A lot of bloodshed and fear, and a near sure-thing to an early death.

Ellen told him that Bacchus' interest in Cory had officially expired... that they weren't backing his training under Karl any longer, but they still wanted her to keep an eye on Cory's progress. Progress toward what, exactly, they hadn't told her.

Terry hadn't liked much of it. Bacchus had cut the purse strings just as Aruithinea had appeared and made their offer. "Too convenient," Terry said. "Real life doesn't work that way. It's like you're being led around by the hand." Big Karl had agreed.

"Yeah, fuck 'em," Karl had said. "We should just give both Aruithinea and Bacchus the finger and head back to Chicago, leave everyone behind. No offense, dear," he said to Ellen.

"Aruithinea knows more than it's telling," Cory said. "I want to hear more from them before I do something like that."

"Fine, fine," Karl grumbled.

"But, hey, if it all looks like shit," Cory said, "I'm all good with ditching. You still got a spot for me with your guys?" he asked the big man.

"Hell, yeah," Karl answered. "Of course." Karl put on a wounded face.

"Okay," Cory replied. "So, we give 'em a call and see what's what."

Soon, they were headed north. Terishor's blockade had grown weary, and Terry knew the gaps well.

The T-Bird rumbled over the hum and staccato divides of the Mayan highway. High cirrus clouds floated dreamily above them in a sky awash with blue, and bright, angry thrasher music roared out of the car's speakers. Karl had Cory at the wheel, and was in the back seat with Terry, where they debated in clipped words about where all of this was headed. Ellen sat in the passenger seat, hiding behind designer sunglasses and watching the scenery cruise by.

The hours drifted past. They hit a truck stop along the dream of 35, just before the Hinckley Shadow, a Native American Indian gambling town. They belonged to the Spirit Nations, Terry told him. Free Societies people.

It was the middle of the afternoon when the crests of glacial hills fell away and revealed the grey patchwork of the Duluth Shadow below, curled up next to the vast and sparkling Lake Superior. Soon, they were down among the tall edifices of metal, stone, and glass, and too far from vantage to do anything but glimpse the water between passes of industrial buildings. High to their left, the rest of the city crawled up the hills and into the sky.

They continued through the Duluth Shadow and emerged, traveling ever north. The lanes narrowed down and got nearer to the water. Pines and thick grass were everywhere, omnipresent. Ellen and Terry navigated, figuring out the mysteries of Mayan travel. They got lost a couple

of times, even though Cory was certain they hadn't turned, and the giant lake remained to their right.

At last, they approached a small bar and grill, next to the shore. It was a run down joint, but Cory felt the thrum of the Vale nonetheless. There, alone in the parking lot, was a small Mazda sports car. Cory slowed and came around the far side, routing along a narrow access road. Pulling into the gravel lot next to the place, he saw Bella DeMorte leaning against the car, dressed in her proud black clothes and sharp top hat. Cory pulled up alongside her and turned the engine off. They got out of the car and stretched their legs.

"Good day," Bella greeted them.

"Mornin' sweetie," Karl grinned. "Miss me?"

"Quite," Bella responded. "You're late. I trust you found us all right?"

"We managed," Cory said.

"Please follow me," Bella said. "I'll lead you to our final destination."

She got into the little black Mazda and Cory pointed the T-Bird after her. A few short minutes later, the Mazda turned and pulled onto a slim patch of asphalt called Silver Cliff Road. They crept between the evergreens and then got onto a driveway. A handful of pickup trucks and sedans had preceded them. There were also a trio of older 80's Yamaha street bikes – nothing special, and well used and etched with highway character. A scratchy, unkempt lawn opened up on both sides with walls of trees beyond. It made the plot into a lane pointed right at the water, broken by a 50's era log cabin which only seemed a speed bump by scale. A dozen rough outcasts milled in the back, almost hidden by the cabin. It was another Vale, a small one. Cory figured it was nearly impossible to sense from the main road.

"Looks like we got ourselves invited to a barbeque," Karl smirked from the back seat.

"They're trying to put you at ease," Ellen said. "They're inviting you to see them in a different light. Considering how poorly the last meeting went, I guess we shouldn't be too surprised."

"At least they're trying, right?" Cory said. The four of them got out of the car.

Bella stuck nearby and made introductions. Lady Paradise came out of the cabin and greeted them, and told them to make themselves feel at home. It was a decidedly informal affair. Food was served, barbeque style, along with longnecks of beer. The Gifted in attendance were a curious collection. There were biker types and the Ren Faire sorts that generally made Cory think of hippies' kids. Lots of working class folks. Acoustic guitars and hand drums came out after the food was done. The music was folk and traditional Irish. In the Maya, the sun worked its way down.

Sir Matheson arrived in a black sedan, accompanied by turtlenecked security. He seemed agitated, somehow, stiff on what Cory presumed was home ground for him. Matheson pulled Lady Paradise's bodyguard away and asked the slim, dangerous man some quiet questions, then dismissed him.

"Are you curious about him?" a lyrical voice asked. Cory turned and was startled by Lady Paradise's closeness. She had crept up to within inches of him.

"Sorry, Lady, I didn't see you there," Cory said. "But yeah, I guess I am. Curious." She gave him a small, bemused smile.

"Therney," she said. "He's been with my House a long time. You and he have a lot in common, I suppose. He's a Shikiri, one of the animal people. They say he has the spirit-blood of Raven."



“He’s a Theran?” Cory asked.

“Yes,” Lady Paradise answered. “Does that surprise you?”

“I guess not. He’s alert, and fast. That makes for a good bodyguard, I’d think.”

“That’s pretty pragmatic,” Lady Paradise commented. “Not a lot of Factions out there trust Therans among them.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard that,” Cory agreed. “But your group is more open-minded than that, eh?”

“Yes. We are.”

“That’s nice to know,” Cory said evenly.

“You don’t trust us, do you?” Lady Paradise asked.

“Not really,” Cory admitted.

“In time,” Lady Paradise said. She touched Cory’s arm. “Excuse me. I have some things to take care of.” She withdrew.

The day waned. It turned out the bikers weren’t members of Aruithinea at all, but belonged to an East Coast Collective instead, called Liberty. The three of them were friends of Bella, and had been invited along. Cory wondered how much of the gathering was a social event, and how much was a vetting process for himself and his people.

Roger, one of the Liberty folks, chewed on Cory’s ear for a while. Liberty was based in New England, where they played cat and mouse with the New York State Police on Incarna, and ran whole swaths of the Mayan highway on the flip side of the Mirror.

“Well, ya see,” Roger told him, “a man’s gotta have his own place in this world. No use being free if you’re going to sit still and let the Order or its puppets slap you in chains. They know better than to come over to our side of the world.”

“Have you had trouble in the past?” Cory asked.

“Oh, sure,” Rogers laughed. “We’ve got a long and sordid tradition of shooting at tyrant’s soldiers and mercenaries, back where I’m from. They know better than to venture too far from their forts. Outside of the cities, free men own New England.”

Terry pulled Cory aside. “I just found out, there’s going to be ceremony tonight,” Terry said. “You’re going to want to have your head clear.” He gestured at Cory’s drink.

“Oh, what now?” Cory asked. “What kind of ceremony?”

“Ritual,” Terry answered. “An invocation or calling. And remember, on this side of the Mirror, spirits can affect you directly, and vice-verca.”

“Okay,” Cory nodded. He set his beer down on a picnic table and made his way over to the coffee pot, and broke out a cigarette.



The hours passed and the sun turned the sky to the west into a knockout Van Gogh fireball. A three-foot wood teepee was put up in a blackened fire pit, and stuffed with kindling and balled up newspaper. Soon there was proper bonfire. They refired the coals in the barbeque and another batch of steaks, hamburgers, and brats were cooked. The pieces of meat split and sizzled and seduced the air with the scent of their juices.

Bella beckoned Cory to her, and led Cory away from the cabin into the outskirts of the trees near the water.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” Bella inquired.

“Yeah, fine,” Cory replied. “Thanks.”

“You’ve gotten a chance to see us with our guard down,” Bella told him. “We were worried after last time we met. Frankly, my superiors don’t know how to proceed. They hadn’t imagined that you’d refuse their offer, and now they’re struggling. I’d like to know where you stand.”

Cory knew that it was a lie; the party was carefully orchestrated. Aruithinea’s guard was anything but down. Cory looked out over the dream of Lake Superior. It looked as if the water went on forever, and Cory realized that, here in the Maya, that somehow might be true.

“If I had to decide right now?”

“Yes,” Bella said.

“I’m not going to join,” Cory answered.

“No?” She didn’t seem surprised.

“Your people are...” he struggled. “Look. If I was just some nobody and you wanted me in as one of Sir Matheson’s guards, I’d be game. But what you’re asking of me... it’s out of my league. I don’t want that kind of position, and I’d have no idea of how to go about any of it.”

“I understand,” Bella said. “They want to make you out to be their savior, it’s true. But you wouldn’t be thrown to the wolves. And we know how powerful our adversary is. You wouldn’t be expected to break the Order’s hold overnight.”

“Just the fact that you think the Order can be broken at all,” Cory argued. “To me, that’s crazy. Maybe with a hundred thousand... it’s not important. I don’t want that kind of responsibility. What you’re asking of me is impossible.”

“Sloan didn’t want her position, either.”

“Sloan?”

“Our Lady Paradise,” Bella explained. “It’s her uncle, you see. He’s the Earl of the Twins. One day, she will be the Countess.” Bella saw confusion on Cory’s face. “That’s the feminine of an Earl. She will one day hold his office. Sloan never had a choice in the matter. Not really. It was her family duty.” Cory turned away from the water and faced Bella.

“Look,” he said. “Just because my father went and died for your cause doesn’t mean I have to. Because in case you haven’t noticed, the Order controls pretty much everything on the other side. And there’s no way your House can ever take them on. Besides, I never knew my father anyway. He’s just a name to me. So trying to invoke his name to get me to come on board isn’t going to work.”

“I see.”

“Hey, I’m sorry,” Cory said.

“No, don’t be,” Bella replied. “It’s your choice. I don’t know what I’d say, if I were in your position.”

“Sloan didn’t have a choice?” Cory asked. “Is that the way it normally is for your people?”

“Sloan grew up in the House,” Bellas said. “As soon as she became Gifted, she was initiated and began to be groomed for her future duties. She was twelve years old at the time.”

“I guess it’s a shame for you that I grew up outside the House, then,” Cory said.

“Yes, it is,” Bella said simply. Cory felt her frustration, and knew she’d keep at it as long as he let her bend his ear. It was her duty, and Bella was going to hammer at him until he made her stop.

“You serve your House well,” Cory said. The compliment made Bella pause.

“Thank you,” she said gracefully.

“But you know my position,” he went on. “And I don’t see how anything is going to change. I’m going back to the party, now. Thanks for the talk.”

Bella nodded quietly and gestured toward the cabin. They returned to the gathering. Terry found him as the sun sank down below the horizon in the west. There was an air of expectation in the group, and conversation had died down to soft murmurs. Many lost themselves in the flames of the fire, or the changing light of dusk.

“You okay?” Terry asked him.

“Yeah, sure. Just got the next phase of their sales pitch,” Cory grimaced.

“And?”

“And I turned them down.”

Sloan emerged from the cabin, followed by twin girls. They had changed their clothes, and now the three of them wore flowing white robes, simple sandals, and flowers in their hair. All three held small bundles of sage, and the smoke of incense spread in their wake. The assembled onlookers fell into silence. Sloan approached the fire and walked around it, and the two girls followed her. They went around three times, and then Sloan stopped with her back to the shore, facing the bonfire with her assistants on either side.

“I open this fire,” she softly. Her voice carried over the sound of lapping waves and splitting, burning wood. “I open this fire in the name of the moon and the stars. I open this fire in the name of Brigid, and call for the blessing of Mannannan. We stand before Brigid’s fire, and honor Mannannan’s water. Our working is begun.” Cory felt the first threads of energy come out of Sloan, and saw it hover above her head.

At that, the drummers began. The beat was slow and intense. Someone began to sing, and Sloan and the two girls joined their voices into the song, and began to dance in a circle around the fire. It was a language that Cory didn’t know. The force of the drumming picked up, and the energy built, tying into a thick pattern of power. Layers of faster beats ran over the original, dull pounding. The strength of the voices rose, and the three women moved faster and faster, the smoke from the sage swirling outward. Cory watched the ritual take shape before his eyes. It was a daring, towering thing, rippling and strong.

At the climax of the song, the three priestesses threw themselves to their knees, returned to their starting positions. They faced the fire, prostrated, hair tumbled over their flushed faces, lightly sheened in sweat. They placed the bundles of sage into the flame, where they snapped and leapt. The smell of the incense overwhelmed. The drums and the singing stopped, and everything held its breath as the energy of the spell crackled and sparked, like a harnessed lightning bolt. Cory glanced around, and was relieved to see Ellen, Terry, and Big Karl around him. If the ritual went wrong, he wanted his friends around him. Just in case.

Sloan began to speak again. It was the same language as before, rough and beautiful at the same time. It was a prayer or a poem, Cory couldn’t be sure which. Sloan stood, repeating the phrases, and slowly turned toward the water’s edge. The energy of the ritual flowed after her,

fiercely powerful, uncaring, and for a moment, Cory was afraid. Sloan entered the water and walked out up to her waist, repeating her prayer, and her voice gained a throaty edge.

The drums began again, punctuating Sloan's words as she fell into a repeat.

"Osclaítear na geataí."

Wham.

"Osclaítear na geataí."

Wham.

"Osclaítear na geataí."

Wham.

Cory watched as the ritual energy swirled about Sloan's head. It thrummed and intensified, crackling, woven ever tight. He stared at the cone of energy above and around Sloan, and knew somehow that any misstep might mean disaster.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

People joined in, shouting, adding their voices to the raw pulse of sound. Cory heard himself say it, too. It was as if the charge of ritual power was itself catching fire. The shape turned white-hot in Cory's eyes. It began to flow upward, like a waterfall in reverse, burning, dangerous...

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

If she lost control of it, the force might do anything. It could destroy her mind, fragment her memories. It could tear a hole in the Mirror, or become a beacon for the kind of Astral beings who liked to feast on the hearts of innocent children. It could slash out and rip a tiny, momentary hole in the cosmos itself.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

It could kill her. It could kill him. It could kill them all.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Wham.

"Osclaítear na geataí!"

Sloan flung her hands high, and the drums and voices stopped as she forced the shape of the ritual into the tapestry of the universe. In his mind's eye, Cory saw a bright light.

The air buzzed, as if from static. Cory felt giddy, as if he should be laughing. As if he'd just ridden through a rough patch of track, one where he knew he should have wiped out, but somehow he hadn't. Adrenaline shot up and down his limbs. The moment passed, and the assembled understood that the ritual calling was a success. A cheer went up, and Cory felt his cheeks flush with warmth as he smiled.

"Now we see if whatever she was calling is over here in the Shadow," muttered Karl.

“And we see what mood we’ve caught it in.” Cory noted the anticipation and murmurs that ran through the faces around him.

“How long?” Cory asked.

“Not long, I’d guess,” Terry answered.

“She was amazing,” Ellen said, a hint of awe in her voice. “That’s a lot of control for someone so young.”

Something happened out in the water.

“Huh,” Karl said.

“What was that?” Cory asked.

“I don’t...” Ellen began.

There was a tiny light, far away in the water, beneath the surface. Deep. Sloan’s face began to glow, as if the light were shining on her. Sloan’s skin shimmered and a strong wind began to blow.

“Our Lady of the Sea has heard our call,” Sloan said, her voice rising above the rush of air and water. A cold, shocking force came at them on the shore, a wall of spray. Waves came fiercely at Sloan’s legs and threatened to throw her under. The dull, train-like roar told of storms beyond counting, and the eventual slaying of earth and even stone, and seasons to near infinity, and beyond that, nearly so far back as to call it the ancestral memory of the very water itself, a gnawing, crawling, crystalline prehistory of ice.

Beneath that oblivion of sound was the siren noise of a woman’s voice. Cory didn’t know the words, but there were words, old words, words from the earliest days of man. Like stones grinding together. Sloan’s wet hair plastered against the side of her pretty face, and she spoke an answer to the awesome scene around them.

In a flash, Cory saw the spirit in the shape of a woman, a mere step away from Sloan’s dripping frame. Fear took him, and he moved forward without thinking, calling for strength, speed, and the ability to do harm. He made it past the twin girls and came up at Sloan’s side. The shock of the cold water slammed into Cory’s legs. The spirit abruptly turned to watch Cory’s approach and a voice slashed into his mind.

“Hello, cousin,” she said. At the same instant, Neco came forth from the back of Cory’s head, a reassuring force, a presence of heat that told him that it wasn’t going to let the spirit hurt him. Cory blinked at the force around the figure, and suddenly, the gale around them subsided. He, Sloan, and the spirit were within a sphere of peace. Beyond it, Cory saw, the force of a storm threw itself at the shore.

“Hello,” Cory said.

“This is the son of the Phoenix Lord,” Sloan said in the spirit-tongue.

“Yes, I know his face,” the spirit replied. “He worries for you, daughter of Dana. He comes ready to cast me down.” At this, the spirit made a rolling noise, and Cory recognized it as laughter.

“Please forgive him,” Sloan said.

“Have no fear, child,” the spirit answered. “His kind have always been proud.”

“My Lady of the Sea,” Sloan said, “we have called you forth to ask for your protection and blessing, in the manner of the old ways. We have sung and danced and drummed in your name, so that you might reveal to us the depths of our hearts, and our lives in future days.”

“Very well, child,” the spirit said. “As you wish it. I see much sorrow for you, Lady Paradise, grieving and loss and fear. The hollow ones will come for you, and your people will be scattered to the four winds.” Cory looked at Sloan’s face, and saw the young woman take the prophesy with stoic strength. The spirit went on.

“Fires will burn all across this land. Your old kingdom will be gone, and you will be left with nothing but ashes. Your name and your line will end. And your music, your joy, and your reverence for your old ways, carried with you from your long-forgotten homeland, will be lost to this continent.”

“My Lady, is there nothing I might do?” Sloan asked. “Is there nothing that can take this future away? Tell me what I must do. Please.”

“It is out of your hands, daughter,” the spirit said. “This one, the one you have such hopes for, he doesn’t know himself. He is lost, adrift, and denies the callings of his burning heart.” Anger flashed in Cory’s eyes.

“Watch what you say,” Cory warned.

“What would you do, Coscar? I am not the future,” the spirit laughed. “I am the Lady of the Sea. Your quarrel is not with me. I know your depths because I am depths. I know your secrets because I hide much beneath my surface. I know your nature because I am nature.”

“I can touch you on this side, spirit,” Cory said, surprised at the forcefulness of his own words. “Don’t mock me.” Neco grew in force around him.

“Cory, don’t,” Sloan hissed at him. “You have nothing to gain by making threats.” Cory grit his teeth and renewed his front against the spirit.

“Be clear,” he said. “Her future. She’s to die? All of these people are going to die?”

“Yes,” the spirit said simply.

“Unless, what? Unless I give in?” Cory shook with frustration. “Stop denying my nature? Unless I turn myself into some kind of monster?”

“You are what you are, Coscar,” the spirit answered. It leaned forward and craned its neck at him, peering, curious. “Why do you deny it so?”

“Because I don’t want it!”

“Then your kingdom will be ashes,” the spirit said. “The both of you. Ashes, and nothing more.”



Cory stared into the fire. He was wrapped in a scratchy blanket, mostly naked beneath it as his jeans, socks, and boots dried nearby, hanging off an impromptu clothes line. Ellen sat next to him with her arm around his shoulders, to keep him from getting cold. Over half of the assembly had left in the hours since the spirit had come. Terry lit a cigarette and handed it to Cory.

“Are you still holding up?” Terry asked him.

“He’s fine,” Ellen answered quickly. Cory took a steep drag and nodded.

The Aruithineans had ushered Sloan into the cabin when the spirit had slipped back beneath the waves and the sudden storm had ceased. She was still in there now. Cory thought she must have told them about the spirit’s prophesy. Well, maybe just some of them. Sir Matheson had emerged from the cabin, pale yet cool, and quietly doubled the guards about the place. Even if

the others hadn't heard the predictions of doom, they could read the hint that came in the form of stone-faced young men, carrying combat rifles.

Finally, Cory's clothes were dry enough to put back on. He shivered into them. Big Karl handed him a hot mug.

"Here, drink this. Mulled wine. It's good for ya," Karl laughed. "We'll get you warmed up." Cory caught Karl send a worried look at Terry.

"Guys," Cory sighed. "Come on. I'm fine." Bella emerged from the cabin and made a steady, straight line toward them.

"Mr. Williams?" she addressed him.

"Yes?"

"Our Lady Paradise invites you and your companions to remain here tonight, in recognition of the late hour," Bella said. "She also extends an invitation for an audience with Lord Bedle, the Earl of the Twins, in the morning. Considering the graveness of the words from the Lady of the Sea, we're sure you appreciate the urgent need we have for you to speak with our highest local authority." Bella waited, as if she expected a reply.

"Umm," Cory said.

"Thank you for your most generous offer," Ellen said brightly. "He'll consider it." Bella nodded at Ellen and withdrew. Big Karl looked at Terry and rolled his eyes.

"Blue, for fuck's sake," Karl muttered. "Let's just go."

"They really take spirit prophesies seriously, don't they?" Cory commented.

"Hold on," Terry interjected. He got up and started moving to the edge of the grounds, near the water. "Let's get some privacy. Everyone?"

They all followed him without speaking. When the light from the fire seemed distant and the guards were out of easy earshot, the four of them huddled into a tight circle. Karl stood with his arms tightly crossed and shook his head.

"No, no, no, no fucking way," Karl spat. "We've been on their turf for long enough. We know their game, and seeing their head honcho will just be more of the same. Fuck it. Cory, if the answer's no, the answer's no!"

"If anyone has leadership over these people, it's this Earl," Terry said. "Any important decisions would come from him, anyway. It would be a good place to take negotiations."

"Negotiations? For what?" Karl exploded. "He ain't no damn mercenary! This is just..."

"Hold on," Cory interjected. "Just wait a minute." Karl let out a pent-up breath and calmed down. "We don't have to stay here. We can break off, find somewhere to spend the night down by Duluth. We shouldn't have much to worry about down there, right?"

"It should be fine," Terry agreed.

"You just want to get some distance, talk things over?" Ellen tried.

"It's a good place to start," Cory said.

"Let's just fucking go home," Karl argued.

"You think you can find us a place to crash in Duluth for the night?" Cory asked Karl. The larger man glowered and narrowed his eyes.

"Listen, punk, I might like you, but I trained you, remember?" Karl said, teeth clenched. "Don't think you can tell me what to do. Not today, not ever. Just because these people want to

put you on a pedestal doesn't mean I have to go along with the program. You got me?" Cory bit his tongue and swallowed the jagged words he wanted to say. He saw Terry grow very still.

"I got you, Big," Cory replied instead. "But we still need a place to crash, dig?" Karl thought it over.

"Fine," Karl said at last. "Duluth."



Karl found an empty motel just outside of the Duluth Shadow. It was a simple affair just off the main highway, and looked like it belonged in a road movie about criminals who were on the run. They hid the T-Bird behind the building, and Karl absently looked the motel over as he leaned over the low chain link fence that enclosed an empty swimming pool. He smoked and cursed the events of the day. His AR-15 rested nearby on a bench. Terry came out of his and Ellen's room, and he dug out a cigarette of his own.

"So what do you think?" Terry asked. Karl chuckled in spite of himself.

"Shit, Terry," he said. "This kid is becoming more trouble than he's worth. The Order wants him either dead, or as a recruit, I'm not sure which. Some Element of Discord keeps tapping him, making him unstable and downright dangerous. And now these guys want him, too. And they look desperate." Terry waved his lighter in front of the cig and it caught.

"No surprise, considering what that spirit said," Terry added.

"You could understand that thing?"

"Well, yeah," Terry answered. "I knew it was going to be an invocation. I snuck off a few minutes ahead of time and did a quick ritual of my own."

"So what'd it say?" Karl asked. Terry frowned.

"If Cory doesn't join their House, a lot of them are going to be wiped out, and they'll disappear from this continent. That's a general summary, but it's what everything boils down to."

"And Cory was speaking its language, right?" Karl asked. "Cause I couldn't understand a word of what he or the girl said to it. He looked pretty pissed, though. Made me proud."

"I don't think that Cory likes the idea of being told what to do," Terry said.

"Yeah."

"Are you really thinking about going back to Chicago?"

"Hell, I've got people down there," Karl said. "A place of my own, things I want to do. Sure, the Order is getting worse and worse to deal with. Sure, there's all sorts of rumors out there, black helicopter stuff, and more coming down the pipe. But I don't see the point of charging straight into the jaws of the Order! Fuck, man! A culture war is one thing, but you can't go toe to toe against Terishor. No one can."

"Is that why you're putting your men through the paces in those paramilitary camps?" Terry asked. "When I left him with you, he didn't know how to set up a three-rifleman kill zone. He does now." Karl narrowed his eyes.

"I just want them to be ready. In case," Karl said.

"And when it comes?" Terry asked.

"That's different!"



“See, I don’t think it is,” Terry countered. “These people want to be proactive and take the fight to the Order on their own terms. If you wait until the Order comes for you, they pick the pace of the fight. And you know that you can’t win on the defensive against something like the Order.”

“You can’t win on the offensive against something like the Order, either. It’s all fucking theory-craft anyway. No one can take on the Order, least of all me and my four dozen guys. What I’m doing is just heavy duty self-defense training. There’s a hell of a lot of other baddies out there besides Terishor.”

“He’s wanted by the Order anyway,” Terry said. “Or did you forget? That I was there the last time they tried to kill him?” The big man sighed.

“Terry, I don’t want to die,” Karl said. “And these people, if they step in front of the Order and start making shit, they are going to die. So if Cory doesn’t see the difference between that and waiting for the Order to catch up with him somewhere, ten years from now, that’s his business. But you and me, we’re not in his shoes. We’re not on the Order’s black list. You got me?”

“I’ve thought about this,” Terry said, “and I’ve already made up my mind. If Cory goes in with them, I’m going with him.”

“You can’t fucking be serious.”

“I am serious,” Terry exhaled.

“You’re willing to throw in with these clowns?! What about your girl? She’s all tied up with Bacchus. What, are they just gonna cut her loose and let her go all Patti Hearst on them?”

“Marrow knows that she’s up here, meeting with Aruithinea,” Terry said. “Bacchus has renewed its interest. There’s some talk of working out some kind of cross support, to these guys from Bacchus. Low key, but information, social support, some select amounts of material and financial backing.”

“Now, why the hell would Bacchus support revolutionaries?” Karl demanded.

“I don’t know,” Terry replied. “But I guess I’ll find out, if it goes that way.”

“Do we really have to go meet this Lord Bedle guy tomorrow?”

“Yes, we do,” Terry answered. Karl sighed.

“God dammit.”



That night, Cory dreamed about the spirit on the shore. He was back in the water, next to Sloan. Instead of the white robes, she wore a flowing wedding dress. She smiled as she looked up at him, and the spirit spoke in a language he couldn’t make out. Cory looked back at the people on the shore, and it was a scene of calm and happy anticipation. They sat on rows of chairs on the grass, and watched the ceremony with fierce attention.

Cory awoke.

He rubbed his face and the remains of the dream lingered in his head. There’d been something after the spirit said the ceremony. Cory thought he remembered Sloan pressing her wet body against his, her mouth hungry, her tongue warm. He shivered at the strangeness of the dream, and the tingle of pleasure.

Then he put it behind him and got up. They left the abandoned motel at about 10:00 am. They drove back and found their way to the cabin again, where a half-dozen Aruithineans were finishing up their breakfast. Many, including Sloan, had already left for Lord Bedle's Citadel. The Aruithineans offered Cory and the others what remained of the bacon, eggs, and pancakes, and then packed up their own vehicles. Then they pulled out onto the cracked road, and led the T-Bird into the depths of the Grass Ocean.

They drove ever north along the giant lake, with Karl back behind the wheel. They were in the middle of a protective train of three automobiles and two motorcycles. The route became strange, and shortly thereafter Karl declared the map useless. They saw tilted and rotting wooden signs that pointed to Castle Danger, Silver Bay, Grand Marais.

"We're out of the Caerra," Terry announced.

"So we're on a Vispiri now?" Cory asked.

"Yeah," muttered Karl. "Spirit path. Now who the hell knows where we're gonna end up."

"They seem to know where we're going," Ellen offered.

"Thanks hon, but I still don't like it," Karl answered.

The Vispiri took them deeper into the Maya. Cory knew from Terry's teachings that Vispiri could be used to cover long distances quickly, crossing from one end of a Caerra to another in a short time. They could also be used to reach the Outer Realms, in the furthest reaches of the Maya. Cory wondered where they would end up.

It was slow going. The caravan slowed to thirty miles per hour, with mist reaching up from the sides of the road making it difficult to make out much of the dreamscape beyond. The roadway cracked and buckled in places, and strange spirits of wildlife looked up from the ditch. Hours passed. Cory smoked and watched the surreal roadway pass by.

"Do you know where we are?" Cory asked Terry.

"No, not really," Terry admitted. "But don't worry. I could get us out of here if I had to."

"I know where we are," Ellen said with a smile. Terry looked at her in surprise. She laughed. "I am a Dionysus Priestess. And this section of Maya is close to some of our usual stomping grounds. We're somewhere between the Frontier and Mists Spheres, hovering in the overlap zones. They're taking a strange route, though. I think we've doubled back a few times."

"Are you sure?" Terry asked. Worry crept into his voice.

"Pretty sure," Ellen replied brightly. "I think that the Post Outer Realm is nearby. And I've seen paths that sneak off the main road here and there, that could either be to Braedinain or Faerie."

"Is that bad?" Cory asked.

"Post can be a dangerous place," Terry said. "A realm formed by people's ideas of civilization's collapse."

"Is that the place where the atomic mutants come from?" Karl asked.

"Yes," Ellen said quietly. Karl looked back at them in the rear view mirror.

"Why don't you kids lift up that seat you're on and get those two guns out of that stowaway space," Karl said. "And give Cory one of 'em."

They did, and Cory kept the AR-15's barrel pointed out the window, into the dense mist on the side of the road. The caravan didn't stop for any breaks, and the T-Bird's gas gauge dropped

below the halfway mark. The sky above them took on an amber tinge and Karl's grip on the wheel grew tighter. A long-ago burned out tank faced them in the opposite lane, the asphalt charred and broken beneath it.

Then, two turns later, the caravan broke back into familiar territory, and a sign for a Highway 11 came into view. Tension in the car evaporated. Karl breathed a sigh of relief; they were back in the Grass Ocean. He laughed.

"We're somewhere in Canada!" Karl chuckled.

They passed signs for Amethyst Heights and Macgregor Township, then pulled away and onto 587. The caravan slowed, hugging a cracked and broken roadway that led down a sweeping hill, then onto a gravel road. The massive swell of the dream of Lake Superior loomed ahead. The rough road ended in a flat turnaround where the lead escorts were already getting out of their cars and off their bikes. Breaking above the treeline, a medieval stone tower reached skyward, its stones black and grey. Karl stopped the T-Bird and shut it down. They got out and stretched, and Cory slung his rifle behind his back.

Roger, one of the Liberty bikers, stood around and watched the newcomers arrive.

"Morning!" he called to Cory. "Good to see ya again!"

"Thanks," Cory replied. "You come with the first group?"

"Yeah, we came in early," Roger said. "Didn't want to get lost, so we had to stay close to Bella's group. Which is a shame, 'cause it looked like some interesting riding, off of that misty highway." He laughed.

Sloan, Sir Matheson, and Therney came out of the trees. Sloan wore black jeans, boots, and a tight red top, and over that a heavy biker jacket, a size too big. It was an odd look for someone with position, Cory thought. As if she were slumming on purpose, or making some kind of statement. Still, Cory knew what it looked like when someone wasn't used to wearing clothes like that, and Sloan seemed comfortable. She might have a down-to-earth side to her, after all. Her thicket of brilliant hair fell perfectly down her back and framed her face.

To Sloan's right, Therney's eyes locked on Cory and the rifle, and the Theran's muscles subtly stiffened.

"Thank you for coming," Sloan greeted them. "Welcome to Glasdun Tower." She led them into the fold of wood and stone beyond the gravel. It was rough earth, and a large mound jutted up in a tangle of tree limbs, wild grass, and rocky ground. Low, pale stone walls held in the earth at several tiers, which gave the hill a pyramid-effect. Sloan pointed out a sloped path that turned into overgrown steps, cut against the walls.

At the top tier of the hill stood the tower, four stories tall, surrounded by a two story wall. Cory felt the swirls of energy that made up the mystical defenses and energies of the Citadel, evidence of the site being a long-used place of power. He made out the shapes of wards, magical protections from outside harm, a mystical invisibility, and other, quieter effects. However, the tower was no Vale. It was not attached to any physical place in the real world, and there wasn't a portal across the Mirror.

The spirits of crows or blackbirds patrolled the trees above his head. Sloan led them across the threshold into the small courtyard. Red and silver banners hung from the top of the tower, and shadows of men and women looked out of glassless windows, or loomed from battlements at the tower's crown.

“This is one of the last Citadels that our branch of the House controls,” Sloan explained. “Sadly, our House is a fractured one. Avalon and Schwartzwald are the two other branches, and they have little interest in North America.”

“So, Aruithinea has three branches?” Cory asked. “Avalon, Schwartzwald, and yours?”

“That’s correct,” Sloan replied.

“What’s the name of your branch?” asked Cory.

“Fenian,” she said.

Two figures stood at military attention on either side of the curved, heavy wooden door at the base of the tower. One reached out and opened the door for them.

Inside was a small entrance hall. It was sparsely decorated with hangings and furs on the curved walls. There was a hearth at the back where a teenage boy in tatters tended a small, smoldering fire. He kept his eyes on his work. At the center of the room was an empty stone throne. Stairs began on the right and hung to the wall, where they disappeared into a wooden ceiling high above. Sloan guided them up the spiraling stairs.

The second story was an open room, slightly smaller than the one beneath it. Open window ports made it brighter, too. A massive wooden table commanded the space at the center of the room. It was dark with oil and age. An older man sat alone there, away from the others who held their places at the edges of the room. He rose as Sloan entered.

He wore a heavy and plain grey robe, peppered with black like dirty, nighttime snow. His eyes were cloudy and white, and he had hands that were large and capable, wrinkled from the years. Although blind, the old man smiled at Sloan.

“I present Cory Williams, son of Christopher Rhine, the Phoenix Lord, and his Circle,” Sloan introduced. “This is Lord Bedle, Earl of the Twins, Regent of Glasdun Tower, and Guardian Protector of the Fenian.”

Cory glanced back to Ellen, who made formal introductions for the rest of the party. Sir Matheson, Sloan, and Therney took their places around the great table.

“Thank you for accepting my invitation,” Lord Bedle said, his voice scratchy and careful. “You honor us with your presence. Your father is well remembered by our House. Please, be seated.”

Simple food, red wine, and dark beer were served. Thick bread, hot stew, potatoes, and game bird were brought before them. Karl attacked the food with eagerness, and Cory realized he was hungry, too.

“I’ve been informed of the results of last night’s consultation with the Lady of the Sea,” Lord Bedle said. “Hard times are coming. The Order is becoming even more blatant in their workings in the mundane world.” He sighed. “I once held out hope that another generation or two might pass before the cycle turned around again. Now, I fear I had been too hopeful. You will inherit position in a troubled land, my niece. And for that, I am sorry.”

“Our people are strong,” Sloan said. “You’ve taught me well, and you will be with us many more years. I have faith that we will make it through to better days.”

“Well said,” Lord Bedle replied.

“To better days,” Sir Matheson said, and he raised his glass in toast. The table joined him.

After the meal was finished, Sloan and the rest of the Aruithineans left the table, leaving Lord Bedle with the guests. A small wooden box rested before the Lord, and he sat quietly for a time.

“Now, I suppose we should discuss official matters,” Lord Bedle said at last. “Your friends, they are staying for this?” Cory looked at Terry, who nodded slightly. Karl leaned forward and gave Cory a solemn look.

“We’ll stay if you want us here,” Karl said. “Doesn’t matter what he says.” Cory looked back to his host.

“If that’s acceptable,” Cory said. “I don’t know your customs, but I’d prefer them with me.” Lord Bedle smiled kindly.

“You remind me a great deal of your father,” he said. “You never knew him, I know. But he was a good man. A good friend to my House, and to me. He... lived a troubled life. The attention and patronage of Neco is a blessing and a curse. It drove the Phoenix to conflict, and drew conflict to him. And in the end, his fury cost him his life. He never got to meet his son.”

“This box is for you,” Lord Bedle continued. He slid it across the table to where Cory sat.

“Thank you,” Cory said. The box was heavily lacquered, and was at one time a fine piece. It was now scratched and chipped with age. Cory worked the latch and opened it. Dozens of photographs rested inside. Stunned, Cory’s mind worked out what he was seeing. His hands dipped into the box and pulled the contents out, and he looked at each in turn. His eyes welled with tears. He held up one and showed it to Ellen, who sat next to him.

“This is my mother,” Cory said. “Before she had me. And this one, the short hair, that’s John Brozeck.” In another, his mother and a man kissed, happy, smiling, in the shade of a large tree. “Is this my biological... is this Chris?”

“The photograph under the tree?” Lord Bedle asked. “Yes, that’s him. Christopher Rhine.” Cory looked up at Lord Bedle, then back at a picture with a dozen people, standing before a stone fountain. Cory squinted at a middle aged man in a simple blue suit, with long, greying hair and a beard.

“And this is you?” Cory asked.

“The old man in the fountain picture, yes, that’s me,” Lord Bedle replied. “That was in the Vale of Missionary Park, before they tore everything down and built a bank on the spot.” Then, softer, he said, “I’m sorry for what happened with Linda. She was a beautiful woman, your mother.”

Cory held up a picture of her. Linda held an apple in the freeze frame, and her head was tilted so that all of her hair swept to one side of her face. Her eyes were smart and her mouth was soft, with an almost-blossomed smile. She looked on to Rhine, who was across from her, deep in conversation with someone out of the frame. Rhine wore a black biker jacket over a white tee shirt, and had on blue jeans, torn and frayed at the knees.

“Thank you for this,” Cory said, his voice heavy.

“When she left, Linda made it clear that she wanted no more to do with House Aruithinea,” Lord Bedle said. “It’s hard to blame her, considering all that she lost. When we learned that she had died, we tried to find you, but when we did Brozeck was already there. You were enrolled in a kind of recruiting school for Terishor.” Cory had a realization, and flipped back to the photo showing John.

“He was a spy?” Cory asked. Lord Bedle sadly nodded.

“Not at first,” Lord Bedle said. “He and your father were friends for a time. Then he tried to win Linda away from Chris. When that didn’t work, he approached the Order. He was a traitor.”

Cory felt something dark ignite quietly in his chest. Hate. He stared at the photograph, and felt the urge to rip John’s face in two.

“Of course,” Lord Bedle went on, “we didn’t know this at the time. We know that Brozeck is back in the Twin Cities. He’s using a different name, but it takes more than that to stop our divinations. He isn’t one that we’re willing to give up looking for. When the opportunity presents itself, your father, and all of the others that died, are going to be avenged. Of all of the people in those photos, Brozeck and myself are the only ones left.”

“The dragon, Neco,” Lord Bedle said. “It was imprisoned in a Talisman called the Millennial Orb, made by the great sorcerer Thomas Dee, Gifted brother of John Dee. The Order was greatly threatened by the Phoenix’s connection to the dragon. They may have believed, as many of us did, that with the dragon’s assistance, Rhine was on track to unravel much of the Order’s control in this part of the world. It was a different time for we Gifted than it was for the mundanes. Authority was on the decline. Watergate and the Vietnam failure, the continuation of the sexual revolution, the mistrust of government. The Halveyans worked their way into power.

“The Order couldn’t afford to lose any more control, and Rhine proved himself willing to push the Order out of areas by force. We had reached out to socialists in South America. If we had remained unchecked, we would have rolled the Order back to...” he stopped himself. “I’m sorry. Please forgive an old man. It’s enough to know that the Order wanted Rhine out of the way, and the only way to do it was to cut him off from the Element’s power.”

“Brozeck accomplished his task, and was initiated into the Order’s higher ranks as a reward,” Lord Bedle said. “But now, another Coscar sits at my table. The wheel has turned, and brought us back to a familiar place. This is our proposition, Cory. Join us against our common foe, and we will claim the Millennial Orb from the Order, and release Neco from the prison. With the strength of the Element behind you, we can reclaim this country for free men once again.”

At that, Cory knew that they had him. He’d join. He’d accept the offer, and become their general. They’d gotten inside him, and the dragon curled tightly around his heart, momentarily content.



Lady Callah Calibri, First Scion of the House of Raeford and Mistress of the Temple of Pure Thought, climbed from her meditative state in her personal working chamber. She was deep within her Citadel, the official seat of Raeford’s power for the entire Province. The mystical strength of the structure flowed around and through her, and she had elevated her will to the proper place for the working she was about to perform.

She tightened the ceremonial robe sash about her waist and took a steadying breath, then emerged through the curtain that cut her personal quarters off from what was considered her throne room. It was a tall room made of finely fitted stone, and deeply stained, ancient bookshelves lined the walls. Lush red curtains hung at the far end of the room, and were tied back by bright golden cords to reveal a large portrait of the Count of Saint Germain. In the center of the floor was a rich, hand-woven rug decorated with a dizzying

circle design. At the near end of the room was a three inch raised floor, on which rested the deep grey Pillar of Irontree, supposedly carved from a piece of the Venus Tree of Crete. Atop this carved artifact of wood sat the opaque Millennial Orb, the black prison.

Callah moved to the center of the room and rolled the rug back, revealing a deeply cut circle in the stone floor. She moved a standing tray from the room's far corner to the edge of the circle and began to place her ritual tools upon it. Among the familiar and the strange were thirteen black candles, a ritual silver dagger, a link of iron chain that once held a murderer's hands fast, a jeweled golden cup, a measure of salt, and preserved in an oak box, a fist-sized lump from a fallen star.

As she worked, Callah considered what the Element inside the Orb might know of what she was about to perform. The Millennial Orb was a Talisman she inherited when she took over from Lord Gregor as First Scion six years ago. The Orb could not safely be moved, and the Pillar required the specific resonance of this Vale to maintain its magics. Callah had often marveled at the power of the Orb... few things on this world could contain an Element. The Pillar protected the delicate Orb with a shield as strong as a steel door, and served as a powerful focus for other kinds of magic workings that made use of the trapped Element. Trapped gods had many uses.

But the Orb's strength had been eroded. The dragon inside had somehow managed to unravel some of the prison's fabric. The discovery of the Element's effort had nearly panicked the Citadel. Callah would not allow such a monster to be loosed once again upon the world. This was her responsibility, and Callah had the clarity of thought and the strength of purpose which few could muster. She was no Grand Master, as Dee had been when he had formed the Orb. But she was unafraid of the task now at hand. She would succeed in patching the hole in the Orb's walls. Of this, she was certain... because failure was not an acceptable alternative.

Gods like Neco didn't belong in the world. This was the Age of Modernity, child of the Age of Reason. There was no place for monsters, or the unbound madness, corruption, and anarchy that many of the Chaos Elements ruled over. These were the enemy of the Order, and as the mystic guardians of the Sect, it was the House of Raeford's duty to ward, dampen, or eradicate these gods of chaos, and all of their twisted offspring.

Callah began the rite.

Karl sat on the hood of his car and lit up another smoke. He exhaled angrily and looked back at Terry.

“Yeah, sure, I get it,” Karl argued. “They’re his people. He belongs to them. And he’ll be treated well as they use him like a cheap hooker.”

“Karl...”

“Oh, right, I forgot. They ain’t gonna fuck him. They don’t want him for sex. They want him for death. They’re gonna make him into a fucking killer. You want that on your conscience? You want to help that little transformation along?”

“He’s already a killer,” Terry said quietly.

“Oh, yeah! That little blood-and-fire action in the diner. Self fucking defense, Terry! Or that bit of Terishor kidnapping he stopped dead in its tracks? Well, fucking excuse me for not feeling sorry for the guys who were going to rape-torture a fucking teenage girl! That’s a hell of a lot different than what he’s going to have to do for them, and you know it!”

“Do you even understand what a Coscar is?” Terry asked. “When I came to, after the diner hit... he’d healed my bullet wound, the one that should have killed me.”

“There’s plenty of Gifted who can do that.”

“He was licking the gore off his hands,” Terry said. “Cleaning himself, eyes glazed. Content as one can be. There’s a part of him that’s old and dark. And that’s not the dragon doing it. That’s what Cory’s instincts are. This House isn’t going to turn him into anything. At the deepest level, he’s already there.”

Karl didn’t have anything to say.

“Some Therans, some Mythica,” Terry said, “the spirit influence isn’t that strong. They don’t inherit that much of the ancestral traits. But Cory did. They just don’t show themselves as much, in his day-to-day. But they’re real. And I don’t think he’s even fully aware of them. He’s going to need our help, Karl. He’s going to need stability, balance...”

“Did you forget what happened to the last group that helped out one of these guys?” Karl shot. Terry sighed.

“At least his mother lived.”

“She left!” Karl exclaimed.

“Yeah, she did,” Terry grudgingly agreed. “So. When are you heading back to Chicago?”

“About as soon as I can get back to the Minneapolis Shadow.”

“Are you at least going to say goodbye to him?” Terry asked. “Or do you want me to do it for you?” Karl narrowed his eyes.

“I’ll do it,” he said sourly. “And tell these fuckers that I need some gas.”

The ride back to the Twin Cities took a lot longer than the trip up had taken. The route had shifted, Ellen said. They traveled in a three vehicle pack - an Aruithinean named David “the Finn” Finnigan, on a mid-nineties Yamaha motorcycle, Karl’s T-Bird, and a big Ford pickup



with three Aruithneans in it. The driver was a giant of a man with a dark beard, in combat fatigues and carrying a SWAT-style entry shield, who was introduced as Sir Oakshotte.

Karl was quieter than usual, and Ellen picked up the slack with stories about her earlier Bacchus days. Cory hadn't realized how structured the Cult of Dionysus really was. From what he'd heard at the Fun House, 'the Cult' was all about drinking, drugs, and in general doing what it took to reach an altered state. They were involved with theatre and music, somehow, too. But Ellen's stories revealed a real religion and philosophy.

"People can glimpse the divine when they get past themselves," Ellen explained. "You can get real insight into the true nature of the world, or about yourself, too. And for a lot of people, the truth is too dangerous or painful to come at head on. People need gentler paths, and they also need paths that actually can get them there. You know, that actually work.

"So any experience that can bring a person to newfound insight like that, those experiences are sacred to us. As a Priestess, I'm responsible for showing people how to get where they want to go, as safely as they can manage. So, to us, what's sacred is what people might need in order to make this kind of journey. First and foremost is the personal freedom to choose whether or not they want to go through with it in the first place.

"There's a story about Dionysus. I don't know if this story is true or not, but Dionysus was real, a real being. So this might literally be true. And the story goes that Dionysus was on the shore one day, and some sailors came by and thought he was a local prince. So they decide they're going to kidnap him. They tried to tie him up, but the ropes refused to work on him. And Dionysus is a passionate thing, and they were trying to take away his most important thing - his freedom - and he rode his passion into anger.

"He turned himself into a lion and unleashed himself on the sailors, killing a great many of them. Some escaped his rage by leaping off the ship, and he turned them into dolphins. The only survivor was the helmsman, who had recognized Dionysus from the start and had tried to warn the other sailors not to go through with it. This one Dionysus spared.

"Can you see why my people are so interested in you?" Ellen asked Cory. "You stepped in and kept that girl Mary from being captured by those Terishor agents, who would have done all sorts of terrible things to her. It's a sign of your purity, your resonance with those things most important to us."

Cory listened as Ellen told the story of how she got involved in the underground rave scene in 1997. It was when she first met Dell, and the Shepherd had been tasked with helping Ellen keep Cult-sponsored parties as safe as they could manage them, and to take care of the material, mundane needs while Ellen worked the art and occult end.

"I was fourteen," Ellen said. "I turned the year before and was recruited by this guy I knew, who was a Priest in the Cult at the time. He actually left the order later on, after a bad, bad run-in with some kind of madness spirit. Anyway, I was new, just an initiate, really, and my mentor had me start working out in the world to do our work. See, we're not a closed order that way... you're expected to be really involved in the community. Not just holed up in a temple somewhere, trying to perfect your ego.

"Dell was pretty new, too, but she'd been in the scene for a while, and she's older than she looks. Just like my fella here." Ellen leaned her head on Terry's shoulder and touched his knee with her hand. "So, we're trying to not screw up too badly, want to make Bacchus proud of us. And our first big party, we're trying to do it completely under the radar. No permits, doing it word of mouth. And I'm trying to figure out how to turn an empty, dusty warehouse into a place

that will bring about the right kind of vibe.

“And so, of course, about two hours in the cops show up. It wasn’t the noise level that got us. Some overprotective soccer mom was trying to find her teenage daughter, and ended up thinking she was at the party. Turns out she wasn’t; the girl was out losing her virginity that night in a cheap motel. But the girl’s friends came, and one of their parents spilled it to the mom, and someone got word out to the cops about where we were.

“So the kids at the front are all scared. Some people are breaking out windows at the back to try to run for it, but there’s cops back there, too. So there’s a panic brewing. They’re dropping every pill and joint and everything on the floor. I went out to try to talk with one of the cops, try to calm things down, and I end up in the back of a squad car, tears running down my face. I wasn’t having a good night.

“And Dell, she just drops a name that stops the cops in their tracks, and she pulls out her cell and dials a number. She explains what’s going on, and just hands her phone over to the cop in charge. And he’s like, ‘uh huh, yes sir, uh huh.’ Hands the phone back, and the cops let everyone they’ve grabbed go and they just turn and leave. Didn’t even ask us to keep the music down.

“So we got back in there and got the party restarted. I got some spirits of dance and ecstasy to show up and do their thing, and between that, a ritual to help induce trance on the dance floor, and some Alchemist-mixed smart drinks, we pulled a small Dreamtime off from about 4:00 am to dawn.”

The Finn guided led them back to the Shadow of Duluth. They drove into the city near 4:15 pm and stopped for fuel, to stretch their legs, and to get word about what the situation in the Twin Cities was like. Terry made some kind of deal and got them phones that were hooked into some kind of Gifted phone network, run by some Messengers.

The word was that the Order still had soldiers in the Maya, and had checkpoints set up on 35, which was the most direct route to the ‘Cities. The Finn led them west, and they took Highway 65 south, staying within about twenty miles of 35 all the way down through. The detour added another thirty miles and two whole hours to the trip, owing to the reduced safe speeds on the cracked, and in places broken, dream of the old Minnesota highway.

It was nearly 10:00 pm that night when Karl’s T-Bird finally rolled into the Shadow of the Twin Cities and up to the Bacchus place on the edge of Bennet Lake, safely past the Terishor perimeter of Humvees and black helicopters. Cory felt a spring of happiness shoot through him as he saw the Ghost parked next to the house. The Aruithineans left them, and the Finn mentioned a House holding they were headed to, an Irish pub in Saint Paul called Shamrock.

Cory, Ellen, Terry, and Karl went inside and were treated to a late dinner waiting for them, dished up by Karol and the dark haired Russian woman, Ivonna. Afterward, Cory went upstairs to shower and get into some fresh clothes. As Cory finished getting dressed there was a knock on the door.

“What’s up?” Cory said as he let Karl in. The big man sighed.

“Blue, I’m heading back to Chicago tonight.”

“You’re what?”

“Leaving,” Karl said. “I’ve got a lot of guys down there that have probably burned down my house by now. And you... you seem pretty set with this Aruithinean thing. They’ll take care of you.”

Something in Cory's gut didn't feel right. He blinked in confusion at Karl's words. Suddenly, he wanted to smoke, and dug into his jacket for his pack.

"So, yeah," Karl went on. "It was good having you down there with us. Come visit sometime, if you like."

Then Cory got it. Karl thought Cory was making a mistake. The kind of mistake that you don't get a chance to walk away from. The kind that got you killed. Karl was saying goodbye for good. Cory flushed at the realization. He lit the smoke and felt the chemical wave of relief wash into his brain. Karl lit up his own smoke in reflex, from seeing Cory do it.

"I'll do that," Cory said. "So, driving straight out?"

"Hmmm? Yeah, I don't get tired like you do, kiddo. I've driven that car for days straight, back when I first got it. Smuggling jobs. Oh, that reminds me. You've still got your gun in the car. C'mon." The two men went down through the house and out.

"You gonna get through the Terishor people okay?" Cory asked. Karl laughed darkly.

"Don't you worry about me. You worry about yourself, with these touchy-feely types. I went through the trouble of pounding common sense through that thick head of yours. Remember that, and what Jake taught you, too. Don't you let me hear that as soon as I let you out of my sight, you went all stupid and civilian on me."

"I'll take care of myself, Karl," Cory said.

"Yeah." Karl got Cory's AR-15 out of the car. He tossed him a case for it, and an Army Surplus battle harness, stuffed with fresh magazines of ammunition. "Well, here you go. Give 'em hell, Blue." Cory saw that Karl's eyes were wet. He watched the big man get into the T-Bird and rumble down the driveway, to the street and gone, into the night.



Sir Matheson and Sir Oakshotte came for Cory in the morning. They drove him a mile to the east, to the overgrown, wooded land in Central Park. They bounced from the roadway to the untended ground in the pickup, and Cory quickly lost sight of the city. They traveled in silence. Sir Oakshotte parked the truck on a flat clearing, and they got out and walked the rest of the way. Cory quieted his nerves with mental exercises Terry had taught him. The two knights led Cory to a large green canvas tent the size of a small house, beneath the protection of the wide arms of trees.

"We're your attendants during these trials," Sir Matheson explained. "Normally, one pledges to enter into our order, and ends up waiting a long time before their training begins. They spend a good year as a pledge, and are assigned to a knight to do his or her bidding, train, and learn by example. When the pledge is considered ready," he continued, pulling back the tent flap and waving the other two men inside, "he goes through a testing phase. Intellect, spirituality, physical fitness, military prowess. If they pass, they end up where you are now. If they fail, they get another year to try to learn what they need to, test again, do the trials one more time.

"In my opinion, you're not ready," Sir Matheson said.

"Nor mine," seconded Sir Oakshotte.

"Our Lord believes otherwise," Sir Matheson continued, "and I serve his will. He believes that your heritage qualifies you for the trials. I think it sets a bad precedent. I guess we'll worry about the ramifications to the rest of our order if you make it through."

The two knights took turns bathing and changing clothes in the adjoining room of the tent. Oakshotte went first, as Sir Matheson explained the significance of a ritual bath and ceremonial garb as a symbol of Cory leaving his old life behind, and of the sacredness of the ceremony. Oakshotte returned, dressed in a rough grey robe tied at the waist with a gold cord, and wearing simple leather boots.

“There are three orders of our House,” Sir Oakshotte told him. “One for druids, new kind or old, one for bards, and one for us. The warrior class. Our god is Lugh. It doesn’t matter if you really believe in him. You will honor him and look up to him. He led the Tuatha De Danann to victory against the Fomorians and killed Balor. He stands for hope, honor, and law. Say it.”

“He stands for hope, honor, and law,” Cory repeated.

“Good,” Sir Oakshotte grunted. “Wash.”

Cory washed himself, and the two knights dressed him in clothes similar to theirs, but white. Sir Matheson explained how the legend of Lugh developed in Britain after the Romans introduced Mithriasm. The proto-god of light and mastery of the cosmos, Mithras, was brought to the north by the Romans. Mithriasm was an initiatory cult favored by soldiers at the time, and worshiped a sun god figure represented by Perseus. Perseus embodied the coming Age of Aries and symbolically slew the Age of Taurus, with the help of other gods representing constellations.

When the Roman influence subsided in Britain, the remaining Mithraic beliefs mingled with Druidic ones. Lugh became a young-faced hero, a skillful master of many disciplines, and a rightful member of the Tuatha De Danann. He was the first king of the Tuatha De after the defeat of the Fomorians, and served as a shining template for Celtic chivalry. House Aruithinea had maintained an initiatory mystery religion surrounding Lugh for well over a thousand years.

“Ready?” Sir Oakshotte asked. “After this, no going back. It’s dangerous. Some pledges don’t make it.”

“I’m not going back,” Cory replied. Sir Matheson stepped out and returned with a cup made from a horn, capped at the top by a jeweled lid.

“In this cup is Lugh’s blood. Drinking it, you will call his presence into you, to see as he sees, to be as he is. Do you understand?” Sir Matheson asked him.

“Yes,” Cory said. He took the horn and drank from it. It was a foul, thick substance, hot in his mouth, and it hurt all the way down. Immediately, his lips went numb and his skin tingled. The drink worked fast.

Terry had forewarned Cory about the likely psychoactives the Knights of Lugh might use. Most initiatory societies used psychoactives. They helped break down the initiate’s sense of self and made him open to the experience, the purpose of which was to reinforce the sense of new belonging. Most made use of trials, too, to test the initiate’s will and to put him into a receptive state. That way, any suggestions made to the initiate might take deeper hold, and any oaths taken would form like stone around his mind.

Cory knew his senses and identity were going to be smashed into new shapes, and he knew to expect a scene of his symbolic death. It just didn’t help him deal with it all that much, when it all unfolded in front of him.

The two knights strapped swords to their waists and picked up spears and wooden shields. Then they led Cory out of the tent and through the green of the park, under a clear summer sky. Cory breathed evenly and kept his mind as clear as he could. He couldn’t feel his tongue, and knew that if he tried to talk, it would come out slurred. He knew that his thoughts were muddled.

The three men walked through waves of trees, stones, and tall grass. They came to a small stream and followed it, moving upstream, where an untended stone path, nearly overgrown, pressed up under their feet.

That's strange, Cory thought. There's no stream in this park.

The rough clothes on Cory's body began to itch, and he sweated in the summer heat. Sounds from the moving water, their footfalls on the stone and earth, and the songs of distant birds began to blur and shift. Things became as if in a dream.

Cory saw Oakshotte watching him out of the corner of his eye. The massive man chuckled to himself quietly, then said something to Sir Matheson in a language that Cory didn't understand.

"Yes, he is, right on time," Matheson said.

They continued onward. Cory's throat began to tighten and go raw with thirst. Dizziness threatened to work its way into his head, and his sweat came faster. His breaths came harder, and he couldn't swallow without pain. He tried to ignore it. More time passed.

"Thirsty," he finally said. The word came out as if from a mouth of sandpaper.

"It's a side effect," Sir Matheson said. "You'll just have to endure it. Lugh's heart burned with anger when he learned of how the Fomorians oppressed the Tuatha De. It was his righteous anger that led him to be brave, and to lead the armies into battle."

Cory nodded. It seemed to make sense to him. He walked on, and tried to concentrate on the strange flowers that grew along the path. Somewhere in the distance, a wolf howled, and despite the heat, Cory shivered.

The men paused and took a break, and leaned over the stream to drink. Cory moved to do the same. Oakshotte snarled and drove a heavy foot into Cory's back.

"No you don't!" he barked. "That water'll kill ya, after drinking what you have. You'll just have to tough it out." Cory gasped at the pain. "This is nothing!" Oakshotte shouted at him. "Your buddy told me that you were made of strong stuff. Said he put you through some kind of military training. Said he taught you himself! Is this the best you can do in his name?"

Ashamed, Cory stood at attention and made his eyes look straight ahead. The two knights finished their rest and led Cory on. They changed to marching single file, with Matheson in the lead and Oakshotte in the rear. His escorts began to sing. It was the same language as before, a fighting song, a soldier's song. Cory didn't need to know the words to feel how it lifted him up and made it easier to march on.

They came to a clearing along the stream, where a game board was set into the top of a low table, carved into the raw, yet polished, wood. Different stones were arranged on the board. Cory recognized it as chess.

"First trial," Sir Matheson announced. "You know how to play chess, I hope?" Cory nodded that he did. "Good. But this isn't chess. This is Shatranj, the game from Persia which chess is based on."

The knight explained to Cory the different ways the pieces moved. The queen could only move one space, diagonally, and the rook moved two spaces, jumping over any piece in the way. Most of the rest of the game was the same. Cory concentrated on Matheson's instructions, but confusion and distraction set in. It seemed that as soon as he turned his attention to one function of the game, he couldn't remember the others. His mind had become quicksand. For each thought thrust above the surface, the body of others sunk lower into the depths.

“So... so who do I play against?” Cory asked. He sat himself in position next to the board.

“You play against the board,” Sir Matheson answered. The two knights took up position on either side of Cory’s place, and faced away. “No matter what happens, you must continue the game.” In the corner of his eye, Cory saw Oakshotte go tense and focused.

“Why? What...” Cory said, then saw something creep out of the trees past Oakshotte’s shoulder. A dark figure, rotted, distressed, something in the shape of tree and stone, but made out of flesh and bone. It hissed quietly, and flexed its claws.

“Holy fuck!” Cory exclaimed. The game made a sound, and Cory whipped back in time to see an old, pale hand disappear into thin air. One of the pieces had moved. The game had begun.

Something rustled in the woods to the left, and Cory heard Sir Matheson take in a calming breath. “Two over here,” he said quietly.

“Just the one here,” Oakshotte answered.

Cory sensed movement, as the assailants moved deliberately toward them. He tried to concentrate on the board. He made a move. The hand returned, hovered briefly, and brought out a knight. Their game progressed. Then Cory lost a piece.

There was a flurry of movement to the left, and Sir Matheson shouted out in anger. There was an explosion of sound as something raged against his shield, and he grunted as he thrust back with his spear. Something cried out in pain, all too-human, tinged in hate.

“Sam?” Oakshotte called out.

“Fine,” Matheson said.

“Two on my side, now,” Oakshotte announced.

It was then that Cory understood the game. Each piece he lost meant the creatures would attack, and they would gain another. The Aruithineans seemed to be strong fighters. Cory figured they could hold off perhaps three creatures at once, each. That meant if he lost three more pieces, one of his defenders would be stuck facing four at once, assuming they couldn’t be crippled or killed, or otherwise reduced in number. And assuming they didn’t get lucky in one of their attacks, and one of the knights got hurt.

Cory saw an opening, and counterattacked. Each time he moved, he realized that his protectors tensed, not knowing if the next move by the game might mean a rush by the creatures. Suddenly, he felt a deep sense of comradery with the men. He had to play better. He couldn’t let them get hurt.

In two moves, he took the opponent’s knight, and there was a wailing from the right. Oakshotte laughed.

“About time you drew some blood,” he said. One of the creatures had fallen. Cory blinked and brought his attention back to the game, and the slippery understanding of the pieces, his options, moves and countermoves. He didn’t have to win. He just couldn’t afford to lose two more pieces than he took from the opponent. Or lose his king, Cory realized. That would probably be a bad thing. The game continued.

After two more exchanges, Sir Matheson lost his spear. They came at him three at once. He drove one back with a blow from his shield, and impaled a second. The third swept around him and took away the knight’s weapon. Then the first recovered and threw itself at Sir Matheson’s legs. The older man spun faster than Cory thought he’d be capable, and was out with the sword. He drove them back with tightly controlled swings. The creatures bled, but the knight’s sword

wasn't able to kill them.

Only the game could do that. Cory brought his attention back to the board, and examined the outcome of the newly lost piece. His opponent, Cory saw, was playing for his king. It didn't seem to care about killing Cory's pieces. If it did, it could have made the board a bloody mess, and Cory's guardians would have been harder pressed. Maybe overwhelmed. In Cory's fear of losing pieces, the opponent had closed most of the board into a forward trap.

Cory reevaluated his options. The game was designed to make him fear losing each battle, each piece. All the while, he had to keep focused on the overall goal. If he had to lose his pieces, and perhaps Matheson or Oakshotte, in order to win, then that's what he had to do.

Cory attacked.

In the end, he was impressed with the martial skills of his protectors. As Cory lost pieces to the forces of the game, Oakshotte and Matheson took on more and more of the black, vile things. More than Cory had thought possible. Then, at last, Oakshotte was overrun, five on one. He delivered blows that would have easily killed a man, and they kept coming at him, and his throat was torn open. The creatures drank greedily from the wound, and the massive knight struggled to die quietly.

Horrified, Cory looked away.

"Don't worry," Sir Matheson said. "They still have to go through me. The trial won't let them get to you unless I'm gone, too. Just tell me that you have him, eh? That you've got the game sewn up?"

"Yeah, I do," Cory answered. "He's not really dead, is he? Oakshotte? This is just part of the test, right?"

"Are you going to lose any more pieces?" Matheson asked. Cory looked at the board. He had checkmate in three moves, and the opponent's offensive had been driven back and rendered useless. Still, Cory was going to lose pieces. One for sure, and probably two.

"Yes, I'm sorry," Cory said.

"You don't have two pieces to lose, Cory," Sir Matheson said. "You've only got one. Then they'll take me. After that, you lose one more, they'll take you. You can only afford to lose one more. So can you do it?"

"No."

It was Cory's move. He could pull out of his attack. He might even get out with all of his remaining pieces intact. But then the opponent would regroup, and would be back on him in a few moves. They would reinitiate their clash mid-board, and Cory was sure to lose two pieces then. The opponent wasn't that strong of a player, really. Cory had played against much better back in school. His adversary was uninspired, and sometimes erratic. It made mistakes. And the opening was there, hovering like a prize in a mirage.

Cory could withdraw his attack and try to save his pieces. Or he could attack, and see if he could rattle his opponent enough that he'd miss something, and Cory could pull off the victory. Perhaps with only losing one piece. Perhaps two.

"I'm sorry," Cory said to Matheson. Then he pressed his attack and took another piece. There was a scream from one of the creatures surrounding Matheson, as the magic from the game took it down.

The adversary was clear to take the knight. Matheson was going to die. When it did, Cory would be open to try for the opponent's king.

Cory turned to watch the damage he was about to cause. He owed Sir Matheson at least that, to witness the sacrifice he was going to force Matheson to make. Cory heard the disembodied hand make its move on the board.

But nothing happened. The creatures did not attack.

The opponent had retreated, brought one of its remaining pieces from its offensive back to protect its king. A poor move. Cory saw a new opportunity, and shifted his strategy. He wasn't going to win in three moves, but he was going to decimate the opponent, now playing in fear. Cory's guardian heard the sounds of moves being made, but Cory hadn't lost a piece.

"What the hell are you doing?" Sir Matheson said in his growing confusion.

"He's running," Cory said in his happy surprise. "Badly."

In short order, Cory's adversary was incapable of making any threats to Cory's king, and Cory could clear the board at his leisure without losing a single piece. In the end, Matheson was alone, the creatures all gone. Cory worked into a checkmate.

When he turned to look, Oakshotte's body and all of the creatures were gone. Sir Matheson's face was grim and measured. It was time to move on. They found the stream again, and moved deeper along the Vispiri. The drug was just as strong as before, Cory realized. Somehow he had grown accustomed to the potion's effect. It made his mind loose, his surroundings were more dreamlike than the Maya normally was. But he no longer felt thirsty. He didn't notice the heat, or his sweat.

Visions slipped past Cory's eyes as he and the remaining knight made their way through the woods. He saw himself as a younger man, racing motorcycles for sport, the wind against his chest, the machine howling. He saw people he knew from his life before; teachers, childhood friends, his mother as he remembered her as a child. He saw blood on his hands, the smoke and horror of the diner, discarded guns and bodies broken into obscene shapes.

They came to the end of the trees, and a long, deep valley bound by gentle hills wrapped around both sides of the stream. The hills were gold, draped in blankets of wheat. The sky was grey, seemingly thin somehow. They walked on into the valley where small villages dotted the landscape, and obscured shapes like men and women moved in slow motion.

"We're a warrior's order," Sir Matheson explained. "Not everyone in a society can be its defenders. Only a select few. The warrior caste, the druid caste, and the bards have long been the special ones for our people, and all exist to serve their own purpose. You must never forget that everything you do, you do for the people. We exist to serve."

"Our House originated in Britain, of course," he went on. "When great waves of immigrants came to America, our branch of the House came with them. The Fenian branch. We served to try to gain independence for our homeland, Ireland, through work in America. But we also were here to protect and support our people. After time, we Fenian ceased to be a revolutionary group. The people wanted a diplomatic solution to Ireland, and we fell back into roles of cultural and spiritual guardians. The Order of Lugh remains the military order of our House, regardless of branch. We remain to protect our people from the dangers of the world, and have knights in Avalon and Schwartzwald."

As Sir Matheson spoke, dark riders appeared on the horizon. They moved as if underwater. In slow motion, mounted hordes with long black cloaks flowed across the land.

"We don't have much time," Matheson said. He moved to a disturbed patch of grain, and uncovered a shield, spear, and sheathed sword. "Put this on," he said, handing Cory the sword and a leather belt. Cory hastily prepared.



“Try to stay close.” Then Sir Matheson gave a loud battle cry, and a horn sounded from a nearby village. It was answered by the dim echoes of others joining the alarm. Mounted defenders rode out of the villages, muddled in the blurred scene, speed softened by the moment.

Cory and Sir Matheson pressed close to one another and faced the enemy. The raiders rode at the two of them, their horses beneath them foaming at the mouth, their identities hidden behind helmets, masks, or expressions of distorted malice that made their faces inhuman and unknowable. The clash of battle arose about Cory as the two lines of warriors met. Horses screamed. Men grappled and tore at one another. A charging man with lance blew between Cory and Matheson, and Cory lost himself in the fray.

He called the power of his Coscar heritage into his limbs, and the strength spread into him. Cory let loose his own terrible cry and sent fire into his enemies. Another mounted assailant came at him, armed with a spiked mace. Cory threw himself airborne and crashed into the screaming man, and the impact jolted him about and he fell hard on the ground. Cory found his feet but had lost his spear. He drew sword and pressed the attack on the fallen rider. The madness of war overtook Cory, and his eyes clouded over with red haze and tongues of flame.

At last, his senses returned to him, and Cory witnessed the horror of broken lives around him. The battle had momentarily quieted. He saw Sir Matheson among the dead. Then the enemy came at him again, and Cory realized that he was alone.

He spun about in circles of widening horror, killing horses and men alike, making the battlefield harder to assail by the mounted men. He found he could send boils of thunder into their ranks, and the horses revolted at the terrible sound. Undaunted, the enemy came at him on foot.

They drove a wedge between Cory and the village, and threw up a wall of spears and shields. The weight of Cory’s limbs, crisscrossed by thin, seeping wounds, became heavy. He threw down his shield and turned his left hand into a thing of war and tore into their ranks. The bloodied faces sternly defended their rear as mounted men rode out ahead of them, into the villages. His people...To Cory’s back, the stream beckoned, marking the path into the woods and safety. But he would not abandon the villages.

Cory let loose an angry cry and took to the air. He flew over the heavy ranks and into the path of the charging riders, sewing fire and death, his right arm numb with the exhaustion of raising the sword and bringing it down again and again. At last the attackers broke off and fell back, horrified at the flying demon above them. The fields were left a mess of torn crops, and dead and dying men. Elsewhere, burning homes and fields threw black smoke up into the air.

Cory strode into the fallen men. He turned one of the enemy over onto his back, and looked down into the pained face of a bearded man wearing an iron crown. His clothing was more adorned than the others, his sword, now broken, with a hilt of silver and gold. He babbled in an unknown tongue and crawled onto his stomach, begging for his life.

Their leader. The one who had ordered the attack onto Cory’s people, who had called for the killing of the farmers and the rape of daughters, who wanted to burn their fields so that any survivors would surely starve when winter came. His enemy.

Abruptly, Cory could understand the man’s words. In ragged desperation the warband leader cried out for mercy, his face a contortion of fear at the terrible figure Cory cut above him, drenched in the blood from his men. The monster’s left hand was a talon of bone and fire, his eyes ablaze like a beast from hell.

“Please, don’t kill me. Don’t kill me,” the man wailed. “Terrible creature, spare me my life.”

“I let you live, and you’ll just come back next year, with more men,” Cory snarled. “Why should I give you the chance?”

“I’ll give you riches in ransom. I’ll give you gold and jewels, enough to make you and all of your children into wealthy peoples.”

“I don’t care about riches,” Cory answered. “I want my people to be safe and prosperous.” At the words, Cory felt an odd presence in his mind, as if his words were guided by script, or he had seen it all before in a dream. He knew what he had to say. The enemy leader went on.

“Then I’ll deal with the faeries on your behalf, and give you four harvests each year. Surely you will be prosperous then.”

“Four harvests will drain the land of its health, and soon we will be starving,” Cory said. “One harvest a year is enough. I think the best thing for my people is for me to kill you, and be done with the threat you cause.”

“No, wait, please!” the man begged. “I will do anything that you ask.”

“Then do this,” Cory demanded. “Swear an oath to me and my people, in the name of the fair folk, that you will quit your battles upon us, or else they will spoil your fields and poison your wells, and split your wealth between our own coffers and theirs. And you will send us your wise ones, and will teach us all you know of the stars, the sea, and your rituals. And you will send your bards out across the country, and have them sing songs and tell stories of this day, when you were defeated in battle and spared, and of the greatness of our compact, so that it might never be forgotten.”

The man agreed, as Cory knew he would. Then Cory went into the village and gave a captain his sword, and went alone along the stream, out through the fields he had saved and the people he now protected. He traveled into the evening, and the stream dwindled to a trickle. The trees became tall around him. At nightfall, Cory found the source of the stream in the side of a mountain, and went inside the cave he found there.

Deep in the dark, surrounded by the thick stone walls, Cory built a small fire. The walls were painted with symbols, the ceiling adorned in the likeness of stars. A sense of understanding crept into his chest, accompanied by the presence of raw beauty, wonder, and awe. Then he fell to sleep.

Cory awoke on a cot in the tent. Oakshotte tended to him, the large knight’s face creased in patient concern. Cory’s vision was blurred, and his ears thrummed. He ached all over, deep into his bones. Outside the tent, the sky was black and crickets sang.

“You’re okay,” Cory said, his voice raw and painful. Sir Oakshotte nodded.

“You did well,” he said evenly. “You passed. Rest for a bit. Then we’ll get you ready for the ceremony.”

Sir Matheson came into the room and fed Cory bread, soup, and fruit. They drank water and once Cory felt better, warm mead.

“So, how much of that was real?” Cory asked.

“It was all real,” Oakshotte said.

“Well, no,” Cory argued. “You died in it. What was that, a dream?”

“No,” Oakshotte said.

“There are places in the Maya that are just as real as life here, but the rules are different,” Sir Matheson said. “You passed the trials. That’s all that matters for now.”

A half hour later, Cory bathed once more and dressed in grey, matching the two knights. Then they walked out of the tent and across the park, to where a small gathering stood around a fire. Cory made out Terry and Ellen among a dozen Aruithineans, including Lady Paradise, Bella DeMorte, and Lord Bedle. Beyond the gathering, at the far end of the park, Cory made out a pair of sentries with rifles, dressed in black, who looked on from their distance. His soon-to-be fellows, Cory thought. Order of Lugh.

Ellen looked up in nervous expectation, and then she beamed at Cory. “He passed,” she whispered. Terry reached for her hand and squeezed it.

“Wait here,” Sir Matheson said. He went forward and conversed with Lord Bedle, while Oakshotte stood with Cory at the edge of the fire’s warmth and light.

“Fellow Fenian, friends,” Lord Bedle said. “The trial has been completed. Bring the pledge forward.”

Sir Oakshotte led Cory before Lord Bedle. A mat was placed before the blind man, and Cory was made to kneel before him. Lord Bedle took in a breath.

“The Order of Lugh bears a heavy responsibility,” Lord Bedle said. “The protection and safety of the Fenian, and their people, belongs to this military order. Its oaths are not taken lightly, and its soldiers are the finest of our own. The man before us has passed our trials and has been found worthy.

“Cory Williams, do you swear to honor and defend the Fenian and their people, and all of the Aruithinean House, from enemies within and without?”

“I do,” Cory said.

“And do you, Cory Williams, hereby resolve to uphold the code of your order, being that of loyalty and honesty among your fellows, and to obey the rightful orders of your superiors, and to conduct yourself in a bearing deserving of your title of knight?”

“I do,” Cory repeated.

“And do you, Cory Williams, enter into this oath willfully and freely, having no conflicting obligations, and promise to support our people and land in the struggle for freedom and independence, against all who might claim it from us?”

“I do.”

“Very well,” Lord Bedle said. He reached to his left, where Sir Matheson stood ready with a sheathed ceremonial sword. Matheson took Lord Bedle’s hand and guided it to the sword’s hilt. With great care, Lord Bedle bared the blade. Matheson reached around Lord Bedle’s back and helped his Lord to find Cory’s shoulder with the flat of the blade.

“Then before these witnesses, in the name of Erin, I dub thee Sir Williams,” Lord Bedle said. “Rise a knight.” Cory stood, and the assembled cheered for him and congratulated him. Terry and Ellen were upon him in a moment, and Terry shook his hand as Ellen embraced and kissed him.

“Congratulations,” Lady Paradise said. “You’ve done well.” Sirs Matheson and Oakshotte, Cory’s sponsors, tied a sword around his waist, and instructed him in its care.

“Of course,” Oakshotte said, “it’s just for ceremony. We’ll get you properly outfitted for real soldiering tomorrow. Sounds like they’ve got big plans for you. I’m glad you’ve got some practical training under you. You’re gonna need it.”

The Aruithineans stayed through most of the night, and they sang, drank, talked, and told stories. Before dawn, most of the higher personages had left to see Lord Bedle safely back to Glasdun Tower. The handful remaining were invited to the Bacchus house nearby, and slept away the morning.



John Brozeck's phone rang. He sat behind his desk, the monitors before him showing live surveillance maps and constant report streams from the field. About him, computers hummed and the hustle of the situation room went through its regular rhythms. Pages, assistants, messengers, communications agents, and analysts ground the data into a fine powder and gleaned the truth from it.

"Drake," he answered. He listened with fast attention to the voice on the other end. "No, maintain your current position. Right. Redirect your feed directly to the established three twenty-two terminal."

He checked his watch. It would take twenty minutes to throw together the action report, under the proper seals. Another twenty to put the assets into place, thirty for team movement. Ten minutes for standard perimeter protocol. Eighty minutes total.

"We'll be go by 11:30," John said. "Call Heclar and get those birds fueled and on the pad."

They had him. Cory. They had him.

## II

### *Dark Riders*

Station Chief Drake had mission control. He ran it remotely from a mobile situation center in an armored van, which was a bit old fashioned, Lieutenant First Class Patrick Phillips thought. The highest ranked officer of Prime Directive 7, Terishor's military, let his mind wander as he went through the standard pre-mission checks. The helicopter around him hummed and throbbed on the pad, waiting for the order to lift off. Phillips shifted in his power armor and scanned the in-helmet screens for readiness reports from his men.

As First Scion, Drake did a lot of things differently. It wasn't against regulations per se. It was just very... Phillips paused to consider it. Hands on, he decided. Operations officers usually stayed back in their out-of-harms-way towers, and either relied on their own agents to do their dirty work under cover of darkness, or they just sent in the PD7 troops under men like Phillips, and let the heavy firepower do the trick. But not this old spy. Drake was going to be right in on the action.

Not that Phillips thought there was going to be much action to speak of. The mission had him overseeing three of his five squads, all to be held as a tactical reserve if the agents in Operations botched the job. PD7 was used to having to clean up messes made by the cloak and dagger guys. That part didn't bother him. What stuck in Phillips' mind was the need for PD7 in the first place. The mission was a fast penetration of a Bacchus Vale, neutralize the very minimal opposition, and retrieve a Person of Special Interest.

Maybe it was just the fact that the mission was happening Maya-side, and Operations simply wanted PD7 as contingency backup in case anything came at them from out of the deep. As a rule, the Order despised leaving Incarna. PD7 was all that stood between the horrors of the cosmos and the rear approach to each and every one of the Order's Vales. They were the soldiers at the gates. And whenever the Order had to do something beyond the safety of their carefully managed half of reality, the powers that be felt exposed.

Mission orders flashed up on Phillip's faceplate. The Operations team was underway, rolling out of the motor pool gate into the Shadow, on the north side of the Saint Paul Airport. A small notice alert buzzed in Phillips' ear. An executive order from Drake, under his seal as Station Chief. A Blackout Order.

That's interesting, Phillips thought. Why did this mission require a Blackout Order? Such things belonged to the discretion of the ranking Terishor officer, of course. It made it a crime to call outside the Terishor network for the duration, or to discuss any of the proceeding events with anything short of a Star Chamber hearing. Whatever they were about to do, it had just ceased to officially happen.

Phillips brought his thirty men up to full launch readiness. The six icons for the Jupiter helicopters went green on Phillips' screen. The Jupiter was a very fast and powerful transport heli, but it was a noisy machine. Any element of surprise the Ops men might gain would be shattered by half a dozen Jupiters screaming into the zone at their two hundred and seventy-five knots. Phillips knew that Drake wouldn't call in PD7 unless everything fell apart.

From time of launch, the Jupiter-delivered force could be over Drake's action area in about ninety seconds. Phillips watched the motorcade's progress through the Saint Paul Shadow. Drake put active intelligence data into the mission network, and Phillips took in the overflight

image from the stealth drone. The sniper team's report from the northern shore of Bennett Lake scrolled before his eyes. No activity from the target structure.

Phillips brought his two Sergeants and his one Master Sergeant into his local command net. The three veteran soldiers were crisp and professional on the com. Phillips suppressed a satisfied smile. His men were in top fighting shape. Drake would have to hit a real leviathan for PD7 to not be able to pull Ops from the fire.



Neco rested at the bottom of the pit. The magical prison about the Element was tight, constricting. The holes in the barrier it had managed to widen would give no more. The dragon's claws were scarred, from the splintering and breaking during its long years of effort to free itself from the terrible cage. The witch had done her magics to try to patch the holes, to keep the Element from projecting its force beyond the prison to the firebird, but the simple, frail patterns had fallen to Neco's willful rage. Now, the dragon was back to where it had been months ago, when the Coscar had first become known to it.

How much longer would it have to wait for the prison walls to crumble with age, until the beast could finally free itself from the Talisman's hold? Another year? Five? Ten whole years? Another generation of waiting, toiling daily against the groaning walls, the cycles of darkness, rage, and exhaustion continuing into the unwinding wheel of time? How many stars would go out while the great dragon was held prisoner by this creation of enlightened man?

The creature brooded in the silence and darkness. Then, the dragon's senses made out a distant vibration in the cosmic currents beyond the prison, flowing in the hole in the wall like a barely perceptible breeze. Neco brought itself to full attention, and the fires and heat around it glowed to life in response. The great cavern lit above the lake, now swirling with movement.

Neco pulled the thread of possibility into its mouth and tasted it. A frigid, brittle thing, and in an instant Neco knew something was very wrong. Understanding exploded in the dragon's mind. The traitor approached the firebird. Panic and anger flooded the great monster's heart, and the lake flew to boiling and a mountain of molten rock flung up the side of the prison. The great creature howled in misery and hate.



The convoy broke formation as it left 36 and rolled north on Rice Street. Nearby, from the west, an Operations-refitted Humvee parked itself on the east-bound side of 36 and pointed its gun back west, in case anyone came up from the far side. The forward vehicles split into two groups of three vehicles each, with half heading west on Minnesota Avenue, and the other half on Country Road B2. They edged alongside Central Park and accelerated. The final four kilometers were the most dangerous. If any enemy spotters were in place, the advance of the armored vehicles would be obvious, and alarm was sure to be raised. They passed by a hundred abandoned buildings, the Shadow's reflection of the urban residential area, each a source of potential observation or ambush. As the intelligence report had indicated, there was no outer resistance.

●

In his bed, Cory's eyes slowly came open. The weight of the previous day's memory came full into his mind. The trials. His initiation into Aruithinea, as he followed in the footsteps of a father he had never known. Returning to the house as dawn approached, and the gratitude he felt as he went fast and deep into the exhausted fog of sleep. He tiredly got into his clothes, laced up his boots, and moved toward the door. Dimly, he thought he smelled the happy evidence of brunch wafting up the hall.

He stopped, his hand stretched out to reach the doorknob. A chill, electric, seemed to hover in the air before him. That's weird. I wonder...

A noise, dull and heavy, from somewhere deep in the house. A muffled, human sound. Cory tilted his head to listen. Then someone shouted. Miller. A gunshot.

Cory threw the door open and dashed down the hall, and pulled the Coscar strength and fury into his body. Distantly, he heard a battle cry from Neco, deep in his heart, and Cory took up what the dragon offered. Flames and invisible scales of armor enveloped Cory's body. He rounded the corner and pushed power into his fingertips, heat and fire, and leapt down half the length of the staircase. Dark figures rolled to the side, and one yelled out in warning. A strange, angular gun pushed toward Cory's face and whispered as it threw out a staccato of death.

"Target sighted!" one shouted. Cory thrashed out a talon at the masked assassin with the silenced submachine gun, and felt the crunch of ribs recoil up the length of his arm. The doomed man flailed and screamed. With a snarl, Cory picked him up with the talon and threw him down to the floor below.

The men rolled back and left three fist-sized devices clattering near their fallen man. Grenades. Flash-bangs. Cory's toughened skin absorbed the cascade of shock, but he went blind in the flash of white. His ears rushed up to a piercing whine. Still, he caught the form of the last man in the room, fleeing too slowly, and ripped him open wide. The figure grasped Cory's neck with one hand, and Cory felt the weak impact of slugs against his chest.

Cory screamed in anger and blindly reached his talons to the man's face, encountered some kind of face shield there, and then bore down with all his might. The man's head did something wrong, then came apart. Cory threw the body sideways and rushed forward. He found a wall. He rebounded and crouched, and stretched out his otherworldly senses, waiting for the sensation of an energy halo that marked the Gifted at close range, even in total darkness.

A panicked psychic shout came at Cory's mind. It was Terry.

Get out, it said. You. They're after you.

In Cory's mind, he saw a picture of Terry pressed hard to the floor of the library, his arm protectively over Ellen's shoulders, pistol out, facing the door. Ellen screamed as bullets ripped into the room.

●

"Hard target," came the call over the Op force's channel. Phillips listened intently, back on the Fort Snelling complex's helipad. "The objective is a hard target." Phillips subvocalized the prep command for a launch and fought the realization that he could be thrust into the air within a few seconds. Drake might give the order to launch after all.

Hard target. It meant a Gifted - or Other - immune to mundane small arms and tactics. It meant that whoever or whatever Drake was out to capture, it was active, fighting them, and wouldn't go down easily. Phillips couldn't recall an instance where a hard target had been dealt with by anything other than PD7 - they were the only ones with the firepower to handle it.

But Drake seemed to have something else in mind.

"Delta unit, move up," the First Scion ordered. Phillips highlighted the real-time icons for Delta on the Action Area map, and saw that Operations Crew Chief Warner, the man just below Drake, was assigned to Delta unit.

"What the hell?" Phillips muttered.

Crew Chief was the equivalent rank to Phillips' own as Lieutenant. With a chill, Phillips realized that half of Terishor's leadership for the entire Province was on this mission. The Blackout Order suddenly made a twisted kind of sense. This was a secret mission of vital importance to Terishor. Whatever the target was, Terishor didn't want any outside interference, and the rest of the Order be damned.

Phillips darted his screens to the casualty reports. Two Operations agents killed outright, another one injured. That was going to be difficult to keep from Lexington. If things got any worse, the truth might be on the Dominus' desk in a matter of days, even hours. And, Phillips realized, if his team launched, Lexington would know about it immediately, Blackout Order or not. Six Jupiter fighting squads weren't something that you could hide from a figure like Lexington. Phillips returned his eyes to Delta unit's progress as it entered the fight. Stupidly, he bent his mind to try to help them.

Come on, Warner, Phillips thought. Do your stuff.



Cory forced himself deeper into the house, his vision scattered by the afterblast images. I'm coming, he forced the thought-words toward Terry. Hold on.

Inwardly, Cory summoned the presence of Neco's mind.

I can't see, Cory projected.

He rammed into something at knee height and fell to the floor. His hearing was a wash of noise. Then Cory felt the flood of energy sing around him as the dragon lent him more power. A curtain of colors flooded Cory's sense of sight, and he saw concentrations of energy in the shapes of people, bright and intense, and the dull, paper-thin outlines of the structure and furniture around him. Energy flowed about his feet like pools of miraculous water. In a flash, Cory understood it to be the energy inherent in the Vale.

He whipped his head around and regained his bearings. The library. Go.

Inside, Terry fired his pistol through the door at the attackers. Despite herself, Ellen let out a surprised sound at Terry's sudden shots. She made herself get up and move to the side of the door.

"Get back!" Terry shouted. Another burst of fire erupted through the wood. The rounds screamed as they tumbled past Terry's head.

Ellen brought forth a ball of psychic energy and flung it forward in a spray of boiling, condensed fear. The waves crashed into the minds of two Operations agents crouched behind the corner, and they stumbled, suddenly uncertain, to the floor. One grabbed the battle harness of



the other and pulled the two of them back, away from whatever had just slashed at their minds. And then something terrible came upon them, a torrent of heat and anger, talons and fire. Cory's roar and Neco's bellow mingled into a horrible chorus.

The two agents fell, their bodies a broken, cut, burning ruin. Cory turned and saw more of the enemy approach, entering the house from the side door of the kitchen and dining area, where the first wave had retreated to. One of the newcomers was a dynamo of power compared to the others, a beacon even in the crashing array of supernatural energies. Cory let loose an inhuman, happy cry of battle and threw himself toward the second wave.

Neco sensed it first. A dark fuzz of psychic energy, contained, bound, in the object in the enemy's hand. The dragon saw the man bend his will to unlock the Talisman and bring its purpose to life, and the etched sphere of glass wrapped in coils of metal unfolded in psychic combustion. A weapon. The dragon sent a panicked sensation to the phoenix.

Cory hesitated outside the doorway, a ball of fire readied in his left talon, gleeful hate still dancing in his eyes. Then he felt his mind tear away, the sound of a thousand train wrecks bursting through his mind, the sensation of glass dust rushing into his ears, then deaf and blind once more, a sea of numbness, and blackout.

Terry rolled on the floor in misery. The torrent subsided, rolled back in reducing spirals of power. He held his head and managed to look about him. Ellen lay collapsed in the doorway. Terry tried to rise and stumbled toward her. He tripped in his confusion as the room spun and his mind grasped for coherent thought. Full words for things slipped beyond his ability to comprehend or articulate. He couldn't speak. Instead, he put his hands to Ellen's face and made a wailful noise.



Slowly, Cory pulled himself out of the depths of darkness that surrounded him. His memory returned to him in misshapen pieces. They slapped into place about his sense of self, paint chips falling from a portrait in reverse. He remembered a day working for Hartigan's Delivery in Saint Paul, his first job since riding on the circuit. Terry had pulled some strings to get him the job, some kind of "connections," they had joked, through a student at the university.

Cory had been surprised to find that he liked the movement and pace of the job, the regularity of the schedule and the flow of predictable routes. His shoulder hurt him after each day, but he just chalked it up to the price of rehabilitating it after long weeks of healing, and months of physical therapy, until the insurance policy had dried up.

A cold, rainy autumn day, the rumble of the truck and the smell of diesel fumes, the college radio station playing over the vehicle's tinny speakers. The sky was flat and grey, a distant mirror image of the slick, dirty street and cement sidewalks that bordered and contained Cory's days.

It was a slow, hard day of slogging through the dreary traffic, and the appointments and daily stops slid further and further past their due delivery schedules, with each stop adding another five or ten minutes to the backlog. Cory came up to a misrouted package that should have gone by bike courier, but the sorter had added to his truck by mistake - a cardboard box the size and heft of a portfolio, marked Urgent, 10:00 am. It was well past noon when Cory pulled into the standing lane in front of Market Plaza and made his way into the Saint Paul skyway.

As Pro-Gate security checked his passes, Cory watched in dismay as the seconds slid away from him on the digital clipboard he carried. The rent-a-cops with military sidearms and

self-important corporate enforcement badges went through his bags a second time, and waited on hold with the Trinity International front desk. They wanted a verbal confirmation from the receiving clerk before they let him in.

Cory had to endure the scrutiny, since Hartigan's wasn't a 'recognized service,' in the skyway lingo. People that worked in the area all had Pro-Gate door passes, and could walk through security without much more than a second glance. They had already been vetted, their backgrounds pawed through, their credit records worried over. But as an independent carrier, Hartigan's didn't have the money to pay Pro-Gate's premium.

At last, security issued him a temporary pass and he was allowed to enter. Most of the surrounding business centers were on lunch break, and the skyway was flooded with clerks, customer service reps, middle managers, and support technicians. Cory jostled elbows and broke into a long, fast stride. He'd end up over the parking time limit in the truck lane, moving at this pace. He just had to hope the Saint Paul meter maids would overlook the truck.

As he threaded through the crowds, Cory tabbed his radio on to dispatch.

"Williams, four five five. Hey, Silvas?" Cory said. The reply came over Cory's earpiece.

"Dispatch," Silvas replied. "What's up?"

"This box totally fucked me. Check it out. D block, A nineteen." There was a long pause as Silvas brought up the package manifest. Cory imagined the thin-faced high school dropout pouring over the screen in front of him, at the main desk of what used to be a taxi office before Dale Hartigan made it his own.

"Um, yeah, four five five, that's some pretty classic snafu you've got there," Silvas replied.

"These corporate types are the worst," Cory lamented. "I'm not going to be able to walk after this."

"Oh, buck up, little trooper."

"Four five five to dispatch," Cory said. "Fuck off."

Cory arrived at Trinity International's receiving desk at 12:29 pm. The desk clerk, a sharp-eyed woman in a severe office dress suit, burst into tirade as soon as she saw Cory's Hartigan's uniform. Her receiving clerk hadn't told her that Cory was coming.

"What the fuck is wrong with you crosstown assholes? God damn stinking amateurs, I don't know how the hell you lowlives ever find any business. Do you have any idea what it's like to be let down by a carrier such as yourselves, time after time? No, you don't. You don't give a fuck, do you?"

"Just need your signature here," Cory said straight-faced, and held out the digital clip-board.

"Fuck you people," she said, crossing her arms. "I'm not signing. The meeting that needed that package got out forty-five fucking minutes ago! We had to reimburse that slack-jawed professor two hundred dollars for your fucked up delivery! Well, it's not coming out of my budget for the week. Fuck you people. I'm not signing. And I'm filing a report with the Better Business Bureau tomorrow on you people, and I'm having your skyway security clearance revoked by five o'clock today!"

"You can refuse reimbursement payment to our customer all you like," Cory said. "And we can refund whoever made the initial payment, too. But can you just sign this to prove that the package at least arrived? I mean, as far as we're concerned, our customer is the Department

of Environmental Science, and not your company.”

“I’m not signing. As far as we’re concerned, you never arrived at all. You failed to deliver service. I don’t know how you’re going to go about trying to officially prove you got here, and I don’t fucking care. Go. To. Hell.” She smiled at that, and pointedly went about ignoring Cory’s presence.

Cory let out a hot breath. He checked his watch. He was already ten minutes overparked. He’d blown nearly a half hour on this stop so far, and the rest of the day was going to be fucked sideways. He looked up, and saw at the large clock face next to the Trinity International logo above the woman’s head.

Cory determinedly set the package up on the desk next to the woman’s computer terminal, took three steps back, and brought up his digital camera, already palmed in his hand.

Flash.

The woman blinked in the sudden light.

“What the hell are you doing?” she demanded. Cory turned and walked away, and shouted over his shoulder.

“Getting my fucking proof of delivery, you fucking bitch!” Startled onlookers parted to make room for his exit. Cory tabbed for dispatch once again.

“Silvas, I fucking quit, you know that?”

“Aw, come on, Williams. It couldn’t have been that bad,” dispatch answered.

“She tried to refuse delivery!”

“What do you mean, tried?”

The memory faded, and Cory’s most recent moments came into clear focus. The firefight. The house rolling in smoke, his boots slippery with blood. The horrible tearing in his mind. The silence and darkness that followed. Cory awoke and looked around himself.

He was in a large, cast iron cage, suspended by thick chain from the ceiling. He shivered in his sudden chill. He was naked, and his stomach hurt from the recent, circular wounds there. He remembered the strange looking gun as it had ripped into his energy-infused skin. Some of the damage had made it through after all, he thought.

Cory checked himself over. Aside from the mostly-healed tissue wounds in his stomach and old scars, he was intact. His awareness grew to his greater surroundings. The cage was suspended four or five feet from the cave floor. A bare light bulb hung from a metal pipe near the closed door. The chamber walls were roughly hewn rock. There was a metal table on the left, with two stainless-steel chairs. Somewhere beyond the door, he heard the sound of water dripping.

Time passed.

He couldn’t feel Neco’s reassuring presence. The connection was somehow blocked. All of Cory’s reserves were spent, too, and hadn’t replenished like they normally do. He was, for the present moment, a mere mortal. He extended his senses and noted the dark shock of the hungry cage around him - it was draining him of energies. Cory sighed.

“Fuck.”

I’m probably under surveillance, Cory thought. There’s likely to be cameras and micro-phones in here. So don’t give anything away. They wanted you alive, so they’re going to want information, one way or another. The sobering thought of being tortured flashed up in Cory’s mind. In this state, there’s nothing I can do about it, he realized.

It had to be the Order, right? No one else has the power to do this kind of thing. At least, no one Terry or Karl have told me about. The Order is the elephant in the room. They're the type to send a hit team to roll over a Vale held by noncombatants like Bacchus. Cory shivered. Who made it out alive?

Terry was up and fighting when the mind bomb went off. In the library. Maybe he got out of there, somehow, after I got flatlined? Assuming anyone could still be standing after that. Wait. It was probably more like a grenade, instead of a house-leveling psy blast. Otherwise, it would have taken out the guys doing the attacking, too, and that's no good for an offensive weapon. It was probably a pretty localized type of attack, and just took me out and anyone within a few dozen meters.

So, okay, maybe Terry was still standing afterwards. Who else? And where the hell were the Aruithineans in all this? They'd crashed in the Vale at dawn. They should have been there when the first bullets started flying. Where was the Finn? Where had Oakshotte been, with that huge bullet-proof riot shield of his?

When the Order dropped me, they had all the time in the world to come in, pick me up, and cart me away. That meant they weren't too worried about anyone else coming in and spoiling their little party. And that meant there had been pretty much no resistance after the mind bomb. If they'd wanted to, they could have killed every last Gifted in that house. Which meant, most likely, everyone in that place was dead. Terry. Ellen. Miller. Karol. Kristen, if she'd been home. The Russians. The Aruithineans. All dead.

They're going to torture and brainwash you, Cory told himself. These are the people who leveled that truck stop and killed all those civilians, trying to get you. They don't care about the damage they cause. They just want results. They don't want you dead; they want something else, since you're still alive. You just have to figure out what that thing is, and what you're willing to endure before you give it to them.

And then, when they're done, hopefully, they'll put you out of your misery.

Cory fought down the rising wave of panic and despair. It threatened to seize him and shake him, to chill him to his bones and twist his psyche into something best forgotten. He got a handle on himself and lifted himself out of that pit.

I'm not going to go that way, he resolved. They win when they break you.

They break everyone.

No, not everyone. Pure mundanes can endure torture for years at a time. You're made of tougher stuff than that. You can shrug off bullets. You can torch whole rooms. You're not vulnerable like the humans are.

Are you sure about that? With no juice to push around? You can't strengthen your body without it, can you? No, you can't. Right now, you're as weak as all those pathetic people walking around out there, clueless about the real world. You're just like them. Victims, waiting to happen.

It's not just the abilities that make me what I am. I'm more than that. I'm Coscar. One of my ancestors was a real, actual, death-dealing god. That's my lineage. That's my heritage. I'm not going to break. I'm not going to give in.

And what will that get you, eh? They'll turn you into a wrecked shell of a man. You think you had it rough falling off your little motorcycle? Snapped a few bones? They're going to turn into hamburger, pal. There's not going to be anything left worth showing in the light of day. They'll keep at it, too, day after day, year after year. Even if you can hold out that long, they'll still kill you in the end. And you want to know the best part?

You deserve it.

Cory shuddered.

Yeah, I do. I'm a monster. I deserve it. I can't even count how many guys I've killed. They died messy, all of them. I did that. I burned them alive and ripped through their ribs, and crushed their skulls and tore their hearts out. I even mind-slaved the only girl I really cared about, so I could fuck her one more time and get her out of my system. So I can't even say I'm only like this to the bad guys. I'm a selfish fuck for what I did to Heather.

So, yeah. I deserve it.

Time passed.



Footsteps. The door opened. Cory started at the sound. He saw a guard in some kind of heavy, all-encasing body armor, the kind that the Pentagon would make if they were trying to mimic the storm trooper look. The guard had some kind of rifle slung across his back, and a sort of spear in his hand. Three other figures entered, and the guard stayed outside. The door closed.

They wore G-man suits and had stern haircuts. Two of them peeled off and set briefcases down on the table. The third stood full in front of Cory's cage and examined him. Then he smiled.

"All that power," he chuckled, "and not even the slightest mental shield. I guess that's what makes you and your kind such throwbacks. We can make armor just as good as yours. We have jump suits and walking tanks. Our firepower is ten times as powerful, with more than ten times the range. And we can mass produce this stuff in our Sciceric labs, and hand it out to our shock troops wholesale. Occult technology made your kind obsolete a thousand years ago.

"The real power in this reality is the power of the mind. And it's a realm of power where you are entirely defenseless. I think that's pretty funny. Don't you? I can make you do anything I want. I can make you dance like a puppet on a string. I can make you gouge out your own eyeballs, put them in your mouth, chew them up, and swallow them. And I can do it with you still in there and aware of it happening, screaming inside, my little grotesque puppet."

"Good news for you," the man said, "is that my orders say otherwise. I'm not going to damage you. I'm just going to dive into that simple little head of yours and pull out everything you know. We're going to put it on disc, you see. Then run it against our databases and find out who hasn't been toeing our party line. And then deal with them."

"After that," he continued, "I'm going to hand you over to my superior. And I'm pretty sure you already know who that is."

Cory did everything he could to bring up some kind of defense. He mentally braced himself. He did the breathing trick Terry had once taught him. He laid in with the mental mantra, the mundane method for building a thought-wall.

Then the man looked at him askance and brought the weak, haphazard mental bricks tumbling down. And then the man was in, and there was nothing that Cory could do.



The phone rang. Ruby fumbled for it with his left hand, his right still stuck to the mouse, directing the hail of screens through the waves of words and images. Click.

“Fun House.”

“It’s Tom Grey,” Terry said on the other line. “Put me through to Karl right now.”

“Oh, hey Tom,” Ruby said. He slowed his surf speed down to a minimum and paid attention to the phone call. “Long time. Karl’s in a meeting for the next few hours, you know how it is when...”

“Right now,” Terry interrupted. “We just got rolled by Terishor. People are dead, Ruby. They took Cory. Find Karl, right now.”

“What? Oh! Oh shit! Hold on a sec, hold on...”

Ruby tabbed the phone channel to Big Karl’s cell and tagged it an Orange Priority. With his right hand, he pointed his data streams at Minneapolis Undernet and ran the Order filters. Alert packages sought out the dots and ran them through the Fun House filters, which busied themselves with the connecting of those dots. Lots of chatter going on. Lots of...

“What the fuck?” Karl said.

“Hey Big, it’s Grey,” Ruby said quickly. “Putting him through.”

“O-kay...” Terry was suddenly in Karl’s ear.

“We got hit about two hours ago,” Terry said. “Looked like a Terishor black op, more cloak-and-dagger than up front and heavy. Rolled the Bacchus Vale from the Maya-side. Karol and Miller got killed. They hit us with some kind of psychic grenade and they took Cory.”

“They what?!”

“They took him, Karl. They knocked us flat and they took him. And if it wasn’t for the two Aruithinean knights who were over in the park who came running, they would have killed me and Ellen, too.”

“What. The. Fuck!”

“They got him alive, Karl,” Terry went on, his words clipped. “Brozeck is bringing his boy into the fold whether Cory wants it or not. They’ll brain-tap him for sure.”

“Well how long do you think he’ll last?”

“He’s not set up for this! They’re going to own his memory any minute, if they don’t have it already.”

“God fucking dammit!” Karl shouted. “He gets smoked like this, grabbed by a team with obvious psychic knowhow, and it takes you two fucking hours to call me? Thanks for the fucking timely warning!” Karl thumbed his phone angrily and brought Ruby into the call.

“Uh, hi boss,” Ruby stumbled.

“Immediate full evac, all assets,” Karl ordered.

“Uh, w-w-w-what?”

“You have three minutes to send the message and clear your post,” Karl said. “Send everyone to the backup center in the Salem. Run a full data dump, then set the system to fry. I’ll call the Blackguard and let them know that you-know-who might be sending a cruise missile or two into the neighborhood. See you in Salem.” Then Karl dropped Ruby from the conference.

“Two hours ago,” Karl repeated. “Two hours.”

“We were busy, Karl,” Terry gritted. “Running like hell. It’s not like I could stop and use a fucking coin-op payphone.”

“So where’d you end up?” Karl’s voice was labored. Terry could tell the big man was on the move. He heard a car door open and close.

“Aruithinea hold-out. Small Vale in an Irish pub,” Terry answered.

“Figures.” Karl fired up the T-Bird.

“They’re really pissed about losing him,” Terry said. “They want to go in and get him.”

Karl laughed.

“Oh, come fucking off it. Even if you could find him, through all their shielding and wards...”

“I might be able to do it, Karl,” Terry countered. “And they’re serious. They’ll go in. He’s important to them, Karl.” Terry set his voice hard. This was going to be the tough part.

“And I’m asking you to help us do it,” Terry said.



Cory awoke on his back, shivering on the cold metal floor of the cage. He rolled over and began to sob. The men were gone. His mind was his, again. For now.

It was a painful dream in his memory, a cloud of razor blades that had slipped into him, dissecting, searching, bringing hidden scenes of his life into the clinical light, the examining eye. He would never forget what had happened, how it had felt, the way he had been defenseless, immobile, helpless... His psyche was wrecked by the horrible tracks of the experience, tracks that would never be paved over or worn away.

It had hurt, but it hadn’t been the pain. It was the shame of it. The invasion. The uncaring methodology of it all. Slivers and flashes of his life hung in his mind’s eye like afterimages of flashbulbs. Words echoed long in the hallway of his childhood, his mother, the funeral, the orphanage and the well-meaning, but somehow distant foster parents. The school. Jack. The group of friends they had made.

His first kiss, her long brown hair, deep pools of brown eyes. Her lips had been so sweet. A bloody nose, his first fight, his mouth salty with tears. The rush of the wind in his hair, on his first motorcycle, laughing as he rode. The empty, lonely nights, not being able to tell anyone how he felt. He had wrapped his heart in steel bands and packed it away deep in his chest. Elizabeth, the first girl he had ever cared about, sixteen years old, groping with furtive hunger in the backseat of an Oldsmobile. Heartbreak, sadness on the long end of a telephone wire.

Everything had been laid bare. He’d been gutted. Everything had gone before the eyes of these people. All of his doubts. All of his fears. All of his shames and sorrows, laughter, dreams. They’d looked everything over, turned the pieces over and over in their dirty hands, and they’d made their own copy of it. So they could look up interesting pieces and hold them under a microscope, at their own leisure.

Cory held himself until he couldn’t cry anymore. Then, mercifully, darkness took him again.

“Wake up, Cory.”

She’d been a frightened girl who’d called for help. It was a simple thing. Someone needed help. And he was the one who’d been there. He’d made a choice. He decided to go and help.

There was something that rang disaster in his ears when he saw the men’s uniforms, their grim, cold faces, their guns and stunners glinting in the streetlight. And her voice. It was the call of someone drowning, about to go under for the last time. It was her last call before certain death. And so he had run in, and that’s when everything opened up inside of him.

“Cory. It’s time to wake up.”

Mary.

He hadn’t thought much about her over the last few months. Was she all right? Was Max taking care of his little sister? He remembered holding her hand as they ran, his fingers sticky, his clothes a vision of gore. The way she had calmed herself so quickly once the danger had passed. How it seemed so normal for her. And he couldn’t understand how someone so young could be so together about the whole thing. In the face of so much fear and death.

“Cory.”

He opened his eyes and looked up from the bottom of the cage. Then frowned, closed his eyes, and rolled over to face the far wall.

“I know you’re not too happy with me right now,” John Brozeck said, “but you’ll come around soon enough. You’ll understand. We’ll have time to talk things through. Hell, we’ve got lots of time, now that you’re back with us again.”

“Go away, John,” Cory replied. “And fuck you.”

“You must be cold like that. We’ll get some clothes for you, something comfortable. And once you’ve calmed down, we’ll get you out of that contraption and into a comfortable room. And what I’m hoping - I want to share this with you. What I’m hoping is that, sooner than you think possible, we’ll be back together as a family again.”

“How is Jack, anyway? Last time I saw him, he was pointing a gun at me.”

“Jack is fine,” John said. “He’s doing important work, now. We both are. And you will be, too. You’re a remarkable man. You really are. You’re got a lot of potential. You could go places and do things that I can only dream about.”

“I swore an oath to fight you people,” Cory said.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. By the end of the week, House Aruithinea will be erased. Like it should have been, all those years ago. Really, it’s just going to be a very-delayed mopping up operation.” Cory turned back over and looked at the older man.

“What did they ever do to you?”

“They’re criminals. Terrorists. Like all of the parasites on civil society. They drag it down, they infect it with damaged thinking and fossilized myths. They make reality fragment, Cory. It’s unhealthy. Common people, mundanes, they suffer when groups like Aruithinea are active nearby. People’s minds simply can’t handle the truth of the cosmos. That’s why they can’t deal with it when we bend reality around them.

“They’re psychologically and spiritually unfit to bear witness. Aruithinea only cares about Aruithinea, and their romanticized myth about living out a modern fairy tale. Well, that outlook



is all well and good if you're one of the dashing knights or beautiful princesses. But common people don't do so well in realities like that. They're the peasants, scrambling for food, riddled with disease, cowering in the darkness. That's not civilization. It was called the Dark Ages for a reason, Cory."

"So you just kill them off?"

"Someone has to," John replied. "If they won't come around to our side, or if they're unfit... then that's what one has to do."

"So when I said no to Jack, you decided to kill me?" Cory's voice was flat. He couldn't bear to summon the rage. He felt used up, empty. The weight of the room seemed to crush his skull.

John's face hardened.

"That wasn't my doing. Terishor had nothing to do with it. The men under me knew full well the way I wanted you handled. That was the Lacrutians. And you taught them a pretty stern lesson. I ought to thank you for that. They only see you as a threat. They don't know you like I do, and they don't have the history of dealing with that monster that wants to control you. But I do. I was going to tell you what happened with your parents, when the time was right, Cory. You have to understand that."

"You killed them," Cory said. "What's to know? As soon as I get out of this cage, I'm going to come for you."

"Cory, please," John chastised him. "You can't hurt me. If that has to be your first lesson, then we might as well get it out of the way."

"Try me."

John sighed. He turned and walked over to the metal desk and pulled a rusty drawer open. He removed a black robe that reminded Cory of the clothes he wore for his initiation ceremony. John walked back and pushed the garb between the bars of the cage.

"Now, get dressed," John said.

"I'm going to kill you."

"Get dressed," John repeated. Cory saw the air in front of John's eyes grow hazy, as if there was a mirage. The blur shot from John's face into Cory's own, almost too fast to see. The psychic command blew through Cory's will against it. Mechanically, Cory's body moved.

God. Fucking. Dammit. Stop. Stop it. Don't move. Hold still. Fight. Come on, fight this. I'm not going to be a fucking puppet...

He put the robe on, his face a mask of hate.

"There," John said. "That's better."

Neco, Cory thought. If you're still there. If you're still alive, if you can hear me. Send me something now. Something. Anything. I need you. I need you to help me kill this motherfucker.



"I loved your mother," John said.

Hours had passed. Cory's mind was a tired mess. At first, it had been a torrent of anger, swirling around him, his fury protecting him somehow from John's words. But it wore him down as the minutes dragged. The effort to keep his heart racing and the desire to do harm drained Cory until his bones hurt and his shoulders sagged. The robe he wore kept him warm, and he

wished there was some way he could make himself take it off.

“She was a dear soul, very beautiful.” John sighed. “It was like Chris had woven some kind of spell over her. So devoted. So loyal. I guess it was the dream of Aruithinea, again. The hope of touching a story larger and more powerful than herself. In the end, she saw what Neco was turning Chris into. Something dangerous, frightful. The kind of monster that belongs in books. Not in your bed. We wanted to run away from Chris’ little revolution. But there was nowhere to run to.

“The Order had had its nose bloodied once too many times to forgive and forget. They were going to send in the black teams. And Chris might have been fine with that, with his armor and firepower and a dragon sitting over his shoulder. But what about the rest of us? We were going to be the ones to die, not him. He would be fine. And that’s when I realized he wasn’t our friend. He didn’t care about me, or her. That’s why she didn’t tell him about being pregnant. With you. Because she just couldn’t bear watching him decide that his cause was more important to him than you were to her. She couldn’t bear the thought of Chris signing his own unborn son’s death warrant.

“So I cut a deal. And you know what? When some people say they’re not proud of what they’ve done... well, I am. I’m proud. I’m the one who saved lives. I’m the one who got your mother and me out of there. Elements of Discord are from the dark side of humanity, Cory. They destroy civilization. They have no right to walk free among us. Getting that artifact and trapping the dragon, that was the best thing I’ve ever done for the world.”

“Chris died,” Cory said. “You killed him.”

“I didn’t kill him,” John shot back. “He killed himself. He killed himself when he led that assault on the First Scion’s Citadel, when he knew the dragon wasn’t there for him anymore. He led his men to their deaths, because of his pride. His pride, Cory. It was all about him. It always was. But I got us out. Me and Linda. The Order kept its side of the bargain. We had our lives ahead of us.”

“She left you. I guess she couldn’t stand the idea of being with you after all,” Cory said.

“Your bastard father did something to her. It was like some kind of withdrawal. She just pulled back into herself. That’s an evil thing to do to someone. Make it so you can never leave them. Sometimes I wonder if he did something like that to me. Those months right afterwards, those were hard times. But I tried to take care of her. I tried.

“She walked out a week before you were born. I was going to raise you like my own. That’s what I promised her. She set herself up nearby. She knew I would watch her and look out for her. For her and for you. And I did. I wasn’t going to let Aruithinea or anyone else find her. Because if Aruithinea knew that your daddy had made a baby boy, they’d have stolen you away from her. Probably left a changeling in your place. And she was terrified of that. So I helped keep you safe. Just like I promised.”

“So you didn’t kill her? The Order didn’t have her killed?” Cory asked.

“Kill her? Hell, boy, I loved her,” John replied. “Our handler had doubts about her loyalty, he wanted to have her brought in and have her evaluated. But I said no. And years later, when all was said and done, you know what I did? I got the clearance and I looked over the file myself. No one did anything to her. She killed herself. And that’s just something you’re going to have to learn to live with. God knows I’ve tried.”

●

“If you can invade my mind and steal my memories, you can change them, too. Can’t you?”

Cory ate the meal they had given him. There was no clock or way to mark the time, but he thought it must be about two days after they had captured him. He was still in the cage, but they had given him a soft bedroll to sleep on.

John talked with him for hours at a time. Then he would leave and Cory would be left in solitude, or in the company of what he guessed were mind technicians. They wore work suits and had the studied, careful faces of psychologists. They pointed strange machines at him from outside of his reach and took readings and made notes into hand-held computers.

“We can do that, yes,” the agent said.

“So why don’t you just do that and get this over with?”

“It’s risky,” the man replied. “And it doesn’t give the best results. Sometimes subjects unravel a year or two after personality reconstruction. It’s best in the long run to simply use the tried and true methods. Assuming you want to keep the person as a long-term asset. And lucky for you, that’s what we have in store.”

“You’re just going to tell me all of this?”

“It’s not like you can change the outcome,” the man said. “One way or another, you’re going to join us.”

●

There must be something psychologically powerful about saying something out loud, Cory thought. That must be why they keep bringing in that mind-rape fucker to make me repeat these things.

The same guy who had come for Cory’s memories - Crew Chief Warner, he had heard them call him - was making Cory say things again.

“No one else can save me. I am the key to my own freedom. Terishor is my home. Chaos is the enemy. I live to serve the Order. The Order is the salvation of humanity. The Order is the key to civilization’s future. No one else can save me...”

I hate them, Cory thought.

Every last one of them.

●

“Jack sends his warmest wishes,” John said. “He says hurry up and get it over with, already.” He smiled.

“That’s easy for him to say,” Cory replied. “Does he even know what you’re doing to me? Sometimes that guy isn’t very bright.” John frowned.

“That’s my son you’re talking about,” he said in a warning tone. “I might love you like a son, Cory, but Jack is my own flesh and blood. Don’t you ever forget that. I raised you two like you were brothers, and I expect you to act like it.”

“What ever happened to your wife, anyway? Did she kill herself like Linda did? To get away from you?”

“You’re trying to make me angry at you, so I might make some kind of mistake,” John said. “It’s not going to work. I’ve done more of these conversions than I care to count. I’m not going to make any mistakes. You’re going to become one of us. You’re going to make such a glorious soldier for the Order.”



The mind technicians and Warner were at him all that next day, but John wasn’t around. Cory thought there were something different about the way they acted toward him, but he couldn’t pin down what. They were afraid of something, but it wasn’t him. If anything, Cory mused, they had grown too accustomed and at ease with their prisoner. More than once, they had come into his reach. If he’d wanted to, he could have killed them, broken one of their necks like a bundle of dry twigs. Juice or no juice, he could do that, Cory was certain.

There was something else at play, here. Cory decided to keep the knowledge hidden. If he let on that he was aware of it, his captors might shift their behavior and whatever opening it might afford would be closed down.

More technicians came in, accompanied by two of the heavily armored guards, each bearing future-tech spears. They made him stick his hands through the bars and tried some very thick, reinforced handcuffs on him, the Talisman etched with runes and circuitry. But the cuffs were the wrong size, and the team withdrew.

Then Cory was alone.

More time passed.



Terry worked his mind through the refining meditation. A staircase made of light, surrounded by pure blue. At the very top, nearly out of sight, a platform. The end.

Scientia et pertinacia, he thought. He conjured the words and saw them blaze upon the surface of the step. He stepped upon it and rose incrementally higher. Scientia et pertinacia, he thought again. Ever higher.

At last, Terry reached the platform. To the east, a great, flawless light rose over the horizon, and Terry’s mind was made pure. He opened his eyes and the vision vanished. Before him, on the etched, worn wood table, was the map of the cities. Affixed to the surface of the map’s edge, by the effort of dripped candle wax, was Cory’s key to his motorcycle.

“What I seek, I seek with all my heart, all my mind. Let the hidden be revealed.”

Terry reached into a wooden bowl and retrieved three casting stones, but did so without looking on them. He closed his eyes and dropped the stones on the map.

“What I seek, I seek with all my heart, all my mind. Let the hidden be revealed.”

In the darkness behind his eyelids, Terry watched the spiraling dots of light, until one of the symbols, a crossed circle, appeared before him. Terry opened his eyes and looked down. The casting stones showed three different symbols - a triangle, a square, and a crossed circle.

Terry marked the map beneath the crossed circle stone. Then he replaced the casting stones into the bowl.

“What I seek, I seek with all my heart, all my mind. Let the hidden be revealed.”

He closed his eyes, and drew again.

He dropped them on the map. Repeated the mantra.

Envisioned a triangle. Opened his eyes. No matches. Was that resistance he felt? As if there was a wall, a ward, that pushed him away? Terry put the stones into the bowl and fused his eyes shut.

Again. This time a square. Opened his eyes. One match. Terry marked the map. One more.

Dropped. Saw the circle. Opened his eyes. A circle. The ritual locked into completion.

Terry marked the map with the third point, then drew connecting lines to the three points, making a triangle. On the longest side, Terry marked the mid-point of the side, then drew a line from this point to the opposite corner of the triangle, bisecting the original triangle into two. At the center of the bisecting line, Terry made a final mark. The true center point of the original triangle.

He'd found Cory.



A distant sound. Not from the deeper reaches of the cave chamber where he was held, where Cory believed there must be some tiny gap or passage to other pieces of the complex. But something else.

Like a song, or a scrap of half-heard conversation. A small lyrical thread. It wove its way as if slowly penetrating the earth and cement, a stealthy snake made of nether stuffs. The coil of energy reached the ceiling and broke into the room, climbing down the chain which affixed the cage.

There was a small flash, and then the coil of power was gone, and in its wake a gentle echo of a last word hung in the air.

“...revealed,” Terry’s voice said.

## 12

### *Light*

“Let’s have no illusions, here,” Big Karl addressed them. “This is a hardened position we’re going to assault. Some of us are going to die. If over half of us buy it on the way in, I’m calling my men off. You Aruithineans want to push ahead on your own after something like that, that’s your prerogative. We’re going to have to move in quick. We have less than five minutes for in-and-out. Anything more, and they’re going to have heavy reinforcements in there, from their post across the river at Fort Snelling.”

They were assembled in the basement of the Shamrock Pub, the small Saint Paul Vale held by Aruithinean agents. The Fun House crowd had driven hard throughout the night to be there, all thirty-three of them. Half a dozen Aruithineans were there, too; the rest were further afield, laying preparations. The air was heavy with dread and dust.

“They took one of ours,” Karl said, eyes hunting for the Chicago faces. “He’s one of theirs, too,” he continued, and gave the Aruithineans a nod. “That’s why we’re going together on this. Well, that, and neither of us could really hope to do this on our own. So. Teamwork. Right. We’ll stick to small fire teams. They’ll either integrate into our positions and act as supplementary forces, or will be on their own. So, keep it simple. They’ll react to us. Just do what you know.

“Blue is being held in the cave complex underneath the country club. We’re going in the Maya-side. We get past the defenses and pound our way inside the Vale. A quarter of you will get to the Vale’s portal and hold it against any fast reinforcements from the real world. The Aruithineans are going to hold our escape route and watch for the first wave of reinforcements coming at us from Fort Snelling. The rest of you - go in there and get our guy out.

“It’s going to be heavy, close-quarters fighting. This is a Terishor stronghold. It’s not a full-fledged military base... that’s across the river. But it’s going to be no cakewalk. Every target is a hard target. When we knock them down, hit them again so they stay down.” Karl looked at the floor.

“Whoever makes it out of there... Terishor is going to mark you in their ‘naughty book’ with permanent ink. Don’t think masks or gloves are going to keep you anonymous with these guys. When all is said and done and their people look over the aftermath, they’ll have ways to figure out who you all are. This mission will make you permanent enemies of the Order. So if you have second thoughts, well, the trucks leave in twenty minutes. If you’re not on them when we go, it’s been nice knowing ya. Finn?” The Finn put on a crooked smile and walked to the head of the room.

“Our big advantage here is that the Order won’t be expecting us to come right up to their door,” the Finn said. “They’re a standing army that’s used to getting their way, without anyone making much noise about it. Today, we’re going to make some noise. We’re going to do something they’re not expecting. Their response is going to be fast and hard. They have some high performance helicopters they’re going to put into the air to get their troops at us in a hurry, since they’re not going to want to drive around to either the Mendota Bridge or the one on 494. There’s not too much we can do to the choppers when they do their attack runs. But when they get in low enough to drop off their troops, they’re going to be in for a surprise.”

“Our way out,” the Finn continued. “We’re calling in a favor from some allies of ours. Something the Order won’t know how to deal with. There’s a forested area southwest of Resurrection Cemetery. A Vispiri is going to open up for us there, and take us deep into Maya. It’s going to close up right behind us. And you won’t have long to get onto it after it opens. Once it’s closed, it’s not going to open up again. Just saying, don’t miss your ride.”

“Last bit,” Karl broke in. “Terry, stand up?” Terry stood. “This is our link to Blue. He’s going to be the one to sniff him out when we’re all dark and scary in the caves. You keep him alive, you hear me? Okay. Let’s get going.”



The Finn rode up to Sir Oakshotte on his Yamaha.

“Hello, Sir Finnigan,” Oakshotte said. The big man smiled darkly. “It’s a good day for killing.”

“Easy for you to say,” the Finn laughed. “You don’t have to worry about the helicopters. You got my bag?”

“Here.” Oakshotte handed over the large olive green military surplus duffel. “That Russian gear of yours. That’s a shame.”

“Oh, come on, Oaky. If it’s good enough for the fighting boys of the IRA, it’s good enough for me.”

“How’d a Shining Order Druid get into heavy weapons, anyway?” Sir Oakshotte chided him. The Finn smiled.

“Cause I’m dual-trained, buddy. I’m Pure Chaos, too. Those Harbingers taught me how to put on a big show,” Finnigan said. Oakshotte sighed at him.

“You take care, Finn.”

“You too. Stay behind that shield of yours.”



“Hey Jake,” Karl said, his voice low.

Karl and Terry moved up to the old veteran’s position. They were a thousand meters out from the Terishor holding’s perimeter, with another thousand to go beyond that to get to the Vale. The Shadow was a quiet, eerie swath of dream, a land of well-manicured lawns and empty luxury homes. Just south of them cut 110, a forgotten divided highway. And then the fence for the country club, and the great acreage of a golf course. Jake shook his head and brought the binoculars back up to his face.

“Well?” Karl persisted.

“Well, what?” Jake muttered.

“How’s our approach look?”

“Like shit.”

“Yeah. I know,” Karl sighed. “I was just hoping you had a plan.”

“We can’t have these guys running two clicks under fire and expect them to get there in time. And that club house commands a lot of open ground, with not too much to hide behind. We’ll have to make use of the bit of concealment those tree lines are going to give us. And hope it’s going to be enough. Which it ain’t.”

“Can’t we just drive in?” Terry asked. Jake nodded.

“Yeah. We’re gonna have to. And they’re gonna know we’re coming at them the whole way in. No sneaky-sneaky. We’re gonna blow two minutes bouncing across those fairways. We’ll get maybe three minutes inside before those choppers are on us.”

“Assuming they have at least one of them just sitting there on a helipad, on constant standby,” Karl said.

“They will,” Jake said. “It’s Terishor.”

“Yeah,” Karl muttered.

“Okay. Load up the trucks,” Jake said. “We cross the highway in three minutes.”

“Go,” Karl replied. He realized it was something that Cory would have said, and smiled. Karl and Terry loaded up and got into a truck with a handful of Fun House commandos in the bed behind them.

The call went out over the radio. Terry’s heart climbed into his throat as Karl stomped on the F-150’s accelerator. They jumped the curb and tore around the cover of the house, throwing grass and dirt behind them. There was a jarring slam as they hit the highway.

“This is gonna hurt!” Karl shouted. They slammed over the median. Terry looked back in time to see the six men bounce into the air, then slam back down onto the metal truck bed. The engine roared. Then they crashed down the meager ditch and broke onto the deserted golf course.

“We’re through!” Karl yelled into the radio. To the left, Terry saw a Jeep Cherokee and a grey commercial van burst out of the pine trees.

“Four and five are in,” came the call on the radio.

“One and two are in.”

“Taking fire!”

Terry heard the dull staccato erupt from ahead of them. Tracer fire cut across the green.

“Go evasive!” Karl yelled. Terry braced as they crashed through a second line of trees. “Oh, fuck!” The truck dipped forward as they went down an embankment and branches snapped and scraped along the truck’s cab. Someone cried out from the back. There was a clang, then repeated whips and the sounds of bees in the air. Red dots screamed passed them. “Down!”

Karl forced Terry below the level of the dash. Bits of glass threw in over the seat.

“What is that? Is it a bunker?” Karl shouted. How Karl could drive through the panic, Terry didn’t know.

“Sentry! The shooters are solo!”

“Well then shoot the fuck back!” Karl snarled.

To the right, Terry heard the pops of gunfire from where Jake’s truck ought to be.

“Contact engaged,” Jake’s cool voice came over the radio. “Sweep left and around. Oh, and I found the Aruithineans. They’re on foot. And they’re ahead of us.”



●

Oakshotte let loose a mad howl and broke out of the trees. Behind him, two Knights of Lugh fired over the top of Oakshotte's head as they tried to keep up. Oakshotte's shield, thirty pounds of riveted metal, felt light on his left arm. He flew over the neat grass as the autofire sang in around him and screeched as it slammed into the shield. The Terishor sentry, clad in digital camouflage, flailed for a backup ammo box for his smoking M249. Oakshotte threw himself bodily forward. His muscles sang with power, his eyes hungry. He brought his massive hand axe high. He flew fifteen meters in an eye blink, roaring. Metal smashed bone. Blood and gore crushed out of the soldier's back.

Oakshotte kicked the man off his blade. The fallen soldier gagged as he tried to draw breath into his torn lungs. Terrified, the soldier watched as his killer brought the axe up once more, and then down, into his forehead.

●

"Holy fuck, did you see that?" Ruby's voice crackled. "That guy with the shield..."

"Ruby! Push left!"

"Get the hell to the house!" Jake commanded.

They pounded forward. When they reached the building, the Terishor defenders were waiting. Phil, Sammy, and one of the Knights of Lugh fell in an onslaught of bullets. The Jeep Cherokee shuddered and crashed into a tree.

"Cover fire!" Jake shouted. "Cover fire!"

●

Heavy footfalls. Guards running. A shout of alarm. Heavy door banged shut. Something was happening.

Cory forced his eyes open. So tired, he thought. He pulled the memory of Terry's voice close to his chest and curled around it, daring to hope that he had not imagined it. Outside the door, the solid clanking of the Terishor power armor suits ran past, a pair of them. Suddenly, Cory had the urge to collapse the walls and ceiling of the building down upon them, even if he, too, would be crushed. Anything, he thought, to get back at them.

Wordless curses and malign scenes played out behind Cory's eyes. An endless series of blood and pain, anger and retribution, fire and brutal, uncaring death. The wave of emotion surged over him. A ragged sound crawled up Cory's throat. He reached out and tried, for the hundredth time, to bend the freezing bars with his hands.

I.

Want.

Out.

●

Across the river at the Fort Snelling complex, the first Jupiter helicopter surged for the Shadow's sky. The double rotors wailed as the engine opened to full, and the rear propeller slammed the aircraft forward. Flight Sergeants Harris and Robinson rocked back in the cockpit seats. Harris, the Designated Pilot, grit his teeth behind the enclosed helmet. Technical overlay screens shined brightly into his eyes. He rolled the Jupiter into a bank and grabbed altitude. Next to him, Robinson tabbed the radio controls for the tower.

"L-Three is in the air, approaching target vector," Robinson reported. She thumbed the weapons pods control open. "Damn, that's close," she remarked into the closed circuit. Harris brought the bearing of the heli over the route indicator in his heads-up display.

"Here we come," Harris said. "Oh, fuck, that's the Lodge!" Anger flashed across Harris' face.

"Gimmie a fly-by. Designating targets," Robinson clipped. She initiated the firing computer's main sequence. The trucks and all-terrain vehicles came starkly into view. Hot halos registered on the thermal screens, from the heat of the burning vehicle, the hot engines, the living people, and the cooler, motionless bodies of the newly dead.

Permission to fire was granted by mission control.

"Coming around, fire mission!" Harris answered. Robinson brought up the rocket pods. She let the ordinance fly.

●

Explosions rocked the grounds. Outside the building, dirt and burning fuel were thrown skyward. The F-150 flew apart. Jake threw himself to the floor in the structure's basement. Glass broke and the building creaked.

"Everyone through!" Jake hollered. "If you're not supposed to be outside, then get your asses in there! Right now!"

Inside, Oakshotte led point, and Terry and Big Karl followed closely behind. Terry's ears rang in the sudden silence of the Citadel... magic kept the noise from the outside away. They went down a stairway thick with red carpet, into a luxurious hallway. Stout, rich wooden doors lined the sides, and shared the space with gilded murals, mirror insets, marble busts, and tall, elegant candlesticks. Terry held up his hand, and Karl put his hand on Oakshotte's shoulder, stiff beneath the armored battle jacket.

"Two men ahead," Terry whispered. Oakshotte nodded and a dark smile erupted on his face. He ran toward the door at the end of the hall. The knight roared. Metal and muscle shattered through centuries-old wood with a sickening slam. Splinters flew inward. Gunshots answered.

Oakshotte came up with a heavy revolver in his right hand and fired back. The two men in charcoal suits knelt behind a sturdy wooden table, thrown over on its side. The choppy roar of their MP-7's split the air. The armor piercing rounds knocked heavy dimples into Oakshotte's tactical shield, but the metal held. The Knight fired right and took down the first man, but the second adjusted his fire and ripped into Oakshotte's left leg.

The knight shouted in pain and crumpled to the floor. The Terishor agent leaned over the table to follow Oakshotte down, the submachine pistol hot and barking. The knight contracted

behind his shield as the last moment, and the bullets screamed and shrieked. Karl threw rifle fire into the room from the remains of the doorway. Huge holes in the table opened up.

The agent ducked back behind cover and groped for a spare magazine. Karl kept firing, and one of the rounds caught the man's torso and spun him to the floor. Oakshotte growled and dragged himself forward, clumsy now under the shield.

"Is he down?" Karl yelled.

"No..." Oakshotte snarled. He reached forward with his gun hand and dragged the edge of the table back, exposing the agent who fumbled to reload the MP-7 one-handed, his other arm limp beneath a destroyed shoulder. Startled, the agent tried to roll to the side. Oakshotte's Magnum boomed.

"Mother..."

Boom.

"...fucker..."

Boom. Boom.

The agent slumped, a wreckage of humanity. Behind him, a cool, wet breeze of air pushed up from a dark stairway that lead down into the darkness.

Karl rushed into the room and brought the AR-15 to bear, and fired a shot into each fallen man's head. Next to him, Oakshotte forced juice into the muscles of his ruined leg, and called the wounds closed. He sighed with the effort, forcing himself into the calm place in his heart so he could shout down the agony of the torn tissue, the cracked bones, and the maddening dizziness from the outrushing blood.

Then he brought himself back up to his feet, and nearly slipped back to the floor in his own blood.

"You okay?" Terry asked.

"Fine. Let's go."

They surged into the labyrinth, and their comrades in arms streamed in behind them.



In the air outside, Harris surveyed the damage his gunner had wrought. The intruder's vehicles were burning hulks. Rockets and cannon fire had turned the familiar shapes into mangled pieces of jagged, scorched sculpture. He brought the Jupiter in low and steady, and dropped altitude.

"Prepare for rapid departure," Harris said over the com. The power troopers behind him tensed for the jump. The heli dropped below fifty meters, over the Shadow replica of the Grey Lodge's parking lot.

The Finn stepped out of his invisibility, like a man parting a mirrored curtain. He took two fast steps away from the charred tree which had taken a hot piece of slag for him, his face streaked with soot. He brought the RPG-7 up to his shoulder, squared the sight picture, and let the 85mm rocket fly.

The projectile boomed as it left the firing tube, the warhead singing with psychic doom and encased in a mystical shaped charge. Inside the Jupiter's cockpit, a shrill alarm rang, and the helicopter's automatic defenses kicked in. Particle bursts fired from the helicopter's left side like oversized shotguns. The flying metal flashed white against the rocket's magic screen, and

then the weapon struck home.

Harris turned in time to see Robinson reach, too late, for the ejection lever above her head. Fire and noise filled the cockpit. Blackness as he fell out of the sky.



Lit by flashlight, the cave was a place of shadows and fear. Terry could feel the defenders ahead as they clung to their confidence and their training, like men clutching life boats in uncertain seas. They were scared. Scared of Karl's and Oakshotte's men. There was anger there, too, and the hot desire to murder, to kill, to push the intruders out of Terishor's sacred place.

The attack force consolidated in the first chamber, backing into the entrance cave.

"What's the hold up?" Jake called from the rear. "We're running out of fucking time!"

From the chamber, the cave complex branched in several places. The air grew colder and more damp, and the cave walls glistened in the startled streaks of light.

"Come on, Terry!" Karl urged. "Which way?"

Terry unfolded his mind and brought his breathing low. He reached out with his inner eye, and tendrils of empathic strings blew out into the black walls. He heard the echo of Cory's signature, a shape that took on Cory's form and imprint.

"There!" Terry exclaimed, his voice tight. "But there's something in the way."

"All right, here we go," Karl announced. "Which branch?"

"No, Karl..."

"Which branch? Dammit Terry, which way do we go?"

"Karl!" Terry hissed. "They're waiting for us," he whispered. "Just outside of Cory's door. Shock troops. Three of them. I can see the shapes they make even from here. That's heavy hardware. They're walking Talismans. I don't... we can't take them."

"We're gonna take 'em," Karl shot back. He grabbed Terry by his collar and wrenched him close. "Now tell me which way." Terry pointed, then shook his head.

The force moved forward. They stalked their way over bundles of clothes and hanging wardrobes, past hanging drapes thick with rot. Terry saw an etched protection circle in the cave floor, the lines filled with hardened wax, and read the sigils that told him it was meant for sending messages in people's dreams. Pungent incense forced its way into Terry's nostrils.

They saw cups filled with wine and blood, and a goblet made from a human skull. They saw a petrified human hand, worked with straps and metal bands so that it could be worn as a grotesque kind of glove. A cracked mirror stood in a corner, next to an industrial power outlet which snaked from a metal pipe electrical conduit.

The cave continued to the left, where a wave of power snaked around the corner. The Aruithinean Knights of Lugh pulled up to the rock wall with their rifles ready. This close, Terry could feel the jagged edges of the enemy nearby. The flat planes of power jutted off their bodies, angular, menacing. The air rippled with possibility. Death hovered, patiently waiting. There was a flash of energy as a Talisman was brought online. Something shifted, just out of sight, a dozen steps away.

Sir Oakshotte motioned for three of his comrades to join him at the corner. He gave hand signals, then unsnapped his hand axe. The closest gunman next to Oakshotte flipped the selec-

tor switch on his rifle to autofire. As one, the four men rolled into the hallway. Hell opened up upon them.

Cannon and machine gun fire swept the cave. Two gunmen were caught and crashed to the floor, torn into unholy shapes. Oakshotte threw himself forward, his eyes hungry for the metallic shape that loomed from behind a stone pillar, demonic and industrial. The thing's rifle-like cannon threw massive, mystically-sharpened rods of exploding lead, and Oakshotte's shield was torn open, and the rod dug into his hard vest and burst. The massive fighter's rib cage trembled, and shrapnel slashed him through. Desperate, he flung himself to the wall and hugged a gap there.

The remaining knight threw fire at the power armor's headpiece and flattened several fingers of lead against the visor. He pulled back to cover and reloaded, cursing.

"Pour it on! Go!" Karl yelled. He hurled a flash-bang grenade around the corner, then threw himself across the hallway.

"Big! No!" Ruby screamed. Mouth agape, he stepped into the open and began to fire. Oakshotte forced himself to stand and staggered forward. Fun House and Aruithinean fighters flooded the gap, and a storm of blood and cordite dashed itself against the walls. Men fell, torn and wailing.

Terry swallowed and forced himself to move. He tripped on a shattered form with a ruined face, slipped, and crawled under an overhanging rock shelf. Someone to his right, an Aruithinean in all black went down clutching a sword, his chest opened up to the wet air. White smoke choked the space, and suddenly Terry couldn't see. He drew his pistol and kept crawling on his hands and knees.

He had to get to Cory. They were all going to die without him.

A glistening form stepped into view, shockingly close to Terry's hand. The metal beast clutched a squat, terrible weapon which roared with terrifying intensity. Terry's ears stopped working. The thing fired past Terry, apparently unseeing, into someone behind them.

Terry uncoiled a psychic blast and unleashed it against the shape. The sentry flailed, visibly shaken. Terry sensed the man inside conjure up a psychic shield, too late to matter. Terry unloaded on him again, and bore through the protective barrier and felt the attack dig in to the man's psyche.

Rogers appeared out of nowhere, an enraged creature, the air blurry about his body. The power armor drunkenly spun to face Rogers and fired. Tracer fire whipped helplessly about Rogers as the fighter threw himself into the air, and acrobat armed to kill. He let loose with the rifle as he landed behind the trooper, and rushed close to the metal warrior's back. Rogers stuck the muzzle of the rifle to the base of the trooper's helmet and fired. At once, the agent fell. Red-hot bullets rushed in to Rogers' side from across the cavern, but Rogers was suddenly not there, like a trick of the light.

"We're coming for ya, Cory!" Rogers shouted.

Oakshotte pounded past Terry's hiding spot, the knight carrying the axe in one hand and the pistol in the other, his shield now forgotten in the carnage behind him. Somewhere ahead, another autocannon opened up. Karl ran past Terry's vantage point with his head low and his arm up protectively, his face a twist of panic and rage.

"Rogers! Find Cory!" Terry heard himself yell. Something exploded over his head, and he found himself in the open, unarmed, dazed, head in pain. Terry scrambled for his dropped pistol, found the trooper, and started shooting.

●

Hell sounded outside of Cory's prison cell door. The room was in full darkness. Cory thought he heard Karl's voice, but he wasn't sure. The shooting stopped. Someone cried out for help. Animal noises of pain echoed up the hallway. Footsteps, running. The peep-slide of the door shacked open, and a face looked in.

"Here! He's here!"

"It's locked. Darcy, get up here with the bomb putty."

"Move," a thick voice growled.

The door was wrenched open with a horrible shriek. In a frozen moment, Cory saw Oakshotte's face as the agonized metal pulled back, and Terry and Karl came through. Grime and the mess of battle covered their clothes and hair.

"Shit, it's good to see you," Cory said.

"Are you all right?" Karl asked.

"I am now."

Oakshotte ripped the cage open. Cory half-fell out of it. Terry caught him. Neco's power flooded Cory's frame.

*I will protect you. We will send them to their graves. Our fires will burn them to their bones.*

"Let's move," Karl said. He turned and yelled, "Everyone out! Back the way we came in! Let's go!"

Barefoot, Cory followed Karl with Terry there to help him. Suddenly, Cory felt ashamed of the robe he wore. His legs were stiff and pained from disuse. They passed by the dead, Terishor, and their men, too. Bloody smears left trails on the cement of the finished hallway, before it turned into pure stone. The rest was a flurry of flashlights and caught images - ammo casings which had rolled into a depression, like puddled water. Bits of broken rock and the stub of a candle, the mangled wreckage of a torn human being and the suit of armor he had once worn, the two now mingled in disjointed horror. An Aruithinean in black, smoking a cigarette. A discarded AR-15, ruined with bullet holes.

Cory had assumed he had been held in a subbasement somewhere. The realization that he'd been deep underground spun in his mind. He felt a moment of suffocation as he imagined the tons of earth and rock above and around them. Neco's protection wrapped around him, and Cory felt the comfort there.

At last, light appeared ahead. Silhouettes of men flowed out ahead of them, into a room with two dead men in grey suits. A richly decorated hallway waited behind the corpses, beyond a destroyed doorway.

"Hurry up!" Jake called. "It's getting thick out there!"

They passed through the Citadel's ward of silence in a flash, and the Shadow reverberated with the grinding of destruction. Gunfire. A muffled burst of explosion. Broken cars lay on their sides outside of the shattered windows of the country club. Once-fine carpets and glorious woodwork were now sacrifices to the uncaring needs of soldiers who wanted cover. The land beyond broke open with gunshots and fire. Neco sent armor about Cory's shape. He brought his Coscar aspect to the full, and was wreathed in heat. Terry gasped and pulled away.

Outside, the air was charged and thick. Cory's mind went numb. The grass was cool against his feet. They ran through hails of noise and plumes of fire. The sounds of battle fell behind them. The faces of the men and women near him were pale with shock. An idyllic pond swept to the left, and the ground ahead opened to a vista of long fairways and perfectly trimmed trees. Karl panted alongside him.

"Fucking... cigarettes..."

They crossed eight lanes of divided freeway, the road deck hard and gritty. Somewhere in the air, behind them, a turboprimed helicopter engine howled. The ground shook with impact, and Cory fell just beyond the freeway into a shallow ditch. He turned back and winced at the sight. Shattered bodies convulsed in his wake. Karl moaned to his left. Ruined flesh, dripping redness.

"Where's Terry?" Cory screamed at him. "Where's Terry?"

Shocked and senseless, Karl looked back blankly. Enraged, Cory swept up Karl's AR-15 and backtracked over the cratered roadway. He spotted the attack helicopter as it banked to the south. Cory brought the rifle up to his shoulder and pulled the trigger, sending shots out over the trees. Useless.

He bent down and put his hand on the first fallen man. Neco's power flowed down Cory's arm and into the hurt man's chest, where the shrapnel had torn in. The wound closed and the man gasped with surprise. He twisted around. It was Rogers.

"Get up," Cory commanded. "It's coming back."

"Finn! Get up here and kill this thing!" someone shouted.

"It's too high and too fast!" the Finn called back.

"Fuck," Oakshotte muttered.

"Get to the treeline! Everyone across!" There was a mad scramble. Cory felt a flash of relief as Terry hurried to him.

"Where did you go? I lost you," Cory said.

"Got separated. I..."

"It's coming around again!" Ruby cried out.

"Spread out!" Oakshotte hollered. "Get into the trees!"

The helicopter swooped upon them like a giant, angry bird. A gatling gun in the nose opened up with a roar. The ground turned to angry holes. Cory stood and fired the rifle, knowing it would do nothing to the heli and firing anyway, out of rage and spite. He had lost the will to care.

*Yes. Fight. Fight.*

Cory was struck. He spun violently. A shearing noise as Neco's lent armor cracked. The earth reached up and smashed Cory in the cheek. His leg convulsed in pain.

His knee. His knee was gone. White hot nerves blinded Cory. He heard the blast as someone fired heavy ordinance from the ground.

"Fucker!" the Finn yelled.

"Run! Run!"

"Get into the cemetery!"

Cory grit a breath out between his teeth. He directed Neco's power into his broken leg.

*Yes, yes. Heal. Then fight. Kill them.*

He felt the kneecap grow, the ligaments retie themselves. The bones reach out and pull themselves back into shape. The pain was astounding. The light grew faint for a moment. When he blinked his eyes, Oakshotte was under his arm, hauling him forward.

“Move!” the armored knight ordered to anyone who could hear.

The survivors picked their way into the cover of the trees. Some, half-carried by their comrades, bled upon the ground as the two remaining Gifted medics moved alongside them, their juice spent, working as best they could. Cory disentangled himself from Oakshotte as they entered the cemetery. Neat rows of headstones stuck up out of the earth.

“I’m fine. Really,” Cory said.

“Move your asses!” Oakshotte bellowed.

“That chopper ought to have been back on us by now,” Cory said, his voice low.

“Yeah. Must be dropping off its squadies,” Karl commented.

Cory doubled back and used Neco’s lent power to patch up the worst-off of his rescuers. The Finn’s voice called out from the edge of the trees near the lake, ahead.

“Over here!”

“Open the road!” Oakshotte shouted.

Someone stepped out from behind a Maple tree trunk. Cory blinked at the tall, lithe figure. Sharp face, shoulder length hair in an unreal shade of blonde. The eyes were very bright, and the proud man was dressed in clothing that seemed to reflect the woods, water, and sky. He held a long, hand-carved bow, and the wash of power about him was surreal. The elf stood watch over the bloodied fighters as they struggled past.

“Is that what I...” someone asked.

“Keep moving. I hear that chopper coming.”

Cory did, too. The high turbine whine rose up from the north. The Finn waved them over, where he stood with two more unearthly figures, one a dark-skinned woman with leaves for hair, and a hunched old man with an impossible amount of wrinkles, and gnarled, knobbed hands. The elderly one made a high, reedy sound, and the air split and charged with the scent of ozone. The ground beneath them vibrated and shook, and the jutting fingers of trees creaked and snapped as they were parted by the dazzling shock of silver which grew out of the earth. The passage cast strange light and shadow, and twisted Cory’s senses. They stepped onto the road. The scene around them fell away, as if pulled back by invisible hands. Ahead, a green, lush wall surrounded the silver path tightly, and only a sliver of light made it through the canopy. Bedazzled men paused after a dozen steps in.

“Is this everyone?” Karl asked.

“Hey,” Terry said to Cory, as they found each other.

“Where’s Jake?”

“Didn’t make it,” Spade said, eyes on the path. The shock slammed into Cory’s throat.

“Jake didn’t...?” he said.

“A lot of guys didn’t.”

“Is this everyone?” Karl asked again. “Is anyone still out there?”

“This is everyone,” Oakshotte replied. “Please,” he said to the dark-skinned faerie. “Close the road behind us.”



The magic passage at their backs winked out. The survivors began their march.



It took several hours to Glasdun. Terry filled Cory in on the aftermath of the Terishor raid on the Bacchus place. Miller and Karol were dead. Ellen had been knocked out by the psychic bomb, but was up and moving a short while later. She had found a place for the Russians to stay with some Monitor contacts within Bacchus, and was still picking up the pieces with Marrow and the rest of her people.

“Brozeck came to see me when I was in there,” Cory said. He purposefully looked ahead as he spoke, afraid that if he locked eyes with Terry, he would see the mess Cory was inside. “He told me that he still wanted me to join them. That what happened at the Get Lucky Diner had been the work of some other group in the Order.”

“Maybe he’ll never give up on that hope, out of some kind of deranged desire to mold you back into his sense of family,” Terry offered. “Who knows?”

“It’s hard for me to wrap my head around, you know? That he would do these things to me, to try to force me to be something that fits... I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m saying, anymore.”

“We got you out,” Terry said. “You’re not their prisoner, anymore.”

“I owe you people everything,” Cory said. Tears came into Cory’s eyes. Karl walked over to the two men. Dark branches reached out and brushed past the tall man’s head.

“You okay?” Karl asked.

“Yeah. Glad you came.”

“Well, you know,” Karl replied. “Couldn’t just leave you in there. It’d make us look bad.” He slapped Cory on the shoulder and moved up the line.

“So what now?” Cory asked Terry.

“The plan is to go through Glasdun, then head back in to the Twins and see what can be done to ruin the Order’s day,” Terry answered. “And see if we can pin down where they’ve got your dragon bottled up.”

“We’re going right back in there, huh?” Cory shuddered despite himself. “I mean, I thought the whole idea was to strike the enemy where he’s weak, not where he’s strongest.”

Terry’s face went flat and grey.

“The Order hit a Free Society Vale, and a Bacchus one at that. There are going to be repercussions. The Order is going to have to answer for that. The local Gifted might be scared, but they’re angry, too. It’ll give us cover. And time. Maybe some information will shake loose, and we can push this thing forward.”

“So what is it? What is this thing?”

“I don’t know yet,” Terry admitted. “But on a meta-level, something is happening. It’s like a weather shift. I’m not sure what it’s going to do. And I don’t think the Order knows for sure, either.”

●

John Brozeck surveyed the damage report, and quieted the tiny flutter of panic in the back of his mind. It was all going to come out. The unauthorized retrieval mission. Keeping a prisoner of interest secret from Lexington, and Callah, First Scion of Raeford, who had a pressing problem with keeping that Element under wraps. John sighed. The witch's retribution would be long and painful; the sorceress' reputation for holding a grudge was well-earned. Soon, she would learn that the dragon's patronage was being directed to Cory, and that John knew about it all along. His connection to Cory since the Coscar's boyhood wasn't going to play out too well, either.

The Dominus could easily strip John of his place here in the Province. His demotion from First Scion, a recognition given out by the Dominus himself, was certain. Warner would probably get it. He was a solid Ops man. John could live with that in the rearview mirror. Warner would serve Terishor well in John's absence.

John knew that Operation North Garden was safe. He couldn't get dereliction of duty in wartime, so a Star Chamber wouldn't have him executed. Not that Lexington couldn't have him bumped off through unauthorized means. It wasn't like Hartford, John's predecessor, had died of natural causes. He wouldn't prosecute Lexington's brain-child, so the Dominus had used his Lacrutian hit team to take Hartford out.

Warner wasn't stupid, John thought. The Crew Chief was almost certain to know about Lexington's assassination of Hartford. And Phillips, too, that PD7 First Lieutenant. He probably knew, too. Neither of them had said anything to John when he came on. If push came to shove, John wondered what the two men would do. John closed the damage report screen and rubbed his eyelids with his fingertips.

## *Shock and Awe*

The most important local figures in Bacchus sat arranged about a long marble table. The Minneapolis Institute of Art was a potent Vale of the Twin Cities, and was the heart of Bacchus' political will. The assembled members wore tight, frightened faces over their designer clothes and urban bohemian chic. Some bore the gravity of power brokers, while others resembled naughty Eurotrash rockers making a half-pass at sobriety.

Ellen sat quietly away from the table, at one of the breakout areas in the vacuous space. Fine art hung on the nearby wall, a mixed media piece that ran from Picasso to Michelangelo in broken canvas and flickering black-and-white documentary footage. She was there as an aide to Morrow, but the High Priest hadn't needed much from her. The Bacchus interest in Cory hadn't come up, and they'd already heard her witness report from the attack. Ellen bided her time and listened to her betters rake through the latest news.

Jackman from the Weavers, Paula Westinghouse, Master of the Artisan Guild and keeper of the Vale they now sat in, Shepherd Dell, under-ranked at the table but holding her own through sheer competence, Gatz, Manager of the Sanctuary Cantina, half a dozen others. Morrow was effectively the second-highest ranked person at the table, but his involvement in Gifted politics, compared to Paula's relatively narrow focus on the arts, meant that he was the real player. Morrow represented the absent Matron as well, a fact not lost on the members present.

The main impasse at the table was Bacchus' political inability to call for outside aid. The obvious solution to the Terishor raid was to call in Division 8 and the weight of the Halveyans. Division 8 would treat the attack as a crime instead of an act of war, and would seek to prosecute the agents and leaders responsible. Except, of course, that Terishor, like the rest of the Order, was essentially out of the Halveyan's reach. Still, Terishor had hesitated more than once in the past when Division 8 had agents present. If anything, Bacchus would stand to gain a sense of security if they had some Division 8 detectives standing around.

The problem with this was that Division 8 wouldn't just stand around. They'd ask questions. They'd interview Ellen. And they'd find out that Bacchus had been harboring Cory. Who'd killed Terishor agents just a few short months ago. And it had slipped Bacchus' mind to report this little fact to the responsible authorities in Division 8. Terishor's "kidnapping" of Cory would take on a whole new light, as would Karol and Miller's deaths. And then there was the Fun House and Aruithinean counterattack on Terishor to consider. Division 8 would find out. Bacchus wasn't involved directly, but Bacchus was certainly acting like Cory was an asset of theirs. And Terry, who'd been instrumental in getting Cory out, was Ellen's lover. On top of this, the Fun House, who Bacchus had effectively paid to train Cory to be a domestic insurgent, had played a frontal role in the firefight. These potential entanglements, along with how limited a role Division 8 was likely to take, had finally brought the option off the table.

Besides the Halveyans, who would help them? Who could help them? Bacchus had gotten itself into this situation by dabbling in dangerous affairs. It should have known better. Sympathy from other Free Societies Factions was going to be hard to find. On top of this, the Terishor-imposed checkpoints in the Shadow, rumors of IAS raids in Incarna, and general chafing and fear throughout the Free Societies was creating an environment of helplessness.

We always botch these kind of things, Ellen thought. Too divided, too many different directions. The Halveyans were steeped in bureaucracy, but at least they know who's in charge. Not us. We just go round and round. And we'll spend hours and hours hashing and rehashing what we should do, what everyone else is doing. By the time any sort of consensus is found, we'll have blown any chance to do anything proactive, and have bruised everyone's ego in the process. The one thing that Bacchus can't do is be decisive in an emergency.

They were going to have to write off the attack. Ellen knew it. In the end, there was nothing they were going to get out of the Order, anyway, and it wasn't like Terishor had any more reason to run Bacchus into the ground. At least not for what happened in the past. But now that Aruithinea had Cory back, who knows what they'd do in revenge? And what the Order might hold Bacchus responsible for, when all was said and done? Her stomach turned over in anxiety.

A sharply dressed courier entered the room, let in by one of Dell's Shepherd bodyguards. The fourth courier of the day. Except this one didn't wait to be addressed by the table, as the others had done. Instead, he stepped up to Ellen's chair.

"Miss Waters?" he said.

"Yes?"

"Message for you." He set his metal briefcase down on the table before her, worked the combination and thumbprint, and opened the case. He smartly handed her an envelope from inside, shut the case, and stepped back to give her privacy. It was from Terry.

*Hello love. We made it to the tower safely, and will be taking a day to recover here. Our guy is doing well, all things considered. I think I'm committed to what we're doing and becoming, but it's hard to tell what it's going to look like in the end. So is K and the rest of the guys. We shall be headed home soon. I miss you. Be safe.*

It wasn't signed. Ellen carefully folded the letter back into its envelope and put it away. She dismissed the courier, who had waited in case there was to be a written reply. Dell's people, whoever they were, had strange custom.

Ellen caught Morrow's eye at the table, then leaned back into the rich leather chair and waited with her eyes closed. They took ten minutes to arrive at a point where Morrow could call for a short break. The brightest of Bacchus stood and stretched, dispersing to speak to their assistants and seek out the coffee and light afternoon buffet.

"What is it?" Morrow asked her.

"They made it to Glasdun. They should be back within two days."

"Any word on casualties?" The question made Ellen pause. Was this out of simple concern, or did Morrow have an operational interest in the tiny army?

"No," Ellen said, and swallowed hard. "Why are... I'm sorry. But why are we doing this?" she hushed. "We've lost two people over this already. I don't like what the Order does any more than you do, but..."

"Priestess," Morrow gently addressed her, and Ellen became quiet. "I know this seems to

run counter to our ideals. Dionysus is not thought to be a god of war. And he is not. But he means freedom, and remember that the Cult of Dionysus was established only after Pentheus, the King of Thebes, who opposed his worship, was torn to pieces by Dionysus' followers. Tyrants who would enslave are our enemies. And we've collectively forgotten that fact, with our museums and galleries and opera houses. Our Matron would have us remember our true duty. We must support the movement to come."

"That's why you had me close to Cory, all this time," Ellen said. "You knew. And why you've quietly supported Aruithinea all these years, too."

The realization opened up before her. Years, perhaps decades of planning, had gone to this plan. Morrow was methodical and precise, but Ellen knew he was merely a willing servant of those above him. How much of everything he'd had Ellen do in her service to Bacchus had, in fact, been part of this? How much of her career had been a piece of the Matron's grand design?



John Brozeck rode the elevator down. The Saint Paul Capitol Complex, the Dominus' crowning Vale, was a massive structure which bound the cultural weight of the political seat to the Order's will. It was traditional for the most important government-attuned Vale within a Province to be the personal throne of the Dominus. Some broke with this tradition at various points within the Order's empire, but the Lacrutians, where they held the position, favored the custom.

The bulk of the Vale was underground, six levels of offices, ceremonial space, library, communications, and living quarters. The architecture was a mishmash of old and new, having married ornate, century-worn marble, granite, and sandstone with the machine necessities of metal, industrial concrete, and molded surfaces. The deeper John went, he knew, the more modern and less human his surroundings. At level -6 the elevator stopped and the doors opened.

The reception area was all angles and hard edges, the light unforgiving, yet creating vast areas of darkness. Flat screen monitors played on the walls. The ultra-thin woman behind the desk looked more like a mannequin than a human being, a beautiful sculpture made of skin and bone. She was armed, John knew. An assassin. One of the Dominus' personal bodyguards, Lacrutian bred-and-raised. She gestured for him to pass with a jerk of her head, and kept her hands below the desk. On a piece of cold, hard, killing technology, John surmised. He crossed the room and went through the heavy wooden doors.

Lexington's office was broad and steeped in shadow. Empty furniture concealed itself in the corners of the room. The Dominus did not rise when John entered. Lexington was soft but not overweight, with silver hair and a face deeply etched with lines from scowls and worry. It was a face that could not imagine itself smiling. The Dominus did not look up. He mashed his lips into a distasteful grimace as he looked at the screens before him.

"Sit."

Lexington finished his work and brought his full attention to Brozeck. The Dominus' displeasure was palpable. John resisted the urge explain or defend himself. With a person like Lexington, such displays would be seen as weakness, and therefore, admissions of wrongdoing. John couldn't afford to be seen as weak or wrong.

"That's quite a list of damage," Lexington commented, as if he were remarking about the weather. "I guess they wanted him back, huh?"

John stayed silent. Lexington leaned forward and narrowed his eyes.

"I'm going to tell you a little secret," Lexington sneered. "I killed Hartford. He didn't have the stones to do the job, so I brought him in here and killed him in the chair you're sitting in now. He didn't have the spine that I needed him to have. So I shot him through the head."

A chill ran through John's skin.

"And here you are," Lexington continued. "You've got the stones. You've got the spine. But no loyalty. John..." Lexington smiled with a sinister flourish and shook his head. "Loyalty. You went behind my back on this Williams thing. And you never told me why. Sure, I should have realized your attachment to the kid before I had the old cloak-and-dagger sent in to rub him out. But you knew about Raeford's difficulty with containing the Element, and what it means to us - to me - to keep that bitch of a thing bottled up. And you didn't say a word. You didn't say a word about the connection between it and Cory. Not a word that he's Rhine's son. Not a word that you had designs on him from the get-go.

"And then, when he came back into the Province, you went behind my back!" Lexington exploded. He shot to his feet and dug his hands into the lip of the desk, as if he might fly into the air without holding himself firm to the floor. "Behind my back! Mine, you piece of washed up shit! Forget your precious Terishor protocol! You went against your Dominus! You went against me!" He paused and fumed silently into John's face.

"You really think he can be controlled?" Lexington asked.

"Don't you?" John shot back, and immediately regretted it.

"No. And neither should you!" Lexington spat. "He needs to die, not be converted. You can't channel someone like that, any more than we could sweet-talk that fucking dragon into behaving for us. It's not what he's made of, John. What you did was foolish and dangerous."

"So demote me," John said angrily. The Dominus just might kill him for that, John realized in a flash. There was probably a handgun, there in the right, top-most drawer. "Write me up," John continued, blocking out the thought. "Have me prosecuted, take me all the way up to Star Chamber. But don't lash me around like I'm fresh from Academy."

Lexington laughed. He sat down and steepled his hands in front of him.

"I have a better idea," he said. "We'll keep you around to finish North Garden. Bring the operation to fruition. Do what Hartford couldn't bring his newly found conscience to do. And you will ignore the Williams boy, and leave him to those who have clearer judgement. When all is finished for you here, you will be transferred somewhere else, so I don't have to be disgusted by seeing your name on my roster anymore."

"Since you've already proven yourself as someone who can't be trusted," Lexington continued, "I have secured your compliance the best way I know how. As of eight o'clock this morning, Jack Quick has been transferred to my personal staff." A flutter of panic went through John's guts.

"Now, before you get all blustery and make a pile of threats you can't back up, know this," the Dominus said. "I had Callah take the time to implant a memory bomb on Jack's Astral imprint. It can be detonated from anywhere on the world. I'm not going to kill your boy if you try to backstab me. I'm going to have him forget who you are, and then have him kill you."

John blinked as the room spun away. It was like he was sinking, deeper into the earth, below the floor, far below the surface of the world, into a vast chasm where his screams would echo long into his fall, into immense darkness.

“Do we have an understanding?” Lexington asked. “One misstep, one hint of a report coming from your office to Terishor Command about my little novel interpretation of Protocol, and your little boy decides that he’s an orphan, and mean old Mr. Drake is the traitor. Deal with that when you go to bed tonight. Get real close to it. Let it creep into your skin. I own you, Brozeck, and I own your boy, too.”

“Now get out of my sight.”



The trip back to the Shadow of the Twins went by in a blur of motion. The faeries whom had walked the silver Vispiri with them as their escorts had parted ways nearing Glasdun, and were a faint memory after the day of recuperation among the Aruithineans. Little was said of the Fair Folk, and Cory didn’t feel like picking at the thread. His House had some kind of uneasy alliance with the faeries, and he was content with knowing that. He let the memory of the elves’ angelic yet earthy image fade in his mind. The two dozen surviving Fun House guys tightened ranks and grew quiet through the march. Cory wondered what they thought of him, now. If the price they had paid was worth it.

Lord Bedle sent them out with orders to unite forces with Lady Paradise and Sir Matheson, who had a hidden base camp in the works at a farm and apple orchard in Basswood Grove, to the southeast of Saint Paul. The local landmark harbored a modest Vale and Gifted traveling through the area were rare. It was far enough away from the Twin Cities to grant some protection from divination and random patrols, but close enough that they could mount a fast strike from the location, if the situation warranted it.

The Vispiri ended and became a dirt path deep in a forest. They had arrived in the Shadow, near the orchard. The woods gave way to the refined landscape of the tended apple trees. Soon, the weary travelers crested a slight hill and the farm house and barns came into view. They were dirty men and women, their faces layered in grit and dust, their clothes torn by branches, their tired feet heavy with mud.

Sir Matheson’s sentries closed ranks with the newcomers, and old friends among Aruithinea shook hands or embraced. Solemnly, the names of the lost were told. Sir Oakshotte led Cory, Terry, and Karl to the farmhouse. They went around the back of the building. Two barns of red and white planks shouldered taller than the house. Next to the nearer structure, nestled between a pickup truck and a dirty Mazda RX-7 was Cory’s Ghost. He stopped and stared at the motorcycle.

“It’s not wrecked...” Cory said.

“Hell no,” Big Karl replied. “Wasn’t gonna let it just sit over there to get ripped off.”

“That means a lot to me,” said Cory.

“You’re welcome,” Terry answered.

The back of the farm house was covered thick with vines, and the Vale’s power sang beneath a solitary apple tree, and a blurry green waterfall at its base marked the portal across to Incarna. Oakshotte causally plucked a ripe apple as they passed beneath the tree and went in the farmhouse’s back door. They came into the simple dining room where Lady Paradise and Sir Matheson stood at the long dining room table, looking over laptops, open books, and maps. Therney leaned into the far corner of the room and quietly watched with his dark eyes.

“I’ve brought him back, like I promised,” Sir Oakshotte said.

“Thank you, sir,” Lady Paradise replied. “You’ve done your Order and your House proud.” She turned to Cory. “It’s good to see you in once piece.”

“Thank you,” Cory said.

Sir Oakshotte reported the official casualties. Eleven soldiers were killed outright or considered missing in action, seven of them Karl’s men, and four of them Aruithinean. They had lost a quarter of the force they had went in with.

“We’re sorry for your loss,” Sloan said to Karl. She stepped up to him and took his big hand in both of hers. “We couldn’t have done it without you or your men’s sacrifice. Your service to our House will never be forgotten.”

“Yeah. Well. Glad we got him out. He’s our guy, too,” Karl said.

“They - and you - could find a place with us,” Sloan said. “Your men are very brave, very capable.”

“Uh, no,” Karl said, and scratched the back of his head. “Sorry. Not much for swearing oaths. Nothing personal, you understand.”

“You’ll be our blood allies, then,” Sloan persisted. “You and your men wouldn’t have to enter into our...”

“We’re not really here to help you,” Karl said.

“Oh?” Sir Matheson said in surprise. Cory saw Therney subtly shift to the balls of his feet on the other side of the room.

“We’re here for him,” Karl pointed at Cory’s chest. “He needed help. We came. We’ll stick around and see what happens. I know you folks want to go in and dig up his Element friend. Maybe you wouldn’t mind us around for that. But nothing else, okay? I don’t know what you people are all about, and I really don’t want to. And if that means you’re going to get all huffy on us and want us to move on, fuck, that’s fine. We’ve got friends in this town.”

“But wait...” Sloan said.

“No, listen,” Karl bore on. “It’s like this. You people have this big tradition of hierarchy. Kings and queens and all that. And we’re the kind of people who used to try to kill your kind with wagonloads of gunpowder. No monarchs. Power to the people. Understand? None of this noblesse oblige. It’s what we’d call a root difference.” A long silence took hold of the room. Terry was the one to break it.

“Now that Cory is considered a fully initiated member of your House, it holds that you’ll be giving him his Lordship soon, right?” Terry asked.

“Yes, of course,” Sloan agreed quickly. She looked at Cory. “As soon as you want to claim your namesake.”

“Phoenix Lord,” Terry said, as if he were trying the title out. “Equivalent to an Earl, if I remember right. Same rank as Lord Bedle, at least in terms of privilege. So Cory would have the right to claim a house guard, then?”

Sir Matheson squeezed his eyes shut, as if in sudden pain.

“Yes,” Sloan said.

“So all he’d have to do is name Karl’s men his bodyguard, and Karl their head,” Terry explained.

“Yes. Yes. Yes. Fine,” Sir Matheson said. “It’s better than having twenty-five unsworn, armed men hanging about on the lawn.”



“So how does this work?” Cory asked.

“It’s pretty simple, actually,” Sloan answered. “You proclaim yourself the rightful heir to Lord Rhine’s holdings, rank, and title, and name yourself the next Phoenix Lord. Our offer from the beginning still stands true. We here in the room will be the witnesses to your declaration. And that’s that.”

Cory pulled Terry and Karl aside.

“There’s really no reason for me not to do this, is there?” Cory asked them.

“No,” Terry shook his head.

“You already swore to them. You might as well get something out of it,” Karl said.

“And you guys will head up my house guard?” Cory asked. “The two of you?”

“I will,” Terry said steadily. Karl sighed.

“I’m not promising to love, honor, and obey,” Karl said. “But I’ll help you in this. And I think the guys will be a hell of a lot happier knowing that they’re here to fight on your side, instead of under the orders of these poofs.”

Cory took in a deep breath and let it out.

“Okay, then,” he said, and approached the table. “Lady Paradise. Sir Matheson. My name is Cory Williams, and I am Chris Rhine’s rightful heir. I now claim my family title. As the Phoenix Lord.”

“And I, Lady Paradise,” Sloan answered, “hear and support your claim. I will make it known.”

“I name the Fun House members as my bodyguard,” Cory said. “Big Karl and Terry Edmonton are in charge of them.”

“I’ll go and tell the guys,” Big Karl said. “Excuse me.” He walked out of the room.



“Neco is being held by some kind of powerful artifact,” Terry began.

They had showered and changed clothes, and the Finn had gone and brought Ellen safely to them. In the heart of the Vale, under the hushed cover of the tree, they plotted their next move, seated around the dining room table which had been brought outside.

“I believe it’s within the Twin Cities proper,” Terry said, “if only so that the local head of Raeford can keep an eye on things. Word from our enemy’s own mouth is that they’re having a hard time keeping Neco properly contained. As of Cory’s breakout, Neco was able to empower him. So for now, we’ll assume that Neco can project some amount of its essence to us.

“For the moment, I’m advising that we not test this further. The Order will have discovered how we were able to get out of town on the Vispiri. Let’s allow them to think we’re still out of the area. Are we agreed so far?” Terry asked them.

No one had any arguments.

“All right,” he went on. “I’m trained in Hermetic magic. The rest of you are old world pagan, leaning Wiccan. With the exception of the Finn, who mentioned to me some Pure Chaos training from somewhere along the way. So I’ll say it this way... Raeford is mostly made up of Hermetics. I think I’m in the best position of anyone here to figure out where the artifact is going

to be holed up. Everyone still with me?”

Cory listened to the sure way that Terry addressed the powerful beings before him. I guess I never realized just how steeped Terry really is in all of this, Cory thought. It started out that he was just my friend, then he was my friend that knew a lot more about something that I was clueless about. Now it turns out that he’s been this kind of magic guru all along, too.

“If I were Raeford,” Terry explained, “first and foremost, I’d have this artifact tucked away in a Vale where my Hermetic paradigm was strongest. That way, I could build a thick-walled Citadel around it to keep it from discovery. I mean, we’re talking about having a caged Element, here. This isn’t something I’d want well known even among my own Sect, and is definitely something I’d want to keep from my enemies. It would have to be nearby, so I could watch it closely for any unexpected developments, like it’s been proving that it wants to do. I’d want to study it, to try to figure out where all this energy is being sent to. And no matter what, I’d want the Citadel as protected from scrying and outside divination as I could make it.

“So. There’s only two reasons I can think of as to why I’d want to keep an Element of Discord trapped for twenty years. One is to simply keep it from juicing up troublemakers like Rhine, or Cory here. Or running around out there in the world, I suppose, making mischief. But the other reason is this... a caged Element of Discord could make an awesome symbol of restraint and conformity. I could magnify the power of this hidden symbol and project it outward, and keep the entire area susceptible to authoritarian control. Keeping Neco from helping House Aruithinea solves a problem. Using Neco as a way to enhance the Order’s domination of the area is a serious boon. A real occult prize.”

Terry paused to let the words sink in. The Finn drew himself into deep concentration, while Ellen and Sloan, occultists in their own, different paths, worked out what it might mean within the Hermetic philosophy. Cory thought he was in the same boat as Karl and Sir Matheson. Waiting for it to make sense.

“If they are doing this, then we can discover where they are keeping the artifact,” Terry finished. “We can align ourselves to the mystical effect they must be putting out to accomplish this meta-ritual feat, and follow the power wave back to the source. And when we find that, we’ll find Neco.”

“Right!” the Finn exclaimed. “Right right right. I’ll uh... I’ll... come up with a test...”

“Fuck. That actually made sense,” Karl muttered.

“Bacchus has free agents we can put to this,” Ellen added. “House Raeford won’t be looking for anything from us like that, and we have some of the strongest Vales in the city at our disposal, all outside of the Order’s direction of concern.”

“That’s very insightful,” Lady Paradise said. “Tell us what you need.”



John Brozeck hadn’t slept.

The vision replayed continuously in his head when he tried, in vain, to rest. Lexington’s soft, smug face. “I own you.” Saying it over and over. “Your boy, too.”

John poured over the reports on the Red Hand once more, in the harshly lit, smoothly decorated office. The Operation. His Operation. The Pro-Gate facility had completed its test shakedown. IAS and FEMA were in place, and the urban operations training for the mundane National Guard

at Camp Ripley was at the largest scale it could manage without drawing unwanted attention.

The plan had been to bring the Red Hand into position to threaten the stability of the local government. Some car bombings here, some sniper shots there. It didn't take much on-the-ground action to whip the public into a frenzy, if you had the major news networks already monkey-wrenched into place. The plan had been to send up the fireworks at the end of September, some six weeks away.

It was part of Lexington's master plan to bring the Province into line with the Walled Cities of the east. Order protocol. Tighten the noose, one city at a time. Shock and awe.

It was why the Dominus couldn't afford to phase John out. There was no time to bring someone even as sharp as Warner into play. Not if the Operation was to work smoothly. Not if Lexington needed someone as versed at wet work as John was.

He realized he was laughing.

I'm too good a mass murderer to demote, he thought numbly. I'm too good to bump off and cremate in one of the ritual furnaces. I'm too much of a bastard to make due without.

But once this is all done...

I'm dead.

Jack, they might keep around. He's nothing like me, his old man, but Jack might be useful, in his own plodding way. But me? I'll be ashes by first snowfall.

So why... the fuck... should I play nicely?

John's sweaty hands shook as he reached for the phone on the desk.

Ten minutes later, both First Lieutenant Phillips and Crew Chief Warner were on their way to the Terishor-held Vale at Alliant Techsystems headquarters in Edina, for a closed, White Priority meeting.



Terry smoothly drew the chalk circle upon the worn, wood floor. He didn't know what kind of strings Ellen had pulled to get him into the Bacchus Vale behind the stage in First Avenue, but he was grateful. The live music venue's power beneath the floorboards was unmistakable. He reproduced the glyphs and icons from memory. Then he placed an outer circle beyond these, enclosing the symbols in an outer ring.

He and Ellen had only had a bare handful of hours together since his return. She was tense, distant, and had pulled away from his advances the previous night. He didn't know what her Faction was putting her through, for their part in all of this. It couldn't be easy. The strike on the Terishor stronghold below the country club had sent the Order into a fortress-like mindset, and the patrols and roadblocks had only increased in the Shadow. It was as much a military buildup as Terry had ever seen. The inevitable flare-ups and deadly incidents between the Free Society Gifted and the Order's heavily armed soldiers were taking their toll on the political fabric of the city.

And here I am, doing my best to make it all much, much worse, Terry thought. We're trying to unleash a god of unrest upon this city. I really don't know what it's going to mean or what's going to happen. Terry knew that the path he was on went into unstable, dark territory, but the specifics were hidden from him.

Over in Saint Paul, the Finn was drawing his own version of a concentration circle at the

Shamrock Pub, Terry thought. The last point of the triangle was to be performed by Lady Paradise herself, under heavy guard at a natural Vale within the Black Dog Lake Conservatory.

The ritual was a complicated and risky one. It required all three participants to equally hold up their side of the effect. Failure at any of the three points would cause all of them to suffer the outcome of a botched working, and all three of them were working from different magical schools. When the Finn had first proposed the feat, Terry had balked. He'd been willing to perform several divinations at various locations, measuring and metering the readings he might find in closing in on the theoretical Raeford effect, and then charting these to a map.

"Not enough time," the Finn had responded. "That might take you a week or even longer! I've got an idea as to how we could do this in one day."

Divination triangles weren't unheard of, in and of themselves. But never from three schools of thought that were so at odds with one another. Terry sighed. They were winging it. No one in history had tried what the three of them were about to attempt, and Terry knew he had the hardest setup of the three. The Finn's style of magic was fairly well matched with the strength of paradigm he would receive from the pub. And Lady Paradise's druidic casting was going to enjoy a strong push from the lush, natural setting of Black Dog.

And here I am, he thought. Hermetic magician, cut from the same Esoteric cloth as Yeats, Crowley, Parsons, and Dee. Performing an Advanced Working of serious mystical import. In a backstage Vale of a nightclub. That used to be a bus station.

Terry shook the thoughts from his mind. What's wrong with me? I'm better than this. Such novice distractions. He examined the magic lines he had drawn, and let their handy craftwork put his mind into neutral. Partially reassured, he assumed a comfortable sitting position and brought his mind into sharp focus with an Enocian meditation procedure.

He checked the time. Nearly 1:00 pm. Time to begin.

Terry stripped off his clothes and anointed himself with perfumed oil, and lit the candles placed at the cardinal points about the outer circle. Then the candles at the four compass point circles, and then the central, divining point. He seated himself and tapped into his wellspring of power and began to lay the energized, magic foundation for the cone of power in his mind.

He visualized each stone being made by his glowing hands, the sides blazoned with the ancient symbols set out by Hermes himself. The mortar that held the bricks together was formed from the secret words that Terry brought to the edge of his silent lips. Upward the energy vortex climbed, narrowing as it progressed. The vessel neared completion, and Terry set out to fill it with the exact mixture of focus and will. Smoothly he poured, drawing deep from within, calm, calculated, precise in measure and desire.

Outside of Terry's sense of self, sweat pushed out of his skin and mingled with the scent of incense, and the damp, old odors of cigarettes and faint mold. An hour passed.

Brought to fulfillment, the tower of energy stood menacingly over him. Terry calmed his breathing. This was where the three rituals were to be joined, as if three walls were leaned into one another to suddenly form a three-sided pyramid. The moment of truth.

Terry sent the hidden word to the apex of the energy coil, and it went ablaze at its peak. Terry's eyes filled with the seething psychic energies of the city, as if a curtain had suddenly been pulled back and he faced a swirl of flashbulbs and spotlights. Dazzled, he reached above the mystical noise and sought out the other two parts of the whole, the energy towers from the Finn and Paradise...

He found the Wiccan energy first. A strange, delicate pattern, like swirling water or a plasmic form of a flower, turning in the sun. It was a spell crafted from a song, and it ducked and wove as somewhere to Terry's south, a sweet voice called out the promises of wondrous balance with the universe, and an energetically active, personified cosmos. Terry gently touched the energy wave and it reacted in happy surprise, and at once he felt the rush and strength of the seemingly fragile calling. The two currents of power reinforced and set into one another.

The Finn's ritual effect was nowhere to be found. Terry cast his mystical senses to the east and scanned for a field reaching out to join him. Nothing.

They couldn't wait forever. Already, Terry felt the underpinnings of his and Sloan's energy signals start to groan and fray. He threw himself against the unraveling and shored up the foundation of the ritual as best he could. If the Finn took too much longer to join them, Terry would have to tap into his deep reserves and settle in for desperate magical acrobatics ahead. Dimly, he wondered if he could manage to disentangle himself from Sloan's calling and redirect his energy in time to accomplish some other effect, and escape the universe's wrath for their collective failure. No, he thought. Too risky. But what else? What if they...

The third force joined them. It was electric, like lightning caged by too widely spaced of bars, that might leap out at any moment and leave the Finn's control. It was a flippant, dangerous energy, yet awesomely powerful if brought to bear with lucky, unwieldy accuracy. Terry let out a tense breath. At last. They were ready to begin.

The three mages were dumb and mute to one another. They had no telepathic link, and their "languages" were too divergent as a result of their differing schools. They had recognized this and settled, in the planning stages, on a simplistic approach. They would reach the convergence of energies and then each of them would open their minds, in their own ways, to the powerful undercurrent of Raeford's reversal-reflection of the Discord Element's energies. Once any of they three found the thread, they would blindly pull the other two toward the depression in the mystic landscape. Through the application of this measured game of psychic tug-of-war, they would triangulate the signal.

Terry open his eyes and brought his hands to the deck of handmade Tarot cards before him, and began to shuffle.



Crew Chief Richard Warner listened to the reports come over his earbud radio jack, and did his best to project the impression that he was just another Minneapolis businessman out for a late-lunch stroll. His face felt thick and heavy, as it always did when he wore the Flesh Talisman disguise. The technological-occult piece worked better than the analysts said it would when it was first introduced ten years ago, and was now standard equipment for high profile covert ops. Like this one was.

Warner flushed with pride as he reflected on his role in what was about to happen. This was a historic moment. It was a September 11th, a Pearl Harbor, a Kennedy Assassination. And Warner was about to get a tour on the Grassy Knoll. He imagined the pages of his secret legacy, and how they would work to frame this day in his biography. The day he helped reshape the face of the world.

It was a clear, beautiful day. It was a fine August day. A glorious day. He put on a pair of dark sunglasses and flipped the overlay screens to life. The ThirdEye system projected the

known locations of supernatural beings, Vales, concentration spikes of ritual magic activity, and probability readouts of theoretical Dreamtimes. Warner flicked his attention to the two strike zones and noted the handfuls of elevated readings within Target One. Nothing usual, all things considered, Warner thought. It's a big building. There's bound to be a few spikes there.

ThirdEye wasn't perfect, though. Warner liked high-end occult technology as much as the next spook, but it paid to understand the weaknesses of any system. ThirdEye only covered the downtown areas directly locked into the sensor grid, and it was a dumb, high threshold system. It was possible to sneak past ThirdEye if you knew what you were doing. Technology on the whole was fine, but Warner liked men on the ground. He sent a spotter team closer to Target One, and directed it to monitor the pings on his monitor. No reason to let their guard down, to vary from protocol. He didn't want anything to go amiss today.

The in-view clock alarm send a small chime to his earbud. Twenty minutes to match time. Richard sent the Ready Station alert to his oversight team. He toggled to the channel for his chase teams.

"This is Task Master. Dogs One and Two, report," Warner said.

"This is Dog One," came a reply. "Tall Man has left the rally point and is en-route. ETA to site is ten minutes."

"This is Dog Two. Moneybags is still at the rally point, but is almost ready to go."

"Get a little proactive, Dog Two," Warner ordered. "I want that truck on the move in sixty seconds."

"Affirmative, Task Master."

Hammond should have managed his men better than that, Warner frowned. Moneybags could be accomplished by one man, if necessary. They should have started moving without the second and third, if that's what it took to stick to the time table. Warner made a mental note to flag Hammond's performance for the mission report.

"Task Master, this is Dog Two," the voice aid. "Subject is resisting the suggestion to leave without his two backups. How should we proceed, over?" A flat slab of fury landed on Warner's face.

"You get him to go, you hear me? You send your psy guy on up to him and make him want to leave! Or do I have to come over there and do your head work for you?"

"Yes sir, we'll take care of it." Dog Two said.

Warner resisted the urge to jump back on the com and tear Dog Two a new one. Better that they get the job done first. He could write them up, break them down, ruin their careers, shit down their throats... after the mission was done.

Fucking clueless bastards.

He brought up Tall Man's moving position on his map and felt his heart slow at the calm, easy sweep of the tracker. At least one of the payloads was going to be in place on time. He let out a calming breath. If the Dominus hadn't reassigned Quick out from under Warner at such short notice, he wouldn't be in the mess he was now, screwing around with an inadequate team in the field.

But Lexington would get his.

"Dog Two, Moneybags is in motion. ETA twelve minutes."

"It's about time, Dog Two," Warner snapped. "Keep me updated if anything else falls

outside of your mission profile.”

“Yes sir.”

Warner looked through the ThirdEye scanning profiles. The Dreamtime profiler was starting to pick up the traces of upcoming possibility, and was already showing double the standard reading, and it had a very wide horizon. Good, Warner thought. It meant something big was becoming more and more likely to happen. Something like North Garden. Something that they’d talk about on the other side of the world. An event for the history books. Something they’d all remember for a long, long time.

He paused. Strange reading near Target One. Warner brought up the spotter team and checked in with their live reports. No, it wasn’t from the supernaturals within the target itself. The spy dialed in the anomaly and locked it in.

It was coming from the Bacchus Vale kitty-corner from the Target Center. First Avenue. A ritual magic profile, and not a little one, either. And just three blocks from Target One.

“Fuck!” Warner cursed. He brought up another spotter team within the strike zone and re-prioritized them, and named them Baker Team. He brought the team up to a high com priority.

“Uh, Baker Team reporting,” announced a keen voice. Warner took in a deep breath. It was Townsend. Thank fucking god.

“Baker, get over to Sector 54 on the double,” Warner ordered. “We’ve got suspicious ritual activity. The ThirdEye profile is in the cache. Get into position and get me a proper reading on it.”

“Right away, Task Master,” Baker Team replied.



Terry placed the last card down in front of him, and felt the flash of power as the effect unlocked and soared above. He rode the sensation upward and pushed with his will against the sensation of mud, the resistance of static reality, and broke through.

He soared above the landscape of the city. It was like Astral Projection, but he knew that his psychic body was back with his physical one. No, the shapes below him weren’t the thoughtforms of the Astral Plane, but were instead the swirling impressions of mystical workings. The trails and imprints of past rituals of every shape and color unfolded before him.

Some were cold shells of sharp steel, the wards and protections of various Citadels. He saw tangles of mental control, and shapes of buildings that were invisible to mundane eyes. He saw a network of grids and sweeps, and the dark efficiency of some kind of energy sensor array, long and wide for a mile in each direction. He saw spirit wards and callings, and thought he must be looking down on the Basilica, and its choir of invocations to various saints. Terry proceeded further into the air and the landscape of the city winked up at him like a room full of jewels.

There. Something cold, like iron, something commanding in whispers and hushed tones, something deep and wide, and both hard to perceive and impossible to ignore. But it was distant, a slippery thread, and Terry was unsure. He stalked the sensation, crawled over the impression of self-hypnosis programs, effects of tiny medical miracles, of empowerment calls and energy transfers.

There. Again, the sensation. A cage, made into a massive shadow, a reflection that pulled anyone who looked at it inside, like a magic mirror. Terry pulled the Finn’s and Sloan’s edges

of the spell toward him. There was a rushing sound in his ears, and he lost his contact with the shape of the cage.

Then. Sloan's song, a chanting verse, strong yet delicate hands, pulling him closer. The sense of the cage renewed, stronger this time, before it again receded again.

The ritual was working. They were closing in.



The two men in unremarkable suits, with identical, military-short haircuts, pulled the Lincoln into the parking lot behind the closed nightclub called First Avenue. They parked the car right up against the side of the building and felt the waves of power roll off of the structure toward them.

Townsend pulled the scanner case from the backseat and twisted around to face forward. He snapped open the case and brought the hardware online. Veng, in the driver's seat next to him, scanned the parking lot for activity and wished for a cigarette. Townsend dialed the scanner in to the profile and opened the receiver. The screen leapt alive with a powerful readout.

"Whoah," Townsend let out. Veng glanced down at the readout.

"Holy shit," Veng remarked.

"Don't see that every day."

"You think it's anything we'll have to deal with?" Veng nervously asked.

"Don't know," Townsend answered. He subvocalized the com channel on. "Task Master, this is Baker. Sending you the reading now."

Warner acknowledged, and Townsend waited as his boss looked at the ritual profile now flying at his eyes. It was just the two of them, Townsend thought. Him and Veng. If the Chief sent them in to bust up the ritual, it was going to be messy. Bacchus wasn't going to play around... not after what Terishor did to them. Townsend calculated the firepower they had on them, and in the car's trunk, and hoped it would be enough.



"Tall Man has arrived at Target One," the report came in. Warner nodded and sent a non-vocal "received" message. Ten minutes to match time. He flicked the map over to Dog Two, and saw them four minutes out. Behind schedule. It was going to be close.

Warner brought his attention back over to Baker's signal. Warner didn't want to send the men in to the Bacchus holding. It would be a risky, last-second forced entry. And they'd have to leave no survivors, which was nearly impossible to guarantee, with no one watching the Vale's portal into the Shadow. If anyone got away, they'd be able to report who hit them. And anyone with a brain in their skull would look at the timing of the invasion and the massive scene that occurred near simultaneously down the street, and the Order's role in the attack would be confirmed.

Hell, they'll know it was us, anyway, Warner mused. But it's the principle of the thing. You don't show your cards like that.

Warner wasn't an occultist. He didn't dabble, the way Drake seemed to. Rituals were left to the head cases of Raeford, and the specialists in Terishor's Department of Gathering. But it didn't



take an expert to unravel the truth about the ritual signal that Baker was showing him.

Bacchus was looking for something. The ritual was active, and it was something pretty big. But it wasn't going to stop what he and his men were about to do. It wasn't a threat, and that was that.

"Baker, pull back to your original mission profile," Warner said. "Good work." In the car, Townsend let out a relieved sound.

"Okay, let's get out of here," he said. Townsend looked southeast, toward the IDS Tower. "Clock's ticking."



The Finn's unstable force pulled Terry once more, and the sensation of the cage loomed powerfully in his vision. They were close, very close now. He could make out the details of the Raeford effect, a grand presence designed to last years, perhaps decades, and not the mere hours or days that most rituals accomplished. The majesty of the pattern before him filled Terry with humility.

With Raeford so powerful, Terry thought, how would they ever manage to break down their door and shatter this spell?

Concentration, he thought. Concentration. Stay with it. We're almost there. He pulled at the other two sides of the triangle, and felt their attention and force-of-being draw at him steadily. He felt strong and reassured. They all saw it now, at once, and drew ever closer.

It was going to work.



Three minutes to go. Moneybags had finally arrived. Warner pulled his spotter team away from Target One. If those Gifted in the building were going to cause a problem, they would have done so by now. He activated his targets' overwatch sniper teams in case anyone came in at his teams hot and bothered.

Warner patched into the surveillance cameras that held both trucks in their respective frames. The parked van had entered the IDS Tower's underground parking ramp. The heavy truck was parked in the street in front of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. Warner imagined the weight of history on his shoulders, the heaviness of all those pages of time, the mountain of news footage about to bloom into existence.

All because of him.

"Full alert," Warner said. "Mission locked. Go in one-fifty seconds."



It was close to him, Terry realized. Very close. The structure loomed in his vision, and the presence of Sloan and the Finn were near enough to touch. It was just across the river. The university.

I know these grounds, he thought.

The triangulation was nearly complete. They pulled each other tighter and tighter. Hands on each others' shoulders, now. Right there. It was right there...



Twenty seconds.

“Go to Moneybags,” Warner ordered. It was difficult to hold his voice calm.

“Go to Moneybags,” a voice responded. Warner watched as the truck’s exhaust coughed. The engine started and revved.

“Ignition patch is live,” Warner announced. He saw the detonation control spring to life in his eyes.

Ten. The van sat quietly below the IDS tower, beneath the glistening Crystal Court.

Nine. It was nine seconds to 1:15 pm. The truck lurched over the curb in the frame.

Eight. Theodore Anderson, twenty years old, looked up from his desk at the strange sight outside his office window. It was a big truck, like a shipping truck. It was coming at the building.

Seven. A customer got his turtle mocha in the Crystal Court Starbucks. A pretty secretary considered a new cell phone inside the T-Mobile shop. A bored Kinkos counter jockey looked at the clock, and realized he would be off the clock in forty-five minutes.

Six. Theodore stood as he watched the truck pile through the bushes and tear tracks into the manicured lawn. An alarmed noise rose in his throat.

Five. Sunlight sparkled on the glass facing of the IDS building.

Four. Somewhere, a car alarm sounded.

Three. In Warner’s eyes, the Dreamtime probability matrix shot for the roof.

Two. Theodore’s mouth fell open. The truck. It was going to hit...

One.

“Match,” Warner said.



It was Burton Hall. The old library building. The Greek pillars, the stone and iron staircase inside, tons of marble weighing down...

Something tore into Terry’s mind. An angry, bellowing force, a storm given voice and suddenly conjured all about him. He reeled in the onslaught. The ritual effect shook and leaned over, wanting to fall.

No!

Terry felt the panic push out from the other two mages as Terry’s side of the spell threatened to give way. He rushed to fill the hole with power, to drive the tower of energy back upright.

Falling. Everything falling, unraveling.

End the ritual. End it, the thought flashed. Cap the effect now! Don’t prolong it, finish it!

Terry forced his will up and over the maelstrom of noise that threatened to engulf him. Up and over, like a furied hand reaching for the apex of a mountain top. To finish the ritual and

release the power, before it tore them all to pieces. The Finn saw Terry's effort first, and leapt up to follow. Sloan was right behind him.

Burton Hall. The ritual locked into place with a thunderous crescendo. In the echo of their victory Terry let out a terrified sound and fell to the floor, his mind reeling for the darkness.

*Kingdom of Ashes*

Cory sat at the table in the Orchard Vale and rested his chin on his hands. Karl sat beside him, the big man's face clenched in concentration, his eyes alight with white, silent anger. The Finn was cut off, but was okay for the moment. Lady Paradise was outside of the Order's wall of patrols, and was on her way back to them. There was no word from Terry. Or Ellen.

It was twenty minutes since Minneapolis exploded. The front half of a Fed building was gone, and the IDS tower had collapsed across Eighth Street, all fifty-five stories reduced to rubble. Domestic terror attack, the news feeds reported. The Red Hand had claimed responsibility. The casualties could break four thousand. Cory balled his fists.

The Order went to a wartime footing as soon as the twin blasts occurred. The roadblocks and checkpoints around the 694-494 loop went hot, and no one was being allowed in or out. Already, reports of shots being fired had reached the Aruithinea's ears. They'd sent a runner with the news to Glasdun, but he wouldn't arrive for hours. For the time being, the Aruithineans in the Twin Cities were on their own.

"It's a major operation," Karl said at last. "It's not about you. This is something that was in the works for a long time."

"Who did it?"

"Come on, Blue," Karl said gently. "Who could do it?"

"But why? Those were the Order's own buildings. Their Vales. Theirs. Why the fuck would they do it?"

"The last time something this big happened, the Order got the mundanes behind the idea of foreign wars. At a guess," Karl said, "this one is to usher in the domestic war, the full-on police state. I mean, if you're mundane, you hear that American-hating assholes are running around your country, are willing to bomb your cities like this... you'll put up with soldiers on every corner. To keep you safe."

Karl had Ruby and a handful of techies set up an information office, a shoestring version of what they had in the Fun House. They skimmed the airwaves and started collecting net data. Lady Paradise arrived within the hour, fresh from the divination ritual. Sir Matheson's face was grim. Terishor had raided the Sanctuary Cantina, he reported. They came in through the Maya side. Heavily armed troops were crawling all over the Twin Cities Shadow. Sloan approached the apple tree and sat at Cory's table.

"We know where it is," she said. "The Millennial Orb. We got the answer just before Terry's side of the working fell apart. A place on the university campus. Burton Hall." She pulled a dog-eared map out of a leather satchel and spread it out on the table. "Any news on the Finn?"

"No," Karl replied. "He checked in just after, and sounded like he was confident he could get out. That was about 1:30."

"I've got a feeling we're going to need him to get into this place," Sloan said.

"You still want to go in?" Cory asked. "With all of that happening out there?"

"We have to," she answered simply. "Unless my uncle tells me otherwise."

“But the lockdown,” Cory said. “The state governor is expected to declare martial law any minute. Most likely, a curfew at dark. And that’s just on the Incarna side. In the Shadow, all hell is breaking loose. People are getting killed here. Free Societies people. Not just resistance people like you and me.”

“And what do you suggest we do about that?” Sloan turned and asked.

Cory let out a breath.

“Terishor is shooting at Gifted for just being in the city? They want to wage war on everyone? I say we start shooting back.”

*Yes, yes.*

“With all due respect,” Sir Matheson countered, “with what army? You don’t have one. If we mustered all of our forces, we might round out to fifty soldiers under arms. Total. And that leaves nothing in reserve. No one at home. If we concentrated everything we had to a single place we might disrupt the Order’s perimeter. We might even hold some strategically useful ground, for maybe an hour. Perhaps a little longer. But then the Order would respond to our position, and we’d be exposed to, say, ten times our numbers, plus air support, artillery, the works. The entire House, and everyone you’ve got in your personal retinue, would be gone. Wiped out. And for what? We can’t save them out there!”

“Right now,” Sloan added, “Terishor has its hands full maintaining the checkpoints and perimeter. They’ll have some kind of reserve force they can throw at any big problems, but nothing like they could do if this were normal circumstances. Our odds of success against Burton Hall actually improved over the last couple of hours.”

“You want to go in right away,” Cory said in realization.

“As soon as we can,” Sir Matheson acknowledged. “Tonight, if possible. Tomorrow night at the absolute latest.”

“Gonna have a hard time getting close to anything important,” Karl mused. “With a little time and prep work, me and my guys could send up a mighty decent distraction. In say, downtown Saint Paul? Also give us time to round up your Finn and Terry, too? Terry knows a lot of people around here. Might be able to find some sympathetic rabble-rousers.”

“Sure, the local Collective,” Cory added in. “I’ve met Max before. He’s someone in their Blackguard.”

“Yes, he is,” Sloan said with a gleam in her eye.

“Lady, I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Sir Matheson said. “Bringing in outsiders like this at the last minute. Seems like quite a serious operational security risk.”

“We don’t have to let them in on the nature of the true target,” said Sloan. “Just get them to Saint Paul under arms.”

“I’m not throwing Max to the wolves,” Cory stood up.

“And we’re not bringing any more people to the table,” Sir Matheson argued, and rose to meet Cory’s stance. “We’re already taking a big enough risk with his people.” He pointed at Karl’s chest for effect.

“I think we’ve bled enough to earn your respect,” Karl said darkly.

“Stop,” Cory growled. To his surprise, they did. Sloan blinked rapidly as she felt an undercurrent of power surge through Cory’s words.

“We plan for tomorrow night,” he continued. “For the next few hours, I want to know what the Order is doing and where they’re doing it, and I want Terry and the Finn brought in. Lady, I want an open line of communication with Bacchus. They assisted you all these years under the radar, so I’m guessing you know how to get a hold of them better than I do. Karl, have the guys ready to go to town by tomorrow. If you need to cook up anything that goes boom, you’d better get to work. And someone figure out how to get a hold of Max.”

Around Cory, people moved to action.



The ceiling came into focus. It was an ugly ceiling, Terry thought. Lathered in fireproof foam, dust, and decades of cigarette tar. There were people around him. He could sense them, dimly, as he slowly came up to full consciousness, a man rising from the depths.

His psychic shielding lay in tatters. The room faded away. Somewhere, a stranger called his name. Terry dove back into the warm, comforting blanket of unconsciousness. There was too much out there, too much. A torrent of psychic disaster crouched at the edge of his mind.

Terry dipped his hand down low and came up with a fist-full of morpheia, the stuff of dreams, and wrapped a messy slab of it over the worst of the damage. Not pretty, but it would have to do. He couldn’t hide behind his closed eyelids for much longer. Something terrible had happened, he knew that much. Whatever it was, it might be getting worse out there.

He rushed upward and broke the surface, blinked.

“Terry. Hey Terry!”

Hand on his chest, fingers pressing deftly into his neck, checking his breathing and pulse. Terry recognized him but didn’t know his name. One of the Shepherds. Kept things in the club working right. First Avenue. Bacchus.

“What happened?” Terry asked.

“Blew it up! Some fuckers blew it up! We gotta get you outta here, man. We thought you were in a coma or something.”

Terry curled into a sitting position. The candles had gone out, some tipped onto their sides, puddles of wax and smeared chalk. The room tilted violently. He took deep breaths.

“Blew what up?” Terry asked. The Shepherd told him.

Terry pulled himself together, packed up his things. The bar man didn’t want to let him go, but Terry didn’t belong to them. Bacchus wouldn’t hold him against his will. He had to go. Terry had a sudden, driving desire to go outside, to see. He drunk-staggered through the Vale portal into the real world. He made his way to the glass front doors. Smoke and ashes drifted past. Terry slapped at the fire-door handles until he found one that gave, and pushed through.

The street was a nightmare of sirens, debris, powdered concrete, choking fumes. He looked right and his mind reeled at the scene. A mob of ambulances, fire fighters, police, military men. A seething pile of humanity converging on something out of sight, but monumental in its invisibility. Terry felt the gravity of the emotional imprint and wanted to wretch. He was jostled, shoved. Someone with a badge. A camera flash. Choking, sobbing, clutching one another’s elbows, spectators crying, in shock, dismay.

Somehow, he made it beyond the hasty barricade, his mind burning, heart begging for relief, but he couldn’t stop himself. He had to see. He might die from it, but he had to bring his feet to

the lip of the dead zone in his psychic eye. To bear witness. To see.

It didn't look like a building anymore. It didn't look like anything. Terry turned and began walking. His mind stopped taking notes. His memory shook and gave way.

Someone's shoe, the leather scuffed.

A cell phone.

Helicopter in the air, kicking up dirt and dust. He looked up and tripped over something. Stumbled. Skinned his palms.

Church bells. The Basilica. What time was it?

Traffic a mess. Cars piled every which way. Bumpers sheared off. Broken glass.

A little girl cried for her mommy. No one would help her.

Voice on a radio. Announcer had a high pitched voice. It was a tragedy, they said. A day of infamy. The Red Hand.

Car alarm going off. No one seemed to care.

Terry sat down on the curb. A cigarette butt between his feet.

His cell phone. He tried to use it, but got a message. Busy circuits. Nothing worked. Suddenly angry, he dashed the artifact of plastic against the sidewalk. Kept going.

Parked car. Honda. He waved his hand, and made the door unlock. He slid behind the wheel and made the engine start.

Time to go.



"What do you mean, he's not there?" Ellen shouted into the phone. "Someone just told me that he was in some kind of a coma, and now he's walked out the door? What happened?" She clenched and unclenched her free hand as she listened, for want of something to break. Ellen shuddered when she spoke.

"I can't... believe... you let him go, Gerard."

Ten minutes. She'd missed him by ten lousy minutes.

"Because there was something wrong with him!" she railed. "He was there to perform some heavy magic, and he went down, Gerard. There are protocols for that, dammit! I don't care if he got up later and said he was fine. He might have been fucking possessed, for all we know!"

It wasn't the Shepherd's fault, Ellen knew. He wasn't a match for Terry's force of will or his psychic bag of tricks. The fact that Terry was able to convince Gerard he was okay meant that her worst fears were unlikely to be true. Terry had walked out under his own power. She just wasn't sure what kind of shape he was in. If he was up for what was unfolding out there.

"Word from Dell is that all Shepherd holdings are on lockdown," Ellen said. "So you take that to heart. It might be a while before anyone gets to you. You're pretty much at ground zero down there, so do what you can."

The Sanctuary Cantina? Yeah, she knew about it.

"If it comes to that, you get the hell out of there, you hear me? We can bargain for it or reclaim it later. If they come knocking, you take off."

Gods help you, Terry, where did you go?



They were on full alert. The Lacrutian Vales at the IDS Tower and the Federal Reserve Bank building had both been hit. The Vale in the IDS Tower, like the building itself, was suddenly and irrevocably gone. The bank building was reported to be a loss but the Vale portal had somehow held, although the Order personnel within it had met gruesome ends. Jack Quick flipped open his badge ID, listing himself as John Quincy, IAS Field Agent. Corbel stuck his head into the room.

“Speed it up,” the thin-faced man said.

“Right there,” Jack replied. He grabbed the MP-5 on the way out and slung the submachine gun over his shoulder. Corbel eyed him but said nothing. They rode the elevator up to the ground floor.

“Anything to say for yourself?” Corbel asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean,” Corbel stepped uncomfortably close, “the colossal fuckup your daddy made. Letting the Red Hand run rampant when they should have been leashed. You did time with Terishor. So you tell me... how the hell did your people bungle the job so badly? You ask me, it’s the worst case of blowback in this Province’s history. Or maybe he meant it to go this way all along?”

“I wouldn’t know anything about that,” Jack replied. His face felt hot with anger. The elevator doors opened. They emerged in the Capitol’s back hall. Jack walked stiff and went straight through the portal on the floor of the grand rotunda. Out into the real world. He felt the flash as Corbel hung on his heels.

“Don’t fuck up, newbie,” Corbel whispered from behind. “I’m watching you.”

The other two guards in their squad met them in the main entrance, where they folded in with Sheriff’s Deputies and a few FBI agents who were there for show in their cheap windbreakers. Corbel stuck close to Jack’s side as they began their perimeter watch and patrol.

A pool of dread formed in Jack’s gut. He’d known the fallout would catch him, with him belonging to Terishor. The Order didn’t forgive mistakes easily, if at all, and this one was going to hurt him, even though he wasn’t even assigned to North Garden anymore. But anyone important knew he was Drake’s son, and if Drake’s reputation was going to be torn to pieces, Jack was going to suffer, too.

What if Dad did this on purpose? No, Jack thought, unthinkable. It’d be treason. Going against the Lacrutians, the Faction with the most power in the Administration? And in a Province with a Lacrutian Dominus? They’d certainly have Dad’s head. Execution. It would be the only way to make a point, to prove by example that the Order doesn’t tolerate inter-Faction conflict.

And if it were true... he’d have earned it, Jack conceded. Allowing the Red Hand to go forward with attacks on Lacrutian Vales, maybe even pointing them in that direction in the first place... Dad wouldn’t have done that, would he? Killing their own people? Why? Why the hell would he ever do such a thing?

No, Jack thought. Put it out of your mind. He didn’t do it. There had to be an explanation. Something went wrong. No one’s perfect, not even John Brozeck. Not even Dad.

But what if you’re wrong, a voice deep in Jack’s mind taunted him. It was a dark voice, a



voice that went back to Jack's adolescence, to the guilt and the shame and the helplessness. A voice that told him everything was going to fall apart, and that it was all Jack's fault, and that they were going to find out.

What if Dad had done it? Chew on that for a while, Jackie-boy. Imagine it. Dad made the Red Hand do it. He wanted this to happen, and he's just pretending that it was all a big mistake. And they're going to find out. Lexington is going to find out. And the Order is going to make him pay for what he's done.

And they're going to make you pay, too. For keeping quiet about it. For letting it happen. For helping. You did your part in this, Jack. You're guilty, too. Those people who died, your brothers and sisters in arms, who trusted you, who believed in you. Terishor is supposed to protect the Order. Protect it, Jackie-boy. Now look at what you've all done. And think of the civilians. Hundreds. Thousands. The people you're supposed to lead, because they aren't capable of helping themselves.

All dead, Jackie-boy. All dead. Because of you.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Corbel hissed in his ear. Jack started, despite himself.

"What?"

"You're falling out of pattern, newbie," Corbel said. "Don't they teach you this in Basic? Get a move on."



The Finn made it back on his own. He looked no worse for wear, and smirked when Cory asked how he had managed to get past Terishor's perimeter.

"It's a secret," the Finn said.

Reports trickled in from the city over the following hours. Air Force and Army aircraft flew air patrol missions, and Predator drones were in the air on both sides of the Mirror. FBI and IAS agents raided a suspected Red Hand safehouse in North Minneapolis, with shots fired and a handful of casualties. The news channels showed live footage from the rear of the police lines. Tanks were rolled in.

Terishor began a concerted attack on unknown supernaturals in the Rosemount Shadow area, who were holed up in an abandoned, World War Two era munitions plant.

"That's about fifteen miles away," Karl realized. He showed Cory where it was on a map.

"Who's telling us this?" Cory asked him.

"Got a spotter down there," Ruby said. "Indie guy, thinks of himself as a journalist. He does all these reports and blogs and things, and puts them up on the Undernet."

"Well, whoever it is, they're getting a pounding," Karl said. "Terishor is committing a lot of forces that way. At least three of those attack helicopters, a bunch of power armored squadies, armored personnel carriers, maybe thirty infantry. Lots of explosions. Using the big guns."

"Think it's the Red Hand?" Cory asked.

"Hard to say," Karl said. "There's not going to be much left to identify. If it isn't the Red Hand over there, I'm sure the Order will say it was, when the smoke clears."

Lady Paradise came out of the farm house.

"I just got off the line with Ellen Waters," she said. "Terry's missing. He survived the ritual, though, so there's hope. We really didn't know what to expect, considering how quickly he broke off contact. She said that Terry seemed to be injured in some way, but left First Avenue on his own."

Cory made a frustrated sound.

"He's tough," Karl assured him. "He'll make it."

"What about everyone else?" Cory asked.

"We'll make it, too," Karl said.

"No, I mean, what else did Ellen say?" Cory asked Sloan. "How's Bacchus? How's the rest of the Free Societies doing?"

"Paldin has placed guardians at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnehaha Park, and is patrolling Dinkytown and Uptown," Sloan said. "The Halveyans have condemned the Order's actions and those who might be responsible for the attacks downtown. Division 8 have put Rapid Response Teams into the field in Uptown, Frogtown, and South Saint Paul, and have every door open for refugees. And they're collecting names of missing or detained individuals."

"Yeah, but no one is gonna stand in the Order's way," Karl muttered.

"They're mitigating the damage," Cory countered.

"Just means the Order will have to work at it a little bit harder," replied Karl. "In the end, the result is the same."

"And what's that?" Sir Matheson asked.

"That no one is going to actually hit back at the Order except us," Cory answered.

"And maybe Max," Karl said.

"Still no luck getting a hold of the local Blackguard people," Ruby piped up. "But I'm trying, dammit. Their regional office was cut off from the usual connection."

"What about the Angels?" Karl asked. "They're Collectives people and have an office around here."

"They don't know what's happening," Ruby sighed. "No word from Max there, either."

"Well, it's one of two things," Cory said. "Either Terishor decided the Blackguard, being a local militia, was going to be trouble and hit them preemptively, or else Max figures they're going to be seen as a threat and they're in deep hiding."

"Doesn't seem like the Blackguard's way," Karl argued. He lit up a smoke, and Cory followed suit out of reflex.

"Yeah, back in Chicago," Ruby agreed, "the Blackguard seemed pretty militant about keeping the Collectives people safe. And ya gotta think that some of their people are being shot up or dragged in to the Order's holding cells. So where the fuck are they?"

"Just keep trying," Cory said. The hours passed. They waded through the flood of news reports, called-in updates, hastily assembled blog postings, and pirate radio transmissions as the waves bounced through the Shadow.

Just past 6:00 pm, Sir Matheson handed Cory an encrypted cell phone attached to an Undernet modem Talisman.

"It's Ellen," he said. Cory grabbed for the phone.

"We found Terry," she said, her voice tight. Cory knew that she was near tears. "He's okay,

Cory. He's going to be okay."

"Oh, fuck," Cory breathed. "Thank fucking God."

"He was so close to the IDS tower when the bombs went off," she said. "Sometimes, strong emotions in other people can affect him, hurt him in a way. And all those people, when they died..."

"Right," Cory said. "Right. I get it."

"Our people are really good at dealing with this kind of thing," Ellen explained. She was trying to convince herself, too, Cory realized. "We'll keep him here at MIA, keep him asleep until one of our psychonauts can repair the damage. Um, how are you? How's everything?"

"It's fine," Cory answered. "We're safe. Hey, um, Ellen?"

"Yeah?"

"I can't really say what I want to tell you," Cory said. "But if you're in a safe place tonight, you'll probably want to be there tomorrow night, too."

There was a short pause.

"Cory, you be careful," Ellen said slowly. "Do what you have to do. If you need somewhere in town to go, there's a Sanctuary being declared at that church we went to. A Monitor named Ripley, and he's got support from a Paldin Kivar Bhala, named Miranda Umos. She's like an officer in Paldin's military. Okay?"

"Got it," Cory said. "You people take care. I'll see you soon."

"Be careful," she said. "I nearly lost Terry today. I don't want to lose you, either."

"I will. Bye."

"Bye."



Cory, Big Karl, and Sir Oakshotte approached the church in the T-Bird. They'd found it difficult, but not impossible, to breach Terishor's wall of men and patrols around the city. In the end, Terishor didn't have enough men on the ground or drones in the sky to eliminate movement in the Shadow. Everyone the T-Bird encountered had been headed the other way - out of the city, and it was obvious that Terishor was all right with that. It was nearly midnight.

Cory sat in the back seat with his rifle across his lap, and Karl's rifle beside him. Silently, Cory marveled at the size of the men in front of him. It was a raw comfort to have them with him. Men who each were worth five. Men who wouldn't be afraid if things got bloody. Men who you'd hate to meet in a dark alley, and who you'd want with you if you had to go down one.

Karl rolled the car down a quiet residential street and scanned the houses. He pulled into a short driveway and got out. He walked around the front of the car and reached down to the garage door's handle. He wrenched the door open with a shriek of metal and a dull bang. Karl got back into the T-Bird and pulled forward into the empty space.

Sir Oakshotte got his shield out of the trunk. It had taken hours for Oakshot to bang and weld the shield back into a usable shape. Cory didn't say anything; he figured that if the knight thought he might need his shield going into this meeting, then Cory wasn't going to argue the point. Cory and Karl slung their rifles. They walked the two blocks to the refitted church, and Cory's senses flared with the halos of Gifted as they approached.

“Who goes there?” someone called out. The three of them stopped, and Karl raised his hand in a peaceful wave. The voice had come from ahead and to the left.

“Sniper on a rooftop to the right,” Oakshotte whispered.

“I see ‘em,” Karl whispered back.

“We’re here to meet someone,” Cory shouted. “The Monitor is expecting us. Besides, I don’t think Umos would like it if you guys got into a scrap this close to the Sanctuary, do you?”

“Who are ya?” the voice demanded.

“My name is Cory Williams. I’m the Phoenix Lord of House Aruithinea. And you’re going to let us pass by.”

“Never heard of ya,” the voice said. “You’d better turn your asses around. This Sanctuary is for locals only.”

“Let them pass,” a man said, stepping out from a tree. He was bald, and wore a military surplus jacket in grey digital camouflage over combat fatigues and Army boots. He carried no weapons. Cory was struck by the immense sense of calm the man carried, and the way his eyes seemed to take in everything at once.

“And who the fuck are you?” the voice again, higher pitched, incredulous.

“Kivar Snyder,” he said.

“Oh,” the voice said. “Shit.”

The sniper hastily withdrew.

“It’s safe,” Kivar Snyder said. “We’re expecting you, Phoenix Lord. Kivar Bhala Umos sends her regards.”

The Paldin quietly led the three of them beyond the stone walled courtyard behind the church, where a small, crumbling stone building stood in the shadow of oak and cedar trees. Another monk, dressed similar to Snyder, stood serenely in front of the ruin’s door. From the church, Cory could hear the buzz of tense conversation, over the thumping of industrial music on a stereo. The Bacchus calling of Sanctuary had been heard, Cory thought, and locals were taking them up on the offer of presumed security. He tried to push the thought of what had happened to the Sanctuary Cantina out of his mind.

The guard stepped aside. Sir Oakshotte went through the battered door first, and disappeared into darkness. Cory and Karl followed. Just inside, stone steps led down into a blackened tunnel. Immediately, Cory flashed back to the caves beneath the Terishor holding, and felt a wave of suffocation invade his mind. Cory’s memory flashed to an image of Warner’s face, the Terishor agent’s thoughts pushing and prying into Cory’s mind, fingers of ice inside of his skull. The sense of dirtiness and impotent rage. The numbness from the cold metal of the cage, as is sucked him dry of power.

No, he told himself. I’m not helpless. I’m not there. I’m here.

He took a deep breath and followed the shape he knew was Oakshotte.

“It’s gonna be hard to do this without Terry,” Karl said. “When I think of who we’re gonna be up against tomorrow night, well, shit, I’d sure rather have a mystic I know and trust. What’s this Finn guy really like, anyway?”

“The Finn’s good,” Oakshotte grunted.

“Seems kinda hair-brained to me,” Karl went on. “Those rockets are nice, though. Just don’t know how we’re gonna penetrate the wards and defenses and things that Raeford is gonna

have up on the place.”

“Quiet,” Oakshotte said. “We’re almost out.”

They emerged in the chamber lined with vines, with the raised water basin. The church pews were as chipped and abused as Cory remembered them. The light was soft and warm, and the sense that had invaded Cory’s mind melted away. The chamber was empty, and the sound of bubbling water permeated to air.

Minutes passed. The three men held their silence. The Citadel kept the noise of the gathering out.

Voices from the tunnel behind them. The creaking of leather, harsh voices. A man came into view, wearing spikes, a biker jacket, and camouflage pants. Another in dirt-covered black jeans and a second-hand trenchcoat. Several more, with proud mohawks, combat boots, bondage pants, and Army surplus gas masks. They carried World War Two era rifles, Garands, sawed-off shotguns, and knock-off AK’s. Max stepped through the threshold.

“Oi, Cory,” he said. “Looks like you’re doing okay for yourself, hey?”

“Hi Max, it’s good to see you. I’m glad you came.”

“Hey, I told ya before,” Max said. “You ever need my help, here I come, right? The Blackguard might not be all that, but we stick to our word.”



They returned to the orchard farm at 3:00 am. Dark-clad sentries met them at the driveway, armed with rifles. Gravel crunched beneath the T-Bird’s tires.

Max had pledged to deploy some thirty-five soldiers to assist the attack of the Order in Saint Paul. Cory felt dizzy with the weight he now carried. The Collectives didn’t have any cause in this, he thought. They didn’t see him as some sort of walking myth like his House did. They weren’t about to free an Element that was an ally of theirs. But they were willing to stand with Cory’s people and fight the Order.

And they’ll do it knowing full well what the Order will do to them, how strong the Order is in this city. They’ll do it, knowing that if they manage to survive, they’re likely to end up caught up in an Order dragnet within a month, and the Order’s revenge will be cold and merciless.

“Can we really do this?” Cory asked.

“Never display your doubts,” Oakshotte said sharply. “Bad for morale. In front of your men, you have to be strong and sure of yourself. Act like your plan will succeed.”

“Okay, I get that,” Cory conceded. “But I need people I can talk with. I need you to advise me, Oakshotte. And Karl, shit, if I can’t talk straight with you...”

“Don’t worry, Blue,” Karl said. “I still think of you as the kid on my couch who needs regular kicks to the ass.”

“Okay, good,” Cory said, a restrained smile on his face. “So. Tomorrow night.”

“No matter what, it’s gonna be a fuck of a good show,” Karl laughed.

Sir Oakshotte was silent. Karl pulled the T-Bird into the barn and shut down the engine. Cory saw the tough, gnarled knight chew through the question in his mind. Karl rolled down the driver’s side window and lit up a smoke. He wanted to hear this, too. Finally, Oakshotte spoke.

“My Lord,” he began, “I have served in a martial capacity for this House for a great many

years. I have seen much fighting. But in all of my years, I have never been where we are now. Frankly, my Lord, I don't know.

"There's too much that could go wrong," he continued. "The barriers on the Raeford Citadel might prove to be too great for our men to breach, and we'll be forced to turn back. The attack on the Order's holdings in Saint Paul will provoke an iron-fisted response. The mundane police and military forces could prove to be overwhelming, if only from their numbers. And the Order's men will fight like demons."

"Even if we succeed we will suffer great casualties," Sir Oakshotte finished. "The Saint Paul forces will lose many. Even with the assistance of the Blackguard I expect half of them to die. And this is about as good as you can expect. I'm sorry, my Lord. But know that when battle comes, I will serve with you to the end."

Cory couldn't find the words to respond, and Karl stared into the distance and let the cigarette burn. Oakshotte got out of the car. The sound of the door slamming shut echoed long in Cory's ears.

Cory and Karl checked in with Ruby for field reports, and Cory spoke with Sir Matheson about their new disposition of forces. Oakshotte's words echoed in Cory's mind. He felt the need to look over the battle plans once more. In case there was anything else he could do.

"Very well, my Lord," Sir Matheson said. "These are the orders you have given." Cory went over the list of forces, and of those in charge of each unit. Cory let out a deep breath.

"Sir Matheson?"

"Yes, my Lord?"

"Why are you so resistant to working with those outside our House?" Cory asked. "The Blackguard, and Karl's men... without them, we wouldn't stand a chance in this. Why do you undermine me when we clearly need them?"

"My apologies," Sir Matheson responded. "I'm an old soldier, and I'm set in my ways."

"No, it's more than that," Cory pressed. "Tell me what it is. I really want to know."

"Very well," Sir Matheson said. "In my experience, irregular forces can't be trusted. If they can't be trusted, then everything you task for them to do is drawn into question. A general lives and dies the things he can count on. He needs to know that his men will follow his orders. He needs to know that they have the heart to withstand losses. That if they are told to dig in and stand their ground that they won't flee like cowards. And I know that our people, our sworn people, believe in our cause. I can trust them, and I know that you can trust them as well."

"These others that you love so much," Sir Matheson gestured. "They aren't like us. They aren't loyal the same way we are loyal. And on a day like tomorrow will be, where so much depends on each individual man under arms... we'd be best off without them, my Lord. I take comfort in knowing that most will be in Saint Paul, away from the vital battle against Raeford. If they break or fail, it won't leave you truly exposed."

"Thank you for your honesty," Cory said gratefully. "I understand why you see them the way you do. But they won't fail me. The people from Chicago came for me and freed me from the Order's hold. As for Max... I've met him. He seems truly genuine in his support. It's personal for him. He won't back down, and I have to believe that any man with a heart like his can inspire the people under him to do great things."

"I hope you're right, my Lord," Sir Matheson said. "I truly do."

They went over the plan for movement through the city perimeter, the early deployment

of the Karl's irregular forces in Saint Paul, where the Blackguard would rally, and the various known targets of value on the way to the Capitol building. Cory's own group would enter Minneapolis from the north. They'd pass near the very same Vale that he and Terry had used in their early days of hiding out.

Cory's force would move undetected into the Shadow of the U of M campus, and commence the attack on Burton Hall ten to fifteen minutes after Karl and Max lit up Saint Paul, in order to allow Terishor to take the bait and hopefully leave the Minneapolis zone less able to deal with the Burton attack. The irregular forces in Saint Paul would keep it up for as long as they could, then fade across the Mirror and withdraw.

"How long do you think they can keep it up in Saint Paul?" Cory asked him.

"Longer than they could in the Shadow," Sir Matheson said carefully. "Somewhere between ten minutes and two hours, in my estimation."

"That's a pretty wide gap," Cory replied.

"Yes," Sir Matheson replied. Cory sighed and went over the maps one more time. The dark hours slipped by. There had to be some way to make the Saint Paul gambit work. He just couldn't find it. Sir Matheson was right. There were too many uncertainties.

"God dammit," Cory said quietly. "I don't know what else to do. We have to have some kind of distraction. Otherwise the Order's air power will wipe the Burton attack completely out. I need to give the Order a reason to send the helicopters to Saint Paul."

There was no time to reorganize a different kind of distraction. The Blackguard under Max already had plans in motion, and the window of opportunity for Aruithinea's attack closed tomorrow night. There was no way to coordinate any other kind of attack. Cory had committed his forces and now he had to ride his earlier decisions to their final outcomes. Sir Matheson stood resolutely by Cory's side until there was nothing more to talk about, and Cory said good night.

Dawn approached as Cory bedded down for a few hours of sleep in the Shadow version of the orchard farm house. Creaky wood stairs led up to tiny bedrooms. He felt weary in his bones and deeper, somewhere near the core of himself. He hoped that he hadn't made a terrible mistake.

We're coming for you tonight, Cory willed to Neco. You'll be free soon, after all these years. Cory bent his mind and imagined the building, with its Greek columns and grey stone. We're coming.

Cory couldn't sleep. The light grew in the window of the small, dusty bedroom. The shapes of an ancient dresser, a wooden chair, a TV tray, slowly drew in definition. He tried to think about something else. Riding in the desert. Days long gone, in the straight lines of the classroom, itchy uniforms. What he remembered of his mother's face, his earliest memory, a day at a rocky Lake Michigan beach. He kept coming back into his tired body. Sleep wouldn't come.

There was a tiny sound, like an insect, or the skittering a mouse might make as it ran across a wood floor. A sound, and a slight buzzing sensation. Cory's eyes opened and he saw a small globe of light at the foot of his bed. Too far to reach the rifle in the corner of the room. He tensed, steadied himself to fling power into his right hand and spring into the air, to slash with fire and talon...

"Cory," the light said, "we must talk." Shock and disbelief made Cory hesitate. It was John's voice. Slowly, deliberately, Cory sat up in the bed. He unleashed the power into his hand and made it a hot, malicious thing that he brandished at the sphere.

John wasn't there in the room disguised in some way. It was a scrying effect, woven together

by ritual like the ones that Terry could do. Cory didn't think he could hurt John through it, but John might not know that.

"What do we have to talk about?" Cory said quietly. He rose out of bed and put his naked feet on the hard floor. The light was close enough to lash out and touch.

"I know you hate me," John's voice said. "But this isn't about me. It's about Jack, and what you're going to do tomorrow night." A chill ran up the base of Cory's spine. Don't react, Cory told himself. Don't give him anything.

"What about Jack?" Cory kept his face cold and even.

"The Dominus is holding him hostage," John said. "He took Jack after you got free of us. The Dominus wanted you destroyed, Cory. But I thought we could make you one of us. Now he's got Jack as one of his bodyguards, and he's got a memory bomb rigged to go if he thinks I've got any other insubordinate tricks up my sleeve."

"What does this have to do with me?" Cory asked.

"He's my son, Cory. He's your friend. And Dominus Lexington can rearrange Jack's mind with one little spell. We'd become dead to him. He'd forget he ever knew us. You or me. Lexington will use Jack to kill us. Do you really want that? To have to face Jack, and to have to decide..."

"Jack and I didn't really get along too well the last time we talked," Cory said.

"He loves you, you know that. And so do I. We're the only family you've got. We belong together."

"Fuck you, John," Cory said quietly.

"When you attack the Capitol, my men won't interfere. I'm offering that, and no Terishor defenses at Burton, either. How does that strike you? I told you, Cory, I know what you're going to do. I can make it easier for you. You just have to be willing to play ball."

Cory took a breath, let it out slowly.

"What do you want?" Cory asked.

"The First Scion of Raeford," John said. "Dead. She's the one who has the power to rip Jack away from us. She controls the spell that can reach Jack's mind. She has to die."

"Aruithinea remembers you," Cory whispered. He got close to the light. It hovered there before Cory's face, a surreal, perfect shape. "They hate you, for what you did to them. To my real dad. For everything. They'll never go for it. They'll never trust you."

"Then don't tell them," John said simply. "It's up to you. But I know you're coming, Cory. I can do anything I want with that information. It's your call."

"And how will you know? If I do this thing or don't? And why can't you just bump her off yourself?"

"I'll know," John said. "I'll use this same effect to watch you when you enter the university."

"You could do this yourself," said Cory. "Save your son. You've got the manpower. The bombs."

"They're watching for it! I can't, Cory," John said. Cory imagined he could see John's face, then. Filled with bile, skin flushed, hands shaking with impotent rage. "If Callah suspects me, sees one Ops agent... she'll say the word and fulfill the spell, and Jack effectively dies. Do you have any idea what this is doing to me? We're like your family, Cory. You have to help us. I'm begging you, here. If you don't do this, I swear to God..."



“Fine,” Cory cut him off. “Fine. I’ll do it.”



Sir Oakshotte and the Finn walked through the orchard, away from the sentries and the bustle back at the house. It was midday. The sky was a broad canvas of glorious summer, light, brilliant clouds, warm sun, maddening blue sky. It was easy to forget the hail of chaos that lived to the west, among the fumes of the sprawling city.

“Hell of a thing,” Sir Oakshotte said.

“Sure seems like it,” the Finn replied.

“So.”

“So,” the Finn agreed.

“What do you think of this kid?” Sir Oakshotte asked.

“I presume you speak of our shiny, new Phoenix Lord?” the Finn replied.

“Yeah. Him,” Sir Oakshotte grunted. “Matheson doesn’t like the way this is all coming together.”

“Well, he wouldn’t,” the Finn laughed. “On paper it looks like utter shit. He’s a military man. He’s doing what military men do.”

“You really think this kid is worth it?” Oakshotte asked. “The dragon. Everything?” The Finn patted Oakshotte on the shoulder.

“Well, my friend, look at it this way,” the Finn said. “His friends dropped everything they had and rushed up here from Chicago to pull him out of the fire. They aren’t soldiers. They aren’t knights sworn to a cause. They were his friends. And they went in against a Terishor holding to get him back. They weren’t stupid, either. They knew what Terishor was. And they did it anyway. If that’s not love, I don’t know what is.”

“So?” Oakshotte said.

“They thought he was worth it,” said the Finn. “It wasn’t about the Element, or who his father was to them. They did it because they loved him. And I think you can judge a man a lot by the people around him.”

“So he’s a swell guy. Great. So why should I risk my neck for him? Besides it being my duty and all that?”

“Oh, you hate the Order,” the Finn said. “You enjoy killing them. Isn’t that enough?”

“Yeah, I guess...” Oakshotte said. “So help me get into this, Finn. Make it right that I’m taking orders from this boy. Because everything I know says that he’s going to get us all killed.”

“Man, you’re just like Matheson,” the Finn said. “Just can’t stand anything from the outside. Hell, he’s a sworn Knight of Lugh, and you still can’t deal.”

“He’s not a real knight,” Oakshotte countered. The Finn spun around.

“He took the oath,” the Finn said. “He passed the test. I’m the Druid here, and I say he’s a knight. Dammit, Oak, he’s the Phoenix Lord. He’s the highest office in the Twins, all the way out until Glasdun. You will respect that. If position isn’t enough for you anymore, I’m not sure anything I can say will change your mind.”

“He sure the hell doesn’t look like he’s Bedle’s equal,” Sir Oakshotte said. “He got his

Lordship because of who his father was, not for anything he did for himself. And sure, he got through the test, but it's not like the Knights of Lugh are going to do more than begrudgingly let him be a member. He's not one of us. He doesn't belong, and we all know it."

"So find a way so that he will belong," the Finn replied. "If the Knights of Lugh aren't going to treat him with real respect, find some other knightly order that will. Get him some honors somewhere that you and Matheson and all of the rest of you people might actually accept."

"There's no time to get him into an established order," Oakshotte said. "The Masters are all hours or days away, and they're not about to come halfway across the cosmos for this kid just because I want them to. All we have is right here."

"Interesting problem you have there," the Finn replied, his eyes alight. "And not just your problem, alone, I'd imagine. If you have reservations about following the Phoenix Lord into battle then you're probably not alone. You know as well as I do the importance of comradery in fighting men. You need a way to make Cory one of your own, and you need Cory to take you all under him, too. If you don't, Oak, I don't think this thing is going to hold together. If you won't follow him, then no one else is going to follow him, either. And that's the kind of thing that's going to get us all killed."

"But it's up to you," the Finn added. He plucked an apple from the nearest tree and took a bite.

"I knew it was a mistake to let you sorcerers study chaos magic," Oakshotte muttered. "Transformation magic, all that. You just can't leave things well enough alone. Always pushing for change."

"Why, Oaky, whatever do you mean?"



Night fell.

The day had rushed by him, a maddening lurch of ringing phones, talking, news reports, coffee, cigarettes. Cory's stomach filled with acid. His leg hurt from the hit he took from the helicopter gunship, and he suppressed the urge to limp as he walked. He shook people's hands, and struggled to appear calm, cool, in control. Cory stood in place and watched the hours fracture and spin past.

Three dozen names were on the Free Societies' missing persons list. This didn't count the mundanes. Cory tried to imagine how many normals were stuck in cells right now, or waited in some temporary prison warehouse with Pro-Gate mercenaries in the gun towers. Hundreds. Perhaps thousands.

Minneapolis and Saint Paul police had gone door-to-door that morning in select neighborhoods and confiscated firearms. There had been reports of shots fired at several squad cars and at one police precinct building. Long lines of cars choked the interstates as people strapped belongings to their roofs and tried to get out of town. A small riot went down at a suburban WalMart as desperation sunk in. The stench of panic mingled with car exhaust in the hot summer air.

"You should eat something," Karl said.

"What's that?"

"Eat," Karl said again, and shoved a fresh grilled hamburger into Cory's hand. "I've gotta get going. See how the guys did down there, setting things up."

“Karl... is this the right thing? What we’re doing?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore, Blue,” Karl chuckled. “Pieces are in motion. Best thing to do is to ride it all out and try not to think about it. There’ll be time enough when the shooting stops.”

Cory forced a smile and wondered if it looked genuine.

“Yeah,” he said. “You’re right. Just got the jitters.”

“You’ll be fine, kid. Seeya late tonight.”

“Yeah. Hey, Karl...” Cory began, but Big Karl cut him off.

“Don’t say it,” Karl said, his face gone stern. He pointed a finger for emphasis. “Seeya later.”

“Okay,” Cory gave up, and nodded. “Seeya, man.”

Cory went up to his room and suited up. He stuffed the heavy AR-15 magazines into the pouches on his chest, the battle harness a gift from Sir Matheson. Cory smeared camouflage makeup on his face. His mind wandered. He realized that Neco hadn’t visited him in his dreams in a long time. The dragon didn’t have to, Cory guessed. It spoke to him well enough when he was awake.

“My Lord,” Oakshotte said. The mountain of a man looked at the floor, and his cheeks rose with color. “I went ahead and did something that I probably should have asked you about first. I hope you’ll understand.” He waved Cory to follow, and went out into the hall, down the stairs, through the empty dining room, and outside into the Vale. Cory followed.

Assembled before the tree were ten soldiers, five from the Fun House crew, and five Aruithineans. They were dressed for battle, as Cory was, but the right sides of their faces were smeared with white, grey, and black paste, and each had grey bands of cloth tied around their right biceps. Lady Paradise, Sir Matheson, and the Finn stood in the back and looked on. Sloan smiled.

“My Lord,” Sir Oakshotte announced, “we have established a new knightly order, by the authority of the Earl of the Twins, and in accordance with the bardic tradition. I present to you the Order of Ashes, and we assembled ask that you be their head.” Cory took in the faces of Mama, Rogers, Spade, Pete, and Mo-Fo.

“You... knighted these guys?”

“It’s not unheard of, to perform battlefield initiations,” Sloan said. “They’re willing to serve you, if you’ll have them.”

“Of course I’ll have them,” Cory replied, flushed with pride. His throat tightened with emotion. “Thank you so much.” He moved to the center of the assembly and shook Mama’s hand. “So, I suppose it’s Lady, now? Lady Mama?”

“Lady Jefferson!” she smirked, and brought her muscled hand up to squeeze Cory’s.

“So you accept?” Sir Matheson asked.

“I do,” Cory said quickly.

Sir Matheson gave a curt nod to Oakshotte, who stepped to Cory’s side with a small bowl filled with muck and ash. Matheson rubbed his thick fingers into the substance and marked Cory’s face. The powder grabbed and held onto the camo paint, and took to his skin like a layer of cement. Sloan approached and tied the rough cloth around Cory’s right arm, and made the effort to straighten the outer piece into a downward triangle, like the others. Sir Matheson stepped away, then approached with something bulky in his hands.

A thick leather belt, and an affixed long sword in a battered leather sheath. The metal pommel was scratched above the worn leather-wrapped handle, and the guard was cut and chipped from long use.

“Cory Williams, Phoenix Lord and Knight of the Order of Lugh, I name thee Master of the Order of Ashes, and present to you the symbol of your office,” Sloan said.

Cory looked about him as Matheson tied the sword belt around his waist. He burned the faces of the men and women into his memory. He realized with mild shock that three of the Aruithineans were strangers to him. They had joined the ranks, Cory was sure, by Oakshotte’s request. Cory closed his eyes.

I won’t let them down, he thought, as the weight of the sword pulled down on his waist.

And then it was time to go.

## *Revolution*

The Ghost growled beneath him. The Shadow of the northern suburbs held a strange light in the wake of sundown. It looked as if the city was on fire toward the southern horizon. The caravan of vehicles cut wide around White Bear Lake. Even over the motorcycle, Cory could hear the roll of a Terishor military jet as it flew air patrol, headed to Saint Paul. Deep thunder rolled elsewhere. Beautiful, empty houses flowed by on the edges of the roads, framed picturesque by wide trees heavy with green. The caravan continued west, and a dented, rusted green street sign told them they were on Ash Street. Cory smiled at the odd synchronicity.

The vehicles of the Ash Knights, as Cory internally named them, stuck close by while the Finn ranged ahead on a dirt bike. All told, they had just over twenty fighters. The rest of the House's people maintained a skeleton crew at the orchard, overseen by Lady Paradise and Sir Matheson.

Cory's gear weighed down on him as he rode. The AR-15, slung across his back with the barrel down, dug into his right hip, and the metal of the sword's scabbard constantly banged and rattled against the bike on the left. Black smoke rose from the south, accompanied by the sound of battle. The caravan came to a stop and Cory rode to the front of the line to find the Finn.

"What's up?"

The Finn pointed at the column of smoke.

"That's napalm!" he shouted. "Either from a chopper or a jet. Don't matter. There's someone fighting down there."

"Well, who the hell is it? It's not us!" Cory answered. The Finn shrugged his shoulders.

"We should really go around," the Finn hollered over the engines.

"Okay," Cory answered. "Follow me. I know a way."

Cory led them further west, until they hit railroad tracks that ran north-south. He led them south, around the mess that had now disappeared into the deepening twilight. The empty houses of Northeast Minneapolis sprawled before them, and the vehicles crawled down the streets, drawing closer to downtown. They took cover behind houses near Saint Anthony Park and shut down the vehicles. It was 9:00 pm. In fifteen minutes, Saint Paul would open up in a storm of noise and fire. At 9:25 pm, Cory and the rest would burn at high speed for the last five miles to Burton Hall.

The Minneapolis skyline shivered across the river to their south. The Shadow struggled under the loss of the real-world IDS Tower, and the Shadow version had already turned hazy and uncertain. The air felt heavy, and too hot. Cory's palms began to sweat. He wanted to call in to Ruby back at the orchard, find out if anything had happened yet... but radio and phone silence was the best doctrine. Even with the trickery they'd done to make phones work in the Shadow, the Order could pluck those signals out of the air if it was looking for them. Instead, Cory looked at his watch and brought up his memories of driving in Saint Paul, of Kellogg Boulevard running parallel to the river.

The freeway, bulging out away from the Mississippi to create the ten block by eight block core of Saint Paul's downtown. High-rise buildings, brick and concrete and steel and glass. Office buildings, parking ramps, food spots and the occasional bar. The Xcel Energy Center, empty behind its massive, sweeping face of glass, the 10 Year Anniversary celebration of the sports and music arena cancelled due to the emergency. A city hushed, the canyons of asphalt ripe for the echoes of explosions, sirens, screams.

First, the three "attention getter" blasts would go off. The FEMA regional office in the Skyway on Fourth Street. The FBI office at the corner of Robert and Fourth. The IAS communications center on Cedar. Saint Paul was a quiet city, even on a Friday night. Most of the time, the responsible city rolled up the doormats at 6:00 pm. With the curfew on, there would be very few civilians out on the streets. Cory tried to comfort himself with the notion. The bombs Karl had cooked up weren't too powerful, but no one would want to be near any of those places when they went off.

The Saint Paul PD would roll hard and fast from the precinct to the northeast, and all available patrol cars would converge on downtown. National Guard units from the west, stationed at a ready area between Xcel and Miller Hospital, would move in, and APCs and trucks of soldiers would come across the river on the 52 Bridge. And that was just the mundanes. The Order would scramble Gifted fighters, and whatever aircraft on hand would burn at top speed for Saint Paul's skies, in the Shadow and in Incarna. If John kept up his side of the bargain, the Terishor soldiers at the airport would stay out of the fight, and their guards at Galtier Plaza, the hospitals, and City Hall would keep to themselves. If not, the attack wasn't going to last very long.

How many humans were about to die? Police, soldiers, rent-a-cop security guards, civil servants. It wasn't their fight. They didn't know or care about the Order. Just men and women doing their jobs. Some were bigoted and closed-minded, jackboots who in their hearts marched to the Order's drum. But just as many were decent, regular folks. The bombs and bullets Cory had conjured would kill each indiscriminately. There was no justice in war. No justice, just death, sewn about by mad animals. He sighed under the thought of lifeless people in uniform, the dead he was about to make. Breathe, he thought. Just breathe. Cory watched the time cross the threshold.

Across the Mirror, to the east, bombs detonated.

"The irregular forces have begun the attack in Saint Paul," Cory announced. "It's begun. We go to do our part in ten minutes." Something surged in Cory's chest as he said the words.

It's out of my hands now, he thought. It's in motion. Nothing left to do but dedicate to it, commit to the effort. All in. I'm all in. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention, and his skin went hot. Clarity came to the moment. The night air went crystal.

Neco flooded Cory's frame with power.

*Almost time. Almost free. So close to me.*

Soon, Cory thought.

We're coming.



Fury poured out onto Saint Paul. Sirens and car alarms shrieked. Gunfire split the air and vehicles and buildings burned. Handfuls of panicked people ran down the sidewalks, eyes wide and white with fear. Masked men were there, in the streets. Men with guns. Shots came out from

corners, doorways, passing cars.

Here, a bleeding man, middle aged, hair tousled, fine, white. He lay on the steps and called for help.

A police car, riddled with bullets, tires flat, glass punched with holes. Emergency lights on, engine dead, officer missing.

Broken glass underfoot. Someone shouted, "Here they come!" A roar of angry guns.



Frag tried to quiet his pounding heart. He was Blackguard, a member of the Collective's poor man army. And Frag was pretty sure he might actually live through this. Or not, Frag thought. He hunched over the edge of the industrial building's roof and watched the bridge to the south.

"Here they come," Frag called out. The headlights of the army trucks bobbed in his super-naturally enhanced vision, a kilometer away. Two men to his right, Scandy and MC, readied the old M-2 machine gun with a heavy clack. Jeff brought the recoilless rifle to bear.

"Now, wait 'til I say, Scandy," Frag said. "Be steady, now. And Jeff?"

"Ya."

"You wait 'til they cross that road beneath 'em, you hear?"

"Ya."

The vehicles on the bridge were over the water, now. Two troop-hauler trucks, to the back. They were moving a little slow. In front of them...

"We got an APC," Frag said, his voice high. The machine gunners stiffened in fear. "It's a Bradley."

The tracked, half-tank, half-troop mover clattered over the roadway at full throttle. The cannon on top would chew the concrete lip of the building with ease. So much for cover. And the .50 caliber M-2 wasn't going to penetrate it.

"Well, shit," MC offered.

"All right, we're just gonna have to wait 'til all three of 'em are close," Frag said. "No use shooting at the trucks out over the water when the heavy is too far out to touch with the rocket. Everyone just wait."

Frag watched the vehicles as they crossed the water and got to their side of the bridge.

"Almost there," Frag said, calmer than he had hoped for. "Ready, Jeff? Guys? Ready? Okay. Three. Two. One. Shoot."

A great wall of horror cried out from Frag's right. The jackhammer of the machine gun, the scream of the recoilless tube. A great swath of the Bradley's front came off amid a hail of debris. A blossom of fire. MC raked the trucks back and forth, the red ember of tracer fire marking his line of hate. Jeff ducked back below the building lip and slotted in a fresh 90mm cartridge.

In the distance, Frag saw the figures crawl out of the stopped trucks. One of the trucks had run into the back of the Bradley, the other into the concrete barrier. Panicked, helmeted soldiers scrambled for their lives. MC's machine gun poured it on.

Jeff fired a second rocket at the Bradley. A flash as it hit. The APC went up hot and burning, and ammo and fuel blew outward.

“Okay, okay, let’s go!” Frag screamed. He shook MC to get his attention, and suddenly the rooftop was quiet. “Move! Fall back! To the next post. Go!”

Scandy threw juice into his muscles and hefted the machine gun over his shoulder. They ran to the metal staircase that would take them to the ground, Jeff already halfway down, nearly an inhuman blur, a Hollywood effect.

“Come on! Let’s go!”



Ellen stood within the Vale of the Sculpture Gardens, the grass soft under her bare feet. The Shadow of Minneapolis hung in the air before her. The mystical landscape swirled with the charged currents of shifting belief. She stripped off her remaining clothes and picked up the goblet of wine. The air was cool on her skin as she drank deeply from the cup, and a trickle of wine ran from the corner of her mouth, down her neck, and between her breasts. When the cup was empty, she began to sing in the ancient, sacred tongue. As she sang, Ellen began to dance.

*When the moon is full and the earth is cold  
And the chains of Prometheus shake in the ground  
And the breasts of men are hollow with fear  
And the women cry in the depths of the night  
You know the time has come  
You know the time has come  
The heart of a lion, the face of love, the wild heart is his fair kingdom  
You know the time has come  
This lovely prince hated father’s wars  
Gave up his sword for lust on the vine  
The gates of his land are lush and green  
And they open for you in dance, sex, and song  
You know the time has come  
You know the time has come  
The heart of a lion, the face of love, the wild heart is his fair kingdom  
You know the time has come*

And the next verse, and more, all seven that Ellen knew. Then she sang a second song that gave glorius praises to the secret ways, and a third, that was usually used to call for the sun’s return during Winter Solstice. And another, and another, until her body ran with sweat in the summer air, her voice strained, and her head swam from wine.

Then Ellen began her calling.

“Hear me, Great Liberator! Hear me, your priestess! Come to me so I might know your blessing!”

She repeated her call and poured more wine into her cup, then upended the bottle to wet the ground.

“Come to me, Dionysus! Come to me, Bacchus! Hear my voice and know my desires!”



Drink from my cup! Kiss upon my lips! Taste the madness that lives within me!” Ellen wrapped the calling within the shape of the ritual and set it free into the world. Her inner eye was blinded by the flash of power. The adrenaline leaked out of her, and her breathing slowed to normal. Then, she waited.

At last, the presence appeared. The nude boy-girl walked proudly through the trees at the edge of the field, its skin glorious and face a delight to look upon.

“You have called me, my priestess?” the spirit sang.

“Yes, my god,” Ellen hushed, taken aback by the spirit’s beauty. Ellen knew in her heart that this was merely the local servitor spirit of Dionysus, and that the true spirit would make this one seem ordinary and plain. She knew this, but still was shocked by the creature’s form.

“And what is it that you desire?” it sang. The spirit smiled, and Ellen felt a rush tingle up and down her thighs.

“I desire freedom for my people, the sons and daughters of this land,” Ellen said, and she held the creature’s gaze. “They fear and tremble in their homes, and the fist of the oppressor stalks them in the night. I want you to free them from their fears so they might know the majesty of your liberation.” As she spoke, Ellen released power from within herself so that the spirit might be nourished, and be encouraged to help her.

“I see,” the spirit said, and reached out for the offering.



“Haul ass, dammit!” Karl yelled. He hustled up Minnesota Street, covered by prepositioned snipers in busted-out office windows. The crack of rifle fire echoed off the buildings.

“We got contact, Tenth and Wabasha,” the radio crackled.

“Pour on the smoke, west side!” Karl said into the mic strapped to his chest.

“Copy,” said a female voice in Karl’s ear.

Crystal, clad in all black, was a shadow on the roof of Jackson Tower at Galtier Plaza. She elbow-crawled over to her control box, thick with patch wires and ink-marked tape above the switches. She flicked the West Smoke control to Armed, then thumbed the Fire button. Three fifty-five gallon drums of industrial-strength smoke ignited, and within fifteen seconds the blocks west of Cedar and north of Seventh were choked and grey.

Karl hugged the building to his right as he ran. Ahead on Eleventh, he saw a Blackguard throw down fire from a modded AK at something across the street. Then the Blackguard fell down. Liquid pumped from the fresh hole in his head.

“Contact, Eleventh and Minnesota!” Karl yelled. It was open area up there. Must be SWAT or Army, Karl thought. They were already in place ahead of them. Max’s voice buzzed in the radio.

“Machine gun squad on the bridge! Machine gun Cedar and Eleventh!” Then the sound of whipping bullets and angry fire. Karl’s squad stopped short of Eleventh and spread out, low and steady. He thumbed his radio.

“Harvey, you ready with that mortar?”

●

Coolie watched the flat screen television with a growing sense of worry. His stomach did that butterfly thing, and the soda water wasn't helping. Vette squeezed his hand and stiffened on the couch next to him. The reporter on the screen did a stand-up in front of a bunker of some kind. The Xcel Energy Center was in the background. They flashed to a map of Saint Paul and showed crude explosion stars where the fighting was. Outside, Coolie heard a police car siren go by on the street.

"That Red Hand again," Vette said sourly. "They ought to kill every last one of 'em."

Coolie's phone went off, the straight ring. Not 'Rock the Casbah' or 'Whip It' or 'Can't Buy Me Love.' Just an old-fashioned ringer. The work ring. Vette nearly jumped out of her skin. Coolie grabbed for the phone, nearly lost it, got it up to his ear.

"C-Coolie," he said.

"They can't make you go out there in this," Vette said, voice high and fast. "They can't. It's martial law after dark. It's curfew. It's..."

Emergency job order. Homeland Security contract. Mandatory, they said. Coolie hung up.

"Gotta go, hon," Coolie said.

"Just don't go," she said.

"I have to go! It's my job!"

"Those aren't teenage gang-bangers out there!" she pointed at the screen. "They're terrorists! Cold blooded killers, Coolie!"

"Vette, I gotta go," he said. And pried his hand free of hers.

●

Time.

"Okay," Cory said. "Let's go." He threw his leg over the Ghost and fired the engine.

*Yes. Come. Free me. Set me loose upon this land.*

They moved swiftly over empty streets and were shortly on Fourth. Cory brought the bike up to fifty and swallowed the distance. The caravan followed hot and heavy, going the wrong way on the deserted one-way street. The wind whipped and howled in Cory's ears. They blew over 35W beneath them and plunged into the university zone.

Cory snarled the bike up short and threw right, toward the river. Over University Avenue, bore to a halt in front of a four story red brick building. Cory took the two seconds to get the bike on its kickstand, then he found something to hide behind. He got on the ground and pulled his rifle up. A hundred yards away, over a field of grass and trees, Burton Hall stood, proud and gleaming in the dark. The university Shadow was quiet.

Something uncoiled in Cory's mind, the dragon, stretching itself out in his unconscious. It stirred in its cage, Cory knew, and a flush of adrenaline went around his veins. The Aruithineans formed up around him. His Ash Knights gathered close. Sir Oakshotte got in front of him and stood braced behind the thick shield.

Burton Hall hurt to look at. A deep sound throbbed in their ears.

“It’s warded,” the Finn commented. “Also... got a gargyle on the roof. It’s... kinda looking at us.” He fumbled with his long bag.

“They got no autogun placements,” Sir Conner reported, and dropped the binoculars into a leather satchel.

“Orders?” Oakshotte asked.

Cory took a breath.

“Spade, Rogers, cover fire from these trees. Oak, you go straight for the front door. Mama, you keep up with him. Finn, you said you had a way to bust down that ward?”

“Right here,” the Finn said. He hefted the RPG, the warhead dizzy to Cory’s sight.

“Okay,” Cory assented. “Rocket, then cover fire, then a flying V behind Oakshotte. Get inside, we fold in and push forward. Finn, get ready.”

The Finn faded from sight. Cory gave him ten seconds to get to a place with a good shot and to clear his back blast.

“Finn!” Cory yelled.

There was a boom and something flashed and blew inward at the triangle peak of Burton Hall. Rubble fell from the hole. Magic energy crackled as the building’s ward shattered.

“Go!”

*I hear you, brother. I hear you at the door.*

Spade and Rogers threw bullets over the green. Oakshotte let out a grunt and a battle cry, and they ran. A sound like a lion cut loose from the roof, and a muscled, winged beast of stone flung itself into the air. It dove upon them faster than Cory thought was possible. The earth shook and men went down in tangles of limbs, ruptured soil, broken bones, guns. Suddenly, the monster was in front of Cory, screaming, fanged mouth, long stone claws.

Bits of stone and dust pocked away from the gargyle’s chest as someone’s rifle found purchase. The beast threw itself at Cory. Sir Daniels got in the way, tried to tackle it, was flung back. He landed on his feet and fired. Cory let loose with a howl and threw a blast at the thing.

Move, he thought, we have to move!

Inside Burton Hall there was a cry, and Cory saw a shadow of a man duck into the building’s darkened entrance, then out of sight. In that instant, Cory knew him. John Brozeck.

Someone grabbed Cory’s harness from behind, and he stumbled. Oakshotte hauled him toward Burton. There was a rush forward. Cory looked back in time to see the stone guardian’s arm blow away in a rain of broken stone. Behind it, the Finn looked over the sights of his weapon, the tube momentarily empty.

The glass on the doors of Burton shattered under rifle fire. Then they were inside. A reception desk. An Aruithinean over the top of it, a gun blast, sword raised. Bloody tile, slipped. Cory slammed into a wall, Oakshotte’s shield pinging from incoming bullets. A strange uniform, part cloak, red and black, an alien weapon. Mama shot him in the leg, chest, arm, face. Something flashed.

*Now. Make them pay for putting us in cages. Make them pay for keeping us apart.*

A part of Cory’s mind unlocked. Fear and confusion evaporated. It was like the Bacchus house attack all over again - the wave of vision, the strength and power, the anger, fuel for hate and fire, bone and talon. He threw himself forward. Next to him, Mama cursed in Spanish.

Some woman, Cory thought. Someone with power. She must die. The First Scion. Someone important. The vision flowered in horrific red. The power of the Vale beyond walls of stone, wood, cloth. The strange shapes of protection, spells, rites of warding that hissed and covered it. Another guard, frightened, in hiding, pushing power into his skin, trying to make himself strong.

And another one, a second figure nearby. To the right, a shadow, a figure cloaked in power to hide himself, but Cory's eyes could see. Brozeck, the sane part of him realized.

"Follow me!" Cory screamed.

The power of Cory's voice shattered glass lights above. Fire rolled from his skin, unreal flame, colors that weren't meant to be. Threw a door to the side, wood splintering. Oakshotte behind him, shouting in warning. Cory ran for the guard, overturned a table with a touch. The man panicked, his face open wide, mouth, eyes, teeth. The man's gun shouted at Cory, too slow, too weak. Cory reached out and broke him open, neck to stomach, hot blood on his talon. Threw the dead man down to the floor. Howled his victory and pushed on.

Sword in right hand, hot, wet talon the left. An inner sanctum. He peeled the protections back, like skin from a kill, the magic protesting, pleading, no use, gone. The doorway stood naked, and Cory went through.



"He's in! He's in!" Oakshotte yelled.

The building had gone suddenly quiet, save for the echoes of shouts, the pounding of their boots. "Get the fuck through!" Oakshotte freed his axe and rushed after his Lord. That phoenix of theirs, that thing, Oakshotte thought in a flash. That's what the real monsters were like. Fuck these things made out of rock, gargoyles, the other civilized tricks of the Order and everyone else. It was the old things, the pagan things like Cory was, that had made the Romans shiver behind their stockade walls. Cory was one of the old things. One of the terrible things.

Thank fuck he was on their side.

Sir Oakshotte pushed through the doorway into the Raeford inner sanctum. He spun to get his bearings. He found himself at the center of a storm of burning pages, library shelves overturned, broken wood. Sir Pendleton came in beside him, then the dark woman, Lady Jefferson. Blasts from ahead. A heat wave, and an inhuman scream. The Phoenix Lord had made another kill. Oakshotte shouted and brought up his shield. He ran out into the hall.

More Raeford guards, Cory mingled with them, a spiral of fire, power, and blood. Then white-hot pain lanced Oakshotte's temples, and the big man trembled. Psychic lance, he dimly thought. One of the Raeford guards. Must have... Oakshotte felt his mind slipping away.

A hand on his shoulder pushed him down. Sound of a rifle, shooting close. Oakshotte regained himself and looked up into the face of one of Karl's men, scruffy, hair a mess. Something happened to him. A hole in his chest. He fell down on Oakshotte's chest. Pete. That's his name, Oakshotte thought. The knight pushed the dying man off him and found his feet, the shield forgotten, the heavy revolver in his right hand kicked back, bang, one, two, three. The walls dripped with spilled red.

●

Cory pushed around the corner. Open room, books, a circle etched into the stone floor, altar, strange smells. Something feminine, a prodding into his skull, the sensation of cold fingers, the gleam of disciplined hate. It forced its way into his mind.

*No!*

He couldn't move. At once, he was a statue made of flesh and blood. Waves of power rolled off the woman who stood before him. She held a curved dagger in her hand.

Cory tried to make the fire come but couldn't. Something about what she had done to him. He was locked up inside, like a cage around his heart. In unison, Cory and Neco screamed. The mage woman came closer, and drove the icy cold blade into his chest. Pain exploded between his ribs.

*No! Nononono...*

●

Oakshotte moved to his Lord and saw the cloaked woman, the blood as it gushed onto the hand that held the ritual blade. She glanced at Oakshotte as he ran and did something with her eyes. There was a flash of power. Oakshotte brought the gun up, too slow, encased in what felt like water. He pulled the trigger, and nothing happened. Click. The hammer and trigger assembly flew apart.

She laughed, a hollow sound, and waved her open hand in a delicate way. Oakshotte felt his nervous system lock up, muscles fused. He couldn't move. His heart dove for his throat and raw white panic oozed into his brain.

Cory howled and twitched as his blood ran down his chest. My God, Oakshotte thought. That's near his heart. He can't move, can't do anything. Like me. Oakshotte pushed his awareness inward, and felt his power gone inert, suddenly used up. He can't heal himself, Oakshotte realized. My Lord is going to die...

The woman's face tilted up to look Oakshotte in the eye. Outside, the heavy blasts of the Raeford guns pounded. Oakshotte's men called out in fear. An ambush, from the side hallways. An encirclement, maybe. His people were dying in the hall. Someone, Pendleton, it might have been, let out a cry. The Finn yelled out a rallying shout. Shots echoed.

The lady mage paused in consideration, then returned to Cory's defenseless form. The fire still reeked out of his pores, the man's face a dangerous, surreal mask. She reached forward and pulled her dagger out from between Cory's ribs.

"So, what have we here?" she asked.

Over in the corner of the room, a globe of black glass atop a black marble pedestal shimmered. There was a noise, something distant, like a train in a deep tunnel. The woman heard it, too, and whipped her head around in shock. She turned back to Cory, her face a mess of anger and fear.

"You!" she shouted. The woman realized, at last, who and what Cory was. She brought the magic blade back, a two handed grip, then thrust forward. A killing blow. She brought the blade in, and then the left side of her head gave way, a bright shock of gore, bone and blood, a flat crack in the room.

Her head snapped sideways but the woman held her feet, swaying, suddenly unsure. At once, the grip on Oakshotte's body gave way. Cory flung his hands in front of him, and metal and talon pierced the woman's chest. The Phoenix Lord let loose a terrible noise.

Oakshotte threw himself to the floor, empty-handed, the revolver broken. He spun around to face whomever had fired. In the doorway, a figure stood in long coat and black business suit beneath. He had peppered hair and a stern face. He held an elongated pistol in his hand, fitted with a heavy silencer thick and sleek, heavy with ultra-modern magic. Smoke poured out the barrel. The moment held, then passed.

There was a heavy sound, the sound of thunder in the room. A guard fired on them from behind. The man's chest open up in a show of horror. A speckle of blood flecked onto Oakshotte's face as Cory and Oakshotte's savior was blasted through.

"My Lady!" the guard cried out. "She's down! In here!"

He fired again, and the weapon roared. Oakshotte watched as the dying man's chest blew out. The stranger looked at Cory and tried to say something, then fell to the floor.

Oakshotte lurched to his feet and fell upon the guard with his bare hands. He gripped the guard's neck and heaved with all of his might. The guard went face-first into the wall, and immediately collapsed. The odd bullpup rifle he'd carried clattered to the stone floor. A second guard burst into the room.

Oakshotte reached back and brought his first forward as hard as he could. He connected the man's head with a jarring shock, and bone crunched sickeningly beneath Oakshotte's fist. The guard went down like dead weight.

Oakshotte looked back at Cory. The Phoenix Lord snarled over the woman's body, her destroyed face contorted in pain. All of the strength had gone out of her. Cory wavered on his feet, pulled down by the weight of the corpse.

"John..." Cory said. He looked at the man who had saved them, then fell.



John. John Brozeck was dead. Cory's heart sagged under the weight of it. Dead, his life force snuffed out when Cory had been unable to help him, unable to move. Helpless. The room tilted and gave way. Dimly, Cory knew he was on the floor. Something tore inside of him. He couldn't move. Blood rushed out of Cory's chest.

John was dead. How would he tell Jack? Dead...

Cory heard Neco's maddened scream and looked up.



Oakshotte fell to his knees at Cory's side. The wound in Cory's chest was deep. Panic fluttered in Oakshotte's throat.

"Medic!" he yelled. "Medic!"

Hollow shots answered him. The Raeford troops outside had Oakshotte's men pinned. He looked down at Cory's face, then followed his Lord's gaze to the black glass globe. Oakshotte saw the desperation, the yearning in Cory's eyes.

Sir Oakshotte didn't know why he did it. Later, when he tried to tell the story, he said something about the way the light had hit the surface of the glass, that it had somehow spoken to him. But that was poetry, something he'd picked up from the bards he liked to listen to when he wasn't occupied by his duties in the field.

Really, Oakshotte would think, he'd just gotten lucky. That's it. That's all there was to it.

Oakshotte crossed the room without a further thought. He tried to put his hands on the glass orb, but struck an invisible barrier as hard as steel. Oakshotte sensed the power of the pedestal as it protected the dark sphere. He howled in frustration. The barrier held against the strength of his hands. Behind him, Cory chest rattled with the sound of a wet breath.

Oakshotte turned and blindly reached down to the floor. He whipped around and swung with every ounce he could muster, and Cory's sword screamed into the glass sphere's shield. A great cascade of crystal noise exploded. The orb shattered. There was an impossible sound, and then great light.

Cory's body flung upright into the air, arms outstretched, his eyes wide, his mouth open and howling. A great head of burning air, the dragon, pierced the lower dimensions of reality and looked upon Cory with a heavy, alien stare. The air about the Phoenix Lord caught fire. A malevolent halo encircled Cory's head. The room fell apart. Part of the ceiling fell as the wall caved in.

Oakshotte ran through the flames and the falling walls, the crashing ceiling. Burning pages whirled about him. The dragon Neco was free. The Element's prison had been destroyed.

"Out!" Oakshotte yelled.

The soldiers scattered. They dragged the wounded that they could. Oakshotte pushed for the exit. Part of the floor collapsed behind him. Sirs Daniels, Pendleton, Cale, and Lady Jefferson never made it out. Burton Hall wailed as the heat rose. They broke out onto the grass lawn and turned to watch in disbelief. Horrified, Oakshotte could only imagine what it was like inside the Vale. The building went white hot. Concrete burned and steel support beams turned to puddles before their eyes. The heat forced them back. The grass nearby browned and began to smoke.

"Where's Cory?" Sir Spade demanded. Helpless, Oakshotte pointed back at the collapsing inferno. One of the pillars broke free and rolled for the street. The Element, ghostlike, flew unhindered by the wreckage and soared for the sky with a deep, ages-old roar. Neco rose overhead. It was a brilliant, burning, low hanging star.

The Phoenix Lord emerged from Burton Hall's remains, a figure of darkness amid the impossible fire. Cory silently walked to the silent, awed men. The wound on his chest was closed, and in its place was an ugly, twisted pink scar. Cory's eyes burned. His face was unearthly and calm. He looked up at the dragon and watched it climb for the heavens.

"Are you all right?" Oakshotte asked his Lord.

"I am fine," the Phoenix Lord said, his voice a strange thing. Oakshotte let out a breath.

"Okay, pack it in, we've got to get out of the area and to our exit route..." Oakshotte said.

"The Capitol," the Phoenix Lord said.

"Sir?"

"Tell them we are coming," said the Phoenix Lord. "Have the irregulars press the attack. We strike the Dominus tonight. Get in your vehicles. Follow me."

Cory walked slowly to his motorcycle, straddled the seat, and switched on the engine. Oakshotte caught up with him and put his hand on Cory's shoulder.

“My Lord!” Oakshotte yelled. “Wait! Please! The men inside. In the fire...”

Cory turned to look Oakshotte in the eyes, and Oakshotte looked into the face of something unknowable. He pulled his hand away in fear.

“Try to keep up, Sir Oakshotte,” Cory said. “Tell my warriors to hurry.”

Overhead, the Element of Discord let out a thunderous, horrible sound. It rolled out over the Shadow, a blast-wave of power, anger, pent up rage. It blew into the cracks and pores of the city, blew through the portals of Vales up to five miles away. Across the Mirror, a sensation of righteous anger throbbled into the landscape, and into the darkened houses and the quiet, curfew-laden streets.

Again, the dragon roared.

It called out anger, in hatred of all cages, all walls, all chains. It called out against the iron hand of oppression, against the prying electric eyes, the secret ears in the telephone switches, the holding cells and the barbed wire. It sung a song of broken glass, a serenade of molotov cocktails and bombs and sniper fire. It brought its terrible voice high and sent static buzzing into radio broadcasts. It brought its voice low and made compass needles spin like tops. It called for broken crowns and overturned thrones. It called deep into the dreams of the sleeping, and whispered into the ears of those who were awake.

*Get up.*

*Go out your doors.*

*Raise up your fists, your swords, your voices, your guns.*

*Go.*

*Do it now.*

*Go out onto your streets, forbidden to you by those who hold their might above your heads. Go out there and find them. Find them and topple them. Burn them out. Tear them limb from limb. Do what you must.*

*Take back your land from the control of the oppressor. Take it back. Cast the false kings down from their mighty, lofty thrones.*

*And do it in my name.*

*Do it in the name of Discord.*



16  
*Capitol*

Karl's emergency phone went off.

"Fuck!"

He dodged behind a pillar of the parking ramp and pointed his rifle at the ceiling. Kieger picked up the slack and got into Karl's old position behind the concrete barrier. They were running low on ammo.

"What!" he barked.

"Big! It's Ruby!"

"What?"

"It's Ruby!" the phone cried.

"What do you want? I'm kinda busy!" There was a ping and a handful of dust exploded above Karl's head. Crap. Crossfire. He lay down on the hard floor.

"Just got a call from the Finn," Ruby told him. "They did the thing."

"Well, thank fucking God," Karl said. "It's getting pretty heavy out here. And they said Saint Paul didn't know how to throw a party!"

"No, boss... they're coming to you. They want to take the Capitol."

"The Capitol... that Capitol?" Karl got up and pointed with the rifle one-handed. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"That's what he said, man," Ruby came back. "That's all I got."

"God dammit!" Karl exclaimed, exasperated beyond words. The city was swarming with National Guard, SWAT, Highway fucking Patrol, even. News helicopters, military helicopters, Air National Guard buzzing the skyline and dropping five-hundred pounders on them if they were caught out in the open. The air was heavy with smoke, burning tires, buildings on fire, tear gas.

"Fine, Ruby, fine," Karl muttered. "I'll do it. Karl out." He shut down the phone. Kieger made a surprised noise and spun around, a hole in his right shoulder, messy, wet. Bullets sang in around them.

"Shit! Hit, hit!" Kieger said. "Aw, fuck me." He'd dropped his rifle.

"Fix that," Karl ordered. "I know you can. Close that hole up and find your damn gun. You ought to be more careful. Dontcha know there's people out there who want to kill us?" He tabbed his radio to Crystal. "Hey, hot-cheeks."

"What?" Crystal replied.

"I got any smoke left?"

"A little."

"Burn it. And set off those secondaries we got left, too," Karl said.

"There's no one over there," Crystal told him.

"I don't care. Just want to make some noise." Karl opened his radio to his team leaders. "Okay, I want everyone who can still move to push north. I want all men north of 94 in ten minutes. Harvey, drop five of your finest on the Xcel, just to scare 'em. Then soften up this big pretty white building north of me. We're taking the Capitol."

●

Karl's transmission ended. The Blackguard soldiers gripped their weapons tighter. Taking the Capitol hadn't been part of the plan.

"Sarge?" Wes asked.

"I heard," Max said. "We'll get there. But we gotta tie up this approach for a little longer. If their reinforcements come, they'll come at us right here. Don't want that kind of trouble at our backs." He watched out of the open alleyway to the southeast, on Tenth near Jackson. It was open sightline for blocks over empty parking lots. Brick, multi-story apartments and shut-down industrial looked back.

"Are they coming?" Alex asked. She guarded Tenth to the west. Max still thought she looked silly, tiny girl like her, carting around that bayoneted M-1. The damn gun was longer than she was tall.

"Hush," Max said. Karl's guys had taken away the bridges. That meant any trouble from the airport had to go around to the south and cross the river on 494, then come get on 94, exit into downtown from the east. It would cost the enemy a lot of time, having to haul men and gear around like that. If they'd left when they should have, the Order's mundane military backup should be coming at them any minute now. To their north the sound of battle reigned.

The mundanes were hesitating to use air power against them. Max had only heard two reports of bombs falling from fighter jets. The mundanes may be too unwilling to bomb their own city in order to save it. Hell, maybe it was a call the Order made itself. Max didn't know.

Movement. Grocery store corner, one-hundred yards. It was the next wave of Minnesota National Guard, right on time. It was the point man of a body of troops. A whole platoon, probably.

"Alex," Max said, a sharp whisper. She and Wes stiffened up. They knew Max's tone.

"Where?" Wes asked. Max pointed, and Wes tried to see. Alex pivoted, and her heels made a grinding sound on the concrete.

"Grocery store, left corner," Max ordered. "Wound 'em."

Max heard the juice flow as Alex dialed the power in. She was a good shot without the juice, and would hit her mark for sure, now. Three, four seconds passed. The M-1 blasted. The soldier cried out as he fell. Right shoulder shot. Nice.

"Sniper!" a voice yelled. Someone behind the grocery called for a medic. That would tie them up for a bit. They'd hunker down for a good five minutes, worried about the next bullet that might sing in to them from a hundred possible places.

Max signaled for his people to move. Time to join the party to the north.

●

Jack scanned the approach through the lens of the scope. Another one. Figure in black, ski mask, assault rifle. Even so far away, Jack could tell he was Gifted. It was the way the figure moved, the surreal bravery, the speed and grace. Normal people just didn't look like that. No, this man was what the Greeks thought of as a hero, graced by the gods to do work

on the earth in their name. One of the blessed ones. One of the beloved.

Jack swiveled the long-barreled rifle on the bipod ever so slightly and lined up the crosshairs. Breathed in, easy breath, let half of it out, held it. Time slowed, ground to a stop. Silence in his ears. Squeezed his finger against the trigger, a slow, sure movement...

The rifle kicked back, solid, time flowing again, the punch in the shoulder, the roar in his ears. The man in the crosshairs fell down. Jack levered back the bolt and ejected the empty shell, slammed the fresh one in.

“Get up,” said the voice behind him. Corbel.

“What?” said Jack, disbelieving. He looked back.

“I said, get up,” Corbel repeated, and leveled the Desert Eagle at Jack’s head. “Let’s go talk to the boss.”

They hit the stairs. Jack kept his hands up near his face. Corbel was cold with anger, crisp. Jack’s face went red with heat. He was tired of the way Corbel looked at him. Tired of taking crap from this cheap suit.

“Am I making you look bad out there?” Jack sneered.

“What did you say?”

“I said, am I making you look bad? You Lacrutians aren’t worth shit when it comes to taking down those...”

Corbel lashed out, gun in hand. The pain erupted in Jack’s cheek, sharp and fast. Blood on his tongue, something cracked in his nose.

“Motherfuck...”

He hadn’t seen Corbel’s hand move.

“Has it occurred to you that Terishor seems, well, a little scarce out there on the battlefield?” Corbel asked him. They got to the ground floor and made it to the portal, flashed through. Corbel led him to the elevator, hand on Jack’s shoulder. Jack paused, his injured face momentarily forgotten.

“On the south end of town, where all that noise was coming from,” Jack said.

“No,” Corbel said darkly. “That was them. the Aruithineans, you shit. Your holy comrades in arms, pride of the Order’s fighting forces, the fucking shining Mithraic throwbacks that you are, they’re nowhere to be found! Hell, Jack-o, you’re the only member of Terishor actually engaging the enemy! And you know, I’m wondering why that is.”

Not possible, Jack thought. I’ve seen the deployment reports. Hell, there’s a PD7 power armor squad on the ground at the Saint Paul airport, just across the river. There’s no way that Terishor wasn’t out there, yet.

“You’re wrong,” Jack said through his wet mouth. His nose ran with blood. Fucking Corbel. You won’t get away with that, hitting me. “Call them and find out.”

“This has been going on for a fucking half hour!” Corbel exploded. “Don’t you think the alarms over at Camp Ripley have tripped? Or Fort fucking Snelling? The call was sent! Terishor isn’t coming!”

Not possible, Jack thought again. It just doesn’t make sense. Dad wouldn’t do such a thing. Makes no sense at all... They rode down the elevator into the underground levels. They passed a pair of Lacrutian sentries wearing ill-fitting battle armor and unscathed helmets, carrying rifles that gleamed in the florescent light. They were rifles that had never seen the dirt of a battlefield.

The secretary’s desk was empty. Corbel steered Jack into Lexington’s office. The

lights were off. The Dominus' face glowed from the screens on his desk. His eyes caught sight of Jack's face and burned into him with a scowl.

"On your knees," Corbel said, and kicked Jack's legs out from under him. "Here he is, my Lord." Lexington didn't bother to look at Jack.

"Terishor hasn't answered the distress call, and no word from the Raeford leadership," Lexington said. "I just got an observer over to the university, and Calibri's Citadel is in ruins."

Jack's head buzzed with the news. Corbel stood agape.

In light of this..." Lexington stood, "I want you to get every Lacrutian, Alturist, Raeford, and Church agent you can muster. Round them up and put them into Pro-Gate uniforms. The governor has just signed the Emergency Order granting martial powers through the corporate policing contract. I want this city wiped clean."



Security Officer Coolie rode in the passenger seat of the patrol car. Hunter cars, they called them. Armored glass and body panels, enough to stop a .357 Magnum at three feet. They had crash bars on the front and a real engine, not some rice-burner Japanese piece of crap. A real car. Tate drove, like always.

There were a lot of new guys at load-out tonight. Supplemental workers, they'd said, from Wisconsin and Illinois. Good thing they had those new cruisers in the warehouse on University. Management had been thinking ahead for once. Radio chatter was heavy. Streets were dark and empty, and Coolie felt a strange sense of not belonging.

"New procedures, huh?" Tate said.

"Uh, yeah," Coolie said. He scrolled down the electronic notebook, which felt heavy in Coolie's hands. Must be the crash padding. He found the protocol list for Martial Law enforcement. "Do you know if we're in Class One or Two?"

"It's Class Three," Tate said.

Three? Jesus.

"Uh, okay," Coolie found the instructions. "Martial Law Class Three environment. Crowd control and denying enemy movement..."

It was going to be a bad night, Coolie thought. The word 'enemy' stood out on the screen, and his stomach tightened up with nerves.

They got to their work zone, and two other Hunter cars were already there. The roadblock was up and the guys had their battle rifles out, and the flares were lit, just like the book said. Tate pulled into position to make a wall of cars angled forty-five degrees to the street. To the north, Saint Paul was on fire.

"Would you look at that," Tate said.

"Yeah, fucking Red Hand again," one of the other officers said.

"Using mortars, heavy machine guns... it's like fucking Baghdad up there."

"So, where's our stop line?" Coolie asked. One of the officers pointed down the street to two distant road flares, one further than the other.

"See that far flare? That's two hundred yards. Next one closer is one-fifty. That's the warning shot. The gas station is one-hundred yards. That's the shot to the engine. They

make it to the red house, that's fifty yards and it's go time."

Coolie felt a chill.

"Got it," he said. Got it.

The radio went off, warning chime. One of the other guys got it. He said a few things, listened to a voice, then got out of the car.

"They just had someone try to run the line over at Robert and Thompson. Shot up the car, coupla casualties," he said. "Don't know if they were armed, but they might have been insurgents. Command just moved everyone up to Full Alert."



The Ghost screamed and howled. The wind buffeted his hair and pressed hard against his chest. Cory leaned low and let the beast surge. The empty freeway on the Shadow beckoned him with its dreamscape, its openness, its simplicity. The reflection of Saint Paul loomed large in the sky. Above the city, the dragon-star burned. Neco sang its plaintive roar, and Cory smiled, and felt a chill of duality. Part of him was detached, maddeningly happy in the hell of the world. This is how the dragon feels, Cory thought. At peace with itself.

The other part of Cory hid from the light, a wretched thing, a knot of pain and sorrow. John was dead. Cory wanted to shriek in misery against the wind, but instead did nothing. Cory buried the ball deep inside himself, further into the darkness. The city came into view.

Cory took the Fifth Street exit off of 94 and let the engine snarl lower. Neco called in the cosmic skies above.

*Free. Free to fly. Free to burn in the hearts and minds of men.*

*Free to drink from the fires of my Domain.*

*Free.*

Cory entered a tunnel and glanced into the rearview. He caught sight of headlights, his Ash Knights behind him, their cars struggling to keep Cory in view. The roar of the Ghost's engine surrounded him in the tunnel's hard echo. Out the other end, the city stood suddenly large before him. A heavy military vehicle, hard and gray, blocked the road ahead. Cory leaned on the brakes.

Something alien and angry snarled at him from the vehicle's roof, a chopping, repetitive sound, thup-thup-thup. The road split open in a wall of shrapnel, craters, smoke. Shards of road split away. The automatic grenade launcher swept the road back and forth. The Ghost shuddered and threw Cory airborne.

*Killing machine.*

A moment of split time.

Cory worked the tumble and righted himself in slow motion. He looked beneath himself and saw the fiberglass and rubber sheer free of the warping, wrecked frame, the Ghost going end over end, a cascade of disaster. Then the road loomed large in his eyes, and Cory stretched in panic and arched his back. Burning wings caught the air and threw him skyward. The armored personnel carrier swept beneath him.

*Yes. Fly.*

Cory wrenched around in time to see the first grenades come down at the caravan in the tunnel. He dove at the military vehicle's roof. Air whistled in his ears as he hardened his body and braced himself. Cory sent fire into the air around him a moment before impact.

*No mercy.*

The concussion threw him wide. He landed roughly. His left arm was torn and broken, something wrong with it, the muscle not right. Neco howled in madness and joy in the sky above. Its power filled Cory's body and righted his gnarled limb. The dragon was proud of him. Cory stood and smiled, and flung away the torn bits of canvas and plastic that had been his armored vest and battle harness. The ruin of the Stryker finished raining down upon him as the first car of the caravan skidded to a stop. Cory drew his sword.

A wave of power told Cory that a Vale was nearby. He walked to the edge of the bridge and looked down at 35E below him. Twists of roadway made the landscape into a concrete maze of hard walls and disjointed tunnels. Memories flashed before his eyes. Maps and GPS screens in the cab of a delivery truck, smell of sweat and exhaust, a small knot in his back. He stepped in front of the pickup. Oakshotte looked through the windshield at his leader.

"I know where we have to go," the Phoenix Lord said. "Follow me." In the Shadow's sky above, the dragon gave out a roar.



Corbel opened the safe in his darkened office and removed the hard plastic case. The problem with guns, he thought as he opened the case, is that there are so many ways for Gifted to deal with them. Magic armor, kinetic shields, warping space about their bodies... Real fights, serious fights, always ended up face to face, anyway, where the combat abilities against the mind and the reality warping of flesh could take hold. Long distance meant throwing bits of dumb metal at supersonic speeds, and not a whole lot of damage.

Damage. Corbel smiled at the thought. The two magazines blazed in his eyes. Godkillers, the tech had called these bullets. Armor-defeating, heal-resistant, little Sciceric reapers. Corbel ejected the unspent magazine from the Desert Eagle and slotted in the new, heavy one.

He rode the elevator back up and crossed into Incarna. A dead sheriff's deputy lay sprawled on the stone tile. Corbel sighed. Did he have to do everything around here? He pulled into himself and was swallowed by an ink shadow. And then Corbel was gone.



"Go go go go!" Karl shouted, and threw a handful of bullets into the capitol building. Sweat stung his eyes. His right shoulder was bruised, his left forearm bleeding.

Kieger ducked and wove across the street, into the cover of trees and bushes. They were almost there. A hail of rounds pinged off the stone as more fire sounded in. Jackel's team had made it to the parking garage where Karl had been when Ruby called him. Jackel's gunners gave Karl cover fire and kept the guards' heads down. National Guard at the Xcel had been stopped cold by Frag's crew. Which was a good thing, since Harvey and the mortar team had gone and gotten themselves killed by a helicopter's rocket.

Karl's rifle went click. He winced inwardly and fast-changed the mag. Last one. Thirty shots left. Kieger crawled up on his belly and threw two shots into the capitol building's front door. Karl looked back in time to catch Sergeant Rivers and his pack of Blackguard break cover and begin to haul straight up the capitol building's front lawn sidewalk, all jacked for running, moving at highway speed. Jackel saw them, too, and opened up with the SAW to cover. Autofire peppered the front of the government building. Karl got ready to move. Three, two, one.

He threw his frame up off the lawn and ran, big thighs pumping. An angry rattle of shots came from the first floor window on the east side corner, all at him, all wide. Gunfire came from the Jackel crew behind him, and thunder called from the running pack on the lawn. Karl hit the dirt and Kieger landed next to him, out of the gun's arc. They'd have a few seconds before the guy in front of them had a chance to switch windows. Karl raised the AR-15 back up and popped a shot off at the window the guard would want to appear in. His ears rang in the tempest.

"Go, go!" he shouted. "Kieger!" Karl looked over into the mess where Kieger's face used to be.

"Mother..." Karl said.

"...Fucker," said a voice from behind. An earth-splitting sound, a dull roar. Karl's head hit the ground, eyes wide, muscles insane from confused impulses. Fading, fading... into the black.

Damage.



"Sir, the enemy is outside the Citadel," the security officer said. "Your helicopter is over the city's Shadow, now."

"Best bring it down here, then," the Dominus replied.

"Yes, my Lord."

They'd pay for this. Brozeck for treason, the Terishor officer corps for crimes of dereliction. Hanging him out to dry like this. Failure to respond to emergency requests, for the burning hole that was Burton Hall. Callah Calibri, the Province's First Scion of Raeford, was dead. North Garden would be the permanent black spot of his career. Lexington balled his fists in rage.

And now this. He'd have to abandon his personal office, his proper and lordly throne. The seat of the Dominus' power. Because of trash. Filthy, armed trash.

"Your father is out there," Lexington said. "Traitorous worm. How do you feel about your old man, Jack, knowing that he's made such a mockery of the oath he swore?"

Jack bit his tongue.

"I asked you a question, Sergeant." Lexington set a gleaming metal briefcase on top of his desk and opened it. He pulled open drawers and threw in files, thick envelopes, compact discs, flash drives.

"The Station Chief..." Jack began.

"Let's call him the condemned," Lexington interrupted. "It's been a long time since we've properly crucified anyone around here." He drew a semi automatic pistol from inside his jacket and pointed it at Jack's head. With his free hand he pulled a set of wrist

binders from the desk drawer. Lexington stalked over to Jack's side. "Please go on. The condemned..." he said helpfully.

The Dominus threw Jack onto his stomach.

"Hands behind you," the Dominus snarled. "Now, the condemned. How do you feel about him?"

The thick cuffs locked around Jack's wrists. Lexington willed the Talismans to activate, and Jack felt the shock tingle up his arms as his power ran out of him.

"What are you doing?" Jack shouted.

"Do you want to live?" the Dominus said into his ear. "Think about it, Jack. Think hard."



There was someone by the gas station. Coolie hadn't seen them right away. Dressed in black, he'd mistaken them for a shadow next to the dumpster. But movement had given them away.

"Hey, Tate."

"Hmmm."

"I see somebody over by the dumpsters out there."

"Where?" Tate said.

"There, see?" Coolie said. "By the BP."

"I don't see anybody."

"There's somebody out there."

"What's he saying?" one of the other officers demanded.

"Says there's someone out by that gas station," Tate replied.

"They can't do that," said the other. "It's after curfew. They can go to jail for that. Hell, they can get shot for that."

Coolie winced at the way the officer had said it. Like he thought the idea of shooting someone for being out after dark was a good thing. He looked at Tate to see where he stood on it, but Tate's face was cold and unreadable.

"So what do we do?" Coolie asked.

"We go get 'em," the first officer said. He got into his Hunter car and his partner followed suit. They fired up the engine and peeled out. The remaining pair edged up to the hood of their car, bundled with excitement. One grinned with fused jaws.

"Is that right?" Coolie asked Tate.

"I guess so."

The Hunter pulled hard into the BP's pump area, and the lights flashed a cold pair of beams on the figure. She turned and ran around to the other side. The car followed, and skidded to a halt. Coolie heard the shouts, muffled by distance. The girl screamed. She sounded young. She was scared.

Coolie realized he was holding his breath.

She screamed again. Was she crying?

"What's taking them so long?" Coolie asked aloud. He hated the way his voice



sounded. Here he was, squeaking like a damned rookie in front of Tate.

“Dunno.”

She shrieked, piercing, high, sobbing. It echoed up the street, a football field away.

“God damn,” Coolie said. He shivered.

“Stun gun,” Tate said, voice flat.

“She must be kicking and spitting something mean,” said one of the other officers. He laughed nervously.

The radios in the two remaining Hunter cars crackled simultaneously. In stereo, the men heard, “There’s another one. Suspect male, approximately sixteen years of age, white, wearing jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. Request backup.”

“We got it,” Tate said. He touched Coolie’s arm, and Coolie twitched at the sudden contact. “Come on.” They got into the car and Tate rolled out. “Seat belt,” he reminded Coolie.

Tate drove swift and smooth, and came around the back. They had the girl on the ground, hands on her head, no cuffs. One of the officers had the stun gun pointed at her, the wires strung to her thigh. The other had his handgun on the boy, who hung out of stun gun dart range. He shouted something to the girl as Tate drove up.

“Get on the ground!” the officer yelled. Tate opened the door and came out, pistol drawn. He put the bead on the kid. Coolie fumbled with the latch that held the shotgun in place, finally got it free, opened the door.

“On the ground! Hands in the air!”

“You’re hurting her, you piece of shit! Let her go! Let her go right now!” The boy’s face ran hot with tears, his hands clenched, knuckles white. Coolie got behind the Hunter’s door like he was supposed to. The shotgun was heavy and slippery in his grip. Nausea hovered in his stomach. There was a distant roar, like the rumble of a train, far away. Something about it stuck in Coolie’s head. There weren’t supposed to be any trains running, not with the Martial Law, the curfew...

“On the ground or I’ll shoot!” the officer said.

“Hands up!” the other officer said. He took his eyes off the girl, and she saw it, started to reach for the ‘trodes stuck in her leg. The officer looked back and caught her, and pulled the trigger. Electricity crackled.

She screamed again, a white hot noise. The boy recoiled, then tensed, ready to run at them. Panic fused in Coolie’s brain.

“Get on the ground, boy!”

“On the ground!”

“Get down! Down!”

“Hey!” a man yelled. Coolie whipped to the right, shotgun in place on his shoulder. Two men, one greying, the other tall, big, like a lumberjack, an aluminum baseball bat in his meaty hand.

“Back up!” Coolie shouted. “Drop the weapon.”

“You’re not cops!” the older one said. “You don’t have the right!” Tate pawed his vest-mounted radio mic.

“Backup. Get over here,” Tate said.

“You don’t have jurisdiction to enforce Martial Law!” the lumberjack said. “You’re

fucking glorified rent-a-cops! Get the fuck out of my neighborhood!” He took a step closer, his face red.

“Drop your weapon!” Coolie shouted again. He tabbed the safety off. Deadly weapon, his mind told him. The bat is a deadly weapon. He’s danger close. You’ve warned him twice. Say it one more time.

“On the ground, boy!”

The girl wailed again. The officer had hit her with the juice once more. Coolie heard the third Hunter car rev up as it covered the distance from the roadblock to the gas station.

“Drop your weapon!” Coolie said one last time. The lumberjack took another step.

Fire, Coolie’s brain said. Two warnings, safety off, third warning, fire. That’s the procedure. Pull the trigger. It’s what you’re supposed to do. Pull the trigger. Quick. Do it.

The man with the bat took another step, leaned his shoulder down and started to charge. The bat swung back, reflected headlights.

Shootshootshootshoot...



They came through a tiny Vale on the corner of Kellog and Mulberry, a bare seventy yards from where the Phoenix Lord had demolished the Terishor APC. It was a little hole-in-the-wall greasy spoon, with four cracked red vinyl stools in front of the counter and a heavy air of spent grease. They stepped into Incarna Saint Paul and into an urban war zone. In a flash of power, the dragon broke through the Mirror above their heads. Now in Astral form, it called out a challenge to the world.

*Come out of your homes.*

*Let this be the night you call your anger to the stars.*

*Come to me.*

*Come to Discord.*

Spotlights and camouflaged troops awaited them at Xcel Center, four hundred yards to the southeast. Immediately, multiple machine guns lit up from afar, behind drab, temporary bunkers of sandbags and plywood.

Lady Jessica Carmichael sprinted east over the open streets amid tracer fire. The nearby Miller Hospital parking lot was awash in emergency vehicles. The perimeter was ringed by patrol cars. Beyond them flashed a carnival of red crosses and ambulance lights. Ahead of her, Oakshotte and the Phoenix Lord cut a path along the hospital’s southern edge. Behind her, a handful of the Knights of Lugh threw fire back at the distant National Guard, and the remainder scrambled to follow their leader with his terrible, alight eyes.

The hospital fell behind them. They beat through a line of trees and hit the hard surface of an on-ramp coming the other way, a singular thread from the tangled knot of ramps, freeway, road, and bridges that suddenly opened before them. A long run, hundreds of yards, and Lady Carmichael’s lungs went raw. Nothing tracked them, no shots were fired down from above. The sky was clear, save for the rumble of a distant fighter jet and a singular medevac helicopter, far to the south.

Ahead, the maelstrom of battle called. They came out from under a sweeping ramp above them, and suddenly Wabasha crossed their path. To the left, the open Capitol lawn bloomed. There was a shout of alarm as the Phoenix Lord ran upon the rear lines of the

irregulars and Blackguard. Jess wanted to fall to the grass, her athletic body empty, her muscles numb. The aged M-16 was a heavy burden. Thin, manicured trees gave sparse protection as they ran. She couldn't keep the pace up much longer. To her right, a dozen dark-clad figures sprinted along the eastern edge of the angled plots of grass, broken up by statues, trees, benches, shrubs. A buzz pierced the air just to the right of her face. Jess dove left.

Sniper, the thought flashed as she hit the grass on her shoulder, keeping the rifle away from the ground. She pawed and crawled on her elbows and knees, boot toes digging for purchase. A small tree, a bare foot across the trunk. Another shot, the crack from the muzzle clear from the capitol building's roof. Someone behind her shouted and fell. Jess looked up in time to see a Blackguard squad go in the front door of the proud white structure. Bright muzzle flashes punctuated the darkness of the Capitol's entryway.

Jess brought the rifle to bear and fired at the rooftop. Ba-da-dun. Ba-da-dun. She couldn't see a thing.

"I'm hit!" the call came from behind her. "I... I need a medic." He was one of the Ash Knights. Spade, Jess thought. "Oh. Oh God. Please help..."

Dammit. She didn't have the juice to keep up with this pace. She could patch Spade together - probably - in one go, if she could get her hands on him. But that wouldn't leave anything inside her for backup. And she'd really like to have one more shot of healing in her. In case, you know, she got shot for a change.

"Hold on!" she called back. She popped two more bursts up at the rooftop. Ba-da-dun. Ba-da-dun. That ought to keep the fucker's head down. Jess got into a crouch and ripped off another one. Ba-da-dun. Two of her comrades ran past her, toward the right side of the building where the Phoenix Lord's head was haloed by fire.

Ba-da-dun.

Something happened to her leg as it stopped working and she fell on it. A smash of hot pain blew up her body. A cry burst out her cracked throat. She never heard the shot. The flash was the same. Her sniper. God damn...

It hurt. She rolled onto her back and saw a gush of blood squirt up six inches from the messy hole. Then again. Then again. Artery. Jess put her hands on the hole and fought the sudden wall of dizziness. Spade groaned nearby. She'd almost made it. Dammit. Spade.

Jess, she thought. Jess, the shooter doesn't know. He doesn't know you can fix yourself. He's just baiting for as many as he can. He's not going for kill shots. And hell, he might pull out of there any second, with the enemy inside his building. Just wait him out.

Fuck, it hurt. Really hurt. Worse than when that thing on the shore had bit her hand, left a jagged gap in her palm, nearly tore half of it away. Worse than that. Tears rolled fast off her face.

The sniper doesn't know you can heal. Just do it. Fix the hole. Fix yourself. Then grab Spade and run for that stone ledge back there by the sidewalk. You might make it. You can keep Spade alive, you used to be paramedic, a real one. You can do this.

Hurt. Losing blood. Hands sticky.

Okay, okay.

I can do this.

Jess brought the power into her hands and told her flesh to mend. The energy flowed down her fingertips and the tissue ran back together, and pushed the ruined bullet out. Jess

gasped at the shock.

Don't screw up. Pretend to be hurt. She glanced at Spade, then down at her dropped weapon. Ready. One. Two. Three. Go.

She rolled right, got the rifle, then left and put her hand on Spade's battle harness. She hauled him backward. The air split behind her as a bullet cracked wide. Spade hissed between clenched teeth at the pain. Jess tried not to think about the sniper lining up another shot on her back as she ran. Come on. Almost there. Come on.

Then they were behind the ledge. She got low and began to work on Spade. His eyes were glazed from the shock. Jess pulled her messenger bag off and dug for her medic kit.

"You're going to be okay," she said. "Spade! Stay awake for me. You're going to be okay." Jess cut Spade's pants away and exposed the torn skin, the brutal wound in Spade's pelvis. A bleedout shot, crippling, nasty. That fucking sniper. She called out, "I need some juice over here! Right now!"

A horrific noise came from the field before her. The Phoenix Lord roared and there was a flare of burning light.

"Juice! Dammit, someone get me some fucking juice over here!" Someone jumped down next to her.

It was one of the irregulars dressed in black battle fatigues. Jess didn't know him. He scrambled to a crouch behind her ledge and checked the capitol building from behind his rifle sights.

"Mana, right?" he asked. "Here." The air shimmered around him, and Jess felt the energy rush into her. Then the fighter pulled himself to his feet and disappeared. Jess never saw his face. She turned back to Spade and put her hands to work.

"Here it comes, Spade," she said. "Here it comes." The power ran through her arms and out her fingertips. Spade grunted in surprise. His eyes flew open.

"Good boy," Jess said. She reached for her rifle and got up.



Cory pulled himself clear of the red haze, the stench of burning flesh and bleeding meat and the piercing, hungry call for more. His body was a tangle of pain. He bled from a dozen places. His knee was a hot demon that crawled up his thigh, and his collarbone was a pure nightmare. He pulled himself clear of the sharp, physical misery, and out of the chorus of guns that echoed long in his ears. Cory pulled back into himself and looked down through eyes that wavered from heat.

Down into Big Karl's shattered face. Lifeless, blank eyes, red ruin down his cheek, out his partially split mouth. The back of his head was a charred hole. Dead.

Panic and sorrow welled. Cory lost his breath. Gasped, as if he were drowning.

Not another one. Not again.

Dead, the word formed. Dead.

No. Not Karl, too. Come on. Not him, too. A canyon of hurt opened up at Cory's feet. Dimly, Cory was aware of Oakshotte and the Finn behind him.

Cory felt the magic on the bullet that had dug deep into Karl's brain. A tangled, cold web of power, a dark thing, an assassin's thing.

Dead.

Cory fell to his knees and dropped his sword. He put his hands on Karl's head. Tears broke Cory's vision. Sobs took away his breath. It welled and built. He couldn't breathe. His hands shook, and Cory felt his heart race faster and faster. His pulse slammed in his ears.

Something inside him broke.

It felt like the moment a storm finally pulled loose, after hour upon hour of clouds and pressure had built and built, immense and dark. At last. Release. At last, the dam burst.

Neco, in the dark veil of sky above, exploded into frenzy of fire and howling, bell-owing pain. The night was split by a burning orange burst of light. The shockwave rolled down into the Saint Paul streets. Glass shattered and stone cracked. White, hot ash began to rain down upon the city, as if it were snow.

Cory heard the drumming of guns calling to him from inside the Capitol's entryway. He looked down at himself. Bare chest crossed with fresh, pink scars. Torn fatigues and scraps of clothing smeared in gore. Big Karl's body rested at his feet. Cory looked down and succumbed to the rage.

*Revenge.*

Cory reached for his sword and stood. He called flame back into his monstrous talon at the end of his left arm and made the sword blade sing with powered hate. He screamed a challenge and surged forward with the might of burning wings. Oakshotte, ears ringing, half-deafened, scrambled to follow Cory up the unforgiving stone steps.

"Attack!" Oakshotte called.

"Attack!" the Finn yelled. He drew a Colt .45 from his side.

Mo-Fo and Sir Conner joined their shout. Two squads of Blackguard, wet with sweat, layered in dirt and blood and filth, surged forward. Lady Jessica Carmichael threw herself into the rushing throng.

"Attack!" Max shouted. They leapt up the steps to the building's front doors.

Cory crashed into the entrance hall. Bodies tangled on the wet, darkly streaked floor. A Blackguard soldier fired a chopped AK-47 upward into the vast rotunda before them, and the Vale's powerful portal beckoned a handful of steps away. Not yet, Cory thought. The killer. The cold bullets. He's out here. I feel him.

*Here. Here.*

The fistful of sharp, snarled, ice-cold bullets called to Cory's mind. There. To the right. Stairwell. Cory balled his hate up into a jet of flame and burst through the rotunda. He was stung by a handful of hail from above; the Blackguard returned fire. A woman in their ranks gave a battle cry. Cory roared the final steps into the hallway and threw the fire along the wall to the left, to the corner of the stairwell. Paint and wood singed and shrieked.

*Kill him. Kill him. Kill...*

The figure rolled low and came up with a heavy pistol in his hand, and to Cory's eyes the weapon looked like a nest of poison. The fire billowed and filled the air. It missed Karl's killer, went wide. He was too fast. An explosion, two, three as the killer fired, the oversized handgun sounded like a cannon, so close, the muzzle flash bright.

Cory stumbled as the shots caught him in the chest. Ice exploded inside him. Cory tried to push forward. He brought the sword arm back but lost his grip. He tried to make the fire come forth again. Nothing happened. He shuddered as the black fingers of the magic bullets spread.

Cory stumbled, and the sword fell to the floor.



Corbel spun to face the next attackers, behind the burning monster. Too late. Panic welled in the moment, grasping, turning...



Jess' guts convulsed as she saw the Phoenix Lord begin to fall, and saw the silhouette of the gunman as he turned. Then the view was blocked by the push of soldiers and weapons. She glanced over her gun sights and saw the Phoenix Lord reach for the wall. Jess surged forward and reached for him as the crescendo of guns erupted around her.



Max and Oakshotte and the Finn fired, rifle and revolver and handgun, and cut the suited gunman down. Corbel gasped and looked down as his heart gave way. Max cut the M-16 loose, impossible to miss, so close. The ruined man fell.

Cory's feet gave out. Jess caught him and helped lay Cory to the floor. Three wounds to the center chest, gushing lifeblood. She leaned down and tried to heal him and was repulsed by a wave of magic. It was like a slap of ice water on her chest. She looked down and couldn't see any change. Null bullets, she realized.

"He won't heal!" Jess shouted.

Numb, Jess tore for her kit. Men shouted around her, and there was gunfire from the main rotunda behind.

"What?!" someone pulled at her arm.

"The bullets!" she answered. "They absorb our healing!"

Not on my watch. The Master of the Order of Ashes isn't going to die.

She had to get those bullets out. Their healing was worthless until they got the magic metal out of the Phoenix Lord's body. He had maybe thirty seconds to live. Jess grabbed a scalpel and slashed into him.



*Brother.*

Cory opened his eyes and looked up into a woman's face.

"One!" she shouted.

He knew her but couldn't recall her name. Behind her, Cory saw Max and the Finn. Somewhere far away, Sir Oakshotte bellowed orders over the noise of gunshots and calling men. Cory's chest hurt. A spray of blood hit the woman's cheek. The Finn went pale.

"That's two," she said.

The building shook.

*Brother.*

Cory saw Neco's shadow on the vaulted ceiling, the Element's power bleeding through from the Astral Plane. The dragon's eyes burned, and then the massive beast moved down and enveloped them all. The room was flooded with the creature's presence. Cory's wounds began to close.

"Three," Jess said. The bullet felt cold in her wet hand. Cory's skin glowed hot and white.

*Brother, I am here.*

## *The City Falls*

The Dominus pushed Jack forward. Thick, luxurious carpet hushed their footsteps. Gilded mirrors and fine wood furniture watched them pass. Jack thought to the Grey Lodge, and was filled with a shame he couldn't name. At the end of the hall, a large oil painting of historical Saint Paul stood before them. Lexington muttered a string of words and the illusion broke with a torrent. A plain metal door remained in the painting's place, and outside Jack heard the thrumming of helicopter blades.

I can't juice myself up, Jack thought. These damn cuffs. And I can't fight worth a damn with my hands behind my back.

He'll shoot me if I try anything. I'll probably bleed to death before anyone finds me. With my luck, it'd be the rabble out there who get to me first. They don't seem to be the kind to take prisoners.

Jack stepped up to doorway and paused. Lexington forced the door open.

"Move!" Lexington snarled. Jack stepped forward. A short nub of a hall, then a door. The old man muttered curses under his breath and flipped back a hidden panel in the second door's frame. A keypad behind the panel. Lexington punched the number sequence with fat fingers. The door beeped and unlocked. He got a hand under Jack's biceps and hauled him forward.

Outside a roar of chopper blades. An unmarked Blackhawk waited on the street. They were on the north side of the capitol building. The Shadow seemed peaceful compared to the carnage of Saint Paul's Incarna. Two suited Lacrutian bodyguards stood in front of the helicopter door holding silencer-equipped MP-5's. The pilot revved the chopper engine when he saw the Dominus approach.

Fuck. Now or never, Jack thought.

Abruptly, Jack broke his stride and spun into Lexington's step. He shot upward with his shoulder. There was a satisfying crack against Lexington's chin, and teeth split.

"Uh," Lexington said.

Jack ducked his head and ran parallel to the Capitol. Bits of stone flung up about him as the bodyguards fired on reflex. Shouting behind him. His left shoulder blade burst open, he spun. Jack's eyes bulged with the shock. Somehow he kept his feet underneath him. He got around the corner of the north wing and skidded, scraped his knee open. Scramble, scramble.

"Kill him! Kill that bastard!"



Crew Chief Richard Warner watched the spectacle through night vision binoculars. He was on the rooftop of an industrial building, three hundred yards to the west of the Capitol.

"Take out the shooters," he said. The designated marksmen to his left and right each fired a single, neat, silent shot. The two Lacrutian gunmen fell to the street. "Surprise." Warner said, his face a cold smile.



“And now it’s decision time for the big boss man,” Warner continued. “Do I go after him myself? Is it worth it? No, no it’s not worth it. Save your own skin. That’s right. Get in the chopper. Get in.” Warner watched as the Dominus pulled himself into the aircraft and closed the sliding door.

The Blackhawk pushed for the sky, tucked nose, and hauled southeast. Probably for the Highland Citadel in Rochester. Warner’s smile broke wide open. Lexington was scared. Running scared. The little emperor had fled as his private empire burned and his capitol city fell. Ah, Rome.

“Take it down,” Warner said to the microphone.

Five Stinger missiles leapt from their shoulder-launched tubes in a raw semi-circle around the capitol. Too late, the helicopter pilot saw the launch blasts. Two heat decoys shot out of the heli, and one of the Stingers went astray. Four missiles found their mark. The Blackhawk split wide and birthed flaming fuel and a tornado of debris.

Warner powered up the ancient brick that was his secure, cross-Mirror Talisman phone. He dialed a number.

“Lieutenant Phillips,” the phone said.

“It’s done,” Warner said.

“Any sign of our First Scion?”

“Negative,” Warner replied. They both knew what their orders said about this. If Drake hadn’t checked in by the time the Dominus was neutralized...

“Very well,” Phillips said. “I’ll inform higher control that I have assumed command here.”

“Congratulations, Dominus Phillips,” Warner smiled. He always thought that Provinces worked best with Terishor at the helm. “What are your orders?”

“Button up everything important for the night. We’re not retreating from our posts, but we’re not going to fight these heathens on their own turf in the dark. Reinforcements from Camp Ripley will arrive within four hours of now. We’ll push the insurgents back into Maya by noon tomorrow.”

“Very well, Sir,” Warner said.

“Phillips out.”

Warner mulled it over. Objectively, it was a shame that Lexington had to die. Deaths of the Domini always shook up the Administration. Maybe this time some good will come of it. North Garden was a success, and the path was clear to bring the Province in line with the Hadrian Doctrine. And now, with the threat of domestic insurgency made real, the political will to fully realize Plan Fortress America was within their grasp.

They’d only needed a proper enemy.

And now, at last, they had one.



Below, Jack Quick blinked as he watched the crashed remains of the helicopter burn. Movement to his left. He turned and saw the Terishor agent in the street, and recognized him as an Operations agent by the equipment he carried and the black uniform he wore. Jack waited

for the Ops agent to reach him. Relief bloomed on Jack's face.

"Hi Sergeant," the agent said. "You're hit."

"Good to see you," Jack said. He managed to keep his voice low and sure, and put on a small smile.

"We'll get you out of those cuffs, get you patched up," the agent said. "But let's get you back to the van, first. There's all sorts of bad men out in the city tonight."



Saint Paul broke open. Rioters stole into downtown shops. Armies of scared, angry, dangerous citizens walked the streets, and the police and security forces were easy targets. Hundreds would die before the night was through. The National Guard held onto pockets of the capitol city through the long night. The soldiers and the masses came to a sort of understanding over the hours. The soldiers agreed to stay within their bunkers and roadblocks and walls, and the tens of thousands agreed to vent their rage elsewhere. Glass littered the street, and entire blocks of downtown burned to steel foundations.

Afterwards, the history books, newspapers, websites, news stories, videos, movies, documentaries... would call it the Saint Paul Riot, or the Red Hand Riot, named for the terror group blamed for the horrific bombing attacks on Saint Paul's twin city, Minneapolis, days before. But in what later became the Movement, the night had a different name - the Battle of the Twins.

The night marked the major emergence of a citizen militia that had organized underground, and seen some action the previous year. The announcement of the militia's arrival took shape in a shaky internet video that emerged within hours of the people's claiming of the capitol. The video showed the raising of a plain black flag above the American flag, flown upside down. The people spray-painted the capitol building's proud white stone walls with the words 'We Are Legion.'

After Neco had made Cory whole, they forced their way through the Vale doorway in the Capitol rotunda. The complex was deserted. The Aruithineans and Blackguard raided it for records, lists of numbers, computer hard drives, discs, everything they could carry. The rest they smashed to pieces, tore open, detonated. A massive safe in the Dominus' office remained out of their reach, its secrets safely locked away, the metal box impervious.

Word of a downed helicopter in the Shadow came across the Blackguard's radios. The shootdown had been spotted by a Collective artist from a quarter mile away. Cory sent a scout to see the wreckage. They didn't know for certain that the Dominus had been on the chopper, but it was worth checking out. But the bodies in the wreckage could not be identified, and time was not on Cory's side. There was no way to verify if the Dominus was dead.

"We can't stay," the Phoenix Lord said. "Gather what you can. Time to go."

The bloodied, weary Aruithineans and Blackguard arrived at the Shamrock Pub. They traveled in Incarna. The Order's troops had fled the field of battle, and didn't seem interested in leaving the relative safety of their Citadels. The real world drifted past.

The pub had stayed open that night, and no one barred their entry. It was a neighbourhood bar, after all, and locals felt safe enough to venture out of their homes to walk across the street. No one said anything to the combatants when they came in the front door, their clothes torn, and their faces tired and splotched with blood. The bar regulars seemed to know where the fighters had been, and knew better than to say anything of it. The Finn, Sir Conner, and Lady Carmichael

drove north with the bodies of their dead.

“To the fallen,” Sir Oakshotte toasted. Cory raised his glass and drank. The real wake wouldn’t come until tomorrow night, after the bulk of them had made the journey to Glasdun, and to true safety from Terishor reprisals. Cory pulled Oakshotte away from the others.

“What do I do next?” Cory quietly asked the great warrior.

“I guess that’s up to you, my Lord,” Sir Oakshotte replied.

“They’ll just keep coming at us,” Cory said. “It’s what they do. Karl taught me…” his voice wavered before he locked it down. “Karl taught me that the only way to beat them was to outlast them. Keep fighting while you change the culture into you. Make it a popular uprising, get the people on your side. So how do I do that?”

“Beats me,” Oakshotte replied. “You’re the one in charge, here. I don’t know anything about that kind of thing. I’m here to fight for you. It’s up to you to decide how.” Cory took a deep breath.

“I’m gonna go,” he said. “We don’t want to stay here too long. I want everyone back at the orchard by sunrise. We’ll leave for Glasdun at noon.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Cory found Max.

“I figure the backlash from this is going to come hard and fast,” Cory said.

“Yeah, me too,” the punk replied. “Lots o’ nasty. Heavy days ahead.”

“You and your people really came through tonight,” Cory said. “I know we wouldn’t have been able to do what we did without you and your men’s sacrifice.”

“Okay. Well,” Max shrugged. “We weren’t just gonna take it lying down. And it was nice to have someone out there with us.”

“So how about joining forces?” Cory asked. “Long term?”

“How you mean?”

“I figure we’re in this together,” Cory explained. “When the Soldiers of Control come out of their bases, they’re going to figure we’re in some kind of alliance and target us both anyway, your people and mine. So we can either stick together, or hang alone, right?”

“Okay. I follow,” Max said. “Well, here’s the deal. Blackguard serves to guard the Collectives and anyone else who’s unjustly getting their heads kicked in. I can’t just drag all of the Collectives into this. Wouldn’t be fair to them. But here’s what we can do.

“We’ll get some kind of declaration made by the Blackguard’s higher-ups,” Max continued, “figure out a way for people to get discharged from the militia. So they could up and join yours. Hell, a lot of guys, they’ve been waiting for the chance to go on the attack against those Order bastards for a long time. I can fill out a little army in no time.”

“I want to make it work,” Cory said. “If you think you can do that, then I say let’s do it.”

“You sure your people will go fer it?” Max crossed his arms. “There’d been some talk about you guys not liking ‘irregulars,’ something like that.”

“They will. They made me the Master of a knightly Order and gave me the authority to fight the Order in their name. So I’m going to raise an army and do it right.”

“Okay,” Max replied. “I’ll do it. I’ll shake it up the command chain and let ‘em know what’s going on.”

“Max?”

“Ya.”

“Thank you,” Cory said.

“Hey, I told ya before, anything you need. You saved my Mary.”

“Okay, Max,” said Cory. “We’ll call you in a few hours.”

“kay.” Max returned to the bar. The Phoenix Lord left the pub and went out into the night, alone.



Coolie sat on the locker room bench with his eyes closed, his head in his hands. The stink of sweat and deodorant permeated the humid air. The men that moved around him were quiet, their minds filled with the echo of radio calls, shouting, gunshots, sirens.

“Coolie.” It was the manager. Haplingberg. Coolie looked up to see the pudgy, balding man in the locker room doorway. Coolie got up and followed him into the hall.

“Listen,” Haplingberg told him. “I know the next few days are gonna be hard. You’ll want to time off. It’s standard procedure after the experience you’ve had.”

Haplingberg’s words brought Coolie back in time. The blast of the shotgun in his ear and against his right shoulder. Everything very clear. The lumberjack landed on the ground, hard and wet. He didn’t die right away. He bled and called for help. There was a lot of yelling. More people came out of their houses. Trouble from all sides.

They’d called for an ambulance, but Coolie knew then that there was no chance of it coming in time. Not with the city coming apart at the seams. The man died in the back of their patrol car, bleeding all over the seats.

Soon after that, the first rifle shot came in from the darkness, and Tate’s face was blown away.

Coolie shuddered.

“Don’t worry, Coolie,” Haplingberg said. “It always shakes a man up a bit, first time. You’ll be fine in a few days. And, you know, if you’re not up to going to the funeral, that’s okay. Don’t make you any less of a man.”

“I quit,” Coolie said.

“What?”

“I quit,” Coolie said with finality.

“Now why don’t you just slow down, there,” Haplingberg said, eyes narrowed. “No reason to do anything hasty. You’re shaken up. That’s fine. Take some time off. Think things through. It’s a rough job market out there...”

Coolie went back into the locker room and changed. Haplingberg stood next to him with a blank face.

“Don’t do anything you’ll regret, hey?” he whispered. “The video shows a clean shoot, all of it. You did great out there. You’ll get a promotion. Maybe get famous. That was heroic, what you did.”

Coolie pulled his ID badge out of his wallet and extended it to Haplingberg. The manager

kept his arms folded across his chest and refused to accept Coolie's badge.

"Fine," Coolie said, and let the thick piece of plastic fall to the floor. He grabbed his windbreaker and walked out.



Terry was awake. The sleeping bag underneath him did little to soften the floor, and pain rolled about his temples. He'd done the best he could to wrap the dream-stuff around his bruised mind, like magic gauze, but he knew it would be a long time before he felt himself again. The walls in the room were white, the floor hardwood. A supply room of some kind, long emptied and forgotten. It must be nice to have a Vale so large that whole rooms go unused for years, he thought.

Ellen was out in the hall, on her cell phone. Terry listened to her end of the conversation, mostly just to hear the reassuring sound of her voice. She was talking with Dell, or someone under Dell, Terry wasn't too sure. Ellen ended the call and came back in.

"Hey, you're up again," she said softly.

"Mmm," he nodded. Speaking was still difficult. The words just didn't want to form, and slipped out of his reach if he didn't concentrate.

"Things are calming down," Ellen told him. "The Sanctuary Cantina has been reclaimed by the Monitors. No sign of Gatz, though. Dell is out there in force, hunting for everyone who's gone missing. It's... it's a lot of people. I don't understand how the Order could do this and expect to get away with it."

"Didn't," Terry said slowly, deliberately. "Used Red Hand as the excuse to start it. Change the way mundanes thought. Usher in new changes. They knew the Free Societies would resist. So they did this. Preemptive."

"You think they want a war?" Ellen asked him.

"No," Terry replied. It was maddening, to have to speak so slowly. "Want everyone to back down, give them what they want. But if there's going to be a fight, they want to control it. Police state needs an enemy, a reason to be. But they made a mistake. They don't realize what Cory is."

"And what am I?" Cory asked from the doorway. Ellen spun in surprise.

"Oh my god!" she exclaimed. "Cory!" She reached him in a heartbeat and threw her arms around his neck.

"Are you okay?" Cory asked Terry, over Ellen's shoulder.

"Are you?" Ellen shot back, and ran her hands over his. She looked at the wrecked fatigues and boots, and the borrowed black battle jacket Cory now wore, bloodied and torn. Her hand paused at the sword that hung from Cory's waist.

"I'm fine," Cory said.

"You look like hell," Terry said with precision. His eyes were wet. Even through his renewed defenses and the psychic numbing the Bacchus people had put on him, Terry felt the psychic waves radiating from Cory.

"Terry, I have to tell you something," Cory said. He tried to steel himself. He had to make himself say it. He owed it to Terry to be the one who told him. "Karl didn't make it."

“Oh, no,” Ellen hushed. Her hands went up to her mouth.

Terry shook in a tight breath and quietly began to cry. Ellen spun around and looked at Terry, then knelt down next to him.

“At the Capitol,” Cory went on. “He didn’t suffer. He went fast.”

“He... wanted to go... like that,” Terry said. “Doing something like that...” Ellen hugged him close.

“It’s my fault,” Cory said.

“No,” Ellen said.

“Yes, it’s mine,” Cory replied. His voice seemed very far away. “He was doing what I’d told him. This goes on me. I’m sorry, Terry. His death is my fault.”

Terry tried to pull himself together, but couldn’t.

“Fucker,” Terry cried. “That fucker died on me.” Ellen soothed his hair back with her hands. She looked up at Cory.

“Can you give us a couple of minutes?” she asked.

Wordlessly, Cory withdrew from the room and shut the door behind him. He put his back to the wall and slunk down to the floor. He knew he should be crying, too, but no tears would come.

Am I the monster, now? he wondered. Is this what it’s like, to be a devil among men? How many am I going to see destroyed before everything is over?

Cory waited a while, but the door didn’t open. He went downstairs and found a table with coffee and ham sandwiches. Strange faces looked him over but didn’t say anything. His hand shook around the styrofoam cup, and he steadied it with effort.

Calm, he thought. Be calm.

He wanted to leave, but knew he had to go back up there. He had to face the pain he had caused Terry. Cory wanted to console him, to somehow ease the damage, but he knew that he couldn’t. He was helpless against the great grey tide. A half hour passed, and Cory made his boots drag him back to the threshold of Terry’s room. Cory knocked.

“Come in,” Ellen said.

Terry looked stronger, somehow, more present, fuller. He took a steadying breath.

“The dragon is out, isn’t it?” Terry asked.

Cory nodded, and began his story. Cory told his two friends what had happened; an hour stretched into two, and the story spilled out between them as Ellen and Terry curled up on the makeshift bed, and Cory sat crosslegged in front of them. He felt empty, like he was someone else watching the three of them, but he pushed himself on to give them the words that made up his history. When it was over, they said their goodbyes.

“When I’m better, I’ll come to you,” Terry told him. “There’s a lot to be done. You’ve started a revolution, or something close to it. You’ll need a lot of help.” Cory saw the fearful look in Ellen’s eyes, but pretended that he hadn’t seen it.

“When you’re able,” Cory told him. “I’ve got to go.”

“Take care, sweetie,” Ellen said.

“You too.”

Heather sat on her leather couch, wrapped in a luxurious silk bathrobe. Her face was red and her eyes were puffy, and the flooded city of New Orleans showed on the flat screen television in front of her, the colors outstandingly vivid. A news show. Hurricane Katrina coverage, just like all of the other channels.

She looked down at the finger of plastic and noted the color indicator with dismay. Another one. Positive. The third in a row.

Pregnant.

The word swam in her head.

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

She'd been late before, but never like this. She'd bought the tests that afternoon, and let them sit on the coffee table for hours and tried not to think about it.

Just do the tests, she thought.

But what if I am?

Just do the tests.

And then she'd done them. And now...

There was a knock at the door. In a daze, Heather stood up and glided over to it. The room didn't seem stable. She looked through the security lens. Brian, the building's night security guard, stood in his uniform next to two men in dark government suits. Heather pushed the Talk button next to the door.

"Hello?"

"Miss Cook?" Brian said.

"Yes?"

"Miss Cook, IAS," one of the men said. They held up ID badges. "We have some questions we'd like to ask you."

"Oh. Okay." She opened the door.

"Thanks," the other man said to Brian. "We'll take it from here." They walked into her apartment and shut the door behind them.

"What do you..." Heather said. "This is kind of a bad time. What do you want?"

The first one spoke again.

"I'm Field Agent Quincy, and this is Field Agent Flint," Jack Quick said. "We'd like to ask you about Cory Williams."





## *About the Author*

Adam Riemenschneider is a game designer and small press publisher, and has been an avid role player for over twenty years. He lives with his girlfriend near Minneapolis, Minnesota, where they are raising a demonic cat.