

FAIRY

CHOCOLATE

O see ye not yon narrow road,
So thick beset with thorns and briers?
That is the path of righteousness,
Though after it but few enquires.

And see ye not that braid braid road,
That lies across that lily levin?
That is the path of wickedness,
Though some call it the road to heaven.

And see ye not that bonny road,
That winds about the fernie brae?
That is the road to fair Elfland,
Where thou and I this night maun gae.

"The Ballad of True Thomas"

Standin at the crossroad
risin sun goin down
Standin at the crossroad babe
risin sun goin down
I believe to my soul now,
Poor Bob is sinkin down.

"Crossroads Blues"

Robert Johnson

PROLOGUE

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

Chapter 1

*Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it;
Nothing in it, nothing in it,
But the binding round it.*

Traditional Children's Song

The darkness was absolute, the color of the insides of your eyelids at the bottom of a mine at midnight. The voice in the darkness smelled like dust from empty rooms.

"It's a dead ending. You lobsticker, I *told* you we should have gone widdershins at the last corkscrew. Put your ear to the ground and find out how close they'll be coming behind us."

The second voice was the color of moldy cheese. "As you say," it grunted. There was a soft rustling sound, then a "whoops" and some scrabbling.

"What's wrong?"

"Dropped the ear."

"Dundernoodle! Blatherscate!"

"Wait, here it is."

"Well listen, then!"

Everything was silent for a bit. Then Moldy-cheese said thoughtfully "They're at the corkscrew. Five of them, plus twelve of the Pack. They're on our scent, sure enough. Fine beasts by the sound of them ... one of them was bred by the Hunter himself, if I mark his cry aright. His dam was..."

"Will you forget the thrice-manged hounds already!" Smells-like-dust snapped. "What about that little gift we left for them?"

"They haven't reached it yet. The lead one's stepping close and ... ah! There it goes!"

Smells-like-dust chortled like wood rubbing glass. "Oya! I knew that last firestring would come in useful-like. Did it devivicate them? All bemortified, eh?"

Moldy-cheese seemed to be considering. "I fear not," it said at last. "They'll be having cantrips of their own, I reckon. By the sound one of them threw a deadsheet over it. They've found this passage now, certain sure." There was more scrambling as the owner of the voice stood up.

"Shatter it and sprinkle it," said Smells-like-dust quietly. "Not much time left now. Anything else left in your bag?"

"Besides the ear? Let me check." There was further rustling. "Well, the Morcan, of course."

"If we knew how to use the Morcan we wouldn't be in this mess, simpleton! The plan was to steal it and get it to Her! If only they hadn't got wind of us so soon..."

Moldy-cheese sighed like wind in moss. "If only she'd won the battle instead of getting banished all these years; if only the king hadn't been able to call up his army so quickly before that; if only someone hadn't betrayed her to the king in the first place; if only if only we'd picked the winning side once upon a time instead of the one that got torn apart like a loaf of bread in a duckpond. If wishes were owls, chipmunks would hide."

"Quiet!" shrieked Smells-like-dust. "Anything else?"

More rustling. "Just the little threshold the dwarf gave us."

"How little?"

"Too little for us."

"Maybe too little for you, you great shambling fungus-brained excuse for a stable-sniffing courtling. Put it up against the dead ending there and let's take a look at it."

"As you say."

A patch of filmy blue appeared in the darkness, the color that the afterimage of a bright light makes on the backs of your eyelids after it's been switched off.

"Ay, you're right, too small for me, too," said Smells-like-dust dejectedly. "Can you see what's on the other side?"

The color in the darkness faded slightly. Then Moldy-cheese gave a laugh that sounded like frogs dying. "You're never going to believe this," it said. "Here, I'll pick you up so you can see."

A second later Smells-like-dust laughed too, its laughter squealing like knives rubbed across a brick. "A young one, if I'm not mistaken. He's gotten himself pretty far down into the Border Realm, hasn't he, to float by these tunnels? And you know what else?"

"What?"

"I do believe that he's been listening to everything we've been saying. It almost makes me wonder..."

But what he wondered was never revealed, for suddenly the darkness was filled with the baying of hounds.

"They've found us!" shrieked Smells-like-dust. "Quick, throw the Morcan through!"

"But..."

"Do it, you fool! Better for it to be lost forever than for those powdered foplings to take it back to the king! Besides, remember that Downhill spell we put on it? If there's a way to Her, it'll find it! Throw it, I say!"

"All right..."

There was a tearing crash and a pop, then a jangling scream like the bell pealed at the last judgment to wake all the weary dead from their pleasant graves.

When the alarm went off, Ava Carver glanced into her son's room and sighed. A small hand groped out of the Jungle Animal blankets, pressed the button for silence, then disappeared again. There were no other signs of movement. And really, why should

there be? Four years old was too young to be giving a child an alarm clock and dragging him out of bed so his parents could rush off to work. At four years old he should be waking up when he was ready and playing with his mother all morning, but there wasn't any way around it, was there?

She sat down on the side of the bed, picked up the oversized yellow alarm clock, and carefully wound the two knobs on the back for the time and the alarm, stopping a full twist short of the final turn for each one. The clock had been a gift from her mother when she was a child, passed down to her son when he needed a reliable awakener on weekday mornings. When she was a child she had always found the ticking far more restful than any electric hum. *Always be careful*, her mother had told her when she first opened the gift box, *never to wind it too tightly. There's a spring inside that could snap, if you aren't careful enough.* And so throughout her life, Ava had been cautious with time. You had to stop yourself while there was still some give to it, or it could shatter into jagged shards of minutes and seconds like seven years worth of broken mirrors. How did the youngsters learn that lesson in these digital days, with clocks that never ticked and woke you with weather reports instead of bells?

Ava stroked the pile of blankets, gently shaking something that looked like a knee. "All right, Danny, rise and shine! We don't want to be late for preschool, do we?"

"Mumph," said the blankets.

"Danny, you've got to hurry, because your Daddy's done with breakfast and I can't afford to be late again. Let's hit the ground running, kiddo!" She pulled back the covers. There he was, curled up with his Binky. It was difficult to be annoyed with him when he was asleep. Curly tangled hair, one fist clutching the blanket and the other thumb pressed against his lips, not for sucking but still there, just in case. She kissed him and rubbed her hands up and down his body until he finally opened his eyes. There was fear in them.

"Bad doggies," he cried vaguely as he rose to wakefulness. Then he came the rest of the way awake with a start. For a moment it looked as if he might cry, and then he threw his arms around her. "Mommy, I had a bad dream!"

"There there, honey," she murmured. "What was it about?"

He sat back to look at her, still sniffing a little. "Uh...uh...I don't remember. 'Cept it was really dark, and something scary was coming." He gave her another fleeting hug, and something he'd been holding in his left hand clattered to the floor.

It was a smooth black stone, the kind you might find on the bank of a river. "Why'd you take this to bed with you, honey?" she asked, while Danny climbed out of bed and carefully picked it up.

Danny looked at it in bleary confusion. "I dunno. Someone gave it to me..." He shook his head. "I gotta go potty."

Ava sighed as she made his bed. She really needed to figure out a way to get him moving earlier - she was starting to run out of excuses for her boss. Since having a child, the springs in her own life seemed to be getting wound tighter and tighter. So much of her life was spent getting other people to hurry, then picking up after them when they had hurried too much, pushing and pushing to keep all the gears turning and trying to fit her own life as best she could into the cracks between. She kept telling herself that she couldn't complain - a husband who did his best, a son who was entirely adorable, so few worries really, and lord knows things could always take a turn for the worse ...

The phone rang. She heard Alex, her husband, getting it in the kitchen. Then she heard him say, "Honey, it's your Dad," and from the tone of his voice she knew instantly that somewhere, somehow, one of the springs had snapped.

Four hours later, after a series of hasty calls to bosses and pre-school, the Carver family was in a car traveling east on I-86, moving as fast as was legal and a bit faster. For Ava's mother was dying, her heart suddenly failing with a weakness that no one had ever previously suspected, and according to her father the doctors thought she might not make it another day. There was nothing to be done other than to pack and go as quickly as possible. Daniel had fallen asleep again in his car seat in back, still clutching his Binky tightly in one hand and the other

clenched in a white-knuckled fist. Ava envied his calm. She sat in the front passenger seat staring at the road, trying to think of nothing but the flickering of the numbers on the car's digital clock and the hum of tires against pavement. Certainly not thinking about her mother, who had seemed so healthy on their last visit that Ava and her husband had both commented on it during the long trip home. Her father had lamented that if her mother's tennis game kept improving, he'd never be able to return any of her serves.

Alex Carver had convinced his wife that she was in no shape to drive, and he was probably right. As they neared the turnoff that would take them south along I-47 to the city where her mother lived, she realized that she was trying to accelerate the car towards home by the sheer force of her will. The tires, the distance - anything was better than thinking about the antiseptic hospital room where her father would be sitting right now, holding her mother's listless hand. With her mind she fought against the digits on the clock, which nevertheless continued to follow one another predictably and relentlessly.

Daniel suddenly woke up with a cry, his hand at his mouth. "The dogs, Daddy! The dogs are right behind us! Drive faster!"

Just ahead, nestled between the arms of the two interstates, lay the great regional tourist town of Crossroads. The Carvers had begun passing billboards for it a hundred miles earlier: "Get Soaked! At the Atlantis Waterpark." "Water your camels at the Oasis Hotel." "Circus Maximus Go-Kart Arena: Five

different tracks!" "The Mother Goose Grotto, where Dreams come to Life." And it was while passing the very last of these billboards, halfway between their own home and that of Ava's mother, that the engine of the Carver station wagon made a ghastly hiccupping clunk and lost all power.

Chapter 2

When Clem was fast asleep, still holding the black stone, which rattled gently to itself, all the fairies came to look at him.

"He doesn't know," said the Water Fairy. "He doesn't know that he has brought away the most precious thing of all, all, all, all, all."

"If he ever learns how to open up that stone," said the Bread Fairy, "he will be more powerful than any of us."

"He will be able to grow apple trees on the moon," said the Apple Fairy.

"Or grass on Mars," said the Grass Fairy.

"Or make tick-tock Time turn backward," ticked the Clock Fairy..

"Well, let us hope that he uses it sensibly, sensibly, sensibly," said the Soap Fairy softly.

Clem's Dream

The Last Slice of Rainbow, Joan Aiken

Alex Carver fought with the steering wheel and wrestled the car to a jerky stop at the side of the highway. His wife's clenched knuckles were white on the dashboard. He reached over and placed his hand on hers. "It'll be all right, dear," he said softly. "I brought the new phone, remember? I'll find us a wrecker."

"Will it really work so far from home?" In 1990 cellular phones were still a rarity, but Alex could never resist the latest gadgets.

"We'll see." Fortunately it did work, and a tow truck was able to make it there within fifteen minutes, or Ava would have been behind the car pushing it into town herself. Twenty-five minutes after that, the three of them sat uncomfortably in the garage's small waiting room, staring at the small table littered with magazines so old and ripped it was impossible to tell whether they had originally had muscle cars or Hollywood stars on their covers. The sun was at its height, and the early summer's heat had begun to deaden the air.

The nature of the emergency had been explained to the mechanics, but Alex finally had to tell his wife that breathing down their sweaty necks would not get the job done any faster. She opened a magazine and stared at it for a few minutes without seeing anything, then stood and began pacing.

Soon a mechanic came in to deliver the diagnosis of a bad fuel pump. It would take several hours to fix, but, in answer to her desperate question, it would still be faster than if she tried to take the bus. "Look, honey," said Alex, "you're going to go nuts here if you aren't doing anything. We've always meant to stop here and see a few of the sights, and we didn't pack much of a lunch. Why don't you take Danny and wander around for a bit? Get a bite to eat. Take the phone, I'll call you the instant the car's fixed." And so, unhappy about the arrangement

but unable to think of anything better to do, a short while later Ava and Daniel found themselves unexpectedly walking together down Main Street in Crossroads.

The turnoff where I-86 met I-47 was like the meeting of no other major highways in America. The vast majority of the northbound traffic on I-47 turned east or west on I-86, and the road itself ceased being an eight-lane interstate and limped on feebly as a two-lane country road. But just before it impacted into the other highway in a standard swirl of entrance and exit ramps, the north-bound road narrowed and slowed and ran smack into a small town that nestled improbably between the arms of the two great highways. Every day thousands of cars, trucks, vans, and motorcycles, instead of zipping seamlessly through gentle arcs and cloverleafs from one highway to another, waited four abreast at stoplights for the chance to make their turns. The town planners had created a city street three blocks long upon which much of the traffic from two major interstates was reduced to a crawl as it tried to turn a corner: a break in their journey from wherever they were coming from to wherever they might be going.

You might suspect that politics had been involved in this bit of highway hijacking, and you would be correct. In 1960, it had become clear that the two local highways that intersected near Eastfell would be subsumed by the burgeoning interstate highway system. The Eastfell merchants wanted to have more of a

chance to make an impression than just a flicker through a window at fifty-five miles an hour. In that year a delegation of Eastfell merchants had paid a visit to their Representative in Washington, armed with satchels of cash and the proposal that, really, an interstate could only be improved if there was a stoplight in the middle of it. And it happened that this Representative was the chairman of the Transportation Committee, and the nation's highways sat up and rolled over at the snap of his nicotine-stained fingers. That was how the little country town suddenly found itself in the perfect position to supply the hungers and thirsts and empty gasoline tanks of much of the traffic of middle America. Shortly afterwards, in honor of the arrangement, the merchants voted to change the town's name to Crossroads. The Crossroads they were referring to were temporal as well as geographical, for they all felt that big things were soon to come.

The first to descend on those three blocks were the gas stations, which always clustered along the coat-tails of the highway anyway like a dog beneath a high-chair, certain of the bounty to descend from above. Next came the hotels and motels, followed by the restaurants. Then came the sellers of bric-a-brac...not that the travelers were crying out their need of penlights, or refrigerator magnets, or bumper stickers, or porcelain statuettes, or cheese logs, but it was an incontestable fact that when these things were offered, the travelers would buy. Give us your tired, your hungry, your diesel trucks running

at a quarter tank, these businesses shouted. Give us your station wagons full of well-scrubbed Minnesotan families on their way to visit Grandma in Florida, your salesmen on day six of a two-week midwest sweep, your truckers bleary with coffee and Vivarin. Let us bed them and stuff them with scrambled eggs and pancakes and Olde Dutche apple fritters. Let us give them a choice between eight different fast food chains that will serve them the exact same food they could have eaten in their own home towns. Let us sell them maps, and oil, and windshield wipers, and bingo games to distract their children and keep them from asking whether they are there yet for the hundred and first time. Let us offer racks of free brochures showing local attractions in order to entice them to stay an extra day. You will not leave us until you have given us a chance to serve you, screamed the businesses of Crossroads to the travelers who swept through their doors.

The racks of brochures were at first somewhat thinly populated. Chief among them was the flyer for Eastfell Caverns. A consortium of local businessmen had bought the caverns from the copper mine that owned them in 1961, shortly after the plans for the interstate had been drawn up. The caverns were a good draw, but the owners soon realized that they were only a one-shot attraction. Travelers might spend an hour or so taking a look at the caves, but once you'd seen them, why would you ever visit them again? What was really needed to keep the eleven hotels and

motels packed with overnight customers was something that would keep folks coming back year after year.

In a tourist town, hotels and attractions nourish one another symbiotically like trees and undergrowth in a forest. When enough of them come together, Orlando-like, they can take on a life of their own, a whole jungle of vines and orchids and lurking wildlife. Already a traffic trap, Crossroads aspired to trap tourists as well, and more and more attractions began competing to dazzle and tempt the town's captive audiences. After the cave, the first to arrive in 1964 was a pony stable with a tour out to Witch's Gulch, three miles distant. Then came the educational spots: the aquarium, the geological museum, and, for a different kind of education, the bars. And more and more sprang up through the decades that followed: more and greater fudge shops and sluices in which to pan for gold and themed minigolf parks and all the wild, strange trappings of America on vacation. The greatest attraction of all opened in 1986, the year that Daniel was born -- an enormous waterpark of waterfalls and twisty slides. By the time Ava and Daniel walked its streets four years later, the town of Crossroads took in more tourist dollars than any other similarly-sized town in a three-state area.

An hour and a half after leaving the garage, on the pedestrian-packed Main Street that ran parallel to I-47, Ava took the cell phone out of her purse for the hundredth time to check

that it was still working properly. She had always been quietly disapproving of her husband's habit of always buying the latest gadgets available, but this one certainly seemed worthwhile. She would have suffocated if she had stayed in that waiting room much longer.

Ava was running out of energy and ideas. The two of them had tried doing the Fallen Empires miniature golf course, but neither of them were good mini-golfers on the best of days, and eventually they were just whacking the balls around past the smoke-belching volcanoes, giant snakes, and artfully decaying temples without even pausing to let them roll to a stop. Besides, it was simply too hot to be outside. Some of the shops might be air-conditioned, but she wasn't seeing anything through the windows that would be interesting to Daniel, or that she wouldn't worry about him breaking - ships of spun glass, swimwear hundreds of miles from an ocean, guaranteed authentic Indian drums and moccasins, miniature Japanese rock gardens, cacti in bright ceramic pots, craft projects of men and women made from corn husks and dried apples, and snow globes reading *Crossroads USA*. Then, across the street, she saw something that looked as if it might be just the thing to take both their minds off the present.

A horizontal circular track was set above the pastel entrance of the Mother Goose Grotto. The fleeing plaster form of Little Red Riding Hood appeared from an archway on the left, spun around the path, and disappeared into darkness on the right,

endlessly pursued by a long lean wolf. Beneath them was a ticket taker's booth beside a trough of blue-tinted water and a bevy of floating fiberglass swans, probably refugees from some bankrupt Tunnel of Love. Not only was it age-appropriate, Ava thought as she crossed the street, the water might keep it cool.

A teenage girl in a gray wig, shawl, and granny glasses beckoned from the ticket taker's booth as they approached. "Hello, little boy. What's your favorite fairy tale?" Ava started; the girl's lips hadn't moved. Instead, the speaker was a goose puppet that covered her arm to the elbow. Danny stared at it wide-eyed as it stretched its long neck down and cocked its head this way and that.

"We've got fairy tales by the basketful inside, little boy! Humpty Dumpty still unfractured, and the Crooked Man all athwart his crooked stile-oh! Bo Peep and Boy Blue with their pretty sheep lost, all lost and forgotten, and perhaps needing a brave young lad like you to count them and bring them home again. Wolves and bears and spiders will threaten -- do you have the courage to overthrow the tyrant King Cole, or rescue pale Snow White from the drifts where she lies frozen and cold? Five dollars per ticket, stay inside the boat at all times." The goose snaked its long neck down and snatched the ten dollar bill from Ava's fingers, then disappeared beneath the counter and reappeared with a pair of orange tickets. "Have fun. Adventure awaits!" The girl's lips still had not quivered.

She's good, thought Ava as another acne-pocked teenager in a yellow tunic helped them into the first swan boat in line. Danny was already pointing to the first diorama visible through the arch: Rapunzel in her tower, gesticulating down to a prince or witch still unseen around the corner.

"Keep your hands inside the boat, Danny," she reminded him as the boat jerked and started. He looked back at her and grinned. "I know, Mom."

There was something clutched in his hand, she noticed, and she leaned forward to inspect it. It was the black pebble that he'd been holding when he woke up this morning, a thousand years ago. Why had he held onto it amidst all the confusion, she wondered? He had always loved picking up rocks as a baby...maybe he was entering a new phase. Should she get him a rock tumbler for Christmas? It was so nice that he still believed in Santa Claus. Thoughts of her dying mother beat against her mind like the wings of an enormous bird, and she tried feebly to push them back, to close the curtains of her mind and keep running about on the safe, predictable tracks she had laid for herself. Daniel still clutched the stone tightly as the swan boat turned the first corner.

Both the witch and Rapunzel could have used a good scrubbing, and the Prince hiding in the bushes was missing some chips of paint from his shiny complexion. Still, the displays were imaginatively lit, and at least the water that lapped on the sides of the boat did indeed keep the place cooler than the sauna

outside. They glided by women living in towers and shoes and pumpkin-shells, around three blind mice and three besieged pigs, and beneath the bottom half of a giant as he shinnied down a beanstalk after a fleeing Jack. The most exciting part was the crooked house of another Jack, seemingly about to topple over on the boat as it passed beneath, and only jerked back up at the last instant by an unseen wire.

The next exhibit seemed rather tame by comparison: Snow White in her plastic casket, surrounded by a crowd of very un-Disney-like stunted dwarves. Ava thought their shadowed faces looked rather sinister in the dim light. Not a Happy or a Dopey among them -- they all looked grim and cunning.

What were their names again? That sort of question was always turning up in trivia games. Still trying to keep her mind off her mother, she tried to recall the names as they sailed past ...Bashful, Sleepy, Dopey, Sneezy...WHAT??

Ava suddenly twisted in her seat to look behind her as the swan entered the next archway. For a moment she could have sworn that there were eight dwarves around the casket. But no, there were only seven. Except...was that a door behind them in the painted plywood forest, quietly swinging shut?

The last room was particularly creepy, with string-spiderwebs festooned up and down the walls. In the center of the web Miss Muffet hunched over her bowl, perched on a giant mushroom since, Ava supposed, no one had any idea what a tuffet was supposed to look like. She was carved to be a girl only a

few years older than Danny, with long, straight, silver-white hair that shimmered with pinks and greens and blues in the lights. Where was the spider, though?

Ava looked up just in time to see an enormous writhing bundle of hairy legs and fangs come plummeting toward her. She was expecting something made of chipped plaster and rubber coated wire like the rest of this place, but the eyes, the countless eyes were gleaming and the fangs...

...and the monster was racing down a thread of its web toward her, eight legs scuttling blurring like a hundred, she was in a cavern that stretched out forever with its vast web in the center as Daniel screamed...

No, it was just a papier-mâché creature after all, she saw that now. The wire attached to its back was clearly visible as it swished by several feet above their heads and disappeared into another hole. There was a big, goofy smile on its face - it should hardly scare a two-year-old, let alone an adult. What was wrong with her?

Then Danny jumped again, but this time it wasn't from the spider. Miss Muffet lifted sea-green eyes and stared at them as they brushed beneath rubbery webs and out into the light.

The swan boat stopped and deposited them in the back of a gift store. "Well, that was pretty exciting, wasn't it, Danny?" she asked as still another teenager helped them out of the boat. Already she was pushing the alarming parts of the ride out of her

mind...it was just a run-down kids' show, certainly nothing there to bother a grown-up like herself. No, the inside of her mind she would keep tidy and bright, with anything that might disturb it kept firmly on the other side of a great locked door. Ava thought in spite of herself of the trapped pigs in the diorama, with the big bad wolf outside hunting for cracks and chimneys and any other way to slide inside.

And how thoroughly typical of this town to make them exit through a gift shop. Would she be able to steer Daniel safely by the rubber bugs, whistles, yo-yos, cardboard masks, sticker books, pop guns, wind-up toys, authentic Indian bows and arrows, and all the rest of the clutter, before he saw something he absolutely had to have?

Half-way out of the store, and Danny was still quiet. It was odd how they hadn't seen any other tourists since stepping into the swan. All the rest of them must be at the big waterpark.

The man behind the cash-register twisted his head to watch them go by. How tall was he, anyway? This place seemed to employ a lot of freaks. Two-thirds of the way. Danny apparently wanted to see some more attractions, not buy junk that would only clutter up his room. Almost there...

"Excuse me, ma'am?" The cash-register man was standing right behind them. He was extraordinarily tall, and thin like a bundle of twigs. His thin face was overshadowed by an enormous nose and a green floppy hat, and his voice rasped. "Excuse me,

ma'am, but I believe your son just took something from us without paying for it."

"WHAT?" Ava was mortified. "He's never done anything like that before." She turned to her son. "Danny, did you take something that didn't belong to you?"

He shook his head no, his blue eyes wide and frightened, looking back and forth between her and the cashier. She saw, though, that his left hand was shut tight on something. Her voice grew sterner. "Danny, what have you got in your hand?"

Biting his lip, he opened his hand to her. It was just the black stone that he'd been carrying all day, though. She was about to make him turn out his pockets when she saw that the cashier was gesturing toward a cardboard stand filled with polished rocks.

"See, ma'am? I clearly saw your boy pick up that stone from this lapidapidapidopterous display. I do not know whether the one he took was Carnelian or Jasper or Hematimatite or Howlite, but from there it assuredly came. Now, if you'll just give it back to me then no harm done..." He held out a leathery hand.

Of all the day's many disasters, finally this was one that Ava could do something about. Her son was NOT a thief. She said so loudly, with great emphasis. She personally had seen him carrying this stone since this morning, hundreds of miles away. She cast aspersions upon the skinny clerk's eyesight and general

character, and prepared to make a grand exit with Danny in tow.
But...

"I'm sorry, ma'am." With a long, spindly leg he stepped around between her and the door, blocking their escape route. "There is no question in my mind that your boy took the stone. I must insist that he return it."

Ava stared at him in disbelief. "Are you calling me a liar?" she asked quietly. The man set his small mouth. "Parents have covered for their children before," he said with grim assurance. "I've seen it happen."

"I saw the boy steal the stone too!" called a new voice. Ava and Danny turned around. Coming from the back of the store was Miss Muffet. Away from the flickering lights of the ride, she looked plainer but more menacing. She marched by them and stood beside the spindly clerk, her green eyes flashing. "From the rock display, just like the Mommet here said. If you give it back to us, ma'am, we'll let you go with no problems. Otherwise I'm afraid we will have to summon the police."

"The POLICE? Over a ten cent ROCK?" Ava stared at the two of them in disbelief. Was everyone in this town insane? This white-haired girl seemed to be no more than seven, but she didn't speak like any seven-year-old that Ava had ever seen. What had she called the clerk? Mop-something? She was NOT going to let herself be bullied on today of all days, held up through no fault of her own on her way to her dying mother's side. She drew herself up as tall as she could. "My son did NOT steal that

stone. He has been carrying it all day. I insist that you let us out of that door. Otherwise, please do call the police, so that I can lodge a complaint against the two of you for unlawful restraint!"

The tall man took a step forward, but the girl made a gesture with her fingers and he jerked back. In low voice that Ava could hardly make out, she muttered, "If you really knew what it was... Did you know you've got dream hounds after you? No, of course you don't. But if they'd caught up to you with it while you were asleep..." Then she raised her voice again to a tone that sounded more girlish. "If you don't give it to me right now I'll get my Daddy. He owns this whole attraction, you know. DaddDEEEEEE!!!" Her voice rose suddenly to a piercing shriek.

"Yes, by all means let me speak to the manager." Ava was icily calm now. Daniel was looking up at her with frightened eyes. She put her arm around his shoulders protectively, the one thing she felt capable of protecting just now. "Don't worry, dear. Mommy knows that you didn't do anything wrong. These two people are just confused, that's all. Very VERY confused."

From the back of the store came a short, stout man with a bushy mustache, a red face, and a bad comb-over. "What is it, honey-doll?" he asked the girl, a bit hesitantly Ava thought.

Ava and the small girl both launched simultaneously into their versions of the purported theft. The man seemed to listen, then turned to Daniel and said, "Well, if the boy has taken the stone then he must give it back, mustn't he?"

Ava felt hemmed in on both sides now, the cashier and the girl blocking the way to the front door while the red-faced man blocked off the store's rear. Her mind felt as if a harpstring inside it had been plucked again and again, and it wasn't until she heard the sound of her own voice that she realized she was screaming. "I TOLD YOU, I SAW HIM HOLDING THAT STONE THIS MORNING, TWO HUNDRED MILES AWAY FROM HERE. HE COULD NOT POSSIBLY HAVE STOLEN IT!!!"

There was a flash of movement at the edge of her vision. She whirled about. The pale girl had darted forward and was prying Daniel's hand open. He shrieked as if he had been stabbed, and she danced back, the stone clutched tightly in her fingers. Ava picked up Daniel bodily, held him against her shoulder with one arm, and charged for the exit like a linebacker. She hit the tall cashier in the chest with her elbow, and he fell back with a terrible crash into a display of wooden helicopters. Then she was outside on the sidewalk, the heat hitting her like a furnace once again. She sprinted half a block, then turned. No one was pursuing them. Daniel was wailing great choking sobs as if he had lost his best friend. Passing tourists stared at them.

"There there, sweetheart," she said soothingly. "You didn't do anything wrong. Those were just some bad people in there. But we got away, didn't we? Mommy got you away. We're back outside now, and we didn't lose anything except for a tiny

little rock. Mommy will get you another rock, sweetheart. You can have plenty of rocks. There, there."

For a moment she considered using her phone to actually summon the police, then immediately dismissed the idea. Whose story would they be likely to believe - the out-of-towners, or the local businessman who helped pay their salary? Besides she had to keep reminding herself, it was only the kind of stone you might pick up on any riverbank. Gravel, almost.

Still clutching the sobbing Daniel to her tightly, she began to stride back across town toward the garage. Just as it came in sight, her cell phone rang. "Alex, honey, you won't believe what just happened," she said as she opened it.

It was not Alex. It was her father. Her throat caught when she heard his voice, until she was able to calm down enough to hear what he was saying.

Her mother had made a complete recovery. The doctors were baffled - her heart had seemed badly deteriorated and all her vital signs had been dropping steadily. Then, all at once, the symptoms stopped as suddenly as they had begun, and now all the tests showed that she was once more in perfect health. The doctors still wanted to keep her in the hospital for another day or two for more tests, but Ava's father wanted her to know that the immediate danger seemed to be past. The Carver family was still welcome to come visit, of course, but they didn't need to break any speed records anymore.

In a daze, Ava shut the phone. She felt like someone who had just survived some great and deadly catastrophe, rescuing her family from fire and storm and bandits, only to be told at the end that it had all been nothing more than a Candid Camera stunt. What was she supposed to do with all this adrenaline now? Was she supposed to simply sweep up all the shattered hours and minutes and seconds into a dustpan, throw them into the garbage, and try to go back to believing that everything would tick along as smoothly as ever for as long as she kept the clock's stem wound up not too tight and not too loose?

Yes, she supposed that was exactly what she would have to do. For her husband's sake, and for Daniel who was now sniffing gently. The people in the Mother Goose Grotto were not thieves or criminals, they were just really, really bad at customer service. The thought almost made her smile. Her mother wasn't dying any more, and that was the most important thing. She would have to put Crossroads out of her mind.

Carefully, she set Daniel down. His face was dirty and tear-streaked, and she automatically opened her purse for a handkerchief to rub it with. "Sweetheart, everything is all right. Grandma's fine now, and you were a very brave boy back there. I'll tell you what, you deserve a pretty special reward for being so good today. Any ride in town, an ice cream sundae, you name it, kiddo."

Daniel opened his left hand where the stone had been, closed it, and opened it again, staring at his empty palm. "I

want it back," he said, his voice still choking from recent sobs.
"Make her give it back!"

Ava knelt helplessly beside her son. She knew she would do anything for her family, drive across country at a moment's notice, face spiders or witches or wolves or worse. But she also knew that no power on earth could make her cross the threshold of the Mother Goose Grotto a second time. She watched her son as he stretched out his empty hand toward the place, and felt powerless and alone.

BOOK 1

THE INDIFFERENT BEAK

Chapter 1

*All would be well
Could we but give us wholly to the dreams,
And get into their world that to the sense
Is shadow, and not linger wretchedly
Among substantial things; for it is dreams
That lift us to the flowing, changing world
That the heart longs for.*

"The Shadowy Waters"

W. B. Yeats

Highway 47, before it dead-ended itself into Highway 86 in a swirling burst of neon and hotels, was the main artery of Crossroads, pumping an endless stream of cars and trucks to nourish the town's businesses. Banks of stoplights were festooned across the highway every hundred yards, and every restaurant boasted a drive-through window and vast acres of parking lot. All the mini-golf courses and amusement park rides were decked out with lights and flags and fountains and giant mannequins and anything else that might attract a family of five packed behind the windows of their minivan. Pedestrians dashing

from motel to restaurant across Route 47 had to be patient or fleet of foot.

Two blocks to the east and parallel to Highway 47 was Main Street, not so much an artery as a slow-moving vein. On Main Street and its tributary capillaries the shops were set up to appeal to walkers: souvenir stores selling mugs and postcards and stuffed animals, storefront museums, great cavernous buildings packed with t-shirts whose slogans ranged from the obscene to the obscure to the obscurely obscene, and the Mother Goose Grotto where Daniel Carver had once lost a stone when he was four. Sixteen years later, balanced beneath a huge orange backpack and trying to rub the sleep out of his eyes, he emerged from a Greyhound bus station and found himself on Main Street once again.

Daniel pulled a folded yellow legal pad page out of his jeans pocket and spread it carefully on the round top of a concrete municipal wastebasket. His finger carefully followed the road he was on to a circled intersection, all marked precisely in a flowing script that he had to squint to read. Once he had his bearings, he began to thread his way up the street through the early evening pedestrians. He'd lived for most of his life in a town where businesses were open to five only in theory, while in actual practice shopkeepers might be as likely to lock up at four-thirty, or two for that matter if there was going to be a good show on daytime television or the river fish beckoned. His aunt's sewing supply store didn't even have

hours posted; its sign said simply "By Chance." In Crossroads, it was well past dusk and not a single store had yet rolled down its iron portcullis.

As he peeked into the businesses he tried to guess which customers were tourists and which were townies out for a little fun. His best guess was that the tourists at this hour were the ones still going into the shops, while the locals mostly streamed into the bars, long thin rooms on every block packed with chairs and smoky, t-shirted figures.

On the fourth corner, Sapphire and Main, was a particularly full watering hole, neon in every window, with a small sign above the door labeling it "The Blue Nile." As Daniel passed the door he caught the sour smell of beer and the smack of billiard balls colliding. He checked his piece of paper again and turned down the side street.

A block ahead of him on Sapphire Street, Daniel could see the beginnings of the normal townish accouterments that other cities don't mind displaying on their main streets, but that Crossroads kept hidden away from tourists like a teenager trying to hide his parents' pictures before throwing a party: a drugstore, a bank, a supermarket. Just before the end of the tourist zone, though, there was one last sprawling antique store. It was the first shop he'd seen so far with a "Closed" sign on its door. The large sign above its picture window read simply "ANTIQUITIES," lit from above by a row of yellow light bulbs in a ghastly saffron glow.

There was a narrow alley running between Antiquities and the back side of the Blue Nile. Daniel wrinkled his nose. As a kid he'd never had many chances to explore alleys, and this one, in particular, had a number of smells that he wasn't eager to encounter personally. He checked his legal pad again, beige now in the light bulbs' yellow glare, then stuffed it into his pocket and forged resolutely into the darkness. There was a splash as he stepped into a puddle, water he hoped but no way to tell. The fingertips of his left hand grazed the wall of Antiquities to keep his bearings while his eyes adjusted to the sudden dimness.

A patch of twilight ahead of him suddenly moved and hissed, and Daniel felt his heart jump. Then it resolved itself to become a shaggy gray cat, that eyed him warily with green eyes amplifying the faint light before it turned tail and disappeared again into the shadows.

Half-way up the alley, a set of iron stairs appeared abruptly out of the gloom, ascending toward the dim sliver of purple evening still visible above. Daniel tested the first few steps to reassure himself that the whole apparatus wouldn't come down on him with a roar of rust, then began to climb. At the top, a narrow iron balcony led to two doors labeled *A* and *B*. Now *all we need is a native from a tribe that either always lies or always tells the truth*, he thought, *and we'll be all set for a logic puzzle. Islander, if I were to ask you which door had my friends behind it, what would you say?* There was music coming

from behind the left-hand door marked A, music Daniel recognized. He knocked, turned the knob, and went in.

Ken Hirosaka, Daniel's best friend as well as his roommate for the past year, was sitting in the midst of a tangle of cords and video equipment in the center of a tiny living room. The green carpet he sat on was so threadbare it could have passed as wallpaper. Surrounding him Daniel saw: an already-operational CD player playing the Radioactive Lizards' latest album; a television; a VCR; a DVD player; two different brands of video game consoles each sprouting its full complement of controllers, joysticks, steering wheels, and keypads; plus another half-dozen or so esoteric black boxes with blinking lights that were theoretically supposed to make it easy to switch from one instrument to another at the push of a button. Ken nodded along with the music as he plugged in the cords, but his carefully-sculpted jet-black hair reminded precisely in place. "Hey, Dan," he said, glancing up with a grin. "Glad you made it. You're the last one we're expecting. Trip go OK?"

"Oh, I was in dreamland from the minute the bus started until it pulled into the station, as usual." Daniel ducked to get his towering backpack through the door. "I guess that means it went all right. Which room are we in? I want to park this thing and grab something to eat. Four hours on the road, and the bus station food at the changeover didn't appeal to me. Have you three eaten yet?"

Ken sat back on his heels. "Weeeell, there are a couple little problems regarding the accommodations. One of them is the front bedroom the two of us got assigned." He gestured with his screwdriver. "Through that door, end of the hall. Take a look at it and tell me what you think. As for the food, Sondra just did a shopping run. She's in the kitchen putting stuff away."

Daniel noted an archway opposite the front door that obviously led to the kitchen. Cupboard-banging noises were coming from within. Then he turned and picked his way through the wires to the door on his left located between a love seat and armchair that were both well on their way to spilling their guts like a mob stoolie. Beyond the door was a narrow hallway leading toward the front of the building.

The problem with the bedroom was the window. Just beneath it, marching above the Antiquities sign he'd seen on his way in, the row of yellow lightbulbs filled the room with the most unearthly glare that had ever pierced Daniel's eyes. The torn shade was entirely unable to keep the room from being flooded with saffron. He moved the shade and looked down at Sapphire Street, and the bulbs shone blindingly back at him, only a few inches below the sill.

Daniel leaned his backpack against one of the two beds. In the ghastly light it had turned from bright orange to pale brown. Then he went back into the hallway and used the bathroom, noting that Ken had already set out the combination of computer and art magazines they'd accumulated in their old bathroom at the dorm.

His roommate, it appeared, didn't believe in putting things in storage.

Back in the living room, he squatted next to Ken, who was beginning to stack up all his players and consoles around the television. "Nice ambiance, roomie" he said. "Worried we might fall asleep accidentally if there isn't enough light?"

Ken looked uncomfortable. "Well yeah, Dan, I know you do have trouble sleeping. Um, this love seat folds out into a futon. I mean, I'd been planning on using it myself and staying in here, but if you really need to be someplace less bright..."

Daniel shook his head. It was a genuine sacrifice his friend was offering - he knew that Ken had always thought of himself as the champion at tossing and turning before he met Dan. "Don't worry about it. I know you'd rather be out here so you can play games when you can't sleep. I'll give the Yellow Room of Death a shot for tonight, at least. If it doesn't work out we can always take turns."

"Thanks," said Ken, sounding relieved.

Just then Sondra appeared in the archway to the kitchen, her fiery hair done up in a kerchief, sweat on her smooth, lightly freckled face. She was wiping her hands with a paper towel. "Look, I'm really really sorry, Danny. When Mrs. Shantih showed me around the apartment last month, it was in the afternoon. I didn't realize what that room would be like when those lights got turned on every night."

"Any chance they'll go off at midnight?" Daniel asked hopefully.

Sondra shook her head. "I got in yesterday evening and checked, and no, they're on all night. Which is weird when you consider the shop underneath is never open. If you can't sleep I'll switch with you. I figure it's my fault..."

"Oh, don't worry." Daniel plopped down on the faded armchair. "Maybe I'll be able to cover the window with something. Then if Ken still wants to sleep out here, I'd have extra space to paint in. Besides, I don't think Justin would appreciate it very much if you volunteered to switch the two of you into the 'Land of the Midnight Light Bulb.'" He looked around. "Where is Justin, anyway?"

Sondra wrinkled her forehead. "There you have stubbed your toe upon the very bedrock of our biggest problem, Daniel my friend. We are one horseman short of an apocalypse. Justin isn't coming."

"What?" Daniel looked up at her in amazement. "I thought the whole reason for this arrangement was because the two of you needed someone to split the rent with!"

"We did," Sondra sniffed. "Well, that plus Justin wanted you guys to play games with. But remember that audition the two of us did, right before finals? The one where we were both joking about how badly we'd bombed? Well, he called me right before I left my dad's place for here. Guess who's going to be

traipsing all over the countryside until August doing summer stock with the pros, hmmn?"

"Aww gee," said Daniel. "That's too bad. I was looking forward to having all of us together without classes to distract us." He did his best to push aside the nervous flutter of hope he felt, reminding himself sternly that Justin was one of his best friends, whose relationship with his girlfriend seemed perfectly solid.

Ken shook his head. "We'll have jobs to distract us, remember, Danny? Worse even than classes for sucking up free time, if the tales Sondra's told us about the work schedules here are true."

"Yes, they're true." Sondra nodded. "And I'm planning on doing that dinner theater I told you about over in Archer's Bluff again like last summer, so I'll be gone practically every waking minute I've got off. Though maybe I'll have to drop that idea and moonlight somewhere, because I did the math, and after we've split the rent three ways, we'll none of us be saving up bupkiss for the school year. Justin said he felt really bad about letting us down, and he asked if he should send us some money since he'd made a commitment, but you know summer stock barely covers rice and gruel for its eager young actors. I told him we'd get by. So maybe I should pay more than a third, since it was my great idea for the two of you to come down here in the first place."

"You've been talking about that dinner theater all year," said Daniel. "Please don't give it up on our account. Maybe we can advertise for a different fourth roommate or something."

"I don't think we're going to have too many folks lining up to share the Lemon Limelight Lounge," said Ken with a sigh. "Still, I suppose we could try."

"Or we could get another girl to share my room," Sondra pointed out.

"What about..." Daniel began, glancing at Ken. He'd been a bit surprised when Ken had agreed to come here to work in the first place, since he knew that his roommate's parents mailed him a hefty allowance check every month that seemed adequate to cover a range of expensive habits. He didn't want to sound like a freeloader, though, so he let the question die.

"Anyway, the rent is the least of my worries right now," Sondra went on. "I've been trying to figure out how many women are going to be traveling around in the company with Justin. They're doing *Fiddler*, so that's at least five, plus probably a few techies -- what do you guys think? Can I trust him?"

The thought that flashed through Daniel's brain was "*You're so certain that Justin can trust you with us?*" But what he said was, "Absolutely. We've all seen you practicing your Kendo. Justin knows he'd be taking his life in his hands to fool around on you."

Sondra tilted her head. "Oh, I wouldn't waste my Kendo on him. Garroting him in his sleep would be easiest, I should think. Anyway, Ken said you were hungry. Both of you come into the kitchen and I'll show you where I put everything."

The kitchen was long, narrow, and brown, the counter scratched and chipped in a dozen places. The metal sink was crusted with grout, and wide clear tape covered several buckling cracks in the brown linoleum floor. Still, Daniel had seen other student apartments compared to which this was a luxury suite.

Sondra gave them a tour of the cupboards. "First things first. I used the ID Ken gave me to get some beer, but I'm afraid it's going to have to stay warm. The refrigerator's busted. It sounds like it's running OK, but after twenty-four hours it's still warm as toast. Not that we're likely to get any warm toast from Ken's toaster *either*, but that isn't Mrs. Shantih's fault."

Ken snatched the toaster from the counter. "Hey, I wasn't the one who dropped it," he said. "I'll fix it, don't worry. Just let me unpack my screwdrivers."

Daniel nodded loyally. "Of course Ken will fix it," he said. "He fixed our CD player last year when it was practically hurling CDs across the room like ninja throwing stars. A toaster should be a snap." He turned to his old roommate. "What's wrong with the fridge, oh wise one?"

Ken shrugged. "I'm studying electrical engineering, not appliance repair, you know? I looked at it for two hours when I

got here this morning, and there's nothing wrong with the electrical system. It runs fine, it just doesn't get cold. Maybe all the freon leaked out, I dunno. I guess we'll need a pro."

Sondra pulled open a drawer. "Which reminds me, I picked up some tape while I was out shopping. Danny, why don't you go over to the B-side apartment and tell Mrs. Shantih about the fridge being busted? It's so nice having the landlady next door. And if she isn't home, which seems to be the normal state of affairs, here's a sign you can tape to her door."

Daniel took the tape and message that Sondra handed him. "Aye aye, Captain. In the name of truth, freedom, and food preservation. Onward!"

Daniel stood on the balcony and knocked on the door labeled "B." Then he knocked a bit harder. Then he shook the balcony to check its stability one last time, and leaned back on the railing to wait a bit, in case the substantial woman Sondra had described over the phone took a long time to get to the door. The dull hum of an air conditioner on the roof of the Blue Nile floated in from across the alley. Above him, squeezed between the roofs of the two buildings, was a narrow strip of sky packed with stars like gravel on a gravel road. Running aslant the spangled path lay the brighter band of the Milky Way, with the bright cross of Cygnus the Swan spreading his wide wings to fly down the center of the river of stars like an avian ferryman on the starry Styx.

For as long as he could remember, swans had bothered Daniel, for reasons he couldn't articulate. Seeing the constellation jogged Daniel's memory back to a line he'd memorized while studying for the History of Poetry final he'd turned in a few weeks earlier, from the poem about the girl who got raped by the sky-god wearing the bird's shape:

*Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?*

Stars and poetry and birds in darkness – the pathway of Daniel's thoughts suddenly turned a corner and passed through a doorway that he recognized, but could not pull himself back from in time. Still leaning on the balcony's railing, Daniel abruptly fell asleep.

A crystalline lake stretched into the distance until it blended into mist. There were no stars in the dark blue sky, none reflected in the dark water, but the horned moon and its reflection bracketed the horizon like a doubled earring on the cheek of night.

Swans from a distance look like many things: paper cut-outs on wedding cakes, feathery ballerinas, enchanted boats to take you to fog-shrouded isles where the true grail is guarded. Up close, with their wicked webbed feet, serpentine necks, and wide hissing beaks, they look like white nightmares. The one floating

in the lake before Daniel was as large as a truck, eyeing him from various angles as if he was a tempting blade of grass. It wore a gold crown on its narrow head, just above its black-rimmed, baleful eyes.

"Hail and well done, mortal," said the swan within Daniel's mind. Its voice sounded flat and emotionless, but perhaps that was because Daniel didn't know yet with what emotions he should color it. "Halfway to heaven, with cold iron between you and the earth. I doubt I could have found you here in the Border Realm in any other place. If I get pushed back any further, soon even your dreams, your doubtful dreams of dreams may be beyond my reach. I must give you your marching orders before it's too late, my little soldier boy."

Terrifying though the gigantic swan might be, Daniel had learned long ago not to let himself be bullied by dream creatures. "I'm not your soldier," he called out to the bird. "And even if I was, it isn't as if there's a war on."

The enormous creature threshed its webbed feet in the water, stretching out its neck into a high white tower that soared above Daniel until it seemed to touch the roof of evening. The huge body rose out of the water, and the vast wings spread and beat a hurricane of wind flattening Daniel on the sand. "Not a war on? NOT A WAR ON, when its very blast blows in our ears?! Now imitate the action of a tiger, tiger burning bright in the forests of the night! To Carthage it comes, burning, burning!"

Most of my KINGDOM may be gone soon if the war goes on much longer, child!"

Lying stunned on the wet sand, Daniel still didn't feel much incentive to be helpful. "I'm not a child, and I'm still not your soldier."

As the great bird settled back into the water, its sense of majesty suddenly seemed to drain away. The black-barred head drooped, the shining white perfection of the feathers deadened to a draggled gray, the proud beak seemed to twist and shorten. It was like the story of the Ugly Duckling in reverse. "There isn't time for this," the voice whined in Daniel's mind. "No time for sergeants, no time for a summer friend. No time for orders, and you wouldn't follow them even if I had any order left. The old order changeth, things fall apart, the center cannot hold lest one good custom should corrupt the world. I must settle for merely a gift and a warning, hammer out a warning, horrid warning gaping wide. First, the gift. Oh wad some power the giftie gie us, unsee oursels when ithers see us. Fern, ferny, ferny hallways couthe in sondry londes." The swan spread out one mighty wing and seemed to blow something off the feathers in Daniel's direction, and his skin suddenly felt dancing and tingly. "And now the warning. You will remember what I say when the need drives you. Listen. If you are both brave and extremely lucky, you may have the opportunity to, shall we say, edit my old decision. Decisions and revisions that a minute will reverse, that time may cease and midnight never come."

The swan stretched out his neck again, far less impressive this time, like an old merry-go-round beast put out to pasture.

"I MAY HAVE BEEN WRONG. That is what you need to know. Many people, some of great wisdom, have ... questioned my decision. I myself have questioned it. I may have been wrong. If you find yourself at a crossroads, do not feel obligated to follow the same path I took. I'll send you what tools I can, figments and fragments I have shored against my ruin, but you must be the ones to decide how to use them. You and your companions must judge as you see best, for everyone. That is all."

The swan returned to its wedding-cake pose, and a bit of its majesty seemed to return as though seen through a patch of fog. There was a great silence. Then, "That's it?" asked Daniel. He was feeling more and more resentful toward the oversized fowl. "Is that all you wanted to tell me? Because it sounds to me as if you just said that your entire advice is that you have no advice. Is that really all you've got?"

A great webbed talon stroked the water, and the swan's torso pivoted and faced out across the lake. "I never said I'd give advice," said the voice in his head. "I said I'd give you a warning, a borning, a morning's mourning of warning. Whatever happens, I don't want to be blamed for everything this time around." Both talons began bicycling, and the swan's wake arrowed behind it as it headed out from shore. "If it's advice you want, then my advice would be, Don't Fall."

"What do you mean by that?" Daniel shouted after him, and then he realized that he wasn't on wet sand, he was leaning back over the balcony railing farther and farther, and he barely managed to grab it before his center of gravity passed the point of no return. The dream vanished in a shot of adrenaline.

Balconies, Daniel thought glumly. Something else I'll have to add to my list of things to avoid. Then he noticed the scrap of paper and the tape where he'd dropped them, luckily still on the iron grating and not fallen to the alley below. There was enough starlight to read the note as he picked it up and taped it to the door: Refrigerator busted in A in Sondra's flowing handwriting. One last knock, one last glance at the stars, and he opened the other door and returned to his friends.

Falling asleep at night, or for that matter at any other time, had never been difficult for Daniel. The hard part was staying under sleep's surface once he had begun his dive. Sleep embraced him with its usual eagerness as soon as he lay down, but two hours later the yellow light boring at his eyelids finally penetrated to his brain, and he woke with a jolt. He got up and searched through his backpack to find an old t-shirt, then lay down again with it over his eyes, but finally decided that having his head wrapped felt too claustrophobic. He got up again and finished unpacking, arranging his clothes carefully in a shabby chest of drawers. Then he set up his portable easel in a corner of the room and briefly considered trying to paint something.

Anything with color was out in the dead light - maybe a pencil sketch out the window? He didn't feel he had the energy, though. He thought of playing a video game, then remembered that Ken was asleep in the TV room. He got the book he'd been reading in the bus station and tried it for a while, then tried to sleep again, then got up and walked around, and finally lay down once more and tossed and turned until morning. The squalid light from the yellow bulbs washed into his eyes whenever he opened them like a splash of liquid wakefulness. *Definitely not an auspicious beginning to the summer*, he thought numbly as the sun rose. *If I cannot catch the dragon, then the dragon will most assuredly catch me.*

Chapter 2

Out of the eater comes something to eat.

Out of the strong comes something sweet.

Judges 14:14

The next morning, Ken made pancakes for everyone to celebrate the first day of their summer together. Sondra seemed to have gotten over worrying about her missing boyfriend and the rent, and was bubbling about the upcoming day. While Daniel washed the dishes, she opened a file folder with CROSSROADS scrawled across the top in large green letters.

"If this was a movie I'd be putting on a pair of spectacles right now," she said, laying out a few pages on the table, "but I don't even own any spectacles, I use contacts, and I don't need them to read, just to drive. Why do so many people in movies need spectacles to read, anyway? I think it's just a gesture, like they're saying, 'I'm going to read something now,' like we in the audience couldn't tell they were actually reading. But ANYWAY, with imaginary spectacles perched on my nose I will now read you the correspondence relevant to today's job hunting. I wrote to Mr. Netherby - remember I told you about him, how he owned half the businesses in town? - well, I wrote to him back in February about how we all wanted jobs, and this is what he wrote back. Except it wasn't actually him, it must have been his wife or one of his daughters. Someone told me he's got two daughters.

He's probably got one of them working as his secretary, I've heard he's really stingy when it comes to stuff like that. Ahem.

'Dear Ms. Fleming,

Crossroads is a fun place to spend the summer, isn't it? Your supervisor at the Island House put in a good word for you last summer, and we'd be delighted to have you come back and waitress for us there again in May.

Your friends are welcome to come and work within the Netherby family of businesses as well. Please have them fill out the attached forms and send them to the address above, so we can check their references, file W-2s for them, and so forth. You should know, though, that we have a policy against hiring groups of friends to work at the same location. If your friends can stop by the Black Forest Fudge House, Sapphire Street Souvenirs, and Frontier Fotos, I'm sure we can promise all three of them some excellent Crossroads summer employment.

Kimberly Netherby'

"Now, I've made copies of this letter for both of you, just in case any of the managers don't want to give you a job for some reason." She slid sheets of paper across the table to both of the two guys. "Not that that's very likely. Crossroads is always desperate for employees during the summer. Last year Mr. Netherby flew in some students from Russia or Rumania or someplace to work for him. If he can find jobs for kids with accents like Bela Lugosi, he can find jobs for you two. So that

should pretty much answer the main questions, except who's going to work where. Three spots for the two of you. What'll it be, guys? Talk it out, or rock-paper-scissors for first pick?"

Daniel scanned down the page. " 'Frontier Fotos?' Ick. I refuse to work anywhere that mixes corny nostalgia with a blatant misspelling of its own name."

"Good choice," said Sondra. "I think they make you wear costumes, too. Sweaty."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ken. "You've got to factor in the hilarity of dressing tourists up to look like cowboys all day. Whereas I peeked in the door of that souvenir shop the other day, and it looked pretty dull. I'll take the sweaty costumes."

"Dull is bad for me too." Daniel glanced back at the page in front of him. "That leaves me with Black Forest Fudge, then. I can live with fudge." He patted his tummy. "I may gain a few pounds, but I suppose there are worse fates."

"Oh, you can afford to gain a few!" Sondra swished her hand at him. "Unlike me, which makes it lucky that I don't like Caribbean food very much. Really, though, they've got some goooood fudge at the Black Forest. I knew a girl who worked there last summer. She said that they kept you on your feet so much that you worked off anything you ate. Not that she was exactly a waif, but that's what she said."

"Sounds good. I need an active job to keep me awake. Shall we head out, then? Where is this place?"

"Oh, it's up on the north end of Main, next to the wax museum." Sondra gathered her papers back into her folder. "You want me to walk you down there, or do you think you can find it on your own?"

"I found this place, didn't I?" said Daniel, stung. "I'm not an invalid, you know."

Sondra looked miffed. "I just like showing this town off," she said. "I had the best time working here with Justin the last two summers. It truly is the greatest place in the world for a summer job. And didn't you say you'd never been here before, Dan?"

"Maybe once or twice when I was a little kid. Not so as I would remember. When I was older we used to drive through here all the time on trips east, but we never stopped once. Not even for gas."

"Oh, what a shame," said Sondra sympathetically. "Were your parents against having fun, or what?"

"I dunno. I don't remember ever talking about it." Which, now that he considered it, did strike him as odd. "Wait a minute, that reminds me -- I was supposed to call my folks when I got in, but I forgot last night. My mom wasn't too happy about my being here this summer, so I had to promise to check in a lot. I assume we aren't going to get a land line just for the summer -- just all use our cells?"

"Maybe," said Sondra. "Reception around here is pretty lousy, and they say it keeps getting worse no matter how many towers they put in."

"Right." While he put the dishes away, his mind was trying to reach into the back seat of all those childhood cross-country trips. His Dad had always made sure that the car was all filled up with gas and oil before they came within twenty miles of the place. But this city was set up to be a children's nirvana. When they drove through, why couldn't he ever remember begging his parents to stop?

Sondra was the first one out onto the balcony. "Look at this!" she cried. She pulled something off the railing and brought it back in to the two guys. "It looks like she even reused your tape, Danny."

It was the message that Daniel had taped on Mrs. Shantih's door the night before. Sondra turned it over. On the back, printed in block capitals, were two words: LEAVE MILK.

Ken was the first to break the silence. "Now *that's* what I call a cryptic note," he said. "I thought *I* could be cryptic sometimes, but this one takes the crypt."

"What do you suppose she means?" asked Sondra, holding it parallel to the floor an inch from her nose as if searching for invisible ink or microdots. "Does she want us to leave the milk in the supermarket, just not buy any? Leave milk out as an

offering to the refrigerator gods? Leave milk for her, and maybe she'll agree to call a repair man? What?"

Daniel shrugged. "I think she means we'd better leave off getting milk and get used to warm beer. Sondra, did she look nuts when she rented the room to you?"

Sondra shook her head and laid the note on the table. "Maybe a bit senile, but still mostly on her rocker. I'm sorry, I'll try to track her down over my lunch break ..."

Ken interrupted. "Sonny, you can't keep on apologizing every time something goes wrong this summer. We're here, the apartment you found us is livable, we're enjoying one another's company. It may have been your suggestion for us to come work here over the summer, but all of us signed off on the idea. Well, all of us until Justin copped out, anyway. So we're in this together. I say we spend no more than today and tomorrow trying to track down the landlady. Then we just find our own repairman and hand her the bill. It's her responsibility to rent us an apartment where everything works, anyway. All agreed?"

Daniel nodded. Sondra sighed. "I could pick up some milk, if we just knew where to leave it. Oh, all right. Now remember, if the managers where you're going have any problems, show them your letter and tell them to call Mr. Netherby. But really, as long as you're in possession of at least a semi-warm body, you should be able to get a job in Crossroads."

"Hi Mom!" Daniel yelled into his cell phone.

"What?" came the fractured voice from the other end.

"Sorry the connection's so terrible! I had to walk around for blocks and blocks to get enough of a signal to reach you, and it's still pretty bad."

"You say you're sad? Then *frizzzz* come home, once you've
frizzzz with your friends. You know I told you that you didn't
have to *frizzzzzz* "

"I can't come home, Mom." The tone in Ava's voice made Daniel clench his fists. "They're counting on me to help with the rent. I'll be a junior next year -- I've told you a thousand times, I can look after myself by now!"

"I'm not sure *frizzzzzz* it isn't that. It's that I don't think you should be living in that *frizz*

"What have you got against this town, Mom? And how come we never stopped here when I was a kid?"

"We did, once. But that isn't *frizzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzz*"

Waves of static washed out of the phone.

"Look, mom, you're breaking up! I just wanted to let you know I made it in safely, I'll write or use a pay phone if I can't find a good connection, ok?"

"*frizzzzz* wanted to tell you before you left, but *frizzzzz* don't *frizzzzzzzzzzzzzz*." The connection was clearly dead. Daniel closed the phone with a definite but unspecified sense of unease, and went to scout out the fudge shop.

Black Forest Fudge House sat beside a large parking lot at the north end of Main Street, beside a kiosk selling tickets to the bigger Crossroads attractions: Eastfell Cavern, Witch's Gulch, Atlantis Water Park, Circus Maximus Go Kart Land, and the like. Daniel looked over the list, but concluded that if he went to see many attractions he'd end the summer with less money than he'd started with.

There was already a constant morning stream of tourists coming out of the parking lot, and it looked like a fair number of them were stopping in at the Black Forest and emerging bearing chunks, nuggets, boxes, bags, and slabs of various types of candy. Daniel followed a family of four inside, the air conditioning a cool bath after the early summer's heat.

To the right of the door was a long glass counter, packed with more different kinds of fudge than Daniel had ever imagined might exist. There was fudge so dark brown it was almost tar-black, fudge as white as snowdrifts, and every shade in between, all with and without nuts. There was every possible combination of pretzels and apples and cherries dipped in chocolate and nuts and caramel and various kinds of ground-up candy bars. And beyond all these there was chocolate, chocolate, chocolate: in strips, in bars, in flakes, and in ice cream cones turned upside-down and dressed up to look like clowns. Behind the counter were vats where employees Daniel's age were stirring fudge, and big metal tables where they were pouring it and stirring it and

cutting it into slabs and chunks. The smell, of course, was indescribably wonderful.

"How can I help you?" asked the woman at the cash register with a smile. The family of four was in the back of the shop, with the parents angrily telling the kids that with all the hundreds of kinds of candy that could be bought here, they were NOT going to just get M&Ms. Daniel turned to look at the woman behind the counter.

The woman's figure cast grave doubts on Sondra's theory that you would work off anything you ate in the shop. The patterned yellow dress she was wearing had clearly been chosen more for the purpose of draping than clinging provocatively. Her broad face and dark brown eyes showed signs of keen intelligence. Daniel guessed her age to be mid-forties. She was not wearing a wedding ring, or any other jewelry for that matter, other than a wooden spoon tied to a braided belt around her waist.

"Hello," said Daniel, trying his best smile. "I'm Daniel Carver. I'm looking for a summer job, and my roommate got a letter from Mr. Netherby's office saying there'd be an opening here. He's got my job application and W-2 info and stuff." He stretched his hand across the counter, and the woman shook it heartily.

"That's great to hear!" she said. Her voice was as dark and creamy as the fudge beneath the counter. "Daniel Carver, eh? Yes, I got the paperwork from Kim about you. Great! My name is Kate Castellano and I'm the manager here. And am I ever glad to

see you. One of the Rumanians just quit, didn't like it when we told him he had to smile at the customers, so we need someone for the morning shift pronto. When can you start?"

"Umm, right now, I guess." Daniel looked around and sniffed again. This really would be a heavenly place to work, at least from an olfactory standpoint.

Kate reached beneath her cash register for a clipboard and flipped through the pages. "Here you are. It looks like everything's in order except for your local address and phone number, so we can get in touch with you in an emergency." She detached a form and handed it to him. "Just fill this one out. It says Job Application on the form, but don't let that scare you. The way jobs are around here this summer, you'd have to be dying slowly of an infectious disease for us not to hire you."

She pointed out a chair in the back corner of the shop, and Daniel retired there to fill out the form, nibble on the pen, and eavesdrop on the family of four arguing over which kinds of jelly beans were the best. Suddenly, like a creature crawling out from some dark black cave, the wings of exhaustion brushed across his brow, and he felt his chin beginning to dip. He shook his head violently, then stood and headed back to the counter.

Twenty is a difficult age for addressing other adults: do you still treat them with the titles of respect you were taught, or are they starting to become your peers yet? Daniel decided to go with the small-town manners he'd been brought up with. "Look, Mrs. Castellano," he said. "Before I fill all this out, there's

something you ought to know about me. You mentioned diseases. Well, I'm not infectious and I'm not dying, but I do have something wrong with me that may affect my job performance, so you should know about it before you decide whether or not you're going to hire me."

The woman looked at him uneasily, as if he might suddenly spew maggots onto the countertop. Daniel was all too used to that look, but he swallowed and continued.

"Have you ever heard of narcolepsy? It's a sleep disorder. I can't always control when and where I fall asleep. I mean, not that anybody ever has complete control, but I have even less. So if I'm sitting around not doing much, it might seem like - well, I might just suddenly pass out. It's gotten me in trouble with some of the bosses I've had before, some of them thought I was just being lazy or staying up too late the night before. But really, there's very little I can do to stop it. So before I fill out your application, are you going to be OK with that?"

The expression on Kate Castellano's face now was another one that Daniel had grown used to over the years: pity mixed with discomfort. He'd seen it from most of the girls he'd dated. For a while he'd tried keeping quiet about his disability around potential dates, but that had been disastrous. Once they'd managed to persuade him to take them to a movie, his snores shortly after the opening credits were a dead giveaway. At first the girls would be insulted, even prone to insecurity attacks - were they really that boring? Then, after he'd been forced to

describe his constant battle with the sleep dragon, at first they'd be fascinated, as if he was a homosexual and they took it as a personal challenge to "cure" him. Those could be interesting times. But eventually, no matter how hard he fought, they'd be necking in a parked car or sitting on a bench holding hands, when without warning the dragon would suck him under the dim waters. After that would come the accusations - "Well, I guess I'm just not *interesting* enough for you!" and he'd be alone again with the echoes of slamming doors and his dreams.

"Look," said Mrs. Castellano, pushing herself up onto a stool beside the cash register and scratching her nose, "I'd like to keep an open mind about this. Tell me, do you ever, umm, pass out when you're standing up, or is it only like you say, when you aren't doing much?"

Daniel remembered when he was leaning against the balcony the night before. There'd been a time the previous year at college, too, when he'd woken up in a bus at the end of the line, gently swaying in the aisle with his hand still gripping the ceiling strap. "The biggest risk is when I'm not doing much," he said, "but it can come at any time."

The woman behind the counter scratched her nose some more, her round forehead wrinkling in thought. "You've got to understand, Daniel, most of the people who work here spend all day making candy. That mixing bowl over there heats up to over three hundred degrees. It's hard enough to keep from burning yourself even when you're fully alert. I'm afraid if you pitched

forward onto one of them..." She let the sentence hang. "And you've got to see how it would look to the customers, if it was a busy day and you were asleep behind the register. Look, I'm terribly sorry, but most people don't realize that making fudge is a pretty hazardous business. I mean, you wouldn't want to work around heavy machinery with a condition like that, and this is almost the same thing. Really, I'm just trying to look out for your own best interests here."

"Oh, sure," said Daniel, trying to keep bitterness out of his voice. "I'm sure there's got to be someone in this town who will hire a lazy bum like me. Well, nice meeting you and all, but I guess I'd better be going, then."

"Wait!" Mrs. Castellano called as Daniel started to turn toward the door. He was pleased to see that she was looking guilty. "I don't want you to go away mad. Tell you what. Why don't you pick out three candies from our special twenty-five-dollar rack behind you. My gift."

Daniel turned around and saw something that he hadn't noticed on the way in. Opposite the counter was a rack of glass jars, each filled with a different kind of individual candy. Beside a stack of brown paper bags there was a large sign: CHOOSE ANY THREE CANDIES, FREE WITH ANY PURCHASE OF TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS OR MORE.

Daniel considered standing on his pride and turning her down; he'd been a victim of blatant discrimination against the handicapped, after all. Someone with a more confrontational

nature might have sued. Why should he let this woman salve her conscience? He was also trying to deal with the nagging question of what Sondra would say about him not getting the job, when she had said that you'd have to be practically dead to fail to get employment. But when he glanced back at the manager he didn't see the pity he'd been expecting, but a different emotion entirely: curiosity. She was staring at him speculatively, as if there was something about him that she couldn't quite place.

Anyway, free chocolate could never be a bad thing. Sondra certainly wouldn't turn a piece down. Daniel turned, grabbed a paper bag from the stack, and shook it open. Then he opened three lids more or less at random, took out three candies using the tongs attached to the jars' lids, and dropped them one by one into the bag. They were all chocolates of various types -- he'd overheard Sondra tell Justin last Valentine's Day how much she loved the chocolates he'd brought her. One for each of them, he thought - Sondra and Ken and Daniel, blazing into town like the Fantastic Three with the Human Torch on vacation. He folded the top of the bag over and started toward the door again.

"Wait!" Kate called behind him once more. "I, um, need to ring those up for inventory. Let me see what you picked."

Inventory? Daniel wondered. *They keep inventory on individual candies?* He handed the sack across the counter. The woman closed her eyes and gave the bag a brief shake, then opened the top and peeked inside. Then it seemed to Daniel that her eyes widened.

"Cinnamon, peanuts, coconut," she murmured softly. She stared at the inside of the bag for several seconds. When she tore her eyes away and handed it back to him, her voice sounded quite different. "Look, I'm terribly sorry we got started on the wrong foot. Three isn't very many. Why don't you pick two more, just to make it a nice round figure, hmm?"

"All right," said Daniel, turning back to the rack of jars again. Since when was five a round number? He thought about Mrs. Shantih's cryptic note -- was anybody in this town sane? Perhaps it was best just to humor them. First he chose another chocolate, something he thought the absent Justin might have liked. For his last pick, he looked around for something a bit different. One of the jars brought back a jolt of memory from the Halloweens of childhood: the joy of candy sorting; his Mom pleading for her cut of the loot; the task of persuading her to let him use the scissors to clip off the end; then best of all, the cool, tart taste of the sugary dust melting on his tongue.

Kate took the bag from him again, gave it another brisk shake, then opened it again and peeked inside. "Honeycomb and a pixie stick?" This time her voice was almost a whisper. She handed the bag back to him and slowly got off her stool. Her entire manner seemed changed.

"I may have been a bit hasty before, Daniel. You look like a very nice young man. Um, you may have figured that was some kind of a test, and you'd have been right. I ... I was impressed by how you always used the tongs to get the candy out, instead of

just sticking your hand in the jar.” She smiled again, but this time it seemed a more deliberate smile than the one she had given him when he came in, as if she was being graded by a panel of judges on the smile’s sincerity and warmth. “There’s nothing more important than cleanliness in a place like this, and you’d be surprised how many kids your age don’t know the first thing about it. Didn’t you say something about having a letter from Jack?”

“You mean Mr. Netherby? Sure,” said Daniel, digging in his back pocket. “I’ve got it right here, and...”

“I’ll take your word for it. Look, now that I think about it I’m sure we’ll be able to find a place for you here where your disability won’t be a problem. After all, we’re making candy, not nuclear missiles, right? Why don’t you just finish filling out that form, and then I’ll introduce you to the rest of us here and give you the grand tour, OK?”

“OK,” said Daniel. He was aware that he’d really wanted this job a few minutes ago, and despite the manager’s strange behavior he couldn’t think of any reason now to turn it down. *Well after all, don’t most managers look a bit nuts to the people who work for them?* Sighing, he went back to his seat to finish the paperwork. At the front counter the family was starting to argue about the three free bonus candies that came with their order. Peace was finally reestablished by buying an extra stick of gum, so that each child would have two items apiece. Again Kate Castellano shook the bag and peered inside before she rang

it up, then watched the family speculatively as they pushed out through the door into Main Street's warmth.

Chapter 3

When Sekhmet saw the ground flooded with the red-tinted beer, she believed it to be the blood of those she had killed. She saw her reflection in it, and laughed, and drank so deeply that she could no longer slay, but instead fell into a deep sleep. Thus was mankind saved.

Rê, His Going Down and Uprising

Daniel knew that in distant Egypt, the Blue Nile began where the great Nile split in two tributaries at Khartoum, hundreds of miles upriver from the Valley of the Kings with its pyramids and pharaohs. Apparently no one had ever communicated that bit of geography to the interior decorators of the Blue Nile bar at Crossroads, however. It was an Egyptian "theme" bar, at least if your idea of a theme was small enough to encompass just four elements: first, a mural by the entrance decorated with pseudo- hieroglyphs and some American's idea of Egyptians dancing to a boom box with their hands crooked at right angles; second, a waist-high inflatable replica of King Tut's sarcophagus at one end of the bar; and third, a statue of Anubis the jackal god on a shelf immediately above it. Daniel and Ken discovered the fourth thing, little pyramid block puzzles on all the tables, when they sat down near the bar with their drinks. Other than those items, the bar just used the same decor as most other American drinking establishments, namely, television screens and alcohol

advertisements. A giant portrait of a famous pirate touting his brand of rum looked down over their booth, with an expression suggesting he was enormously pleased that the larger-than-life image he had promoted during his life had outlasted him by three centuries.

Ken glanced at the picture as he sat down. "Pirates in Ancient Egypt, eh? I think that was where Joe Camel got his start too. I'm surprised the bartender isn't dressed up as a mummy." He leaned forward with a surreptitious glance at the broad bouncer standing by the door, and whispered. "Just water, Dan? My IDs got us in OK, didn't they? You don't have to worry about getting busted if you order a beer."

Daniel shifted uncomfortably, lowering his voice as well. "My doctor prescribed some new meds for me, and he said they'd lower my alcohol tolerance. Besides, umm, we're on a shoestring budget, remember? I'm trying to save up some cash."

Ken shrugged. "Well, I bet you're the only twenty-year-old in history who's used a fake ID to get into a bar just to drink water, but suit yourself." He leaned back again and raised his voice to a normal level, idly picking up and disassembling the little block pyramid as he spoke. "So how was your first day?"

"Just a second." Daniel jumped up and scanned the room for an empty table with a similar pyramid. When he had one, he came back and dumped the pieces on his side of the table across from Ken. "Ready, set, go."

Their hands flew for a few seconds. Then "Done," said Ken, displaying his finished pyramid. "Of course, I had more time to look at mine."

Daniel finished a few seconds later, and compared the two creations side by side. "Good engineering, oh wise one. If I ever need someone to design a tomb to carry me and my worldly possessions over into the afterlife, I'll be sure to look you up. My day did not suck too badly, by which I mean that my new boss decided to hire me even though I told her I might suddenly keel over at any moment. I think she was eyeing me all day in case I pitched over into the caramel pot, but fortunately I managed to stay conscious. About all she did was give me a tour of the place and brief me on The Proper Way to Clean Counters and Dishes. She said she'd start putting me to work tomorrow hauling stuff up and down from the basement. I may just build up some muscles by the end of the summer after all. How was Frontier Fotos?"

"Oh," Ken shook his head, "definitely a hoot. I wouldn't call any of their clothes authentic to the Old West, but who am I to complain? I'm sure our pioneer ancestors would've used velcro if they'd had it."

"What did they have you doing? Did you get to take any pictures?"

"Nah, a real photographer did the actual shooting. I mostly just sat in the sauna-like booth out front and took people's money, then helped them get into their costumes. You'd

be amazed at how many women seem to jump at the opportunity to dress like prostitutes. The high point came when I got to help some fat guy get into a cowboy outfit. You know, velcro may be tough, but it doesn't stretch very well."

"I suppose so." Daniel gathered all the pyramid pieces and began trying them in different combinations, twisting them back and forth. "You know, I ought to write these stories down, Ken. One day when you're an engineer and making twice my salary, I'll be able to tell people about the good old days when you had to humiliate yourself for a summer job just like the rest of us. I'll have to make you get your picture taken there this summer dressed up in chaps and spurs so I can prove my tale."

"Hey, your paintings are going to be selling for millions, aren't they?" Ken said after taking a swig of beer. "No way I'll be able to top that. Which reminds me, what did you finally put down as your major? I remember you were planning on agonizing over it right up to the deadline the last time I saw you. You said it all depended on whether or not you bombed that poetry final."

Daniel sighed. "It wouldn't have been so hard if everything I read for that class hadn't put me to sleep. Read a stanza, clunk, read a stanza, clunk. I could remember it pretty well when I was done, but the homework took me three times longer than all my other classes. So that doesn't bode well for a career in English; art's starting to look better." To illustrate his point he made the pyramid blocks into an eagle, flapping

awkwardly around the table. "I figure I'll probably have to sell out either way, but at least with art they might let me keep some small spark of creativity from being crushed. I've been thinking about going into advertising -- maybe then I could combine both."

Ken began carefully adjusting his mug so that it occupied the precise center of a coaster. "My Dad has to work with advertisers a lot, and he says it's like the old west. Creativity is gold, but you're surrounded by all those desperate miners, so if you make a strike on an original idea you get swarmed by bandits and claim-jumpers before you can even get it appraised. And if you don't do the same thing, your head will get used as a stepping-stone so often you might as well glue a doormat to your scalp. I don't think you'd last a year, Dan."

Daniel sighed. "Perhaps not. I envy you, Ken. You've got your future all planned out."

"Do I now." Ken didn't look up from his measuring. "And what's that?"

"Didn't you tell me once that you wanted to work for NASA?"

"Hmph." Ken turned the coaster to look at it from a different angle. "Just like every actor wants to be on the big screen, just like every musician wants to play the Met. Doesn't mean it's going to happen."

"Well even so, it's not like engineers go begging. I'll bet your Dad has hundreds of contacts to get you started. Which reminds me, didn't you say back in March that he wanted you to work for him this summer? Why'd that fall through?"

Ken gave up arranging the mug and drank off the last of the beer in it. He set it down without looking at Daniel. "I'd have to live at home then," he said as if that made everything obvious. "And while my folks do travel a lot, there would still be unavoidable occasions over the summer when they might be home." There was a long pause while he stared into his empty glass. Finally he looked up and forced a smile. "Anyway, Sondra and Justin are the ones who've really got things mapped out. The only decision they've got left to make is when to get married, and whether they're going for their big break in New York or L.A."

Daniel arranged the blocks into the shape of a coiled snake. "That reminds me. Did Sondra say what play she was trying out for tonight? I assume it's at that dinner theater over in Archer's Bluff where she did 'Joseph' last summer."

"Yeah, she's been talking about that all year, hasn't she? I think she said they're doing Faust this year."

"Doctor Faustus? That's an odd choice for a dinner theater."

"I didn't say Doctor Faustus, did I?" Ken snorted. "I said Faust. Or rather, 'Faust!' with an exclamation mark. It's some way-off-Broadway musical version. If it's Gothic it hits the boards, apparently. You know - Phantom, Dracula, Mr. Hyde -- they'll be teaching the Hunchback of Notre Dame to tap-dance next, I shouldn't wonder."

Daniel spun his glass meditatively. "Ken, what do you think about the arrangements this summer? Do you think the whole apartment thing will work out?"

Ken shifted uncomfortably. "I guess you know I didn't exactly come out here for the job. It was just, well, I didn't have any other great ideas for what to do with myself. I know you guys are scraping by, so maybe I could pay something extra..."

"I don't want to take your money, Ken. That wasn't what I meant. What about the two of us sharing an apartment with Sondra, with Justin not around? Isn't that going to drive you crazy? I mean, Justin's a good friend and all, but still ..."

Ken frowned. "That way lies madness, my boy. First thing, she's not going to be leaving him. She just isn't. They've been dating since, what, junior high? Chose the same college so they wouldn't be separated? Second, like you said, Justin's been our friend for two years now. I don't think you could live with yourself if you stabbed him in the back like that. And third, if by any chance she was thinking of leaving him, I don't think you're her type. She strikes me as a girl who would want someone a bit more, hmm, flamboyant, don't you think?"

"Maybe." Daniel stared broodingly into his lemonade.

Just then, there was a disturbance at the doorway. Over the bouncer's protests, five teenagers with leather jackets were shouldering their way into the bar.

The apparent leader of the group was one of three members with Asian features -- Chinese, Vietnamese, maybe Korean. His hair was short in the front and long in the back, and he wore a pair of small round dark glasses perched halfway down his nose. Over his shoulder was slung a wooden walking stick with a curved staghorn for a handle. When he slapped it on the bar, everyone nearby turned to look. He leaned his back against the bar, put his elbows on it, and surveyed the place like a medieval warlord.

One of the other teens dropped a coin into a nearby video arcade and began driving a pixilated truck through virtual city streets, apparently with the object of causing as much property damage as possible. Daniel saw the words "The Wild Hunt" painted on the back of his jacket. The bouncer strode by on his way toward the back of the bar, presumably to call the manager. Another black-jacketed young man jerked the plug out of the bar's jukebox, causing a few more patrons to turn and look. The fourth one turned on a boom box he'd carried in, and heavy metal filled the room. The kid holding the boom box kept turning up the volume as the song went on until it ended with a crashing roar:

*I am the sky of dark and light,
I am the moon of silver flame,
I am the stone that burns at night,
I am the power that has no name,
I am the lightning,
I am its scream,*

*I am the nightmare,
That wakes from a dream,
Strength in my nostrils,
Strength in my shining teeth,
Strength in my hair,
Strength in my belly,
Strength on my tongue,
Strength in my fingers,
Strength in my toes,
Strength in my knees,
Strength in my eyes,
Strength in my ears,
Strength in my throat.
Rrouuuuuuuug!*

As the final howl of the song shook the glasses behind the bar a small, dark-skinned, heavy-set man with a worn suede jacket and thick mustache appeared from the back. "What do you kids want?" he asked grimly.

The Wild Hunt's leader gave a laugh midway between a cackle and a screech. "Same thing we always want, pops," he said shrilly. "Same thing the bossman wants, all your stocks, locks, and pyramids. Not your *cojones*, the way anybody would think from how you keep ahold of the place. Just sign on the dotted line and you can keep right on doing whatever garbage it is you're doing here now. But if you keep on saying you have to think

about it, bad things could start happening real soon, Sanchez, real soon. Sands of the old desert hourglass are running out on our hero, eh old man? Same thing that happened to Atlantis could happen to the land of the pharaohs, savvy?

The heavy-set man's lips tightened beneath his mustache. "Please tell your 'bossman' that I would very much prefer to discuss business matters in my office with him, in person, instead of out here through a bunch of hoodlums and juvenile delinquents."

"Ooooh," said some of the gang, stepping back in mock admiration. The arm of their leader, lying along the bar, tightened a bit. He reached up behind the bar, took down a clean glass, and stared at it for a second before dropping it on the floor, where it splintered into sharp fragments.

"I don't think you understand, old man," he said quietly. "I'm practically the bossman's *son-in-law*, y'understand? The bossman has put this place under my *special care*. Wants to see how I handle these here negotiations. Says if me and my buddies can handle this place, we may have a future in his *corporation*. What do ya say about that, José?"

The man with the mustache sniffed. "Just that any organization that employs folks like you in management isn't one I would care to be associated with."

"Only game in town, pops," the kid sneered.

The heavy man sighed, his mustache drooping. "Look, it isn't like I'm trying to hold up the wheels of progress here.

Tell him if he just gives me what the place is worth, I'll move on and to hell with all of you. Lots of towns need bars."

The leader leaned forward. "That ain't the way it works, little man. The boss decides what this place is worth, and he thinks your askin' way too much for this dump. Accident-prone, it looks like to me."

Just then the one who had been playing the video game ended his race in a fiery cataclysm, wheels of his imaginary truck flying through the air as it burst into flames. The words 'Game Over' filled the screen. The leader sighted along his walking stick and said "Bang" softly, and the screen went black.

"Last chance, Pedro! We can do this the easy way, or we can do it the hard way!" He stepped on the broken glass and crushed it into slivers with his boot, then sauntered out of the bar leaving a shining glass trail, his troops falling in behind him. The man with the mustache stared after them, then let his shoulders slump and headed toward the back again.

Daniel and Ken stared at one another. They weren't the only ones shocked into silence; the whole place seemed to have gone quiet. Finally, Ken said softly, "Speaking of the frontier, did we just step into Tombstone or something? I kept expecting John Wayne to show up."

Daniel looked around the room. "I dunno, Ken. Maybe we should get out of here.'

"And miss the rest of the fun? Hardly." Ken stood up. "If there are street gangs running protection rackets and hostile

small-business takeovers in this town, I want to know about them. It might be us next. Plus, you know, this really oughta break up the summer blahs. Come on." He picked up his empty beer glass and went over to sit on a barstool. Reluctantly, Daniel took his lemonade and followed.

After the interruption, the other patrons seemed to be giving the bar a wide berth. The bartender, a tall black man who appeared to be in his late twenties, had been hovering at the far end of the bar during the confrontation, but after they gang left he had come around with a broom and dustpan to sweep up the broken glass. As Ken and Daniel approached, he straightened and returned to his place by the cash register. "What can I do you guys for?" he asked, his voice softened with a faint southern drawl.

"Give me another beer," said Ken, stuffing a five-dollar bill into the tip jar, "and tell me what just went down."

The bartender looked the two of them over carefully. "You gents from out of town?"

Daniel figured it was time for him to say something. "Summer help. I'm Daniel, I'm working at the Black Forest, and my friend Ken here is at Frontier Fotos. We just moved in next door, over the antique shop."

The bartender's expression cleared, and he reached across the bar to shake their hands. "The name's Jeremiah Fry, but most folks call me Jay. Pleased to meetcha. I ain't from around here

myself, y'understand. Just passin' through. But folks round here don't like makin' the town look bad for tourists."

Ken nodded his head toward the door. "It didn't seem like those guys cared much about what your customers thought."

Jay squinted as he poured the beer. "Master Douglas Chee and his Wild Hunt?" His voice dripped with disdain. "Those boys in over they heads drowning and don't even know it."

Ken took the glass Jay gave him and set it down carefully on a beer mat. Then he leaned forward and put both elbows on the bar. "In most towns," he said, "a businessman who got himself threatened like that would be calling the police right now. Is that what your boss is doing?"

"Huph!" Jay snorted. "I ain't sayin' nothin' about the police in this town. Enough other joints been bought up around here, I reckon the grease must be spread around some, y'know? But I ain't sayin' no more."

Ken nodded and stuffed a few more dollars into the tip jar. "Of course not. But who's this 'bossman' that those bozos were talking about? It looked like some kind of corporate takeover."

The bartender looked to the right and the left, then lowered his voice. "The bossman over them boys goes by the name of Netherby. He owns both of them places you two said you was workin' at, so you oughta be careful where you stick your noses. Seems like he's tryin' to buy up every spare scrap o' business this town's got, but Mr. Santiago won't sell. What do you guys

care about all this, though? Us out-of-towners best to steer clear of all this local craziness."

Ken sat back and took a sip from his beer, so Daniel answered the question. "My friend here sometimes likes to pretend he's Sherlock Holmes and the Green Hornet wrapped up into one. The problem is, college hasn't provided him with many international jewel thieves to go after so far. I'm sure he thinks he'll be able to bring this gang to justice in a few days with ----- say, Ken, what were you planning on stopping them with, anyhow? You pick up the power to cloud men's minds since the term let out, or what?"

Ken sputtered and clunked his mug down. "Don't tell me you weren't curious too, Dan! I happen to think that if something bad is going down, we'll be a hell of a lot safer knowing what it is."

The bartender shook his head. "Seems like ain't nobody safe poking their noses in Netherby business. Now it looks like I've got some more customers coming, so if you two will 'scuse me..."

"Wait!" Daniel called after him as he began to move down the bar. "One more question. What happened to Atlantis?"

Jay turned back to them with a frown. "Ain't you read what that Plato fellah said? It done sank beneath the sea, fellahs. Done sank beneath the sea."

Chapter 4

My lord, I shall reply amazedly,

Half sleep, half waking.

Midsummer Night's Dream Act 5 Scene 2

William Shakespeare

Back in his lemon-flooded room that night, Daniel unwrapped a package he'd picked up at a thrift store on the way to work: a large roll of thick, black plastic and a roll of duct tape. The window would have to go --- if he had to choose between no darkness and no air, he'd have to find out what it felt like to be stifled.

He removed the flimsy yellowed shade from its holder, and carefully taped the edge of the plastic to the top of the window, then started down the side. Then, before taping down the other side, he pulled it back for one last glimpse of Sapphire Drive before he shut off his view of it forever. Across the street, a large black bird was pecking at something and *the entire street suddenly shifted like a stereogram, like one of those pictures you study as a child where you must search for the hidden faces. The faces were everywhere. A lamppost winked at him, the stop light flashed him a green smile beneath its mad red eyes, and the concrete wastebasket tilted back and stared up before turning to waddle off on three short, stubby legs. And the whole scene was changing as he watched, deepening and unfolding like a backdrop*

that slowly became transparent, and what was becoming visible behind it was ...

Daniel pulled himself awake again with a start. *Damn you, dragon!* he thought. When he earnestly sought it, pleaded with it, begged it to take him it would turn a cold shoulder, only to pounce when his back was turned. Wearily he finished taping the plastic, then stood back and turned off the light switch. The darkness wasn't total, but it was certainly improved. That was good. Darkness was golden.

He woke up in the belly of the night. For a while he lay quietly and tried to will himself back into the cool white birches of his favorite dream, but to no avail. The dragon had flown again, leaving behind not a puff of smoke from its nostrils, as usual. After a while he groped for the light switch and looked around for something else to do. With the window blocked by its black film, the room felt like an isolation chamber. The city was silent, and he half suspected that if he opened the door, his friends and their apartment would be gone, and there'd be nothing outside but the gray fog of oblivion. For a moment it seemed obvious that Sondra and Ken, the town of Crossroads, college, family, and all the world were only illusions, and that Daniel was the only conscious creature in all the wide universe.

He unpacked his watercolors. At least with the window taped shut, he could tell the difference between red and green

again. He put a piece of paper on his easel, and began trying for the thousandth time to paint his lost dreams.

When you battle dragons as part of your daily routine, you keep a tally of every minor skirmish's wins and losses. *Five hours*, Daniel thought as he stumbled to breakfast the next morning. *I've done better, but I've done far worse too. Five hours can hold me, if I can just manage a nap...*

Sondra was standing by the kitchen counter in a forest green brocaded nightgown, slicing a banana. "Sit down, sit down!" she called gaily over her shoulder. "You won't *believe* how great I did at the audition last night. The female lead is mine for sure!"

"Was that the big news you were saving for when both of us were here?" Ken, in silk pajamas, was already at the table, squinting into a Star Trek mug full of black coffee.

Sondra whirled around balancing two bowls of Captain Crunch and two slices of toast, and plunked them down in front of the guys. "No, Mister Smarty Pants, it wasn't my big news. Have some breakfast and see if you can figure it out."

Ken took one bite of his cereal and then sat back, bemused. Daniel was halfway through his bowlful before the realization hit him.

"This milk is cold! How'd you fix the refrigerator?"

Sondra beamed. "Am I a great engineer or what? Who needs Ken to fix things when you've got me, eh?"

Ken pushed himself away from the table, opened the refrigerator door, and ran his finger along one of the shelves. "Yep, it's cold all right. What's the trick?"

"What do you mean, trick?" Daniel asked between bites of Captain Crunch.

Ken returned to his seat and scratched the back of his neck. "Well, the fridge still wasn't cold when Danny and I got home from the bar last night, so I unplugged it so the humming wouldn't keep me awake. Now, I can hear it running again. And Sondra hasn't been out this morning because she's still wearing her nightgown, so she must have gotten the milk sometime yesterday. I'm assuming she came home from her audition after we were both asleep, ran into Mrs. Shantih, and our landlady told her how to get the refrigerator cold and gave her some milk. So again, what's the trick?"

"Well, it's not a *trick* exactly." Sondra stuck out her lower lip and blew her bangs upwards. "It was her note. It was perfectly straightforward once she explained it. Leave milk. Like for a cat. And she gave me a quart so you're right there, smart guys."

"Who's smart?" asked Daniel. "Dumb as a box of rocks, that's me."

"Befuddled is more like it," said Ken. "Leave what milk? What are you talking about, Sondra?"

"This." Sondra picked up an empty bowl from the floor next to the refrigerator. "Mrs. Shantih told me to leave a dish of

milk next to the refrigerator every night, like for a cat. And see?" She brandished the empty bowl under their noses. "This was full last night! It must have something to do with evaporation and humidity or something."

Ken took the bowl from her and stared into it analytically. He sniffed it, then looked down at the floor. "It didn't spoil, at least," he said. He ran his fingernail along the bottom and examined it. "Hardly any residue. Sondra, surely you realize that there's no way that a full bowl of water could evaporate in one night, let alone milk. Milk would curdle or, I don't know, turn into yogurt or something. Assuming neither of you snuck a thirsty cat in with your luggage, I'd guess we must have very thirsty mice or something. As for the refrigerator starting to work, it's obviously a coincidence. It must have just made a connection and decided to start working on its own."

"I saw a cat in the alley the other night," offered Daniel. Sondra seemed to be building up a head of steam, and he wanted to head off an explosion.

Sondra looked thoughtful, successfully deflected for the moment. "Mrs. Shantih has a gray cat," she said. "That could have been the one you saw, Daniel."

Ken snorted. "Don't you think we'd notice if there were any holes in the walls big enough for a cat to get in, Danny? Mice seem a lot more likely. It would take a lot of them, though, unless Sondra didn't pour out much milk to start with..."

Sondra sniffed. "You don't seem to think very highly of Mrs. Shantih's intelligence, do you Ken? Or mine either, for that matter. She says she's been putting milk out every night for five years, all her appliances work perfectly, and the milk is always gone every morning. And no, it isn't her cat drinking it, because he likes to stay out all night."

"Then this building must have really fat rats!" Ken's voice was rising to match Sondra's. "Appliances run on electricity, not lactose fumes! This is just how superstitions get started - people start off with a loose circuit or some other coincidence, and they end up cutting each other's hearts out on the altar of the Great Refrigerator God!"

"Humph!" Sondra crossed her arms. Daniel had seen her in moods like this once or twice before - 'Full Redhead Episodes' Justin used to call them - and he'd no wish to provoke one, but Ken seemed to have no such instinct for self-preservation. "If that's the way you feel, oh great engineer, then how about a little bet? We won't put any milk out tonight. If the refrigerator works in the morning, then I make breakfast. No refrigeration and you're the chef."

"This is ridiculous!" Ken flung open the refrigerator door and stared inside, then slammed it shut again. "It makes no sense to be betting on a loose wire. How do I know whether or not it's going to slip again?" He stepped back and looked at the white edifice from a different angle, then turned around and shook Sondra's hand. "If this thing is still working when we go

to bed tonight, then you're on. I'm guessing the odds are at least fifty per cent in my favor."

"Great!" Sondra turned and headed out the door. "We've got to get ready for work, guys. Enjoy your toast. Toaster works now too."

Ken sat down and stuck his spoon into his now-utterly-soggy Captain Crunch. "What are you smiling about?" he asked Daniel sharply.

"Hey, no matter what happens, looks like I get a free breakfast, don't I?"

Ken put the spoon into his mouth and made a face, then got up and dumped his bowl of yellow sludge into the sink.

Daniel arrived at the fudge shop at eight o'clock. Kate Castellano and a mocha-skinned, teenaged girl with a frizzy explosion of a pony-tail were already there, both wearing green aprons, standing beside a caldron of bubbling white fudge. Kate was adding some creamy white syrup while the girl stirred.

"When shall we three meet again," said Daniel. "Who brought the eye of newt?"

"Daniel!" cried Kate, looking genuinely pleased to see him. "Just in time. You see here the day's first batch of fudge. Pure, white, and virginal, just like Cindy here. Well, except for the white part, anyway. By the way, Cindy, meet Daniel." The pony-tailed girl lowered her head in obvious embarrassment while Kate went on obliviously. "Alas, you'll see how it darkens

as the day goes on. Browner and browner until it's a shadowy pit of chocolate sin by evening. The kettle, that is, not Cindy. Still, how like life, don't you think?"

Cindy shrugged apologetically, still stirring. "This way you only have to clean the pot once a day, you know? Pleased to meet you, Daniel."

"Likewise. What's my first job?"

Kate straightened up and put her hands on her ample hips. "Washing dishes and cleaning the store, for starters. Whenever you're standing around without a job to do, you should grab a rag or a broom and start cleaning something. If there's time to lean, there's time to clean. No one wants to buy candy from a dusty store. If you can't find anything that needs cleaning, go through the shelves and face them - push the merchandise up so everyone can see it. Then go back and clean some more. We don't want anybody lying down on the job around..." She suddenly interrupted her spiel, perhaps abashed at having forgotten Daniel's disability. "Umm, just keep busy, OK?"

"No problem," said Daniel, trying to think of something that would take her mind off his syndrome. "I like to clean things that really need it. It sort of feels like I'm bringing order out of chaos, you know? Like I'm doing my little part to reverse entropy."

Kate shook her head. " 'That time may cease and midnight never come,' eh? I'm just asking you to make a few passes with the Windex, Dan, not smack the Fenris in the snout. It's ready,

Cindy.” Together the two women lifted the pot from its holder and poured the mixture across a metal table in a snaky white river of sweetness.

Cindy poured a cup of vanilla extract onto the fudge, then smeared a glob of white fondant across the top. She unhooked two metal cutters that were hanging beside the table and began to make a great show of slicing and shoveling the ingredients into each other. “We could just stir it in the pot, you know,” she said self-consciously, “but we have to put on a performance for the customers.”

Kate turned back to Daniel. “Now, every morning from eight fifteen on, you should keep an ear open for the delivery truck. The driver will pile up boxes by the back door, and it’ll be your job to carry them downstairs and stack them where I showed you yesterday. Speaking of which devil, I hear him out back this very moment. Any questions?”

“Nope,” said Daniel. He went out onto the loading dock and stood by while Kate signed for the delivery, then took the first two heavy buckets -- inverted sugar, he remembered from the tour yesterday, that was the creamy white syrup she’d added to the fudge -- and headed down the rickety steps to the basement. He remembered what liquid Kate had said inverted sugar always reminded her of, and he was sure it would have embarrassed Cindy if she’d been around. For that matter, it had embarrassed him.

The basement was the obverse of the bright shop above. Where everything above was order and cleanliness, the store’s dim

underbelly looked as if no one had tidied it for years. In the center of the room was an enormous table made of sheets of plywood on trestles, stacked above and below with boxes of all sizes and shapes. Bits of unidentifiable machinery rusted in corners, white powder drifted underfoot, and dampness trickled down one bare stone wall and seeped across the floor to a rusty drain. Daniel carefully maneuvered the buckets down the narrow aisle to the wooden pallets where they were supposed to be stacked, right next to the oversized refrigerator where they stored apples and strawberries for chocolate dipping. As he turned to go back upstairs, he had a sudden sense of a presence in the room besides himself. He caught a brief flash of tiny green eyes looking at him from beneath a towering stack of napkin boxes, which then disappeared in a skittering flurry of movement.

Kate was telling the punchline of a joke when he reemerged from the depths. "Bittersweet chocolate?" she was saying to Cindy while cutting fudge into strips, "But officer, I hardly even knew her!" She laughed hugely, and Cindy returned a tight, nervous smile.

Before Daniel went out back again for another box, he sidled up to Kate and murmured as softly as he could so that no customers would hear, "Did you know that there are mice down there?"

"Just one mouse, actually," Kate replied nonchalantly. "Hieronymus Mus the Third. You should be honored that he chose to come out and have a look at you."

"But..." he bit back what he wanted to say. Surely where there was one mouse there would be more? No, he told himself, *don't tell the boss how to run things on your second day*, but it was no use. The thought of mouse droppings had already begun to take away his appetite for fudge. "Surely the Health Department..."

"Don't mention those fools!"

Daniel stepped back in amazement. For just a moment, his hitherto friendly boss seemed to have metamorphosed into some medieval tyrant queen getting set to order a massacre. Then her features softened again, and she smiled a little too broadly. "There's no need to worry about Musmus, Daniel," she said soothingly. "He's a pet, not vermin, I assure you. He's trained to go where he needs to go, if that's what's worrying you."

Daniel had his doubts about how well a free-range mouse could be litter trained, but this time he managed to keep his objections to himself. He had thought on the way up the stairs that he might suggest fetching in his landlady's cat to take care of the rodent problem, but he discarded that idea unuttered as well. Instead he returned to the back porch and hefted two more buckets of inverted sugar, preparing for his next trip to the underworld.

Daniel got through his morning at the Black Forest Fudge Shop fairly well. Two or three times the black waves of

exhaustion swirled around his knees and ankles, but he managed to pull himself out of them and keep trudging on.

The second shift, which overlapped the first during the busiest hours of the afternoon, came in at two o'clock. The Assistant Manager was a leather-skinned older lady, possibly in her sixties, possibly twenty years younger but with her skin shriveled by too much sun tanning and smoke. Mrs. Castellano introduced her as Mrs. Vanderski. Cindy waved her peanut brittle scraper in her direction enthusiastically; the two seemed to be old friends. There were also two tall, dark-skinned, brooding Rumanians whose names Daniel was not able to catch.

At half past two, Kate told Daniel that he could take his lunch break. He walked out the front door of the shop, sat down on the sidewalk bench outside, leaned his head back and promptly began to snore.

He awoke with the sense of someone nearby. It was the girl Cindy, her frizzy hair spread wide out of its pony tail now, eating a sandwich beside him. She put the sandwich down as if she was about to say something, but he was still too mired in sleep to want conversation, so he closed his eyes again and turned to face the other direction. When he opened them again she was still in front of him, the pony tail back in place. He shook himself as sleep forsook him, looking from left to right. There were two of her, sitting on both sides of him like bookends.

"Hi," said the tail-less one, "I'm Heather Erikson. I work at the souvenir store next door. My sister was just telling me about you."

"Hello," Daniel replied, blinking rapidly and feeling stupid. It was difficult enough to get his brain working properly when he woke up in completely familiar surroundings, let alone around new places or new people or both. "Umm, I'm guessing you two must be twins. I'm Daniel Carver, but I guess you already knew that. Do you two live here in town, or are you migrants, errr, immigrants like me?"

Cindy laughed; Daniel was relieved to hear that it was a genuine laugh this time and not the self-conscious giggle he'd heard before. "We're townies," she said. "We go to Stone Valley High."

"Seniors next year," put in Heather. "I'll bet our entire graduating class is working within five blocks of here right now."

"Well, I'm pleased to meet, ah, both of you." Daniel shook his head, still struggling to gather up all his broken shards of wakefulness. "Look, I'm sorry if I'm kind of foggy right now, but sometimes I nap pretty hard, and..."

"Oh, don't worry about it," said Heather as she flipped her hair. It had streaks of henna in it, Daniel saw now. There were plenty of differences once you looked. "Cindy found out all about you from Mrs. Castellano yesterday. We know all about how you're narcopathic and everything."

"Narcoleptic, Heth," corrected Cindy before Daniel had a chance to. "From the Greek. Narcoun meaning numbness, plus leptos meaning to grasp hold of. There are worse circuits to have shorted, but it must still be a real pain." She smiled sympathetically. "What does it feel like when it hits you?"

"Cin here wants to be a doctor," put in Heather. "That's why she thinks she has a license to be nosy with complete strangers. You have every right to ignore her; that's what I always do."

Cindy stuck out her tongue at her sister, and Heather retaliated by throwing a few raisins from her lunch bag. Between them, Daniel felt that his soul was still far away but finally starting to zoom in closer. "No, it's all right," he said. "I don't mind talking about it. What did you want to know?"

"Well..." Cindy tapped her front teeth thoughtfully. "Does it come all at once, or gradually?"

"It's like...let me think." Daniel had given this description many times before, but a few shades of sleep still lingered in the dark corners of his memory. Ice skating, that was it. "It's like you're ice skating on top of a frozen lake, OK? For you normal people, when you're awake, you know that the ice underneath your feet is a good solid barrier a couple of inches thick between you and the cold water beneath. And when you go to sleep, when you dig a hole through that ice and put on your wetsuit and go diving in the lake, then that barrier is up above you, too, keeping you from breaking back up to the surface

before you've finished whatever it was you went down there to dream about."

"What a nice description," sighed Heather. Cindy just nodded.

"Well, for narcoleptics like me, that ice is thinner than paper. We're gliding along in the waking world like Michelle Kwan, and all of a sudden our consciousness gives way and the sleep world sucks us down under before there's any lifeline we can throw out to save ourselves. Or else we can feel the ice groaning and bending beneath our skates, and sometimes we can scramble up and get back to something solid, and sometimes we just get pulled under one inch at a time."

"Very interesting," said Cindy. Heather whistled. "Wow, I thought I knew some guys who were great nappers, but you guys win the snooze cruise!"

"Oh, not really," said Daniel uncomfortably. "I mean, it works both ways. A lot of us have trouble at night when we're supposed to be sleeping, too. That thin ice can't keep us under the surface, and we keep bobbing back out again and again. Which means we don't get enough sleep, which makes us exhausted and more likely to fall asleep when we shouldn't, and so on and so on. We get bitten in the backside by the vicious circle."

"Any other symptoms?" asked Cindy. She might make a good doctor at that, Daniel thought. Doctors and fortune tellers: half the reason we pay them is because it's so very hard to find anyone else willing to spend a few minutes talking about our

problems instead of theirs. 'There there,' says the palm reader, 'you'll pull through this,' and we fork over the cash because who else will be willing to tell us what we so much need to hear, all the while holding our hand?

"There's automatic behavior," said Daniel. "That's when a narcoleptic falls asleep but keeps working on whatever it was he was doing when he was awake, like a robot or something. So if you see me spraying Windex on the lollipops instead of the countertops, wake me up, ok?"

"Wow," said Cindy, "have you ever actually done that?"

Daniel considered how much to tell her. "Last semester I was in an English lecture taking notes, and suddenly I woke up because everyone in class was standing up to leave, and I had two pages of nothing but chicken scratchings."

"Sleepwriting," breathed Heather. "What a great way to get a message from your subconscious! Did you put down anything profound?"

"Ironically enough, when I got someone else's notes later on, I found that the lecture I had missed was about the poet Yeats, and how his wife used to go into trances and write down messages that Yeats thought came from the spirit world. But no, my own personal sleepwriting just looked like a wavy line."

Heather looked disappointed. "That's fascinating," said Cindy. "What else?"

Daniel frowned. "You understand, there are thousands of people who have it a lot worse than I do. Once it gets bad

enough, you can find that you're spending more time sleeping than you are living. I'm young, I take drugs so it only hits me a few times a day, but when I get older it'll probably get worse." He considered a bit more. "Hmm. There's cataplexy, but fortunately I've never had that. That's where you're still awake, but your brain suddenly decides to stop sending messages to the rest of your body so you just sort of collapse. You're trying to move but you can't, instead you just lie there on the floor twitching like a grounded trout. Strong emotions can do that to us -- we're laughing or crying and suddenly we're helpless as a baby. Pretty scary the first time, I hear.

"Let's see, what else. Oh yes, Hypnagogic Hallucinations. Those are pretty bad. Night terrors. They're when you start dreaming before your brain has finished falling all the way asleep. Or else the opposite - you think you've woken up, but really you're still dreaming. Actually, researchers are finding out that a lot of people have them who don't realize what they are. Have you ever woken up and been convinced there was someone else in the room with you, a slasher or a monster or something else dreadful, and you were paralyzed and couldn't turn around to see what it was? And it seemed absolutely real to you?"

"Our brother had something like that happen to him once," said Heather slowly. "Waking up with two tall green glowing figures standing beside his bed."

"Exactly!" said Daniel. "Hallucinations like that happen to us more often, but they can happen to anybody. They seem a

lot realer than other dreams, which probably explains most of the stories about alien abductions."

"Maybe." Heather didn't look entirely convinced. "He didn't think they were aliens, though."

"Well, or burglars then." Daniel paused. "Glowing, you say? If he didn't think they were aliens, then what were they?"

Heather avoided his eyes, looking down and starting to brush the crumbs vigorously from her lap. A lone gray pigeon approached cautiously, its head jerking back and forth in the peculiar dance pigeons always make, and pecked at the scattered crumbs. Cindy stared fixedly across the street. Finally, almost nonchalantly, Heather stood up and grabbed her sandwich bag.

"He said they were elves," she said. She cast a worried glance at Daniel before disappearing into the souvenir shop next door.

Chapter 5

*For it is love that I am seeking for,
But of a beautiful, unheard-of kind
That is not in the world.*

"The Shadowy Waters"

W.B. Yeats

The first shift finally ended at six o'clock. Kate stayed, beginning yet another new batch of peanut butter fudge - Daniel got the impression that she spent most of her waking hours in the shop - while Daniel and Cindy did their final cleaning and took off their aprons.

"Do you have a way home?" he asked once they were out on the sidewalk. "I mean, not that I have a car to offer you a ride or anything. Just, you know, my father brought me up not to send a girl off to walk home in the dark or anything, and..."

"My sister and I share a car," interrupted Cindy. "Do you need a ride anywhere?"

"Oh, I'm just up the street," Daniel murmured awkwardly. "Some college friends and I are living above the antique store on Sapphire. Do you know the place?"

"Of course I know the place," said Cindy. "I know everything about this town. Mrs. Shantih's Antiquities."

"That's the one," said Daniel. "I like to walk, and it isn't far. Well, I should at least accompany you to your car."

The car was a rusty green Accord in a parking lot a block off Main Street, beside freshly-painted dumpsters at the backside of the line of shops. The sky was muffled by a distant sheet of clouds, bright enough to show that the sun was behind them somewhere, but thick enough to give no clue as to where precisely it might be.

"So you know everything about the town?" Daniel asked, leaning against an Employees Only sign. He unconsciously lowered his voice. "Listen, we heard something last night that made us curious. Some gang bangers came into the Blue Nile, and it sounded like they were trying to do some kind of extortion takeover in the name of the guy who owns our fudge shop. Mr. Netherby, right? What's up with that?"

Cindy stopped in her tracks and did a long, slow turn, taking in the tourist cars, the weed-infested railroad tracks nearby, and the flock of birds sitting on the nearby electrical wires. "No," she said tightly. "Not right now. Ask me some other time, Dan."

"Umm, ok." There was clearly no one around, but Daniel was starting to get used to apparently irrational behavior from Crossroads residents.

Cindy reached her car and pulled her keys out of her purse, then paused. "Anything else you wanted to ask?"

"Well..." Daniel reflected. "Yes, there was. Kate Castellano. She went a little nuts about that mouse in the basement, didn't she? I mean, who ever heard of letting a pet mouse run around in a food shop? Is she, you know, all right to work for?"

Cindy leaned against the roof of her car and looked across at Daniel. "That was a bit over the top, wasn't it? I've never seen her act that way before. But I worked for Kate Castellano all last summer, and she is the dearest, kindest, most generous person I have ever known. I mean, it's not just mice, it's any helpless creature. Anybody who was in trouble or needed a hand, she would give them the literal shirt off her back if she was sure she wouldn't get arrested for public indecency and she thought they could use a shirt. I mean, there were people coming into the shop all the time with problems, and she'd drop whatever she was doing and move heaven and earth to help them. Like Mrs. Vanderski, our math teacher."

"The Assistant Manager?" asked Daniel. "I didn't know she was your teacher."

"Yep, she's taught us Trig and Functions so far," said Cindy. "All about the denizens of the far-off planet Funct. Anyway, a year ago last spring, her husband of twenty years suddenly took off with all their joint savings and a pizza waitress from the Coliseum Pizzeria for parts unknown. Try to find the cosine of that, eh? We got some interesting word problems in our final that year, I can tell you. But when she

realized she was going to have to take a summer job to make ends meet, we introduced her to Kate, and Kate felt sorry for her and hired her and trained her up to Assistant Manager speed by the end of June. Partly because Kate had already gotten dumped by her own husband, of course, but still..."

"OK, I'll grant she seems nice," said Daniel. "After all, she took in damaged goods like me. But, I mean, a mouse running around in the basement with all that sugar and chocolate - is that a good idea?"

"Please don't say anything bad about Hieronymus again," Cindy warned. "She's just crazy about the little guy."

"That's fine," said Daniel, "but..."

"Makes him a special treat every night and takes it down to him on a silver platter."

"Ok, that's a little weird. Wouldn't it at least be better if he was in a cage or something?"

"Don't be silly. Ahoy!" She raised her hand in greeting, but not to him. Daniel turned and saw Heather trip-trapping toward them across the parking lot on high clogs, raising her sandwich bag to her sister in a return salute.

"A matched set of high-school babes, eh?" said Ken later that evening. He'd been deep in a session of Caverns of Mount Horath when Daniel came in, but paused the game to ask about Daniel's day, his frozen wizard avatar filling half the screen with the sparkles of a spell that would surely obliterate a dozen

undead when it eventually coalesced. "Just looking for a suwave and debonner college student to sweep them off their feet behind the fudge pot, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Oh Ken, it's not like that. They're practically kids, you know?"

"We're talking about, what, three years difference? Seniors next year, right? So they're past the age of consent. Besides, it wouldn't need to be some huge epic romance, just one of those summer things. Sondra told me once that around here, all the steady high school couples break up over the summer as a matter of course, then hook up again in the fall. Both partners free to sample all the visiting wares and all."

Daniel threw up his hands. "Oh, I can't talk about anything with you! Go back to your game!" Ken shrugged and pressed the play button and his wizard's spell found its target.

Daniel stumbled to his room with coils of sleep tugging at his ankles all the way down the corridor. But of course, once he had donned his pajamas and crawled beneath his own covers, it slipped away again and left him once more wide-eyed and staring. Resigned, he got his sketch book out from under the bed and began to work.

Half an hour later there was a knock on his door. He opened it expecting to find Ken with some announcement about his latest victory, but was surprised instead to see Sondra in her brocaded green nightgown, holding a portable writing desk with a hinged top under her arm.

"Hey Dan," she said, "hope you don't mind my barging in this late, but I saw your light on. Did Ken tell you that the director called, and I got the lead?"

"Really? That's great! No, Ken was engrossed in his game as usual. Who's the lead woman in Faustus, though? We read Marlowe's version last fall, and I don't remember any women in it besides Helen of Troy."

"The director says this is based more on the German version of the story by somebody named Gerta, ever heard of her? I play Margarete. I haven't read the whole script yet, though. I'll tell you more when I'm done. But I had to write Justin all about it, and the internet service in this town is just as bad as the cell phones are, so I'll have to write letters longhand and send them to points along his route, and I just realized I'm out of stamps. Have you got any?"

"Um, sure, I think so." Daniel walked back across the room and rummaged through the top drawer of the scarred dresser. "Here you go." He turned to discover that she was standing beside his bed, looking at the drawing he'd been working on.

"This is amazing." She absently took the stamp he proffered, then sat down and turned the page. "This one too. You make this look like a place I'd like to visit, somehow. Is this your portfolio?"

"Just a sketchbook." Daniel sat down uncomfortably on the bed across from her while she turned a few more pages. "Sorry, most of them are just variations on that one scene. I keep

coming back to it because I can never get the composition quite right. The shading of the grass - well, I suppose it must look kind of obsessive."

"There's nothing wrong with a little obsession when you're following your art," Sondra stated positively. She turned another page. Each sketch showed a grove of trees, the trunks arranged differently in each picture, but always white-skinned birches. The next page was in watercolors to try to catch the color of the sky -- just at the edge of evening, with Venus near the horizon and perhaps one or two other stars up higher, and the sky still holding on to its last bit of royal blue like a tree holding onto its leaves before winter. Sondra put the book on the floor and moved the floor lamp over to get a better look. "I think the last time I used watercolors was in third grade, but these are incredible! Is this a real place?"

"Sure! Well, I guess not really. I mean, no."

Sondra rested her hands on the book and looked across the bed at him. "Which is it?" she asked. "Sure, not really, or no?"

In spite of the fact that Daniel had long dreamed of showing these pictures to someone who would respond to them, he found that now, with the opportunity at hand, he felt a strong urge to grab the book out of her hands and slam it shut. He groped for something to say. "Sondra, how well do you remember your dreams?"

"My dreams? Oh, okay, I guess. You're the champion dreamer around here." She looked down and turned another page. "Is that where you saw this place?"

Daniel closed his eyes to try to remember the vision, then realized he'd made a mistake. Talking about dreams was a good way to invite them, and he suddenly realized that he was seconds away from starting to snore in front of his visitor. He fought his way back from beneath the dark ice and opened his eyes. "I remember once when I was little, my dad told me that there were two different kinds of dreams. The ones we can remember, they come from the last few minutes before we wake up. But he said that there's a different kind of dream that we have in the middle of the night, ones that we can never, ever remember. Always scared the dickens out of me, thinking there were rooms in me I couldn't ever unlock, like Bluebeard's wife or something. Inside everyone, you know? But I think," he swallowed and tried not to blink, "I think that I saw this place in one of those dreams."

Sondra didn't seem to be listening anymore. She squinted, held the book up even closer to the light, and read aloud what was scrawled faintly on the back of one of the pages:

*"From beyond the troubles that I must face,
From over the wind-swept sea,
From beyond the limits of time and space,
My love will come to me.*

*And over the barriers of Why and How,
Through whatever may occur,
From out of the Then, and into the Now,
Oh, I will come to her."*

Daniel wondered if she could see his burning cheeks in the dim light, but if she did she didn't say anything. She just said, "That's sweet, Daniel. I didn't realize that you could write poetry as well as paint. Quite a double threat, aren't you? So there's a girl in your dreams too?"

His careful defenses breached and scattered, Daniel stared at Sondra in dismay. In his fantasies the One who would find that poem would be the One it was written for, but in Sondra's eyes he saw nothing but friendly admiration and good-natured curiosity. There was nothing there that looked as if it might be love, not that he was certain he would know what love would look like in an eye if he ever saw it. Anyway, unlike the girl that the poem was written for, Sondra was all too real.

He couldn't risk closing his eyes again, so he looked into the picture, trying to recapture the vision that lay beyond it. "She's in there behind the trees, somewhere. Wearing a white gown, no decorations. Just walking across the grass quietly, a star over her shoulder maybe, or little flowers in the grass under her feet. And it's just the, the alienness of the whole scene, you know? As if somehow in my dream I realized that this entire forest was utterly *somewhere else*, a different world than

ours. The trees, the girl, every blade of grass in that world are made of pure Magic, and if I could just reach out my hand..." There was nothing to reach for, and his hand dropped back onto the bed. "Well anyway, that's why I keep coming back to it. Just the idea that maybe if I could get the trees right, I'd be able to find her in them and paint her too, and finally, I don't know..."

"Break on through to the other side? Or aren't you a Doors fan?" Sondra closed the book and set it on the bed between them. "You're a romantic, aren't you, Dan?"

Daniel started to say something self-deprecating, then looked at her again and realized that she hadn't intended it as a compliment. Now she was the one staring into the distance.

"My grandmother warned me against romantics," she said dreamily. "She was a New York magazine model back in the Jackie O. days, and she used to date a bunch of famous photographers." Her voice grew raspy and her fingers scissored an imaginary cigarette as she entered the role. "'Sonny, whatever ya do, ya oughta try your best never to be any man's ideal,' that's what she told me. 'Men chasing their ideal women, they ain't none of them nothing but trouble. Some of 'em fall in love with that shutter muse of theirs, and some of 'em fall in love with them girls they catch on paper in their darkrooms, but there ain't a one of 'em who won't toss you aside like a damp tissue the first time ya blow your nose and he notices you're made out of flesh and bones 'stead of starlight and rainbows. Don't you forget

that, girl!' That was my grandma.'" She shook her head and seemed to notice Daniel again. "Not that I think that's true of all artists, of course," she added hastily.

"Of course not," said Daniel, wondering if it was.

Sondra picked up the portable writing desk she'd brought in with her and started to get up, then hesitated and sat back down on the bed instead. "I want to show you something, Dan," she said. She flipped up the lid and began rummaging through bundles of letters and pictures. Daniel realized he was starting to drift off, and pulled himself back with what he hoped was an inconspicuous jerk as she laid a photograph in front of him.

The girl in the class photo could only be Sondra, back when she had been slammed hard upside the head with the puberty stick. A shower of blotchy freckles fought with pimples to cover her face, her eyes squinted behind hideous pointy glasses, and a full set of braces and assorted apparatus glinted on her teeth. Her carrot-red hair frizzed out in an ungovernable shock.

"That," she said, pointing to the picture, "was what I looked like in eighth grade, when Justin Petrovitch first started paying attention to me. Whenever any of my friends from college ask me why on earth I'm going out with somebody as geeky-looking as him, I get out this picture again to remind myself. It's because he liked me even back when I looked like this."

She put the picture back in her desk and stood up again. "Anyway, thanks for the stamp."

Daniel managed to mumble "You're welcome," before he discovered that he'd reached the limits of his wakefulness. When she heard his faint snores beginning, Sondra looked down on him quizzically for a minute, then tiptoed softly out of the room.

Chapter 6

*There, through the broken branches, go
The ravens of unresting thought;
Flying, crying, to and fro,
Cruel claw and hungry throat.*

"The Two Trees"

W.B. Yeats

Whenever a tourist turned off the main roads into the parking lots and side streets of Crossroads, the Attractions stretched over him greedily on every side like a gang of pirates eager to seize and divide the loot of a passing merchantman. Each tourist came with limited hoarded hours of vacation, wallet or pocketbook filled with limited dollars that the pirates hoped would be left behind amongst them. Where these precious hours and dollars were spent was a matter of great competition amongst the Attractions, a grand melee fought on the sloping decks of a thousand billboards and radio spots and brochure racks.

But these places alone were still not enough to extract the maximum cash possible from the ceaseless tourist stream. Every last Who in Whoville must stand on the highest tower and sound their barbaric yopps over the roofs of all the world. And thus the Chamber of Commerce, realizing that no praises could be sung of something a person had never seen, had decided to make it possible for even the poorest of the summer help to get in to the

Big Draws. If you went to the Chamber and presented a valid paycheck from any Crossroads business, you would receive a special card which you could present at each Attraction for one free entrance during your stay that year. The hope was that, whenever a tourist asked a hotel maid or gas station attendant or caddie whether the House of Wax was really as great as it was cracked up to be, they would be answered with the enthusiastic assent of one who had Been There, Done That, and Paid Thirteen Ninety-Five For The T-shirt. If the Chamber had its way, the very rocks and stones would have joined in the chorus.

Daniel first began working at Black Forest Fudge on a Sunday, and it wasn't until Wednesday, when a customer asked him for directions to the Serpent Garden and Kate Castellano overheard him admit to his lack of a clue, that she remembered to tell him about the free pass. She was in one of her kind-hearted moods, and told him that he could have Friday as his day off, present his paycheck at the Chamber to get his coupon book, and go off exploring. She couldn't afford to be down two employees, so Cindy would have to stay, but she'd try to convince the woman who ran the souvenir shop next door to let Heather off to be his guide.

Sondra was using all her leave time from the restaurant for rehearsals at the dinner theater, so she wasn't available, but Ken was able to get the day off from Frontier Fotos. And so early Friday morning, Daniel, Heather, and Ken, towels flung over their shoulders and Daniel swinging a cooler, all exited

Crossroad's Chamber of Commerce on their way to Atlantis, famous once upon a time as a great sunken kingdom, and now as the largest water park in this section of the Midwest.

"It's starting to get mysterious, that's all," Daniel said, picking up where he had left off when they went in to get their passes. He'd been recounting the Great Refrigerator Saga to Heather.

"So who won the bet?" she asked, fanning herself with a brochure she'd picked up, as the three of them set off down Main Street.

"Oh, Sondra did. After a night with no milk the refrigerator was just a big box for keeping food at room temperature. Ken said that the mess he cooked for his payoff was Eggs Benedict, but if that's true then it was inspired by Benedict Arnold, not Benedict the chef." Ken stalked along beside the two of them, pointedly glaring across the street and not participating in the discussion. "So anyway, that evening he put the milk out and then dumped half a bag of flour around it. He said if anything came to drink it again, the tracks would show us what it was."

Heather nodded. "Why not? That sort of thing always used to work for the Hardy Boys."

"I believe you've put your finger on exactly where Ken learned his detecting skills. He made us both swear not to enter the kitchen in the morning until he gave the all-clear. And Wednesday morning..." Daniel paused dramatically.

Heather pursed her lips. "Let me guess. No milk, no tracks."

"Oh, even better than that. No milk, no tracks, no flour. Not a speck of it. All three of us crawled around on our hands and knees looking. In fact, if I hadn't been there the whole time, I never would have believed that the three of us had even been using the kitchen, let alone seen it covered in flour, the floor was so clean. And of course, the refrigerator was sitting there as chilly as a cucumber."

Heather glanced again at Ken, who was still pretending to be deaf. "So what's happened since then?"

Daniel shrugged. "Who knows? I told you it was mysterious. The last two nights he's shut up the kitchen at ten thirty and not let us in, then kept us out in the mornings too while he cleaned up whatever experiment he was running in there. Yesterday morning he wouldn't let us in at all, just shoved some cereal bowls out at us and told us to eat on the balcony. Sondra is not happy, I can tell you. Her attitude is, 'Everything works, why mess with it?' Which may be an unscientific attitude, but then again, most scientists don't cook dinner in their laboratories."

They reached an intersection, and Heather indicated they should turn right. As they started down Ash Street, one of the shop-lined connectors between Main and Route 92, she put in hesitantly, "I agree with Sondra. I mean, why go looking for trouble?"

Ken sniffed loudly. "That kind of attitude," he said, "is exactly what has hampered every scientific discovery since the Renaissance."

"Sure, sure, they'll be burning you at the stake next," said Daniel, patting him on the shoulder. "What do you mean, trouble, Heather? What kind of trouble can we possibly expect to see coming at us out of our own kitch..."

Something he saw ahead made him slow down and stop. The other two turned to see what was wrong.

The sign above the entrance read "*Nightmare's Castle*." Above it, a blowsy blonde manikin in a red dress fled in an endless circle around a horizontal circular track, her arms flung up ahead of her as if desperately fending off clutching branches in a flight through a midnight forest. Close behind her, so close that if the two of them had been real she would have felt its hot breath on her naked outstretched foot, came the long lean wolf. Its eyes were redder than her dress, flecks of foam on its cheeks, and teeth spread sharp and fearsomely wide.

At street level beneath this perpetual chase, a plump woman in her thirties sat behind a ticket counter, wearing a black Elvira wig and a dress festooned with silvery cobwebs. She cocked her eye at the three of them as they approached. On a perch next to her sat a large raven, which also seemed to sense their presence, for it opened its eyes and began to croak.

"Nightmares for sale, my dears! Nightmares for sale! Hear the thump of gravedigger's dirt as it lands on your coffin,

shutting off light and air and company too, save for that of the curious worms. Will you rise again on bat wings to sip the blood of the living, or claw through the dirt with decaying fingers to devour the unwary visitors to your peaceful cemetery, or will a few of your scattered parts be stitched together by a madman willy-nilly to construct a creature hideous to behold? Hear the songs the full moon makes in your blood as the hair sprouts from the backs of your hands, as your teeth sharpen and your nostrils stretch to sniff the sweet perfume of fear in those around you. Oh, the monsters all wait for you within, of that you may be sure, clutching at you from swamp and mist and fire and stone. But there is not a one of them as terrifying as the monster that lurks in your own brain, and you shall face that one here as well, children. We all must face our monsters here."

"Hey! Whatever happened to 'Nevermore'?" Heather catcalled. The woman in the black dress smiled with only the corners of her mouth.

Ken whistled. "Those are some nice animatronics on that bird," he said admiringly. "The recording synched up amazingly well with the beak."

The raven cocked its head sideways and stared at him. "Recording? Hey, go synch yourself!" it rasped. Ken took an involuntary step backwards.

Heather went up to the booth. "Guys," she said, "this is our boss's older daughter, Kimberly Netherby, probably the best ventriloquist in the state. My aunt went to school with her, and

she says that she used to drive the teachers crazy. They never knew which kid to punish for mouthing off. Miss Netherby, meet Daniel Carver from the fudge shop and Ken Hirosaka from the photo place. We're on our way to Atlantis."

Kim Netherby smiled again and gave a faint wave, but the raven shook its head and sounded disgusted. "Atlantis? If you ask me, nothing but a bunch of sewer pipes with greased-up sunbathers squirting through 'em like watermelon seeds someone forgot to spit out. Naah, if you want adrenaline, come in here and we'll have it leaking out your eyeballs."

"Hush, you nasty thing," said Heather. Kim Netherby shrugged apologetically while Heather turned back to Ken and Daniel. "What do you think, guys? We could do it on our pass, and it wouldn't take too long. I've been through a couple of times. It's mostly just guys in capes and rubber masks jumping out at you, but some of the effects are pretty cool."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ken. "It looks kind of cheesy, and if we're only going to have one day at the park, I'd like to make the most of it. What do you think, Danny?"

But Daniel was struggling with a dream that had reached out of his past and sunk its teeth into his throat.

It always began the same way.

"Where are you going, little boy?" asked the wolf. It was always polite, though Daniel knew that it longed for nothing more

than to tear out his living entrails with its sharp teeth and wet its claws in the gush of his heart's blood.

"I am going to my grandmother's house, for she is dying, and I have something here that will make her well." Then he would realize that he was clutching something in his hand, but he did not know what it was, only that it must be protected at all costs.

"Your grandmother must be eaten, boy, as all things living and dead must be eaten. Step off the path."

"No."

"Suit yourself, boy. We shall meet again."

He raced down the path as fast as his legs would carry him, the tips of his toes barely skimming the blacktop, but at the path's ending stood the wolf again, dressed in a white flowered nightgown now and standing on its hind legs. For some reason the nightgown made it seem far more terrifying than when it wore nothing but hair.

"I have eaten your grandmother time and your grandfather space, boy, and now I shall eat you as well. Step off the path."

"No."

"Look behind you, boy."

He looked back and saw that the safe path he had run down was shriveling and flaking away behind him like salt in a rainstorm, no help that way. As he watched, the last of it melted into ribbons and dribbled away beneath his feet.

"Run, boy," said the wolf, and Daniel ran, and as he thrust each foot behind him he could feel the wolf's hot breath on his soles. Then he was not running but falling, and as he looked down he saw that the wolf was beneath him now as well as behind him, above him, inside him, its jaws spread as wide as the whole starry universe...

"Wake up, man." Ken was holding his shoulder and shaking him, looking worried. Heather hung back nervously, with the expression of mingled pity and discomfort on her face that Daniel so loathed. The raven appeared to be amused.

Daniel drew a long, shuddering breath. "I'm OK," he said, swallowing hard. "That was a strange one. It wasn't like I fell asleep, it was like it pulled me in." He shook his head to clear it of cobwebs and teeth. "What were we talking about?"

"Whether we should go into Nightmare's Castle or not," said Ken. "But I wouldn't recommend it. You look as if you've been having enough of a nightmare already - you're drenched in sweat."

"Should we go in?" Daniel repeated dully. "Should we go in?"

He found that he was of three minds on the subject. One part of him was as aware as his friends were of the attraction's tawdriness: the chipped paint on the manikins, the polyester in the witch's robe, the poor quality of the sound system projecting shrieks and moans from its interior. But in a different part of his mind, he realized that he was bone-shakingly, heart-

stoppingly, mind-numbingly afraid of every creak of the floorboards in Nightmare's Castle, every ominous chuckle, every shadow. The entrance to the Castle just beyond Kimberly Netherby, framed by head-down bats and garishly-lit plaster tombstones, was thick with shadows.

And the third part of his mind, buried deeply beneath the other two, whispered silkily to him, *"Come in, come in,"* with a cultured voice trying to mask its mouthful of teeth. *"Just take a quick step through the shadow curtain and it will all be over. So nice it will be in here, so warm, so deliciously warm. Don't hold on to your form so tightly, boy. Step off the path."*

Daniel suddenly found that he was standing in front of the ticket-taker's booth, his hand in his pocket fishing out the Pass that he'd just picked up at the Chamber of Commerce. The raven stretched out its beak, a look of exultation in its glassy eyes.

He shoved the Pass back into his pocket and turned back to his friends. "Not today," he said, trying to look nonchalant. "Let's go to Atlantis."

Behind him he heard a sound like a raven gnashing its beak.

Later, stuck halfway up a wooden tower in a long queue of bathing-suited teenagers lugging oversized inner-tubes, all waiting their turn to go splashing down the spillway of the Marie Celeste slide, Daniel finally roused up enough courage to ask Heather what she could tell him about the Netherby family. Ken had decided to try out the Bermuda Triangle, but the other two

had decided that a sixty-foot drop almost straight down in total darkness wasn't their idea of fun.

Daniel noticed that before she answered him, Heather made the same neck-craning perimeter sweep that her sister had made earlier when he had asked her the same question. Then she leaned conspiratorially close and spoke almost in a whisper. That close, Daniel couldn't help but notice how very little her orange flowered bikini left to the imagination. "Well, first off, I assume you saw how nutty that one we saw today was."

"She seemed nice enough in the little 'Welcome to Crossroads' letter she sent to Sondra."

Heather leaned her innertube against the damp balustrade and settled her shapely rump back into it. "Oh, *letters!* Sure, she comes off normal enough writing letters to people. Kate exchanges email with her practically every day. But you know what the weird thing about her is?" She leaned in even closer, and Daniel found himself leaning in to meet her and smelling the hot static charge of her hair. "My aunt says nobody's heard the actual sound of her voice for *ten years*. It's always her puppets, she never even opens her mouth anymore except to eat."

"OK, that's pretty weird all right," Daniel agreed. "Hey, here's a question -- if her father's such a big shot around here and she's his right-hand woman, why was she out front there taking tickets? Wouldn't that normally be a job for us lowly summer peons?"

"Good point," said Heather. "From what I've heard, Old Man Netherby is pretty attached to that Castle. Kate told me once that it was the first attraction he ever owned, back before he started exploding madly in all directions with capital investments. I think it used to have a different theme back in those days, but that was before my time..." The line moved up a few more steps, and Heather and Daniel picked up their innertubes again and followed. When they stopped on a platform she went on, "Anyway, he's put the place solely under the control of his daughters now, and apparently Kim takes its continued success as a point of personal pride. And you have to admit, but she's an awfully good shill. There always seem to be double the number of customers going through when she's out front."

"What about the father?" asked Daniel.

"Jack? Oh, he's nothing special. A typical small-town Napoleon, can't conquer Europe with fire and blood so he sets off to conquer Crossroads with bank loans and lease agreements. If it wasn't for her steering him, he'd be lucky to be managing a lemonade stand."

Daniel felt the conversation had skipped a track somewhere. "Who's steering him? Kimberly?"

Just then the line moved, and Heather seemed to physically dodge the question, hefting her innertube like a shield. "Not Kimberly, no -is there anything else you want to know about her?"

Daniel noticed both the dodge and the sudden tension in her shoulders, but decided to press on. "That's the second time you've mentioned another daughter. Kimberly and who else?"

Heather's face abruptly shut down like a slamming door. Through clenched teeth, so that Daniel had to lean forward to hear her, she whispered tightly, "Lilith."

A sliver of frost crackled down Daniel's spine. "That's a, umm, rather unusual name. Wasn't she supposed to be the first wife that God made for Adam, the one who didn't work out so great and went off to breed monsters?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Heather. "Lily is the name on her birth certificate, but she changed it to Lilith as soon as she was old enough to talk. Which was surprisingly early, from what I've heard." Her voice tightened as if it had been twisted with a crescent wrench. "Stay away from her, Danny. She's worse than bad news, she's a frigging bad almanac. Stay far, far away. If you can manage to never catch a glimpse of her, that still might not be far enough."

They were almost at the top of the tower now, where two teenagers wearing green swimming suits and cheerleader smiles were helping people into their innertubes and shoving them off into the entrance of a long, blue tunnel filled with water and mist and darkness.

"One more thing," Daniel whispered to her as they waited their turn for the tunnel to swallow them. "How do you know so much about these people? What's your connection?"

"Your boss Kate Castellano, of course," she whispered back. "Didn't you know?" His expression made it clear that he didn't. "Well, she's Jack Netherby's ex-wife. Kimberly and Lilith's mother."

The smiling green-suited young man beckoned to Heather, and helped to adjust her in her tube in a small pool while Daniel tried to absorb this information. On the other side of the platform in a second tributary to the blue tunnel, the green-suited girl reassured a mother who wanted to take her nervous five-year-old down with her on her lap, towed them both out into position, and shoved them away into the mist. Heather gazed up at Daniel as she floated at his feet.

"Cindy and I started trying to find out about the family," she said quietly, "after that bitch killed our brother." Then she was gone.

Chapter 7

Here is Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks,

The lady of situations.

"The Waste Land"

T.S. Eliot

Ever since Heather had emerged from the changing room wearing her assorted bits of somewhat breathtaking orange cloth, Ken had begun paying more attention to her. "And you say she has a twin sister?" he'd asked Daniel softly on the stairway to the first slide. "Hmm." When Daniel caught up to them he was in the process of presenting Heather with a beer, cocooned in a styrofoam sleeve to make it unrecognizable by any passing law enforcement personnel. It was, he said with a low, sweeping bow, "Purchased for you against the express provisions of the law and at great personal risk of arrest and incarceration, my dusky enchantress." Heather tittered. *Sondra would never titter*, Daniel thought disapprovingly. When Daniel tried to ask her more questions about her last statement at the top of the slide, Ken brushed him aside.

"Today is a day for seeking entertainment, not for hunting down evil-doers," he said breezily. Daniel had learned in his years of friendship with Ken that there was no use in trying to distract him when he was on the prowl, so he fell in glumly

behind the two of them while Ken explained to her some of the finer points of his thriving fake ID business.

"I've got the files and inks for fifteen states and Quebec so far," he boasted. "It's not just a technical challenge, it's an art form. An unending task, really - they keep on coming up with new reflective logos and frillwork and holograms, and we have to keep on coming up with new ways to crack them. It's sort of like an arms race, but you know, where there's a demand there's gotta be a supply."

When Heather excused herself to visit the ladies' room, Daniel took the opportunity to fill him in on what he'd learned about the Netherbys. Ken leaned against one of the arms of a giant plastic octopus, deep in thought. When Heather reappeared they started walking again, and he seemed to have forgotten his earlier proclamation that today was just for entertainment, for he asked her another question that Daniel had forgotten. "What," he asked, "happened to Atlantis?"

"What do you mean?" she asked, startled, and Ken told her about the threats they'd overheard in the Blue Nile. "Jack Netherby owns this place too, right?"

Heather nodded.

"Let me further guess that, like Mr. Santiago, the original owner here didn't want to sell, and then something bad happened. And please don't tell me that Plato said Atlantis sank beneath the sea. What was it?"

Heather stopped on a concrete bridge and leaned her elbows on the railing, and Daniel and Ken took up places on both sides of her. Beneath them was a pirate's ship broken in half and sunk in the center of a wading pool, swarming with children who slid down the gangplanks and squirted each other with the water cannons that bristled from the portholes.

"It wasn't a single owner, it was a consortium that built this place," she said without looking at them. "They were expanding into other ventures, but this was their flagship. Jack Netherby offered them a ton of money, but they utterly refused. This was, oh, about three years ago, I guess. I understand some harsh words were exchanged, and they came storming out of his office yelling back that he'd better not shake his fist at them, and he came out after them and yelled that they'd see what kind of fist he could shake. A bunch of people heard this," she added defensively, and Ken raised his hand and said, "We believe you. Go on."

Below them a mother pushed her laughing toddler, his toes just trailing through the water, on a swing suspended from the flippers of a giant smiling sea turtle. Heather still looked straight ahead. "Well," she said, "you've both been down slides here. They all have those swimming pools that you splash into at the bottom. Did you notice why the pools don't overflow from all the water pouring into them all the time?"

"Pumps, I assume," said Daniel.

Ken nodded. "Each slide has its own pump that recirculates the water from the pool at the bottom back up to the top. The pipes vary in capacity from about six inches to two feet in diameter, I'd guess." He saw how the other two were looking at him and shrugged. "Engineers pay attention to these things."

Heather nodded. "You guess very well, Ken. The biggest ones are indeed two feet in diameter. They're supposed to have screens over them, but that day one was missing. And a kid was horsing around in the pool, and you'd have thought that he would have been too big, but..."

"He got sucked into the pipe," said Ken positively. "Even at just four feet deep, a pipe like that could pull a kid in like a tissue in a vacuum cleaner."

"Imagine it," said Daniel, shuddering. "All that water pressure on top of you, crushing you deeper and deeper into the pipe. I wonder how long it took." For a while they were all quiet, imagining it.

"That's a big fist all right," said Ken at last.

Without saying anything, all three turned and began walking along the bridge again. "There was a bungled coverup that dumped even more bad publicity on some of the other places they were building," said Heather after a while, "and then the standard big lawsuit, and it all got to be too much for them. They folded like a poker player looking at a two-five unsuited, and Jack Netherby ended up with the whole wet shebang at a bargain price. And I really wish you hadn't asked me about this, because he's

fixed up the safety problems and it really is a fun place. So, anybody want to do another slide?"

Neither Daniel nor Ken felt up for one at the moment, so they decided to eat the lunch they'd been carrying all day instead. As they unpacked the cooler in the midst of a covered bank of picnic tables, Ken began to ask, "But what about..." and Heather looked to the side and very emphatically said "Hush! I've said too much already." Daniel looked off in the same direction to see what might have silenced her, but didn't see anything aside from a small boy in red shorts feeding popcorn to a flock of black birds.

The picnic table shelter was next to the Kraken, the newest attraction at the park. Some demented genius had come up with the idea of combining a water slide and a merry-go-round. When you came up from the underground queue into the center of the ride, you would step onto a rotating platform. Then, when your turn came, you would lie down on a body board in front of the entrance to one of the four tubes that radiated from the center like the arms of an octopus. With a little push you were on your way, accelerating more and more from centrifugal force as you neared the outer edge of the platform until at last you were shot out like a sling stone into the circular pool that surrounded the entire spinning apparatus. While the three friends nibbled the PB&J sandwiches that Daniel had made the night before and the strawberries and carrots brought by Heather, their conversation

was punctuated by the giant tubes that winnowed the air nearby, periodically spitting out shrieking teenagers who flew through the air, skimmed across the water, sank, and finally waded trembling to shore.

Heather was discussing everyone's job picks. "I worked for a while at Black Forest too last year, but it got to be too much for me," she said. "Threw my back out lifting a crate of apples. Gotta miss the number one perk, though."

"What's that?" asked Ken.

"That's easy," said Daniel. "All the chocolate you can eat, right?"

Heather crossed her arms and hugged herself. "Ah, chocolate," she said dreamily. "Born from the heaven-sent tree *Theomusa Cacao*. Kate says the name means food of the gods, did you know that?"

"Aztec gods," Ken observed. "Blood gods. Tlaloc drowned kids in pools before he'd agree to send rain, Xipotec skinned people alive to make the spring come, Huitzipichlu ate hearts in industrial-sized batches just to make the sun rise. If chocolate is a gift from the gods, they're the most psychopathic pantheon ever to get high sniffing incense."

"I'll grant you they were pretty extreme," said Heather defensively. "But I think you've got it backwards. Chocolate isn't the gods' gift to us, it's our gift to them. Keep them distracted so they'll leave our hearts alone, right?"

"Which reminds me," said Ken, suddenly sitting up straight, "don't forget my contribution to the picnic. I got a package of stuff from home today, including these." He dug into the cooler, took out a round metal container with a picture of New England skaters on the lid, and opened it. It was filled with home-made chocolate chip cookies.

"Yum," said Heather, grabbing one in each hand. She'd devoured both of them before Daniel had finished his first. "Most excellent. So let's see, Ken, if your favorite form of chocolate is the traditional cookie, then you must be somewhat old-fashioned. Home, hearth, and family are very important to you. You crave security above all else, and you only feel comfortable when you're among your nearest and dearest. Am I right?"

"Who? Me?" Ken sputtered. "What are you babbling about, girl? You sound like a Cosmo astrology column."

"What I'm talking about," sniffed Heather, drawing herself up to her full height, "is Sucromancy. It's a very new and exciting form of divination."

"Oh, good lord," Ken groaned. "It's not enough for them to be looking for the future in tea leaves, now they've got to find patterns in the sugar gunk left in the bottom of the cup too? What the heck is next? Pretty soon we'll start seeing centers for Podiastry, people reading your future from your calluses and bunions and ingrown toenails. Give me an ever-loving break!"

"Sucromancy," said Heather primly, speaking to Daniel now and ignoring Ken, "is a very complex and scientific study of peoples' personality types based on their individual gastronomic chemistry." She had to raise her voice for the last few words to drown out the hacking, gargling sounds that Ken was producing. "Its practitioners find that, simply by observing the types and, in some cases, the orientations of a person's sucric choices, they can reveal unseen depths of the person's character and potential. It's true -- I've seen it!"

"Are you done reciting the brochure now? Good." Ken began counting on his fingers. "First off, that description of me that you just gave, based on my supposed favorite kind of chocolate, was what the pros in the fortunetelling biz would call a cold read, meaning about 90% of the general population would feel that it applies to them. Walk up to anyone and tell them their psychic horoscope says they're sociable yet also love to be alone, they've done a few things they're ashamed of but are generally a good person, blah blah blah but on the other hand bleh bleh bleh, and if they already believe in that rubbish then they'll say you've got a god-given psychic talent. Secondly, though, I've got to tell you that in my case your description was way, way off base. I dislike things that are old-fashioned, and I make it a policy to stay as far away from home, hearth, and family as it is physically possible for me to get. And thirdly, it seems as if this Sucromancy of yours relies heavily on assumptions, and assumptions tend to be wrong more often than

not. For instance, since I said that those cookies came in a package from home, you assumed that I liked chocolate chips, and that someone at home knew that I liked them and made them for me with loving care. What you overlooked was the fact that I was not eating any of the cookies myself."

"Why not?" said Heather icily. "Should I have assumed instead that they were poisoned? Should Daniel and I be rushing to the first aid station?"

"I hope not," said Ken, sounding taken aback. "I mean, I hope they're not poisoned. But as for me, I'm not eating them because I can't stand chocolate chip cookies. My mother has never absorbed that fact, but that's irrelevant because she didn't have anything to do with the contents of that package. I'm not sure whether she's supposed to be in Paris or L.A. or Oahu this month, but she was probably sending a message to the cook and said, 'Oh, and if Kenny is still sticking it out in that ghastly little Midwest tourist trap, why don't you send him a package of some decent food so he doesn't come down with botulism?' The cook, who is Korean, doesn't know what I like either because he just got hired recently, so he probably just put in a bunch of things that his kids would eat. One of the other things in the package was a pint of Kimshe. Kimshe, I will point out, is basically spoiled cabbage. So that's what I think about my 'nearest and dearest,' and that's what I think about your Sucromancy as well!" Abruptly he was standing up. "I

believe I'll go find myself another beer," he snapped, and stalked off.

Heather stared after him. "What did I say?" she murmured. "'Craves security above all else?' Oh, I've got your number there, Mister Ken Hurosaka. I've got you where you live."

From the Kraken came another shriek, and this time a skinny blond pre-teen managed to skim almost all the way across the pool before coming to a stop a few feet from the edge. A green-suited lifeguard waded over to help him get out.

"Don't take it too personally," put in Daniel helpfully. "Ken has a long history of infuriating the women he's trying to hit on."

Heather gradually refocused on him. "It's all right," she said eventually. "My sister is the same way, thinks the whole business is bunk. Just shutting their eyes to new ways of seeing things, that's all. Their loss. Makes me crazy."

"Well, I'd like to hear more," said Daniel. "Try it on me, OK?"

"OK." She shifted to face him directly. "The first step is to close your eyes and relax. Are you relaxed?"

"I'm relaxed. I might be too relaxed. Pinch me if I start snoring, all right?" Heather obligingly pinched him.

"Ouch! I said IF!"

"Now be quiet," said Heather. "You have to imagine a gigantic Whitman's sampler box, stretching before you as far as the eye can see. It's got thousands and thousands of little

compartments, all holding chocolates with every kind of filling you've ever heard of. Nuts, fruits, candies, all dipped in the finest stuff around."

"Yum," said Daniel. As soon as he'd closed his eyes he'd begun hearing sleep's far-distant call, but for now he was able to resist it.

"Great. Now, I want you to stretch out your hand and pick whichever one is closest to you. Bite into it. What's inside?"

Daniel bit, chewed, and swallowed. "It's coconut," he said, opening his eyes. "What does that mean?"

"A highly appropriate choice for Atlantis," said Heather, looking pleased. "Coconut, a tough shell covering inner sweetness. Coconut is a mariner, a sailor blown by the wind across boundless seas, both without and within. It has to have a tough shell to get where it's going without getting spoiled. I predict a journey to another country for you in the near future. And it's in sync with our surroundings because it's the elemental sucric of water. Good pick!"

"Let me guess something," said Daniel, leaning his chin in his hand. "You learned all this from Kate Castellano, didn't you?"

"She's awesome with this stuff," Heather agreed. "She's actually talked about writing a book. Has she explained anything about it to you yet?"

"Not yet, no. But I've seen the way she looks at everyone's free picks from the display across from the counter

when they ring out. I always wondered what she was doing, but now it makes sense."

"I've seen her predict the most amazing stuff," said Heather. "Like, there was one time when she practically begged this biker to check his brake pads, and he came in the next day and told her that he could have had a serious wipe-out if he hadn't listened to her. And another time she told this buttoned-down guy, 'I'd give it back before I got caught if I were you,' really stern, you know? And he turned white and ran out of the store. All I know is the list of sucrics, but she knows how to read the candies' position compared to each other in the bag, too, so she gets a lot more detail in her readings. She's incredible."

Daniel was racking his brains trying to remember the details of his first full day in Crossroads. "What would you say," he asked slowly, "about someone who went to that rack to choose five candies, and picked chocolates with coconut, peanuts, cinnamon, some crunchy sweet yellow stuff whose name I don't remember, plus, umm, a Pixie Stick?"

Heather's eyes widened, in much the same way that Kate's had that first day. "All four elemental ingredients at once," she breathed. "Coconut far-traveler for water, and peanuts, sign of earth, sprouting downward instead of up, buried to rise again. Cinnamon, sign of fire, first added to chocolate by the Spanish when they conquered the Aztecs by fire and sword, destroyer and creator, the wood used by the phoenix to build its five-hundred-

year nest. And the crunchy stuff sounds like what we call honeycomb around here, that's the sign of air. Whoever chose those four, if he didn't know anything about Sucromancy to start with, I'd say he was standing in the eye of the frigging hurricane, that's what I'd say."

"That's what I was afraid of," said Daniel, swallowing hard. "What about the Pixie Stick?"

Heather pursed her lips. "I don't really know the meanings of all the sucrics yet," she said, frowning. "Those are just about pure sugar, and I definitely remember that sugar is connected with the Glamour. Maybe it stands for, I don't know, pixies?"

Daniel looked at her expression to try to figure out whether she was kidding. He hoped she was; from her expression, it looked as if she hoped she was too.

Then, without warning, she ducked beneath the picnic table.

"What is it?" he asked, ducking down as well to face her frightened eyes beneath the tabletop.

"Ohmygod," she said, in a strangled voice as if she hadn't taken enough air down with her. "It's her it's her it's her."

"It's who?" asked Daniel. He twisted around on the bench and looked behind him, and suddenly felt as if the Kraken had just cranked up to its top speed, then hurled him off into a lake of glacial runoff.

He knew at once, without having to be told, that the woman striding purposefully through Atlantis could only be Lilith

Netherby. Her long, silvery-white hair reached down to the small of her back, and her green eyes seemed to burn a path through the crowds of milling tourists ahead of her like a laser in a video game. She wore blue jeans and a Crossroads t-shirt with the same regal authority as if they had been a diamond tiara and necklace, and she walked with absolute assurance, as if she was in reality standing still and forcing the world to spin beneath her feet. Somewhere outside the waterpark, a dog began barking hysterically.

A half step behind her and trying to match his pace to hers, his black leather jacket looking wildly inappropriate amongst all the swimsuits of Atlantis, jogged Master Chee of the Wild Hunt, his stag-handled walking stick over his shoulder. The two of them took a left turn around the Kraken and disappeared.

Suddenly, Ken was standing beside the table, beckoning to them. "Come on," he said urgently. "Lilith and Chee look like they're in a big rush to get someplace, and I want to see where it is. Hurry."

Before they knew what they were doing, Daniel and Heather had abandoned the cooler and were hurrying after the retreating couple beside Ken.

"Bad idea," said Heather breathlessly. "Very, very bad idea. Worst idea I've seen all day." Despite her misgivings, though, she didn't slacken her pace.

"How did you know," asked Daniel, breaking into a half-jog to keep up, "that she was Lilith?"

"Remember back when Master Chee said he was practically old Netherby's son-in-law?" Ken stopped suddenly and held up his hand, peered around a corner of a hot pretzel stand, and then took off with rapid strides again. "I figured he had to be dating either Kimberly or Lilith, and we already saw Kimberly, and that one sure ain't her."

Now they found themselves striding down a broad, gently sloping covered concrete walkway that led underground. Above them they could hear the shrieks of toddlers splashing in the Islands of the Ever-Young play area, but these became muffled as they went deeper. Around a curve ahead, they could hear the sounds of flowing water and reflections of a faint green light. They passed a sign that read "Sacred Spring," above a list of warnings aimed at the pregnant, at children, at the elderly. They'd seen similar warnings dozens of times already today, but the warnings had never looked ominous until now. They turned the corner, and a space opened up before them.

The Sacred Spring was a room-sized triangular whirlpool tub. On two sides it was surrounded by cascades of gigantic translucent imitation crystals, lit from within to throw out dancing flashes of every color in the spectrum, but especially a cool, undersea green. The third side of the chamber was an enormous blocky Mayan god's head, made of the same crystalline material. From its thick-lipped mouth poured an endless waterfall that filled the chamber with dense white steam.

Half a step below Ken's sandaled feet, the spa's heated water bubbled and frothed. There were no obvious exits, and no sign of Lilith or Chee, but the omnipresent mist gave the impression that it might be concealing something just a little deeper, a little farther in.

Ken kicked off his sandals and took a cautious step into the bubbling water, and Heather, after a long hesitation, did likewise. The last one to set foot into the warm water was Daniel. As soon as his toes touched the surface, he felt the dragon sink its fangs into him more savagely than he had ever felt before. His eyes snapped shut, and he went pitching forward head-first toward the center of the frothing maelstrom.

Chapter 8

Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea,

there I will command the serpent to bite them.

Though they are driven into exile by their enemies,

there I will command the sword to slay them.

I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good.

Amos 9:4-5

The next thing Daniel was aware of, his arms were around his friends' shoulders, and they were carrying him stumbling out of what appeared to be an alabaster fountain. "What happened?" he asked weakly.

Ken brushed him off and let go of his arm. "Well, when you decided to perform your little swan dive back there, we caught you, didn't we?" Then he looked around at the chamber they were in, and his eyes widened. "Guh" was the sound that came out of his mouth.

Daniel spun around to look at the room too. "Umm, guys? You know that line about Toto and not being in Kansas and all? Well, consider it quoted."

They were standing beside a white stone basin from which a fountain rose. Four jets of water spouted into the air in a graceful spiral, but they did not fall back into the basin again. Instead they continued to rise, twining gracefully around one another, until they disappeared through a hole in the room's

domed ceiling. Four more jets of water descended from above, twining in the opposite direction just inside the rising jets' helix.

Aside from pillars spaced around the curved walls, the room was bare of furnishings. Four archways at the points of the compass led out onto a wide circular balcony, and the vista beyond made it clear that they were in the topmost chamber of a tower. Through one of the archways they could hear a dreadful cacophony of sizzles, clangs, splashes, and hoarse yells.

Daniel looked to Ken, who usually tended to provide leadership in crisis situations like this one, but both Ken and Heather were staring around with their jaws hanging. Daniel grasped them by their shoulders to get their attention, then put his finger to his lips. Then he pointed to the columns on either side of the noisy archway. After a moment his friends came at least partway back to earth and nodded. Ken crept over to hide behind the lefthand column, while Daniel and Heather took up positions behind the right. Then Daniel pointed again, and all three cautiously peeked around the columns to look out at the balcony and what lay beyond.

Atlantis (for the city they saw stretched beneath them could only be Atlantis) lay perched on the edge of a tall undersea cliff that plunged to unknown dark depths. Clustered along the clifftop Daniel could see dozens of white stone temples, domes, and other towers. A handful of the buildings, including the one they were currently in, were surrounded by

translucent bubbles of air, and golden-skinned figures could be seen manning their balconies. The rest of the buildings lay ruined and empty, with branching corals and anemones dotting their cracked roofs, blue-green shafts of light flitting through their courtyards, and shoals of tiny fish flitting in and out through their gaping doors.

About a hundred yards out from the cliff, a shimmering green curtain hung in the gulf. It stretched parallel to the cliff in all directions, off to the right and left of the tower where the three friends stood, up to the distantly visible surface, and down into the cold, gloomy depths. Where the curtain came closest to Atlantis, there was a gaping hole in its fabric. Later, when his eyes adjusted to the gloom and the distortion caused by their tower's own surrounding bubble of air, Daniel realized that the hole was being held open by four great gray whales, straining to stay in place. Through the hole swam what at first appeared to be a vast school of fish. Once his eyes had adjusted to the scale, though, they resolved themselves into hundreds upon hundreds of green- and blue-skinned merfolk swimming in formations, the mermen clutching tridents and javelins and spears with fierce determination, the mermaids holding conch shells, or riding tamed barracuda, or trailing nets behind them as beautiful and mysterious as their waving hair.

All of these things taking place beyond the balcony, though, took Daniel a long time to absorb. At first he hardly noticed that there was anything beyond the shimmering interior

surface of the bubble surrounding their tower, because what was happening inside was more than enough to take up his attention.

Every ten feet or so along the balcony's white carved railing, a curious object was attached, resembling a narrow-necked Greek urn. Each urn had two Atlantean operators, impossibly tall with white close-cropped hair and golden skins. The first one would swivel the vase so that the mouth was facing upward, and pour into it the contents of two different containers. Then the other one would swivel it back down again, aim it at the approaching merfolk, and wait. Suddenly there would be a deafening roar, and a jagged yellow or blue or green lightning bolt would flash out from the vase and into the water, incinerating a few invaders as they swam and leaving behind a gleaming trail of bubbles and a smell of ozone.

Close enough so that Daniel could almost reach out and touch his leather jacket, legs spread wide and braced, stood Master Chee, roaring with delight as he held at his shoulder something that looked like a self-loading harpoon gun. It fired much faster than the vase-guns could, and every time a harpoon left it, a merman would clutch his chest, surrounded by greenish ichor.

But all the firepower of the defenders was not going to be enough. Daniel could see that the instant he had figured out what was going on. Out of all the towers that Daniel could make out on the cliffward side of the city, perhaps twenty beams were

striking out unevenly, but they were too few and too slow to impede the endless ranks of merfolk.

An attack was being launched against a nearby tower. Three mermaids waited until after both of the defending vase-guns had fired, then swam forward arm in arm. Their waving hair, seemingly possessed of a life of its own, wove itself back and forth within the triangle of their arms, until the three were holding a glowing net. They flicked their tails and swam around it in a tight circle, and it began spinning faster and growing larger as it descended toward the tower. It broke through the tower's bubble just as a vase gun fired, but the crackling energy didn't slow it. It landed on the gun's crew and twisted itself around them, their shrieks blending in with the general roar of battle. Then the net with the defenders inside began to pulse, and hair-like strands snaked out of it and began threading through the tower. Another nearby vase-gun crew quit their post to flee, but one of them was too slow and a strand grasped him around the ankle and began pulling him across the balcony.

Daniel noticed that his arm hurt. He looked down and saw that this was because Heather was gripping it so hard that her fingers were white. Her voice was a tightly stretched wire as she whispered, "We've got to get out of here NOW. Nownownownownow. Please?" Her eyes were wild.

"Any ideas how?" Daniel whispered back. She jerked her head back toward the fountain. Daniel nodded and started to

crawl back again across the floor, when there came an interruption.

Mermen had begun dropping through the bubbles like Navy Seals making a commando raid. Now two of them landed on the balcony within spitting distance of where Daniel and Heather crouched. Their lower halves were less like fishes' tails than the tails of eels or great blue snakes, and they landed with them coiled up beneath them like springs. One of them uncoiled and began slithering toward the nearest vase-gun crew, menacing them with a wicked trident. The two golden Atlanteans set down their jars and drew jagged black swords. The other merman swiveled slowly, his wide lidless eyes peering into every nook and cranny. He spotted Ken, still crouching petrified on the opposite side of the archway from Daniel and Heather, and drew back his spear for a mighty throw. Daniel launched himself toward the scaly blue arm, grabbing it just as it began its murderous cast.

The spear missed Ken's throat by a few inches, but Daniel saw that it was attached to a seaweed tether about four feet long that was tied to the merman's wrist. With a quick flick he had it pulled back to his hand, while at the same time his blue snaky tail whipped up from the floor and wrapped itself around Daniel's waist. He had time to notice the delicate frilly dorsal fin that ran all the way down its length as it began to crush him, and to think, *Oh, how nice, at least I will be killed by something beautiful.* The merman clutched his spear just above two curved fish-teeth set into the shaft, put there, Daniel realized, to

keep it from penetrating its target too deeply, and drew it back to thrust into his chest. Daniel closed his eyes.

Then there was a clash, and he opened them again. Master Chee no longer carried his harpoon gun; instead he was now wielding a wide machete. The merman holding Daniel had lifted his spear to parry it as it came down at his head. With a whip-quick motion he threw Daniel against the wall and leapt back a full tail-length, warily clutching his spear and looking for an opening against Chee, who chuckled grimly and shifted his grasp on his weapon. Green ichor was running along its length, and the black leather jacket was splashed with it. Chee glanced at Daniel and his eyes widened slightly. "Stay there, we'll deal with you later!" he hissed, then turned his full attention to parrying as the merman stabbed at him with his spear.

Heather grabbed Daniel's hand and pulled him to his feet, and Daniel gasped and tried to get his breath back. Then a boiling, foaming noise outside made them both glance out of the archway.

The air bubble enclosing the nearby tower that had been attacked by the mermaids' net was in the process of disintegrating. It broke apart into a thousand smaller bubbles that began streaming towards the surface. With the encroaching water streamed in a squad of mermaids and their barracuda pets to devour any survivors. Another trio of mermaids were heading toward the tower in which they stood. One of them opened a bag out of which darted two long-toothed Moray eels that went

arrowing through the water, broke through the tower's encircling bubble, and latched themselves onto an Atlantean gunner's face.

Then Heather was dragging Daniel by his neck back across the floor to the fountain. Ken took one last wild-eyed look outside, then scrambled across the floor after them. The merman backed up again, then made a fast underhanded cast at Master Chee, who lightly dodged aside. With a flick the spear returned to the merman's hand, and he began slithering in a semicircle, looking for a new opening.

By now all three young people were standing ankle-deep in the white basin of the fountain. Heather gripped Daniel's shoulders and yelled, "YOU GOT US INTO THIS! I could feel you pulling us down after you! You've got to get us out!"

Daniel gulped and nodded. He tried to tell himself sternly that this was all just one of his narcoleptic vivid dreams, that if he kicked himself off in the right direction he could reach the land of wakefulness and sanity. Nothing happened. Three more mermen dropped through the wall of the bubble to land in coiled, deadly precision on the balcony.

On the floor of the balcony there was a rectangular opening that Daniel had not noticed before, leading to a stairway going down. Now, with the same majestic pace that they had seen her using in the waterpark, Lilith strode up those stairs. She made a gesture and all three of the recently-landed mermen staggered as if blasted by a mighty wind, then flew backward over the railing. One managed to wrap its tail around it, but the chunk

of stone he was holding onto broke off with a resounding snap and he disappeared after his comrades. Puffing and wheezing, a red-faced dwarf came jogging up the staircase on Lilith's heels.

Without a glance behind her at the melee unfolding in the circular chamber, Lilith turned and leaned on the railing to face the underwater battle. She held out her hand, and the dwarf pressed a conch shell into it. She raised it to her lips and blew, but no sound detectable to Daniel's ears emerged.

The merman in the chamber cast his spear at Master Chee again. This time he dodged and brought his machete down on the spear's seaweed tether, and the spear went clattering off harmlessly against a pillar. Instantly the merman turned and streaked out one of the opposite archways, with Chee charging after him in hot pursuit, waving his machete shrieking with pure battle joy.

There was a commotion now amongst the merfolk attacking the city. Some of them were looking down at the dim gulf that lay beneath the cliff, pointing with open mouths, then turning tail and fleeing toward the gap in the shimmering green curtain.

Daniel tried to take a step forward to get a better look at what the merfolk were fleeing from, but Heather jerked him back. Then he saw them. They were a cluster of gigantic black snakes rising from the dark green waters beneath the cliff, each with a thin head but thickening farther down their bodies, each of inestimable length. Two of them made for each of the great whales that were holding open the gap in the green curtain.

Three whales were encircled by the rubbery snakes, and the fourth one fled with the snakes in rapid pursuit.

"Kra," Ken choked out, his face a ghastly white. "Kra."

Then Daniel saw what it was that all the snakes were attached to, and his mind temporarily shut down. There was simply no category in it for anything as big as what he was seeing. Trying to comprehend it was like a flea's conception of an elephant - not as a creature, but as a collection of landscapes.

The tower shook as the bow wave of the Kraken hit it. Its aircraft-hanger-sized parrot beak opened wide, and dozens of merfolk were swept inside, followed as a chaser by the wriggling whales. When the great, merciless eye passed by outside the archway, they saw that the entire room they were standing in would have fit inside its pupil. And then came what felt like an eternity, while first the long black body and then the tail filled up their entire field of vision, and blackness seemed to keep on going by until the end of the world. Daniel had the sensation that he was holding his breath, that he might die if he couldn't breathe soon, and yet he couldn't gasp for oxygen until at last, baleful eyes still gleaming with pale light, the monstrous thing finally turned and sank again into the abyss from which it had come.

The Kraken passed once across the battlefield like the shadow of a mountain, and that was the end of the battle of Atlantis. Nothing remained of the great merfolk army but a few

drifting nets of mermaid hair. Lilith threw back her head and laughed long and hard. "You call that a counterattack?" she cried gleefully to the handful of fleeing merfolk, their backs undulating as they sped frantically for the shrinking gap in the green curtain. She reached into the pocket of her jeans, pulled something dark out, and held it over her head. It began to glow so brightly that Daniel had to look away. When he looked back, he saw that the gash in the curtain had healed as entirely as if it had never been.

And suddenly, in the somehow familiar presence of whatever she was holding, Daniel found that he could look in a direction that he had sought in vain only a few moments earlier. He remembered all at once the trick of it, the consciousness rising like a bubble, the mind stretching out to rediscover its properly attached nerves and arms and legs, memories coalescing, the reimposition of Time. Daniel remembered once more how to wake himself up, and did so, just as the dwarf turned around, glimpsed the three humans soaking in the fountain, and drew in his breath to shout something to Lilith.

Then Daniel found himself floating once more in the warm waters of the Sacred Spring, his body entangled with those of Heather and Ken. With a certain amount of difficulty and embarrassment they all managed to stand up and stare at each other. Ken waded to the side of the pool and sat down, his elbows on his knees and head between his hands.

"That was some dream?" said Heather. She tried to make the sentence into a definite statement, but her voice rose up into a question on the last word in spite of itself.

"I don't think so," said Daniel. He started trying to describe what he had just been through, but found that his own voice was betraying him as well. Perhaps he had been screaming when he saw the Kraken; perhaps they all had. So instead he mimed the throwing of a spear, wiggled his fingers to suggest tentacles, then stretched his arms wide to suggest something huge. "You too?" he croaked, pointing at Heather. She nodded. Ken seconded her with a barely perceptible downward twitch of his chin.

Then, suddenly, Ken sprang from where he was sitting and pointed at the center of the pool. For an instant, Daniel couldn't tell what his friend was pointing at. A small whirlpool was starting to revolve around a patch of something that at first he couldn't identify, until he realized that it was a swirl of silvery white hair. There was only one exit from the Sacred Spring, and Lilith was beginning to rise from the water between them and it.

Chapter 9

'Tis magic, magic that hath ravaged me.

Dr. Faustus

Christopher Marlowe

There was only one possible hiding place, and Daniel dove for it, closely followed by Heather and Ken: behind the waterfall pouring from the mouth of the translucent stone god. Once they were behind it they all hugged one another to keep anyone from drifting away. Everything except for their faces they kept submerged beneath the foaming water, mostly invisible, though Heather's orange bikini that had seemed so attractive before now felt uncomfortably like a blinding beacon.

Daniel began to feel a rising sense of panic, as if he was having a nightmare with no way of waking up. He tried to will himself to wake up again, just to see what would happen, and a great wave of exhaustion surged around him and subsided. It didn't pull him under, though, and he was thankfully still awake when Lilith strode dripping from the maelstrom to the edge of the pool, with Master Chee and the dwarf close behind her. Though the thick mist and the pouring waterfall made it impossible to see more of them than a blurred outline, by some trick of acoustics their voices were perfectly clear.

"Did you see them flee before my mighty ally?" Lilith laughed. "Oh, there was much blood and cash paid to gain his aid, blood on both sides of the barrier, but the blood was not mine, so surely it was a bargain, was it not? I could not afford to lose this tether. There was too much in the making of it."

"What about me?" asked Master Chee. "Did you see how I killed, what, fifteen, maybe twenty of those things? Two of 'em *mano a mano!*" He slashed his walking stick from side to side. "Who's the greatest hunter in both worlds? Here's a hint -- one word, rhymes with *me*."

"Oh, well done." Lilith's compliment dripped with sarcasm. "And may I ask why you never shot any of the mermaids, despite the fact that I specifically told you they were the more dangerous sex? Your chivalry shall be your undoing one day, Doug." Then, in a harsher tone, she snapped "Oh, what is it?"

Daniel could see blurrily through the waterfall that the dwarf had been waving his arms insistently for some time. "If it please you, mistress..."

"Remember, you are to call me 'my liege' from now on, Drallo." The water seemed to grow chillier at her tone.

"Yes, my liege. As I have been trying to ask you, were you aware that three Daysiders followed us through the tether?"

"What? Impossible." Lilith turned her head back to glance at the pool, and Daniel tried to make his body and mind as blank as he could imagine them being. She didn't seem to see anything,

and went on, "No Daysider could pass through the tether without my permission."

"Oh, they were there all right," said Chee. "I saw 'em too, right before I disarmed the big blue one. Did you see how I sidestepped that spear like *this*, and then I brought down my machete like *this* and then *bam*, and he took off and..."

"Whatever, dear. Well, if anybody did briefly get through somehow, they're probably so scared they're halfway to Kalamazoo by now." She turned back to the dwarf. "Now Drallo, you've fulfilled your sentry duty well today. Many thanks for the timely warning. But where there was one attack there may be others planned, so your vigilance must not flag. Go back and hold my Twilightside dominions together in my name. Farewell!" They heard splashes as the dwarf trudged back into the whirlpool and disappeared. Then two sets of footsteps faded up the walkway into the distance, and the waterfall's music filled the Sacred Spring without interruption.

It was a long, long time before three swim-suited figures climbed out from underneath the waterfall, their skins red and blotchy from prolonged soaking in the hot water. They stood at the edge of the pool and shifted from one foot to the other, staring nervously up the walkway where Lilith had gone, wondering what kind of a world they had come back to.

Later that evening, Daniel stood in front of his easel with his watercolors spread before him, doing his best to avoid

thinking of anything remotely connected with either Atlantis. He and his two friends had picked up their cooler and made it to the changing rooms of the water park with little speech or eye contact with one another. As soon as they were out of the park's gates, Heather had thanked them insincerely for a nice day and rushed off, and Daniel and Ken had stumbled home to retreat into their respective rooms and seek out oblivion in painting and video games, respectively.

The morning after Sondra had visited him in his room, three nights earlier, Daniel had tried to go back to work on his sketchbook of white dream trees. But after having seen them through her eyes, he had discovered that the magic and otherworldliness he'd been working to capture had disappeared like a snowflake melting under a warm breath. The silvery twilight and alien stars of his dreams were vanished, and he was left to marvel at his drawings' poor shading and shoddy composition. He'd written on the inside of the front cover:

*Georgie Porgie, high and dry,
Kissed a dream and made it fly.
When the real girls come to play,
Georgie Porgie fades away.*

After shutting up the sketchbook for what he feared might be the last time, he'd wondered if he had been overtaxing his abilities. Perhaps he should work on some technical exercises for a while, he had thought sadly, finger warmups, scales and arpeggios. Accordingly he had stopped at the supermarket the

next day, picked up an assortment of fruit, and arranged it on a striped beach towel on his dresser for a traditional still life. The project had revealed two drawbacks so far, however, -- first, while drawing the forest scenes was one of the few things that had almost always kept the sleep dragon at bay, the still life was proving less gripping. Several times he had caught himself on the edge of launching into automatic behavior, an apple's red threatening to expand and engulf the fruit around it. The second problem was that the work made him hungry.

He'd purchased some spare fruit in case of emergencies. After two hours of painting he had finished off the last of the grapes, and he began to detect with his mind's ear a pleading voice crying "*Eat me!*" from the direction of the kitchen, which he eventually identified as coming from the remainder of Ken's chocolate chip cookies.

Ken was sitting hunched up on the love seat, which he had moved to within a few feet of the television. Three beer bottles lay scattered around him, and he was clutching a fourth one to his chest protectively. He wore headphones and stared intently at the screen, which was showing a confetti storm of static. When he realized that Daniel was in the room, he hit the remote and turned the snowstorm to abrupt darkness.

"So, roommate," he said, with an intense degree of control. Daniel knew that the more Ken had had to drink, the more carefully he would try to monitor what he said so as to give nothing away. "Didja get any sunburn today?"

"Nah, the sunblock seemed to work OK," Daniel replied, equally nonchalantly. "Listen, do you think between the two of us, we managed to show Heather a sufficiently good time today? I mean, between your ridiculing her most deeply cherished beliefs, and my --- well, how *would* you describe whatever it was that I did today anyway, oh wise one?"

"I'd call it our mutually suggested joint hallucination, if you asked me," replied Ken, blinking. "Oh wait, you did ask me. Maybe those cookies really were poisoned, I dunno. Anyway, something along those lines is what I'd call my Working Hypothesis, right around now."

"But you didn't eat any of the cookies," pointed out Daniel, sitting down on the sofa.

"Aw hell, you're right." Ken upended the bottle and took several swallows, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "And I'm lying when I say that it's my working hypothesis. It's my badly busted hypothesis, my flames-shooting-out-the-back-end-while-going-over-the-cliff hypothesis. And all the others are in even worse shape, 'cept for one."

"Which one is that?" asked Daniel.

Ken covered his eyes with his hands. "Schizophrenia," he said. "Full-blown, imaginary friends talking to me, John Nash-style craziness." He suddenly grabbed Daniel by the shoulder. "Would you keep an eye on me? If you think I've gone totally round the bend, would you take me to a doctor before I hurt somebody? Promise me that, Danny."

"Umm, sure," said Daniel uncomfortably. "But remember, I saw it all too. I don't think you're crazy."

Ken let out a long, malty breath. "Thass very reassuring," he said, "at least, it is if you're not a figment of my diseased imagination. Or else maybe you caught it from me." He let go of Daniel's shoulder and flopped back on the love seat. "What about you? Have you got any inneresting theories you wanna share? Cause I'm fresh out."

Daniel shook his head. "You forget, my friend, I've seen you heap scorn upon the heads of way too many people who say they believe anything that can't be proven. I think my head's better off unscorned, so I'll keep my opinions to myself, thank you very much."

"A wise move," his roommate responded. "But I don't seem to find myself in a scorning mood this evening." He finished off his bottle and dropped it with a clank on the floor. "What I find myself searching for right now, frankly, is some kind of, whatchacall 'em, a paradigm shift. You wouldn' happen to have one of those handy, would you?"

Daniel shook his head again. "All out," he said, spreading his hands wide.

Ken grimaced. "I was afraid of that. I was kinda hoping that I might get one from out of these," he gestured at the bottles at his feet, "but I'm beginning to fear that a six-pack may not be enough. Perhaps it's time to start in on the vodka."

"I hope not," said Daniel, beginning to get worried. He'd never seen Ken tearing off on a bender like this one before, even after some pretty serious jiltings.

"Why shouldn't it be necessary?" Ken almost growled back in reply. His lips curled, and he looked almost ready to scream or cry. "Why the *hell* shouldn't it be? Maybe you're accustomed enough to living in your own personal dreamworld that you don't MIND the real world getting snatched away from under you, but I happened to LIKE the real one, OK? I liked it a lot! Or, well, maybe not always, but at least I was used to it!" Then he saw Daniel's face, and softened. "Aw, I'm sorry, Dan. I shouldn't be taking any of this out on you. It wasn't your fault, I know that." He grabbed the remote from the seat beside him. "Look, you were probably wondering what I was doing when you came in. Lemme show you, and you can take it into account when you're deciding whether or not my mind has entered the Twilight Zone."

He pushed the remote button, and the curtain of static returned.

"Have you ever really, really stared at a screenful of static, Dan?" Ken asked, closing his eyes. "Try it now."

Daniel stared at his roommate appraisingly for a moment, wondering if it might be true that one or both of them were going crazy. Then he obediently scooted closer and let the snow fill his vision. After a minute or so, he began to experience an unsettling sensation. There seemed to be ripples rolling beneath

the screen, uncertain forms like distant clouds near the horizon -- lines and curves and angles struggling to take shape.

"Keep looking," said Ken. "See anything?"

"Yeeees," said Daniel. "Umm, probably just an optical illusion, though. I mean, I assume it's actually random?"

"What would you say if I told you that it wasn't? That this was actually an imperfectly erased recording, and there were still ghosts of the original movie underneath the static? D'you think you'd be able to piece together any scenes?" Ken seemed to be getting a bit excited now; it looked as if the alcohol he'd drunk was starting to wear off.

"I don't know," said Daniel. He kept his eyes on the screen, and blocky shapes seemed to coalesce out of the flickering colored pixels. Could that be an arm unfolding from that shape there, he wondered? Or a shocked face with its mouth wide open, there on the right? He blinked his eyes and the shapes vanished. "Maybe. Is any of that true, or is it really just static?"

Ken hit the remote again and the screen went dark. "I don't know," he said, pressing his fingers to his temples. "I'll tell you in a minute what it is. But in the Psych course I took last semester, I read about an experiment someone did once with static. They hired a bunch of people and gave them a fancy version of the story I just gave you. It was a load of claptrap about how this was a videotape that had been kept in a safe-deposit box and left in a millionaire's will to his heir, but it

got erased accidentally before anybody could see it, and now the heir was paying a bunch of people to watch the video and write down what they saw, descriptions of scenes with the precise times and all."

"And I'm guessing the subjects saw a lot?"

"Around seventy percent of them did. Some just faces and movement, but a few were able to come up with whole scenes complete with dialogue." He held up the headphones with a rueful smile.

"And it was all purely random static."

"Designed to be mathematically random, yes." Ken tried to sit up too quickly, and grasped the arm of the love seat for support. "Our brains are wired to look for patterns, Danny, even when they don't exist. The fancy name's apho - ap - apophenia, that's it. It was one of our ancestors' biggest survival adaptations, and it's real hard to break. And it's one of the greatest enemies ever to science. Most of the bad science out there -- the astrology, the Aristotelian medicine, the face on Mars, the phregolo - prekol - phre-no-lo-gy" he paused and pronounced each syllable precisely, "it all comes from people finding patterns where they don't actually exist."

Daniel picked up the remote from the arm of the loveseat and turned it on, filling the screen with static once more. "And what do you see on the screen, Ken?" he asked.

Ken stared at it for a long time in silence. Finally, he said, "All my life, I've tried to train myself to see nothing

except precisely what's there. The real stars, not the imaginary constellations. I wanted to have a scientist's eyes to tell the difference between patterns and randomness, never the twain shall meet forever and ever amen."

"And now?" asked Daniel gently.

Suddenly the static on the screen came to an end. In its place there was a top-down view of the apartment's kitchen. The refrigerator filled the background, with the empty milk dish beside it.

Ken sighed deeply. "You told Heather that you had no idea what experiment I did in the kitchen last night. Well, it was this. I set up my laptop's wireless webcam to record the kitchen onto a DVD. One way or the other I figured it would settle it, you know?"

"What did you expect to find?"

Some more of Ken's reserve cracked. "Aw hell, Danny! You've seen what's been going on in that kitchen! I sure as hell hoped it'd be mice, but that isn't looking too likely now, is it? I mean, unless the mice have learned to use vacuum cleaners? Anyway, that's what I got."

"What?" asked Daniel, turning back to look at the screen.

"That. Three hours of empty kitchen with a full dish of milk, then an hour of static like you just saw, then the rest of the night with an empty dish."

"Maybe Sondra's been sneaking in?" Daniel offered, grasping at straws.

"I've been sleeping across the archway every night. I don't trust anybody."

"I see," said Daniel, stung. "So what's next?"

"What's next. Yes, that's a very very good question. What exactly should be next, I wonder?" For a long time he sat watching the unmoving picture. Daniel waited for him to say anything more, but finally decided that Ken was through talking for the evening.

"Umm, Ken? Would you mind if I got some of your cookies before I turn in? I'm, umm, kinda hungry after everything that's been going on today."

"Sure," said Ken, "go ahead. Like I said, I don't like 'em. The box is on the counter." Then, as Daniel was going through the door into the kitchen, he called out, "Could you bring a few more things along with you when you come back?"

"No problem," called Daniel as he fished a cookie out. "What did you have in mind?"

"Bring out the whole box that the cookies came in, actually. Plus the roll of packing tape, plus all the knives in the silverware drawer. Oh, and what the hell, you might as well bring out the vodka while you're at it."

Daniel turned around slowly. "What exactly are you planning on doing, wise one?"

Ken leaned his head back on the cushion of the loveseat. "I can't tell you how much I hate to say this." He shut his eyes again and was quiet for a long time, then finally sighed deeply.

"You know that static experiment? I think it's time to start looking for the pictures."

Daniel woke up abruptly from a dream of rapid motion, and discovered that he could not move. Someone small was sitting on the end of his bed near his feet, and he could sense as well that someone else was huddled on the floor in a patch of moonlight, just beyond his range of vision. He tried to send messages to his body willing it to sit up, perhaps to push off the thing by his feet, at least to turn and see what the two creatures were, but his body did not respond. It was as if his head was cut off at the neck. He tried to scream, but failed in that too. All he could do was lie there in panic and listen.

The thing on the end of the bed tensed itself, as if ready to spring. "Hold, prey!" it spat out in a dark, silky voice. "No more running for you. I've chased you all the way from the Border Realm to the lip of this dream, but you can't go any farther and we both know it!"

"Mercy!" shrieked the thing rolling back and forth on the floor in a high-pitched voice. "It's nothing but a poor, weak nis-woman I am, and no mistake! Never did no harm to no one, and not my fault for all of them as is trying to be catching me, oh woe!" The thing on the end of the bed made a sudden flicking move, and the other's shrieks rose an octave. "Oh, if it's killing me you're planning then please make it quick, kind assassin sir!"

"Be quiet," said the creature on the bed, seeming to curl up into a warm ball again. "I don't have the slightest interest in killing you. Your kind are entirely too sweet and too crunchy, and I like my prey salty and soft."

"Then what..?" The thing on the floor rolled over and looked up. "It's recognizing you I am. You're one of them cats, them legendary creatures, that is what you are, indeed. But it's hearing I was that there was a truce between our two peoples, centuries ago gone by. So why is it you're out hunting a poor weak nis-woman such as myself?"

"Hunting?" the cat curled up on Daniel's feet sounded vastly amused. "If I'd been hunting you, prey, you wouldn't have seen me coming. I just sniffed you out in the Border Realm for a little chat, and you up and ran. Just the way mother birds always try to draw me away from their nests, if I'm not mistaken. Which, by the by, is a trick that rarely works."

The creature on the floor just knelt there, sniveling. "A chat, did you say? Well, and a fine one it's been, so if you'll be excusing me..."

"Hush, prey. Unless you want me to make sure you don't run any more?"

"i'll keep still," squeaked the nis.

"Good. Then listen to my message. First off, you're the one they call Skeeble, are you not?"

Somehow Daniel was able to sense that the creature on the floor was holding its knees and rocking back and forth. "Aye," she said miserably.

"Splendid. I bring you a message from your king, Skeeble."

The nis stopped rocking. "The king? But..."

"But why should a fine handsome feline monarch such as myself be acting as a mere messenger, even if it's for the King of Faerie, you were about to ask? A good question, I'll grant you. Because I'm concerned about changes in the old agreements that were made long times gone by, that's one reason. Milk drinkers and form stealers and turning the clock back, all nasty businesses and no mistake. Another reason is that I'm being well paid. And the final reason is, I am carrying your king's messages through for him because I am one of the only ones who can. You know the old rhyme..."

Skeeble nodded and began to chant in a sing-song voice, still clutching her knees:

Cats milky white,
Bad dreams put to flight.
Cats midnight black,
Three-fold will give back.
Cats pale as chalk,
Their spirits will walk.
Cats calico,
The future they know.

Cats twilight gray,
No barrier can stay.
Cats ginger orange..."

"Enough!" hissed the cat. "Do you want to know what your king said or don't you?"

"Yesyesyes," said the nis. "Skeeble is being quiet now. Very, very quiet. So quiet I'll be that..."

"HUSH!" Suddenly the cat didn't just sound like a small thing that might sit curled up on your lap, but a great beast of the jungle, all claws and teeth and darkness.

"whimper," said Skeeble, rolling up into a ball.

"Good. Now, your king says that you can have amnesty for your several crimes, on one condition."

"Amnesty? But that would mean..." Skeeble unrolled, glanced up at the cat, then rolled up again. "Go on. It's quiet now I'm being."

"AS I was saying, you may have amnesty on the condition that you agree to start giving guidance to this one whose dream we're now visiting."

Daniel had the unpleasant feeling that both of his two visitors had turned to stare at him. He strained again to see them directly, and almost thought he could catch a glimpse of Skeeble's tangled brown hair in the moonlight, but still his vision seemed strangely occluded, and his muscles wouldn't do so much as twitch.

"This one?" sputtered Skeeble. "But he's just a Daysider! Maybe a Border Skimmer too, but that's hardly a reason..."

"That shows how much you know," said the cat. "The Oberon says he's already been tangled up in this business before, and thus must be so again. His majesty paid him a visit before the wall got too thick, and he said he was satisfied with his answers. I couldn't get anything else out of him, but I'd suggest you try to figure out what else the fellow has going for him that would attract attention. For one thing, as you might have noticed if you hadn't been running so fast, there are things that have happened in this house he's staying in, and things that are going to happen, and a thing that is happening to one of your distant cousins right this very..."

Daniel woke with a start and sat up in his bed. There was nothing in his room, not even the patch of moonlight he'd dreamed one of his visitors was sitting in. That wouldn't have been possible anyway, he now remembered, considering his window was taped over. *Night terrors*, he told himself. *The false awakening*. He'd done it before, but never quite this vivid. What had been in the room with him this time, anyway? Burglars? Aliens? Could he even remember?

Suddenly Daniel realized that a terrible racket was coming from the direction of the kitchen - a jangling clatter, and then a high-pitched piping sound. He crawled out of bed and threw on a bathrobe, knocking over his still life arrangement in the

process and sending apples and grapes and peaches rolling across the floor, then stumbled into the hall and almost collided with Sondra, who was still pulling on her green nightgown. They ran into Ken's room together, scrambled over the love seat-turned-futon that was blocking the archway to the kitchen, and then both pulled up short when they saw Ken.

His jet-black hair still almost perfect even in the dead of night, Ken was standing next to an upside-down cardboard box on the kitchen floor with a look of wild exultation in his eyes. A steak knife was clutched in his hand, point downward.

"Look there," he cried, pointing with the knife down to the box. "Look at what I've done! I was right! God help me, I was right!"

Trembling slightly, Daniel took a step forward. The cardboard box was the one that had been mailed to Ken by his family's cook, with a small jagged hole in the top, apparently sawed out by the knife Ken was clutching. Empty cans and a stick were scattered across the floor; it was evident that Ken had set up a classic "stick and box" trap over the milk dish to catch something, with the cans stacked on top to give the alarm that Daniel had heard.

There were high-pitched noises coming from inside the box. Daniel found that he was deeply afraid of whatever was making them, but when Ken beckoned, he found himself practically pulled forward by his roommate's fierce exultation. Unwillingly, he knelt beside the box and put his eye to the hole.

Several smaller knife-holes let shafts of light into the box's interior. Ten mismatched butter knives were taped to the sides of the box parallel to the floor, overlapping to create a continuous metal barrier.

Running in a circle around the dish of milk on the floor was a tiny creature. He had seen misshapen, lumpy images of it for sale on the shelves of Crossroads' craft shops, carved out of tree roots or twisted from wire and tightly woven gray yarn. Like them it appeared to have only the suggestions of joints and features. From its indistinct mouth came a constant keening whine, a high irritating "yi yi yi yi yi yi yi yi yi."

It looked like something from one of Daniel's dreams, yet there it indisputably was under the fluorescent kitchen light. If the labels on the craft shop dolls were correct, it could not be anything other than a brownie.

Book 2

CROSSROADS BLUES

Chapter 1

*Is Eden far away, or do you hide
From human thought, as hares and mice and coneys
That run before the reaping-hook and lie
In the last ridge of the barley? Do our woods
And winds and ponds cover more quiet woods,
More shining winds, more star-glimmering ponds?*

Prologue to "The Shadowy Waters"

W.B. Yeats

The tiny stage of The Blue Nile was just big enough for a single stool and a microphone. Two and a half weeks after Ken captured the brownie, Jeremiah Fry perched on the worn stool, lit by a single spotlight, a battered black guitar cradled in his arms. Even when his left hand wasn't touching the strings, the long gnarled fingers of his right hand kept absently picking out silent chords to a song that only he could hear.

"Any o' you folks know anything about th' blues, you probly know somethin' 'bout Poor Bob Johnson," said Fry, leaning his long head down close to the microphone. "Wrote this 'bout 1932 way down in Clarksdale, Mississippi, sittin' on a tombstone with his good friend Willie Brown."

Daniel looked around the room. Some of the tourists in the bar were playing pool, while others watched baseball on tv; none of them were paying the slightest attention to the guitarist. Most of them looked as if they wouldn't know the difference between a bluesman and a blunderbuss.

Daniel, Ken, and Sondra were sitting at a table in the Nile because their favorite bartender had invited all of them to come listen to him play his regular Tuesday night gig. Daniel had tried asking Cindy and Heather to come along, but they'd said that the bouncer knew them, and knew perfectly well that they were only 17. Heather had said this regretfully, Cindy accusingly, as if the very idea of entering a bar illegally was an affront to the entire city of Crossroads.

Jeremiah Fry didn't look at his audience as he spoke; he just gazed down lovingly at the silent chords his right hand was picking out. "Now Bob Johnson, his pretty wife done died tryin' to birth a baby when he was jus' 19, and he was so far down that even down looked like up to him. He was so far down the whiskey tasted just like water, and if it hadn't been for his guitar he would have drowned hisself in there right quick. But even though the guitar was the one thing that in the world made the sun seem warm for him, every time he played he stunk up the joint so bad his friend Son House tol' him he be makin' better music if he done laid his guitar down and banged the strings with a rock. He say 'Put that guitar down, boy, you drivin' people nuts.'" Without seeming to be aware of what he was doing, Fry's left hand

began to pick out a few notes, as if the music was welling up inside his guitar and it was too hard for him to keep it cooped up any longer. "So the story goes that one dark night at midnight, ol' Bob, he went down to the place where Highway 1 crosses Highway 8 outside of Rosedale, and he sat down an' started playin' a song. And the devil came up to him, devil lookin' like a big black man, the devil sat down beside him on the log where he was playin' and held out his hand for Bob's guitar. Bob he handed it over, and the devil tuned them strings and played a little song on that there guitar, and when he was done he handed it back to Bob.

"And the story goes that ever since that night, there ain't been nobody in this world could play a guitar as well as Robert Johnson could, but poor Bob's soul weren't never his own no more. Took his heart right out his body, the devil did, an' filled up all that hollow space in his chest where his love for his wife had been with them ol' lonesome blues."

The melody rose up out of the guitar at that, like a sudden flood of tears, and Jay Fry's spidery fingers seemed to be dancing to keep up:

I went down to the crossroad,

Fell down on my knees.

I went down to the crossroad,

Fell down on my knees.

Asked the Lord above "Have mercy, now,

Save poor Bob, if you please.

Jay Fry leaned his head down close to the guitar as if he was singing to the strings and not the crowd, his moaning voice caught up and amplified in the hollow wood. His face was beginning to bead with sweat. Flickers of light bouncing off of the guitar's frets chased each other around the room, and in them Daniel imagined he could see reflections from the events of the past two weeks and a half weeks. He half closed his eyes, but what came welling up at him was for once not sleep, but memory.

Mmmmm, standin' at the crossroad,

I tried to flag a ride.

Standin' at the crossroad,

I tried to flag a ride.

Didn't nobody seem to know me

Everybody pass me by.

When Daniel saw the brownie in the box, his head jerked back as if it had been burned. He looked around the room once to convince himself he was still awake, then peeked inside again. The tiny creature was still running in circles, and Daniel's eyes seemed to have trouble adjusting to see it, as if he was looking into a bright light. *It's like something that's been painted over in the background of a painting, he thought, something that's used to being invisible and doesn't know how to be looked*

at. He beckoned Sondra to come forward to see if she saw the same thing he did. She knelt down and peered in at the shrieking brownie, then turned to look up at Ken and said something that neither of her apartmentmates expected.

"The poor little thing," she said. "He sounds like he's in pain. You've got to let him out."

"Well, umm," said Ken, still looking the worse for wear from the sixpack plus vodka. "I mean, really. I mean, I was looking for a paradigm shift, and there it is, plain as day. So it turns out that all of my most cherished beliefs up until this point have got to be chucked out the window." He flapped his hands vaguely, like a blind swimmer with no clear idea of which direction to go to reach the shore. "So hey, looks like I'll have to go back to square one and start over. Hell, if we make this public, maybe everybody in the whole world will. No big deal, right? Right?"

Sondra looked appalled. "You can't go public with him, Ken. He's got feelings. Think about the consequences!"

"Consequences, right." Ken ran his hand back through his stiff black hair, which remained perfect. "I'm good with consequences. Causes and effects, OK. It's just that if we don't show it to anybody else, I'm not sure the two of you alone are enough to convince me afterwards that this really happened. Taking it to a lab is what a scientist should do, right?" Ken turned to Daniel, who shrugged helplessly.

"He'd die in a lab. You know he would," Sondra stated positively. She peeked into the box again. "You put the knives in there to trap him because of the stories about them not liking Cold Iron, right? Well, they're obviously true. Listen to him crying; they must hurt something awful." She put her mouth to the hole and murmured through it, "Hush, hush, little one. Calm down. Everything's going to be all right."

"Well, yes, but..." Ken paused, then started over, his next words obviously costing him enormous effort. "This means that Magic must work after all, doesn't it? At least here in this kitchen. That's the only explanation that fits all the facts - the fridge, the flour, the video. This thing must have been, I dunno, magicking them on and off somehow." He leaned heavily against the counter and ran a hand through his hair again. "Oh, man, I feel sick."

"Well, you know the stories about brownies," said Daniel hesitantly. "Weren't they supposed to do domestic stuff on a farm - sweep the floor, sew the shoes, make sure the cream churned to butter, so long as you kept giving leaving them a saucer of milk every night? I suppose keeping all the appliances running would be the modern equivalent."

"Right," said Sondra, looking up from her crooning. "And if you made them mad, they made it impossible to get anything done. The butter wouldn't churn anymore. Were you forgetting that, 'wise one'?" Her voice dripped with sarcasm.

"We don't churn our butter, in case you hadn't noticed. Wait a minute, wait..." Ken drummed his fingers on the counter rapidly. "I'm the one who caught it, I oughta figure out what we should do with it. I bet I could whip together a metal cage to could keep it for a few days so we could study it."

Sondra cried out at that, and the keening coming from inside the box grew louder and shriller as well, "yi yi yi yi YI YI YI YI YI"

Daniel knelt down beside the box. "Maybe it can understand us," he said excitedly. He addressed the side of the box: "Are you really a brownie?"

There was a brief pause, and then the sound "ep" emerged clearly from within.

"I bet 'yi' means no and 'ep' means yes," said Sondra, shouldering Daniel aside. "Little brownie, are those big metal knives hurting you?"

"EP EP!" came the high piping sounds.

Sondra sat back on her heels, satisfied. "I won't let you keep it like this, Ken. Not while it's in pain. You've got to take the knives away." She moved her hand toward the box.

"Wait!" cried Ken. "Brownie, if we took the knives away, would you leave right away? You know, disappear in a puff of smoke or something?"

Hesitation, then another "Ep."

Daniel suddenly snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute! Leprechauns!"

"Umm, that thing doesn't look like any picture I ever saw of a leprechaun," Ken said doubtfully.

"No, I mean catching leprechauns. Isn't the story supposed to be that when you catch one, he'll tell you where his gold is in exchange for letting him go?" He turned and addressed the box. "Brownie, will you give us something if we let you go?"

"EP!" came the sound from within the box, and Daniel could have sworn there was enthusiasm in its voice. "Well, what can you give us then?" He felt he was on a roll.

There was silence from the box. "Just binary answers, remember?" said Ken.

"Oh, all right. Brownie, can you give us gold if we set you free?"

"Yi" said the brownie, sounding apologetic.

"Hmm. Some kind of magical items, maybe?" put in Sondra hopefully.

"Yi Yi"

"Nothing physical, it sounds like," said Ken thoughtfully.

"Hmm. What about wishes? Probably not all-powerful genie-type ones, considering how small it is, but still maybe something useful. Brownie, could you give the three of us a wish apiece if we let you out?"

"EP EP EP EP EP" chattered the brownie, now sounding positively rapturous.

"All right, then," said Sondra. "I know exactly what I want from him, and I'm sure it won't overtax his abilities, either." She leaned back against the side of the refrigerator and addressed the box with the high, commanding voice that had won her a standing ovation as the lead in a student-directed production of Shaw's *Saint Joan* the previous fall. "Brownie, if we let you go, I wish that you will neither harbor a grudge against this household for Ken's capture of you here, nor take any revenge against us or our domestic appliances, but rather that you will continue to keep all our appliances working smoothly here for as long as we keep leaving you milk. Is that acceptable?"

"EP" cried the voice from within the box with gusto.

"Wow," whispered Daniel admiringly. "What a great speech. How'd you come up with all of that so fast?"

"I was always good at Improv," Sondra whispered back, blushing a bit. "Why are we whispering?" She looked around the room and raised her voice. "So who's next?"

Daniel and Ken looked at each other, and Ken folded his arms. "My catch, so I go last. You're up next, Danny."

"Umm, well." Daniel cleared his throat uncomfortably several times. "Let's see now. I've got an idea, but I'm not sure if it's possible. Could I ask you a few questions first, Mr. Brownie, without having them count against my wish?"

"Ep ep" said the brownie, sounding almost gracious.

"All right. First question." He hesitated, not wanting to say a word as nursery-rhymish as 'Fairyland' out loud. "Is there really a, a world, a place somewhere, where, umm, creatures like you, supernatural beings like, well, elves and such, where you all live?"

"Ep."

"Good! I mean..." He knelt forward. "OK, next question. Are there doorways or portals or some such near here that people like us could use to get there?"

There was a long pause, then a very uncertain "ep."

"Besides the one we used to go to Atlantis, I mean, because we don't want to go back there."

"Ep" came again, sounding more confident this time.

"Could you give me a sign or a clue or something, to help me find one? Because that's my wish. If you can do that, I mean."

"Ep. Ep."

"OK, then. Umm, thanks." He stepped back, feeling foolish. "Your turn, oh wise capturer of things that don't exist. Have you thought of a good one yet?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," said Ken, unfolding his arms. "But actually, I'd prefer to talk to *my* brownie alone before I let it go, if you don't mind, since it was my idea and my box and all."

"Oh. All right," said Daniel, hurt for the second time that day that his friend wouldn't trust him more. "And hey, Ken,

thanks for sharing the wishes with us. I suppose you could have asked for all three yourself. It was generous to count us in."

"Thanks for agreeing to let it go," added Sondra. "For a second there, I was afraid you were going to go marching with him into some biology lab like a trophy or something."

"And have to drink warm beer for the rest of the summer?" Ken gave a crooked smile. "Not a chance. Now shoo."

Daniel and Sondra clambered back over the sofa into the living room and headed down the hallway toward their rooms. "Maybe we should have tried taking a snapshot or something," said Sondra. "Just so we'd all know we didn't dream this."

"I don't think it would have worked," said Daniel, and told her briefly about the videotape Ken had showed him. "Though I wouldn't be surprised if Ken tries a picture anyway, just as an experiment. And by the way, this isn't the only bizarre thing that's happened today." He gave a huge yawn. "Listen, I want to tell you all about what happened at the waterpark, but I'd drop off in midsentence. Remind me at breakfast." Putting his hand on the doorknob, he could already feel himself beginning to slide down the long twisting waterslide that led to sleep.

"Dan?" asked Sondra, framed in her bedroom doorway. Daniel made a huge effort and turned back to look at her, his eyelids fluttering. "Do you suppose this is the only refrigerator brownie around? Or are there others, somewhere?"

Daniel tried to say something in response, but it was too late -- he had already started to plunge down into the smooth

black water at the bottom of the slide. What came out of his mouth, though, before he pushed open his door and stumbled into his room, sounded a good deal like "Ask the cat," and Sondra stared after him for several long heartbeats before going into her own room and shutting her door on the darkness.

Mmm, the sun goin' down, boy

Dark gonna catch me here.

Sun goin' down, boy

Boy, dark gonna catch me here.

I haven't got no lovin' sweet woman that

Love and feel my care

The next morning over scrambled eggs, Daniel told Sondra as much as he could remember about the trip to the waterpark Atlantis and the other Atlantis that lay beyond it. As he told the story he kept expecting the details to fade like a remembered dream, but all of them came back to him with the sharp edges of wakefulness. Sondra was the perfect listener, nodding intently and only asking a few questions from time to time. She left for work after telling him to be sure to let her know if anything else strange happened.

On his walk to the fudge shop, he stopped in his tracks when he passed a newspaper box on the corner of Main and Diamond. One of the headlines read **SERIOUS INJURY ON NEW ATLANTIS**

ATTRACTION. He shoved two quarters into the slot and grabbed a copy.

The safety features on the Kraken ride had malfunctioned somehow. A fifteen year old kid from Pittsburgh had been slow getting out of the pool, and another rider flew out of a tube and landed on top of him. Both kids were in serious condition at Stone Valley Memorial Hospital, the ride was shut down, and some of the ride's attendants were on unpaid leave now pending an investigation. Daniel looked at the time when the accident had happened, and calculated that it was only a minute or so after they had left their picnic table nearby. He remembered what Lilith had said about 'blood on both sides,' and shivered in spite of the heat.

Cindy scowled at him when he walked into the fudge shop. "Heather told me a bit about yesterday," she said. "She sounded as if she was on drugs or something. What on earth did you do to her?"

Daniel didn't feel much like defending himself at the time, and said nothing more than a curt, "It wasn't my fault." During their lunch break, though, he did his best to fill her in on his version of the strange events of the previous day. When he got to the part about the brownie, she stood up and stormed inside, calling back at him that she wasn't going to sit there just to have her intelligence insulted. Daniel moodily shredded half the sandwich he'd packed and dropped the fragments around his feet,

and the group of pigeons who had recently claimed this stretch of sidewalk as their territory swooped over to devour them.

A few days later, Mrs. Vanderski, the assistant manager, beckoned him to her side by one of the big mixing vats. "Kate said it was time for me to show you how to make some candy," she said, "so I thought we'd start you out on something interesting."

"She's stopped worrying that I'm going to keel over into the vat, then?" asked Daniel uncertainly, wrapping a wide green apron around himself. In fact he'd found himself dropping into brief catnaps more frequently over the previous week, and it was starting to worry him. The most frightening episode had been the time he fell into a dream wherein he discovered that the fudge shop was the skull of some gigantic creature. It was filled with enormous bees, making honey that dripped out of the mouth and wept from the empty eye sockets.

Mrs. Vanderski gave a short, barking laugh. "Well, if you do, you won't be the first student I've anesthetized with one of my lectures. Though I would have hoped that making candy might be a bit more interesting than the binomial theorem."

Daniel grinned. He liked Mrs. Vanderski, or 'The Prince of Derskness' as Cindy said all her high school math classes called her. After she arrived at two, Kate would usually disappear into her tiny office up the stairs in the back to do the next day's ordering, and things would loosen up a bit in the shop. Kate had been growing increasingly short-tempered recently, which Cindy

told Daniel worriedly was quite unlike her. Mrs. Vanderski, on the other hand, was a lot less strict about things like breaks. In fact, she herself tended to nip out to the alley behind the shop for a few minutes every hour to pay homage to the nicotine god.

"You may have heard people say that cooking is an art form," Mrs. Vanderski said, measuring sugar and vinegar into the pot as she spoke. "And maybe it is; if you just throw ingredients together as the spirit moves you. Cook your pot roast a few minutes extra or leave out a spice, and it'll still probably be edible. Whereas baking and candymaking, on the other hand, are exact sciences. If you cook the fudge just a minute past the hardball stage, it'll turn into cement and you'll have to start all over. Five degrees too low and it'll never set up. If you want to know the real secret of making desserts, boy, it's all chemistry. Like this one, for example."

She upended a cup of baking soda into the mixture, and the yellow liquid began to hiss and expand like a volcano from a grade-school science project, yellow foam rushing upward toward the top of the pot. "Opposites reacting with each other. Acid and base, positive and negative."

"'Without contraries there is no progression,'" said Daniel, impressed. "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. I studied that for my poetry exam. I wonder if Blake liked candy?"

Mrs. Vanderski blinked at him. "I have no idea. Come on, help me get it out before it sticks to the sides. When it's dry we'll cut it up in chunks and dip it in chocolate. Crunchy."

"What's it called?" asked Daniel as he helped her scrape the rapidly hardening yellow substance out of the kettle.

"Oh, it has lots of different names -- angel food, honeycomb. Where I grew up, we used to call it Fairy Food."

Daniel started, and Cindy, who was weighing out a half pound of chocolate pecan fudge for a customer right behind him, snorted derisively.

*I went to the crossroad momma,
I looked east and west.
I went to the crossroad baby,
I looked east and west.
Lord, I didn't have no sweet woman
Well babe, in my distress.*

One night Daniel came home at ten thirty carrying a basket of newly-cleaned laundry, and found Ken stretched out on the floor in front of the television set, headphones over his ears, fast asleep. Once again the TV screen was filled with static. Daniel set his basket down on the sofa and stared into the electronic snow for a few minutes. The longer he looked, the more sure he became that there really was a figure buried beneath the chaos, phantom eyes floating over a cloudy phantom jaw.

Suddenly Ken jerked awake. He glanced at Daniel, then quickly grabbed the remote and shut off the TV.

"We've got to get more channels on this thing," he said defensively.

Daniel shrugged. "You're the only one of us who ever seems to have enough time to watch it," he said. He glanced down the hallway. "Sondra still at rehearsal?"

"Coming down to the final week," said Ken. "The dress rehearsal is going to be this Thursday. She's invited both of us to come and watch."

"Cool. I'm looking forward to it." Daniel hesitated, then moved his basket onto the floor and sat down on the sofa. "Ken, would you think I was crazy if I said I wanted to talk about some dreams I've been having for the last few nights?"

Ken instantly sat up and leaned forward. "As if I'm the one to accuse anyone else of being crazy. I've developed a great deal of respect for your dreams, Danny boy, ever since one of them practically killed me. I'd just as soon try to figure out how to keep the next one from finishing the job."

"Hunh?" said Daniel, taken aback. "I didn't think you blamed me for what happened."

"Blame you, no. But you were responsible -- Heather and I didn't go anywhere until you touched the water. That doesn't matter, though. Go ahead and tell me about your dream. Am I right in guessing that this has a bit more to it than showing up in class in your underwear?"

"Well..." Daniel hesitated, staring at his hands. "It starts off in a forest. That part isn't new. I mean, it's a forest I've dreamed about before. And there's this little creature - bigger than the brownie, almost knee-height, maybe, with a big head and great big ears - there's this creature sitting up in one of the trees and beckoning to me. She always starts off by telling me something like 'Now don't forget it all this time,' and then she begins talking about something really important, but it's always all gone by the time I wake up."

"You can't remember any of it?" asked Ken sharply. "Not even scraps?"

"Oh, maybe a bit more each time. Something about borders and boundaries and stones, I think. Do you have any ideas what it might mean?"

Ken gave an abrupt laugh. "I'm no Sigmund Freud, but I happen to know from experience what a shrink would say nowadays. He'd say, 'What do you think it means?'" His smile faded just as abruptly. "So what do you think it means, Danny? And don't tell me it's a metaphor for your mother not paying you enough attention."

Daniel swallowed. "Yeah, I think you're right. No metaphor. I think the brownie we caught managed to get in touch with this creature - Skeeble, I just remembered she said her name was - and so this Skeeble is trying to help me get my wish, trying to tell me how to break on through to the other side. Or maybe - this is really vague - maybe there was another dream

before the brownie, someone else telling Skeeble to get in touch with me. Except it's too hard for me to remember what she's told me in my dreams." He looked up defiantly at Ken. "That's what I think. What about you?"

Ken drummed his fingers on his knees and stared off into the distance. Finally he said, "Makes sense to me. So that's all the progress you've made with your wish, eh?"

"Not entirely." Daniel reached into the laundry basket and pulled out the book he'd taken along to read at the laundromat. "I picked a few things up at the library three days ago. This one's called *The Eye and the Hand: Liminality in Northern European Mythology*." He handed it over to Ken. As his roommate leafed through it he added, "Funny thing about that library. I looked up 'Fairies' in the catalogue, and their holdings are huge. More than what our college has got, I'll bet. But when I went back into the stacks to look at what was actually on the shelves, it seemed like practically everything they had was checked out. What do you think about that?"

"I think this is a pretty odd town," Ken replied, tossing the book back into Daniel's lap. "So to save me the trouble of reading this whole thing, what's liminality? I've heard of a subliminal message, would a liminal message be one that came in just above it?"

"As far as I can make out," said Daniel, running his hands across the book's cover, "the word comes from *limen*, which is the Latin word for a 'threshold.' Which originally, you know, would

have been an actual big stone sill under the door of a threshing room, to hold the wheat inside."

"Big rock in the door. Gotcha." Ken nodded. "So subliminal messages come in beneath the doorway, under the radar. Right?"

"Pretty much," Daniel nodded, warming to the subject he'd been thinking about for the last few days. "See, according to this book, the ancients thought that boundaries were the best places to work magic. It was like, the logical part of your brain wants to put everything into categories: light and dark, inside and outside, life and death. So if you wanted to do magic, get to a place where the rules of logic wouldn't work so well, you'd have to go somewhere outside the definitions, betwixt and between. Those are the places where changes can happen. Big changes, I mean - new dynasties, life and death, that sort of thing. On the cusp. Like, there was this Welsh hero with way too many L's in his name who could only be killed if he was put in a sort of super-liminal state. He had to be hit with a special spear while neither indoors nor outside, neither mounted nor on foot, neither on land nor on water."

Ken frowned. "I assume somebody managed to meet the conditions. They always do."

"Of course. His wife asked him to put her mind at ease by giving her a demonstration of how difficult it would be for him to stand in a doorway with one foot in a tub of water and the other on an animal's back. You can guess the rest."

For a moment, Ken seemed to be staring off into the distance. Then he said thoughtfully, "You know, you pulled us into Atlantis when you had one foot on the edge of the pool and one in the water."

Daniel paused. "I hadn't realized that," he said thoughtfully. "Anyway, there's a lot more in the book. Times can be liminal too. That's why evenings are a good time to do magic, between day and night."

"And midnight, too, I suppose" put in Ken, "between one day and the next. With midnight on New Year's Eve being the best time of all.

"Yeah," said Daniel. "If you want to cast a spell you ought to do it between the first and last strokes, so better talk fast. Celestial borders like new moons, full moons, and eclipses are all good too."

"It all makes perfect sense, if you believe any of that stuff works. Which," Ken suddenly caught himself and shook his head, "which I suppose I now do. So what do the hand and the eye have to do with it?"

"Well," said Daniel, "if you really wanted to get in touch with the spirit world, the best way was to have some part of your body over there. The kings had to be in perfect physical shape, because they were tied to the land and if they got wounded, the land would be wounded too. But the wizards often were maimed somehow, just like their gods. You know Odin lost his eye so he could see the future, and Tyr had his hand bitten off by the

Fenris Wolf. Lugh was a Welsh god who lost a hand too. Because, see, when your hand is in the spirit realm, that gives you power."

Ken closed his eyes, took in a deep breath, and let it out slowly. "Sacrifice," he said in a half whisper.

Daniel looked at him quizzically. Finally he said, "So, that's all the progress I've been able to make so far. How's your wish been working out?"

Ken blinked his eyes open and hoisted himself to his feet abruptly. "My wish? Well, you know. It all seems pretty silly in the light of day, doesn't it? Sondra's wish seems to be the one that's working best so far, everything in the kitchen works perfectly." He tilted his head back, stretched out his arms, and yawned a bit too widely. "Better than perfectly, in fact. I unplugged every single electrical appliance in the apartment three days ago, and everything still runs fine. It would have made me think I'd gone nuts, if I didn't know categorically that I'd already gone nuts two weeks ago. We should both get to bed. Dibs on first turn to brush teeth." He staggered slightly as he walked down the hall.

When Daniel heard Ken come out of the bathroom and start back down the hall toward the living room, he paused from putting clothes in his dresser and went to the door of his room to call after his friend, "I just remembered something else. Guess what one of the most liminal places of all is?"

Ken glanced back over his shoulder and shrugged.

Daniel smiled grimly. "I'll give you a hint. It's the place where the whole world comes together in a single point: north, east, west and south. It's on the way to every place, but a part of no place. Suicide's burial ground, first step of a journey, sacred spot to Hecate the Goddess of Magic. Crossroads, Ken. This entire city is out there on the edge of things."

*You can run, you can run,
Tell my friend -- boy Willie Brown.
You can run, you can run,
Tell my friend -- boy Willie Brown.
I got the crossroad blues this morning,
And babe I'm sinkin' down.*

Sitting in the dimness of the Blue Nile, wrapped up in the Blues and the Past, Daniel found himself imitating the words that Jay Fry was singing, sinking down past Memory into Sleep. As the song ended, though, he was interrupted when Sondra touched his arm and smiled. "He's good, isn't he? I've never heard anyone make a guitar wail like that."

"I guess so," said Daniel, struggling to keep his eyes open. "I don't know much about the blues. I've always thought..." He hesitated as his eyes fluttered closed, realizing that he had no idea what he thought about the blues or any other color under the sun. Sondra's hand on his arm seemed to drift away like a

lifeline, and the dreams that had been waiting for him beneath
the surface rose up and seized him.

Chapter 2

*But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man:
A sound magician is a mighty god.*

Dr. Faustus

Christopher Marlowe

In the years before his narcolepsy had been diagnosed, Daniel had always been made to feel guilty whenever his tiredness overwhelmed him. His teachers kept sending notes home that he needed to get more sleep, and his parents kept writing back that he was already spending more time in bed than any other kid they'd ever heard of. If he started to drift off while he was in a public place with his mother, she would grab his arm with a steely grip or nudge him till his ribs were bruised to keep him conscious. Ever since then, the term "falling asleep" had seemed ominous, like a fall from grace or Satan's fall from heaven. Sometimes the journey felt like a literal descent as well- Alice drifting gently through her rabbit hole, or Hercules tossing honey cakes to Cerberus to pass down the long staircase to the Land of the Dead.

On the first step of the stairway, Daniel was still sitting in The Blue Nile. In the dream, though, the great Egyptian river itself passed just above the transparent roof, so that the

patrons of the bar could look up and see the shining water flowing above their heads. Then Daniel looked more closely and saw that it wasn't water in the river above, but the liquid stream of stars that made up the Milky Way. Just above the stage where Jay Fry sat picking out tunes was a cleft in the roof, and the stars spilled through it in a cascade all around him. Some of the stars were as large and bright as incandescent baseballs and others were tiny grains of glowing sand, but they all passed through Jay as if he wasn't there, and bounced and skittered across the floor and over the feet of the people sitting at the tables. A star burned a hole in the floor nearby and he slipped through it, thinking *Farther In, Deeper Down*.

Below the bar was a star-drenched nighttime sky. Daniel made up his mind to fall faster, for there was clearly still a long way to go to whatever destination he was heading towards. Then some of the stars went dark as if they had been brushed aside by a casual wing, and he heard a croaking voice say, "Why is a raving like a writhing disk?"

It was Kim Netherby's raven, and Daniel suddenly realized that it terrified him. "Why does a craven take a running bass?" it croaked, drawing closer.

Somewhere in his dreams there was shelter, he knew. A sanctuary, a haven, a quiet bower in the midst of the dream storm. He leapt on instinct, and landed in the spot he was searching for.

A thin layer of silvery leaves covered the forest floor. Occasionally a leaf would float down, but there never seemed to be any more leaves on the ground below or any fewer decking the branches above.

Coming as she did from a country where women tended to have the reputation of being either beautiful enough to drive a man insane or hideous enough to split rocks, Skeeble (for Daniel remembered her at once as the visitor to his dreams the night Ken caught the brownie, and other nights as well) was remarkable only for her homeliness. Her hair was an untidy tangle the color of midsummer dirt, her nose blobby, and her mouth lopsided. Her most striking features were her long, narrow, majestic ears, which hung down almost to her waist and stretched above the top of her head. If she'd been standing, the top of her head would only have come to Daniel's knees, but her ears were half again as tall as she was. She was not standing as Daniel approached, though; rather, she had slung the tips of her ears over a tree branch and was holding them, swinging back and forth and singing to herself at the top of her lungs.

*"There was a knight, a pleasant sight, who galloped through the trees!
His plume was red. Upon his head it fluttered in the breeze.
He sought to win a lady fair who held him in disdain.
He sought for fame, to earn a name and bring him home again."*

As soon as she saw her visitor, she let go and dropped to the ground. then commenced berating him.

"Done nothing at all, you have not! First comes the frisky kitty making threats about pouncing on poor Skeeble, and then the sneaky brownie starts tugging on Skeeble's ears wanting the same thing. And then the stupid mortal Daysider keeps showing up and forgetting what Skeeble tells him, EVERY SINGLE TIME!"

"I'm sorry!" said Daniel, looking down at the leaves covering the ground. "I try to remember, really I do. The wall into waking is too strong - I always drop everything on the way back through." He looked up again. "I do work at it, though. I bring back a few more pieces every time."

"RrrrAUgh!!" Skeeble growled, shaking her fist at him. "Why is it that you idiot Daysiders are so bewitless about keeping hold of your dreamings, eh?"

"I...I'm not sure," said Daniel, taken aback. "But I don't think that my dreams are quite like everyone else's. I mean, most people don't seem to realize when they're dreaming, but I almost always know."

"That's because it's a Border Skimmer you are," said Skeeble, sounding pleased. "Are you for remembering what I was saying about that?"

"Umm, no," said Daniel.

Skeeble sighed. "All right. One more time, then. Most of you Dayside mortals, you're never for dreaming outside of your own heads. You spend all your days running around in little

circles sunwise, and then you're all for turning around and spending your nights running back in those selfsame circles widdershins. But some of you sleepers, now, it's clever enough you are for to be holding your breath all the way down to the very borderlings of our lands. The deepest deeps of your dreams brush up against the topmost tips of our tallest trees, that's the way of it here - and some of our tunnels and trolldens too, for all of that. Now the Great Edict says that you Skimmers can never ride your dreams all the way through to the Land of the Ever-Young, no more than you're allowed to go there in your bodies, no more than we're allowed to slither up through the crannies to Dayside. This here Border Realm is as close as you can come, like a shadow-stretch between the two worlds. Are you for understanding?"

"Not really," Daniel admitted. Skeeble wagged her head from side to side so vigorously that Daniel had to step back to keep from being ear-lashed.

"Mortals!" she wailed. "Right, is it true as I'm thinking that your country has things called windows made of a thing called glass, or is Skeeble getting it all mixed up with somewhen else?"

"Yes, we have glass windows," Daniel replied, bemused.

Skeeble looked pleased again. "Well then, you'll be knowing how, if you're standing in front of a shop window and looking at what's inside, you're all the while for seeing your

own reflection floating all ghosty-like over and through the wares?"

"Sure," said Daniel. "I remember pretending my reflection was a ghost when I was a kid. Waving my hands so they looked like they were passing through the manikins on the other side."

"Aye," said Skeeble. "Now what you Skimmers see here in the Border Realm, understand, it's just like that window. Half what you find here is made from the stuff of your own dreams, and half from what's going on in the Twilight Lands. Your boss might be having the face of the Domino Emperor, maybe perhaps, or your sister wear a crown she got off the head of one of the Seven Who Mourn, or the railway carriage you're riding in turn itself into part of the Dark Queen's Dragon Chariot. Some of your poets and dreamer-types catch wisdom from what they see in this country, and others catch glimpses of things as are like to drive them mad."

"I saw something like that once already," said Daniel, shuddering at the memory of the vast malevolent yellow eye of the Kraken passing by the window in Atlantis. "Tentacles you couldn't even see the ends of..."

"Oh aye, you was telling me the last time you was here about your visit with the water people and the monster and all," Skeeble said. "But them monsters aren't the worst things you can see, nowhen close. Not half as bad as them elf-queens what make every mortal girl when you wake up be looking halfwhere between an ape and a spider. Those'll be messing you up real nicely-

like, I tell you. But it's digressing I am." She stuck a finger in one ear meditatively, rotated it, then pulled it out and inspected the contents. After a bit she nodded and went on, "Oh yes, them tentacles. Now that creature you was seeing, you wasn't just a-peeking in from the Border Realm when you were for seeing that thing. It was finding a way straight on through to the Land of Stories that you'd walked, body and all, and how you figured a way to be a-doing that past the Edict I'm having no way of knowing." She sat down and began tugging her earlobes, seemingly lost in thought. "No explaining it at all, leastways not unless the boundaries have been getting redone while I've been beprisoned. Laws and boundaries and all manner of upset..."

"Prisoned?" interrupted Daniel, surprised. "You mean you're a captive here?"

"Oh, aye." Skeeble scrambled to her feet, looking astonished to notice Daniel was still there. "This here Border Realm, it's got plenty of uses besides just for you Dayside tourist-types, and one of them is for the King and Queen to be sticking in those folks what are being punished for their dastardly crime-types of behaviors."

"Pardon me," said Daniel, trying to hide a smile, "but you don't look like a great criminal to me."

"Ah, but you're not for knowing what Skeeble did." The creature looked utterly miserable. "Betrayed a great trust, Skeeble did, and that's all for the reason why it's getting me out of here that you'll need to do. Not the way you came, no,

Skeeble can't get past the lip of your dreaming into the Dayside world. No, it's up from the Twilight Kingdom that you'll need to be finding a passage, and that with a right good speediness, too. Now the first step is for you to be finding a portal open somewhen, Skeeble thought they was all shut tight but the cat and the brownie seem to be thinking it's no troubles you'll be having. Find one, and then..."

"Wait a minute," said Daniel. "OK, so maybe you're being held prisoner, but maybe you deserved your sentence. Maybe if I let you out I'll discover you're actually an ogre in disguise, looking to make me into a snack. And even if you aren't, if I go to all this trouble like you're asking me to, shouldn't there be something in it for me?"

Skeeble took a step backwards and threw her hands up in the air, but before he could say anything, Daniel caught a white shape moving toward them out of the corner of his eye. He swung to face it, and found himself staring directly at the girl from his dreams. She wasn't walking off in the distance now -- with snowdrops and crocuses under her feet, she was standing right in front of him amidst the silent twilight trees.

She was tall and slender, with long, dark, perfectly straight hair hanging unevenly halfway down her back. It was impossible to tell what age she was, except that her face suggested serenity and confidence, but not the wisdom that would come with long years.

Skeeble was staring at her with horror. "Mistress!" she shrieked miserably. "You know it isn't safe-like, you all for being seen like this! Have a care, mistress, have a care!"

"Nonsense, Skeeble," the girl replied regally. "Daniel here has a perfectly good point. Why should he bother sticking his neck under the ax to try and rescue us? You must have forgotten what it means to be Seelie, asking him to give us something for nothing like that." Skeeble sunk her head down so that her ears almost touched the ground, and the girl patted her head affectionately. "Besides, you've made this exact same argument to him before, and obviously it hasn't made an impression yet, so he must need a bit more persuading."

She turned to face the visitor. "Daniel, my guardian here hasn't been entirely honest, which is an unfortunately common trait among the fair folk. They figure anyone who wants the truth badly enough should be willing to pay extra. We aren't imprisoned here in the Border Realm, we're in hiding. Some of the things we're hiding from make that kraken you saw look like a jellyfish. But that cat messenger that chased Skeeble into your dream found us here, and I wouldn't be surprised if others followed him as well. We talked it over, and we think I'd be safest on the Dayside. Besides, I've always wanted to see the world you people dream about - cars and cliffs and underwear and final exams and all those other exciting things. Will you help us find a path that will take us there?"

Skeeble was shaking her head back and forth, muttering under her breath "Wellaway, mistress, ah, wellaway." Daniel tried to say something, but found that his voice was completely gone, so he just nodded.

"We haven't much time," said the girl, running her hand through her long shimmering hair. When she pulled it away there was a long dark strand between her fingers. "I've been working on your difficulty, Daniel. Give me your hand."

Daniel held out his left hand to her, and she quickly wrapped the hair several times around the base of his little finger and pulled it tight in a knot. "For pulling you back to us," she said softly. "A gift for a gift. I'm no fay for giving gifts of power, but I think this may help you with the problem that Skeeble was complaining about earlier."

Then she looked up at him and smiled. "Good luck. That balcony he was talking about works both ways, you know. There isn't much for us to do here besides watching peoples' dreams go drifting by like clouds. You have nice dreams, Daniel."

Then, suddenly, the sound of raised voices pierced through the twilight leaves, and Daniel felt insistent ropes of wakefulness start to snake through the trees all around him and shatter the forest into scraps. He reached his hand out to the girl desperately, trying to grab hold of her and take her along with him, or perhaps just to keep her as an anchor to stay safely beneath the cool safe covers of sleep, but she just smiled ruefully, waved, and evaporated with all the rest.

Jay Fry had apparently finished his set and left the stage, for the stool was empty, the spotlight turned off. The regular barroom murmur of the Blue Nile's patrons, which had diminished only slightly during the set, had returned once again to its regular level. It was Sondra's voice that had pulled him back into the waking world.

"I can't believe it's really you I'm talking to, Ken!" she was saying stridently. "You were always so logical, but now you're getting all woo-woo spooky on us!"

"I am most certainly not getting 'woo-woo spooky,' whatever that's supposed to mean," replied Ken, his arms folded obstinately across his chest. "And just because my paradigm has shifted doesn't mean I've gone completely round the bend, thank you very much. I've given this a great deal of thought, and I believe I've been consistent from start to finish. Hey Dan, sorry we woke you up."

"What's going on?" asked Daniel blurrily. He groped around the table until he found his glass of lemonade and took three big swallows to clear his head. "What are you two arguing about this time?"

Sondra and Ken looked at one another uncertainly, suddenly unwilling to talk. Finally Ken broke the silence. "Sondra said she's been worried about you," he said defensively. "She thinks ... well, she thinks your sleeping problem is getting worse. Not only that, she thinks you're going overboard with all this

reading you've been doing on, umm, Passageways. She thinks that you ought to keep your attention more on the here and now, instead of trying to wander off even further into the twilight. And then..."

"Then Ken said that there was nothing wrong with you seeking out your own path," Sondra interrupted. "He said that all three of us would be needing to find new paths this summer, whatever *that's* supposed to mean. And then *I* said that kind of talk didn't sound much like the Ken we were all used to, who never had two seconds to spare for anything that wasn't a provable scientific fact, and that maybe *he* should start paying more attention to the here and now as well."

Daniel blinked several times. "Let me get this straight," he said slowly. "You're saying that Ken here - our own roommate Ken the skeptic - this very Ken sitting here beside me argued that I should spend more time studying up on the supernatural? Whereupon you, Sondra -- the one who doesn't care whether the refrigerator runs by electricity or by Jack Frost waving his magic wand, as long as it keeps our food cold - you were saying that he and I need to be more logical?" He shook his head. "And here I thought I'd taken a trip through the looking glass before. Talk about your crossroads."

"What you two don't seem to understand is that the rules have all changed now," Ken said, sounding exasperated. "Look, all three of us were wide awake eighteen nights ago, and we all

saw something that doesn't belong anywhere in the world of Newton and Einstein, didn't we? Are we all agreed on that?"

Daniel and Sondra shifted their eyes back and forth between one another and Ken, and finally both nodded reluctantly.

"Good. So there's no point in going on trying to pretend that everything's just the same as it was before, because it isn't. We've all got to be tough enough to accept that." Ken picked up his glass, noticed that it was empty, and set it back down regretfully. Then he burst out, "Your problem, Sonny, is that you're like most lay people in the world, you simply don't have a clue what Science is all about. Everybody assumes it's this great big body of knowledge somewhere, like an enormous library in the sky. You can't imagine how crazy it makes me when I hear idiots try to justify some cockamamie theory with no supporting evidence by saying idiot stuff like 'Hey, Science doesn't know everything.' Of course science doesn't know anything! It's a method, it's not a set of information. Observe, theorize, test, repeat." He was getting fairly loud by this time, and a blowdried blonde at a nearby table turned and stared at him, but he went on obliviously. "That's why science can't really be contradicted. If I could produce concrete evidence tomorrow irrefutably disproving every theory from Newton on down to the present, that still wouldn't disprove science. You'd just have to pick up your evidence and start your looking for a new theory to fit the new universe. A scientist in Hyperboria or Oz could still use the same method -- figure out

that world's rules, then figure out how to apply them. He'd just go by a different name, that's all. He'd call himself a wizard!"

He slapped his hand down on the table, then stopped, looking embarrassed. He was flushed and breathing heavily, and Daniel thought that he might have said more than he had intended to. He half rose from his bench, muttering something about going to get a round of refills, but Sondra said "Sit down, Ken," and he sat down meekly and didn't return her gaze.

Daniel leaned forward and stared his roommate in the eye. For the first time he could remember in the two years they'd known each other, Ken was the first to look away. Somehow that clinched the suspicions that Daniel had been developing.

"Ken," he said quietly, "your wish from the brownie was to learn how to do magic, wasn't it?"

Ken bowed his head, then looked up again defiantly. "So what if it was? You've seen what's going on in this town. We need to fight fire with fire, don't we?" His voice was starting to rise again. "You guys *still* don't get it. I couldn't stand not knowing what the rules were!"

Sondra leaned forward and took Ken's hand. "It's all right," she said comfortingly. "We weren't accusing you of anything. Were we, Dan?"

"Nah," said Daniel. "It's pretty cool, actually. So, umm, if you don't mind my asking - how've the lessons been going? Did you get a book of spells, or what?"

Ken was starting to look uncomfortable again. "I got a familiar, if you must know. Now about those refills..."

"What kind of familiar?" asked Sondra. "I haven't seen any new animals anywhere around the apartment, have you, Dan?"

Ken took a deep breath. "My familiar is a snowman," he said steadily. "Danny knows what I mean."

It took Daniel a second to get it. "A face in the television set," he said once he'd worked it out. "In the static. And a voice underneath the white noise, too?" Ken nodded heavily. "So you finally started seeing the pattern, did you?"

Ken bit his lip. "It got clearer and clearer the more I stared at it," he said softly. "At first the voice beneath the hiss was just a whisper, but now I can hear it as clear as a radio broadcast. Not with my ears, exactly, but inside my mind I can hear every word."

Daniel and Sondra exchanged concerned glances. Daniel turned back to his roommate and said hesitantly, "Umm, Ken? Has it occurred to you that, well, this voice you say you're hearing, maybe it's possible that..."

"That I'm going around the bend?" Ken broke in. "Lost my marbles, flipped my lid, fell off my rocker, joined the tinfoil-hat channeling brigade? Believe me, not a day goes by when I don't wonder if I've started pulling the wool over my own eyes like the idiots I used to make fun of. I wouldn't be surprised if they sent me this familiar just to get back at me for all the

time I spent ridiculing nutcases like the one I'm turning into." He stared at Daniel then, his eyes filed with agony. "Remember how I asked you before to get me some help if I started sounding too crazy? I'm not sure if I'm there yet, Danny, but sometimes..."

There was a disturbance by the door, and Daniel glanced back over his shoulder. Douglas Chee was striding to the center of the room, walking stick over his shoulder, flanked by two of his leather-clad goons.

"Alhandro!" Chee called out loudly in his most taunting voice. "Old man! Ricky Ricardo, Don Quixote, whatever the hell your name is, come out, come out wherever you are. Time's up! We been real patient with you so far, but our patience is hereby at an end." He paused and looked around the room for a few seconds, then nodded to his right-hand underling. "OK, we waited long enough. Leo, shut the place down."

The gang member he addressed was the one who had carried in the boom box on the Wild Hunt's previous visit, a hulking linebacker type with wavy long blond hair and a mullet. He gave a feral grin, surveyed the bar disdainfully, then stepped up onto the tiny stage where Jay Fry had played earlier and grabbed the microphone from its stand.

"Now hear this, bar patrons," he growled menacingly into the mike. "Now hear this." He turned back and grinned at his two friends, who were leaning on the wall next to the stage. "Hey, I always wanted to say that." Then he addressed the microphone again. "I'm sorry to say that this here bar the Blue

Nile is officially closed as of right now, by orders of the Wild Hunt. It'll be opening in a few days under new management, but in the meanwhile I'd suggest that you all just finish your drinks as quickly as you can and UKK UKK UKK."

His entire body stiffened suddenly as if he'd been hit in the head with a brick, and his fingers gripped the microphone with white-knuckled fierceness. The lights flickered, and the room smelled of ozone and burnt leather.

In a flash Master Chee stretched out in a long, graceful fencer's lunge with his walking stick, hooked its staghorn handle around the microphone cord where it was plugged into the wall, and yanked it out with a mighty heave. There was a loud *bang* that could have been mistaken for a gunshot, sparks flew out of the socket, and half the lights in the building went out. At the sound Chee jumped backward a step, tripped over the inflatable sarcophagus, and banged his head against one of the supports for the long shelf above it. The support snapped, and with a long, grinding, scraping sound the ebony statue of Anubis slid down the shelf's length to plummet to the ground, missing Chee's head by a hand span.

Everyone in the bar was dead silent. Leo, still standing dazedly on the stage, teetered forward slowly and crashed head-first onto a table occupied by three girls wearing House of Wax Guide t-shirts. Somebody screamed. Master Chee was bent forward under the ruined shelf, leaning heavily on his stick and breathing deep, shuddering breaths. Just then Mr. Santiago

appeared from the back of the bar, with Jay Fry behind him. The owner looked uncomprehendingly at the scene, and Chee slowly pulled himself back up to his full height. He raised his stick and pointed it directly at Mr. Santiago's mustache.

"We'll be back, Ramirez! And you sure as hell had better be gone before we get here, because next time we won't go so easy on you!" He jerked his head at his other henchman, and together they hoisted the ashen-faced Leo to his feet and half-carried, half-dragged him out the door.

For a long time nothing moved in the bar except for the broken shelf, swinging back and forth on its remaining support. Then came the scraping of chairs, as several of the bar's patrons hurriedly made for the exit.

Jay Fry showed up beside their table a moment later. "Hiya, fellas," he said breezily, as if nothing had happened, "Glad all three've ya could make it. How'd you like my set?"

"Great!" said Daniel enthusiastically, unwilling to admit that he'd slept through most of it. Sondra, clearly very agitated, said "Oh, Mr. Fry! That boy got electrocuted! What if it had been you?"

"Well, I don't know," replied Jay thoughtfully, looking from one face to another. "Doesn't seem right likely, all things considered. Y'all stayin' for my second set?" Just then Mr. Santiago called him over, and he left waving a cheerful "Be seein' ya!" to the table.

Slowly, Daniel and Sondra turned around to look at Ken. He was in the process of putting a small black object into his pocket. As they turned to him he began inspecting his nails intently, and said to no one in particular, "Lord, I wasn't sure whether or not that was going to work." Then he looked back up at his friends; there was a lopsided grin on his face, but his eyes were haunted. "I *think* I was responsible for that. And I'm not crazy if I get results, right? Right?"

Later that night, Daniel intercepted Sondra in the hallway outside his doorway between the bathroom and her bedroom.

"So what do you think was going on there?" he asked her uncertainly. "I was worried about him, but maybe there actually is something in this wizard business?"

Sondra frowned, tiny wrinkles appearing above and between her delicate orange eyebrows. "If there really is something in this 'wizard business' then I'm more worried than ever," she said. "Dan, what is it that scientists and wizards have in common besides wanting to figure out the rules?"

Daniel pondered. "I have no idea what you're getting at," he said finally. "Bad reps? Hunchbacked assistants? Funky hairstyles?"

Sondra shook her head. "Power, Dan," she said firmly. "They don't just want to understand the universe, they want to control it. And if there's one thing I know for sure, it's that the pursuit of power is dangerous. Always always always."

Daniel leaned his back against his door frame. "Actually, I think I'd have to go along with Ken on that one, Sondra. Power might be dangerous, but it's a lot more dangerous when the bad guys have it and we don't."

Sondra blew up at her bangs. "Hmph. Try to explain anything to a man. Good night, Dan." Then she leaned her head closer to his hand on the doorframe. "Say, what are you trying to remember?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Daniel.

She pointed at his hand. "You've got a string tied around your little finger. So what was it that you wanted to remind yourself not to forget?"

Daniel stared at his finger blankly. Looking closer, he saw that it wasn't actually something tied to the finger, but rather a faint black circle that seemed to be drawn around its base. He shrugged. "I have no idea."

"Didn't do much good then, did it?" Sondra replied sadly. "I swear, between the two of you guys, by the end of this summer I'm going to have pink hairs like my grandmother's. Red and gray make pink, you know. Well, good night again."

After her door shut, Daniel lingered in the hallway, still staring at the faint black line. He racked his brain, but couldn't think of anywhere he might have received such a mark. Then he brought up the forefinger of his other hand to touch it.

As soon as the two fingers made contact, he felt as if a floodgate in his mind had opened. Image after image bubbled up

into his consciousness - leaves, forests, long pointed ears, a girl in a white dress, a cat, a wolf, a swan.

He rubbed his hand along the doorframe to convince himself that he was really awake, then went into the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. The cold streams trickling down his neck finally convinced him that he hadn't drifted off without realizing it.

For the first time in his life, wide awake as he stood, Daniel Carver could remember all of his dreams. As his memory stretched backwards from yesterday's forest to a childhood swan-back ride past fairy tales and nightmare spiders, his clenched hand remembered the shape of a pebble it had once held, and he recalled for the first time what lost thing he had been seeking all his life.

Chapter 3

Well now way back in the Bible

Temptations always come along.

There's always somebody tempting somebody into

Doing something they know is wrong.

"Pink Cadillac"

Bruce Springsteen

Lying in bed that night and the nights that followed, Daniel could think of a million questions to ask Skeeble and the girl, but as usual the harder he pursued sleep the more it eluded him. Then when he finally could doze, he could never find any signposts that would lead him back to the silver forest. Instead his dreams were a confused jumble of Master Chee with a stag's antlers growing up from behind his ears, Kate Castellano with stalky plants sprouting in her breasts and shoulders, and Jeremiah Fry handing his guitar for a tune-up over to a flock of pecking ravens.

For three days he saw little of either of his roommates. Sondra always rushed off every night after her shift to the theater for her final rehearsals, and Ken disappeared early every morning and returned late at night after everyone was asleep. They assumed he was still putting time in at Frontier Fotos, but no one had any idea how he spent the rest of his days. The few times when Daniel did come home and found him in the apartment,

he was stretched out on the floor eating a tv dinner, staring at static on the television set, his ears muffled behind headphones. On those occasions Daniel simply tiptoed down the hall to his room.

On Thursday, though, Daniel walked into the door of the apartment at ten after six carrying a long, narrow box, to find Sondra ripping the headphones off of Ken's head.

"Dress rehearsal, remember?" She smiled dangerously at both of them. "We're supposed to bring friends and family to watch so we can get used to the audience reactions. You guys are friends, so I'm counting on you to give me some moral support. Plus, there's a cast party afterwards that you two should come to. I've never seen such a pair of home-barnacles as the pair of you!"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." Daniel handed the box he was carrying to Sondra. "These are for you. We sell them at the store -- one dozen chocolate roses. I know the tradition is to give flowers on opening night, not dress rehearsal, but I thought maybe you could share them with the rest of the cast at the party."

"Why, Daniel, how thoughtful!" Sondra took the long-stemmed flowers from him and buried her nose in them, breathing deeply. Daniel wondered if she might be going to kiss him, but she didn't. "They smell much nicer than real ones. Well, Ken, let's get going. Zahir just called and said he had to run an

errand for somebody, and he's my usual driver, so you're going to need to get us to Stone Valley in your car."

"Look, I'm really sorry, Sonny," said Ken, sitting up slowly and shifting his eyes away from hers. "I want to see your show, really I do, but tonight I've got other commitments. I promise I'll catch it first chance I get, OK? My keys are in that drawer if you two want to borrow my car."

"Who's Zahir?" put in Daniel, hoping to head off a storm, but there was no stopping it and it came on relentlessly.

"So now that you can wiggle your fingers and zap people, you think you're above honoring your commitments to your friends, is that it? What on *earth* here in Crossroads could be more important than my dress rehearsal?" Sondra's eyes blazed like lightning. "Do you realize how hard I've been working on this? Me and everyone else in the cast and crew? Or are mere boring mundane things like entertainment that people have poured their sweat and blood into now beneath your almighty gaze, oh Mister Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz?"

Ken leaned forward and wrapped his arms around his shins, resting his chin on his knees. "All right, if you really must know," he said tightly. "Though I'm sure Dan here will ridicule me once again for convincing myself that I'm Batman and Doctor Strange wrapped up into one. I've been spending most of my free time for the last few days staking out the Blue Nile next door, waiting for Master Chee and his gang to try their little takeover gambit again. I've never been able to tolerate bullies, and he

just rubs me the wrong way, OK? And a little bird told me that something big's going to go down tonight. So like I said, I'm terribly sorry, but I just can't make it."

"Fine!" sniffed Sondra. "Just fine! My play *certainly* isn't as important as saving the world, is it?"

"Hey, I said I'm sorry." Ken took a slender gadget from a stand next to the television and slid it along the sofa. "Here, you can use this if you need to get in touch with me."

"What good is that supposed to be?" scoffed Sondra. "Cell phones don't work any better around Archer's Bluff than they do here."

Ken smiled uncertainly. "It's been modified. I keyed it in to a couple of air elementals that I'd done a favor for, and they're perfectly happy to carry messages for me. It should still work just the same."

"Great," Sondra snorted, shoving the phone into Daniel's pocket. "Let's get going, Dan. I don't want to be late, and we're going to have to figure out how to drive Ken's car since Hirosaka the Stupendous can't be bothered."

Ken had once told Daniel after a few beers that his grandparents, along with thousands of other Japanese-American citizens, had been interned in California as kids during World War II. Thus his parents had been brought up to blend in with the general population as much as possible: they watched nothing but American movies, bought only American products, and whenever

Japan was mentioned, always looked blankly as if the country was some obscure region on the far side of the moon. Ken, during the most rebellious of his high school years, had taken pains to go the exact opposite route, becoming, he told Daniel ruefully, "practically a samurai." His 16th birthday had arrived during the midst of what he called his katana-and-kimono stage, and when his father offered to buy him a car he had insisted on a racy black Mitsubishi Eclipse. Almost everything the trio needed was available within walking distance, though, so most of the time Ken paid an exorbitant fee for it to sit in a tourist parking garage two blocks away from their apartment.

There was an awkward moment while Sondra and Daniel tried to figure out how to follow the instructions that Ken had given them to operate the remote on his keyless entry system, and another one when they both put their hands on the passenger door's handle.

"You've got a license, don't you?" asked Daniel.

"Well sure. Don't you?"

Daniel shook his head, then leaned it to one side, shut his eyes, and made 'Honk Shoo' noises. "Sleepy-time, remember? Well, technically I suppose I do have a license, if you count the fake one Ken gave me. But a real one, no. I was always afraid I'd conk out behind the wheel, so I never took the class." He gave a self-pitying shrug.

Once the chocolate flowers had been safely tucked away into the back and they were both sunk down in the bucket seats, Sondra

chewed a fingernail as she surveyed the bank of controls. "I wish I'd paid more attention to what he was doing the last time he took me out to do my laundry," she muttered, turning the key. "Aw heck, it's a manual."

"Have you ever driven one?" asked Daniel.

"Justin tried to teach me how to drive his. I'm just dandy as long as I never slow down. Well, here goes nothing."

With a shriek of gears they were off. Sondra managed several adequate shifts as they went through town, and soon they were on the road to Archer's Bluff, ten miles away. She glanced over at Daniel sheepishly. "Sorry, Dan, I should have realized you wouldn't be a driver. I just don't like to get behind the wheel very much, that's all."

"Why not?" asked Daniel, trying to keep the conversation going.

Sondra swallowed and grasped the steering wheel stiffly as she turned a corner, fast enough to put a strain on the car's suspension. She said nothing for over a minute. Finally, without glancing at Daniel, she said, "I oughta be able to talk about it, but it's hard, ok? Three years ago. My best friend. A car accident and. She died. We'd had a big fight and, well, she drove off. Sorry, sorry, I should be more over it by now, I guess." She sniffed.

"Whoah, don't apologize," said Daniel. For several seconds he tried to send a message to his hand to lift up and rest comfortably upon her knee, but the hand stubbornly refused his

command, and eventually he gave up. Instead he found a package of Kleenex in the glove compartment and offered her one, saying awkwardly "Just because you had a fight doesn't make it your fault."

"Of course it doesn't," Sondra said in a tone that meant the exact opposite. She took the tissue and blew her nose self-consciously, then gave him a watery smile. "Look, I don't want to get you involved in all my bad stuff just now. Talk to me about something else, OK?"

"OK." He looked out the window to keep from staring at her. "Heard from Justin recently? How's his show..."

"No, I haven't." Sondra cut him off abruptly, and they drove in silence for a while. They were traveling past farmland, with foot-high stalks of corn beginning to show streaks of brown from the summer heat. The sun was starting to dip into a premature sunset, still far above the horizon but slipping behind a low cloudbank that would cover its exit for the rest of the way down.

Finally Daniel tried again. "Listen, I haven't had a chance yet to hear what you think about all this weird stuff that's been happening. Umm, you know, the brownie, and Ken wanting to be a vigilante wizard and all."

"Oh. Sure." Sondra blew past a 4-way stop sign with no cars at any of the other three crossroads without taking her foot off the gas pedal. "Hey, this isn't so hard. Let's see, the brownie." She stuck out her lip and blew her bangs up while she

was thinking. "I get the idea that, for you and Ken, accepting it was absolutely a huge deal, am I right? All that 'Woe is me, I must shift my paradigm' stuff that he was doing. And you, well Dan, you've got to admit that you've been acting funny ever since then too. Whereas I, on the other hand, I've believed passionately in fairies ever since I was a kid. Before my folks split up my Dad made a little flower garden in front of our house, and he always told me there were fairies living there. And, well, I guess I believed him. I can't remember ever stopping believing in them, to tell the truth. So when I saw the brownie, the first thing I remember thinking was, 'What took you so long?'"

Daniel nodded. The top slice of the sun was almost gone behind the clouds by now.

"As for the refrigerator," Sondra went on, "I remember you said I didn't care how it worked as long as it made the food cold, and that's true. I mean, I don't think I ever quite understood how a refrigerator was supposed to work in the first place. Something about how the freon was supposed to get colder when it expanded, right? Well, that never made any sense to me. Cakes expand when they get hotter, so why should it work the other way around for freon?"

Daniel opened his mouth to explain, but she waved her hand to shush him. "Oh, I know there's more to it than that, and I got good grades in my science classes because I've got a good memory. The point is, brownies and wizards and trips to Atlantis

don't seem all that much more unlikely than a box that makes things inside it turn cold, if you stop and think about it."

They came to a stoplight, and this time Sondra had to stop for another car. She checked her watch nervously. "Geez, I hope I didn't cut this too close. 'Course, luckily Margarete isn't even in the first act, so I've got a bit of extra time to get made up." The car jerked again as she put it into gear. "So it sounds like Ken might be getting to be a wizard, and everything's been running great in the apartment. How's your wish coming?"

"Oh, maybe making some progress. It's hard to tell." Daniel found that he didn't want to tell Sondra about his newly remembered dreams just yet. Time to change the subject. "Listen, what I'd really like to find out about is what this play of yours is going to be like. Who's this Zahir guy?"

"Oh, just a guy in the cast who's been giving me rides to rehearsals. There's nothing going on that Justin doesn't already know about, so no need to blow it out of proportion."

"What part does he play?" asked Daniel.

"Oh, you know, the main guy. The one who seems to have more lines even than Chris who plays Faustus. Mephisto, doncha know."

"Mephisto? I thought it was Mephistopheles."

"The guy who adapted the play for us thought it would go over better with a younger audience if some of the characters' names sounded like they could be in comic books," said Sondra. "But he's a cool guy. You'll like him."

They passed a sign welcoming them to Archer's Bluff, pop. 3,194. "I read Marlowe's version for Lit last fall," Daniel said. "What else is changed?"

"Well, my character, mostly." Sondra slowed down as she began a series of turns through a sleepy-looking hillside town. "See, Faust falls in love with me and tries to seduce me, but he's getting nowhere because I'm a goody two-shoes. So Mephisto keeps talking him into selling more and more of his soul so he can get enough magic to win me over, kind of like a drug dealer leading him down the garden path, and..."

"Wait a minute," said Daniel as the car screeched to a sudden stop to let some kids retrieve a baseball that had rolled into the road. "You're saying in this version he doesn't just make out a contract for his soul in the first act?"

"Nah," said Sondra. "Reverend Schwarzwold, he's the producer, he says nowadays most people do it a piece at a time. So Faust uses his magic to solve all my family's problems in a big special effects scene, and I finally agree to sleep with him." They passed the dinner theater, its tiny parking lot full, and pulled into a parking space in the church lot next door, jerking forward somewhat more quickly than the car's designers might have preferred. Sondra unbuckled her seat belt and got out, with barely a break in her synopsis as she and Daniel threaded through parked cars. "So then in the last act I'm pregnant and asking him what he's going to do about it, and he suddenly realizes that he doesn't love me any more like he used

to, it was all just lust at the end, because see he's lost his soul now and he hasn't got anything left to love *with*. And then I try to convince him that it's not too late to save his soul, to get it back from the demons. Then Mephisto tries to tempt *me* into selling my soul, but I've already got everything I want and there isn't anything he can tempt me with. I wish that was true in real life, actually. Anyway, you'll see how it all ends up."

As Daniel opened the side door for her she glanced for the twentieth time at her watch, looking a bit relieved. "OK, by breaking all kinds of speed limits I've still got a few minutes before I absolutely have to start changing. Let me take you out front and introduce you to the producer, and he can answer any other questions you've got."

The long hall was set with tables and chairs with a smattering of audience seated at them. Sondra led Daniel to a table at the opposite end from the stage, where a short, thickly-built man with a crew cut and a clerical collar was eating a fast-food hamburger with one hand and scribbling on a legal pad with the other.

"Reverend Schwarzwold? I'd like you to meet my friend Daniel Carver. Dan, this is Reverend Schwarzwold from the Archer's Bluff United Church next door. He wrote most of this play and helped put the whole production together. You two should talk, and I'd love to chat, but I've gotta change. See you guys!" She rushed back to the other end of the hall, jumped

up onto the stage, and disappeared into the wings. Daniel shook the minister's hand and sat down uncertainly.

"Look, I don't want to interrupt or anything," he said. "If you're the director and the writer too, you must be pretty busy."

The man shook his head and wiped his mouth with a napkin. "Nah, I'm the producer, not the director." His low rumbling voice sounded more like a marine's than a minister's. "I just sign the checks. The director's the frantic one right now. I just stick around at this point in case there are any fires needing to be put out." He looked Daniel up and down. "So you're Daniel," he said. "Sondra's told me about you."

"Really?" said Daniel out loud, but what he was thinking was that this meeting had all the markings of being a set-up, for what purpose he couldn't imagine. Maybe Sondra thought he needed pastoral counseling? He still wasn't in the mood to start talking about himself, though, so he decided to steer the conversation to safer topics. "If you don't mind my asking, sir, how'd a minister like you end up producing a musical?"

"Hmhf." The minister grabbed a box of French fries and offered it to Daniel, who suddenly realized that he was hungry and grabbed a few. Reverend Schwarzwold took one as well and gestured with it as he spoke. "Ministry, Dan. I'm tired of just preaching to the converted, up there in my pulpit. This is my way of going out and trying to grab a few of those lost sheep we're supposed to be looking after. Folks come from fifty miles

away to see our plays. Tourists, even. Folks who'd normally never set foot inside a church." He glanced significantly at Daniel and popped the fry into his mouth.

"But I'm not..." Daniel started to say, then decided it was stupid to act defensive around this man he barely knew. "I mean, I'm not sure how plays can be a ministry."

"Oh, there are lots of plays with themes that reinforce the Word. Sondra must have told you how she played Potiphar's wife in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* last year. And the year before that was *Godspell*. But this is the one I'm hoping will make the biggest impact around here. It flopped pretty badly in New York, but I made a few modifications to the book. Folks in these parts need to see this play." Abruptly his voice shifted into resonating pulpit tones. "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world."

"You've got a big problem with, umm, people selling their souls to the devil around here?" asked Daniel, trying to be light-hearted and then immediately regretting it.

Reverend Schwarzwold frowned, his thick eyebrows bunching up on his ruddy forehead. "You'd be surprised."

They were interrupted by two new arrivals. A short woman wearing a yellow dress and glasses, carrying a clipboard, came hurriedly out of a door beside the stage and beckoned to the minister. Daniel guessed she must be the director. "We're

almost ready to start," she called out. "Did you still want to say a few words to the cast?"

"Of course, of course." The minister pulled himself to his feet. "If you'll excuse me, Dan?"

Daniel nodded, his attention focused on the other newcomer who had just come in from the door at the back of the hall and was in the process of ponderously settling herself down at the next table over. She seemed to be in her late fifties or early sixties, with mahogany skin pitted like old leather left out in the sun. The impression Daniel had was of someone carved out of a set of dark brown nuts, all piled on top of one another like a squat brown snowman: a big-breasted round body, then a wide neck supporting a round apple-cheeked face, and silver-threaded black hair pulled back into a tight round bun behind her. She'd picked up a program from beside the door, and now she was eyeing it intently.

There were quite a few other occupied tables around the hall - other friends and relatives of the actors, Daniel supposed. After a few more minutes of waiting, Reverend Schwarzwold appeared on the stage.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "welcome to the dress rehearsal of *Faust*! All these actors and musicians and folks backstage have worked hard for the past month to make this happen, so I hope you'll give them lots of support. You came to see a play, not to hear me talk, so I give you, *Faust*!" Then he hopped down off the stage and strode back through the darkness to

sit down next to Daniel again. In the shadows to one side of the stage, figures at a piano, an electric guitar and a drumset began a sketchy overture, then launched into the chords of an opening number. "I'll be interested in hearing what you think after the show," he whispered as the house lights dimmed and the stage lights came up.

The curtain opened to reveal a modern doctor's office, the rear wall covered with diplomas and certificates. Upstage beside a desk stood a high-backed chair with its occupant invisible to the audience. After a moment, it swung around to reveal a middle-aged man. He was wearing a white outfit, which as he stood was shown to be halfway between a doctor's coat and a magician's robe. As the band receded in volume, he began to sing in a strong tenor voice:

I've seen the world at forty-three..

It doesn't mean that much to me.

I've gotten all I need to earn,

But what I want is more to learn.

I've a Nobel Prize fixing broken hearts;

My "Healthy Living" books top the charts.

The press call me when they need a quote,

And senators ask me how to vote.

I've got what the whole world's searching for

But it makes no difference how high I soar

I may be rich, but I still feel poor

It's not helping

I'm still empty

I want moooooooooore.....

Here the music began to swell up into long, sweeping phrases as the doctor came out from behind his desk and stood at the lip of the stage, raising his arms to the spotlights while his voice filled the hall.

Spirits of the air, come hear my voice

Help me find my way! Help me to make a different choice.

Spirits of the air, hear my plea

I'm a prisoner of this world; set me free.

The play soon settled into Marlowe's familiar outline. Doctor Faust was the envy of all the world for both his wisdom and his kindness, but science, philosophy, and religion all seemed barren to him, and a deep hunger lurked in his soul that could only be filled by the supernatural. All the standardized props of witchcraft made their appearance - the ancient book, the inscribed circle, the incantations, the dagger, and the three drops of blood.

The surprise came when Mephisto arrived in a burst of smoke-machine fog. As far as Daniel could tell, there didn't

seem to be anything particularly satanic about his costume, for he was dressed in nothing but green, from cap to cape to leotard to boots. He was green as a spring morning, a green thought in a green shade, green as a lime-tree bower, green as grass and greener than regrets. Daniel heard a small gasp from the next table.

Something like lines he remembered studying for his literature final rose to the surface of his consciousness,

All in green my love went riding,

My heart fell dead before.

and as the poetry rose, his consciousness sank. For several minutes, by concentrating all his will power, he was able to struggle against sleep's relentless pull. On stage he was dimly aware of Sondra making her first entrance behind a gauzy curtain wherein Mephisto was revealing to Faustus the untold delights that magic would bring him. Daniel could feel her eyes scanning the audience, and as they brushed across him he lost his grip on wakefulness entirely and found himself lying suddenly spread-eagled on the fallen leaves of Skeeble's twilight woods.

In everyone's heart there is a sacred space, a sanctum sanctorum whose existence they admit to few and whose key they offer to even fewer. Daniel's place, he had realized the first time he tried to paint it, was Lily's forest glade, suffused with peaceful timelessness, a constant sense of mystery unrevealed,

and the unmistakable assurance of Magic that breathed from each silver tree and every gently falling leaf.

This time, though, the spreading trees of Daniel's dreams were on fire.

Chapter 4

*Whatever flames upon the night
Man's own resinous heart has fed.*

"Two Songs from a Play"

W. B. Yeats

As he staggered to his feet befuddled and terrified, Daniel saw that the trees seemed taller than before, their tops ablaze against a twilight sky now filled with billows of wind-blown smoke. The steady stars that Daniel remembered from his last visit were gone, and it seemed to him for a moment as if they were not simply obscured, but had fled the scene in terror.

Looking around, Daniel saw that he was standing on a ridge of bare rock that lay just outside the edge of the burning woods. From behind him came a howling wind that sent showers of sparks upward and caused the forest to moan and quiver and flare as if it was being lashed with a whip. Then, with a crash, one of the dark blazing trees hurtled to the ground, leaving behind it a gaping chasm where its roots had been while it plummeted headlong into the trees surrounding it. Another tree fell at an angle to it, then another, while flames spread through the underbrush and bushes exploded with the force of their conflagration. From another slope above the forest on Daniel's right, a wall of rock broke apart with a roar, sending an avalanche of gigantic

boulders rolling and bounding down the hillside into the midst of the inferno.

Daniel thought of Skeeble and the black-haired girl he had met on his last visit to this wood, and realized that he had forgotten to breathe. It didn't seem possible that anything could have survived within the blaze.

Then it seemed as if a cloud had eclipsed the moon, and the wind-ravaged path of uprooted trees suddenly appeared to right itself in an eyeblink like a looped video clip. The tops of the burning trees were silhouetted once again against the orange sky, not scattered like jackstraws across the forest floor. The stone cliff on the hillside was back in its place as well. And then the first tree uprooted itself as it had before, and the whole sequence began to repeat itself.

Where was Skeeble? Where was the girl? And who could be behind this catastrophe? Daniel felt positive that Lilith must have been involved somehow.

The forest righted itself and began its third collapse. And this time, there was something about the chaos of crashing limbs and up-flung roots that tugged at a corner of Daniel's memory. The whole thing seemed familiar, as if he'd seen forests destroyed by earth and wind and fire on numerous previous occasions.

And then he remembered that he had.

The Falling Forest sequence from "Code Neutrino" was the most talked-about episode in the video game. People bought a specific brand of console system just for the chance to watch the most cutting-edge graphics of the decade.

After your character completed a mission in which he blew up a villain's hidden munitions factory, the bad guy made his getaway on a private jetspeeder carrying information you vitally needed. His route lay through a forest that had been set ablaze by the enormous explosion. You had to take off after him through the blaze on foot, leaping around and over and under the spreading flames, dodging falling trees and crashing boulders coming at you from every direction. In an open glade in the center of the forest you came across the crashed speeder, and then you'd have to fight the villain in the midst of a blazing forest doing its best to burn and flatten the both of you.

Daniel could remember a week just after midterms last fall when he had dozed off almost every night watching Ken trying to push his save point a few meters more past the obstacles in the forest - over and around the Ripping Roots, zigging and zagging through the Toppling Trees, leaping and dodging the Bouncing Boulders. In his dreams that week, he'd followed Ken's footsteps through every twist and turn of the path.

If what Skeeble said about the Border Realm was true, then last time he'd come through his dreams to reach this Border Realm, and once before that Skeeble had managed to get into his dreams from here. Was it possible that someone had reached into

his dreams to inflict this particular nightmare on the forest? And could that someone enter his dreams again? Daniel shied from the thought.

The forest was reloading itself for its seventh or eighth collapse, and Daniel felt utterly helpless. It was Ken who had beaten the forest at its hardest setting, not he, and even Ken had eventually had to swallow his pride and go online to look up the path through some of the trickiest sections. Daniel would just have to stand and watch, unable to lift a finger to stop anything, while...

Suddenly, over the dull roar and popping explosions of the burning forest, Daniel distinctly heard from the heart of the inferno a high-pitched scream. He wasn't aware of making any conscious decision, but he suddenly found himself making gigantic leaps down the rocky hillside, then diving between two towering pines that went up in a sheet of flame behind him as soon as he'd crossed the forest's boundary. By the time he came to his senses there was no way back, only forward down the path stretching into darkness. He knew from watching Ken that if he paused for even an instant to consider his options, the top of a burning tree would crash down from on high to obliterate him. And he also knew somehow that, unlike most dreams, this one might well be able to kill him, and that he had just done something almost suicidally stupid. No turning back, though. Got to run, run.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the gale-force wind at his back bringing the first tree crashing down toward

him. This one was simple to avoid; just keep running along the blackened grass and don't stop to look behind you to see the flaming branches fill your vision. In the video game, though, you merely saw sparks coming from behind your right shoulder where the tree landed; you didn't feel the wave of heat, or smell the acrid smoke that caused Daniel to choke as he ran. Then there were two saplings falling ahead of him in quick succession from opposite sides of the path, requiring a slowdown and a quick swerve to avoid both.

Directly ahead an enormous tree filled the path, thick undergrowth growing on both sides of it. As Daniel approached it began to topple slowly to the left, its root structure ripping out an enormous wad of earth with it as it fell. Meanwhile another tree was heading towards him from behind. This one was a straightforward jump; it needed to be precisely timed, but Ken had mastered it on his first run-through.

Daniel adjusted his steps so that his left foot hit the edge of the pit precisely, took off in a long, sailing leap, and fell a yard short of the opposite side.

The loose soil caved in beneath his feet, and he began to slide down into the hole. Pits in "Code Neutrino" were deadly; it didn't matter how deep or shallow they were, once you had fallen into one it was Game Over, return to last save point. Daniel didn't want to take a chance on this dream having a save point, though, and he frantically grabbed all around him for something to hold on to. His hand closed around one of the

protruding roots from the fallen tree. Just as he did so, the tree which had been falling at him from behind hit the opposite rim of the pit from which he had launched himself, sending a shower of burning twigs and leaves to smolder in Daniel's clothes and hair.

But...this was impossible. If you fell into a pit, you died. The roots sticking out of the side of the hole were just window dressing, not something you could grab onto. Ken had tried - a section later on had a sequence of pits and boulders that had squashed him repeatedly - but it had always been true that once he missed a jump, he had to restart. Daniel scrambled up to the edge of the pit, pulled himself to his feet, and looked ahead. The path through the forest was completely blocked by fallen burning trees. There was no way forward, no way back, and the smoke was shutting down his lungs.

Daniel knew he had to think more quickly than he'd ever thought before. If the Falling Forest was derived from the game, then from where had the smell of smoke and nausea come? Or the root he'd just grabbed, for that matter? But then he remembered that this wasn't actually based on the game. It was based on his dream-memory of the game. It must have been his own imagination that had supplied these things, reasoning that if there was a root then it could be grabbed, if there was smoke then it would be hard to breathe. His imagination was coloring his memories, the way it always does in dreams.

Daniel tried for a moment to imagine the entire burning forest drenched in a sudden downpour, but nothing happened. He'd heard of people who were able to dictate their dreams that thoroughly, but he'd never possessed the skill. But if part of the forest came from his own imagination, he should be able to use that to his advantage. The way out was to go farther in. He would have to imagine it more.

Take the boundaries on both sides of the path, for instance. In the game they were an impenetrable wall of thorns that slowed you down if you got too close to them. But Daniel had never seen any real vegetation in his life that didn't have some gaps in it, somewhere. And sure enough, what he sought he found. There was a thin spot through which he could wriggle, the thorns tearing at his sleeves, and then suddenly he was off the highway, out of the box, in terra incognita, drawing outside the lines.

He'd still want to follow the path, of course. There was nothing else in the forest besides that open glade in its heart, and Daniel had to guess that if the girl was anywhere alive and not squashed or burned, she'd have to be there. But finding a way alongside the path ought to be a lot easier than managing all the acrobatics involved in running down it.

The journey through the thorns and undergrowth was not entirely without risk. Whether it had been summoned up from Daniel's subconscious envisioning of what such a journey might be, or whether it had been pasted in from a forest conflagration

derived from some other dreamer's nightmare, there were still plenty of hazards of flame and collapse and smoke. But Daniel found that the mantra of "Imagine It More" always seemed enough to get him through. Falling trees weren't really instant death if any part of them struck you -- sometimes you could dodge between separate branches, or arrange to be in the midst of the tinier ones to protect you from the big ones, so you'd only end up scratched and blistered. In the game the boulders bounced seemingly at random so that Ken had needed to memorize the sequences, but in this part of the forest they didn't bound up into the air unless they hit a fallen log or some other obstacle, and Daniel could time his crossing through them without resorting to trial and error. And finally, ahead of him, was the glade.

Just as he was sprinting across the last stretch of ground, he heard a cracking sound on his right. He looked around just in time to see a toppling tree heading directly at him, with not enough space for him to dodge. As he backed up against another tree trunk, one of the falling branches slashed through his shirt and ripped a ragged cut down his left side, just below his ribcage. Gasping for breath and holding his side, he managed to stumble the last few feet into the clearing.

There was no crashed jetspeeder like the one in the game. There was also no girl. The only thing lying on the blackened grass was Skeeble, her ears wrapped around her head, screaming at the top of her lungs..

Daniel grabbed the nis by a shoulder and pulled her to her feet. "Where is she?" he cried.

Skeeble shook her head frantically. "Gone, gone!" she shrieked. "Wellaway, ah wellaway! And it's us who'll soon be gone as well, all betrapped in this fire-fingery place!"

"Gone? Where?" Daniel had to fight the urge to pick up the nis by the ears and shake her.

"Took her away and locked her up, he did. The lady's nasty, nasty servant. Drallo the dwarfling. And trapped us too with no escaping he has as well, alack alack!"

Daniel took stock of the situation. The path he'd arrived on was now a sheet of flames, and no other escape route presented itself. The smoke was becoming intolerably thick, and Daniel's eyes and throat felt like they were on fire. "Code Neutrino" was no help either - at this point in the game, after you had defeated the villain and taken his code book, a friendly chopper appeared overhead and let down a rope ladder. Daniel shut his eyes and tried to imagine a helicopter showing up here, or perhaps a giant eagle or some other rescuer more appropriate to the locale, but when he opened them again there was nothing. It seemed as if his imagination could only serve to make a situation marginally better or, in the case of the smoke, considerably worse, but couldn't make any major alterations.

He was desperately casting about for other inspirations when a deafening series of beeps shook the clearing.

"That'll be sir's alarm clock!" shouted Skeeble. "Go let yourself be waking up and leaving Skeeble behind!"

"Couldn't I take you with me as I woke up?" asked Daniel, already close enough to waking to realize that even though the suggestion made perfect sense with dream-logic, it would seem a lot less likely in the waking world to pull a whole creature out of a dream with him.

"It's more than just flamings holding me in here, sir! Drallo's set up a barrier round about the clearing that I can't set foot through nohow!"

"I'll just have to set foot through it for you, then," said Daniel grimly. "If there's one thing I'm good at it's falling asleep and waking up, and it'll take more than a half-pint Disney reject to stop me." He picked Skeeble up and tucked her under one arm like a football, then ran towards the flaming bushes and dove through, and as he did so the beeping noise filled his ears and his world.

Daniel became aware of several things in sequence as he rose to consciousness.

The first was that somebody was shaking him gently by the shoulder.

The second was that the shoulder being shaken was in an enormous amount of pain.

The third was that he was slumped over a table in a dinner theater, not in his bed at home, so that the beeping couldn't be

coming from his alarm clock. *Some idiot forgot to turn off his cell phone for Sondra's play*, he thought groggily. *What a jerk.*

Finally he finished his journey and opened his eyes. The fourth thing he noticed was that there was no sign of Skeeble, but after all that was hardly to be expected.

Reverend Schwarzwold was the one tapping him on the throbbing shoulder. His expression showed concern, but Daniel noticed that several others at nearby tables were looking at him with obvious annoyance. The jerk with the cell phone still hadn't turned it off.

"Could you get that please?" whispered the minister, and Daniel suddenly realized that the cell phone Ken had tossed him when he and Sondra had left for the performance was beeping in his pocket. Embarrassed, he got up, then staggered and grabbed the back of his chair. His neck, arms and shoulders all seemed to be stretched tight and screaming as if he'd gotten the worst sunburn of his life, and there was a dull ache on his left side, just below his rib cage. Bleary and in pain, he stumbled toward the door at the back of the hall.

In the doorway he glanced back over his shoulder and caught a glimpse of what was happening on stage. Faust was standing in its center, while the green Mephisto conducted a chorus surrounding him that could have come from Hieronymus Bosch's worst nightmare. A swarm of actors costumed as figs, owls, enormous eggs, scissors with ears, rats, wombats, snakes with legs, and walking teapots were all down on their knees, their

arms held out entreatingly to Faust while they sang climactically, "Have we got a bargain for youuuuu!"

Daniel shook his head to clear it and make sure he was really awake, letting the door swing shut behind him. He was on the front steps of the hall, and in front of him the full moon was just beginning to rise. He fished the phone out of his pocket and began pushing buttons on it at random until the beeping finally stopped. The voice at the other end of the line was Ken's.

"Hey there, Dan. It's your old college roommate, *Stephen Mamuro*. Remember me?" There seemed to be a pleading note to Ken's voice.

"Stephen wha...?" said Daniel in confusion. Then he remembered. In their dorm room the previous year, Ken had once taken a book down from a shelf and showed him that it was really a hollowed-out box. Inside was a bottle of single malt scotch. But behind that there was yet another false secret panel, and behind that was the prize of his entire fake ID business: a stash of blank Vermont birth certificates.

"I got them off a buddy who used to work in the Department of Records up there and swiped 'em," Ken had said enthusiastically. "Fill these puppies in and you can create a whole new person. Driver's license, bank account - you name it. I've made up a few paper people already, just in case I ever have to disappear. Take a look!"

"But why would you ever want to disappear?" Daniel had asked while leafing through the other documents in the secret compartment.

"No idea," Ken had replied cheerfully. "But it's pretty cool to know that I could if I wanted to. Want me to make one for you?"

"No thanks," Daniel had said, unable to imagine what kind of gall it would take to suddenly step sideways and leave your life behind. He remembered now, though, that as he put the stack of fake identities back into their compartment, the one on top had been made out for Stephen Mamuro.

"Sure, um, Stephen, I remember you," Daniel said cautiously into the phone. "What's the problem?"

"I was just driving through Crossroads, you remember where that is?"

"Sure," answered Daniel, deciding it was best to let Ken keep doing the talking.

"Well, I stopped in a bar for a drink," said Ken, "and there was this big fight, and the manager of the bar came out to try to settle things down, and the next thing I knew he'd been shot. Most of the other folks put down their drinks and skedaddled, but I stuck around till the police showed up because I was a witness, you know? And that was what I figured a good citizen oughta do. But then, well, there were some more altercations, and then some other things happened, and I guess you could say the upshot is that I'm at the police station right

now charged with Interfering with an Investigation. Could you, um, scrape together three hundred dollars and meet me down here as soon as possible? I promise I'll make it up to you."

Daniel grabbed the railing beside him for support. "But what..." he spluttered, "who..." But the questions would have to wait - clearly the important thing was to spring his roommate as soon as possible. "Oh, never mind. It'll just about clean out my account, but yeah, I can swing it. But you'd better give me a whole bunch of details when I get there, you hear me? I warned you something like this would happen, you know, I said..."

"I'll fill you in, don't worry," came Ken's voice. "Just as soon as I've finished explaining it all to the fine policeman who's sitting across from me right now with a clipboard. Let's just say that Frank and Joe are trapped in the submarine, OK? So I'd really, really appreciate it if you could get down here as soon as possible."

"As soon as possible. Police station. Sure thing, K-Stephen. You can count on me."

"Thanks. I know you won't let me down." There was a click on the other end of the line.

Daniel flipped the telephone closed, then stood for a moment pondering the tasks ahead of him. The reference to Frank and Joe Hardy made it sound as if Ken's situation involved life or death. Then, suddenly, he leaned forward and banged his forehead against one of the porch's columns. He'd abruptly

realized that, to get back to Crossroads from Archer's Bluff, it would be necessary for him to figure out how to grow wings.

Chapter 5

You have set the powers of the four quarters of the earth to cross each other. You have made me cross the good road and road of difficulties, and where they cross, the place is holy. Day in, day out, forevermore, you are the life of things.

Black Elk Speaks

Daniel considered his options. He could no more drive Ken's car than he could grow wings, and even if he could drive the thing, Sondra had the keys, and she was probably up on stage right now. Daniel would do an awful lot for his friends, but dragging Sondra off a stage during a performance was not one he was able to contemplate. Archer's Bluff looked way too small to have any taxis; Daniel was pretty sure that he could see both the town's northern and southern edges from where he stood. That left - what, hitchhiking? Not something he'd ever done before, but this might be a time for desperate measures. If he got murdered and thrown into a ditch, at least it'd make Ken sorry for whatever idiotic stunt he'd pulled in that bar, so that was one consolation. He was about to march down to the road and stick his thumb out when he heard someone clear a throat on the porch behind him.

He turned. It was the woman who'd been sitting at the table next to his inside, the dark-skinned woman with the round pitted face, round chin, and round bun at the back of her head.

He saw now that she was about half a foot shorter than he was, but twice as thick from front to back. She was smoking a thin brown cigarette and staring at him, her dark eyes flashing as she spoke.

"I was just deciding that I don't think much of this play." Her voice was high-pitched and musical, like a child's. The inflections made Daniel think of someone who had learned English by listening to songs instead of speech. "Thinking of heading back to Crossroads. Want a lift?"

Daniel sagged with relief against the railing. "Yes!" he cried. "Thank you! Look, I wouldn't normally be trying to get rides off of strangers, but there's a bit of an emergency back there, and I..."

"Yes, the police station, I heard the last piece of your phone call," said the woman. "Come on, my truck's over here."

The truck was a battered gray pickup - at least, Daniel guessed it was gray, but it might have been almost any color beneath the thick coating of dirt and rust. There was something about it that looked familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on what.

"Don't worry, it should hold together at least one more trip," said the woman. "Hop in."

"Wait a minute!" There were alarm bells going off now in Daniel's head. This all seemed to be far too easy. Perhaps he was picking up some of Ken's paranoia; still, his roommate had said that someone had been shot, Mr. Santiago it sounded like,

which meant that the bad guys, whoever they might be, weren't just confining their activities to dreams and the undersea Atlantis anymore. There didn't seem to be anything sinister about this woman, but since when did that make any difference? If he just hopped into the truck with her, he'd be doing exactly the same sort of thing that he and Ken always hooted at when characters did them in movies. "Look, I really appreciate the offer and all, but like I said, I don't like accepting rides from strangers." *Especially strangers who are a bit too convenient*, he thought. "If you don't mind, I'll see if I can find a taxi, and..."

"But I'm not a stranger," said the woman, giving a purring, honey-rich chuckle. "Sondra's told me all about you. She's the one who invited me here, just like she invited you. I told you how to fix your refrigerator. I'm your landlady, Cloudfoot Shantih."

"Feeling all right, Dan? You look as if you're in pain."

Daniel had at last overcome his reservations and climbed up into the dusty truck beside Mrs. Shantih. There truly did not seem to be anything threatening about her, and anyway, if she'd had bad designs against any of them, she wouldn't have needed to wait until now to carry them out while she was living right next door. She had stubbed out her brown cigarette into the overflowing ash tray and jerked the truck into gear, and it had lurched out onto the highway as if no engineer had ever conceived

of such a thing as a shock absorber. In Ken's Mitsubishi on the way to Archer's Bluff, Daniel and Sondra had slid along like ice on satin; now, heading back, it felt as if every pebble on the road was magnified to boulder size. To make matters worse, she wasn't taking the well-kept route that Sondra had taken, but was navigating instead through a maze of back roads marked only by double and triple letters, running between cornfields and occasional patches of forested hills.

The jostling would have been bad enough at any time, but Daniel's back still felt as if it was on fire, and even the brush of his shirt against it was agonizing. He had to lean carefully forward so that no part of his back would come in contact with any part of the car. The jostling also made the dull throbbing in Daniel's side hurt even worse.

"What's wrong?" asked Mrs. Shantih kindly.

Daniel ran his finger across his shoulder and winced, feeling large blisters rising on his skin. "I think I've got some second degree burns," he admitted, adding mentally, *and it'd be really difficult to explain where I got them, so I hope you don't ask.*

Fortunately, the only thing Mrs. Shantih said was, "I'll stop at a drug store when we get back into town so you can get some burn cream. You'll need a bandage for your side, too."

Daniel reached down and touched his left side gingerly, and his finger came away sticky. "You're right, I'm bleeding!" Mrs. Shantih reached across the car to pop open the glove compartment

and hand him a handkerchief, and he wadded it up and pressed it onto his wound.

As he shifted his position, he bumped into a lumpy object that lay on the seat between him and the driver. He'd thought it was just a discarded sweater in the darkness, so he jerked back when it lifted its head to stare at him. Then he cried out from the pain when his back touched the bouncing seat.

"Meet Rakshasa," said the driver, glancing sideways.

"We've met," said Daniel, remembering the night of his arrival in Crossroads and the dream with the cat perched on the end of his bed. "He gets around, doesn't he?"

"He does at that. You know the story about the King of the Cats?"

"I've heard of it," said Daniel, rubbing his side ruefully. The shape on the seat beside him had now uncurled into a gray cat, one of the biggest Daniel had ever seen, with darker tiger stripes down its back. He considered the question, remembering his mother's thick book of folktales with the spooky illustrations. "Farmer sees a procession of cats late at night carrying a coffin, and one of them stops and tells him to tell Mungo that Mingo is dead. He tells his wife the whole story when he gets home, and their sleepy cat on the hearth suddenly leaps up and yells, 'Mingo is dead? Then I'm the King of the Cats!' and he bolts up the chimney and disappears, never to be seen again. Is that the one you mean? It always gave me the creeps."

Mrs. Shantih nodded, turning at an intersection in the middle of corn fields. "The story makes it sound like he was king of all the cats in the world, though, and really it was only his village. All the local monarchs think they're kings or queens of all the cats there are. Terrible with geography, cats are. Such foolishness. But Rakshasa here is king of all the cats in Crossroads, sure enough."

On the seat beside him, Rakshasa cocked his head sideways to stare at Daniel with the green eyes that Daniel remembered scaring the living daylights out of him when he first saw them in the alley outside his apartment. The animal shut one eye, opened it, then shut both eyes and curled up into an even tighter ball.

I've just been winked at by a cat, Daniel realized.

For the next several miles Daniel alternated between wondering if the cat had really winked at him, wondering whether or not Mrs. Shantih was crazy, and wondering how he'd managed to get wounded so badly from a dream. The only conclusion he could come to about the last question was that he apparently was a deeper diver than he'd ever thought possible.

Mrs. Shantih lit another cigarette and smoked it companionably. There are some people who are perfectly comfortable with silence, and she was evidently one of them. Daniel wasn't, though, and her contented calm as she drove began making him increasingly uneasy. "If you don't mind my asking, ma'am, where did you get a name like Cloudfoot Shantih?" he

finally ventured as an icebreaker. "I've been trying to place your accent, but it doesn't sound quite like anything I've heard before."

Mrs. Shantih smiled and gripped the vibrating steering wheel tighter. "I'm Indian. As Indian as they come."

"Oh." For another two miles Daniel considered this while he studied her rounded profile, but he still couldn't make up his mind. Finally he couldn't stand it any more, and blurted out, "I don't want to be rude, but which..?"

"Yes," she interrupted. Then she looked sidelong at him and burst into warm, smoky laughter. "I'm sorry, but I so love being asked that question. I'm one hundred percent Indian, sure enough. Father a gastroenterologist from Madras, mother a full-blood Chippewa nurse. Both families hated the marriage, of course, but there's no stopping love." She cranked down her window, then leaned out and adjusted the outside mirror, the car bouncing even more with only one hand on the wheel. "You see it all the time in Crossroads," she added when she'd finished and cranked the window back up again. "Not love. The whole world in every shop."

"Yeah, I'd noticed that." It was true. He'd talked with Sondra just the week before about how it would be fun to do a scavenger hunt among in the shops of Main Street, with teams competing to see which could find something from every culture in the world first. Twisted stalks of Chinese bamboo, plastic Japanese ninja throwing stars, Norse trolls and Navaho kachinka

dolls, busts of Queen Nefertiti and Queen Victoria, animals from penguins to polar bears and every climate between the poles, carvings of African ancestors and Catholic saints and acrobatic posing Buddhas, there wasn't a single spot on the globe that was overlooked within Crossroads souvenir stores. Daniel remembered another line from his English final, and began "East is east, and west is west..."

"...and in Crossroads we'll sell them both to you for seven fifty plus tax," Mrs. Shantih finished for him, still chuckling.

For a few more miles they rode in a silence that now felt more comfortable. Then she glanced at him again. "Sondra says all your appliances work now?"

"Yes." Daniel winced in pain again as the truck went over a bump. It didn't seem right, somehow, to talk about something as bizarre as the Brownie with someone who still seemed like a stranger, even if it had been she who had given them the tip-off in the first place. On the other hand, there were plenty of questions that still needed to be answered.

"How long have you known about - you know - the ones who make the appliances run?" he finally brought himself to ask.

Cloudfoot Shantih didn't say anything while she maneuvered the truck around a sharp corner where nothing was visible in any direction for miles other than farmland surrounding a distant house. When she'd gotten the truck up to speed again, she shrugged. "They've always been here," she said. "Without them flowers couldn't open in spring, raindrops wouldn't know where to

fall, rivers would stop running downhill and acorns would forget how to become trees. All that's changed now is that a few more people can see them."

"Well, but...how many of them are there, then?" Daniel asked, befuddled.

"Why do you need to count 'em? Four quarters in a wheel, twelve seats in a pantheon, twenty-four futhark runes, sixty-four hexagrams, seventy-eight cards in the tarot, four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie. How many do you want there to be? All I know is no fewer than one, no more than however many ideas exist in the world."

"Wow. Okay." Daniel felt uncomfortably that these weren't the answers he needed, and that he still didn't know the right questions. "Why are we able to see them here in Crossroads, though?" he finally asked.

The driver of the car just shrugged her round shoulders. Evidently he'd been lucky with his first questions, because a shrug was the only response he got for the next few he asked as well. Did she know what the Netherbys had to do with all this? Shrug. Was it true that there was a war going on amongst them? Shrug. Do you know how to reach their kingdom? A shake of the head this time. What are they trying to do?

The last one finally brought a response. "Most of them aren't trying to *do* anything," she said. "They just are what they are. That's what your preacher friend back there has wrong."

"Not a friend, I just met him," Daniel replied automatically. "What's Reverend Schwarzwold's angle here?"

"His kind have always been against them," Mrs. Shantih replied without taking her eyes off the road. "All the way back to the burning and hanging years. His kind says they're devils trying to drag souls to Hell, like that play. Not true. They're no more evil than a thunderstorm." She lit a new one cigarette and snuffed out her old one with one smooth gesture. "Not that they're any better than a thunderstorm either, of course. The wind blows where it wills, east, west, north, or south, and there's no reason in guessing where it came from or where it's going."

"But..." the pain and the wind rushing by the car and Mrs. Shantih's smoke were all starting to make Daniel's head spin. "But I'm not the wind. I need to figure out where I've come from and where I'm going." His voice rose. "I feel like I'm being blown somewhere out of control, and I don't know which way it is!"

"Is that so?" said the driver. They were approaching another nameless, darkened intersection, and suddenly she put her foot heavily on the brake and brought the truck to a lurching stop in the precise center of the four dark roads. Then she switched off the headlights.

"If you need to find a path," she said quietly, "look in each direction and tell try to sense which one you should take."

"Are you really sure," Daniel began nervously, and then stopped. Somehow, if the threat of being crashed into by another car in the darkness didn't bother her, then he discovered it did not bother him either. Obediently, he peered down each of the moonlit highways and tried to make out any features that might suggest a path, lights from the bars of Crossroads, anything. But there were no signs or features to help him, only a chorus of summer crickets rubbing their thin legs together in song.

Sense, she had said. Perhaps if he closed his eyes, he might pick up some kind of feeling to help him decide. But of course, the instant his eyes were closed, he was sucked into sleep as if caught in a whirlpool.

He was standing up to his ankles in wisps of fog - then he realized that it was not fog but cloud, and that he was high and cut off from the earth, with the chirping of the crickets turning into the cries of an eagle overhead. The sky above was too bright to look up at, and it was impossible to tell from looking at the cloud what kind of sun illuminated it, for it contained mixed in its fringes all the rainbow colors of the day, from the pink and orange fingers of dawn, to the gold rim of a high cumulus at noon, to the blue and purple blanket of sunset. Toward the center of the cloud were the silvers and grays of moonlight, and it was occasionally lit from deep within by flashes of hidden lightning. Other clouds were scattered around

like countries on a vast map, stretching in all directions to an impossibly distant horizon.

"Your answer shows you are not totally lost," said Mrs. Shantih, standing beside him. Daniel turned and saw that the rainbow cloud was wrapped around her like a robe, and when he looked down he saw that it clothed him as well. He wondered what answer she meant, and then realized that she was referring to how he had closed his eyes.

"Face each direction and salute the power that lives there," she said. Daniel felt foolish, but he obediently turned in the direction that he somehow sensed was East and bowed his head, then South, then West, and finally North.

"There is the path of spirit," Cloudfoot Shantih intoned, "and the path of mind, the path of feeling and the path of wisdom. My mother's people call this place a Medicine Wheel, and my father's call it a Mandala. Learn all of these ways, but learn especially of the place where the paths meet. For only when you find the exact center of Crossroads will you know which way you should go."

Suddenly he realized that the truck was jolting and rattling again. How long it had been moving he could not tell, and he ruefully considered the possibility that he'd been asleep ever since he first sat down and buckled his seat belt.

They were driving down yet another country road. Then Mrs. Shantih spun the wheel and turned through a patch of woods, and

they were on Opal Lane heading into downtown Crossroads. She turned again into the parking lot of a Rite Aid and pulled up in front. "Here's your drug store. Get something with aloe for the burns. Police station is right around the corner. You've got enough money for your friend?"

"Yeah, this place has gotta have a cash machine. I can swing it." Daniel opened the door beside him and stepped down onto the pavement. "Look, I can't thank you enough for your help. For the ride and ... well, everything. You're a real lifesaver. If there's anything you ever need on your side of the balcony..."

Mrs. Shantih suddenly leaned across the seat, surprisingly quickly for her size, and closed her small thick hand around his wrist. "Don't go writing anybody any blank checks," she whispered, frowning. "Bad habit. Gets you in heaps of trouble. Help your friend. I'll see you around." Then she threw the truck into gear again and jolted away, the whole truck seeming to fly up into the air with a chorus of squeaks when it went over a speed bump. Daniel turned and went into the fluorescent aisles of the store. A clock said it was a little after 9, but to Daniel it seemed a lot later. He had a sneaking suspicion, though, that his night was only getting started.

The police station was quiet when Daniel arrived. Downstairs there was a window where he had to show his ID and sign in as a visitor. Then the woman behind the desk summoned an

officer, a short dark-skinned man who led Daniel upstairs to the jail. They went through a locked door together, and then there was another window where an elderly woman gave him a form to fill out. Daniel tried to see if he could glimpse Ken through a small window in another thick nearby door, but all he could make out was a small part of a walkway surrounded by metal bars.

Confronted with the first space on the form which asked for his name, he hesitated. In his pocket was the fake ID that Ken had given him. Should he write Daniel Carver, or the false name on the card? If Ken had gone to considerable trouble to give a fake identity, it must mean he was worried that they might come looking for him after they let him out, so putting down their actual address on a police record would surely be a bad idea. On the other hand, signing an official document with a fake name would have to be illegal -- how far exactly was he willing to stick his neck out for his friend?

Suddenly the door to the jail opened, and a tall, thin uniformed man stepped out, speaking into a radio. Daniel glanced at him, then lowered his head close to the form and began rapidly filling in the false name and a made-up address, trying to keep his face from being seen. Last time he'd seen this man and his enormous nose, he'd been wearing a green floppy hat and coming out from behind a cash register to accuse Daniel of stealing a stone. Now, the badge he wore read "Chief of Police."

Daniel caught a snatch of what he was saying into the radio as he crossed the room: "...complete docility under

interrorrerrogation, so that outburst must have been a fluke. It's unnecessessessary to disturb *her*." He didn't glance in Daniel's direction, and his voice faded as the door to the stairs swung closed behind him.

Once the bail money he'd gotten from the machine at the drug store had been handed over and counted, the officer told him to stay where he was and went through the second door. He came back a few minutes later with Ken close behind. The two friends exchanged worried glances as they were escorted downstairs, and all the way down the long corridor to freedom, Daniel kept expecting a door to open and the skinny Chief to grasp his stick-like fingers on both their shoulders. They both quickened their paces considerably once they finally set foot outside the station. It was only after they'd gone through an alley and turned three more corners that Ken finally collapsed onto a railing and pulled out a handkerchief to mop his face.

"That was extremely tough," he gasped. "Almost two hours of pretending to be a complete moron. What took you so long?"

"Long story," said Daniel, frowning. "I'll tell you later. And by the way, you're welcome."

Ken shot him a glance but didn't say anything, so he went on. "So, it looks as if you've finally gotten your wish, haven't you? Got yourself a proper mystery to solve. Did Mr. Santiago really get shot at the Blue Nile? Any idea who did it?"

"Oh, there's no question about who the culprit was," Ken replied, rolling his head from side to side with his hands on his

shoulders. "It was Doug Chee, just like you must have guessed. Don't expect those Keystone Kops back there to do anything about it, though."

"I don't," said Daniel. Ken shot him a questioning look. "Yeah, I've got some news too, but we'd better not talk about it here in the street."

"You're right, we need to head home," said Ken. "But there's something we need to get first." He shook himself and strode down another back alley that Daniel had never noticed before. Then it was in and out through several more courtyards, parking lots, and back staircases whose existence Daniel had never suspected. Fortunately there was no cloud cover blocking the moon, and it shone with its full splendor to light their path.

"How exactly," Daniel huffed as he followed Ken down a lane with a moonlit stream on one side and a wall backing up a row of houses on the other, "how exactly have you been able during the past month to learn magic, AND keep surveillance on the Blue Nile, AND swarm around learning all the back ways of the city? Or is this street knowledge another example of your wizardly powers?"

"No, it took lots of swarming, like you said," Ken replied. "And I got the time to accomplish all three by quitting my job at the photo store two and a half weeks ago. It was pretty boring, and it's not like I needed the money. My parents still haven't cut off my allowance yet, despite occasional threats."

"Oh," said Daniel. A thought struck him. "With all that exploring, you wouldn't have happened to come across the exact center of Crossroads, would you?"

"Hunh? You mean the main intersection of the highways? Well, that'd be underneath the overpass, I suppose, but it wouldn't be a place I'd care to hang out. Now, here's what we're going to need - could you give me a boost over?"

The five-foot-tall brick wall on their left side had wooden or iron gates every twenty yards or so that led into the back yards of prosperous-looking stolid brick homes. Ken had stopped beside a place where a wooden tool shed had been built up against the other side of the wall in a corner of one of the yards. Peeking over the wall where Ken was pointing, Daniel saw that between the shed and the wall there was a narrow, ivy-clotted gap a few feet wide. Hanging on hooks on the back of the shed was an aluminum extension ladder.

"The hardware stores won't be open at this time of night, and even if they were, there's no way we'd manage to get a ladder home in my car," said Ken. "So we'll have to borrow this one." He paused. "Say, where'd you leave my car, anyway?"

"Sondra's going to need it to get home from the play," said Daniel. Then he struck himself sharply on the side of his head. "Sondra! I forgot to leave her a message about where I was going! She'll have no idea - she'll be frantic!"

"More furious than frantic, I should think, if you missed the second half of her play," Ken observed dryly. "Sorry about

that. How about giving me a boost over this wall? I'll pass the ladder over to you."

"And you're going to explain to me at some point why we need to steal a ladder, I assume?" said Daniel. "Oh, never mind, I'm sure you have some excellent reason."

"I always do," said Ken soothingly. "And don't worry, I'm pretty sure these people only come and stay here a few weeks out of the year."

"Really?" asked Daniel, somewhat reassured.

"Nah, I made that up," Ken sighed. "I have no idea who lives here. But I don't think they'll miss a ladder this late at night, and we can always put it back when we're done with it. Anyway, the shed ought to block us from the house."

Daniel sighed, bent over, and made a cup with his hands on the side of the wall. "Why not?" he said morosely. "I've already committed one felony for you tonight. Why should I quit now?" Ken stepped into his hands and scrambled over the wall, kicking Daniel's shoulder as he went and causing him to stifle a shriek. "Watch the back!" he moaned through clenched teeth. "I got a bad burn tonight."

"You're the only person I know who can get a sunburn after sunset," whispered Ken, gently removing the ladder from its hooks.

"It isn't a sunburn, and I'll tell you about it later, OK?" whispered Daniel back across the wall. Once he'd bought what

he'd needed at the drug store earlier that night, he'd gone back into the restroom, slathered burn cream all over his back and shoulders, and stuck a large gauze bandage over the wound in his side. The injuries looked even worse than they felt. Giving Ken a boost had set both wounds throbbing all over again.

"Sounds like your evening's been almost as interesting as mine," said Ken as he passed the top of the ladder over the wall. "What was the felony?"

"At the jail. I used the fake ID you gave me to sign you out."

"Oh," Ken whispered. He handed the rest of the ladder over the wall and watched Daniel lower it carefully onto the path, still wincing from his wounds. "Yeah, I was hoping you'd do something like that. Umm, quick thinking, though. I think that'd just be Obstructing an Officer, so that's a misdemeanor not a felony, if it makes you feel any better. This ladder isn't worth enough to be a felony either, and besides you're only aiding and abetting. Now, you want to pull me back over, or should I make a dash for the gate and risk getting spotted?"

Daniel weighed the options. Pulling Ken across the wall again sounded as if it might hurt a great deal, but he was getting more and more nervous about the dark house looming at the far end of the lawn "I'll pull you over," he hissed.

The hauling was indeed painful, and involved a certain amount of scraping and kicking about. Suddenly, just as Ken dropped to the ground, a brilliant light flooded the back yard.

Chapter 6

*The glacier knocks in the cupboard,
The desert sighs in the bed,
And the crack in the tea-cup opens
A lane to the land of the dead.*

"As I Walked Out One Evening"

W.

H. Auden

Daniel ducked under the wall and sprinted down the lane, then realized Ken was far behind him. He turned and saw that Ken was trying to carry the ladder single-handed, so he dashed back and grabbed an end. Then they both took off down the lane again with the ladder swinging between them and bashing their shins. Finally, when they'd cleared the neighborhood and reached a small patch of woods, they paused, panting.

"It was probably *huff* one of those *huff* automatic motion-sensor lights *huff*," said Ken.

"Could be *huff*," said Daniel. "But that didn't *huff* slow you down any *huff* I see." Once he'd recovered his breath he began to chuckle at the memory of Ken trying to sprint with the ladder, and before long both of them were nearly doubled over guffawing. "I wouldn't recommend you starting a life of crime, wise one," Daniel finally gasped as he wiped his eyes on his sleeve.

When they had both recovered their breaths, they switched positions so that Ken was in front again and began carrying the ladder through more back streets. There was one nerve-wracking moment when they had to cross one of Crossroads' many sidestreets off Main, but fortunately it was late enough that the traffic was avoidable.

"Break time," said Ken when they'd reached the far end of their own building's alley. "The next step is to get this ladder up onto our balcony, and we'll need to have our wits about us for that. Besides, I want to hear all about what you've been up to so far this evening, what with getting burned and committing crimes and all."

"What about *your* story?" asked Daniel as he sat down beside his roommate on the ladder's edge. "What I've been through kind of pales next to witnessing a murder and getting thrown in jail."

"Maybe," said Ken with a shrug. "There's some stuff I need to check on up in the apartment to corroborate my story before I tell it, though. You first."

"All right," sighed Daniel. "Umm...a big part of it was this weird dream I had. Do you want to hear about that, too?"

"By all means," said Ken. So Daniel told him about the trip with Sondra, the opening scene of the play, the dream that seemed to wound him, and waking up to Ken's call.

"Cripes, we oughta look at that burn," said Ken when they'd reached that part in the story. "Why didn't you say it was that bad? Let's go upstairs." Daniel, who had been getting tired of

sitting on the edge of the ladder anyway, followed his roommate up the iron steps, explaining along the way about the ride with Mrs. Shantih.

Once they were in their bathroom, Daniel peeled away the bandages he'd put on in the Rite Aid restroom. "Ouch," said Ken. "Those are second degree blisters, all right. You oughta visit a doctor tomorrow."

"Not unless I can come up with a plausible excuse for getting burnt," said Daniel.

"This is a tourist town. Just say you forgot to use sunscreen at the water park."

"Maybe." Daniel fished the burn cream he'd bought earlier out of his pocket. "About time for more of this, anyway." While he was rubbing it in, he was struck by another memory. "Here's something else odd. Did you know that in the drug store in this town, there's a display rack with candles, sidewalk chalk, directional compasses, blank leather-bound notebooks, and CDs of Druidic Chants?"

"I guess they take the name Rite Aid pretty literally around here," said Ken thoughtfully. "So anyway, she dropped you off, you bought some first aid stuff, you withdrew some money, and you came and got me. Does that about sum it up?"

"Not quite," said Daniel. "I didn't tell you the real reason I gave that false name when I signed you out. I saw one of my childhood nightmares tonight." He absently fingered the black circle etched around the base of his ring finger while he

told Ken everything he could remember about his childhood trip through Mother Goose's Grotto and what had happened to him there, and how the man that Lilith had called the Momet was now the Chief of Police of Crossroads. Ken listened to the whole thing impassively, with his fingers clasped in front of his chin.

"So that's how she's probably got the police on her side," he finished. "I assume that's about the same conclusion you reached?"

"P

retty much," Ken said, glancing at his watch and unfolding himself from the wall. "I'll tell you all about it once we finish getting that ladder set up."

As it turned out, raising the ladder to the balcony wasn't as painful as Daniel had feared. First, Ken insisted that they both change into the darkest outfits they possessed. Then he rummaged around in some of the suitcases he had stashed in the big closet off the hall until he found a sturdy coil of rope and a flashlight. After that it wasn't terribly strenuous for the two of them to heave the ladder up to the balcony. Fortunately, the moon had risen high enough to give some light to the upper part of the alleyway, though the street level was still in deep shadow. Ken wedged the ladder against the balcony railing so that it angled across the alleyway, then extended it so its far end stopped just beneath a small, dark window in the back wall of the Blue Nile that Daniel had never noticed before.

"So, Mr. Ninja, I take it you're planning on rounding off the evening's crime spree with a little spot of breaking and entering, eh?" Daniel asked brightly when Ken had finished setting up.

"That's about the size of it," Ken responded. "You in?"

"That depends. Misdemeanor or felony?"

Ken considered the question. "I'm pretty sure it's only a misdemeanor if we don't steal anything."

"Oh, who am I kidding," said Daniel with a sigh. "Of course I'm in. But not until you've explained what's going on. When are you expecting whatever it is you're expecting to happen?"

"Guess," said Ken, jiggling the ladder a bit to wedge it in more tightly.

"The witching hour of midnight," Daniel answered. "Of course. Well, it's still just ten thirty, so we've got plenty of time. Spill it, or you're on your own over there."

Ken turned and stared at him in the moonlight, his face cut in half by the sharp-edged moon's shadow coming over the roof of the building. Suddenly Daniel saw him not as a confident leader, but a scared kid jumping into water far over his head.

"Promise me you won't say I'm crazy?" he asked in a voice far tinier than his normal sweeping assertions.

"Like I'd be any kind of judge? Oh, all right, I promise," said Daniel. He was about to add the childhood pledge 'cross my

heart and hope to die,' but then he remembered what Mrs. Shantih had told him about not writing any blank checks.

"Come inside then," said Ken sadly. "Either I've got some more blasted static, or I may have just recorded one seriously bizarre murder."

Ken led the way into the apartment's kitchen. His shiny laptop computer hummed on the counter, wired to peripherals that Daniel didn't recognize.

"Have you ever seen those internet ads for tiny wireless cameras that feed video to your computer?" said Ken, kicking the brownie's bowl out of the way as he pulled up a stool for Daniel. "The ones that say they're for keeping an eye on children and property, while hinting strongly that they're also dandy for spying on hot chicks?"

"Sure," said Daniel. "Those things must have paid for half the websites in the early days of the internet."

"I hid a few of those over at the Blue Nile for surveillance." Ken touched a key on the keyboard and the screen came to life. "Let's see if they saw what I saw."

Daniel watched as Ken began calling up video software. "But isn't that illegal? Oh, never mind. That's obviously not a big concern for you these days. But with all the people over there, how could you keep anyone from spotting the cameras?"

"Two possibilities," said Ken, gliding the mouse from point to point with the precision of a portrait painter. "Either I'm

better at this James Bond stuff than I suspected, or the concealment spell I cast on them actually works. Here we go."

The computer screen showed three different staticky views of the interior of the Blue Nile. A clock at the corner of the screen said 6:23.

"This is from a little while after you left," said Ken. "Let's jump ahead a bit."

The figures in the frames jerked and leapt across the screen as he dragged a toggle across a bar at the bottom of the screen, then slowed again.

"This is 7:06," he said. "I was up here monitoring, just taking my burrito out of the microwave. And there you see them arriving."

He pointed at the screen that showed the bar's front door. Swaggering through it was Master Chee, one hand resting on the stag-horn handle of his walking stick and the other wrapped possessively around the waist of Lilith Netherby. He still wore his black jacket, and she was wearing the same jeans and Crossroads t-shirt she'd had on in the water park. The bouncer got up from his chair by the door and began to remonstrate with them.

"The place is too noisy for my microphoning attempts to have any success," Ken explained, "but Jay Fry told me that Mr. Santiago's given orders for any Netherbys or Huntsmen who want to come in to get chucked out on their ear. I assume that's what the bouncer's trying to accomplish."

"Was Jay Fry tending bar?" Daniel asked.

"No, it was somebody I'd never seen. Okay, this next bit is one of the places I particularly want to see, 'cause while it was recording I was charging headlong down the steps and around the corner while stuffing the burrito into my face."

At a table on a different screen, four men stood up and walked out of that camera's range to reappear on the screen that showed the confrontation at the door. "Mercenaries," said Ken, nodding. "Security for hire. Probably out-of-towners. I figured that'd be a reasonable precaution for Santiago to take."

Master Chee raised his walking stick aggressively, but Lilith put a hand on his arm and he lowered it again. Then she smiled and said something to the bouncer and the four other men who were facing her, making a gesture as if she was brushing a fly away from her face. All five men took a step back and stared at her as if she'd suddenly turned into a demon from the darkest pits of hell, then broke and fled out the door while Chee and Lilith stepped aside to let them go.

"I passed them in the street," said Ken. "Strong convictions, that's what I'm guessing it takes at a minimum to stand up against her. She'd know all about money, there's no way just the desire for a paycheck would let you put up any defense."

Lilith and Chee walked forward out of the frame and reappeared shortly on a different screen in front of the bar. Chee was waving his arms in the air and seemed to be complaining about something. Meanwhile, back on the doorway screen, a wild-

eyed Ken appeared, licking his fingers. He had to fight his way in past a stream of people heading in the opposite direction; the screens showed that half the people in the bar were heading for the exit as if the building had just caught on fire.

"I caught the tale-end of Chee and Lilith's conversation, once I managed to get in," Ken nodded. "She was telling him to try for once not acting like such an idiot. Then... oh yes, there he is."

Mr. Santiago appeared in the center screen, furious like Daniel had never seen him before. He was obviously screaming at his two visitors at the top of his lungs. Lilith smiled and said something, then perched herself on a bar stool and crossed her legs demurely.

"She was telling Chee that if he was tired of not being allowed to handle things, then he could go ahead and take charge," Ken noted.

Chee held his stick up and pointed it at the bar owner's face as if it was a fencing foil. Daniel squinted at the grainy video. That part of the screen was so blurred that he couldn't be certain, but it almost seemed as if the stick had indeed gotten thinner. He turned questioningly to Ken.

"Yeah, it turned into a sword all right," said Ken tightly. "Remember the spear gun and the machete he had in Atlantis? I think that cane can change into any weapon he imagines. That was one of the reasons I wanted to watch this video, to see if you'd

be able to see it changing or not. But I'll bet there's nothing recorded here that'd stand up in court."

On the screen, Mr. Santiago was reaching into a pocket of his sports jacket and pulling out a small bag. He opened it while shouting something, then drew out a handful of small dark objects. Daniel couldn't tell whether they were beans, acorns, pebbles, or what.

"I wish I'd managed to record the sound for that part," said Ken, leaning close to the screen. "I *think* what he yelled was 'You aren't the only one who can get help from a brujah!' and then some more words I didn't understand. This next part's what I most want to see the recording of, though."

On the screen, Mr. Santiago hurled the small objects at Doug Chee's feet. Then the central screen, the one showing Santiago and Chee facing off against one another, was washed out by a wave of static. The other two screens still worked as they had before, one showing tables with a handful of people sitting and staring ahead blankly, the other showing a recording of Ken still standing in the bar's doorway. He took out a small dark object from his pocket and fiddled with it, then glanced up and stared with slack-jawed amazement.

The Ken who was watching all of this on the computer monitor slammed his palm onto the kitchen counter. "Damn!" he said. "Just like the brownie. Well, I guess that's more corroboration that you can't videotape magic. The only thing I managed to get was me completely flubbing a spell attempt. I'm

not even sure what I was trying to do - something grand in the way of bringing down the house, I think, but I was so rattled all it did was maybe make somebody spill a drink."

As suddenly as it had appeared, the static from the center screen cleared again. Now it showed Mr. Santiago lying on his back in a pool of slowly spreading blood. Master Chee was clutching his stick and leaning over the bar, his back heaving, while Lilith patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. The image of Ken, still standing in the doorway, slowly put whatever he was holding back into his pocket.

"What?" cried Daniel. "What happened? What did you see?"

Ken frowned and closed the laptop's lid, then sat on his stool for almost a minute. Finally he said in a dull voice, "I wish I could say that I couldn't be sure, or that I didn't have a good view from where I was standing. But I saw everything just as clear as I can see you, Dan. Those things Mr. Santiago threw sprouted plants -- twisting tendrils like grape vines, almost. They crawled out of the floor and wrapped themselves around Doug Chee's feet and legs, and then they kept on crawling up his chest until he started making hiccups like the air was being forced out of his lungs. Right as a tendril wrapped around his neck and started to strangle him, his sword or cane or whatever it was changed into a Glock 17 pistol, and he shot Mr. Santiago through the chest. As soon as he hit the floor, those awful plants disappeared, and I had to sit down at one of the tables and swallow one of the drinks that somebody had thoughtfully left

behind, or I would have skipped the 'worrying-about-being-crazy' stage and gone straight to the rubber room."

"Oh - kay," said Daniel softly. "Grape vines growing out of the floor, right. So what happened then? Did the other half of the bar clear out? And who called the cops? You?"

"Nah." Ken passed his hand across his face. "I was too busy drinking, remember? Nobody else in the bar was moving a muscle; they were all just staring at Lilith as if they were hypnotized. Chee looked about as gray as one of those people from the Middle East you see on the news who got off the bus right before it blew up, and he stumbled over to the bar and collapsed across one of the stools next to her. She just sat there as cool as ever, her toe tapping up and down while she fished a cell phone out of her purse and hit a button. I think she must have called that police chief you talked about. I didn't hear much of the conversation, but I did catch something that sounded like 'cleaning up this mess.' After she closed the phone, she stood and glanced down at Chee's heaving back, and then she sauntered to the rear of the bar and went into Mr. Santiago's office. I can't remember whether or not she actually stepped over his body, but she certainly didn't act very impressed by it. And as soon as she left - get this - all the other people in the room picked up their glasses or whatever, and went back to their conversations as if nothing had happened. And he was lying in the middle of the floor the whole time!"

"I suppose it kind of makes sense," Daniel said thoughtfully. "If you went out for a night on the town, you wouldn't want to be a witness to some big spectacle like that. You wouldn't expect it. I doubt it'd take a big mental push to convince people that they hadn't seen anything."

"Probably." Ken sounded very tired. "We're way out of our league here, aren't we Danny?"

"So what happened after the police got there?" Daniel prompted. "Did she come out of the office again?"

"A bit before." Ken went to the sink, turned the faucet on, and splashed some water into his face. Then he stared absently out the window at the moonlit vacant lot that lay between Antiquities and the apartment building further down Sapphire Street.

"She came out with a sheaf of papers in one hand and an ink pad in the other," he said finally. "She knelt beside the corpse, pressed its thumb against the pad, then pushed the thumb three or four places in the papers she had there. She looked up at Chee where he'd managed to wrap his hands around a glass of scotch the bartender had provided him, and I heard her say, 'This won't hold up in a human court, but it ought to be good enough for our midnight guests. You'll be my witness, won't you sweetheart?' And he nodded. And then the police came in right after that."

"So that's what makes you so sure she's coming back there tonight," Daniel guessed. "But if she just needs to get into the

building, why would she need the title or whatever that was?

With the owner dead she already knew the place would be empty."

Ken shrugged. "Good question. The answer is, I don't know." He bent and rubbed water across his face again. "Anyway, that skinny broomstick you said was called Mommet was in charge. I don't pretend to know much about police procedure beyond what you see on TV, but it was pretty obvious that they weren't doing a single thing by the book. One of them checked Mr. Santiago's body for a pulse, then took a few pictures, zipped him into a body bag, and helped another guy carry him out. Meanwhile the Chief was over in a corner talking to Lilith. When they finished, she dragged Chee away from the scotch he'd been sucking up and headed out the door, while the Chief started sauntering around the room asking people questions. Maybe it's too generous to call them questions. I heard him interrogating a middle-aged tourist couple sitting next to me, and it was something along these lines: 'We've heard that a couple of rough bikers fitting these made-up descriptions came in and tried to rob the bar, and Mr. Santiago tried to stop them so they shot him and ran away. Is that what you saw?' And the man and his wife smiled and nodded and said 'Anything you say, officer. Can we go back to our hotel now?' And so pretty soon the bar was almost empty except for them and me."

"Whereupon you said exactly the same thing all the other customers did, right Ken?" asked Daniel without much hope.

"Seeing as how you're always criticizing the spies in the movies

who never make the slightest effort to blend in with the crowd. You answered just the way that other couple did, so the police wouldn't take any special notice of how you weren't enchanted like everybody else, right? Right?" He paused. "RIGHT?"

"Well of course that's what I did. What kind of idiot do you think I am?" Ken hesitated, abashed. "Umm, it was later I made a fuss. When I heard one of the officers say 'What's that sheep doing still here,' and he put a hand on my shoulder. You know I don't like it when people touch me without permission, Dan."

"I know," Daniel sighed. He remembered one day the previous winter when they'd been leaving the lunch hall together, and Ken had gotten into an argument with someone who was protesting about some upcoming campus event. The guy had put his hand on Ken's shoulder, and Ken had started screaming at him until Daniel dragged his friend away. "So he grabbed you and you cussed him out, and that's when they decided to arrest you."

"Yeah," Ken agreed glumly. "Some master spy I turned out to be. Now when I don't show up for the hearing they'll have my face up on the precinct wall, I suppose. I'm assuming the judge is as crooked as everyone else in this town, so there's no way I oughta go."

"You'd be crazy to risk it," Daniel granted. "All right, you've gotten my curiosity sufficiently aroused now, and the burn doesn't feel too bad. It's almost 11. Let's try that ladder of

yours. Anyway, I'd rather not be here when Sondra gets back from her cast party."

"That reminds me, we need to tell her what we're up to so she doesn't move the ladder. Tell you what, you write her a note while I finish getting set up outside."

Daniel quickly grabbed a sheet of paper off the pad beside the phone and wrote "Dear Sondra, very sorry I missed the end of your play but Ken called with a big emergency. Landlady gave me a ride home. We're playing James Bond so don't move the ladder. I'll see the end of the play later, I promise. Sorry again. D." He taped the note to the door, then joined his roommate at the foot of the ladder. Ken was putting a small object into a backpack.

"All right, that's the third time I've seen you do that," said Daniel. "Once just after that guy almost got electrocuted in the Nile, once when Chee and Santiago were fighting, and now. C'mon, what is it, or I'm staying home to lick my wounds like a sane person."

"Oh, all right." Ken reluctantly hauled the object back out. "It's a universal remote I got a few years ago, but it's busted. It was in a box of miscellaneous electronic junk I keep around for spare parts, but, well...remember the snowman I told you about?"

Daniel nodded.

"She told me that with the right rituals and preparations, this thing could be the focus of my power. All the different

signs and powers and forces have numbers that go with 'em, so if I can figure out the right numbers and punch them into this thing, it can be like, I dunno, a magic wand or something. Crazy, huh?"

"Chee's friend Leo wouldn't think so," said Daniel thoughtfully. "What were you using it for just now?"

"Hmm, well," Ken eyed the window at the far end of the ladder. "That window over there might be locked, so if it is then I may have just used this to unlock it."

"You positive about that?" Daniel snorted, then leaned against the ladder and looked up. "Wouldn't it make more sense to find out for sure whether it was locked before you went to the effort of jinxing it?"

"That's not the way it works." Ken shook the ladder one last time, then put his feet on the lowest step. "The magic only works, *if* it works, when there's no way for me to prove whether it's working or not. If I knew for sure the window was locked, then I couldn't do anything to it."

"Well, that just inspires truckloads of confidence." Daniel gripped the metal tightly as Ken took his first step out over the alley.

"It's like I can affect probabilities but not certainties," Ken grunted, taking another step in midair. "I can't do anything that couldn't be rationally explained by somebody as skeptical as I used to be. A Heisenberg wand. Hold that thing tight, you hear?"

"I've got it." After that they both just concentrated on their jobs of holding and climbing until Ken reached the window, swung it open, and wriggled inside. A few moments later, his arm appeared and beckoned for Daniel to come across.

The first three steps of the ladder were wedged inside the balcony, but the farther Daniel got beyond the railing the more uncomfortably aware he was of how far the ground was beneath him, how much his side hurt, and how utterly precarious the whole arrangement was. Ken's arm sticking out of the window ahead steadied the ladder a little, but it still wobbled significantly when Daniel was halfway across. He flattened himself on the rungs desperately, but finally forced himself to climb across the rest of the way.

The window at the far end was barely wider than his shoulders, and his entrance was a lot less silent than he'd been trying for, even with Ken helping him, so that both intruders ended up in an ungraceful heap on a warped table. Once they'd gotten themselves disentangled and standing, Ken shone his flashlight around the room they were in. It seemed to be used for storage, packed almost to the ceiling with discarded bar furniture and cleaning supplies.

"From here on out, let's try to be quiet, OK?" Ken pleaded. "Now follow me." He opened the door cautiously, the lighted end of his flashlight pressed against his chest, then shifted it slightly so a glimmer shone out. By the light Daniel could see a narrow corridor going off to their right, with restrooms to their

left and on the opposite side. Moving as quietly as he could, he followed Ken down the hallway to a wooden door at the far end. The door had a panel near the floor with ventilation louvers, and Ken knelt down and peered through these for a few moments before giving an all-clear sign to Daniel. Then he pushed the door open and went through.

The room on the other side was lit by a large semicircular window on the opposite side, stretched above a staircase leading down. From the arrangement of tables and chairs they could tell that the place was probably intended to be used for special occasions, wedding receptions and birthday parties and the like. There was a small but well-stocked bar in a corner. The most striking feature of the room, though, was a mural painted on the wall next to the door they'd just come through. Doubtless by the same artist as the one by the entrance downstairs, it showed a wide arch decorated with hieroglyphics, flanked on both sides by dancing mummies and animal-headed gods.

Ken cautiously tiptoed across the room to the pool of moonlight at the top of the stairs, then peered down over the railing. Suddenly he began waving his arm frantically at Daniel and backing up across the room. As Daniel dove into the bathroom corridor with Ken close behind him, they could hear voices coming up the stairs, and then Master Chee appeared in the moonlight, clutching an AK-47 with a flashlight attached to its barrel.

Chapter 7

The gods have their own rules.

Metamorphoses

Ovid

By squirming around on the floor, Daniel and Ken managed to get into positions where they could both peer through the louvers into the room. Master Chee was going into a crouch and pointing the light into all the corners of the room.

"It's clear," he called out to Lilith, who had come up the steps right behind him and walked into the center of the room without paying him the slightest attention.

"Would you put that thing away?" she asked petulantly, putting the candle she was carrying down on a table and unslinging a handbag from her shoulder. "Come over here and help me with this equipment. You've been getting so paranoid recently."

Chee stayed in his crouch, still stabbing the light around the room. Daniel and Ken jerked back as it crossed the door they were hiding behind. When they got back into position they could see the gang leader fingering his neck. "That's easy for you to say, you didn't almost get strangled by magic plants this afternoon," he muttered. Finally he relaxed a bit, and the rifle

flickered back into a walking stick. "You can't be too careful. This place gives me the creeps." He strolled over and peered out the window, then began to pace around the perimeter of the room. "So, Egypt, huh? I didn't think they had fairies. Who ya gonna reach across for, a mummy or something?"

Lilith was taking things out of the handbag and putting them on one of the tables, but from Daniel's angle the only thing he could recognize was an ornate brass clock with a pendulum that Lilith set to swinging. "Actually, this time I believe we'll try for a god. My position ought to be well enough established by now to risk it. Could you move those tables away from the mural? Even you should be able to realize it'll make a good gate."

Chee stopped in his tracks. "A god?" he stammered. "You mean, like, one of those guys with animal heads around there? Geez, I didn't think you'd be going for no gods. You sure that's safe?"

Lilith gave an exasperated sigh. "Well of course it's not safe, Doug. Nothing we've done so far has been safe. But it's not like this is the first time. Don't you remember the Jade Garden?"

"You mean those eight old guys were gods? Get out." Chee began pushing tables to clear a space in front of the mural, at the very edge of where Daniel could see. When he'd finished he slumped down on a chair and put his chin on the handle of his cane, staring at where Lilith seemed to be drawing something on the floor with a piece of chalk. "So which one's it gonna be? I

always thought that Set guy was pretty cool. I read about him in a comic book once."

Lilith sat back on her heels and surveyed her drawing critically, then rubbed out a bit with a cloth and began laboriously redrawing it. "Not a chance. Those big-name deities are unpredictable, and once we let one through it could obliterate this whole block as easily as it could sneeze. More easily - never knew gods to be big on sneezing. No, we'll be trying for someone a bit more obscure -- I'm thinking Wepwawet, Opener of Ways. He was the guide for the spirits of the dead into the underworld, and his standard always led processions. It led the pharaoh's armies into battle, too, so I figure he won't mind a good dust up if it comes to that. He shouldn't be too tough to persuade - I've never met a god yet who wasn't a sucker for sacrifices. Once we've convinced him to help hold the portal open and let us get a foothold, we can start trying to bring the bigger boys around."

Chee leaned forward to get a better look at what she was drawing. "Guess I shoulda known you'd be fluent with that Egyptian picture writing, just like every other freakin' language. You're incredible, Lil." He leaned back again. "So what's this Weppywet god look like, anyways?"

Lilith glared at him. "How many times do I have to tell you to be careful with names, Chee? He's either a jackal or a human with the head of a jackal, if you must know." She got some candles from the table and began setting them up on the floor.

Chee jumped up. "Hold on, Lil. I know ya think I'm pretty dumb about stuff like this, but even I know the one with the jackal head was Anu-something. There's a statue on a shelf downstairs that fell a few days ago and nearly...never mind. But he was Set's partner in that comic book, and he had this knife that shot out bolts of energy and a big mummy army and a flying pyramid and..."

Lilith sniffed. "Wapwawet has the head of a white jackal and Anubis has the head of a black jackal. Black for the color a body turns after it's been embalmed, you know. They did work together a lot, though. Hmm." She stared at him for a moment, considering. "You might have a point there, Chee, amazing as it seems. With two dogs, it's possible there could have been some merging."

"Whatcha mean, merging?" Chee asked, striding across the room to the corner where the bar was located.

Lilith glanced at the ticking clock she'd set on the table. "We've still got fifteen minutes till showtime. Guess there's still time to go over the basics. OK, Chee, fairies and gods are superior to a human like you in most ways, of course, but you've got one thing that most of them don't. Can you guess what it is?"

Chee was pulling down bottles and setting them on the bar. Lilith glared at him and he scratched his head. "I dunno. We can die and they can't, I know that. And that preacher guy Schwarzwold says fairies ain't got souls, if ya believe in junk

like that." He glanced at Lilith suspiciously. "Is that what ya mean?"

Lilith laughed a tinkly laugh and shook her silver hair. "I wouldn't know anything about souls, dear. He might be right, I have no idea. What I was talking about, though - well, I suppose you might call it a sense of identity. Every time you wake up in the morning, you can be sure you're still going be the same person you were the day before. From the day you're born till the day you die, you always know the boundary where you leave off and the next guy begins. Whereas we - oh, put that down, Chee."

Chee lowered a whiskey bottle and wiped his lips on his sleeve. "What, what? Jeez, Lil, you nag worse than my mother sometimes. We own the place now, so it's not like this is stealing."

"No, but you'll be no use at all to me in a stupor."

Chee narrowed his eyes and took another swig defiantly. "I can hold it. So OK, identity, yeah, whatever. You're saying fairies, what, get mixed up on which one's which or something?"

Lilith stroked her finger down the side of her nose. "Let's put it this way. Did you ever play with Play-Doh when you were growing up?"

Chee shrugged. "Well sure, I guess so. Doesn't everybody?"

Lilith laughed. "Some of us had better things to do with our childhoods than wasting them with playing, dear. But when

you were playing with Play-do, did any particular blob of clay have an identity? Of course not," she went on without waiting for an answer. "One time you got it out of the can that blob might be a snake, the next time it might be the left foot of a big bear, and the next time you might split it apart into lots of little, I don't know..."

"Little men to get squished by my trucks."

"Exactly." Lilith nodded approvingly. "That's sort of how it works with a fairy. He might know that his *job* is 'Obstacle to hinder Hero on the Road,' but the actual *form* he'll take depends a lot on the particular hero he's required to try to stop. So one day he might be a troll, and the next day a squad of goblins, and the next day, I don't know, the tail of a dragon or something." She shook her head. "And with gods it's even worse. They're always swapping jobs and aspects and identities so much it's a wonder they can stay conscious, let alone function. I mean, take Artemis. She went from multi-breasted fertility goddess to virgin huntress in barely three centuries. Or else the mortals will give you an extra name, and the next thing you know you're split up into two entirely different entities. Hard to see why anyone would want the job, really, if you didn't get all the power along with it."

"I didn't think gods and fairies hung out together," said Chee, grabbing more bottles off a shelf at random and pouring them into a glass.

"Sure, there's lots of overlap. Look at Titania the Titan. Lots of gods got their starts as little place spirits or concept imps. And vise versa, too - if you're a god and too many people forget your name, you either get folded up into a different deity, or you end up just a spot in the Greenwood like poor Jenny Greenteeth. So anyway, Egypt had *lots* of different gods of the dead, but not all of them necessarily at the same time and the same place, so ... oh, what's the use explaining anything to you, Chee, you're halfway soused already."

"Am not!" Chee cried out indignantly, setting the empty glass down on the bar. He grabbed a bottle and came back to stand beside her. "Anyways, it's gotta be almost showtime. Let's get a move on. Did I mention this place gives me the creeps?"

"Well of course it does," said Lilith matter-of-factly. "The blood of the man you killed is still wet downstairs, and it wants payback. That ought to help get this particular god's attention, though. Now clean up the mess and let's get started," for the bottle had slipped from Chee's hand at her words.

Unfortunately, whatever it was that Lilith had drawn on the ground was at the extreme limit Daniel could see through the louver. Ken, on the outside, could see a bit more. But they both could see the small dark object that she pulled out of the pocket of her jeans. Daniel stiffened, and his hand reached out for it in spite of himself. Hand in hand with Chee she faced the

mural, and as she swept the stone in the shape of an arch it began to glow green in her hand. Then she started to chant, and although the language she spoke was not English, Daniel could understand every word. Halfway through her recitation, the clock on the table began to chime midnight.

"I am Lilith, Queen of the Dark Wood and the Green Wood, Suzerain of the Castle of Lures, High Priestess of Atlantis, Guardian of the Celestial Garden of Jade, and Rememberer of the Forgotten Peoples. Here on this last full moon before midsummer, Hekate's time, time of gateways, I call upon the power of the Morcan! Stone of stones, gateway and barrier, bridge between light and darkness, pivot between two worlds, circle's end and beginning, I call on thee from this place sacred in memory to Hapi, the great river Nile, to open this gate to its other banks in the twilight realm.

"Across the worlds I call forth Wapwawet, Opener of Ways, He who Separated Earth from Sky, Lord of the Necropolis, Breaker of the Mouths of the Dead, God with the sharp arrow that is more powerful than the gods. Oh Protector of the Pharaoh, I call upon thee with the Summer King at my side, still fresh with the scent of the blood of the enemy he hath slain. Come through the path we have made for thee, Treader of New Roads. See what we offer in tribute to your loyalty, Lord of Abydos, if you guard this tether from the Twilight Realms to the Lands beneath the Sun. From of old we..."

Lilith's chant faltered as the echoes from the last stroke of midnight faded. Daniel and Ken couldn't see the mural, but they could tell that some kind of light was now pouring off it, or perhaps not light but rather a shining darkness. Suddenly, just beyond the range of his vision, Daniel sensed a Presence enter the room and fill it the way eternity fills a home where someone has just died. Ken, able to see a bit more from his angle, clutched Daniel's arm like a vise. Chee, trembling visibly as he held Lilith's hand, whispered, "Um, that's not white, that's black, right Lil?"

Lilith's only response was to speed up her chanting a fraction. *"Oh great lord Anubis, Lord of the Hallowed Land, Awakener of the Soul of the Dead, He Who Weighs the Hearts of Men, Conductor of Souls, greetings. The Summer King and I welcome thee with..."*

Lilith's speech was cut short by a growl so low it seemed at the edge of human hearing, more like a distant earthquake than something you could imagine being produced by a throat. The growl turned into a voice that seemed again too low to be heard, but rather had to be sensed through the vibrations picked up through Daniel's hands and feet as he knelt in terror behind the door.

I am not interested in your schemes, Changeling. Things that have been properly buried should have no wish to be raised up again. Leave us in peace to follow Osiris in his boat that travels through Tuat under the earth forever.

Lilith licked her lips. *"Overseer of the Mysteries of the Tomb, Dweller in the Mummy Chamber, the people have forgotten thy ways. They no longer seek the proper guides to lead them through the land of the dead. With your help we can ..."*

The Presence barked once, so loudly it seemed as if the universe had stopped briefly and then started again. Daniel could not tell whether the sound meant laughter or sorrow.

You speak of things you do not understand, Ageless one. You toss hearts as if they were Senet sticks, but you have no comprehension of that with which you play. There is no lack of hearts that come to us in the land beneath the earth. The Jaws of Ammut do not go hungry.

Lilith frowned, and her voice sounded almost petulant to Daniel. *"He Who is Upon the Mountain, listen to what I will bring to pass for you..."*

Suddenly Master Chee took a step toward the mural, unwillingly, as if he was being drawn by wires. It was clear now that the Presence was addressing only him, ignoring Lilith entirely, and her smooth brow knitted with rage.

Listen to me well, Summer King. The scales that will weigh your heart are already set to swinging in the halls of Ma'at. The feather your heart will be measured against is clutched in the goddesses' hand lest a breeze should blow it away. If your heart should sink the scale, I will pluck it up and drop it in the mouth of the beast Ammut, and you shall be no more. Consider your actions well, Summer King.

Chee stumbled backwards and shook himself. Lilith looked as if she was about to say something, then thought better of it.

Changeling, your plans are not well made. The time when the mortals will bend to your will draws to an end, and even now you are watched by your foes. You too should consider your actions. Do not attempt this passage again.

As suddenly as the room had seemed overfull of Presence, it now seemed abruptly empty, as if it was a rag that had been squeezed. Daniel gasped for breath, and Ken's head sank to the floor as if it had been dropped from a height.

The look on Lilith's face was one of cold fury. "That whelp! That mangy cur! Oh, I'll chain him in a doghouse and throw bones for him to chew after I come into my kingdom! Try the passage again? Soon I'll be strong enough to get a line out to Ptah or somebody else willing to deal, and when I do..." She grasped a metal chair-back with a slim white hand, her knuckles quivering, and Daniel could see red rust eating across its surface from underneath her fingers. A second later there was a loud snap, and the chair back shattered into fragments.

"I thought you said you never met a god who wasn't a sucker for sacrifices," said Chee truculently, leaning heavily on his cane and breathing hard.

"Maybe not the death gods. I suppose they must get sated," Lilith admitted, beginning to pace back and forth. Then "Gods!" she burst out suddenly, in the same tone of voice that other women would say 'Men!' "At least a fairy would have been polite

and listened to my offer. And he would have had to give me something, too, to pay back for the gate and the offerings and..." her eyes narrowed suddenly. "Wait a minute, he did give me something. Right at the end." Her eyes darted around the room. "*Even now you are watched...* Chee, grab that stick of yours and check that door. We may have some company." She smiled an arctic smile.

Ken and Daniel were already scrambling down the corridor before Chee could take a step in their direction. Ken shoved open the door to the ladies' room and flicked on the light switch, then dove across the hall into the storage room behind Daniel. "He'll look in there first," he whispered as Daniel pulled him up onto the tabletop.

Outside the window, the ladder was gone. They could see it across the alley on their balcony, leaning against the brick wall, a thousand miles away.

"Hide!" hissed Ken.

The storeroom, which had looked so packed with junk before, suddenly seemed as barren of decent hiding places as an empty closet. Ken found a table on its side and curled up behind it, and Daniel tried to squeeze himself into a rusty locker filled with mops. They could hear footsteps moving down the corridor, and once again, as he had under the waterfall, Daniel had the panicked sense of a nightmare from which he could not wake up. He tried to force himself out of the world, and suddenly felt a wave of sleep swirling around his ankles, then rising to his

waist, rolling over his head so that he was forced to close his eyes, and then just as suddenly receding. He blinked several times, but nothing seemed to have changed about the room. He felt light-headed, though, as if a sneeze might propel him to the ceiling.

Then the doorknob turned, the door opened, and Master Chee was standing in the doorway shining the flashlight on his rifle over every part of the room. Daniel shut his eyes as the light passed across him, waiting for the bullets to follow.

The next thing he heard were footsteps walking away, and Chee's voice calling out "Nothing back here, Lil! Guess I'm not the only one who's paranoid, huh?"

Daniel let out the breath he'd been holding, but that was the only movement he made for several more minutes while he waited for the two footsteps go back down the steps, and then for several more minutes of silence. Outside in the mural room they could hear Chee's and Lilith's voices arguing indistinctly for a while, then silence. They waited for the silence to settle for over ten minutes before Ken finally unfolded himself from his hiding place. He motioned to Daniel to stay put and crept out of the door, then came back in a minute later carrying a wet paper towel to wipe the sweat off his forehead.

"Coast is clear," he said. "That was - odd. I might go so far as to say inexplicable. I was going to try firing off a spell, but my methods are pretty slow and I doubt I could stop bullets on my best day. You have any idea how he missed us?"

Daniel had an idea, but it wasn't something he felt he could say out loud without more testing, so he just shook his head. Ken shrugged. "Well, let's see if we can get out from downstairs."

With all its neon signs and gimmicks shut down, the bar was almost as eerie as the room upstairs, but the headlights on the street outside were reassuring. At the bottom of the stairs, Daniel was unable to restrain himself any longer from asking Ken what he had seen coming out of the mural.

"Big black dog," said Ken. "That's my story and I'm sticking to it."

Daniel paused on the bottom step. *"That corpse you planted last year in your garden,"* he said, *"Has it begun to sprout? Will it bloom this year? Or has the sudden frost disturbed its bed? Oh keep the Dog far hence, that's friend to men, or with his nails he'll dig it up again!"*

"What the heck are you talking about, Danny?" asked Ken, his hands on his hips.

"It's from 'The Waste Land.' Sorry." Daniel shrugged, embarrassed. "It's not like I did all that well on my poetry final, but ever since I got off the bus here in Crossroads, lines from the poems have been bubbling out of my subconscious more and more. The prof said in that bit that Eliot was talking about Anubis reassembling the corpse of Osiris."

Ken shook his head. "You're nuts, Dan." He hesitated, staring out the dark window. "You know, it wasn't as bad as I would have expected, if you'd told me beforehand I was going to see a Lord of Death. It wasn't scary on purpose, if you know what I mean. Not like 'I'm the big death god, everybody fear me.' Scary because of course you could tell he could annihilate you if he wanted to, but still - I guess if I'd just died and he was the first creature I saw, he'd seem like a pretty decent guide."

"You boys sure could use a few more o' them guides," said a voice from a darkened corner of the room. Ken and Daniel both jumped as if the words were bullets. They turned to see Jay Fry hobbling out of the back of the bar toward them.

At second glance, Daniel realized that he couldn't be positive it was actually Jay. In the darkness he looked wrinkled and ancient, and his voice sounded much too old. His clothes seemed ragged, and he carried a twisted staff and leaned on it heavily.

"You two been lucky tonight so far, boys. Full moon afore midsummer's, barriers real thin, all sorts o' strange things could be acomin' through. Tell ya what, gimme a shot o' rum and I'll give ya some advice."

Daniel glanced at Ken to see what his roommate thought, and Jay tapped his cane on the floor impatiently. "Don' take all night thinkin' 'bout it, boys. Not like I axed ya ta find me a phoenix egg or a kelpie horn. We's standin' in a bar, ya know."

Ken walked behind the bar and grabbed a glass and a bottle off the shelf. He was about to take it over to Jay when Daniel came over too, fished his wallet out of his pocket, and laid a five dollar bill on the cash register. He shrugged at Ken. "I figure we've broken enough laws already tonight. No reason to add theft to the list."

Ken said nothing, just walked over and handed the glass and bottle to Jay, made a little bow, and stepped back. Jay threw his head back and gulped it down.

"Don't get ta do this often enough anymore," he sighed. "Anyways, wizard, this time yer friend's smarter'n you. Acksherly, there ain't no such thing as stealin' if ya look at it right. Ya always gotta pay fer everythin' ya take, and money's jus' usually the least 'spensive thing ta pay with." He poured another fingerfull of rum into the glass, swirled it around, and held it above his head to look at it from beneath. Then he put the glass back onto a table and stared at them unnervingly, leaning on his cane.

"Promised ya advice and advice I got, so take the stuffin' outta yer ears and listen. This here's the real deal. That changeling queen and the old Obron, they's playin' a big game fer keeps over twilight-side, y'unnerstand? That country ain't like this 'un, ain't no maps tellin' things where they oughta be, so they's shiftin' round all the time. But that stone she got, it can tell that world how it oughta fit itself together. Bridges and boundaries, that's what ya can make with it. When her

servants swiped that rock from the palace sixteen years ago and got it ta her somehow, she put up a fence ta guard herself. Now every time she gets one o' them gates open and the otherside folk loyal ta her, she can lengthen that wall she got set up twixt her and the king's people jus' like blowin' up a balloon. First it was just defense, but now she's got so much o' the kingdom, he's the one in the shrinkin' box, not her."

"Sir," said Ken respectfully, "what would you suggest we do to stop her?"

"Stop her?" Daniel turned to stare at his roommate. "Maybe we should talk about this a bit. It's a civil war in a distant country, right? And if she's got gods on her side..."

"Plus at least one god who isn't, right Mr. Fry?" said Ken. "We know she's bad news, Danny. What else do we need?"

Jay let out a wheezing laugh. "I'm thinkin' you two are too far in already ta be backin' out now. She or one o' her flunkies gonna be comin' after you soon enough. Watchu need is allies. You best be gettin' ahead of her through one o' them doors she been openin' to even the ante 'fore she catch up with you."

Then, abruptly, he was gone, as suddenly as if he'd been a trick of light. "Whoah," said Daniel. He went to the back of the bar where Jay first appeared and stared stupidly at a dark patch on the floor. "Where'd he go? And do you have any idea what he was talking about?"

"My suspicion is that that wasn't actually Jay we were just talking to," said Ken. "And I'm counting on you to figure out what he meant. Try not to get any of that on your shoes, ok? At least if Lilith was right when she said it's looking for payback."

Daniel took a step backward. "Blood?"

"Of course. I bet it attracts them."

Daniel turned around. Ken was down on his hands and knees, shining his flashlight along the floor. He looked up and shrugged apologetically. "I was planning on doing some searching earlier, if I hadn't gotten that little invitation to visit the police station."

"What are you looking for?" asked Daniel nervously. "Don't you think we're way overdue to skedaddle??"

"In a minute. The police must have shut this place down once they'd hauled the body away, so I don't see how anybody could have had time to sweep up, and - aha! Here we go." Ken pulled a box out of his backpack, opened it, and removed a pair of tweezers. He used them to pick up something from underneath one of the tables and held it in the beam of the flashlight, staring at it intently.

"What is it?" asked Daniel, kneeling beside his friend.

"One of those little things Mr. Santiago threw at Doug Chee. Take a look."

He handed the tweezers and flashlight to Daniel. At first glance it looked like a bean or a seed, but when his work

experience of the last month kicked in, he realized that it was,
in fact, a chocolate-covered raisin.

Chapter 8

*Not as thine, not as thine was our mother, a blossom of
flowering seas,
Clothed round with the world's desire as with raiment,
and fair as the foam,
And fleeter than kindled fire, and a goddess, and mother of
Rome.*

"Hymn to Proserpine"

Algernon Charles Swinburne

It was after two when Daniel finally spread on another layer of burn cream and stumbled into bed, his back still aching, his side bruised and sore, and so tired he could barely stagger. He'd managed to convince Ken that they should return the ladder to the yard where they'd found it before they turned in for the night. Ken had been reluctant to take to the streets again with the possibility of the police and Lilith and Master Chee and the Wild Hunt and who knew what else out looking for them, but Daniel had pointed out that anyone would be able to look up the alleyway the next morning and see the ladder sitting there on the balcony. Besides, it would be less dangerous to return if its owners hadn't missed it yet.

The trip there and back had gone uneventfully, except for once when Ken had to grab Daniel to stop him from walking into the canal because he was falling asleep on his feet. When they

returned, they saw that Sondra must have come home and gone straight to bed, because Ken's car keys were lying on top of a crumpled *Faust!* program on his futon.

Daniel entered his bed cautiously, afraid his aching side would prevent him from falling asleep. The instant his head touched his pillow, though, his dreams reached out once again and swallowed him alive.

When Daniel dreamed of flying it was never like he was Superman, able to zoom effortlessly by the power of his thoughts. Instead, he would discover or remember in his dream that there was a certain trick of holding his breath that could make him as weightless as a blown-up birthday balloon. He could push off from the floor and never touch it again, climb up a bookcase by paddling up the shelves with his fingertips until he could perch on the top, then launch himself off for an aerial circuit around the room. Just a tap on the top of a door or a lampshade would be enough to keep him airborne, and as he recovered his dream legs he could do more difficult maneuvers like launching himself from one end of the room to sail over to the opposite wall, then curling his body around like a swimmer making a turn and push off again in the opposite direction.

The room he was flying about in was his living room at home. His mother was sitting in the center of the room, dipping her wedding ring into a pan of soapsuds and blowing enormous bubbles that floated up to where Daniel was performing his aerial

acrobatics. He perched on top of a chest of drawers to look more closely at one.

Inside the bubble was a unicorn, rearing and prancing and shaking its mane. Another bubble held a beautiful shimmering swan, another a dancing ballerina, and another a great oak tree with heavy branches. Each one was so beautiful that Daniel longed to reach out and touch them, but he knew they were only soap and would break.

The bubble with the unicorn was drifting nearer, and in his anxiousness to keep it intact, Daniel pushed off from his perch and floated up to grab onto the top of an open door. The unicorn bubble followed him, and if Daniel hadn't needed to hold his breath to fly he would have called out to the creature to be careful as it shook its head, because its horn was coming too close to the bubble's side...

Then the bubble exploded, not with a silent pop but with the roar and concussion of a grenade. Daniel flew back off the top of the door and only just managed to push down on a picture frame nearby to keep himself from hitting the floor. Not hitting the floor was crucially important, he knew. Now other soap bubbles were exploding as well, and Daniel had to push off from the wall across the room to try to reach another perch, desperately scrabbling at the ceiling to try to change his direction as he found himself heading right towards a huge bubble that held a shining castle, bedecked with pennants that snapped in the breeze like guns. Bubbles exploded all around him...

And now the bubbles were foam that Skeeble was blowing off a mug of beer she was holding. She raised the glass high and called out,

"All hail to my rescuer! Without him I'd be turned inside-out.

Hail to him who saved my neck and stashed me in this great dream hide-out!"

She upended the mug, took a big swallow, then gagged and spat it out again theatrically. "Bleach! What have you done with the beer in this dreaming? It's all for tasting like ditch water!"

"S

orry," said Daniel, unsteadily checking to make sure he was standing on his own two feet now. "Um, I don't like beer very much. It gives me a bad reaction with my meds, so I never got the taste for it."

Sk

eeble tugged on her earlobes and muttered, "All the young men there are in the world, and it's the only one who doesn't like beer whose dreams I'm bestuck in." Then she forced a smile. "But Skeeble is ever so grateful for the rescuing and the hiding and all. It's a fine safe dream you're for having here, fine and safe."

"I

s it?" asked Daniel, looking around the dream room they were in. It was the bedroom where he'd grown up, all run to wild. Ivy curled up the sides of his dresser, his old bed was a forest of moss and curled ferns, and his closet door hung between two gnarled tree trunks. Skeeble was sitting beside what had once been a small table where Daniel as a child had pored laboriously over his drawings, but which in this room had metamorphosed into a great tree stump. The walls were made of waving leaves that covered the world beyond.

Su

ddenly he remembered what he'd rescued Skeeble from, and whirled to face the nis again. "Where is she?" he cried. "The girl who was with you before. I never even knew her name! What happened to her?"

"G

one!" wailed Skeeble, hanging her head in sorrow. "All up and gone and taken away! That nasty nasty Drallo came and took her!" Her eyes suddenly narrowed. "You wouldn't have been all be-followed when you were for visiting us last time, would you? No one had ever found us save the brownie and the frisky kittie, and you."

"I

don't think so," said Daniel. Then he remembered how Kim Netherby's raven had been flying toward him right before he found

the silver forest the first time. "Umm, maybe, possibly. I didn't realize at the time you were hiding."

"S

keebble and Lily have been doing nothing but hiding for positively bushels of years!" cried the nis. "Ever since poor Skeeble listened to that rat-taster, that mossy-nosed sweat-dealing toad-peeler, that..."

"W

ho?" interrupted Daniel. "Who are you talking about? Is Lily the girl's name? COULD YOU PLEASE TAKE A MINUTE TO TELL ME WHAT'S GOING ON?" Since they were in Daniel's dream, the force of his question was strong enough to ruffle Skeeble's hair and bend her ears behind her. She grabbed onto the tree stump for support.

"You're wanting the tale?" she asked, apparently astonished at the idea. "Well, you could have just asked Skeeble all civil-like, instead of all this yelling and bellowing. Sure and I'll be telling you, if you'll be having a seat."

Abashed, Daniel sat down on the pile of leaves that had once been his bed, and Skeeble tucked her legs up beneath her on the tree stump and began, twisting her earlobes around her fingers as she spoke.

"It was all beginning, oh, more than a score of years back the way you Daysiders reckon. The one you call Lilith, now, she was all scheming for becoming a Power over Twilight side. She

was always for dallying with you border skimmers so as to pick up aspects - your Andersen called her the Snow Queen, and for that Keats she was La Belle Dame Sans Merci. Maleficent. Dolores, Lady of Pain. And she had other names as well that weren't even so nice as those. So anyways, she was all picking up fey supporters. The reason being, twixt you and me and this stump, rumors had been whispering for the last handful of centuries that the old king's been gathering a few too many bats a-twittering inside his crown, and I for one wouldn't be saying they were untruthful."

"This king," interrupted Daniel, "does he appear sometimes as a giant swan?"

"Swan, firefly, oak tree, giant badger --- the Oberon would appear as whatever took his fancy, mortling. But as I was for saying, this Lilith was all for leading a great revolt against the Seelie court."

"Sorry to be interrupting so much, but I have lots of questions," said Daniel apologetically. "I've heard a couple of people say THE Oberon. Is that his name or his title?"

"Well, maybe once it was a name, but now it's a title," Skeeble grinned. "For long years now what mortals come seeking the fairy king are all expecting to be finding him under that name, and whilst dealing with the Twilight Realms what you're seeking often enough brings about what you'll be finding."

"All right." Daniel nodded. "Then you used the word 'Seelie.' Lily said that before too. In the legends, the Seelie

are the friendly fairies and the Unseelie are the bad ones, right?"

Skeeble's lower jaw dropped so far her pointed chin touched her chest. Then she yanked on her earlobes with both fists and let loose a wild bray of laughter that made the leaves of Daniel's dream-house dance.

"And is THAT what you mortals are for saying about us in these days, Border-Skimmer? It's no wonder she claimed you'd be like babes for the conquering!" Tears of mirth rolled down her cheeks. "Listen and listen well, mortal, or I wouldn't give a rotten walnut for your life's worth. There is one difference between the Seelie and the Unseelie and one difference ONLY, mark you well my words. A Seelie has to make bargains. Has to, has to, has to! The exchange may not be fair by mortal standards, but for every gift we MUST be giving a counter-gift, for every slight a punishment, or most times the imbalance comes swinging round and knocks us clean butterfly-over-teacup. One of us could no more accept a gift we couldn't repay than let a slight go unpunished or cast a blight on one who'd never done us harm. Everything we touch is turn-about, turn-about, get what we give and give what we get. Are you for understanding?"

"I think so," said Daniel. "So the Unseelie aren't bound to make exchanges? Which makes them the more dangerous ones."

At this Skeeble burst into fresh gales of laughter, until she had to lean forward and grab a handful of Daniel's nightshirt to dab her streaming eyes.

"Ach, mortal, I haven't waxed so merry since I was for seeing old Lord Ustart flung off his horse and getting his head all bestuck in a rabbit hole," the nis finally gasped. "Have all mortals turned as bewitless as you over the last score of score of years? Aye, it's true that an Unseelie Red-cap or Ettin could be all a-killing you if he took a mind to it, and with great dispatch at that. But after he did that, it's only merely dead you'd be. He couldn't be holding you prisoner for seventy times seven mortal lifetimes, or putting your entire kingdom to sleep for a hundred years -- it'd take a Seelie to be accomplishing THAT!"

"Umm, I see," said Daniel, uncomfortably. "Maybe that's why I fall asleep all the time - my mother insulted a Seelie or something. I'll give both sides a wide berth, then. Anyway, you were saying there was a rebellion against the king?"

"Ah yes, my tale. Where was I?" Skeeble stroked her earlobes while she considered. "The rebellion. Well, the king's councilors got wind of it, didn't they? So they were all for counterattacking before the rebels was ready. The ringleaders got all becaptured, Lilith no exception. Some was for saying she should get all prisoned away for eternity, and others was for saying she should get her head snicked off, and some was even for saying as she should be ground up into Glamour and scattered in the Great Murk. But the king maybe could have been having a soft spot for her, like as many men had been having before. He dusted off an old punishment as hadn't been used in a score of scores,

and he up and decreed, 'If she loves the human world so much, let her go live there! It'll be a Changeling's lot for this one, and mayhap after she's had a good steaming lifetimesful of the Dayside, she'll be more peaceable-like when she comes back to the Shining Lands.'"

"So the king be-prodded her and be-bundled her and be-stuffed her into a serviceable Changeling, and he stripped out her memories of Faerie so as to keep her from making mischief, and then he appointed two smartish young fair folk to be carrying her off to her new home and bringing about the switch. All the Doors Between was shut up tight, so he used the Morcan for to be making a tiny Threshold to package up and take with us and slip through once we reached the proper spot."

"Us?" asked Daniel. "YOU were one of the ones who brought Lilith here?"

"Aye," said Skeeble miserably. "This unlucky nis accepted the king's mission, and the dwarf Drallo was the other. We picked up the baby-looking-thing that was now Lilith, wrapped in a blanket betwixt us, and off we started over the Green Lands and the Wet Lands and the Dry Lands and the Hot and Cold Countries and the Place of Broken Things and all the other Territories between, towards the far-off spot we'd been ordered to set up the Threshold and go Dayside to find a babe to switch her with.

"And oh! but how that Changeling babe soon weighed like a well full of stones! We were both for staggering before we'd traveled half the distance. And that was when I should have been

suspecting as for how Drallo had been her servant all along, because he up and suggested, 'Why don't we just be dropping her off right here, then skedaddle back to the king and tell him the mission went all splendid-like? He's too daff to ever figure out.'"

" 'And have one of her followers find her and pour her memories into her again, so as she'd be following us back to court in a few shakes leading another army? Not likely!' I cried, looking all suspicious-like at Drallo. For I was ever loyal to the king, even if he was daffer than a moth in a lighthouse. So Drallo hefted up his side of the blanket and trudged on, deep in scheming as I should have guessed. Because after another furlong he piped up, 'All right then, but why take her all that way into the wilderness? Couldn't we be finding a nearer place where the border is thin-like to pop on through?'"

"I should've been explaining to you, Danny, that the barrier betwixt Dayside and Twilightside isn't all the same thickness every which-where. Places where all the mortals are thinking about is hunger, or money, or that science-stuff you've come up with, those are all for being a powerful far trek from the lands where we live, and that's where the king had told us to go. And for certain sure, if we'd gone the whole way like he'd ordered us, to some city where the only thinkings were of steel or computers, the babe we carried might have gotten all grown up without a speck of Glamour to remind her of her true nature or let her be grabbing some of her old power. But Skeeble, alack

alack, Skeeble was weak! She listened to wicked Drallo's suggestings. She helped him seek out the thinnest spot in the barrier they could be finding, and then she helped him set up the threshold and pop on through and find a likely mortal babe and make the switch. Then she helped him carry the tiny mortal creature back Twilightside, and after that she watched him high-tail off over the hills and far away with the king's Threshold, and she realized that she'd be the one who'd have to go back and pay the piper's son. Too late I was all befiguring out how Drallo was her servant. I couldn't go back to court because the king might be daff but his advisors weren't, and once they knew Drallo had shaken his boot heels at me, they'd ask questions till they found out what I'd been talked into. And I couldn't go over to Lilith's side, because Drallo would be sure to tell her other friends how I'd refused to let her go in the Fey lands where she'd have been able to regain her true shape and power. The only thing to be doing was for hiding from both sides in the Border Realm with the babe we'd taken from dayside, the babe which no one had seemed to have given much thought to, but there I was holding her. And it's there we've dwelt from that day to this, when Drallo came with an army of spriggans and took her away, for why Skeeble wishes she knew, alackalackadaisy."

"So Lilith is Lily's changeling?" Skeeble nodded, and Daniel rustled his feet through the leaves while he considered the story. "How do you suppose Lily wound up in so many of my

dreams?" he asked at length. "Most of my life I was two states away from where Lilith was growing up."

Skeebble shrugged. "It sounds to me as if your state of mind wasn't all too terribly far off, mortling. Distances for you aren't the same as distances for us, and Dreams are odd things."

Daniel tried to think of other questions. "So if Lilith was in the form of a mortal baby, how'd she get her powers back?"

"Skeebble doesn't know for certain, but she can guess. This town she was brought up in, was it a place where folks are loyal to facts or fancy? From how thin the border was where we went through, I'm guessing it was a spot where the merchants were all for shining up dreams and setting them in every shop window. Is that not so?"

Daniel thought of the stores of Crossroads, and nodded.

"Places like that are full of stray sparks of Glamour, and once she'd picked up enough of them she'd have been able at least to get her memory back. Not her powers, though, I'm thinking. Even in a town where dreams and Glamour lined the streets like dust, magic wouldn't have been working in your world any more. But that all must have been be-changed once her servants stole the Morcan."

At the word, Daniel felt his fingers tighten into fists. "What IS the Morcan?" he murmured.

Skeebble tilted her head to one side. "There's some as say it's a love-token that the Lord of the Moon threw down to court

the Lady of the Sea, and ever since then she's been reaching up to him all searching for his kiss. And there's some as say it's the only bit as is left from the world before the world before this one, and some as say it's the broken-off tip of the stalagmite that the dragon at the heart of things is all be-curved around, and some as say it's the lynch-pin that holds the balance between what's certain and what's possible."

"So how'd this big important thing get stolen?" Daniel asked. He absently rubbed the strand of hair tied around his finger, while his inward eye tried to catch the shape of a memory submerged deeper than a stone cast into the sea.

"All I know are the rumors I heard a-flying about when I fed down my ears Twilightside all stealthy-like to catch the gossip." The nis looked smug. "If there's one thing Skeeble's good at, it's listening. And what Skeeble heard is that there were two servants of Lilith's at court who came under orders, hers or Drallo's, to steal the thing, and they succeeded, but they were all being pursued into the tunnels by the Royal Hunt. But they had with them the Threshold that Drallo and I had used and Drallo had made off with. It had all beshrunken -- it was never to be used more than for the one use that the king had put into its making - but it was still big enough for them to throw the Morcan through, all be-spelled for finding its way to its new mistress. The traitors got all caught and devivicated, but she got the stone, and from what I've been hearing since then all chaos has been breaking loose Twilightside."

"Heh!" said Daniel abruptly. The last piece of the puzzle had fallen into place. "I know how she got it." And he quickly filled Skeeble in on the dream that was his earliest memory, and the stone whose pressure in his palm he'd never stopped longing for.

"I couldn't remember what it was," he explained breathlessly, "but I always knew that I'd once had something infinitely magical and valuable, and that it had been taken from me. And now that I come to think of it, that's probably when Sleep began pulling me so hard. Like I knew that's where the wonderful thing had come from, and I was always yearning to go back and search for it."

Skeeble's pointed jaw had dropped down almost as far as the bottoms of her ears. "YOUR dream had the Morcan pass through it?" she whispered. "But I always wondered... wait a bit..."

She jumped off the stump she'd been sitting on, bent over, wrapped her earlobes around both hands, and dug her fingers under one of the stump's roots. Then she strained with arms and head pulling up so mightily that her eyes bulged and her ears seemed to stretch to twice their normal length. Slowly the stump inched out of the ground, followed by a tangle of roots. Then the nis began tugging on the roots, and as she did so the whole room began to unravel like knitting being undone. Before long they were floating in blackness, and where the roots had been there was a spot of something different, the color a bright light makes inside of your eyelids when you close them.

"It's still here," breathed Skeeble. "Growing all be-tangled in your dreams for all these many years! A doorway singing in your blood -- no wonder you're a Border Skimmer all yearning to go Twilightside, mortal! You're for having our old Threshold all bestuck in your dreams!"

"Is that good or bad?" Daniel asked uncertainly.

"Ach, some of both, some of both. The good part is that if you practice in and about the Border Realms, you may be up for doing some odd sorts of dreamtime tricksiness."

"Great! Sounds like fun. And the bad?"

The nis twisted her face in a grimace. "That's what may be making me go out looking for a safer hideout than here, mortling. Once the Lady gets wind of you and sends her nightmares a-hunting, it's out of your brain and around your neck that their tentacles will be wrapped right quick enough. Poets are all for saying that sleep is a little bit like death, but yours will be a lot like, indeed indeedy deed."

Book 3

THEIR HUNGRY, THIRSTY ROOTS

Chapter 1

When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it; but when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind.

Popular Lectures and Addresses

William Thomson, Lord Kelvin

Kenneth Hurosaka had never owned an alarm clock. He was one of those lucky ones with the gift of being able to tell his body precisely when he wanted it to awaken, give or take no more than a minute. Daniel always told him that if part of his sleeping mind was still able to keep track of the time, then he wasn't sleeping hard enough.

Recently, Ken had been finding that the more secrets the voice in the static told him, the less sleep he needed. At seven

a.m. the morning after his arrest, his eyes snapped wide open like Bela Lugosi's in *Dracula*. Once he had risen, his morning routine always took seventeen and a half minutes if he was undisturbed, give or take half a minute. Each morning he would fold the futon back into a love seat, visit the bathroom, go into the kitchen and make himself a bowl of Captain Crunch, then visit the bathroom again to brush his teeth and see to the rest of his day's grooming. On this particular morning, as he'd been doing more and more often recently, he concluded by plopping down on his love seat again, donning headphones, and turning on the television to a field of random snow.

From the crack between the seat and the wall he pulled out his busted remote, a stubby pencil, and a worn Far Side notebook. Then he leaned forward until his forehead almost touched the screen and began murmuring to himself, pressing buttons on the remote and scribbling things down.

An eavesdropper would have heard, "Next up is eighty-eight. Eighty-eight, what is that? The head of a snowman parade? You can do better than that. Her tête-à-tête ate at eight too. No! Oh, piano keys of course, so musical associations with range and virtuosity." He jotted something down in tiny script. "And they look like eyes, maybe, making sure you stay in line. Let's see, tarot factors are Justice multiplied by Strength. A police state, maybe? Eight for the April rainers, eleven for the eleven that went to heaven. Definitely some kind of certainty in conformity, then. That's good." He turned a page. "Now eighty-

nine, first one since thirteen to be both Fibonacci and Prime, that's gotta mean something big..."

"Didn't your mother ever tell you you'd hurt your eyes if you sat too close to a television set?" asked Daniel, appearing suddenly on the arm of the sofa beside him. Ken dropped his pencil and shot into the air as if he'd been jolted with a cattle prod.

"How..?" he sputtered, looking around wildly "where..?"

Daniel indulged himself in the luxury of laughing with a touch of hysteria while he unfolded himself from the couch's arm. "You should see your face right now!" he chortled. "That's for all those times you tagged me playing Killer." Daniel had never been the stealthy one when his friends stalked each other through Clark Hall in their late night games of freshman year.

Ken managed to extricate himself from the tangle of cords between the love seat and the television, trying to regain his dignity. He scrutinized Daniel closely. "I know my peripheral vision isn't that bad," he muttered. He stared some more, then nodded decisively. "Danny, may Sherlock Holmes forgive me, but I've been getting into the habit recently of skipping over the improbable and heading straight for the impossible. Shall I presume, then, that I'm not the only one who's been dabbling in Things Man Was Not Meant To Know?"

Daniel gave one final hiccupping laugh, still internally exulting, *it worked!* He took a deep breath to calm himself down and nodded gravely. "If by that you mean have I figured out how

to turn myself invisible, I believe the answer is yes. Actually, I think I've been able to do it unconsciously for a while, and maybe that's why Master Chee couldn't see us last night in the storeroom, or Lilith and her dwarf in the waterfall. My dream last night filled me in on a few reasons why I'm such a funny sleeper. I've got something stuck in my dreams that, well, that makes me go under deeper and harder than most people. I'm not sure if it's what's caused the narcolepsy, or if I was never really narcoleptic at all, but this made me act like I was."

Ken was leaning against the kitchen archway with his fingers templed, staring off into the distance. When Daniel hesitated he barked "Go on."

Daniel swallowed another burst of laughter and continued. "So anyway, this morning while I was putting on my burn cream and getting dressed, I was thinking about last night, and I wondered if there was some sort of side path on the road to sleep that could have gotten us suspended just outside the world. So I tried it, and the next thing I knew I was, well, floating. It was like one of those things you remember in dreams, you know? As if I'd always known how to do this, and it was a question of following the right steps, holding my breath in just the right way. It's hard to describe - as if I was dreaming the real world, maybe. The colors were all smeary. Does any of this make sense?"

Ken made a waving-off gesture suggesting that the expectation of anything making sense at this stage was the worst

kind of absurdity. After a short pause, Daniel went on.

"Anyway, I tried to walk, but I felt as if I only weighed a few ounces, like a balloon, you know? And I didn't weigh enough to get traction on the floor. I was standing in the hall when I did this, so I jumped up to the ceiling and grabbed the top sill of the hall closet to pull myself along to the front room. Then I pushed off the wall and landed on the side of your couch while you were muttering, while I tried to figure out how to wake up in the right sequence to get back to the world. Then once I figured it out, I got to see you vault up into the air like a spooked pigeon. And that's all. It's kind of depressing to have all my weight back, though." He crossed his arms in front of him and rubbed his neck, wincing when he touched his burned shoulder.

Ken took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, that could be a useful ability," he said thoughtfully. "Try it again. I'll watch and tell you what it looks like."

Daniel nodded. He put a hand on the television set to steady himself, then shut his eyes. *Come dragon, come lord dragon, come to me*, he thought. The trick was almost like imagining fourth-dimensional space - to choose a particular vector to fall asleep into, not downwards or inwards or sideways but parallel to all three. But after a few moments he found that the swirl of sleep had eluded him once again, and he opened his eyes. "Apparently I haven't quite mastered it yet," he said apologetically, "but you do agree there was something weird about my sneaking up on you just now, right?"

"Agreed," said Ken with a touch of annoyance in his voice. "Look, you don't need to keep worrying that I won't believe you when you tell me something ridiculous, all right? I'm done with skepticism. You could tell me that Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster were dancing the mazurka out in the alley, and I'd run to the balcony to take a look." He made a painful effort at smiling. "Anyway, I'm sure you'll nail it if you keep practicing. Perhaps you can't phase out when somebody's looking right at you. That would strain credibility, and at least in *my* experience, credibility doesn't seem to be something that magic likes to strain. It likes to keep what spies would call plausible deniability."

Daniel frowned. "What about what we eavesdropped on last night? Or that thing growing out of the chocolate raisin you described to me? Where's the plausible deniability in that?"

"Oh yeah, those." Ken ran his finger along the stucco stubbling of the arch beside him. "Maybe it's just *my* magic that can't strain credibility. A possibility I've considered is that my old skepticism may be...holding me back somehow. Maybe deep down I can't stop believing in the old laws of physics, so I can't do anything magically that would violate them. If I could just get myself to believe more..."

He sighed. From the bathroom came the sound of running water.

"Sondra's up," Ken observed.

"Oh jeez, she must still be furious about me cutting out on her last night," said Daniel unhappily. "I'm not ready to face her angry yet. Could you do me a favor and explain why I had to run out on her? I've got to run, I'll be late for work."

After the door had swung closed behind him, Ken gazed thoughtfully at it for a minute, then picked up his remote and notebook and sank down once again to gaze into the million shimmering dots.

Half an hour later in the candy store, Cindy leaned across the fudge mixing table to whisper furtively to Daniel, "Keep an eye on Mrs. Vanderski."

"Hunh?" Daniel whispered back.

Daniel was mixing fudge on the metal table in front of the window, while Cindy prepared the next batch. Standing there always made Daniel feel self-conscious, especially when families with children would stand just the other side of the glass, sometimes laughing and pointing as if the glass was one way and he was unable to see them just outside. But Cindy and Kate both said that part of making candy was putting on a show. Just before Cindy had sought his attention he had flipped some of the fudge into the air and let it stream down again in ribbons for the benefit of a well-dressed couple passing by. They'd looked in just in time to watch him wincing in pain, as his shoulder still hadn't forgiven him for the previous night's adventures.

Kate had apparently gotten over her original nervousness about Daniel falling asleep and burning himself, and now she let him make the candy just like any other employee. That wasn't to say he wasn't perfectly capable of burning himself even while wide awake, and his arms and hands bore several reminders of the dangers of hot utensils and molten candy. Fortunately the only snoozes that had overtaken him in the shop had been small and unnoticeable, so he felt confident that he was still on the manager's good side. Not that Kate presented much of a side for anyone to be on these days, good or otherwise -- she was spending more and more time in her small upstairs office, apparently trusting Mrs. Vanderski to keep things running smoothly in the shop. Only now the leather-faced assistant manager seemed to be absenting herself from her surroundings more and more as well. Today she sat at the cash register, fiddling with something on the counter beside her and looking puzzled, while an unsmiling Romanian restocked malted milk balls in the jars at the back of the shop.

"What's wrong with her?" Daniel whispered back to Cindy. "She's been awfully distracted lately." The fudge he was working with at the moment was supposed to have nuts in it, and he was trying to lift up the fudge with the paddles and pour the nuts over it to create patterns the way Cindy had shown him. When she did it, the nuts seemed to flow like ripples of sand on a beach, but when he did it they always ended in clumps like gravel at an off-road race track.

"I've been watching her all morning," Cindy whispered back. "She hasn't done a single thing except push buttons on that calculator. She hasn't been writing the answers down or anything. And I can't tell for sure, but I think she's been punching out the same problem over and over. Very weird."

"Didn't you say before that she was a math teacher? Why's she even using a calculator?"

Cindy snorted. "That's another thing - she always hated them in class! She used to say..."

"There you are!" Cindy and Daniel both turned to look at who had just come through the door. It was Sondra, looking like five days of bad weather. On most mornings she took half an hour just to "get her face ready to meet the day," as she put it. But on this day, she seemed to have barely had time to drag a brush through her hair. Daniel took an unconscious step behind the fudge table. He'd been wondering all day how annoyed she would be, but now he realized that she was far beyond annoyance and well into stark fury or possibly hysteria. She grabbed the counter with white knuckles and glared at Daniel.

"*Why'd you do it, Dan?* she hissed through clenched teeth. "*What did you put in those things?*"

"Hunh?" asked Daniel. "What things? Look, Ken must have told you why I had to cut out at intermission..."

"Cut out? Oh, you mean from the rehearsal. Pfeh." Sondra brushed the idea away. "I've long since given up expecting any kind of consistency or follow-through from you guys, so it's not

like I was surprised. But that was before I got *them* out. *What did you put in those things, Dan?*" She seemed to be on the verge of tears.

"Sondra, I'm sorry, but I have no idea at all what you're talking about." Daniel came closer to the front counter, his hands up in a placating gesture. "Could you just take it slowly and tell me what's going on?"

"Those flowers, you moron!" Sondra cried, raising her voice so that Mrs. Vanderski glanced up briefly, then returned her attention to her calculator. "If you didn't make them, then where did you *find* those terrible roses?"

"Well, umm." Daniel hesitated. "It wasn't exactly my idea, but that doesn't mean..."

"I suggested them,"" Cindy interrupted. "You must be Sondra, right? Dan's mentioned you and your play a bunch of times over the past few weeks, and I told him it was traditional to get roses for an actress at dress rehearsal or opening night, and these were on sale. But listen, now that I think about it, they weren't my idea either. Kate was the one. You've heard Dan talk about our boss, right? The ex-wife of Mr. Netherby? She and I were talking, well, gossiping really about Dan, and she said she'd made too many of the things and she could afford to give him a dozen at half price for the girl he had a crush on." She frowned sternly at the woman on the other side of the counter. "What was wrong with our chocolate, Sondra?"

Sondra squeezed her eyes shut tight and bit down hard on the left index finger, as if she was trying to keep herself from screaming. "The roses," she said in a harsh whisper, her eyes still shut. "I passed them around at the cast party and people were unwrapping them, but I didn't eat any myself because, well, I was still kind of miffed at you, Dan."

"It was a genuine emergency," Daniel put in apologetically.

"So Ken told me this morning. But then..." She paused for a long time, then finally opened her eyes and tossed her hair back. "No, I can't say it out loud in the daytime like this. Is this Kate person here right now? Can you get her? Is that her?" She jerked her head in the direction of Mrs. Vanderski.

"No, that's not her," Daniel answered hastily, for Sondra looked as if she was ready to start grabbing people by the throat and shaking them. "She's upstairs. I'll go and..."

Once again the bell above the door rang to announce new arrivals in the shop, and everyone turned to look at the couple who had entered. As soon as he had gotten a good look at both of them, Daniel's heart plummeted directly into his shoes.

The woman was the first to grab Daniel's attention, as she would have done for any other heterosexual, pulse-possessing male. He had never seen her before, but he knew for certain that he would have remembered her if he had. The word "blonde" seemed inadequate to describe the tawny mane that framed the woman's narrow features - a more descriptive word would have been simply "golden," gold the color of the treasure in the mythical

leprechaun's horde, perhaps, or the gold leaf painted on a religious icon resting in some czar's private gallery, or the gold thread spun from heaps of straw by an ambitious dwarf with a difficult-to-pronounce name. The rest of the woman's body seemed similarly closer to fantasy than reality, with a waist so tiny in proportion to those measurements above and below it that Daniel glanced briefly at her elbows and knees to make sure that they were made of flesh and blood and not the plastic hinges of an overgrown fashion doll.

It was when he'd managed to tear his eyes away from her to look at her partner that his stomach dropped. The bad comb-over he remembered from his childhood was now covered by an unconvincing toupee, and spider veins now traced across the ruddy face, but everything else matched his newly recovered memories from his first tour of Crossroads exactly.

"That's our boss Jack Netherby and his second wife," Cindy whispered to Daniel, and he whispered back, turning aside so as not to be seen, "We've met before. He helped his daughter steal my favorite rock when I was four."

Chapter 2

*For all the wild witches, those most noble ladies,
For all their broomsticks and their tears,
Their angry tears, are gone.*

"Lines Written in Dejection"

W.B. Yeats

Cindy looked quizzically at him, but Daniel's mind was racing. Mr. Netherby must obviously be working closely with Lilith. Had she sent her father here because she'd learned how Daniel and Ken had spied on her the previous night?

Then he forced himself to calm down. Mr. Netherby did own this business, after all, even if Kate handled all the management tasks. All things considered, it was odd that he *hadn't* visited the fudge shop in person this summer before now.

Daniel's fears calmed somewhat when neither of the new visitors glanced at him, but instead went straight to the cash register where Mrs. Vanderski was sitting. The man leaned forward over the counter and rumbled, "Morning, Ethel. Called Kate earlier and told her I was coming by today. Could you send someone up and tell her I'm here?"

Mrs. Vanderski blinked, nodded, and began slowly turning on her stool toward the front of the store. "I'll do it!" Daniel piped up instantly. "Cindy, could you take over my fudge?" He handed her his cutter and strode purposefully toward the small

staircase that led to the upper floor before any of the other employees could react, keeping his back to the visitors. *The fudge will probably end up a lot better with someone else in charge of it*, he thought ruefully as he passed the register. He couldn't resist glancing at Mrs. Vanderski's calculator as he went by. The only thing he could see on the LED screen was the solitary numeral 1.

Daniel had only climbed the narrow staircase to Kate Castellano's office once or twice before. Daniel held tightly to the railing as he climbed, wondering how his stout employer managed to navigate the tiny steps several times a day. At the top he knocked twice on the door, heard her beckon from within, and stepped inside.

Kate's windowless office seemed impossibly cluttered for its size. On one side a small table and stove was surrounded by a forest of hanging pots and pans, where Daniel knew she experimented with new confectionary inventions. This area was spotlessly neat and organized, in stark contrast to her desk on the opposite wall, where a computer screen was surrounded by a blizzard of check stubs, sticky notes, memos, invoices, and recipes. On a corner of the desk a fondue pot bubbled, full of chocolate dark as midnight.

Kate was playing solitaire on the computer when Daniel came in. He felt a sinking in his gut. The computer and its peripherals were all plugged into a standard power strip amidst a

jungle of dusty cords, but the cord to the power strip itself lay naked and unplugged.

"Ah, Daniel," she said without turning. She gestured at the game on the screen of computer before her. "Remember your first day, how you said you liked cleaning because it felt like you were holding back entropy? Behold the ultimate cheat when it comes to such things. You start with a deck chock full of randomness, and if you do well enough, you wind up with four perfectly sequenced piles. Yet still, at the end of the day, the beast of chaos is not one hair the weaker." She made a final click, and the screen was abruptly inundated with flying, exploding cards, while Kate watched it glumly with her chin in her hand.

After a moment of staring at the screen, she swiveled her chair to face Daniel and pulled out the wooden spoon that she always kept tied around her waist. With it she stirred the bubbling fondue pot three times counterclockwise, then lifted up a spoonful of dark chocolate and let it dribble back into the pot. Her voice had the sound of poisoned honey. "So, what brings you up to visit your old boss? Don't tell me, let me guess. My darling ex-husband is downstairs because he's just noticed that the big bad wolf has already swallowed nine-tenths of his miserable carcass and is just about to reach his toupee. Oh, and you want to ask me if I'd be kind enough to undo whatever it was I did to your girlfriend's cast party last night to make it go kerflooie. Anything else?"

Daniel thought back to Mr. Santiago's mention of a brujah before he was shot, and the chocolate-covered raisin that Ken had found afterwards, and suddenly a suspicion he'd been harboring for the last few weeks became a certainty. "You're a witch, aren't you?" he said. As soon as the words were out of his mouth he regretted them, but Kate just smiled indulgently.

"And what if I am?" she said. "What are you going to do about it? Hand me over to the local witch-finder? Let him torture me until I confess how I've given my soul over to Satan? The closest thing we've got to one of those around here right now is Reverend Schwarzwold, and if what I've heard about the cast party last night is true, he's rather indisposed." She giggled horribly while rising from her chair, and Daniel took a step backwards. Her dress and her shadow and her voice suddenly seemed to fill the room to overflowing, and the odor of chocolate now was too sweet, too dark for him to breathe.

"Daniel," she said imperiously, pointing the chocolate-covered spoon at his throat, "I've seen the look in your eyes. I've known since the day I hired you that you're going have a part to play in what's happening here. You've seen the People, haven't you?"

Daniel nodded. The chocolate fumes seemed to cover his face like a blanket, stifling his voice.

Kate smiled an unwelcoming smile. "Know this, then. *It wasn't devils that showed up at the witch meetings.* I don't know whether there really is a Devil or not, but if he exists, he's a

taker, not a giver. I'll bet he's never taught anyone a single hex or cure. No, all those men and women brewing salves and flying on broomsticks in the Middle Ages, they were using gifts that came from the People and from nowhere else. And the Church, the Church *hated* that, because they couldn't control it. The Church made up all that Faustian rubbish about sorcerers losing their souls and getting dragged off to Hell just so they'd have an excuse to torture us and hang us and burn us. Just because they were afraid of something that didn't fit easily inside their neat little clockwork universe! Well NO MORE!" Her voice didn't seem to have grown any louder, and yet Daniel felt as if he had been plunged into the bottom of an ocean. "NO MORE will we be the victims. This time we will take the fight to the enemy FIRST, before they know the measure of who they're dealing with! THIS TIME WE WILL BE THE HUNTERS!"

She flicked her wrist for emphasis, and a fleck of chocolate from her spoon landed on Daniel's shirt. In the midst of the thick, sweet odor, Daniel felt as if he was falling through the ice of a different kind of sleep, a slumber not of mind but of will. He sought blindly to recover some strong feeling to bring himself back to himself, but waking from dreams had never been his strong point. But before he could fall completely under the fondue's dark surface, he managed to remind himself of the anger that had propelled him up the stairs in the first place -- not his own feelings, but Sondra's. *What she's trying to do to you isn't real, it's a dream you can wake up*

from, he told himself, and he shook his head and found his voice. "Sondra doesn't care about any of that. She's just trying to help her friends. You've got to fix whatever you did to those roses -- that play means a lot to her." Speaking, he found, gave him strength.

Kate seemed to shrink back down to normal proportions as he spoke. "Well, aren't you the mentally tough one," she growled, not looking directly at Daniel now. "Can't do it, though. Even if I wanted to, which I don't. I don't think *they* like the good Reverend very much either. I was acting under orders, part of an exchange. You know how it is."

Was she embarrassed? Regardless, Daniel knew she was telling the truth. "What can we do to get them back, then?" he asked.

Kate shrugged. "Go ask the People, if you must. It's no longer my affair."

Daniel shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "Your ex is waiting down there. What should I tell him?"

She turned and thrust the spoon back into the pot with a grimace. "Oh, go ahead and send him up. Make sure he leaves that ... that wife-thing of his downstairs, though. Well, what are you waiting for? Go!"

Daniel beat a hasty retreat down the stairs. The return of the dense smell of cooking fudge as he descended felt like a fresh springtime breeze.

Sondra was no longer in the fudge shop. Mr. Netherby was clearly impatient, but fortunately he didn't seem to blame Daniel for the delay. "Finally!" he barked when Daniel motioned for him from the stairs. "I swear, that woman stays awake nights dreaming up ways to irritate me." As he started up the steps he called over his shoulder to his doll-wife, "Try to stay out of trouble, Chrissy. Ethel, have Kate send me the bill as usual." The buxom blonde squealed and clapped her hands together like a teenager, while Mrs. Vanderski shook her head as if to clear it, nodded and slowly took a clipboard from beneath the cash register.

Daniel turned on the water of a sink in an alcove and began scrubbing at the spot of chocolate on his shirt. Cindy promptly wandered over to grab a cloth and start washing off her fudge cutter beside him.

"Your friend seemed kind of jumpy," she whispered. "She said she had to head out and keep looking for some people. Any idea what she was talking about?"

"None."

"It sounded pretty strange. Say, what took you so long up there?"

Daniel considered the plausibility of the entire dialogue he'd just had. Should he say that their boss had just admitted to being a witch? Hardly. "I'll tell you later," he whispered back. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Chrissy Netherby

moving up and down the aisles, with Mrs. Vanderski close behind her. "What's up with her?" he asked with a jerk of his thumb.

"Mr. Netherby's second wife really, REALLY likes candy," Cindy answered with a shrug. And sure enough, the pneumatically-proportioned blonde seemed to be helping herself to samples of practically every confection in the store. Daniel watched her grab a handful of candy canes and began crunching all of them at once with gleeful abandon, shards of red and white flying in every direction, while Mrs. Vanderski jotted down the purchase.

"Does she eat like that every time she comes here?" Daniel asked, dismayed. "How does she keep her figure?"

Cindy began scrubbing her cutter even more vigorously. "No one knows," she replied, not looking up. "But Mr. Netherby always pays for everything. She's a big boost for business, but doesn't she just freak you out?"

"Everything about that family freaks me out," Daniel admitted.

Cindy grabbed some more chocolate-covered utensils. "They used to come around all the time, but I haven't seen them here since the beginning of last summer. I think Jack and Kate had a big fight and threw around some threats.

"Yeah, how does that work, anyway, him running the business when they can't stand each other?"

Cindy frowned. "It was kind of odd, actually. From what Heather and I could find out, back when the two of them split, they owned just two attractions, so Kate figured it'd be fair if

they each got one, and of course she wanted this place. And the sticking point wasn't Jack, it was..."

"Lilith," Daniel interrupted. "At a guess."

"Correct. Only eleven at the time, but she somehow managed to insist that her parents didn't split the property. Strangest thing. Kate finally agreed to a hefty salary and a no-fire contract, but Jack's name is still on the ownership papers." Then she held up her hand. "Shh!"

Both of them could hear Mr. Netherby's raised voice upstairs, and then his wife's low tones rumbling back like distant artillery.

"I'd give up a lot of fudge to eavesdrop on that conversation," Cindy sighed.

Daniel paused from wringing out his wet shirt. "Actually," he mused, "that isn't a bad idea. Could you cover for me a bit with the Dirsk?"

"What are you talking about?" Cindy hissed, her voice automatically dropping to a whisper. "You can't go up there! Look, I know I told you Kate's a pussycat, but that was last year. This year... well, you've heard how she goes off. I'm a bit scared of her these days, Dan. Stay out of her way."

Daniel smiled. "It's nice to know you care, Cindy. But don't worry, I've picked up a few tricks. Just don't look in my direction for a few minutes, all right?"

She stared at him, then let her shoulders down. "You'd better not make me regret this. All right." She glanced

nervously around the store, where Chrissy Netherby was upending a basket of gummy worms, their red-green-purple tails hanging from her exquisite mouth as she chewed. Luckily there weren't any other customers around, and the Romanian was out smoking on the back deck.

Cindy moved out from behind the counter toward Mrs. Vanderski, smoothing her apron with anxious fingers. Daniel went back to the foot of the narrow steps he'd descended gratefully only a few minutes earlier. He gripped the railing, glanced once more around the store to make sure no one was watching, then began searching for the side-road on the path to sleep that would allow him to step sideways out of the world. He started to feel his weight slip away, but then with a sudden sinking he realized he'd missed his turnoff, gone too far and let himself be brushed by the raven's wing of dreams.

The overwhelming smell of chocolate that permeated everything in the store became darker, smokier, more exotic. Then Daniel was climbing a different set of steps, a link in a chain of shuffling young men and women who wore nothing but loincloths and jewelry and a thick layer of blue chalk. He felt the warmth of massive blocks of stone beneath his bare feet, and suddenly realized that they were climbing the steps of a great stone pyramid. But still, the smell of warm chocolate filled the air, and nearing the pyramid's flat top he saw three robed women stirring a great basin of frothy brown liquid with long-handled beaters. Behind them was a great stone slab of an altar that

held something that Daniel couldn't bear to look at, and a giant feathered figure turned from the altar cradling something in its hands and plunged whatever it was into the basin's foam. Then the three women joined to become one, and she dragged a cup through the reddened froth and held it up to Daniel saying "Drink of this cup, traveler, and know that nothing worth having comes without sacrifice." Daniel found that he was raising his right hand to push the cup away while his left hand reached to take it. As his hand brushed it, though, he began to awaken, and in awakening he found the exit that he had missed, and returned to the surface blurred in the half-world of invisibility.

His feet drifted off the floor as he used the railing to pull himself hand over hand up the stairs. Luckily, the door at the top of the stairs was half open, and Daniel was able to pull himself through the gap, then leap up and perch on top. The wooden edge of the door was unsanded and dusty, but not terribly uncomfortable given Daniel's current weightlessness. He scooted until his back was against the wall, and settled in to watch the confrontation between his boss and her former husband.

"... was bad enough when you were just going to my enemies' strategy sessions ..."

"Really, Jack, a couple of businessfolk griping over their beers in the Nile hardly constitutes a strategy session. Honestly, you've gotten so paranoid since..."

"Let me finish. LET ME FINISH. I say, it was bad enough when you started consorting with my enemies, but now I find out that you've been ARMING them too!"

Kate raised a hand to cover her pleased smile. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Are you saying I'm some kind of gunrunner?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean, Kate. Lil told me all about that little surprise that Domingo had for her and Doug yesterday. Who else could it have come from but you?"

"Oh, those little things? Pshaw. Wouldn't hurt a fly." Kate waved her hand dismissively. Then, slowly, her smile faded. "Anyway, it doesn't matter. Domingo is dead. You used to golf with him, remember?"

Mr. Netherby sighed. "Yes."

Kate was still sitting back comfortably in the large suede chair in front of her computer. It was the only chair in the room, so her visitor had to lean uncomfortably against a short bookcase full of candymaking cookbooks beside the door. From Daniel's angle above, his toupee looked almost believable. The pot of fondue still bubbled on the corner of the desk, but Daniel was relieved to find that, in his current insubstantial state, the thick smell had no effect on him. Mr. Netherby, on the other hand, seemed to be having difficulty drawing breath. He waved his hand in front of his face in an attempt to clear the air, then ploughed forward.

"Well, if you've been in touch today with your other drinking buddies, you'll know by now that your little gift to Domingo didn't do you any good. I've suspected for a while now that he was the lynchpin holding my enemies' coalition together, and events this morning proved that I was correct." He folded his fingers across his stomach and nodded contentedly. "All the owners on my list have started calling me, Kate. They're willing to settle for my terms. Everyone who stood against me is caving in. By the end of the week I should be the owner of every remaining property on my list, and there's nothing you can do to stop me."

"Oh, isn't there?" Kate absently removed her wooden spoon from the belt around her waist and began stirring the fondue pot counterclockwise. "But it isn't really *your* list, now, is it, Jack? You can hardly stand there with that satisfied smirk on your face and tell me that all of your success has just been due to your own wizardly financial sense. You know perfectly well that the Grotto would have gone under if *she* hadn't started giving you advice. She's got her hand stuck up your back like Kimberly with one of her filthy little puppets. Surely you're intelligent enough to realize that?"

Jack Netherby scowled. "She already knows she'll get half of it after I'm gone. Why shouldn't I let her make a few business decisions here and there?"

Kate threw her head back and laughed. "Oh, Jack, that's rich. You let her take the reins when she was nine, when she

taught you how to take over this place. All that fuss we went through, all those questionable fundraising schemes, just because a little girl wanted to spend the night in a candy store basement! You were always such an amazing sap, Jack, I honestly can't imagine what I ever saw in you."

Mr. Netherby scowled again, but his face seemed to have difficulty holding the position, and the scowl gradually slid away to be replaced by a look of growing apprehension. Kate carefully withdrew the spoon, scraping the dark mixture off both sides of it onto the rim of the pot. "Anyway, if you really want to know why the other owners are caving in and selling out, I'm guessing a lot of it has to do with the way Captain Momett has closed the case of Domingo's murder already, thus sending everyone the message that it's pretty much open season around here on folks who get in her way. So again, no credit to you."

She leaned forward. "This town will start looking like a feudal kingdom pretty soon, you know that? The Folk could never quite figure out the concept of democracy. Sometimes I think monarchy and commerce are the only human institutions they can actually grasp. They're both about bargains across a table, I suppose. Anyway, they want a nice king they can understand, and it looks like you've gotten yourself propped up into the position. At least on the temporal side of things, anyway." She waved her spoon at him, then leaned back. "I wonder what my role will be? Morgan Le Fey, perhaps? Brewing up potions here in my

sanctum, trying to find a way to topple the king and his whole stinking realm - should that be it? Hmm?"

Mr. Netherby tried to push himself forward from the bookcase he was leaning against, but his arms seemed to have lost all their strength. His face looked gray. "You're diabolical, Kate," he breathed through quivering lips. "What's become of you?"

"Me? Diabolical? Me? A man died yesterday because of you! Which of us is evil?"

Each breath seemed to require some effort for Jack Netherby by now. His mustache barely fluttered as he whispered, "From where I stand, you don't seem very upset about Domingo either, Katie."

"True." Kate shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "And I can remember when he used to be a close friend, too. Still, you can't make walnut fudge without a few nuts getting smashed."

She rose and swept across the room to take a pinch of something out of a jar from a shelf beside her cooking space. This she dusted into the fondue pot. To Daniel's blurry, dream-fogged vision, it seemed as if the air suddenly exploded with flashing sparkles of light. Her voice changed as she stood before her former husband. "All right, Jack, let's get down to business. You didn't come here just to threaten me, or to gloat about your business breakthrough. I doubt you have any idea how far I've gotten over this past year, but even you must have

realized that I might not be exactly safe anymore. What was it that you wanted from me?"

Motionless where he sat, Mr. Netherby started to speak, but his words gagged as his tongue suddenly was too thick for his mouth. Kate laughed. "And nothing but the truth, mind you, or I can assure you that your end of the conversation will be both unpleasant and brief."

Mr. Netherby tried unsuccessfully to lick his dry lips, and began again in a strange new voice. "I was afraid. Oh, Katie, I'm so afraid. I've made a few roughhouse deals in my time, I admit it, but now a man's been killed. I want out. Out! I think she's almost done with whatever it is she's trying to do, and it's going to be terrible, Kate, terrible. I can't get out on my own, I've never been strong like you." With a great effort, he pushed himself forward and landed on his knees. "I know I've done badly by you, but you felt something for me once. Please protect me?"

Kate drew in her breath sharply. "Protect you?" she hissed through clenched teeth. "Protect you? Me? You would have to hunt from the bowels of the underworld to the mountains of the moon to find someone less willing to protect you, Jack. Ever since you took my daughters away and threw me over for that ... that ..." She paused in an attempt to regain control over herself, her fingers clenching and unclenching as if they were kneading invisible dough. When she had finally calmed herself down enough to speak, her voice still simmered with triumph and disgust.

"You have absolutely no idea how long I have dreamed about this moment, Jack. How many times I've imagined you crawling, literally crawling on the ground like you are right now, begging me for my forgiveness."

Jack Netherby swallowed hard. "Leaving you for her was a mistake, Katie. A big one. You're right, I've realized that. But now, if you could see it in your heart..."

"And when I saw you down there I knew I would laugh at you, the way I'm laughing now. Ha. Ha ha. Ha ha ha ha ha ha!" The laughter was forced and horrible, like a corpse dancing. She didn't stop until she had run out of breath, the laughter turning at last into broken gasps. She placed a hand on her chest and swayed, her eyes closed. When she opened them again they were gaunt and haggard. Then she turned to open a cupboard and pull out a pair of rubber gloves. After she had slipped these on, she took out a tiny box, opened it carefully, and tilted it so he could see the contents.

"My special recipe for Pecan Divinity," she explained. "I haven't tried it myself, but I've been told it's extremely tasty. So tasty, in fact, that after you've eaten one, anything else that passes between your lips for the rest of your life becomes vile enough to make you vomit. I've tested it on some stray cats, and they all starved to death as advertised. I suppose for a human a hospital might try a feeding tube or some such, but even then the digestive tract might rebel. Care to try one?"

Mr. Netherby begged with his eyes, while his mouth slowly opened.

Kate reached her thumb and forefinger into the box to remove the pearl-white candy, then hesitated. Holding her ex-husband's gaze, she put the candy back into its box and slowly squatted down until she was on his level. "Jack, darling," she said in a voice that was almost tender, "I've been plotting out ways I could kill you for more than a year now. I've even started preparing a weapon to bring you down safely, because I didn't think you'd come back to the shop again after our last fight. And now here you are, desperate enough to walk right in and kneel to me and fulfill all my fantasies of revenge, and I..." She swallowed, then turned and seemed to address someone other than the visible and invisible men in the room. "Where's the triumph? I can't feel my triumph anywhere! Isn't this what I always wanted?"

There was no answer. Slowly she pulled herself to her feet and placed the box on the corner of her desk. Then she began to pace, two steps each direction in the tiny office, her skirts brushing across her helpless, kneeling ex-husband at every other turn, perhaps talking to him or perhaps to the naked air. "Eight years ago, it was, before I'd ever heard of these bargains. And I remember feeling so very, very weak and helpless, like a naked rat trying to gnaw its way out of a steel cage. There were so many things - big things - that I passionately wanted to do. Getting even with you was way, way down the list. There were all

these desires I was eating my heart out to accomplish, and I couldn't think how to begin managing a single, solitary one of them. And now, now I've got lots of power, my hand can adjust the temperature of the flame that bakes the world, and yet," she gestured at the computer, "now I spend half my days pushing cards around on that damned machine, just because it lets me win all the time! Because there's nothing, nothing left that I *want* anymore. Most of the other things, the important things on my list, I can't even remember now. They were so important I never even thought to write them down, and now they're gone like smoke." She crushed her fingers against her mouth. "Plotting to kill you was just something to pass the time, Jack. But it's no good. I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing anymore. I've gone too far down the path to come back, but I don't remember where I was heading anymore. I don't remember!"

Kate paused in her pacing to give her ex a melancholy smile. "What a pair we make, eh, Jack? Both going down in our own little parts of the ocean, both no help for anybody and least of all each other." She bowed her head, then abruptly picked up the wooden spoon from the desk and tapped it against his shoulder. "Get out of here," she said, her voice half command and half plea. "And please don't come back. Next time it might be too easy..."

Jack stiffly grabbed the side of the office door and pulled himself to his feet, nearly shaking Daniel down from his perch in the process. Then he began to take small steps through the door,

then larger ones as he descended the stairs, until he was fairly leaping as he reached the store below.

Mrs. Castellano didn't pay him any more attention. Instead she went back to the cabinet she'd taken the Divinity from, took out a bundle, and carefully unwrapped it. It looked to Daniel like a like a small shard of mirrored glass. It was perhaps as big as a pocket knife, long and skinny, tapering to a sharp point. Kate held it in her hand and stared into it, while the smoky office's dim light sent a reflection off it to jiggle across the ceiling.

"You were the key, weren't you?" Daniel overheard her murmur. "At least I remember that much. But to what? What used to be more important to me than life or breath? Oh, what was it, what's happened to me, what?"

After reverently wrapping the glass again and returning it to the cupboard, she picked up the box holding the Pecan Divinity from the desk and gazed at the pale confection inside. After a while she shook it out into her hand and lifted it slowly until it was just in front of her face. Daniel was scrambling to remember the proper sequence to rematerialize, so he could grab her arm before she did something foolish. But instead she just sniffed, then carefully dropped the candy into the pot of bubbling fondue on her desk. Daniel could see white streaks spreading through the whole dark rich mass as Kate gave it one more stir. Then she upended the whole pot into a tiny sink next to her work table and began scouring it, while Daniel drifted out

the door and began pulling himself hand over hand down the railing. *I wonder if it will reassure Sondra, he thought, if I tell her that whatever happened to her castmates is hardly the worst thing these people are capable of. I suppose not - it certainly doesn't reassure me.*

Chapter 3

"Come and look, the cat is eating roses; she'll turn into a woman! When beasts eat these roses they turn into men and women!"

Percy Shelley's diary, quoting his wife Mary Shelley

In this dream, Daniel was pushing the family lawnmower through the back yard as he had done every summer Saturday for as long as he could remember. A creek ran behind the house, and sometimes after it rained the lawn would be full of tiny hopping frogs, invisible until the moment they leapt out of the lawnmower's path. They always seemed to get out of the way in time, but their instinct was to head to the taller grass instead of the cut part of the lawn, so the bursts of hops would intensify as he spiraled inward toward the last few frog-laden strips.

And then he was seeing the scene not as the mower but as one of the frogs. Blades of grass towered above his head, and he tremblingly tried to blend in amongst them while the thundering scythes of the giant machine came closer and closer. But when it rumbled into sight it was no machine at all, but a gigantic Lilith carrying a pair of enormous shears, cutting great swaths through the grass, eager to squeeze the life out of any frogs she might catch in her iron grip.

It was his dreams that were being mowed, Daniel realized. She was searching for him by razing his dreams, and the space he could hide in was growing smaller by the minute.

Daniel pulled himself out of his nap and groaned. He was outdoors and it was dark, somewhere after midnight. Where was he? Gradually his surroundings came back into focus, and as his short-term memory returned, he made a mental note that narcoleptics should avoid any occupation that called for stakeouts. He was hiding in a patch of trees on the opposite side of the parking lot from the back entrance to The Black Forest Fudge Shoppe, his place of employment. He was waiting there until the final members of the evening shift had closed and locked the building and gone home the way he should be home.

Scanning the parking lot, he realized that they must have already done so while he was asleep. The only cars still in the parking lot belonged to tourists with out-of-state licenses, and there was no sign of Mrs. Vanderski's Oldsmobile or Kate Castellano's pickup. He circled the building to make absolutely sure everyone was gone, then pulled Ken's cell phone out of his pocket and called the apartment. Sondra answered at the other end.

"Pellinore to Guenevere, Pellinore to Guenevere, come in Guenevere."

"This is, um, Guenevere I guess." She still sounded amazingly alert for the late hour. "How are things at Castle Perilous?"

"The coast is clear," Daniel whispered back. "Can you and Merlin get here in fifteen minutes?"

Sondra giggled. "Actually, Merlin is pretty grumpy right now. He says he needs a few more nights of recovery from last night's skulking before he'll be ready to go out and skulk once more."

"Will you be able to bring him, though?"

Her voice grew more serious. "If this will really help get my friends back, Dan, I'll get him down there if I have to stick toothpicks underneath his eyelids. Guenevere signing out."

While Daniel waited he watched the nearly-round moon rising in the summer sky, its light combining with the lights that always shone from Crossroad's hotels and theaters to banish any hope of real darkness. This would not be a good night for burglary, he reflected. Behind him in the trees he could hear frogs and crickets singing their summer songs, which reminded him of his dream. Was it possible, he wondered, that Lilith had been alerted by their brushes with her in Atlantis and the Nile, and was even now searching for them to wipe away a possible hindrance to her plans? The more he thought about, the more likely it seemed. All the more reason to jump in a direction she might not expect.

By the time the lights of Ken's Eclipse swept across him, the last few tourists had returned to their cars and driven back to their nighttime hotels, and the lot was finally empty. Ken pulled up close beside his hiding space and rolled down his window.

"All right, Danny, what's this all about? Can it really not wait until we've caught up on our sleep from the last job?" He yawned theatrically.

Daniel extricated himself from his hiding place, brushed a few stray insects off his jeans, and leaned against Ken's window. "Ask her," he said, pointing to Sondra who was already getting out of the passengers' seat and walking around the car. "She seemed pretty demanding that we do something right away, and this is definitely something, so let's do it!"

"Sure, sure, 'we've got to do something.' That's what they kept telling Custer." Ken gestured around the empty lot. "Do what? You weren't exactly very clear on your plan, you know. You'd just finished telling Sonny about last night and briefing both of us about Mrs. Castellano over supper, and then you suddenly put your fork down and said 'I think I just figured something out,' and that we should get prepared for some more breaking and entering. So ok, here we are, and it's from here we'll be going home again unless you start explaining how taking another shot at something that almost got us killed last night will help get Sondra's friends back."

"That's right," said Sondra. Both guys turned to look at her. She was dressed in black leotards, black tennis shoes, and a black pullover, her hair tucked up under a black beret. She reminded Daniel of Brigitte Auber as a cat burglar in *To Catch a Thief*, beautiful and lethal as a stiletto.

"Nice outfit," he said. "I remember when you used to wear that in our Killer games."

"Well of course I did." She shook her head. "I never could figure out why no one else ever bothered with camouflage. You guys would always try to do these acrobatic leaps and throw your tennis balls all over the place, and I could just let someone walk by without noticing me in the dark and nail him in the back. So what's the plan, Dan?"

"In a minute." Daniel looked again in all directions, but the lot was still deserted. "OK, before I explain my idea, Sondra, I want you to tell us exactly what happened at your party last night. Every time we've asked you so far, you've clammed up, but how are we supposed to help you if we don't know what we're looking for?"

Sondra tilted her head back and looked up at the waning moon. From the woods, the electric whine of tiny frogs seemed deafening. Finally she looked down again and said, "All right."

At the edge of the trees was an enormous boulder as tall as Daniel's chest, dropped off in Crossroads by some ancient tourist glacier. Sondra climbed it and perched near the top, clasping her arms around her knees and turning sideways so that the

moonlight seemed to shine off her skin like glowing water. Ken got out of his Eclipse and came to stand beside Daniel. When Sondra spoke it was in a dreamy, distant voice, as if she was telling fairy tales to children.

"I love chocolate," she began. "Dan, you know I love chocolate. That's why I thought at first you'd been aiming them at me. But like I said, I was still pretty mad at you at the cast party, so I just stuck the roses in a bowl for the rest of the cast and went out onto the deck to get a beer." She sighed. "Oh, I should have said, we were over at the guy's house who plays Faust. It's way up on the bluff the town's named after, so you can look down off his deck into the tops of trees. The wind was starting to pick up, so the treetops were rolling beneath our feet like waves, with the full moon right above us."

After a long pause, Ken said encouragingly, "So you got yourself a beer?"

Sondra nodded. "Actually, Zahir got me a couple. He was being really nice. I started to get tipsy pretty quickly, and I was talking about how the house seemed like a big ship plowing through this ocean of trees." She smiled at the memory. "Cast parties are great. You're with all these people you've spent all this time with, so you feel really close, but you probably won't see half of them ever again, so you don't worry much about acting like an idiot. I was giddy. We were all giddy, you know? One of those parties where everyone starts sounding wittier than they have any right to be? Oh, and the moon was like quicksilver..."

"I've been to parties like that," Daniel volunteered.

"Where the music fits the mood. Even the plainest people turn beautiful."

Sondra nodded. "One of those. But anyway, while I was going on and on about all this, somebody brought out the bowl of chocolate roses and started passing them around. Just about everybody took one, I think. Even Reverend Schwarzwold. And then..." Sondra's voice began to crack, "then I said something stupid about how all we needed was some dolphins to ride on and a flock of seagulls to pull us along and we could keep the moon company up there. And Zahir - oh, he was acting so crazy last night - Zahir jumped up onto the railing and said that he'd be a little bird and fly up to bring down a piece of the moon for me. I was kind of shrieking for him to get down, you know? Because we were so far up and he was making me nervous. But it was all in good fun, I knew he had good balance and wouldn't fall off. And then..."

"He fell off." Daniel filled in the gap.

"He flew off," Sondra corrected. "He began flapping his arms up and down like a big dorky stork, and all of a sudden he rose up off the railing with this surprised look on his face. I was screaming for real by then, I can tell you, but he got up high before I could grab his legs or anything. And then a couple of the other cast members who'd eaten the roses started flapping their arms and rising up to follow him. I nearly passed out.

They flew up and formed into a V, and then they started flying off above the trees in the direction of Crossroads."

Ken nodded as if this was just the sort of thing he would have expected. "So that was when you last saw the twelve who'd eaten the chocolates? Flying in formation towards town?"

Sondra rubbed her hand across the back of her neck, looking down. "First of all, there weren't twelve roses, there were thirteen. Dan must not have counted them. I didn't either, and I should have. I never took acting superstitions very seriously before, but I guess that was a mistake." She smiled wanly. "But no, not all of them flew away. The deck is built up about eight feet above the bluff where it starts to slope down. Reverend Schwarzwold and a couple of actors jumped down off the deck and started digging, and in a minute or so they'd completely disappeared beneath the dirt." Sondra swallowed and dabbed at her face. "It was over so fast, you know? One minute I was quoting lines from the play, and the next minute I was alone."

"What did you do then?" Daniel asked. He realized that there wasn't any point in doubting her story; it wasn't as if stranger things hadn't happened.

"Oh, after I'd dug frantically and unsuccessfully for the mole faction, I started driving Ken's car back into town," she sighed. "I was trying to stay parallel to the course I'd seen them taking, but my road kept twisting back and forth while they were going straight. I just got glimpses of them from time to time getting farther and farther away." She bent her head and

began to carefully pick tiny pebbles out of a patch of moss on the rock's side. "That's why I used that ladder you'd brought up to the balcony, Dan. I'd been planning on finding you and yelling at you about the roses, but I wanted to get up to a high point with my binoculars and scan the skies, too. So when I saw your ladder there and your note that you weren't home, I figured it would serve you right if you got stranded someplace."

Ken drew his breath in sharply. "So you were up on our building's roof looking for these guys while Danny and I..."

"We found what we were looking for and nobody got hurt," interrupted Daniel. "Let bygones be bygones."

Sondra hugged her knees tight against her chest. "Tonight was supposed to have been our opening night. The Assistant Stage Manager is right now trying to call all the ticket holders and tell them our opening has been delayed due to illness in the cast. Most of the cast." She sniffed. "How's a theater supposed to survive when the play closes before it opens? And you," she turned desperately to Daniel, "you say your boss shut us down because she thought the play was too critical of fairies?"

"That's about it." Daniel shrugged. "Fairies and sorcerers and witchcraft in general. Plus I don't think she likes religious figures much. But if you believe her, the poisoned roses weren't exactly her idea -- she said she was acting under orders. I don't think it would do much good if we just confronted her as an intermediary. We can't bribe her

because even she doesn't know what she wants, and I doubt any threat we could make would be as bad as what her fey associates could do. I think we need to go straight to the source, over on the other side."

Ken's eyes narrowed. "The other side? You mean, the way we did in Atlantis?"

"Well, hopefully not exactly like that, because this time we'll know what we're doing. But yes, that's the general idea. Find whoever is over there sending Mrs. Castellano her orders, and persuade him or her to fix Sondra's friends."

"Hmmp. From what I've heard, the Fair Folk don't much like taking back any gift they've given, good or bad. Also," Ken swallowed "also, our last little visit to Atlantis scared the living bejabbers out of me." He turned to Sondra. "What do you think of Danny's plan, Sonny?"

Her eyes were shining. "Hey, I've been wanting to cross over since he told me about the trip you guys made. If you're asking if I want to go along, well, what took you so long?"

"OK, then." Daniel cleared his throat nervously. "Here's what I think. Ken, you know when Jay Fry was acting so weird last night, telling us about the war Lilith and the old king are fighting on the other side?"

Ken picked up a pebble that lay beside the boulder and rolled it between his fingers. "Yeah, I remember. Jay or whoever he was carrying." Daniel glanced at him quizzically, and he shrugged. "Tell you later."

"Whatever. Anyway, what I *think* he was saying was that Lilith is claiming territories on the Other Side by getting her dad to purchase, let's say, mythically resonant businesses here in Crossroads. Then she uses the Morcan, that stone-thing I delivered to her, to link it up to matching locations in the Faerie realms. Like for instance a waterpark to Atlantis, or the Blue Nile to the myths of ancient Egypt." He glanced over at Ken. "Does this all make sense so far, your wizardliness?"

His friend nodded, tossing up his pebble and catching it again. "Pretty much."

"Good. Jay said that she can use the Morcan to reorganize the country, so now she's got her part of the kingdom all walled off. Every time she opens up a new gate, her side grows and the king's side shrinks. What Ken and Heather and I saw in Atlantis must have seen the king's merfolk allies making an unsuccessful counterattack through the barrier." Daniel saw Ken's fingers tighten over his rock. "Now, my guess is that the longer she's had a gate open, the closer it is to the heart of her domain. From what I picked up from Kate, Jack Netherby's owned the Black Forest Fudge Shop longer than anyplace else except for the Nightmare's Castle. There's no way we're going to her headquarters there yet..."

"You got that right," Ken muttered darkly.

Daniel ignored his roommate. "But Kate said that Lilith had one of her midnight ceremonies here in the basement right after her dad bought this place. If we can manage to find her

gateway here, I might be able to pull us through. I'm guessing my boss gets her orders from the other side of the gate somehow, so that's where we should start looking for whoever told her to ensorcel your cast, Sondra. What do you think?"

Ken carefully inspected the pebble between his fingers for a while. Finally, he said, "Sounds like a pretty good plan, Danny. I detect just one tiny flaw in it."

"Oh?" said Daniel, hurt. "What's that?"

When Ken looked up, his eyes were haunted and wild. "It's completely fricking insane, that's what the problem is!"

"Well, if you don't think it would work..."

"I didn't say it wouldn't work, I said it was insane! Do you have the slightest recollection of what happened the last time we went through one of those gates? How close I came to getting shish-kebaped by a homicidal spear-hurling eel-man? And then the second time we saw one of those things open, what was it that came through, Danny?"

"Umm, a God of Death?" Daniel answered in a small voice.

Ken cupped a hand to his ear. "What was that? I couldn't hear you."

"A GOD OF DEATH!"

"That's right, a jackal-headed Egyptian Death God. Danny, you just don't seem to have the proper attitude towards the people on the other side of these gateways."

"Oh yeah? And what attitude should that be, oh wise one?"

Ken gathered himself up and shook the pebble in Daniel's face. "SHEER UNADULTERATED TERROR!"

"Oh yeah?" Daniel shot back. "Well if that's so, then how come you're the one who's learning magic from them?"

Ken drew in a quick breath. "Fight fire with fire, all right? But that doesn't mean we need to jump into a frigging volcano!"

Sondra suddenly unfolded herself from the boulder and stepped firmly between the two arguing men. "Guys, both of you, shut up and listen. Ken, you seem to have forgotten that somewhere out there, my friends may be migrating to another continent right now for all I know. Besides, from what Dan said, we shouldn't be going into a war zone again like last time. I mean, it's a fudge shop, right? I doubt there'll be any, what were they again?"

"Homicidal spear-hurling eel-men," Daniel supplied helpfully.

"Right, any of those through this particular portal. It's a big world over there, right? It's not like every single denizen is going to want to kill us."

"But..." Ken began.

"No buts. Dan and I are going in. Ken, you can come along if you want."

"But..."

"Fine. See you later. Come on, Dan, let's go." She strode across the parking lot. Daniel shrugged at Ken, then

dragged a backpack out of the weeds where he'd hidden it earlier and followed her.

Ken wavered, looking once more at the pebble in his hand. Then he hurled it deep into the trees before jogging to catch up.

Daniel motioned both friends to stop behind the dumpster, across a narrow service road from the fudge shop's loading dock.

"What's up?" whispered Ken. "I thought you said everyone had gone home for the night?"

"They have," Daniel whispered back. "Here's the thing. I've heard Mrs. Castellano complain that sometimes Mrs. Vanderski forgets to lock the back door when she locks up at night. So there's a chance that it's unlocked right now. Maybe it is, maybe it isn't. We need you to use that magic remote of yours to make sure it is."

"Why not just check..." Sondra began, but Daniel shushed her.

Ken stared at Daniel for a long moment, then reached into the pocket of his jeans and pulled out the remote. He pointed it at the door and tapped a series of keys. "All right," he said at last, dropping it back into his pocket. "Try it now."

Sondra darted across the road, nearly invisible amidst the shadows in her dark clothes. She slid onto the dock and turned the knob. "It's open!" she whispered back happily to the other two, then pulled the door a sliver wide and slipped through.

Daniel and Ken looked around the darkened lot once more, then dashed up onto the dock themselves. Ken pulled the door

open, then paused and looked at the lock. Inside with the door closed behind them, he turned. "Danny," he said slowly, "was it really true what you said about Mrs. Vanderski? That she leaves the back door open sometimes? I'd think that wouldn't be the sort of job you'd be allowed to screw up more than once."

Daniel smiled widely and clapped his friend on the back. "My story was completely false, oh wise one. She's never left the door unlocked that I know of, and certainly not tonight. I checked it before you guys showed up. Tight as a drum. I was just trying to sow some seeds of uncertainty, if you know what I mean."

Ken's smooth features gathered into a scowl. "I had suspicions about your honesty," he said darkly, "but I managed to suppress them. If you can't trust your own roommate..."

"Happy to oblige," said Daniel cheerfully.

Ken shuffled his feet uncomfortably. "One more question. Did you have a backup plan?"

"Heh." Daniel reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. "Kate's asked me to open a couple of times."

"I see." He squinted at Daniel suspiciously. "You seem awfully eager with all of this. Do you by any chance have some ulterior motive besides just helping Sonny get her friends back?"

"Well, that and sightseeing." Daniel busied himself unslinging the backpack from his shoulder and rummaging through it, trying not to think about the girl Lily who had been in the forest clearing and must surely need his help now. He produced

three new flashlights and handed them out. "The basement has frosted window slits, so we can't turn on the light switch down there, and we'll have to be careful with these so no one on the street notices us."

Sondra switched on her flashlight and pointed it down the rickety wooden steps that led to the cellar, then looked back over her shoulder. "So far so good. But really, Ken, haven't you always wanted to visit Faeryland?"

"No."

Daniel and Sondra looked at each other and shook their heads, then started down the creaky wooden staircase in single file. Ken sighed and looked around the darkened fudge shop, then fell in behind them as they descended into darkness.

The smell that rose from the candy store basement was a unique mixture of sweet chocolate, damp stone, mold, and something else organic that Daniel was unable to identify. As he stood on the steps and swept his flashlight around the gigantic table in the center of the room and the piles of junk in the corners, the confidence he'd felt when he came up with his plan began to ebb. With the overhead lights on during the day, the place had always seemed eerie and foreboding. Now, the after-midnight shadows surrounding the flashlight beams seemed filled with monsters.

"What exactly are we looking for down here?" Sondra asked as she gingerly picked her way around a broken electric chocolate melter that sprawled into the aisle like a cast-off cauldron.

"I'm not sure, exactly," Daniel admitted as he came the rest of the way down the steps. "I suppose the gate could be anywhere, big or little. Maybe in one of the boxes? I just hope we'll be able to recognize it when we see it. We should spread out and start searching." He lifted a rusty bag sealer off a pile of crates and set it on the floor. "Oh, and watch out for Musmus."

Ken spun around and shone his flashlight blindingly at Daniel. "And what, exactly, is Musmus?" he demanded.

Daniel blinked into the glare. "Oh, I guess his real name is Hieronymus Mus. He's just Kate's pet mouse that lives down here. I've never gotten a close look at him, but I'm pretty sure he's harm..." He broke off with a sharp intake of breath. "Oh."

"Penny just dropped?" said Ken softly. "Kate's a witch, so that means..."

"...he must be her familiar," Daniel sighed. "Sorry, I should have figured that out sooner. All right, be extra careful to watch out for the fairy mouse familiar."

Chapter 4

*I think we are in rat's alley, where the dead men lost
their bones.*

"The Waste Land"

T.S. Eliot

Ken walked down an aisle and picked up a ragged cardboard display rack. "Look, it's a shrine dedicated to candy made by the Roman God of War. Could this mean something?"

Sondra came over to stand beside him. "Ha ha. Yeah, it's funny when you think about it. Out of all the deities, he's hardly the one you can imagine munching on a Snickers."

"Au contraire," Daniel called out from the other side of the room. "Kate's told me about some of the things that company and their rivals do to grab each others' market share. There's espionage, betrayal - a no-holds-barred battle over America's golden sweet tooth."

"Sure," said Ken, tossing the display aside and moving down the aisle, "and besides, nobody would want to eat a candy bar named Mercury."

"Hmph." Sondra began moving some boxes of plastic forks. "If you're going to name chocolate after any deity it ought to be Venus. She'd be able to appreciate it."

"Well, here's a box of Godiva," Daniel called back. "Not a goddess, but at least she's nude."

"Heck." Ken began clearing a space near the middle of one of the sides of the enormous table. "This could take us all week at this rate. Let me try something." He drew his remote and the Far Side notebook out of his pocket. After some page-flipping, he punched in a string of numbers. Then he set the remote down on the table and spun it rapidly like a top. Slowly the spinning petered out, until it was pointing back into a dark corner of the cellar they hadn't visited yet. "This way."

"Say," said Daniel as he came around the table, "I've been meaning to ask you how that thing works. I heard you working on some kind of numerology this morning -- is that what you punch in?"

"Kind of." Ken frowned as though the subject was distasteful. "Not like the real numerologists - now there are two words I never thought I'd use together in a sentence - not like they do, no. See, in *normal* mathematics like I grew up with, the values of numbers were fixed. You never had to worry that fifty-three tomorrow might end up being something different than fifty-three was yesterday. Whereas with the numbers I'm working with now, I have to figure out..." he hesitated as if he was getting ready to say a foul word in polite company, "...connotations." He blinked. "Like, when I was making that magic-detection program just now, one of the first numbers was 360 because that's the number people think of when they're finding directions. A lot of this is figuring out what, say, the number 11 really means to people, whether it reminds them of

something happy or sad or the title of some new movie that just came out. Then you go over to the next county and you find out that everybody feels differently about it there because their Channel 11 just got in a totally hot weather babe. So compared to real math, well, it's just an awful mess."

Just then Sondra, who had begun clearing out boxes along the line that the remote had pointed down, gestured for them to come and look at something.

"Seems to get results, though," Daniel observed as they went to join her.

"Results, yeah," Ken muttered gloomily. "Can't argue with those."

It was a section where brand name candies were stored: artificial fruit wedges, sour candies stronger than battery acid, and boxes of suckers guaranteed to turn a kid's tongue purple or yellow or green. Nestled in their midst was a pile of shredded cardboard and packing material that could only be the mouse familiar's nest. There were no signs of its occupant.

"That isn't the gate," Daniel announced with unexpected certainty. "Try looking around it."

The sides of all the nearby cartons hung in tatters. Ken pointed to the remnants of a box filled with brightly colored packages and gave a wry smile. "Look, it's Hieronymus Musculus and the Garden of Turkish Delights."

Daniel picked up one of the mangled packages of soft candy. "Hold on a minute," he said, fingering the hole in the side.

"This isn't made of cardboard. It's tin. How strong are the little guy's teeth, anyway?"

"Hush." Sondra held up a hand. "Listen!"

All three explorers fell silent. From the dark recesses between the boxes underneath the trestle table they could hear the scurry of tiny footsteps. Then they stopped. There was silence, then a noise that sounded like the scrape of metal against metal.

Ken, Daniel, and Sondra exchanged nervous glances. "Come on, no need to panic," said Daniel with forced nonchalance. "It's only a little mouse. How dangerous can it be?"

From underneath the table came a rattle, a clunk, and a high-pitched squeal. Ken pointed to a small rusty circular grate in the floor nearby. "How many more of those drains are there down here?" he asked.

"Oh, three or four, I suppose," Daniel answered slowly.

"And I suppose they all must eventually lead to the sewers..."

The scurrying beneath the table began again. This time it seemed amplified ten- or twenty-fold, fanning out towards them and growing in volume like a shower of pebbles falling down a mountainside.

Daniel's feet suddenly seemed possessed by their own emotions, screaming with the urge to get up, off the floor, away from the advancing horde of skittering unseen rodents. "Right, now it's time to panic!" he cried. He shoved a canister of

walnuts off the table and scrambled up in its place, closely followed by an ashen-faced Ken.

"What are you guys doing?" called Sondra through clenched teeth. She was still standing in the aisle near where they'd found the nest, leaning forward and burrowing through displays of gummy worms, cockroaches, spiders, and scorpions. "We've got to find that portal, 'cause if those are rats, they're between us and the steps. Help me with this, I think the familiar was guarding it." She was yanking at the strings binding an enormous cake-box near the center.

Daniel scrambled to join her. "Ken, your pocket knife," he cried, but Ken was already unfolding the multi-bladed instrument attached to his key ring. In seconds the string was severed, and he and Sondra yanked off the box lid. Daniel noticed that one of the bottom corners was already gnawed through.

Out of a vanilla-white frosting plain rose a fairy-tale gingerbread castle. Battlements, crenellations, and turrets all sparkled with ripples of spun sugar, surrounding a keep decorated with dribbles of dark chocolate. Marzipan pennants waved at the tops of towers. And every inch of the castle's curtain walls was encrusted with swirls and patterns of every type of candy - buttermint spirals, caramel corn cobblestones, and lollipop lattices.

"That's it," Daniel shouted. Out of the corners of his eyes he could see gray shapes scurrying up the trestle legs, and now from the packages of gummy insects that Sondra had tossed

aside came a hissing sigh like rice rolling down sandpaper.

"Grab hands," he cried, snatching up Sondra's. Ken grabbed her other hand to make a chain. "Here goes nothing."

He studied the pastry architecture closely, looking for something liminal. A graham-cracker wall ran around the entire perimeter of the frosted cookie base. A winding lemon-drop path led down the slope from the castle's drawbridge to a gate in the wall made of two candy canes with their tips touching. Daniel hesitantly slid the pinky finger of his free hand through the gate.

Nothing happened.

"I'm sure this is it, but something's blocking me!" he cried, frantically touching other doors and archways on the castle. A nearby box slid to the floor as a high-pitched squeaking filled the air.

Ken suddenly dropped Sondra's hand and snapped his fingers. "We need to ditch the metal. They don't like iron, remember?" He tossed his keys and knife onto the table, and Sondra and Daniel quickly went through their pockets and tossed out anything that might have a trace of metal. Then they grabbed hands again and Daniel once more extended his pinky through the candy-cane gate.

And with that, they were through.

There were plenty of differences between the fairyland castle and its gingerbread counterpart. The striped, heart-

shaped gate they were standing in looked similar to the one Daniel had put his finger through, but outside it there was a dark forest that led, not into boxes, but rather depths of twisted trees and dark moss.

Then they turned and looked at the castle itself. The boxed gingerbread version had been raised slightly above the cookie sheet base, but the castle in Faerie of which the cookie version was merely a shadow crested high on a mountain, and the path ran from where they stood up the face of a cliff to the drawbridge in jagged zigzags. And the castle itself - the castle was simply, wonderfully, breath-takingly beautiful. It was framed by puffs of pink cotton candy clouds against a sky that the word 'azure' had been invented to describe. Crenellations shone in the sun, pennants snapped in the breeze. It was every child's dream of a fairy-tale castle, and as they all stared, Sondra breathed, "This is truly the land of heart's desire." Her companions just nodded.

Then, with a rush, Musmus was upon them.

The three friends were still standing in the gate, and the familiar appeared in their midst without warning and knocked them in all directions. He was no longer mouse-sized; rather, he now had the heft of a full-grown grizzly bear. Daniel rolled to one side to avoid the scrabbling rat-feet, and then he gaped up at the form that towered above him.

He'd never had a close look at Kate Castellano's familiar before. Now he realized why the thing preferred the basement

shadows. In most respects it was like a regular mouse, but instead of a mouth, protruding from beneath the familiar's nose parallel to the ground were the blades of a gigantic black pair of shears. With a terrifying *snikt* they closed together inches from Daniel's chest as he scrambled back against the wall.

Then Sondra was jerking the creature's tail and yelling "RUN!" Daniel didn't need a second invitation, and a moment later he had scrambled over the wall and taken off into the woods with Ken and Sondra close behind. The creature blasted through the gate behind them, so they headed into the denser trees hoping the underbrush would slow it down.

Suddenly Sondra stopped and grabbed an overhanging branch, Daniel assumed preparatory to climbing a tree. "Cover me!" she yelled, so Daniel and Ken obediently wheeled around and faced the creature that was scissoring toward them through vines and branches like an oversized hedge clipper.

Ken pulled his remote out of his pocket and began punching buttons with finger-breaking speed, muttering, "Rodent, cutlery, forest setting, incapacitation," as his finger flew across the pad. Then Musmus reached him, the great head sweeping from side to side like an enraged unicorn, and Ken crashed into a tree trunk while his remote sailed off into the bushes.

The creature swung its head toward Daniel again, its shears spread wide as it advanced. Daniel ducked behind a tree just as the blades scissored shut, sending huge chunks of bark flying. Then, as it drew back for another charge, Sondra leapt forward

wielding as a club the branch she'd pulled down. "Hai!" she yelled at the top of her lungs, and dealt it a resounding thwack on its left haunch. It wheeled to face the new threat, thrusting its closed blades at her in a lunge she deftly parried.

Daniel began hurrying toward where Ken was lying, but when he saw his friend shakily beginning to pull himself to his feet, he changed course to where he'd seen the remote sail into the bushes. Behind him he could hear the *snikt* of the shears closing again, and then the thud of Sondra landing another blow. Then his fingers closed on the remote, and he turned and tossed it to Ken, yelling "Catch!"

Ken caught it shakily and began punching numbers again, still muttering under his breath. Then the giant familiar closed its shears into unicorn position again and pulled back for another ferocious lunge. Sondra leapt aside at the last instant, and the shears embedded themselves a foot and a half deep into the tree she'd been standing in front of. The creature tried backpedaling desperately, sending up showers of moss and dirt, but its scissors were stuck fast.

"Time to go," Ken cried, turning and bounding through the trees in the direction of the gate.

Sondra balanced her branch on her shoulder and followed. "Always wanted to try my kendo for real," she said happily.

"Umm, thanks, Sonny," said Daniel as he hurried after her.

"Don't mention it. Feels good to be doing something active for a change."

Daniel looked back over his shoulder as they reached the path, and could still see the creature pushing against the tree trunk with its front paws as it strove to free itself.

Through the gate and inside the wall, there were still trees and shrubs about, but interspersed more widely with green grass between. None of them were sure how long it might be before Musmus freed himself, so they kept moving at a jog toward the base of the mountain. A narrow waterfall tumbled down the cliff close beside the zig-zag path, then meandered through the walled area. The path crossed it by a wooden bridge, and they saw that the water fizzed like champagne and smelled like ginger ale. The trees were all hung with fruit, bees buzzed drowsily amidst the honey-smelling bushes, and it was hard to stay anxious for long.

Sondra had soon pushed ahead with eager strides, occasionally twirling her improvised club. Daniel leaned over and whispered to Ken, "Did your magic have anything to do with that thing getting stuck, or was it just Sondra's swordplay?"

"Aww, who knows?" Ken replied in disgust. "Who knows anything these days? Me, Sondra, you, whoever." Daniel recognized him going into a sulk and left him alone.

Soon they reached the foot of the cliff and began climbing their first switchback.

"What is this rock, anyway?" asked Sondra, leaning over to scratch it with her thumbnail. "Some kind of quartz? It almost

looks transparent." She rubbed it against her finger. "Sticky, too. Almost like..."

She was just about to taste it when Daniel grabbed her arm. "Wait! If this is what I think it is..." He sniffed the rock face, then rubbed his palm against it. "Yep. Rock candy. Which I suppose makes this..."

"The Big Rock Candy Mountain," finished Sondra. "I know the song. Look down there, I think those are the cigarette trees, yuck. See them all fluttering in the wind?"

"And a little stream of gin over there, I think," put in Ken, coming out of his funk as abruptly as he had begun it. "Something for everyone, I suppose. Let's just hope that the railway bulls are blind here too like the song says."

"What's wrong, Dan?" Sondra asked, putting her hand on his arm. "Didn't you dream of visiting this place from the first time you heard that song as a kid? Surely there can't be any harm in a little taste. Or do you think it's poisoned?"

"Worse," said Daniel. "I'll bet it comes with strings attached. Listen, guys, I should have warned you earlier, but when we were in that basement I didn't really believe this whole portal idea would work. There are bunches of rules we're going to have to watch out for while we're here, and that the biggest one is that you mustn't eat or drink *anything*." Briefly he related Skeeble's description of the difference between the Seelie and Unseelie, and how the Seelie could enslave any mortal foolish enough to accidentally accrue a debt to them.

"Look at Persephone," he said. "Half her immortal life down the tubes for eating a half dozen pomegranate seeds. And Rip Van Winkle, one flagon paid for with twenty years of shuteye." He paused. "I always identified with him, you know? A comrade snoozemaster. Snow White went down for the count from a bad snack too. And Hansel and Gretel ate the witch's house, so I guess by fairy logic she had every right to eat them."

"I'd like to point out that we're heading towards someone who apparently shared an architect with that witch," put in Ken. "Let's hope they don't also share appetites for human flesh."

"Um...right. Duly noted." Another fragment from the poetry final came to Daniel and seemed to bubble out of his lips. "*We must not look at goblin men, we must not buy their fruits: who knows upon what soil they fed their hungry, thirsty roots?*"

"Right, so no eating or drinking anything, check." Sondra wiped her fingers off carefully and started up the hill again. "I should have remembered that. Reverend Schwarzwold was always going on about it at rehearsals, like 'Just Say No to Fairies' or something." At the mention of the Reverend's name she unconsciously sped up.

Daniel fell into step beside her, racking his brains for other warnings. "Look," he said finally, "don't pick up or accept anything, all right? Even the trash could have a hidden price tag. Aladdin got threatened with death if he so much as touched anything in the cave. And Jack-and-the-Beanstalk would have been fine if he hadn't been a kleptomaniac. All the trips

to the otherside are filled with all sorts of warnings about what you should and shouldn't pick up."

"But Jack got away with it," put in Ken, panting a bit with the effort of keeping up. "And what about the soldier in Andersen's Tinder-box? He came out of the cave with his pockets stuffed with gold, to say nothing of his three giant supernatural slave dogs."

"I've always wondered about that soldier," Sondra mused thoughtfully. "He killed an awful lot of people along the way, for someone supposed to be the hero of the story. I think he must have paid something, somehow. Jackie Beanstalk too, maybe." They reached the first switchback and turned the corner, the sugar cliffs of the Rock Candy Mountain seeming to grow clearer and sweeter as they climbed.

"Whatever." Daniel spread his hands wide. "Look, I'm not saying you may not be able to get the best of a bargain sometimes. You're right, lots of people who pulled off transactions with the Folk with nothing bad happening, like us giving that brownie milk to keep our kitchen running. There was a fairy hill in Scotland, and they said if you were worn out from hunting and needed to cool off, you could climb it and say 'I'm thirsty,' and a little guy would appear at your elbow with a cup full of liquor. Apparently folks drank there all the time with no ill effects. At least none that showed up in the story, anyway."

Sondra looked puzzled. "I thought you said they always had to get something out of every trade."

"I said there had to be something passing both ways. Our sense of value doesn't seem to enter into it. Like on that hill, they handed over a full cup and got back an empty cup, so apparently they were cool with that. But I don't think they did it out of any idea of hospitality - they just liked passing things back and forth."

"How did the story end?" Ken asked.

"Yeah. Somebody swiped the cup and gave it to King Henry the Elder, and that was the end of that. I'm sure the Folk were thinking, leave it to the humans to mess up a good thing."

They climbed in silence for a while. "Look," Daniel burst out at last, "I don't think they're out to hurt us. Or to help us either. The main thing you have to remember is, *we don't make the rules. They do.* I mean, lots of this stuff doesn't make any rational sense, right? Like, it doesn't matter whether a brownie is doing all the work on your entire farm or whether he makes it his life's goal to ruin every chore you do, if you give him a gift of clothing then he's got to leave. The way they follow these rules, sometimes they almost sound autistic, like the Rain Man or something. If one of them is chasing you, you're supposed to drop a handful of flax seeds, and he'll have to stop and count every seed before he can go on."

"You didn't happen to bring any flax seed, did you Danny?" said Ken thoughtfully.

"Right here." Daniel struck the side of his backpack.

"Got it at the health food store. It never hurts to be prepared. Though from what I've read, I suspect they can count extremely fast."

As they reached the second switchback, Ken hesitated close beside the fizzing waterfall tumbling down the cut-crystal wall. "Look, Danny," he said. "You and Sonny have talked me into going this far, so I suppose I'm in it for the full count. But have you stopped to consider that we may be walking directly into Lilith's main base of operations up there? You know I don't like doing things without a plan. If she's found out about us by now then this could be exactly what she wants us to do, and if she hasn't then she certainly will before we go. Should we really just go up there and announce ourselves?"

Daniel sighed. "You're right, I'm not positive she isn't waiting for us in that castle. But my gut feeling tells me she isn't. For one thing, from what we've heard so far, it sounds as if she leaves most of running Faerie to that dwarf, Drallo."

Ken rubbed the side of his head. "Well I don't exactly care to walk into his clutches either."

"But also," Daniel continued, raising his voice, "also, this was the second portal she opened, remember. The first was in that haunted house. I'm hoping the one in charge here will be some kind of viceroy, one of her lieutenants tasked with guarding this side of the gate like she wanted Wepwawet to be at the Blue Nile. Maybe somebody with loyalty we can stretch."

"You just got through explaining how concepts like loyalty don't mean anything to them." Ken put his hands on his hips.

"So okay, what if you're wrong? What's the fallback plan?"

"If your magic extends to penetrating castle walls, I'm all ears, oh wise one." Daniel shrugged. "And no, I can't do the floating invisibility trick here. I tried back in the woods, and no dice. I don't even think I could fall asleep, actually, and I've been known to fall asleep on roller coasters. It's as if this place is beyond sleep." He stretched his arms wide. "But hey, I'm open to ideas. And remember, we don't have all day, because by this time the Musmus may be on the loose."

Ken bit his lip, then shook his head in disgust. "You know I don't have any. It's not like my magic is something we can rely on, is it? So right, we march up and knock, wonderful plan. Wish I'd thought of it. Perhaps there'll be a surprise party waiting for us with ice cream and cake for all." He turned and began shuffling up the path again. "Come on, let's get it over with."

At the final switchback they all spontaneously felt the urge to turn and look down across the lands of Faerie, and none of them said a word while they stared. The difference between a fairy vista and a real one, Daniel thought in a daze, was that the fairy landscape seemed to be made up, not of regions or landmarks, but of suggestions. Pieces of scenery didn't just sit there like real oceans and forests and mountains, content with being what they were; rather, they engaged you like the spines of

books that you were seeing for the first time in the bookcase of a generous friend. *Come visit me*, they seemed to say. The forest beyond the wall cried out warnings of the secrets and dangers it concealed -- skeletons and silver armor of forgotten knights intertwined amongst the roots of its oldest trees, great spiders winnowing their webs in hidden hollows, hermits who lived in holes in the ground for centuries and wore coats of brown leaves and spoke in riddles, bushes filled with nuts that would teach your tongue the secret languages of beasts. The river beyond it spoke of the river-king's daughter who had been captured by an evil emperor and chained in his dungeon until her father would agree to give up the golden horde of a treasure-barge sunk in its rapids, and beyond that the rolling hills told tales of trolls in caves and hidden valleys guarded by enormous serpents where all the trees bore emeralds and sapphires. The distant mountains said that they sat atop mazes of caverns filled with toiling dwarves in constant warfare against armies of dark things that came slithering out of cracks from the center of the earth. *Come visit me, visit me, visit me*. He almost started down the path again, ready to begin a lifetime of wandering through the adventuresome world forever, but Sondra pulled him back. "The castle," she murmured, and Daniel sighed and turned his back on the green inviting landscape. Together they took the last short trek that brought them in sight of the frosted battlements.

At the very edge of the cliff where the sparkling stream pitched over the cliff into the waterfall, an island divided the channel. It was upon this candy rock spur that the castle sat, with its drawbridge crossing the foaming liquid and touching the end of the path they were on only a few paces from the top of the cliff. When the explorers had reached the center of the bridge's heavy oak beams, a lone guard stepped out of the shadows of the gatehouse and stood beneath the open portcullis, negligently holding a spear. He was in no sense human. His skin was the color of a ripe olive, his face almond-shaped and topped with a dank tuft of mossy green hair. The single eye in the center of his broad forehead shifted and blinked at them with dull hostility as they approached.

Chapter 5

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

William Blake

Murmuring to his friends, "Let me be the spokesman for now," Daniel stepped forward. "Umm, guardian of the gateway, we beg that you tell us to whom this fair fortress belongs."

The guard wrinkled an unpleasant brow, then opened a broad lipless mouth filled with sharp teeth and spoke the gargling word "neargh."

Daniel wasn't sure whether it was an answer to his question or a denial of an answer, so he tried again. "Could you be so kind as to send word to the monarch of this castle that three travelers bearing gifts seek audience?"

This time there could be no doubt as to the negativity of the answer as the creature again narrowed its eye and said, "neargh."

"Well then, could you summon someone else to whom we could speak, kind sir?"

"Neargh." The creature leaned at ease on his spear, looking as if he would be perfectly content to block their path all day.

"Huddle," said Ken behind Daniel's shoulder. Daniel sighed, turned, and followed his companions as they ducked back down the path till they were out of sight of the guardian.

"It doesn't look to me as if there'll be any reasoning with him," Ken went on, seemingly in a better mood now that he had a challenge to be overcome. "Maybe I could try casting a spell to cause a diversion and get him to leave his post, and we could sneak past."

"I'm not sure that would work." Daniel slid his backpack off his shoulders. "I was thinking of trying to bribe him. I've got some stuff that might be worth something here. I was hoping to save it for that viceroy, though, and from the looks of him I'm not even sure this guy would be bribable."

"Where's Sondra?" asked Ken suddenly. From the direction of the gate they heard a resounding *thwock*, followed by a dull thud. They peeked over the top of the cliff in time to see Sondra stepping over the prostrate guard.

"Monosyllabic guys always annoy me," she said when Daniel and Ken caught up with her, Daniel pausing briefly to make sure the fallen guard was still breathing. They had to half-jog to stay with her as she strode through the gatehouse and into the courtyard.

"I'm not sure that was wise," Daniel began, but she cut him off with a snort.

"I could tell he was a pansy. You can't do much with a spear if you don't have any depth perception."

"That's not what I meant. I just remembered that I forgot to tell you another important story. Have you heard the one about the hunchbacked tinker?"

"I don't think so." As they talked Sondra kept leading them up a wide flight of steps made of huge blocks of rock candy stone, through giant gingerbread gates decorated with thousands of jelly beans in concentric bands of color like an exploded rainbow, then up another flight of steps with balustrades of finest chocolate, every spindle carved into the shape of a different creature with its mouth open and paws out, as if begging treats from passersby.

"I'll make this quick, then," said Daniel as they climbed. "This traveling hunchbacked tinker fell in with a fairy dance, and the song they were singing was 'Monday, Tuesday, Monday, Tuesday.' Well, he thought that was a bit tedious, so after they finished he came back with 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday.' The fairies loved his addition, so they rewarded him by taking off his hump and filling his pockets with gold."

They reached the top of the staircase and passed through a set of elaborate butterscotch doors, then proceeded down a long hall hung with enormous glowing jawbreaker chandeliers. Daniel sped up his story.

"So the innkeeper where the former hunchback stayed that night was also a hunchback, and when he heard the story about the transformation, he hotfooted up into the hills to try and get similarly wealthy. Same thing happened, he found them dancing and singing, but he broke right in and interrupted them, singing 'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sun-Sun-Sunday!' Well, they didn't take kindly to being interrupted,

and in some of the stories they didn't much like the mention of Sunday either because they were pagans, or maybe he was just a bad singer. Anyway, they rewarded him by giving him the other hunchback's hump on top of his own. In one version of the story it was so heavy he couldn't get out of bed next morning and he starved to death."

They reached a final set of doors, so impossibly grand that you could have spent days following all the complicated swirls and intricate mosaics of bon-bons that covered every inch of them.

"So what's the point?" asked Sondra as the doors began to swing open.

"As far as I can tell," Daniel said breathlessly, "the point is that bad manners can be fatal."

Gumdrop mosaics hung on every wall of the Great Hall, all their blurred designs showing humans engaged in quests. From where Daniel stood he could see a knight riding through a lonely forest in sleet and hail, a ballerina pushing her body to its limit in a graceful arabesque, a captain at the helm of a ship fenced in by icebergs, a ragged thin artist staring at an easel, a chef licking a spoon, and a photographer looking through a viewfinder at a beautiful woman.

The fairy woman sitting on the throne was undeniably beautiful as well. There was nothing of the fashion-model sylph about her; she was broad in all her dimensions, solid and thick

like a matron in some 1930s film, and yet no less beautiful for that. Her amplitude fit her precisely, and Daniel felt as she filled his vision that she represented an ideal of feminine beauty as old and deep as the urge to sit close to a fire on a cold night, or to jump for shelter when a wolf snarled nearby.

Her robe was the warm gold of midsummer's honey, falling to the floor in the complex folds usually only seen in paintings. Honey-gold hair was piled in a cloud above her broad face like that of some Pre-Raphaelite pagan goddess, and instead of a crown, a circle of twinkling lights like fireflies hovered above her head. Daniel glanced sideways to observe the reactions on his friends' faces, and he was surprised to see how, in comparison to the woman on the throne, Sondra the beautiful now seemed scrawny and anemic and pale.

As the three mortals stepped across her threshold, the queen rose and spread her arms in a wide gesture of greeting. "At last, at last," she cried in ringing tones, "it has happened as has been prophesied. The gates are truly swinging wide after these many lonely years, and the daylight walkers are finding paths into the Twilight realms. No longer will you float beyond our reach in the Border Realms as untouchable as summer clouds! Welcome, welcome to this humble dwelling, far-travelers! Come, servants!" She clapped her hands, and a dozen of the greenish one-eyed creatures stumbled out of a darkened recess. "Bring my new guests a light repast to refresh themselves after their journey!"

The food was not brought from anywhere; it was obvious that their coming had been anticipated. The servants whisked a silver cloth from a long table, and Daniel had to tense his muscles to turn his head from the sight of what was piled high on trenchers there, or he would have bolted across the floor and begun stuffing handfuls into his mouth. If he hadn't been worried about exhibiting bad manners he would have plugged his nose as well, but there was no escaping the odor drifting across the hall to them, a mixture of every home-cooked meal, every gourmet restaurant, and every shared snack with friends from a thousand thousand repasts.

Daniel stared helplessly at Sondra and Ken, and they stared back at him with the same expression, until he realized that he would have to continue to be spokesman for the group. He turned to face the queen. "Oh most gracious sovereign," he said uncomfortably, "we give you great thanks for your beneficent hospitality, but the fact is that, umm, we just ate. A lot. So, well, I'm afraid we must decline your generous offer. But thanks again, really." His stomach grumbled loudly as he finished.

The lights hovering above the queen's head began to quiver slightly, but her expression was still impassive as she clapped her hands again, and the servants made the table disappear so quickly that it was impossible to tell whether they had picked it up and carried it away or simply folded it into their pockets. Then she seated herself upon her wide throne again, folded her hands in front of her face, and surveyed them more closely.

"Mortals seem to have grown cleverer during our long separation, though not, perhaps, any more skilled at addressing royalty." She smiled, but it was not the kind of smile designed to put those smiled upon at ease. "And yet it is I who have been remiss, for we are strangers to one another still. By what names are my guests known in their home countries?"

Daniel abruptly remembered that names were another danger that he had forgotten to warn his friends about, so as he heard Ken clear his throat he broke in quickly, "My name is, eh..." and then he drew a total blank, and there was a long pause while he groped for the first name that came to mind. "My friends call me Dreamspinner," he finally managed to get out weakly.

"I am known as The Engineer," said Ken smoothly, but his voice as he glanced at Daniel was dripping with a note of *'Do you think I'm a complete idiot?'*

"And I am Dawnstar Alorien," Sondra announced blandly. It was the name of the elvish swashbuckler she played in Justin's roleplaying game. "And now, oh queen, by what name should we know you?"

By now the lights above the queen's head were whirling in tiny orbits, and occasional crackles of electricity could occasionally be seen jumping from one to another. She pressed her fingertips tightly together and leaned forward. "Oh, but I've had so many different names over the centuries, little ones. Why don't you pick one for me, and I'll see if I like it?"

Daniel exchanged quick glances with his friends, then murmured, "Huddle. But don't turn your back on her." They all took a step back and moved closer together.

"It's a test, right?" muttered Ken.

"I'm pretty sure. If we choose something unpleasant I think it would force her to act that way, so let's stay on the sunny side."

They all considered briefly. "How about Queen Frostine, from Candyland?" said Ken. "I was completely in love with her when I was five."

"That might not be such a good idea, then," warned Daniel.

Then Sondra made a suggestion, and the two guys shrugged and nodded. They stepped forward again, and Sondra said, "We have decided that we would like to call you the Sugar Plum Fairy, your majesty."

The newly-named Sugar Plum Fairy clasped her hands together and smiled again. "Oh, that's one I've always liked. In exchange, I'll tell you one of the other names I've been called in the past. I used to be known as the Lady of Lures." She didn't say it as a warning or a caution; it was simply a repayment for the name they had given her. In some ways it was more disturbing that she didn't seem to care whether they were on their guards or not.

Daniel squatted down, removed his backpack, and opened it on the ground in front of him. He'd begun to have grave doubts about his plans for bribing this fairy to help them, but he

couldn't think of any other plans at short notice. "We seek your aid in an important matter, your majesty" he said with as much formality as he could muster, laying out a beach towel with a picture of a winged horse he'd bought that evening, the closest thing to a fairy he could find on short notice. "And in exchange we have brought these gifts in honor of, uh, your beautiful castle." He drew the items one at a time out of his pack and tried to arrange them in as enticing a manner as possible. This had seemed like a good idea when he'd been trying to come up with a plan in the fudge shop that afternoon. He'd found several sources that said fairies liked sweet things, and so he'd blown most of the week's paycheck on fudge and other candy from the shop. Now, though, the bags and packages looked somewhat pathetic compared to the vast tableaux of confectionary they'd passed on the way into the castle. "This fudge which I made myself is in tribute to your, um, sweetness, and this chocolate-coated gold is what we call fairy candy, and..."

"Yes, yes." The fairy looked bored, but at least the lights above her head had begun to slow down their violent spinning. "Let's say this ... interesting ... tribute can be your repayment for damaging my spriggan at the gate, shall we? We did have that little affair to clear up before we got started with the serious bargaining." She clapped her hands, and a servant stepped forward and made the entire towel-full of gifts vanish. "Now, why don't you tell me what nature of boons you really came

here seeking, and I'll tell you whether or not I can be of any help."

Daniel sat back on his heels. "But...but we don't have anything left to offer you in exchange. Great queen," he added hastily.

The smile that the queen gave them in return was starting to resemble that of a wolf moving in on prey that it knew to be helpless, her teeth spreading far too wide. "Oh, I wouldn't say that, my pretties. I'm sure we'll be able to come up with some other tiny thing that you'll easily be able to spare." Her voice took on the syrupy tones of a childless woman treating a ten-year-old as if he was three. "Tell Aunty Sugar Plum all about it."

When Daniel hesitated, a deep feeling of dread settling into the pit of his stomach, Sondra stepped forward. "Well if you won't say anything, Dan, I will. I don't know whether or not you had anything to do with telling Kate Castellano to put that spell over the cast of the play I was in to make them think they were beasts, but I want you to undo it right now."

The queen frowned. "Undo a gift? I think not. Your *actors* gave us a tribute with their little theatrical presentation, and we gave them one in return. People need to relearn that it's bad luck to speak of us with discourtesy. Indeed, soon we'll be getting rid of that whole troublesome idea of *luck* altogether. People who want good fortune will know where to look for it, and when they get bad fortune they'll know

exactly whom to blame." She smiled her terrible smile again, clasping her hands to her chest, and the circle of lights above her head spread wide and seemed to pulse with delight. "Oh, soon it will be just like the old days, thank the lady! Familiars flittering hither and yon, all manner of funny destitute humans with their funny little catastrophes..." She sighed rapturously.

Sondra put her hands on her hips and began sternly, "Now if you think..." but the Sugar Plum Fairy cut her off with a force that could not be contradicted.

"My dear, I make it a policy to never take back gifts at any price. Now if there was something more ... personal ... you wanted to ask me about? Isn't there a young man who's stopped answering your letters, perhaps? That's just the sort of thing I specialize in, sweetness. Perhaps a chocolate truffle filled with a cordial to revive his interest?" Covered with confusion, Sondra shook her head no. "Well, maybe later, my duck. Who's next?"

Daniel hesitated, then stood up and stepped forward beside Sondra. "I have a little request too, your majesty. It's for advice, actually. You know the one we humans are calling Lilith these days?"

With a deepening frown, the fairy nodded slowly. Daniel considered whether the territory he was entering was too dangerous, but decided he couldn't stop now.

"She's got a changeling twin who's been hiding in the Border lands for a long time. Now she's been captured by

Lilith's forces, and I think she must be imprisoned somewhere in Faerie. I need advice on how I can rescue..."

"ENOUGH!" The Sugar Plum Fairy was rising majestically now, her lights darting about her head like angry bees, her face darkening with clouds of anger and something else as well that Daniel eventually recognized as fear. Her eyes flickered briefly to a far corner of the room, and he noticed something he'd overlooked before: a thin column of smoke rising from a hole in the floor, then disappearing into the dark shadows of the ceiling.

She strode towards them now, her bearing icy, majestic, and formal. "My guests did not say that they were aligned with my lady's enemies," she said, her face huge and rigid and terrifying. "My lady will *not* be pleased if I go about granting boons to those plotting her downfall. Her instructions on what I should do with any like you are *most* specific. And yet..." she cocked her head to one side, "and yet the little mortlings look so scrumptious standing there all needy. Ohh, what to do, what to do." Her gaze flickered back and forth between the humans and the pillar of smoke. Then she clapped her hands abruptly. "Guards!"

A dozen of the green creatures she had called spriggans stumbled into the room clutching spears, and unlike the hapless gate guard they held them at the ready. The lady smiled too widely again. "Guards, my lady's enemies must be under lock and key while I decide what to do with them. Take them away, and try

not to let the red-maned strumpet thrash any more of you this time, all right?"

Spears held low, the platoon of spriggans advanced.

Chapter 6

We think of the key, each in his prison.

Thinking of the key, each confirms a prison.

"The Waste Land"

T. S. Eliot

"Let's get out of here," Daniel cried, backing towards the entrance flanked by his friends. As the spriggans advanced, he reached into his backpack, pulled out his bag of flax seed, and hurled its contents across the floor. Instantly one of the green creatures dropped to his knees and began counting the scattered seeds, but the rest kept on coming. Just as Daniel reached them, the large doors slammed shut.

Ken began madly punching buttons on his remote, but one of the spearmen brought the shaft of his spear down heavily on his knuckles and it fell skittering across the floor. Then the spriggans were surrounding them in a circle of spearpoints, though all of them, Daniel noticed, seemed to be trying to keep a good distance from Sondra. One of them darted at her, and as she blocked him another one knocked her stick out of her hands. On her dais the Sugar Plum Fairy folded her fingers against her palms, and long red strands detached from the walls and wrapped themselves tightly around each pair of human wrists. Then the guards began jabbing the group toward a door that appeared suddenly in the nearest wall. One of them snatched away Daniel's

backpack. Another shoved at Ken's shoulder, but the wizard snarled so fiercely at the spriggan for touching him that the creature backed off. But still they kept prodding insistently with their spears, so that their captives could do nothing but stumble helplessly down a long spiral rock candy staircase, across an open floor, and into a set of cells whose doors whispered shut behind them.

As soon as the guards had disappeared back up the steps, Daniel sank to the floor and buried his face in his bound hands. "Geez, I'm so sorry, guys. I don't think it was possible for me to have messed that up any worse than I just did."

For a long time no one else said anything. Sondra lay on her back and stared up at the ceiling while Ken rubbed his bruised knuckles. At last he leaned against the bars of his cell and gave them an experimental shake, then nodded slowly. "You'll get no argument from me there."

"Me neither," said Sondra, rolling onto her stomach. "You really need to work on your improv, Dan. 'We just ate'? Come on."

"Any chance that you could do that trick you managed back in the fountain in Atlantis, and wake us all up?" asked Ken without much enthusiasm.

Daniel shut his eyes and gave it his best effort, but he knew before opening them that nothing had changed. "I couldn't get us out of there until I was back in the fountain," he said.

"The gates on both sides seem to be connected, so I think to get out we need to get back to the gate we came in through."

"Makes sense," Ken sighed. "I didn't think it was going to be that easy." He leaned against the bars of his cage and gazed around the cavern.

There was plenty to gaze at. In the castle of the Lady of Lures, even the dungeon was a room of radiant beauty. It was a cave carved or dissolved out of the solid rock candy heart of the mountain, but the sides of the cave were transparent, so that they could look out through many yards of crystalline sugar to a blurred watery vision of the descending sun and sky and trees beyond. Daniel thought that, if they were to stay in here for very long, it would be even more demoralizing than the standard dungeon fare of moss and rats and spiders to always be able to see in every direction the free world that you could never touch.

A stream of liquid trickled down one wall of the cavern, ran down a channel in the floor with a pleasant fizzing sound, and disappeared through a grate on the opposite side. Beside it, a dozen or so cages that seemed to be made of spun-sugar were arranged in a semi-circle, some gigantic enough to hold an ettin or an elephant, others so tiny and with bars so fine that a mosquito would have beaten its wings against them in vain. Each one was exquisite enough in its swirls and loops to win first prize in a worldwide competition of dessert chefs. Taken together they looked more like a fantasy city of oriental minarets than a means of depriving people of their freedom.

Ken reared back, then propelled himself shoulder-first into the bars of his cell. "Ow," he said, rubbing his shoulder gingerly. "Obviously, the bars are tougher than they look."

Sondra held her bound hands up. "Have you noticed what our manacles are made of?"

Distracted from his self-accusation, Daniel looked down. A thin strip of red licorice was wrapped around each wrist, and another strip connected the two bands. He tried tugging and twisting the sticky ropes, but they didn't seem to have any give to them, even though they felt soft to the touch. He was just about to lift them to his mouth and try biting them when Sondra called out a warning, and he remembered his own instructions about avoiding Faerie food. His stomach growled again, though, and he realized that he was starving.

Ken laughed explosively in his cage, a laugh with far more bitterness than humor. "That's pretty good, I must say. Look, even the locks are made out of butterscotch. She's telling us we can get out of here any time we want to. All we have to do is bite through our bonds and lick our way out of our cages. Our road to freedom lies through our biggest prohibition. Oh, she's clever all right." He raised his voice as if he hoped someone outside the door was listening in. "And when I get out of here and get my focus back, I'm gonna stuff this entire poisoned castle down her throat, PIECE BY FREAKING PIECE!"

"Oh, I wouldn't go that far," said Daniel miserably. "She's just doing what's in her nature. We might even have found

some way to get her to help us, if I hadn't blurted that out about Lilith's changeling..."

"Yes, what was that last bit you said about the changeling there, right before she started with the wraparound smile and the whole pitching-Ken-into-the-dungeon business?" Ken grabbed the bars separating his cage from Daniel's, his voice rising to a snarl. "What ever happened to 'I'm just here to do some sightseeing and help Sondra get her friends back,' hmm? You lied to us, Danny, in addition to bargaining worse than an American tourist in Tijuana and getting us all locked up to get turned over to Lilith or worse." His smooth face, that Daniel had hardly ever seen display an emotion beyond petulance, was twisting itself into a look of rage. "Why did we ever listen to you in the first place? You're always coming up with these hare-brained schemes that could never work in our world or any world besides the one in your own dream-clogged noggin. I've never seen a smart person make as many stupendously stupid moves as I've seen from you, and your small-town hick upbringing isn't enough to get you off the hook, either. When I think back to..."

"Stop it, stop it!" cried Sondra, leaping to her feet. "What's the matter with you, Ken? Maybe Dan didn't do the greatest job, but I'll bet either of us might have done just as badly. We're going to have to put our heads together to get out of this, and you're just making everything ten times worse!"

"Is that so, sister?" Ken stalked across to the other side of his cage to face Sondra, and Daniel thought to himself in his

misery, he doesn't even walk like himself any more. Ken fixed his eyes on her and she took a step back. "You're almost as bad as he is. You think you can just bat your eyelashes and men are gonna fall down at your feet and flop around like salmon after a tsunami. Well, I've got news for you, sweetcheeks, and I don't think you're gonna like it. From now on, I..."

But they did not discover what Ken was planning on doing from then on, for just then the crystalline door to the cavern opened, and four of the one-eyed spriggans entered the room. They went directly to Daniel's cage, produced a key to open it, and yanked him out roughly by the shoulders.

As Daniel was shoved across the room and onto the winding staircase that led back to the throne room, he glanced back and was poked by a spear for his trouble. He didn't look into Sondra's cage because he was afraid of what she might look like, but he saw Ken's face scrunching up as if he was being pierced by some devastating emotion, whether of regret or bitterness he had no time to tell before the door slammed shut behind him and he was led upstairs into the bright candy castle.

This time the guards bypassed the door that led to the throne room. They kept going up and up the spiral staircase until Daniel felt sure they must be at the top of the highest tower of the castle. Then they reached a broad gingerbread door, and knocked. A soft voice from within beckoned them to leave their prisoner and wait outside, so one of them opened the door

while another gave Daniel a shove that sent him stumbling into the room.

It was a small, airy round chamber with no walls, only archways leading out on all sides onto a broad balcony. There were only three pieces of furniture within: a brass telescope, an easel, and a low divan upon which the Lady of Lures reclined on one elbow. She pointed and his licorice hand cuffs flew away, and after that she simply lay and regarded him calmly, her starry crown now circling her head at a leisurely pace.

Daniel was feeling so low by now that he decided anything he could possibly say would only make things worse, so he decided to let her make the first move. She said nothing for what seemed like an eternity, though, and finally he felt that even another blunder would be better than more silence. "You have no right to keep us prisoners," he ventured. "We've done nothing to harm you."

"Nothing?" She let loose a little trill of laughter. "What about what you did to my guard? To say nothing of my familiar?"

"I'll remind you that you've already accepted recompense for what Sondra did to your guard. And if by your familiar you're referring to that - that nightmare mouse thing outside, well, it was trying to kill us." A thought struck Daniel. "If you were so glad for us mortals to come visiting you, why did you have to make it so difficult for us to get here?"

"Oh, humans never value anything they don't have to work for, dear. At any rate, Musmus has gotten to be a bit of a rogue recently - still carries messages, but he's following orders from the human mistress I loaned him to rather than me these days. She must have told him to guard the portal, and he did so a bit too vigorously, I'm afraid. I'll have to speak to him about that." Her eyes glittered dangerously. "As for whether I have a right or not, is it you who is an expert on the ways of the Folk now? As host I have an obligation to give you accommodations, and who's to say I have not done so?"

"So, have you decided whether or not you're going to follow Lilith's instructions like a good lackey?" Daniel muttered through his teeth.

"My, what a temper," she laughed. "No, I haven't decided what to do with you yet. Perhaps I should let her have you. But there's ever so much I still need to find out about how humans have changed in all the centuries our worlds have been apart. And there's so, so much that you want. So very much I'm hoping to give you."

"What do you mean?" Daniel asked, confused. "You've already told me that you think my request would betray your boss somehow. You threw us into the dungeon just because I asked it. Have you changed your mind?"

"Oh, that." The fairy waved her hand dismissively. "That's only what you think you want. I'm talking about what you really, really want in your heart's deep heart, mortling. You

and your lady friend were just asking for the wrong things, that's all."

"Okay," said Daniel cautiously, sensing a trap but trying to play along. "What *should* I have asked for?"

For answer the fairy pointed at the telescope. "Look through that first for me, all right? It doesn't matter which direction you point it," she added as he hesitantly approached the instrument. "Earth, sky, it's all Glamour from up here."

Daniel picked an archway at random and pointed the telescope through it, then bent to look through the eyepiece. He kept looking at the scene for a long time until he couldn't stand its loveliness any more, and then he thought that with a tap to one side or the other, he could bring up a whole new view that would be equally beautiful and desirable and heartbreaking, and he tore himself away from the eyepiece while he still could.

"Tell me what you saw," said the lady gently.

Daniel tried to find words, but they wouldn't come. Finally he croaked out, "The stuff that dreams are made of," in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

"Is that all?"

"Magic casements, opening on the foam of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." He shook himself to break the spell.

"Very nice. But how about in your own words, instead of Shakespeare and Keats?" The lights above her head seemed to ripple with amusement.

He opened his mouth and closed it, then opened it and closed it again. Finally he hung his head and said, "You know I cannot, ma'am."

"Then paint it, dear one. The easel and paint are right beside you, and I can see that you've used them before. Give me your best approximation of what you saw through the telescope."

Daniel turned to the easel and touched the brush and paints beside it, then turned back to the lady. "I could try, lady, but it would be like trying to sketch the Grand Canyon at sunset using nothing but a blunt yellow crayon. I would always be unhappy with the result."

"And are you satisfied with any of the paintings and poems you make now, little one?"

He hung his head. "You know I'm not."

She laughed again gently. "No true artist ever is, dear. At least, not without my help." She put her wide fingertips together and laid them against her cheek. "That's what my offer to you is, my duck. What every artist wants, and not one in ten million can lay his brush upon. What I gave to True Thomas centuries gone by when he came my way through one of the old doors in the hills. Because you're the first, the very first in ever such a long while, and I like you. I offer you the gift of being always able to say what you mean."

Daniel looked up, puzzled. "You mean, being truthful? But I try to be, even though my friends were just saying..."

"Not truthful in that way, silly mortal! I mean that whatever dream it is that you want to pull out of your heart and toss to the world, the world from here on will always be able to catch it with just the same taste that it made in your own mouth. It will always be just as big and important inside them as it was inside you."

"Oh," said Daniel. Then the enormity of what she was offering sunk in. "OH!"

"Yes, you see it now, don't you, my sweet? Did you think that the great makers saw any more of the world than you did? There isn't a fogbrain among your species who doesn't have thoughts within him that could make tyrants tremble and misers give up their gold and seraphim weep. All of you have oceans inside, but you can only pass each other a teaspoonful at a time."

She drew a dark hazelnut from the folds of her robe and set it on the rim of the easel, and the stars above her head seemed to lean closer to Daniel. "There. Eat that, and you may choose what gift you like. Paintings hung in world museums with frantic millionaires liquidating their assets just to outbid one another, or novels that jostle your other novels off the best-seller charts as fast as they fly off your desk. Or you could write the music that the world will be singing for the next hundred years, with all the girls fainting with lust when you shake your hips, hmm? Oh, don't wonder how I know so much of what goes on in your world, little one. We may not have met face to face in a

dipperful of years, but we can still touch your dreams as they float by."

Daniel frowned. "But...if you know everything about me..."

"Oh, I don't know everything by any means, my dear. Just your desires. I see them burning always inside you mortals like colored flames. Sometimes I wonder why they don't burn you right up like matches."

"I understand." Daniel clenched his fists. He'd almost said 'Okay,' but he didn't want to utter anything that might be taken for acceptance of her offer. What she was offering would surely be bad for him in the long run, just like eating any fairy food would be bad. It was good to remind himself of that. And yet...

Yet why shouldn't he get something for himself out of this visit? After all, he'd found the portal, braved the monsters, climbed the mountain. To say nothing of the fact that if he turned down this offer he might end his days locked in an edible birdcage. And when he thought about what she offered him...

Loneliness was a prison too, with crystal walls like the cavern downstairs. You could catch glimpses of others locked up in their own crystal prisons as well, but a lifetime's worth of chiseling could never make the wall any thinner between your cage and theirs. And yet he had felt cracks - reading poems or listening to songs or standing in museums, there had been times when he had felt a hand reach through from another cell and touch his own. To be able to do the same thing himself, to touch

someone and reassure her that she was not alone – hadn't that been what he had wanted ever since he was old enough to scribble? Wouldn't anyone sell his soul for that, the way Jay Fry had said the bluesman Bob Johnson did on a dark night at a Crossroads?

Remembering Jay Fry's face as he leaned over his guitar and sang Bob Johnson's heartweary blues, Daniel began to feel stronger. If what Kate Castellano said about such deals was true, then it had been no devil that had tuned Bob Johnson's guitar that night. Daniel faced the Lady of Lures more boldly, and asked, "Your kind aren't known for giving gifts outright, lady. What would you be asking from me, then, in exchange for the little treat you've got there?"

The fairy must have thought she had him, must have seen the flame of his desire burning bright and hot, for suddenly she slid out of her divan and coiled her arms around Daniel's neck, her cool fingers sliding down the back of his shirt while her dark chocolate-scented breath whispered in his ear, "Does it matter, dear one? All you have to do is want it so badly that you don't care what you give up in exchange."

Jolts of energy seemed to be running up and down Daniel's back as he stared at the brown nut that contained within itself everything he'd ever wanted to say, and he saw his hand beginning to creep toward it. The others wouldn't have to know, would they? Besides, what did it matter what they thought? His best friend hated him now, and Sondra would never stretch out a hand

to him even if Justin was blowing her off the face of the earth, and he was all alone...

He knew that his thoughts now were poisonous, and yet somehow, his mind couldn't seem to latch upon any good reason to turn her down. He felt as if he was sliding down a steepening hill with nothing to hold onto, and he began searching through the recesses of his brain for anything substantial. And from behind that door which had begun opening so much more frequently ever since his first night in Crossroads, at last he found what he was looking for. A line from Robert Browning came to him, and he heard himself say "Man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" And with that, her spell on him was broken, and he knew that he would have to be content with stumbling through life trying to reach past the walls with nothing but the same paltry tools that all mortals possessed.

From the fairy's dark countenance, he knew that she could tell he was free as well. She slumped back onto her divan, sighed, and clapped her hands. Instantly the door behind Daniel opened and the spriggan guards returned.

"Take him back and lock him up to rot, for all I care," she said morosely, as the licorice handcuffs whipped around his wrists once more. "And bring the next one up. I hope there aren't too many mortals like you these days, little one. But I trust there aren't." Once again she smiled that too-wide smile of hers, as Daniel was hustled back down the steps to the crystal dungeon.

There were thirty-seven bars on Daniel's cage at its widest point. This was only one of the many absorbing facts that he had discovered while wriggling about on its floor, trying to make himself comfortable. Now that things had quieted down again, the burns and bandages on his side were reminding him uncomfortably of their presence once more. Aside from studying the geological intricacies of the rock-crystal architecture, there was nothing else to do. He supposed that, for a prison, lack of entertainment options must be considered a design feature.

He had plenty of leisure to ponder this sort of question, because Ken seemed to have disappeared inside a shell. When Daniel had first been put back into his cage, Ken had been curled up in a fetal position, rocking slightly. When he finally unrolled, he ignored Daniel entirely. Instead of talking, he put his chin on his fists and seemed to become completely absorbed with staring at the amber fizzing creek that ran not far from his cage. This state of affairs suited Daniel just fine considering their last conversation, so the two of them sat in a silence that filled the crystal cavern like frost.

At least counting the bars on the cages was better than worrying about what was happening to Sondra. After the one-eyed guards had finished heaving Daniel into his cage and slamming his door shut, they had dragged her out of her cell and hauled her to the stairs even more roughly than they had handled Daniel. She had only had time to shoot him a single frightened, questioning

glance, and he had only had time to yell out "Remember Persephone!" before she disappeared up the steps. It was impossible to tell how much time she'd been gone since then, minutes or hours, but through the sugar walls Daniel could dimly see the sun shouldering with determination toward the horizon.

Then the door of the dungeon opened again, not with the clang that dungeon doors are supposed to have, but rather with an almost musical swish. Daniel turned expecting to call out a greeting to Sondra while simultaneously trying to guess from her face whether she'd accepted whatever temptations the Sugar Plum Fairy had offered her.

The prisoner that the one-eyed creatures were grasping tightly, however, was not Sondra. It was Musmus. A series of Lifesaver candies of graduated sizes had been forced over his wicked scissors blades so that they were clamped tightly together. After the guards had thrown him into one of the larger cages and hastily flung the door closed, he reared back and charged the door viciously, so that the nearest spriggan would have been turned into shish kebab if he had not jumped frantically back. Then the guards beat a hasty retreat, leaving the huge familiar eying the two human prisoners balefully. Daniel was grateful that at least his cell was out of scissors range - even bound together, those sharp metal shears looked as deadly as any unicorn's horn.

It seemed as if the guards were gone only a moment before they, or possibly a different squad, returned holding Sondra, who

was struggling mightily in their midst. When Daniel realized that they were hauling her toward the same cage she had been in before, he sprang to his feet; it was only inches away from the cage holding the creature.

"Hey! You can't put her in that one! That thing will run her through!" But the one-eyed spriggans seemed to be as deaf as they were depth-perceptually challenged, and they tossed her through the door and turned to leave.

"HEY!" This time Daniel was so fearful that he took off one of his shoes and flung it at a guard's retreating back. The shoe missed and bounced off the opposite wall of the cavern, and its target and the other spriggans continued out the door without a backward glance.

At this point even Ken unfolded himself to stand up and watch what was happening in the other cages. As soon as Sondra had assessed the situation, she went into a crouch, tensing her muscles to spring in any direction as soon as the beast charged. *It's like one of those magic tricks, Daniel thought, where a girl gets in a basket and the magician sticks a sword through it, and you wonder if this will be the one time when the trick goes wrong and you'll see blood pooling out of the basket's bottom and the magician going pale and the curtain crashing down.* Then the familiar charged.

Chapter 7

*Our arms are waving our lips are apart;
And if any gaze on our rushing band,
We come between him and the deed of his hand,
We come between him and the hope of his heart.*

"The Hosting of the Sidhe"

W. B. Yeats

Sondra dodged. Since the bindings on the shears made them broader than they normally would be, Musmus had to be choosy about which combination of openings in the bars of the two cages would be wide enough for him to thrust through, which seemed to make it a bit easier for her to anticipate where he was about to lunge. However, it was also clear that there wasn't any spot in her cage that would be completely safe. The fact that her hands were still bound would also be a hindrance. The familiar pulled its blades back and lunged again, and once again she was able to get out of the way, but the margin this time was smaller. Daniel hurled his other shoe at the creature's cage, and it bounced off the bars and was once again ignored by its intended target.

Do supernatural monstrosities ever get tired? Daniel wondered as he watched helplessly. By the fifth lunge, it was already clear that Sondra wouldn't be able to keep her end up all day. All it would take would be a single slip and she would be

done for, and for all Daniel knew the creature might be able to keep this up all night and the next day as well.

Then, on the sixth lunge, Sondra made her move. She darted forward and grabbed the shears just behind the second Lifesaver that bound them together. Then she held on with both hands, so that Musmus scrabbled his feet trying to pull himself free.

After several minutes of frantic scrabbling, the familiar went limp, perhaps embarrassed at being captured twice in the same day by the same person in almost the same manner. Sondra bent forward, and for a few moments in the diminishing light Daniel couldn't tell what she was up to. Then she moved aside, and he saw that she had undone one of her own shoelaces and used it to bind the shears to one of the bars in her cage. Then she reached her bound hands carefully through the bars of the adjoining cages. "There there, little one," she said softly, soothingly. The mouse-creature's whiskers vibrated anxiously, but it didn't make any further movements. "There there. Did that bad old lure-lady threaten you? Is that why you're scared? Don't be afraid, little one. I won't hurt you. I want to be your friend."

I hope it doesn't remember earlier today when she whacked it upside the head with her stick, thought Daniel. Now Sondra was stroking the furry head gently, and the frantically vibrating whiskers were beginning to calm down to a gentle waving in time with her strokes. The creature's eyes rolled back, and a low rumbling sound began to emerge from its throat.

"Well I'll be..." said Ken. Then Sondra pulled her hands back and started to work the first Lifesaver off the scissors blades where it was adhered. "Are you sure that's wise?" She ignored him and jiggled it back and forth gently until it slipped off the point. Then she began work on the second one.

"I'm not sure about whether that's a good idea either, Sondra," Daniel called out. By that time, though, she'd begun on the third band, and the familiar was actively helping her along, laying the shears along one of the bars of the cage and pulling backwards so that the candy bands would slide off more easily.

In another minute the process was complete. Musmus jumped backwards to the middle of its cage and pointed its shears at the ceiling and *shnikt* them together several times ecstatically like an enormous psychopathic barber. Then he leapt at the bars of his cage, and with a few mighty scythes, they lay on the ground in chunks. He leapt free of the shattered spun candy prison and gamboled about the cavern a bit, then turned and charged at the cage holding Sondra.

Ken and Daniel both cried out as the bars of her cell were reduced to fragments in moments. But as the creature's mighty shears swung open wide and it advanced towards her, she merely held up her bound wrists in front of her. "You won't hurt me, will ya big fella?" she cooed gently. And sure enough, when the blades swished shut, it was the red licorice strands that fell to the floor and not her bleeding torso.

"Now get the guys out too, okay Musie?" she purred, scratching its head, and it rubbed itself against her affectionately. It was the work of moments for Daniel and Ken's cages to be similarly demolished, and they both rushed to Sondra's side. The familiar got there first and gave them a protective glare, though, and they both stepped back again.

"That was incredible, Sondra!" Daniel gushed.

"Oh, I had a hunch he was actually a big softy once you got past the snippers," Sondra replied with a shrug. "My mom and I used to take in stray kitties."

"It isn't an animal, it's some kind of fairy in animal form," Ken remarked dryly. "Did you have the slightest evidence to back up your hunch? Because by all rights you should be confetti right now."

Sondra gazed back at him with narrowed eyes. "And why is that, pray tell? The way you were talking before, it sounds like you figure once someone acts like an enemy, they're going to stay an enemy forever everlasting without end amen? Is that it?"

Ken shifted uncomfortably. "That's been my experience, yes." He lifted his eyes briefly to glance at both his friends, then looked back down at the ground. "Oh, and by the way. About that little outburst of mine a while ago. Don't pay any attention to what I said back then. I was under a lot of stress."

"And...?" demanded Daniel, placing his hands on his hips.

"And what?" Ken's eyes flickered back up to Daniel again.
"Really, forget I said those things. I didn't mean any of them."

"I'm waiting to hear the words 'I'm sorry,' goofball,"
Daniel insisted.

"Oh. All right. Sorry, you two." He looked up again and slumped his shoulders as if immensely relieved to get that over with. "Now let's see whether that door is locked or not."

It was locked. "Now what do we do?" asked Daniel, recovering his shoes and sitting down to put them on. "Can you unlock it, Ken?"

"I can't do much without my focus," Ken said regretfully. "But I may have come up with another way for us to get out. I hadn't figured out how to get us out of the cages yet, though, so I suppose thanks for that, Sonny. We need to hurry before any more spriggans show up, though."

"Yes, I was meaning to ask you about that," Sondra put in. "How come...?"

"No time to answer questions right now." Ken walked briskly to the far end of the cavern where the amber stream disappeared through a hole in the rock. Rock candy bars covered the hole, so there didn't seem to be any escape in that direction, but he crouched down beside it anyway. "It is my opinion that going through here will eventually take us outside the mountain."

"Are you sure about that?" Sondra asked snippily, still scratching Musmus' head. "Or is it just a hunch?"

"I'm sure," said Ken definitely. Then he hesitated.

"Well, as sure as I am with anything about Statticus."

"Statticus?" asked Daniel, standing to join the other two.

"Yes, well. Statticus is what I call *my* familiar. She isn't just confined to television screens, you know. Any chaotic visual and audio pattern will work as a background. While you were busy counting the bars on your cage, Danny, I was summoning her up in the stream and listening to her advice." He hesitated again. "At least, that's what I was doing if she isn't just a figment of my imagination."

"Well, that inspires just tons of confidence," Sondra sighed. "Musie, can you cut through those bars and get us out of here?"

Alas, the bars proved to be too thick and at too flat an angle, and the creature's shears just slid off them.

"All right then," said Ken. "We'll have to try my familiar's suggestion. Even in Faerie, rock candy should dissolve when a liquid flows across it constantly like this. That's its nature, after all. I think there must be some kind of charm on one or both that keeps them in their respective states, and I think I might be able to remove it. That's what I was asking Statticus about, and she showed me how to manage it without my focus."

"She?" asked Sondra, bemused. But now Ken had dipped his finger into the liquid and was drawing hard-to-see mathematical expressions along the side of the streambed.

"Both of you, please keep quiet so I can listen to her while I work," he murmured.

Sondra and Daniel stood by patiently while Ken drew his figures on the rock candy edge of the stream, while Musmus rolled around at Sondra's feet. Occasionally Ken would pause and cock his head to listen to the rippling liquid, then start a new section. While he worked, the last vestiges of sunlight faded from the chamber, but through the opposite wall they could see a full moon rising as the sun set. The chamber was, if possible, even more beautiful in the moonlight, seemingly carved directly out of diamonds and silver and dreams. Daniel found himself almost regretting the destruction of the cages, for despite their purpose, the ones that remained seemed enchanting and pure.

"All done," Ken said finally, standing up and wiping his hands on his jeans. "If I got it right, it should remove some of the protection magic that's on this place. Nothing to do now except watch."

"Oh, by the way, Sondra," put in Daniel, "what did the SPF try to sell you up there?"

"SP...? Oh, our friend Miss Sugar Plum." She tossed her hair. "Pretty standard rich and famous deal, that's all. A string of blockbusters, then famous enough so the tabloids only call me by my first name, able to start new fashions, Wondrous Beauty to Drive Men Mad. The usual."

"And you told her you weren't interested?"

Sondra snorted. "Well of course I'm interested, silly. But I've read enough tabloids to know that sort of thing is worse than useless if you don't feel you've earned it. I don't want to be like some child star that it all gets handed to, and they need truckloads of nose candy and worse to make them feel worthy. But I'll be up there made of lights on my own merits some day, mark my words."

"I got an offer along the same general lines," Daniel told her, not wanting to go into too many details. "Managed to turn her down too, but it was tough."

Sondra swung around and faced Ken. "Which brings us to a certain little factoid that I think deserves comment, Mister Wizard. When the sprigs brought Dan back, they turned right around and took me away for my bout of being presented with the Kingdoms of This World. But after they brought me back, they apparently left for good. Why do you suppose they didn't take you, Ken?"

Ken squatted down again to examine the bars, not making eye contact with either of them. "How on earth should I know, Sonny? Maybe she's taking a coffee break right now. Do you think these things look any thinner yet?"

"A coffee break. Maybe so." She bent down over him and spoke softly into his ear. "You know what I think, Ken? I think she has her hooks so far into you already that she doesn't think she needs to dangle any more forbidden fruit to reel you in. You heard when she was talking about the good old days when this

place was full of familiars? I think she *runs* the familiars, Ken."

"That's true," put in Daniel. He realized suddenly that Sondra was voicing a fear he'd been keeping buried for the last few weeks, too thrilled with Ken's new sorcerous powers to bring it out into the open. "She did tell me that she was mad at Musmus here for obeying his human mistress over her. So she must be the boss of your Statticus too, Ken."

Suddenly Sondra's hand clamped hard on Ken's shoulder and pulled him up slowly to face her. Musmus crowded up close beside her, the blades of his scissors slightly spread. Daniel waited for an eruption, knowing how his friend disliked being touched, but Ken made no move to resist her; his skin looked ashen, and his eyes darted for an exit.

"Dear friend," Sondra said softly, "you didn't receive all these newfound powers of yours just for freeing that brownie, did you? The first few lessons were nothing but her foot in the door, the free sample that the crack dealer hands out. What did you *really* pay for the knowledge to bind your familiar and construct your focus, Ken?"

For a moment Daniel thought Ken might do something crazy or violent, might strike Sondra or take off sprinting or curl up into a ball. But instead he took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and seemed to will the tension to leave his body. He closed his eyes and put his hands over his face, and said into them, muffled, "It's memories she wants, mostly."

Sondra kept her grip tight on his shoulder, but her voice was kind. "What kinds of memories, Ken?"

"Oh," Ken balled up his hands up into fists, "mainly the ones from my childhood. It isn't actually the memories themselves, it's the emotions that go along with them. Which," and here he opened his eyes again and lowered his hands, "which I find I am not at all unwilling to give up. So it's a win-win situation, you see."

"Explain." Sondra's voice was still kind, but backed with a steel that Daniel couldn't imagine anyone being able to resist.

"All right." Ken stared back at them both with something like defiance now, a kind of frantic desire to justify himself. "Just listen. When I was in sixth grade, my project on ionic rocket propulsion won first place at the city-wide science fair. And my father had promised to come and watch, but when I got off the stage someone handed me a message that he'd needed to fly off to an important meeting, written on the back of an envelope with money for a taxi. There I was, twelve years old, with a toothpick-chewing seventy-year-old Dominican taxi-driver helping me load hundreds of dollars worth of equipment into the trunk of his taxi for the hour-long trip home." He drew another deep breath. "That was a memory that used to -- *disturb* me -- before I sold all the emotional baggage from it to the fairies. And now I can still remember it, just without having my insides getting scrunched up into a wad. It's as if it happened to someone else, and it doesn't weaken me anymore, see?"

"I see," said Sondra silkily. "And is that all they've asked for?"

"No." Ken took another deep breath. "There've been good memories too." Then he exploded. "What difference does it make? It was an awful childhood anyway, and I'm better off without it. Why should you guys care if I sell it off for something better?"

Sondra was still holding Ken's shoulder with her right hand. She drew her left arm back and slapped him sharply across the cheek. Then she grabbed his other shoulder, while he stared back at her, open-mouthed.

"Ken," she said. "Listen to me carefully, all right?"

"WHAT..." She shook him gently, but still hard enough to make his head snap forward.

"...EXACTLY..." She shook him again.

"...DO YOU THINK..." Shake.

"...A SOUL ..." Shake.

"...IS MADE OF..." Shake.

"...ANYWAY?"

She let go of his shoulders and held out her hands to him, pleading. "Did you think your soul was some kind of pink smoke or something, that you'd be able to see it drifting away? Our emotions make us who we are, Ken. The ones from our childhoods as much as the ones from last week. More, even. Good or bad, you are NOT," here she poked him in the chest so that he staggered back, "NOT to throw yourself away like this just because your memories cause you a bit of discomfort sometimes!"

Daniel chimed in, aware by now that he could no more resist the scraps of poetry that rose into his consciousness these days than he could resist the demands sleep made of him: "Feelings too of unremembered pleasure: such, perhaps, as have no slight or trivial influence on that best portion of a good man's life, his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love."

Sondra blinked. "I think I got that, Dan." She turned back to Ken. "You're supposed to be so smart, Mister Engineer. Do you really think there's no connection between what you sold to that familiar of yours and the way you were treating us both a while ago?"

Just then the sound of footsteps came through the door. Daniel dropped his eyes down to the grate again, and saw that there was nothing left of the bars now but dwindling threads. He brought his foot down upon them hard, and they smashed to flinders that disappeared like swirling bubbles down the hole.

"We'd better get going," he said anxiously. Just then the door to the cavern burst open and five one-eyed guards entered. Musmus immediately leapt from his place by Sondra's side and bounded across the chamber toward them, scissors spread wide. The spriggans dropped back with frightened grunts and raised their spears.

"Now would be a good time!" cried Daniel. Without a word, Ken sat down in the midst of the stream, drew a deep breath, held his nose, and pushed himself away down the chute like it was one of the waterpark slides.

Sondra sat down gingerly in the stream where Ken had just been. "So a tainted engineer-turned-wizard gets advice on escaping from a suspect familiar. Why am I not thinking very much of this plan?" she muttered.

"I think the stream is ginger ale or something," Daniel warned her. "Smells awfully good, but remember not to inhale any."

She gave him a rueful grin. "Breathing is one of those habits I've found hard to give up," she sighed. "Well, here goes nothing." She drew a deep breath and pushed off.

As Daniel sat down in the freezing cold liquid he glanced back over his shoulders. Musmus was bounding about amongst the guards with gleeful abandon, and chopped-up bits of spear were flying through the air. The hole led down into unimaginable dark depths before him, but Daniel knew he had to stay close to his friends. He held his breath and pushed off.

Shooting down the tunnel reminded Daniel of something, but it took him a while to figure out what it was. At last he realized that it reminded him of his own room on Sapphire Street, the way it felt sometimes with the window taped shut and the door closed - a sealed-off world at the heart of things, Alice down the rabbit-hole, a cocoon in the midst of time. In every direction there was nothing visible but the cool sugar crystal of the mountain, filled up to the brim with moonlight like a sapphire filled with blue. It didn't feel as if he was falling, but rather floating, drifting through the cool heart of the candy

mountain like a thought passing through a brain. Daniel couldn't remember afterwards whether there had been enough air in the tube for him to breathe, or whether he had simply forgotten how to inhale.

And then he was aware of space around himself once again, and he felt as if he was falling for real once more, and he landed with a splash in a pool. He felt the liquid pressing against his lips, but finally clawed his way back to the surface before he had to take a gasp of ginger-scented air. He splashed and floundered in the spray, and at last he realized where he was. He was back in the throne room of the Lady of Lures, and spriggans with spears were hauling a soaking Sondra and Ken out of the pool. Ken was looking completely drained, Sondra spitting with rage. The spriggans fished him out of the pool as well and hustled him over to stand beside his friends, and then the Sugar Plum Fairy ascended from her throne and flew to hover above them; Daniel noted dumbly that she now seemed to be equipped with enormous dark purple butterfly's wings, like one of the hand-painted plaster fairies in a Crossroads souvenir store. They did not make her ethereal and dainty like the figurines, though, but rather like some midnight bird of prey. The glowing sparks above her head drowned out the moon shining through the walls and drenched the chamber with light like captive stars.

"Well, well, well," she chortled, rubbing her hands together like a cartoon villain. "So the little mortlings wanted to escape. What could they have been thinking, foolish little

objects as they are? Well, perhaps one of them not quite so foolish." She swooped closer and chucked Ken's ear, and he flinched as if he had been struck again. "One had the sense to take up my offer. But really, all of you, where were your brains? This is my kingdom. It wouldn't matter whether you followed a trail made of bread crumbs or ice crystals or beanstalks or stars, whether you hacked your way through brambles or climbed a ladder of hair. How could you not have known that every road here would lead back to me?"

"Yes, well, perhaps we'll just be pushing you into an oven, then!" yelled Sondra, struggling in the spriggans' grip.

"Me? ME???" The fairy soared higher again, her eyes flashing like opals in the light of her stars. "Mortlings will never catch me, not with all the nets in the ocean. It's the mortal-catcher that I am, the trap-springer, your hearts strung up in my chamber like coneys. When all the gates are open your fondest dreams will be my pocket change. None will be able to resist receiving their hearts' desires from me, and my power will grow by skips and soars beyond all bounds of madness and desire, and soon I will be the Hecate, the one true Queen of Air and Darkness..."

"YOU?!" bellowed a new voice from a far corner of the throne room. "YOU the Queen of Air and Darkness? Baroness of Fog and Flatulence, more likely." The pillar of smoke that had been rising from a hole in the floor began to lean and spread and grow, and as it grew it curved into the gigantic proportions of

Lilith Netherby, one hand on her hip, the other stretched to point a cloudy finger at the cowering Sugar Plum Fairy.

Chapter 8

*It was mirk mirk night, and there was nae light,
 And they waded through red blude to the knee;
 For a' the blude that's shed on earth
 Rins through the springs o' that countrie.*

"The Ballad of True Thomas"

"Pardon, mistress, pardon!" squeaked the Lady of Lures. The swallowtail wings disappeared from her back and she sprawled ungracefully with her arms outstretched on the floor. The lights that had been hovering above her head broke apart and scattered, flopping where they lay like stranded fish. "I was speaking only to impress the mortals, and..."

"SILENCE!" cried the great cloudy Lilith. "I heard what I heard. I have not yet even taken my throne, and already you are plotting how to steal it from me? No one will take the aspect of the crossroads goddess but I. What has become of the oaths of loyalty you bound yourself with when you swore to aid our cause?"

"Truly, mistress, I meant nothing by what I said to these children." The lady of the castle scrambled towards the cloud on her hands and knees, her words tumbling over one another in haste. "It was the visit after such a long weary drought, smelling their sweet dreams close enough to make my mouth water, so that I..."

"You forgot your place, minion. And having done so once you will surely do so again, unless I see to it that you are unable. I will take over your *aspects*, oathbreaker. And as for the mortals, I will deal with them now by the terms of our agreement as well."

"But..." began the Sugar Plum Fairy, and then she clamped her mouth shut with a look of horror on her face, for as she spoke the word an enormous blue-black wasp flew out of her mouth and then looped around to dive at her.

A wide grin split the face of the smoky Lilith. "Your own oaths come back to destroy you," boomed the great voice, "and when they have finished my servant will bring back what is left of you to me. It is as it should be. Let all know how the new Queen of Magic will punish disloyalty!" With that she swung her two smoky hands together in a thunderous clap, but the thunder was not the sound of percussion but rather a loud, screeching buzz. For now the great image of Lilith was made no longer of smoke, but rather a swirl of insects of every variety under the sun and moon, and after holding her shape briefly they broke apart in every direction and filled the room with a terrible, flitting, stinging fog. The spriggans threw their spears in all directions and dove into the ginger-ale pool.

"OW!" cried Sondra and Ken simultaneously, trying desperately to slap all the places where they were being bitten and stung and chewed. The cloud-Liliths' feet had broken apart into two swarms of cockroaches, centipedes, scorpions, ticks, and

biting ants, and now these were spreading out across the floor towards the feet of the mortals as they danced about trying to keep the stinging flies and bees and wasps at bay.

As Daniel saw the insects heading toward him, his first impulse was neither terror nor despair, but rather flat-out denial. Later he realized that this response was what had saved them all. There is always a moment when every nightmare becomes too nightmarish, when the branch you are clinging to on the side of the cliff gives way or the car you are driving hurtles spinning towards the oncoming traffic, and when your brain can think of no other way to resolve the situation other than to wake you up instantly, lying in your bed drenched in cold sweat. This was the reaction that Daniel had as the cloud of bugs flew at him, and while his brain was not able to wrest him free of Faerie entirely, it exerted an influence on his surroundings nonetheless. It took Daniel a few seconds to realize that he was not getting stung the way the other two seemed to be, and a few seconds more to remember the way he had been able to consciously use his imagination to nudge his surroundings in his dream of the Flaming Forest at Sondra's rehearsal.

"Guys!" he yelled at them, "these are dream bugs, I can tell! "Here..." and he reached into the swarms of insects surrounding his friends and grabbed their arms, then strove to send certainty down his fingertips that this pestilence was not come here to torment them, that the nightmare belonged to someone else, and that the bugs were only harmless phantasms of dream.

Then he was holding the two of them upright as they sagged, and the insects were still swarming around them, but touching them no longer.

"Remind me - to ask you later - how you did that," murmured Ken, his smooth face now marked with swelling bite-marks.

"Out!" was all that Daniel said, and with arms around one another's waists the three crouched and stumbled towards the great doors. But alas, the inner surfaces of the doors were smooth with no handle or knob to pull, and when they threw themselves against them the doors did not budge. Then they drew back, for up close they could see that the bon-bon mosaics on the door were being swarmed over by thousands of ants and beetles and cockroaches, devouring the patterns there and on the walls and in every part of the chamber.

"We can't do anything holding on to each other like this. I'm going to try an experiment," shouted Ken over the droning buzz, and he shoved aside Daniel's arm and stood independently for a moment. A passing cloud of horseflies briefly obscured his face, but when it was gone he could be seen nodding in relief. "They're still not biting me. I think whatever you did fixed it for both of us, Dan. Split up and let's look for a way out of here." Then he crouched low again and dashed across the floor to the place where the bugs were thickest: the cloud surrounding the hapless Lady of Lures so that she was nearly invisible in their midst. As Ken ran they could hear him yelling, "MY FOCUS! WHERE IS MY FOCUS?" Then they saw the bug-covered lump that might have

been the Lady look in his direction and throw something weakly, and he dove into the thickest part of the swarm to retrieve it.

Daniel turned to Sondra, but she hid her face from him and he couldn't tell what her bites and stings looked like. Then he saw something else that chilled him even worse than the swarm, and he held her arm and pointed.

The hole in the corner from which the smoke had poured was stretching. At first it seemed as if the tips of a cluster of squirming vines were growing out of it, and then Daniel saw what the tips were actually attached to, and for a moment his mind shut down. For they were the tips of the legs of an enormous spider, and as it pulled its fanged head out of the hole and began to drag out its ponderous body, he was taken back abruptly to an instant he'd blocked out of his childhood memories, when he had shared a boat shaped like a swan with his mother, and they had turned a corner and seen Lilith for the first time, and for an instant he had believed he was seeing this hideous apparition descending from above.

His flashback did not last long, however, for Sondra's arm suddenly tightened around him as she yelled "OW!" again and slapped at a fly that was nipping her neck. From Ken's direction too Daniel heard cursing, and he quickly tried to refocus his attention on the task at hand. Apparently he didn't need to keep touching his friends to protect them, but he did need to keep concentrating.

Gigantic as it was, the spider moved with disturbing speed once free of its hole, skittering across the floor towards the cloud of insects surrounding Ken and the Lady. The dark swarm lifted as it approached, and for the first time they could see what was left of her. There were no signs of blood or welts from any bites - rather, she looked almost as if she had been eroded, pitted and blasted like an ice sculpture that had been left out in the rain. And yet still she moved, struggling back up to her hands and feet before the creature was upon her.

It did not bite her; apparently she was too helpless for it to need such precautions. It simply picked her up with several of its arms and began twirling her in place, shooting out a web from its hind end and wrapping her spinning body in the sticky strands. The multifaceted eyes fixed balefully on Ken where he stood nearby, madly punching numbers on his remote as he backed away slowly, but it made no move to challenge him yet.

"You know what, Dan? I've never liked spiders much," said Sondra, wearily. "At least I've had plenty of chances to warm up today." And then she was dashing across the floor as well, crunching beetles and cockroaches beneath her feet, to the place where her club had fallen during her earlier brawl with the guards. It was untouched by the bugs - why should they bother with wood in a whole castle made of sugar? She snatched it up, advanced toward the spider from behind, and then extended herself into a mighty baseball bat *thwock* on its hind carapace that sent it toppling over in a leg-waving heap. It pulled itself back up

into fighting position faster than Daniel would have thought possible, though, and advanced towards her gnashing its mandibles.

Then Ken finished the spell he had been casting with a great shout. From the opposite side of the chamber, where the small stream down which they had plummeted jetted out of its hole and rained into its pool, there came a growing roar. Then, as the sound climaxed into a thunderous crash, the whole wall exploded into a great tidal wave of ginger ale and flailing spriggans and enormous chunks of rock candy that swept across the floor in a broad torrent.

Immediately Daniel could see what Ken had done. With his focus and the self-confidence he'd been gaining in his powers, he'd been able to use the spell Statticus had taught him to remove the protective enchantments on the rock candy, then amplified it a hundred-fold. The swirling river surrounding the palace, the secret trickling pathways within its walls, all of these he had harnessed to use as the engines of its destruction. *When you say you'll find an exit, friend, you don't mess around,* he thought dazedly.

Ken was still pressing the buttons of his remote with almost superhuman speed, seeming to guide the torrent as it rushed across the floor. With a rush it swept the great spider off its feet and sent it tumbling with flailing arms down the channel it was carving. Then Daniel realized the river's destination: the door in the wall leading to the dungeons. At

the last instant, though, as the river crested and plunged down the spiral steps, the flailing arachnid managed to anchor a thread onto a nearby wall and haul itself to one side of the widening hole.

"Come on!" Ken yelled from nearby. "The whole castle could get swept off the cliff soon. Only one way left." Daniel turned to see that his friend had managed to anchor a large chunk of floating rock candy wall to the side of the rushing torrent. "Hop on!"

Daniel scrambled onto the makeshift raft. When he turned to offer his hand to Sondra, he saw that she was carrying a bundle that she dumped unceremoniously onto the pitted surface before leaping on herself. The whole raft tipped precariously as Ken scrambled on board, and then Sondra pushed them off the bank with her staff and they were away.

Ken was still pushing buttons madly on his remote, but he paused briefly to lean over and yell at Daniel, "Whatever you're doing to keep those bugs off us, try to see if you can do the same thing to keep us from capsizing, okay?"

"Okay!" Daniel yelled back, trying desperately to concentrate on both things as once, for the swarms of flies and bees and wasps were still close around them on all sides.

Beside the broadening hole in the wall where the river roared down the staircase, the spider waited for them, its bloated body low in the midst of a ring of high-arching legs. As they neared the doorway, it leapt from the bank and sailed

through the air directly at their craft, legs and fangs extended toward them. Sondra stood, both Daniel and Ken grabbing her belt to steady her and try to balance the dangerous rocking of their craft, and with a mighty wallop of her staff sent the creature tumbling back to land with a splash near the edge of the stream once again. Then all three of them had to duck and clutch the edges of the raft as the liquid plunged down the steps, only barely getting a glimpse behind them of the creature scuttling bedraggled up the shore.

"Did I ever mention - I played baseball - in high school?" Sondra called out with her head thrown back and her hair streaming behind her, while the torrent swirled them down around the broad steps like water going down a drain. Ken still had his head bent over his remote, and Daniel was still concentrating with all his might on the raft staying upright. Suddenly he realized that he was clutching something besides the edge of the raft, and he looked down to see the eroded pitted face of the Lady of Lures, her body still swathed in spider silk. She was the bundle that Sondra had thrown onto the raft before she leapt on.

Then he noticed something else as well, and called out to Ken, "Did you know our raft is dissolving?" Ken glanced down at the thinning piece of rock candy they were sitting on and nodded, then reached into his pocket and pulled out his Far Side notebook and began flipping through pages.

The raft was still careening in circles when they burst out of the base of the staircase and crossed the breadth of the crystal dungeon. "I hope Musie made it out all right," cried Sondra.

"Here we go again!" yelled Ken, and then they were rushing down the chute they'd used for their previous escape attempt, much wider now from the force of the escaping torrent.

Once again Daniel felt oddly at peace as they passed through the heart of the moonlit mountain. The craft was still spinning and rocking giddily, and the thought occurred to him in a distant part of his mind that they were hardly safe and might perish at any moment, and yet overriding it there was a much stronger part of his mind that told him that if these were to be his final moments, then there were no better ones he might have chosen. He looked over at Sondra's face as she clutched the thinning edge of the raft with one hand and used her staff to fend off nearby chunks of floating candy with the other. Her hair was thrown back and a look of wild excitement was in her eyes, and although the welts from the biting insects might break her heart later when she looked into a mirror, for now at least she looked happy and alive. Ken was frowning as he consulted his book and punched in numbers, and the expression on his face was one Daniel remembered from countless times he had watched his roommate struggling with a calculus problem or a tough stretch in a video game. These were his friends whom he loved deeply, and he would be proud to die in their company.

The raft was now growing thin enough for them to look directly through and see the bottom of the chute rushing by. Its edge was as sharp as a knife, and Daniel found that he needed to scoot closer to the center of the raft where the Lady of Lures still lay in a tightly-wrapped bundle. But the raft neither capsized nor dissolved completely, and suddenly in a whoosh of spray they found themselves sailing out of the tunnel at the base of the mountain and, still spinning, floating down a peaceful stream under the tranquil moon.

When they approached close enough to the side of the stream, Sondra tensed herself and leapt to the bank, then spun around and stretched out her staff for Daniel to grab onto. With the abrupt change in momentum, a chunk of the remaining raft cracked off and swirled away, but there was barely enough left for them to wrestle to shore. Daniel and Ken scrambled up while Sondra held the raft, and then together the three of them lifted it onto the bank, still cradling the Sugar Plum Fairy. Daniel noticed that her eyes were open now, watching them warily. A single flickering light was still caught in her warm golden hair.

"Wow," said Ken, clutching a nearby tree that overhung the river, lollipops dangling from its branches. "If the waterpark ever makes that into a ride, I'm gonna be first in line."

"I don't think I'll ever be able to drink ginger ale again," gasped Daniel, drawing deep breaths while he gazed around and tried to take in their surroundings.

Only a short stroll up the grassy bank, he could see the graham cracker wall and the heart-shaped candy cane gate through which they had arrived. The whole scene was bathed in moonlight from a moon that seemed to take up a fifth of the sky. Then Sondra turned and gazed up the cliff face, and the others looked with her. The waterfall on the cliff face was still bringing down huge chunks of turrets and battlements, crashing into a gigantic pool at the cliff's base from which a river flowed to join their stream. At the top of the cliff, the castle's remnants squatted vacantly like the skull of some great beast, and even at this distance they could still see the cloud of bees and other insects that had made the place their habitation.

"They'll be making honey there soon, I shouldn't wonder," came a croaking voice from behind them. They turned again to look at the former queen. She flopped about, seeming to be trying to make some gesture, but at last her head sank back hopelessly. "I seem to be still entrapped," she said with resignation. "What can I offer you if you will free me, mortals?"

"Now that's more like it." Sondra was leaning heavily on her staff, but she managed to smile weakly in the midst of her exhaustion and pain. "I was hoping you might show a bit of gratitude when I went after that - thing -- to rescue you."

"That, plus if she was telling the truth about all roads in her realm leading to her, we probably would have ended up right

back in the throne room if she hadn't been with us," put in Ken, collapsing beside her on the minty grass.

The fairy wrinkled her brow in puzzlement. "I know nothing of this gratitude you speak of," she said in a voice whose sweetness had been crushed like a lollipop run over by a truck. "But there is indeed a debt I now owe you for bringing me away from that which my lady had planned for me, and another debt if you will free me from these strands that bind me. And here is my offer for these things: for the second, healing of those wounds you took in my hall, and for the first, a boon each of your choosing if it lies within my remaining power. Are those terms acceptable?"

Ken rubbed his hands across his face and shuddered when he felt the welts there. "Sounds good to me," he said, and started to crawl toward the queen, but Sondra put a hand on his arm.

"None of this business about refusing to take back a gift you've already given, Lady." She was trying to put iron in her voice, but its strength was no more than beaten tin. "You already know what I want."

The fairy looked from Sondra to Daniel pleadingly. "The gifts I offered in the tower are still here for you," she said softly, but the two mortals shook their heads. She lay her head back and closed her eyes. "Mayhap the white lady is wrong, and you mortals truly have changed. Very well. Your playacting friends will be restored safely to themselves, though I cannot vouch what state they may be in when they return. More than this

I cannot do. It is of no matter; the point I wished to make with them has been made well enough." She wriggled again in her silk cocoon. "For any other boons I shall need my hands."

The three humans exchanged glances, then shuffled to the queen and began freeing her from the spider silk. Daniel did most of the work, for his companions seemed to be lapsing into delayed shock from their bites. It was difficult work with no knives or other sharp instruments, but at last he thought to break up the remnants of the raft into smaller pieces, and the sharp eroded edges did the job well.

"What...what happened to you" Daniel said wonderingly as more and more of the queen was uncovered and they could see the pits and cracks covering her face and arms. "Why isn't there any..."

"Blood?" The queen tried to give one of her too-wide smiles, but was unable to muster it. "We who live twilight-side don't have our skins bloated up with your nasty juices, mortling. It's made up of Glamour we are, back to breastbone. And so is everything else you see here made of Glamour as well, grass and sky and all between, and all the forms you perceive come partly from your imagination as well as your eyes."

He nodded slowly as he worked the wedge of sugar underneath the last sticky strands around her waist. "So everything here is, like, concentrated dreams? No wondered eating fairy food puts us mortals to sleep."

The last of her bonds fell away, and she grimaced as she pulled herself carefully to her feet like a broken statue being

dragged back onto its pedestal. "'Tis true, too much fantasy will do that when it enters mortal stomachs or pricks mortal fingers on spinning wheels and roses. But ah, what dreams when it does!" She looked closely at Daniel. "I'm thinking you got a mouthful when you were small, is that not so?"

Daniel looked down and nodded. "I suppose so."

"Aye, you have the look." She inspected her limbs and sighed. "Dear me, I will need much and more of the stuff to repair the damage the Lady has dealt me. And granting your boons will cost what little I have left. But it is not to be helped." She curled her fingers in a beckoning gesture toward Ken, then toward Sondra, and as she did so the welts from their insect bites faded while her own skin grew even more cracked and pitted. Both humans gasped as if they had been holding their breaths, and could only now allow themselves to inhale. Then her gaze turned back to Daniel, and she narrowed her cracked eyes.

"You have been wounded as well, but not in Faerie and not tonight, and I cannot heal you. Yet I still owe you twice over. Will you have an extra boon, then?"

"Sure, I'll think of something," Daniel said quickly. "You do remember what I asked you for last time, right before you heaved us into your dungeon?"

"Ah, yes." The Lady frowned. "My mistress would have me ground away to dust and scattered into the Great Murk if she learned I had told you this. And yet my promise has been given, and it seems I am no longer of her faction at any odds. Very

well." She paused and seemed to stare off beyond the mountain into the blackness of the far distant midnight sky. "This is all I know," she said at last. "The one you seek has been imprisoned with those loyal to the old regime, beyond the boundaries, in the Edge Country, the Farthest Reaches, the shrinking lands. When I first joined the Lady's cause, the boundary she set up with the Morcan made our countries a tiny island in the midst of all the King's wide lands, and now it has expanded so greatly that it has become a prison for our enemies instead of for us. And now I must go and seek exile there, or else seek for others in these lands who will hide me and begin intrigues anew, alas!"

She shook her head. "But you will not wish to hear of my woes. Not many mortals would be able to find their ways to the prisoners, but you have made it this far and shown yourselves to have keen eyes and sharp wits, and perhaps you may. With the boundaries in the state they are in these days, you might create your own gate. You would need, let me see: first a wizard, which you already have, to craft the ritual; second, a guide who knows the way; and third, something connected to the one you sought to help you through the barrier. There. That is all I know, and more than enough to be my doom should my mistress catch me. And what shall be your second boon?"

Daniel thought hard. He had many, many questions that she might be able to answer, and yet there was something tugging on him as well from his afternoon of eavesdropping. He knew, if he did not ask for it now, he would never have a chance again, and

he knew that the missed opportunity would rankle him forever. So he regretfully said farewell to the other excellent boons, and said with as much sureness as his voice could muster, "I would like you to restore to Kate Castellano the memory of what her purpose once was, which she has now forgotten."

The former queen frowned deeply once more. "All this taking back of gifts is so unpleasant, do you not think? Why must you mortlings be so fickle with your hearts' desires? Would it not be better to be like the excellent moth?" She sighed. "But it was ever thus. First someone wants a sausage on someone else's nose, and after only a few short moments she decides that the nose was better off sausageless after all. It is beyond understanding, but very well, I will grant your request." She turned to Ken, who was now sitting with his head leaning against the tree as if he lacked the strength to hold it upright. "And for you, Engineer?"

Ken flopped his head forward. "I've been doing a lot of thinking," he said slowly. "Ever since, um, Dawnstar Alorien here slapped me upside the face a little while ago."

"I'd always hoped I'd get an excuse to do that someday," said Sondra dreamily, still leaning on her stick. "What a scene."

"Yes, you performed splendidly." Ken rubbed his cheek. "Well, you may have been right. Perhaps the price I paid was higher than I had thought."

The Sugar Plum Fairy shook her head sadly. "But it's the only price there is, sweetness. Asking for wizardry without paying for it is like asking for honey that has never touched a bee." She sighed. "So you want to give up all your newfound power?"

"Not when our enemies still have it," Ken snapped automatically without stopping to think. Then he paused, and seemed to visibly sway. "But I don't like the person I'm turning into." His voice was barely above a whisper. "And the power ... it sings ..."

"K... Engineer," said Sondra warningly, but the Lady interrupted her.

"All this mortal indecisiveness is very entertaining, I'm sure, but it won't be long before the white lady sends someone more intelligent than a bug after me, and I must be far away by then." She blew into her closed fist and then opened it. Upon her palm lay two chocolate bonbons.

"This one has Kate's lost sweetness and this one has yours," she said, handing one to Daniel and one to Ken. "Do not worry, they have no Glamour in them, only your petty mortling dreams. When they are swallowed, the powers they paid for will begin to fade. Do with them as you will. Are our accounts now settled?"

She looked at each of them in turn and each nodded, though Ken's nod was a long time in coming.

"Very well. Now I must find a form more suited for traveling. I cannot say I hope we meet again, for our meeting so far has brought me nothing but ill fortune. And yet still I will wish you goodspeed for being the first to find a gate and bridge the worlds. If only ...well, no matter. There will be others. Farewell."

The edges of her form blurred and slid as she spoke, and suddenly where she had stood there was a bedraggled great horned owl ruffling her feathers. Just as she spread her wings to depart, though, Ken called out, "Wait!"

The enormous eyes turned to him, and the wicked curved beak opened to rasp, "What is it?"

"Tell us what your former mistress plans to do with our world."

The yellow eyes narrowed to slits. "I have no more debts to repay, mortal."

Ken gave a smile to match one of hers. "Don't tell us as payment for us," he said grimly. "Tell us as payback for her."

"Yeeeeesssss," breathed the owl in a long sigh, and although Ken was the one who had spoken, it was at Daniel that she stared, her head cocked thoughtfully to one side. Then she flapped her great wings and flew to the lowest branch of the tree, and her head swiveled in a great circle as her luminous eyes peered in all directions into the night. Finally she bowed toward them. "So be it. Listen well and quickly. What do you know about the Great Edict?"

"I've heard of it before," said Daniel, remembering a long-ago conversation with Skeeble in a moonlit glade with silver leaves drifting down. "It has something to do with boundaries, doesn't it?"

"Boundaries, aye." The owl spoke rapidly, still swiveling her head from side to side. "It was issued near fifteen score years ago, as you mortals count time. Bad and worse things were happening every which where the two worlds touched -- fairies cheated, mortals burned at the stake, all manner of unpleasantness. And some of your wisest mortals, those who knew both our ways and the ways of nature, they sought the Oberon and petitioned him. They said that they wished for the chance to look at flowers and stars and such without us getting in the way and blocking their view, that there were secrets they couldn't find with our Glamour blinding them, and they meant to ferret them out. Some of them we could keep distracted questing for alchemist gold and such-like, but still the searchers kept coming. And all the while your churches and temples and mosques called us demons and sought to destroy us. And the king, he watched closely into the dealings between our worlds, and how the wise and foolish on both sides spent their days, and at last he did something no Seelie should ever do." The owl looked down at each upturned face in turn. "He felt what you call pity for you mortals, though how he should come across such a thing I shall never know. And he decided you would be better off without us."

"Naturally there was much hullabaloo and shouting and sulking and denouncing, my voice right in amongst the loudest. But the king was the king, and not so daff back then, and he issued an Edict we had to obey. All the outliers and solitaries were to be called home and the gates shut, from the forest temples to the haunted caves, the sacred springs to the paths beneath the sea. Ever so long it took him and the Morcan to close them all, but afterwards there we were: markets without customers, puppet shows with no audiences, priests without congregations. No way even to reach you other than casting our shadows into the Border Realm for your dreams to sniff at like dogs." A tear trickled down the soft feathers on the owl's face. "The Oberon said we should watch and see how your lot got along without us for a bit, and of course most of us predicted you wouldn't last a season's turning. But you have somehow managed to muddle through, even though what you have done to the rivers and woods and oceans would never have been permitted had we still made dwellings there."

She sighed, then brightened. "But all that changed when the white lady made her rounds and promised her promises. She said she had a plan to snap the Edict like dry kindling, to burst open the gates once more and imprison the old king and set things back as they had been in the better days gone by. Many joined her cause even when it seemed hopeless during her first rebellion, and after she somehow got her hands on the Morcan, well ..." she swiveled her head to look around at the moonlit

world. "Only a few more gates left for her to open, I should think, and then what's left of the old Oberon's kingdom will be so small he won't be able to spit without wetting the back of his head." She hooted a long, rasping, predator's chuckle.

"We figured some of this out already," remarked Ken. "So once she's finished opening all these gates, magic will work in the whole town of Crossroads, right?"

"Oh no, no, no, no, no, little Engineer. You are thinking far too small. It matters nothing to a god or fairy where a place dedicated to its memory resides on one of your maps. They do not need to pass through the gates of their original temples. Once they cross a threshold, they move outwards in all directions like light. The place you call Crossroads is only the start. When she has finished, every corner of your world shall be as it once was. Soon, oh very soon, the children's toy you call science shall be nothing but a fading memory in human lands."

Book 4**THE IRON TONGUE OF MIDNIGHT****Interlude**

A hundred miles west of Crossroads on US87, State Trooper Darren White stood beside the dark blue station wagon he'd just stopped and waited while the driver rolled down her window. The couple looking nervously up at him from the front seat were older than he'd anticipated - he'd expected new parents who'd not yet heard about securing toddlers. These people, though, would have to be the grandparents of the child he'd seen cavorting about in the back seat. It had practically been doing acrobatics as he pulled up beside the car, pressing its thin face up to the glass and sticking out its tongue at him so that he had instinctively dropped back and flipped on his flashers.

"What seems to be the trouble, officer?" the white-haired lady behind the wheel asked blandly.

Darren put on what his friends called his scare-the-bejeezus-out-of-them face. "Are you aware that we have a seatbelt law in this state, ma'am?"

The woman gestured at her lap. "Certainly sir, but my husband and I have had them on ever since we stopped for lunch."

"It's the child in back I'm concerned about, ma'am. He needs to be buckled into an appropriate car seat for his age. If you were to put the brakes on suddenly..."

Darren trailed off uncertainly when he saw the look of utter confusion on the woman's face. She and her husband both twisted around to look at the back seat, and Darren unclipped his flashlight from his belt and shone it back there as well.

There was no child, nor was there space where a child could hide. The seat was empty.

"We've never had children," said the woman, turning back to him in puzzlement, and Darren knew that he would have to make up some excuse about being fooled by a trick of light. He knew that the excuse would be a lie. There had been something there, but now it was gone.

For the tenth time in as many minutes, Greyhound driver Shirley Lowry glanced up at her passenger mirror uneasily. Bus passengers these days were usually an odd bunch, but this group gave oddness a whole new meaning.

They've got to be from some kind of private school, she thought as she forced her eyes back to the road. She'd carried her share of students before on the southern run out of Crossroads down I47 - Spring Breakers too poor to get to the southern beaches who wound up settling for a few days at a

cheaper Crossroads poolside motel instead, or weekenders making their ways back to campus after spontaneous Friday-afternoon decisions that homework could wait but the waterpark could not, or day-tripping high schoolers for whom the lack of parental supervision was a giddier thrill than all the race cars at Circus Maximus Go Kart Land.

But these girls (*how many were there exactly, again?*) were so very quiet - not the familiar sun-baked exhaustion of kids who had worked hard all day sun-worshipping and flirting, but rather the kind of peaceful yet eager anticipation of brides on their way to their weddings. Then there were the clothes. Her first thought when they'd all glided up the stairs in a line was that they must be wearing prom dresses, but it was long past that season. Bridesmaids, perhaps? But what wedding would have so many? And when she looked closer she saw that they were hardly formal -- though at a distance the dresses had looked shimmery and soft and girlish, up close they turned out to be little better than rags, more a collection of streamers and ribbons than a real outfit. Maybe some kind of cult?

None of these things were what bothered Shirley most, though. No, what she couldn't grasp was how - *There! Was that it?* No. She shook her head. *Just a flash from an approaching headlight.* What really bothered her was that she couldn't count exactly how many of them there were.

The bus had been on the road for two hours now without stopping, yet she was prepared to swear that there were fewer of

the smooth-faced girls now than when she had taken their tickets. The problem was that every time she glanced in the mirror they seemed to have exchanged seats, although she could never catch them at it.

A sign ahead said they were coming up on the Avenel River. Hadn't they been at a river the last time she'd sensed a passenger was missing? As the bus crossed the viaduct over a brief sliver of green, she glanced in the passenger mirror again. Most of the girls had moved over to the right-hand side of the bus, where they seemed to be waving goodbye to someone through a half-open window. Shirley quickly shifted her gaze to the right rearview mirror and was rewarded by a brief glimpse of a fine spray suspended in the air behind the bus. The mist of water droplets caught sunlight in diamonds and rainbows as it shimmered down past the balustrade into the river waiting eagerly below - water that had waited patiently for its genius for centuries now, soon to be lonesome no longer.

The computers in the exports office at the great eastern port city had not yet begun to display any of the troublesome anomalies that had begun giving programmers nightmares in Crossroads. The shipping data for every cargo container packed on every ship went through these terminals, but the smooth automation of the system did not prevent the humans who monitored

the flow of information from adopting the data for their own purposes.

"C'mere and look at this!" one lanky young man called to another. "I think we've got a new winner!" The second man pushed himself away from his screen and walked around the cubicle wall to join his friend.

"That goes in the top ten list, all right," he agreed. "Might even pass up the croissants to Marseilles." He copied the cargo showing on the screen onto the bottom of a lengthy list tacked to the wall of the cubicle. "Wow, twenty crates. Never imagined there was that much demand back in the old country for garden gnomes."

Twice every week, the diesel engines of Kingfisher Freight carried lumber from the great Canadian forests down to U.S. sawmills, and twice a week they pulled empty cars back to the forests to be reloaded. Ben Flebes had been the chief engineer on the run for almost twenty years, but still each time he saw the northern lights spangling the sky in front of him like waltzing ghosts, he shuddered as if someone was walking across his grave. They seemed like things that belonged in a world with different rules than ours: lights and fires ought to stay fixed in one spot, he felt, not go playing hide-and-seek across the whole night sky.

On this night, the lights were putting on a show beyond the wildest dreams of any Hollywood special effects department. Ben, however, was in no position to appreciate them. He was curled up in a corner of what had once been the cab of Engine 628, whimpering.

While many fairies hold modern technology in contempt, there are notable exceptions. Ever since they had first glimpsed the coal-shoveling, smoke-billowing, spark-laden dreams of the first firemen on Stephenson's Rocket in 1830, fire imps have loved locomotives.

When a tribe of imps hopped aboard the 628 as it slowed to a crawl through Crossroads, they were momentarily confused and disappointed by the fire so deeply hidden within its diesel bowels. Fortunately, as a tribe they had enough Glamour saved up to right the perceived wrong, which was why Ben Flebes was cowering in his own cab. He had no way of knowing that the dark spidery figures scrambling over the newly-sprouted dials and gauges were recreating the dreams of generations of his forefathers. All he knew was that his gleaming engine had somehow been transformed into a night-black, spark-lit flying coffin, trailed by an ever-full coal car inhabited by more hordes of black-faced grinning shovelers. The open door to the furnace seemed to grin hungrily at him, and the eternal track dropped away before and behind between dark firs like jailers, as the locomotive formerly known as engine 628 tore north on its fiery way beneath the molten northern lights forever.

Chapter 1

*A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!*

"Ode to Psyche"

John Keats

Daniel had to blink his eyes several times before he could convince himself that what he was seeing was real. Amazingly enough, the tiny cardboard sign in the window was not an optical illusion or a stray fragment of dream. It really did read "OPEN," and the glass door of the store labeled ANTIQUITIES swung wide when he pushed it. He'd been checking ever since they moved in, but despite the never-quenched yellow lights, the store beneath them had never showed signs of life before today. Now a bell on a spring loudly announced his entrance to whoever lurked in the store's dim depths.

After the Sugar Plum Fairy's aerial departure the night before, the rest of the trio's journey home had been uneventful. When they joined hands and Daniel touched the sticky side of the candy-cane gate, they found themselves once more in the Black Forest's basement, out of which they scrambled as rapidly as their feet would carry them. Hardly a word was said the rest of the way home, except for Ken's announcement in their living room that they needed to call a meeting of all friendlies to discuss

strategy, and that Daniel should try to persuade Heather and Cindy to come to the restaurant of the same name at 7 the next evening. Then they all went to bed and slept hard; Daniel dreamt he was a gargoyle trying to defend the cathedral to which he was attached from hosts of evil spirits, and that his only weapon was to spit water at them, which only made them laugh and climb faster. When he woke at 9:30, Sondra had already left, presumably to do more hunting for her flyaway friends, and Ken was still out cold on his futon. Daniel prepared himself for the day as quietly as he could, and headed outside to walk around town for the hour he had left before he was due at work. And that was when, miraculously, he found the open antique shop door.

The furniture inside seemed to be laid out, not with the intent of displaying itself to customers, but rather as a means of causing the maximum obstruction to any intruder. Daniel cast around for a path through the armoirs and china-stuffed cabinets, at last squeezing through a gap that didn't seem as if it would lead anywhere but turned out to open into a passageway of bookcases filled with dusty hardbacks. "Mrs. Shantih?" he called out softly, but it wasn't the store's proprietor who came around a wicker birdcage toward him. Or maybe it was, for the gray cat seemed to regard the store as his rightful domain.

Cats twilight gray,

No barrier can stay.

"Rakshasa," Daniel whispered. "I wanted to see you too." Acutely self-conscious, he forced himself to drop to one knee.

"Oh cat, no, umm, oh monarch among cats, see here how I, a human, salute you. Oh Rakshasa, I know that you know the paths to the Border Realms and the Twilight Realms, and thus I come to request a boon from you, OH DRAT IT!" for Rakshasa had eyed him disdainfully for a few moments while he began his speech, then flipped his tail and slipped off between two enormous boxes of phonograph records.

"Wait!" he cried, but every path he tried to pursue the fleeing feline seemed blocked. "Dang it, cat, wait!"

"Looks as if you don't have much experience with cats, boy," said a voice from the shadows. Daniel turned. Cloudfoot Shantih was rocking comfortably in a dark-stained oak rocking chair that matched the color of her skin. The orange light from her cigarette tip and a maroon *bindi* dot on her forehead were the only parts of her clearly visible amidst the morning shadows. She blew a cloud of smoke out of her nostrils as Daniel picked his way over to her.

"I hear some of you young folks are all upset over tobacco," she said conversationally. "But you shouldn't refuse the gifts of the earth. Tobacco gives its gifts right away, doesn't ask you to pay for them till later. That's better than some bargains, leastways."

That didn't seem to be a question, so Daniel decided to try again to outlast her silence. This time it stretched out until she had smoked her cigarette down to a flicker, all the while tapping the ashes into a tall Art Deco ashtray. When she was

finally finished she didn't mash the butt out in the tray, but ground it into fragments between her thick fingers and sprinkled them over the ashtray's contents, then bent over and studied the gray pile like a newspaper. Whatever tobacco she was using smelled far sweeter than Daniel's previous experiences with cigarettes - like the pages of old books, perhaps, or burning cherrywood.

When she was finished with her reading, she grasped the arms of her chair and grunted as she shoved herself to her feet, shaking her head when Daniel offered her a hand.

"Follow me," she said when she was finally vertical, and Daniel followed her through the maze of aisles to the back of her shop where a tiny kitchen, smelling of fry bread and curry, was crammed beneath a staircase leading up. "I have an upstairs kitchen too," she said, "but those steps are too narrow for a gal like me to be traipsin' up and down all the time."

She shuffled over to a refrigerator and did something complicated to the handle to open it. It had the rounded body and arched top of a jukebox, a relic of bygone times. Daniel noted with a sinking feeling that not only was the thick electrical cord lying on the floor unplugged, but there were no signs of functioning outlets anywhere in the kitchen. "Now if you were just asking for a guide across town, tuna would probably do, but if you want him to take you all the way to the twilight realm I'm thinking grilled salmon, wouldn't you say?"

"Salmon, absolutely," Daniel murmured distractedly. Did he have any secrets left in this town?

"Here you go." She handed him a can, leaving her hand outstretched after he took it. "That'll be two fifty. It's got to be a gift from you, not me, or he couldn't possibly do you any favors." With a sigh, Daniel dug his wallet out of his pocket, counted out the change, and handed it to her. She closed her thick fingers over the coins and gave him a satisfied nod. "Do you know your trip's itinerary yet? When you should be going, and all?"

"Well," said Daniel uncertainly, "we were going to be holding a council of war tonight, but so far we don't have any real plans yet..."

"Hmph." Mrs. Shantih turned and began rummaging through a drawer. She withdrew an impossibly intricate contraption and handed it to him, shaking her head. "Can opener. I'm thinking you and your friends are heading into a gunfight armed with spoons, son. Not even an inkling of when to go about crossing over, with one of the four windows in the sun's house lying straight across your path?"

"Windows? But..." Daniel paused to think back to all her talk about crossroads and spirit wheels and compasses and mandalas on their last trip together. What other circle was divided into quarters? "Oh, of course. It's the solstice three days from now, isn't it?"

Mrs. Shantih nodded gravely. "Aye. The Catholic Feast of John Baptist, the decapitated opener of ways, head ripped off by a mad woman and served up on a platter just like the summer king Orpheus. The time of witches and balefires at the crossroads, dreamer. Doctors picked their herbs for the rest of the year, girls dreamt of future lovers, and the king of leaves had to get burned or lopped or tossed into the sea. Midsummer Night's Eve followed by Midsummer's Day. If the one you're working against can't complete her plans by midnight when the year's window closes, she'll have to wait through a full turn of the wheel before she can try again. Move against her then or not at all."

"So you think the cat will be able to guide us..?" Daniel began, but she was already lurching back into the labyrinth of the shop.

She called back over her shoulder, "Find me when you're done. Use a nice plate from the cupboard. Try to put some pizzazz into the presentation if you can, all right? I mean, it's not like you'll be able to come up with a trumpet fanfare, but that would be the general idea. He's a cat, after all."

"What..?" Daniel began, but she was gone.

If she hadn't told him the device was a can opener, he might never have decoded its function - it looked like nothing of that description that he had ever seen before. The arms had to be flipped back and forth and tried in different configurations, clamps had to be fastened and tightened, and one key to be turned for the blade to pierce the metal and another for it to slice

around the lid. The whole thing positively reeked of peril, and Daniel wasn't too surprised when the sawtoothed lid gave his finger a nasty gash while he tried to disengage the mechanism.

"Ouch," he murmured, sucking his finger while he banged through cupboards looking for a bandage. "Guess you can't get a single thing in Faery without making a blood sacrifice these days, can you?" The best he could come up with was a handkerchief, which he tied around his finger before continuing to arrange the cat's meal. There weren't any obvious flowers or garnishes with which to spruce up the plate, so eventually he took a knife and pushed the minced salmon around until it was roughly in the shape of a fish. He even tried making a little smiling face on it before setting it down on the floor. Then he found some milk and poured it into a crystal bowl he dug out of a display cabinet. When he'd finished all his preparations, he turned to see Rakshasa hunched up and eying him warily from the top of a nearby credenza.

"Oh, monarch among cats," Daniel called out warily.

"Please deign to accept this humble repast from..."

Cut the chatter, growled the cat in a rumbling purr. You have fish, fish in fish shape, very nice. You'll let me have it if I guide you to the captured changeling girl that the nis was trying to hide from me before? I accept. Now out of the way and let me eat.

"I guess even the animals know my secrets now," Daniel muttered, moving aside. *Of course,* replied the gray cat as he

launched itself off its perch in a waterfall of skin and fur, ending up crouched next to the plate with its pink tongue darting in and out.

"How come I can understand you now when I'm awake, instead of just during dreaming like before?"

Oh, you picked one of the old methods, replied the cat nonchalantly, not looking up. *Folks used to burn their finger cooking the salmon and then suck on it, but blood is just as good. You really are stumbling down the hero's path, aren't you?*

"Maybe." Daniel leaned against an ancient record player. "If I'm a hero, does that mean you think we'll win?"

Don't get your hopes up, Cat Feeder.

"The name's Daniel. We should get to know each other if you're going to be our guide. See, if Lilith is going to be making her move on Midsummer Day, we'll need to get started the night before..."

Right, right, I'll be on your balcony a little while before midnight. You talk too much, Feeder.

"I already told you my name," said Daniel. The cat looked up with his pink tongue sweeping the edges of his mouth, stretched, then rippled away around an old sewing machine.

"Don't feel insulted by that title," called out Mrs. Shantih, rounding a different corner with the ponderous gait of one who needs to feel the ground planted firmly beneath her feet.. "That's the highest rank they've got for us. Still lower

than any of their rankings, of course. Now, is there anything else you need?"

"Well, um..." Daniel hesitated. "I feel as if I already owe you way more than two and a half bucks, you've been so helpful. But...I'm also supposed to find something that's associated with the girl I'm trying to locate. The problem is, she hasn't been ...well, here in this world, really, since she was a baby. Is there any chance that in all this stuff, there are any baby clothes or something that the Netherbys threw out a long time ago? I know it's a long shot."

Mrs. Shantih scratched her mahogany chin thoughtfully and looked around the shop. "Netherby baby, Netherbaby, Neverbye. It's possible. This store tends to attract the things that were important once and will be important again, but nobody cares about them right now." She pulled an old tin box decorated with a stylized eagle out of a pocket of her dress and opened it to reveal tobacco and rolling papers. She shook a rectangular paper out onto an old record player, and then her stubby fingers seemed to blur as she rolled herself a new cigarette and flicked a match to light it. She inhaled deeply, then blew a dense cloud of smoke into the air. "Follow that," she said casually, cocking her head and taking another long pull.

For a moment Daniel wasn't sure what she meant. Then he realized she was talking about the gray cloud of smoke drifting slowly through the shop, and he found that he had to scramble over a chest of drawers and crawl between two dressmakers'

dummies to keep up with it. Finally, in a small alcove hung with every imaginable style of antique mirror, the cloud dissipated beside something that looked like a six-foot-tall rectangular swiveling frame.

"What is this thing?" he asked Mrs. Shantih when she came rolling up beside him a few minutes later, obviously having followed a less strenuous route. "It looks like some kind of portable window."

"Close," the store's proprietress agreed, taking another drag on her cigarette. "Originally it would have held a big mirror. The English call it a cheval glass, but to me that makes it sound like only horses should use it. I prefer the French name, myself. They called it a psyche."

"Psyche? Like the girl in the myth? That's really the name?" Daniel walked around the glass. "So she doesn't see the god of love when she lights the lamp, she just sees herself, eh?"

Mrs. Shantih blew another smoke cloud at the furniture and snorted. "Hmph. Back in the old days, folks would have known it was unlucky to have one of these in a room with a baby, even if they'd forgotten why. This is what you're looking for, sure enough. Over twenty years since Jack Netherby sold it to me, and it's sat right there the whole time."

Daniel knelt beside the frame and gingerly stuck his pinky finger through the opening. Nothing happened. Reassured that at least for the moment the thing wasn't acting as an interdimensional portal, he carefully ran his hand down the

inside edge and leaned in for a closer inspection. "Interesting. These brackets look like they would have held the mirror in place, but they haven't been swiveled since the thing first got varnished. The mirror must have been broken, and then all the pieces got pried out one at a time. The glass was all gone when it came here?"

"That's right." Mrs. Shantih watched him while he continued his examination. "So, you think it will give you what you need?"

"If you don't mind my prying this loose sliver off the front," Daniel replied, looking up at her pleadingly. She spread her arms in an accommodating shrug, and he began working on the piece of wood with his fingernails. "My guess is, this thing might have been the last object of our world that she ever got a chance to see while she was getting carried through here as a baby." The sliver snapped free, and he found an unused Kleenex in his pocket to wrap it up with. "I hope that'll be enough of a connection."

"It might be at that." Mrs. Shantih gazed at him impassively.

"Well," Daniel glanced at his watch apologetically, "I'm afraid I've got to get to work soon. I can't tell you how much I appreciate all the help you and Rakshasa have been today, Mrs. Shantih. I'm sorry, I ... well, I wasn't really sure whose side you were on, at first. You seemed to be on such good terms with Them, I thought you'd be rooting for Lilith."

"And how do you know I'm not?" Mrs. Shantih smiled more widely than he had ever seen her smile before, and Daniel swallowed. It suddenly occurred to him perhaps it hadn't been the brightest idea for him to come in here without telling anyone else where he was going. Mrs. Shantih seemed to have given him good advice before in the car, but perhaps that had just been a way to lure him into her lair. He certainly wasn't positive that he knew the way out of the maze of this shop. And that smoke she kept exhaling - was it just fog now, or a barrier?

"I really should be getting to work," Daniel began, but as he touched the wall of smoke, the strength to move forward seemed to leave him. Mrs. Shantih shuffled forward, looking up, until the smooth black hair on the top of her head was almost beneath Daniel's chin.

"I've been helping you," she said slowly and distinctly in her dark, music-rich voice, "because help is what you and your friends truly need, and the help you have needed so far has by no means been a strain upon me to provide. And to the stars and the moon and the sun, it makes not an atom's worth of difference whether magic or science is to rule on this planet, and if it matters little to them then it should matter little to me."

"But ... but ..." sputtered Daniel, fighting to keep his voice steady, "We think the girl called Lilith Netherby is a fairy changeling who's trying to become the goddess Hecate. She doesn't seem to care who she walks across to get there, either. Isn't that something you should care about?"

Mrs. Shantih took a step back and turned to look in the direction Daniel guessed the far-distant front windows lay, grasping an armchair's back with her stubby fingers. "She wouldn't actually *become* the Hecate. Humans always make the mistake of thinking the gods are *people*, when really they're more like - well, roles, you might say. She might get to be the Triple Lady's new personality if she plays her cards right, I suppose. It's true that for the last few centuries the Mother of Magic has been keeping to herself - inside a grain of sand between the wings of a fly swallowed by a fish at the bottom of a lake inside a cave at the heart of a mountain or some such, I'd imagine. And if Lilith takes on her aspect she'll be a bit more outgoing, to be sure. But in the big scheme of things, does it really make much difference whether your doctor cures you by driving out germs or by driving out evil spirits, as long as you're cured?"

"Does it ... well of course it makes a difference!" Daniel couldn't think where to start. "And besides, Lilith is evil!"

"Evil, good, east, west, whatever." Mrs. Shantih shrugged. "Is what she has in mind really so much worse than what the scientists do now?"

"The scientists?" Now Daniel felt confused, but he thought he had an uneasy idea that he knew what was coming next. "What do you mean?"

Mrs. Shantih cocked her head, and her voice grew sterner. "Back when the People were in charge, mortals knew enough to

respect the places where They lived. There was none of this clear-cutting, poison-dumping, air-befouling, creature-choking mess that technology seems to be bent on creating out of the only world we've got. If Lilith and her little friends are successful, don't you think they'll see to it that we stop muddying our own nest right quickly?"

"Look, science led us into this hole and science should be able to get us out," Daniel began, but it sounded lame as he said it, and the desire to make it out of this building in one piece was beginning to overwhelm the desire to score points in a debate. "Look, I don't really know whether we're going to try to stop her or not. I just want to help her changeling twin get out of the Twilight Realm - that is, if she wants to leave. I personally don't have anything against magicians like you. Can I go now?"

"Magicians?" Mrs. Shantih gave another deep, smoky laugh. "I'm no spell-swapper, dreamer. If the universe gives me anything it's because I know how to ask for it, not because I'm forever trading rags and bones back and forth. Though to be sure there are some who would be tempting me to do otherwise..." She hesitated. "Dreamer-child, you have the look of one who has shown his back to the Lady with the Tempting Fruits. Am I right?"

Daniel thought back to the events in the Twilight Realm the night before. "I suppose so," he said cautiously.

"Good." She shuffled over to an antique that Daniel had not noticed before - some object hanging on a wall of the alcove in the center of a wall full of mirrors, draped with a pale green cloth. "This showed up here seven nights ago, and I suspect it's the latest inducement from her. I'm curious what her offering might be this time, but I'd rather not look into it myself, so I've left it just as you see. But perhaps you might be the one to help me look. You stand there," and she pointed to a place forty-five degrees off to one side, "and I'll stand here, and we'll see one another instead of ourselves. That's always the safest way with this sort of gift."

"Is that wise?" Daniel asked uncertainly. "I mean, if you don't intend to go along with what she's offering, why stand in the way of temptation?"

Mrs. Shantih sighed. "Temptation is just an experience, dreamer. Maybe we stand, maybe we fall, but we should never run from what grandmother Time has to offer.

Still hovering uneasily between fear and gratitude, Daniel stood where she told him at a ninety degree angle off the mirror from her. She reached out her wrinkled fingers and grasped the cloth, then shot a look sideways at him. "Remember, with mirrors it's always best to get a second opinion." Then she whisked the cloth away.

The frame of the mirror on the wall swooped and arched with the same graceful curves Daniel remembered seeing in the architecture of the candy fairy castle, but it was what was

reflected in it that was spectacular. He glanced sideways to make sure Mrs. Shantih was still standing there the same as before, then looked back again at her awe-inspiring reflection.

He had read once that Hindus didn't really believe that their gods and goddesses had the multiple pairs of arms portrayed in statues. Rather, the item or gesture displayed by each hand was supposed to remind the viewer of a different aspect of the deity.

It wasn't so much that the reflection of Mrs. Shantih in the mirror had many arms, he realized after a moment; as it was that, folded up in itself like a puzzle, the reflection contained many versions of Mrs. Shantih: healing an injured bird, showing a rapt student how to fold herself in meditation, singing the sun up in the morning and back down again in the evening, and then the blunt fingers drawing the colors out of the sunrise and sunset themselves and tossing them onto the threads of a loom as she wove, glowing with all the colors of nature. In the center of all of the rest was Mrs. Shantih sitting in a lotus, the spot on her forehead transformed into a blindingly bright eye that gazed both inward and outward with absolute tranquility.

"Wow," Daniel breathed.

The real Mrs. Shantih glanced from the mirror over to him and smiled ruefully. "Heya," she called slowly in a kind of low warbling cry. "I can see in your face what she's offering."

"What is it?" Daniel asked uncertainly. It seemed impossible that anyone could turn down the blissful radiance he'd seen.

"Peace." Mrs. Shantih shook her head sadly. Then she stepped forward and cast the cloth over the mirror again. "What her kind can never realize is that most of the things they keep trying to give us are worthless unless they're earned." She held her hand for a moment against the covered glass, then turned and began threading her way down a twisting alleyway. "Follow me. You need to get to your job."

"Wait!" Daniel cried as he hurried after her. "Could you tell me what my reflection looked like in the mirror?"

The shop door emerged from the haze ahead like the moon out of nighttime clouds, and the proprietress paused with her hand on the latch.

"I gave you some advice before, dreamer," she said. "Now I've got some more. Don't fall in love with anything that can't love you back."

The sun was nearing the top of its journey as the door swung shut behind Daniel. According to his watch, there was precisely enough time to make it to the fudge shop before his shift began, with not a minute or half-minute to spare. As he walked down Main Street, he had the sensation that he was standing perfectly still and spinning the planet underneath him with the soles of his feet.

A few hours later, Daniel, Cindy, and Heather met for lunch on the loading dock behind Black Forest Fudge. On the western horizon, clouds were piled up on top of other clouds, and from them occasionally a low growl of thunder would roll across the city, bringing with it so far no hint of lightning or rain.

The dock was surrounded, almost to the ends of the parking lot, by what seemed to be the majority of the pigeon population of Crossroads. Every day during his lunch hour Daniel had been bringing out bread for them, and as the summer progressed, more and more birds showed up. From the crusts of sandwiches Daniel had gone to whole slices of bread, and at last entire bags of popcorn. It was starting to take a bite out of his paycheck, but feeding them made him feel as if he was doing at least some good in the world.

As the three of them ate and talked and threw popcorn, Daniel kept thinking back to the desperate struggle to cross this dock and open this door less than twelve hours ago. Every battlefield must be like this to the soldiers who fought there, he supposed - the same ground that had been worth any number of lives to occupy one day became a spot to drop a picnic basket the next. As in all things, time was the ultimate victor.

"Man, I wish you'd invited us," Heather complained. Daniel had been recounting the story of the last two days: the disastrous cast party, murder in the Nile and the jackal-headed god, Kate's interview with her ex, the rats in the basement, the

scissoring familiar and the candy castle in Faerie. The story had taken a while.

"We couldn't have come, Heth. Curfew, remember?" Cindy reminded her sister earnestly.

Heather rolled her eyes and turned back to Daniel. "So what about that candy the Sugar Plum Fairy gave you for Kate -- have you passed it on yet?"

Daniel tapped his pocket. "I've got it in a box, but who ever gets to see Kate these days? There wasn't any answer when I knocked at her office this morning. That could mean she wasn't there, or maybe she's just ignoring us." He looked uncertainly from one girl to the other. "You know, this isn't just a story. It really happened. Honestly, do you guys believe me?"

Heather shrugged, tossing a kernel directly beneath the beak of a fat aggressive gray. "Remember, I've been there. Scared the daylights out of me at the time, it did, but now I'd be willing to give it another shot. Sure I believe you. Cin here is the skeptic -- how about it, Cin?"

Cindy pursed her lips. "Well, it's true that we've seen some odd things happening around town in the past year or so," she said finally. "And you don't look crazy."

"Don't forget Allen," said Heather.

"Who's Allen?" Daniel asked.

Both sisters looked away. Finally Cindy said, "Allen was our brother. He died a year ago next week."

"We think Lilith killed him," Heather added. Cindy nodded.

Daniel spread his hands wide. "Look," he said, "it seems to me that you two are as wrapped up in this as anybody, and we don't have very many people we can trust right now. Ken wants us to have a meeting tonight when our shift lets out - sort of a council of war with all the people he calls 'friendlies.' It'll be in the restaurant that goes by the same name. Do you want to come?"

"Of course!" said Heather without hesitation. Cindy looked pensive.

"You don't know this town," she observed darkly, dribbling a handful of popcorn to some birds on the steps. "Bad things happen to people who make waves outside the waterpark. I don't know..."

Heather turned on her twin. "What's wrong with you? Do you want to do something about Allen or not?"

Just then there was an interruption. Mrs. Vanderski's dark blue Oldsmobile pulled into a nearby slot in the parking lot, sending a great cloud of pigeons soaring into the air, and the store's assistant manager pulled herself out of the driver's seat and began wandering vaguely in their direction. To Daniel, she seemed to have deteriorated from the day before. At the beginning of the summer she had always come into work dapper and

neatly made up; today, though, she might have picked her clothes blindfolded. Cindy and Heather both rose and began to head toward her, but stopped when she began to chant in a low, hopeless monotone.

"Two hundred and seventy three degrees!" she cried out, moaning, sobbing, trembling. "I cut off the three corners of a triangle myself and added up the angle they made, and that's what they came to! All the proofs are turning to pudding, the axioms getting axed. Quadratic equations with three unique solutions, parabolas that won't reach infinity and circles that will. The sines no longer signify, the logarithms are logjammed, the functions are all funct up and the pi is burnt to ashes!" She stumbled up the steps onto the dock and collapsed beside the picnickers.

Cindy knelt beside her. "Take it easy, Mrs. Van..." she hesitated and hissed over her shoulder at her twin, "what's her first name?"

"Adelaide, I think" Heather whispered back.

"Adelaide, come on, it'll be all right." Cindy stroked her teacher's gray, papery forehead. "There isn't anything wrong with the numbers, they're right where they're supposed to be."

"We've been afraid of this," whispered Heather to Daniel as they stepped back to give Cindy more room for her ministrations. "She took the news about her husband's leaving pretty calmly, but

we all knew something was seething inside her that would blow up some day."

"It might not be that at all," Daniel whispered back as Cindy led Mrs. Vanderski inside. "I think maybe she's right. I'll bet the numbers really have stopped working the way they're supposed to. After all, math is the soil the rest of the sciences grow from. If it goes, they all go."

They went inside, where the assistant manager was now lying in a crumpled heap on two chairs behind the counter while Cindy wetted her forehead with a washcloth. "One and one could add up to anything now," the math teacher was moaning piteously, tears streaming down her leathery cheeks. "Anything, everything, nothing, nothing at all."

Chapter 2

*Mister East gave a feast;
 Mister North laid the cloth;
 Mister West did his best;
 Mister South burnt his mouth
 Eating cold potato.*

Traditional Children's Song

The chain restaurant where Ken had called the evening's meeting was on Route 93 near the center of town, and thus was designed for car access and not pedestrians. Still, with the aid of the two girls' area knowledge, Daniel and Heather and Cindy managed to find a neglected alley to navigate, a steep bank to scramble down, a concrete barrier to climb over, and a vast parking lot to traverse before finally reaching its smoothly-opening glass doors.

"I still can't believe you even hesitated about this. Don't you care about what happens to this town?" Heather was still berating her sister while Daniel checked with the hostess about Ken's reservations. There were about a dozen people sitting on benches in the entryway, but the matronly green-aproned woman checked her list, then smiled and motioned for the three of them to follow her. She led them, not to a booth or table as Daniel had expected, but through a door to a side room, probably usually reserved for childrens' birthday parties and the

like. There was a long table set inside, but no one else had arrived yet. The hostess left the door open and returned to her station.

"Nice," said Daniel as he sat down on the far side of the table where he could watch the door. "Ken must not have wanted anybody eavesdropping on us. He's been getting paranoid ever since the cops took him in."

"I wish we could have gone to a nicer restaurant," Heather pouted as she sat across from Daniel. "Didn't Cindy tell you it's our birthday today?"

"No, she didn't!" Daniel shot an accusing look at Cindy, who shrugged. "Wow, twice the birthday, eh? I wish I'd known so I could've brought you something."

"No chocolate roses this time, please," said Cindy with a little frown.

"Agreed." Daniel leaned sideways to try to glimpse the entrance. "About the restaurant, though - Ken wanted to have it in a big chain because he thought there was less chance of the enemy having any tethers or outposts here."

"Couldn't we at least have gone to the Jade Garden, though?" Heather complained. "I love the fish pond."

"Already in enemy hands," said Daniel, remembering the conversation between Lilith and her boyfriend in the Blue Nile.

Cindy shook her head. "I can't get used to thinking of our town as if it was some kind of war zone."

"According to Reverend Schwartzwold, everyplace is a war zone," said Heather, leaning back in her chair. "Tell him what you told me about Mrs. Vanderski this afternoon."

"Oh, that." Cindy unwrapped the paper napkin around her utensils and began tearing tiny pieces off it without looking up. "Right. Well, it occurred to me that maybe her condition might not be a reaction to her husband running off or something happening with math. Or maybe in addition to both of those." She glanced at Daniel and Heather briefly, then returned to her tearing. "Dan, if what you say about Kate is true - I mean, about her making magical chocolate - well, the Power of Derskness does have a fudge stash under the counter ..."

"Cin thinks Kate's been poisoning her somehow," Heather interrupted. Cindy nodded several times rapidly, her gaze still fixed on her shredded napkin.

"Hmm," said Daniel thoughtfully. "Could be. I wonder why, though. She wouldn't have any reason to dislike her assistant, would she?" Both girls shook their heads.

"She did look kind of lost and, well, suggestible this afternoon," said Cindy after a few moments. "Maybe the craziness could be a side effect of some sort of mind control drug Kate's using on her?"

"Good point," said Daniel. "Kate did tell her ex-husband that she'd been working on another weapon to get at him. I wonder if the weapon was Mrs. Vanderski?"

Just then Ken came into the room with a clipboard under his arm. He glanced around the room to count heads, then took a seat at the end of the table. He was followed by a short, fresh-faced, blonde waitress who went around taking drink orders.

"Are you expecting anyone else?" she asked, her pencil poised.

"At least one more, maybe two," Ken told her. She nodded and left.

"Two?" asked Daniel, surprised. "Sondra and who else?"

"A possible mystery guest," Ken answered smugly. "I put some more thought into possible allies and made a long phone call this morning. Because trust me, guys," and his expression darkened as he leaned forward, "by the end of all this, I think we'll need all the help we can get."

"You can say that again," came a voice from the door. For a moment Daniel didn't recognize the woman in the doorway, until he realized that Sondra had dyed her hair black. She was wearing a nondescript army jacket from Ken's closet. She swayed for a moment, breathing deeply, then grabbed the nearest chair and collapsed into it.

"What's wrong?" asked Ken at the same time Daniel was saying "Did you find your friends?"

Sondra held up her hand while her breathing returned to normal. After a few moments, she swallowed and said, "Looks like I've joined your fugitive club, Ken. I asked too many questions,

and now I think Captain Mommet and his goons are looking for me, too."

"Oh no!" cried Daniel. Ken glanced at the door.

"Don't worry, I skedaddled as soon as they started looking at me funny, and I wore a disguise to get here. Don't know how I'll be able to report to work tomorrow, though."

"Did you find out anything about Zahir and the rest?" asked Daniel.

Sondra blew on her bangs. "It took me all day, but I finally tracked them down. I think they're back to normal. The only problem now is, most of them are in jail."

"What?" cried Daniel. Ken just shook his head as if he'd expected this.

"County or city?" Heather asked. "Oh, of course it's city. The county police never do wacky stuff like that. Any idea what the charge is?"

"That's what I've been trying to find out all afternoon." She seemed to be almost in tears, and Daniel earnestly handed her a napkin which she seized and crumpled. Just then the waitress came in carrying drinks, and Sondra grabbed a glass of water off the tray and took five long swallows while the waitress handed out the rest. Then there was an awkward pause while the waitress collected dinner orders, and Sondra kept herself busy with her water until the woman was gone. Finally when the coast was clear she set her glass down, a bit more composed. "Ahhhh. I was saying, it seems to be some kind of trespassing charge. I

couldn't figure out where they were that they weren't supposed to be, and I couldn't find out anything about bail.

Cindy sighed, without looking up from her shredded napkin. "If they can do that to some of the area's leading citizens, what chance have we got?"

"Shoot," Ken said resignedly. "I was hoping we might get some more allies out of that lot once they recovered. But I didn't really believe Lilith would let them go that easily. Oh well. I'm not sure how long it may take my mystery guest to get here, so we might as well get started." He made a check mark on his clipboard, then glanced over at Heather and Cindy. "Did Danny fill you two ladies in on everything at lunch like he said he would? You're both cool with it all? 'Cause we don't have much time for skepticism anymore." Heather nodded vigorously. Cindy looked at her sister unhappily, then made several tight miniscule nods as well.

"Good. First order of business: can anyone think of anybody else who ought to be here but isn't?"

He looked at Sondra first, but she just shrugged and took another long swallow. Heather and Cindy exchanged glances mutely; then Heather turned back to Ken and shook her head. "Lilith has lots of admirers at our school."

"Umm, actually, I almost invited Mrs. Shantih this morning, but I changed my mind," said Daniel tentatively. Everyone turned to him, and he briefly explained his exploration of the Antiquities store. "The problem is, though," he concluded,

"she's been helpful every time I've seen her, but I wouldn't trust her not to be just as helpful to Lilith if Lilith asked her."

"I wouldn't trust her either," stated Heather adamantly. "Cin, what was that class she offered two years ago?"

"Yoga for Beginners," answered her twin without looking up.

"Right, that was it. So we were all on the grass in the park doing breathing exercises, and I was folded up next to her, and this mosquito came and landed on her arm. She wouldn't have even had to break position to brush it off, you know? She could have just blown on it or wiggled her arm against her dress. But no, she and I just watched that thing keep sucking up her blood until it was full, and then we watched it fly away." She shook her head disgustedly. "Heck, I try to be kind to living creatures as much as the next gal, but I draw the line at parasites. The problem with Cloudfoot Shantih is that she's too enlightened for her own darn good."

"All right then," said Ken, making another check mark. "For now, it's just the five of us. So the next order of business is, what do we do next?"

"As in, how do we try to stop Lilith?" asked Sondra.

"As in, do we try to stop Lilith?" Everyone turned to stare at Daniel, and he sat back in his chair uncomfortably. "Really, guys, shouldn't we at least discuss it before we commit ourselves? I mean, sure she's a bit creepy - okay, a lot creepy - and I'd like to get her out of the picture as much as anyone."

But I'm not absolutely positive we should try to prevent everything she's trying to do." He looked around the table imploringly. "I mean, come on, guys. Magic works! He spread his hands out to his friends, then let them fall to the table. "It really does work. I know I wished desperately for it to work when I was a kid. I bet you did too - Sonny, you already believed in fairies." He gestured at Sondra, and she nodded wistfully. "People have dreamed of living in magical worlds since the first stories crawled up out of the ocean. I ..." His voice caught. "I... I hate to be responsible for taking peoples' dreams away." Heather put her hand around his comfortingly, while Ken snorted derisively.

"Who cares about dreams?" Cindy shoved the pile of fibers that had once been her napkin off her lap and looked up fiercely. "If all the machines stop working, won't there be panic in the streets?"

"I don't see much panic here in Crossroads," said Daniel. "And it's been going on here for a while now, I think."

"You might be surprised how well people may accept this if she does it gradually," said Ken with his chin in his hand. "After all, lots of them already believe in horoscopes and auras and numerology and astral projection and dousing, when there isn't a shred of evidence to back any of it up. Once the evidence starts accumulating, I'd expect the tide of superstition to breach the dams of reason pretty quickly. I mean, no offense, Sonny, but you yourself said you didn't care whether the

refrigerator ran by freon or magic brownies, as long as it kept your food cold. I suspect that kind of attitude may be a lot more common than you'd think. Heck, for most people, a brownie might be easier to understand than fluid decompression."

"Well, maybe, but what about the actual scientists?" asked Cindy. "Or even just math people like Mrs. Vanderski? All the stuff they've spent their whole life working for might suddenly fall over like a house of cards. There'd be suicides..."

"Some, I suppose," said Ken thoughtfully. "The older ones, maybe, and the ones who love science for itself and not for other reasons like power and fame and the ability to hack cool problems and such. But the young ones ..."

"They'd all become wizards like you," Daniel said, thumping his lemonade down. "They'd just see it as a different set of rules to hack. I mean, what did it take for you? All you needed was one sixpack to shift your paradigms, and you were ready to make like Paracelsus."

Sondra chimed in with a sideways glance at Ken. "And they'd never stop to think about the consequences of their actions until it was too late. Not too different from the way they act now, actually."

"Souls would be flying fast and furious," Daniel agreed. "But I'd like to point out that the world might have just as good a chance of survival under Lilith's plan as under technology. Better, maybe."

Ken was starting to look very tired. "What do you mean?"

"Well," Daniel leaned back again and drummed his fingers unhappily on the arm of his chair, "Mrs. Shantih seemed to think that the elves would encourage us to take a lot better care of nature than we've been doing so far. I mean, back before the modern age, when their kind were, I don't know, holding us back, the water was a lot purer and the air a lot cleaner."

"Cleaner if you liked smelling cow dung!" Ken burst out explosively. He took a deep breath and forced himself calm. "Look, when I called this council, I agreed that we ought to look at all the options. Are there any other reasons why anyone thinks it's a *good* idea to let Lilith succeed in taking away our tech?"

Everyone's eyes darted around the table. Finally Cindy coughed and said, "It's not out of line to state the obvious, is it? Which is, there's a very good chance that if we try to stop her, we'll all get killed."

Ken stared at her for a while, then nodded and said softly, "No, it isn't out of line. Thanks, Cindy. That's definitely something we need to take into consideration." He looked around the table. "Anything else?"

Everyone looked around the table but no one said anything, and a moment later the door opened and the waitress returned with food, so everyone had to participate in the distribution of the plates. When she had gone and closed the door behind her, Ken picked up his fork and hesitated with it over his omelet, then put it down and stood up abruptly.

"Look, guys," he said, surveying the table. "I find myself in the position of a guy who's cheated on his wife, and then found out she's willing to take him back, and now he's realized how crazy he was to want to leave her in the first place, and he can't stand anything about his old mistress anymore. I mean, this stuff," he pulled his remote and Far Side notebook out of his pocket and threw them down onto the table, "it just disgusts me now, all right? I can't *believe* I let her take me in like that, and I can't wait until this is all over and I can quit this junk and swallow my memories again. I mean, look at the history books before the scientific method came along and blew all this fairy *crap* out of the water. Humanity was going absolutely nowhere. Nowhere! And I see now it wasn't just because of our ignorance or superstition, no. It was because they were holding us back! Because they were afraid - afraid! - of what we might do, so they had to keep dangling shiny magic toys in front of our brightest minds so we wouldn't go too far too fast. They even got Newton in the end. And once they were out of the way, look how far we've gotten!" He struck his fist on the table. "WE were ON the MOON, dammit! THE MOON! We're taking pictures of ice volcanoes off Saturn!"

He looked around the table. "Does anyone think the fairies would have let us do that if they'd still been able to mess with us? Sure, they'll keep our refrigerators running *now*, because we're used to them. But there never would have been such a thing as a device to keep food cold if we'd just waited around for

fairy gifts. Or even if there'd been one, it would only have belonged to some king somewhere, not one in every home." He pointed a trembling finger at Daniel. "Look, you can go tell Mrs. Shantih that we may not know for sure where we'll end up on this planet. Maybe we'll reach the stars someday, maybe we'll turn into gods, maybe we'll wipe ourselves out and leave the planet for the roaches. But I think we should make the decision ourselves, not shackled like some kind of *symbiote* to another race that's more alien to us than fleas are to fungus." His shoulders slumped, and he sat back down again and picked up his fork. "Anyway, that's what I think. Anyone else's opinions are welcome as always."

There was a long silence. Everyone ate thoughtfully, glancing around as if daring each other to make the first statement, but no one said anything until most of the plates were empty. Finally Heather, who had been uncharacteristically silent for most of the meeting, was the first to speak.

"Look," she said. "Good, evil, the future of humanity, I'm afraid all this stuff is a bit beyond me. But if someone's life is in danger, you should do everything you can to save it, right? That's always the bottom line."

"So what do you think?" asked Ken, his voice almost breaking with exhaustion. "Should the three of us just pull up stakes and leave town before she tracks us down and finishes us off? You twins would probably be OK -- I don't think you've done anything to attract her attention yet. Is that your suggestion?"

Heather shook her head angrily. "That's not what I'm saying at all. We know what we're letting ourselves in for. The person I'm thinking about doesn't even realize his head's on the block. He's the one I think we should try to protect."

"Who..?" asked Daniel, puzzled. He looked at Ken, but his roommate looked as perplexed as he was.

Cindy leaned forward. "The person my sister is talking about is Douglas Chee. His parents and ours were friends, back before that witch got her clutches on him. He used to be a good kid - his parents came here to keep him out of gangs in the Philippines, you know."

"He gave me a ride on his motorcycle once," added Heather.

"I don't understand," said Daniel. "He's Lilith's right-hand man now. Why do you think he's in danger?"

Cindy glanced fearfully at her twin. "Tell them why, Heth."

Heather began carefully tracing the pattern on her plate with her fork. "Just a year and a half ago in December, Lilith started dating our big brother Allen."

"Snatched him up with her claws, I'd say," put in Cindy angrily. "I don't think there was much volition on his part in the matter."

"Right. Anyway, we didn't like her too much then, but we didn't know anything bad about her, so we kept quiet. And he was so proud of this crazy baseball cap she gave him ..."

"A crown, I'll bet," said Ken. "Just like the scepter she's given the current one. Go on."

"And then, it was almost a year ago..."

"June twenty-first, I'll bet" interrupted Daniel, who had begun to figure out where this was heading.

Heather glanced at him in surprise. "Right, midsummer's day. The two of them went out joy riding in, of all the cars in the world, her Pontiac Solstice. Figures, right? Next thing we knew a pair of cops were on our doorstep with those grim faces cops wear when they've got bad news, except to me it looked like these cops were actually pleased inside. A single-car accident. They said his seat belt wouldn't open, and there was a fire, and there was barely enough left of him at the morgue for us to identify, and, and..."

She bit her lip and was silent.

"And Lilith got out without a scratch," finished her sister bitterly. "She was acting upset, but you could tell it was fake like the police."

"Did their investigation turn up anything?" asked Ken.

Heather snorted. "Under Captain Momo-head? You think?"

"The king of leaves," Daniel murmured thoughtfully, and everyone turned to look at him once more.

"The which of what?" asked Heather.

"Oh, this just reminded me of something Mrs. Shantih said this morning. She said that on Midsummer's Day the king of leaves has to get burned or beheaded or thrown into the sea."

"And the other night in the Blue Nile, Lilith and Anubis both called Master Chee the summer king," said Ken. "Danny, isn't there something in mythology about a king of summer and a king of winter who fight every year on the solstices?"

"I think I saw something about that in one of those library books," said Daniel. "I'll check up on it."

Heather dinged her glass loudly. "Wait, that's not all," she said. "Speaking of the library, Cin, tell them what else you found out."

Cindy squirmed in her chair. "Well, I've always been the suspicious type," she said uncomfortably. "There was something about the accident that seemed familiar, so I went to the library and did some checking. It turns out that on the *previous* June twenty-first, there was some college guy who got practically decapitated over at Circus Maximus Go Karts when a bridge collapsed. And his friends mentioned how at least he'd gotten lucky at the bar the night before. I suspect she had something to do with finishing him off too."

"Right then," said Ken, and some of his weariness seemed to be gone. "So it sounds like she picks up some guy -- maybe at the last minute the first time, but back in the winter with the other two - and she sleeps with him so he gets to be this king somehow, and then she kills him off on midsummer's day like some kind of ritual sacrifice. Does that sound right?"

"Absolutely," said Cindy with a bit more certainty. "And Chee's next on her list. So the question is, what are we going to do about it?"

"What should we do about it?" Sondra wrinkled her nose. "Sorry, girls, he may have been a good kid once, but he's definitely thrown in with the creepy side now. If she wants to start offing her lieutenants like a James Bond villain, why not let her?"

"I don't think she'd do it if she wasn't getting something out of it," put in Ken. "I'll bet she arranges for them to take on a lot of power as a king, and then she steals it somehow when she kills them."

"And if Cindy's right, then Douglas is the third one," added Daniel. "You know these things always go in threes."

"So you're saying we ought to rescue him, not to help him but to hurt her," said Sondra. "I can deal with that. Count me in."

"A stakeout starting midsummer morning, I'm thinking," said Ken, flipping a page on his clipboard and beginning a list. Now he seemed to be all business. "Heather and Cindy, I'm not sure how good a look Lilith got of the three of us when she was that bug-cloud thing, but I think you'd better be the only ones to get in eye-shot of her. I guess she's done decapitation and burning so far, so what's likely to come next?"

"Drowning," said Daniel. "At least according to Mrs. Shantih."

"Sounds reasonable. So that'll probably happen at the Waterpark, since that's one of her bases. We'll want to have someone there too."

Sondra spoke up. "Look, we can say we're just going to try to rescue Doug Chee, but I'd bet anything that we're going to end up in a showdown with Lilith on midsummer's day. I mean, from what Dan said, that's when she's going to make her big power play, right? And, well, I've been thinking about it, and I've come up with a plan that might mess her up. Gods need people to believe in them, right? I'll need to go shopping for some really expensive cream - something the brownie would like." She pointed across the table at Cindy. "And I'm going to need help from you, I think."

"Why me?" asked Cindy plaintively, but Sondra put a finger across her lips.

"One other thing, guys," said Daniel. "I'd like to try a rescue mission out of Faery at midnight the night before."

There was a moment's silence. "You say that as if you were proposing a shopping trip," said Ken finally.

"I remember," said Sondra. "It's that question you asked the SPF right at the end last night. I meant to ask who you were talking about."

"Lilith's changeling," Daniel explained. Briefly he outlined the background of the girl Lily - how she'd been stolen by Drallo and Skeeble and grown up in the Border Realm, then stolen again by Drallo and spriggans and confined. "My guess is

that Lilith must think she's dangerous somehow," he finished, "and whatever is dangerous to Lilith must be good for us. Ken, could I draft you into helping me craft a ritual to find her? I mean, if you and Sondra are willing to come, of course."

"What about us!" cried Heather. "We want to come too!"

"Errr, maybe," said Daniel carefully. "Something I came across in my research makes me leery about that. Can I get back to you?"

"Hmph," said Heather, crossing her arms.

"What is it about you and Faery?" Ken had been glowering throughout Daniel's explanation. "Spears, bugs, giant scissor-mice - what insanely dangerous threat should we go dig up there next?"

Daniel stared. "But we can't do it without you! The fairy said so!"

Ten minutes later they were still arguing over whether or not opening a portal was a good idea when the waitress came in to clear away their plates. She reappeared a few moments later bearing a plate with an open box of chocolates, ice cream, and a small birthday cake with blue frosting and a single candle. She set it down with a flourish in front of Heather and Cindy. "I understand we've got two birthday girls here," she said brightly. "Lucky seventeens."

"Ooh, my favorite," said Heather, reaching out for one of the chocolates. "Thanks, Ken."

Then several things happened.

Daniel noticed with his peripheral vision that the door to their room was swinging shut behind the waitress without anyone having touched it, and alarm bells began going off in his head. He started to call out a warning to Heather. Across the table he saw Ken shouting out that he hadn't ordered any dessert, and reaching towards the remote he'd thrown onto the table during his speech.

Then the candle on the cake burst into a jet of flame and burnt down to nothing in less than a second, and the cake exploded like a bomb. The piles of ice cream that had surrounded it vaporized into a fine mist that sprayed everyone in the room, and Daniel suddenly felt chilled as if all the heat in his body had been sucked out of him. He looked at his arm and saw webs of blue ice crystals spreading across his skin like frost on a January window. He tried to push himself up out of his chair to run, but his ability to move seemed frozen as well.

Then the features of the blonde waitress began to shimmer and change, and Kate Castellano stood before them in a deep blue dress. "Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice," she gloated. "In your case I'm betting on the latter. Expensive, buying enough Glamour to change my shape for all this time, but worth it, worth it. And I had to make sure you all arrived at different times, so you'd all think someone else was the one who ordered the room. Ah, but I've bagged the whole clutch of you now!" She pursed her lips at Cindy. "You were my best employee, Cindy -- why'd you have to get mixed up with these

out-of-town trouble-makers? Ah well, when my Lil pays me the bounty she's promised, I won't need to keep the shop anyway." Her eyes narrowed as they went around the table. Then she drew the spoon from the sash at her waist and tapped once on the box of chocolates. "And since the orders were that she'd rather have you dead than alive..."

The chocolates in their troughs seemed to writhe and shudder, as if whatever was inside the coating was attempting to sense its surroundings. Then, slowly, one of them stretched itself towards Heather's frozen finger tips, growing thinner as it swayed blindly upward. It had almost reached them when, with a thump, it overbalanced and toppled over. For a moment it regrouped itself into a ball on the table; then, painstakingly, it began to inch its way toward her chair. It was impossible for Daniel to tell whether he saw fear in her frozen eyes. With a slithering sound four more chocolates began to coil out of the box and work their ways across the table towards the other frozen young people. Bumps and cracks appeared and disappeared in the chocolate coating as they crept forward.

Daniel's eyes darted around the table at his friends. All of them seemed to be frozen blue statues, Ken's hand stopped only a few inches from his remote. He noticed something else as well, though -- behind Kate's back, the door was gradually inching open again. He couldn't see anyone on the other side, but the obvious stealth of whoever was out there made him eager to create a diversion.

Once again, as he had in the flaming forest and the enchanted fondue pot and the insect swarm in the candy castle, he tried to focus his power of denial on the situation. *This isn't real*, he told himself. *If I concentrate I can stop this*. He thought about the most warming thing he could imagine, Sondra's flaming hair, and gradually felt a slight loosening in his frozen muscles. His joints still wouldn't budge, but he found he could barely move his tongue and teeth enough to grunt out "Why ... oo ... doing ... tis?"

Kate turned to him. "Ah, one of my little popsicles can speak, eh? I suppose I should have expected that from you, Dan, given what I've known about you all along. I'm doing this because milady Lil was right put out at what the three of you did to her plans last night. Subverting my dear cooking teacher from her banner, and then on top of that helping her escape the natural consequences of treachery! Oh, ready to bite non-ferrous nails, she was. Fortunately for you she still doesn't know your names, or there wouldn't have been enough of the three of you left at daybreak this morning to moisten a sponge, but she's put out a supernatural bounty on all of you that's got every Sidhe, bogie, phooka, coblynau, cluricaun, trow, kelpie, nuckelavee and glaistig in her kingdom out scouring the hills. But I recognized you from her description, so I followed you and picked you up first."

Whoever was behind the door still wasn't making a move. Daniel struggled to force words out again. "Wha ... di ... she ... promise ... oo?"

"What did she promise me? Ah," Kate gazed off into the distance dreamily. "I'll be a demigoddess in her pantheon, that's what she said. Sugar cane will grow wherever I put my left foot and cacao beans wherever I put my right. My luscious bounty shall shower upon all who approach me humbly, for I, I shall be known everywhere as the giver of all things utterly sweet!"

The first creeping chocolate creature was almost at the edge of the table where it could drop into Heather's frozen lap. Daniel could feel his tongue loosening a bit more, but the rest of his body still refused to budge. "I rought ack dose ebories oo sold to ta wady uf wures."

For a moment Kate's triumphant composure slipped. "My memories? But why..." Then she seemed to stiffen, and her eyes narrowed. "Is this how you expect to buy back your freedom? I traded those baubles away once for power, so why would I want them back now, when far more power is within my grasp? Besides, if I gave them away once, they must not have been worth very much in the first place. So now, my little bon bons..."

"You're wrong," came a voice from the doorway. For a moment Daniel believed that his frosted eyes were playing tricks on him when he saw who was standing there.

"Mo... mob?" he asked incredulously.

Ava Carver kicked the door closed behind her and leaned her back against it. One of her hands was wrapped with the orange blanket that Daniel recalled she always kept in the back of her car for snow emergencies. She dropped it to the floor and revealed a tiny silver handgun, pointed at Kate.

Chapter 3

Where the world ends

*The mind is made unchanging, for it finds
Miracle, ecstasy, the impossible hope,
The flagstone under all, the fire of fires,
The roots of the world.*

W.B. Yeats, The Shadowy Waters

"You will not touch that spoon again, sister," Ava said in a measured tone. "That's my son you've got frozen there, and if you threaten him again you'll be a tough target to miss at this range." She glanced down at the things crawling across the table, and her eyes widened briefly before she snapped back her attention to Kate. "Now, are you going to call those disgusting things off, or should I grab a plate and start squishing?"

Kate's lips curled with scorn as her hand began to descend towards her spoon. "You wouldn't dare shoot me, woman. Don't you know all the police in this town are on our side? They would put you down like a stray dog."

Ava barked out a sharp laugh. "You're the mother of that Lilith girl who took my son's rock, aren't you? Ken there told me all about your family." She cocked the gun and raised it to point directly at Kate's ample bosom. "If you were any kind of mother at all, then you would know how little that threat means to me."

Kate stared at her fixedly, then sighed and let her shoulders slump. She called out a word in a strange language, and the creeping chocolates turned and began crawling back toward their box.

"Now unfreeze them," Ava growled, cocking her head at the five seated at the table.

Kate stared back at her with her jaw set. "I won't," she said sharply. "And shooting me won't help you get them back. I believe we are at a standoff."

For a moment Ava seemed to sag; then she rallied. "Listen. When my son's roommate called me this morning and laid out this story, I would have thought he was crazy if it wasn't for two things. One, when I first met Ken he struck me as being unusually sane, and two, I've met your daughters and your husband once before. I thought there was just enough possibility of truth in his story to make it worth swiping a revolver from my husband's collection before I hit the road." She jerked her head toward the motionless Ken. "He told me your daughter Lilith is a changeling. One mother to another, is that true?"

Kate hesitated, then shrugged. "True enough. But how does that make any difference to our situation right now?"

Ava nodded decisively. "It makes all the difference in the world. I asked Ken a lot of questions this morning. Is it true that you can't remember why you originally started down this road you're on?"

"It's true." Kate shook her head impatiently. "But what difference does that make? Besides, I didn't really lose memories, just the emotions that went with them. How important could they have been, if I was so willing to give them up?"

Ava stared at her speculatively, the gun barrel never wavering. Then, gently, she said, "Tell me, Kate, how many children do you have?"

Kate's broad forehead wrinkled in confusion. "Two, of course. Kimberly and Lilith. Well, I suppose Lilith is more like a stepdaughter, but she's still part of the family."

"And where, exactly, is the daughter you gave birth to, the one that Lilith replaced?" Ava spoke with a measured clarity now, as if every word was the stroke of a clock striking midnight. "It must have been years after the substitution before you finally learned for sure that she'd been stolen when she was tiny. I'll bet you suspected right from the first day, though. A mother would know the difference between her baby and a changeling in a second. How did you feel when you found out she'd been stolen, Kate? Can you remember that emotion?"

While Ava was talking Kate was gradually backing up, until her back was flat against the wall. She balled up her fists and put them against her mouth, her breath coming fast and shallow.

"That was it," she gasped. "That was the pain that the Lady of Lures wanted me to give up for my first taste of Glamour. But it wasn't as if there was any way of getting her back. Was there?"

Suddenly she took three strides across the room to stand next to Daniel, drawing her wooden spoon as she went. Ava kept the gun trained on her closely, but made no gesture to stop her as she drew something on Daniel's forehead with the spoon's handle. With a crackling noise and a cloud of thin steam, the ice around him warmed and melted, and he found that he could move again.

"My grief, boy! Give it back to me!" the big woman cried out desperately. Daniel fished in his pocket and pulled out the box he'd been carrying around all day. Without a word, Kate Castellano grabbed it out of his hand and opened it. Inside was a single, heart-shaped chocolate, so dark it was almost black. Kate hesitated only an instant, then popped the thing into her mouth, chewed, and swallowed.

For a moment there seemed to be no effect. Then she closed her eyes and sank into a chair.

"Lily," she said as tears began trickling down her face. "Oh Lily, Lily, I'm sorry." Then she blinked her wet eyes open and looked around the room. "If you people are being hunted by the ones who took my daughter, then I am ever so much on your side."

"Good," said Ava grimly. "Unfreeze the rest of them. It looks as if your stepdaughter has given all of us a few scores to settle."

At ten o'clock on Midsummer's Eve, a syncopated series of knocks sounded on the apartment door, immediately followed by a loud crack of thunder. Daniel sprang up and gave another series of knocks in response, then threw back the bolt, removing as well the chocolate-stuffed pretzel inserted into the latch. His mother pushed her way into the apartment, shaking her poncho and a large orange-striped umbrella. Rakshasa the cat slipped in between her legs.

"Thanks for waiting for him, Mom," Daniel said affectionately as he relocked the door. "I wasn't sure he'd come in this weather. Rakshasa, the most expensive fish I could find at the market is waiting for you in the kitchen for showing up like you promised."

The cat's green eyes stared up at him coolly. *Of course we keep our promises, cat feeder,* he heard its thoughts projected at him. *But I shall eat your fishie anyway.* Then the animal shot through the archway into the kitchen like gray lightning.

Daniel returned to the love seat and picked up the notebook he'd been reading from. Cindy, curled up on the sofa, explained, "Dan was going over all the research he's been doing, Mrs. Carver."

"Great!" his mother smiled, sitting down beside him. "Glad they taught him how to do something at college. Carry on. Where's everyone else, though?"

"I'm here!" cried Sondra from the kitchen archway, waving a towel. "Heather's out on an errand, and Ken's holed up in his portal as usual."

Daniel looked up and shook his head, still having difficulty accepting Sondra as a brunette. He coughed and resumed where he'd left off. "Midsummer's Eve was a big time for herbs, apparently. If you were a doctor back in the middle ages, that's when you'd go out to stock up your supplies of burdock and nettle and thorn and so forth for the next year."

"Makes sense," Ava nodded. "Plants get strength from the sun, so to medieval folks they'd be most potent when the sun was strongest."

"Yep." Daniel consulted his notes again. "Hmm. Lots of stuff about vegetation. If you could gather fern seeds they were supposed to make you invisible."

"But ferns don't have seeds," said Cindy with a frown. "Just spores."

"They thought that every plant must have seeds, so the fern seeds must be invisible, and they'd make you invisible if you ate them." Suddenly Daniel stopped short, remembering a dream where a giant swan blew some kind of invisible dust on him. Lightning split the night outside the kitchen window, followed a few seconds later by a crack of thunder that shook the apartment's thin windows.

"Go on," said Ava, and Daniel shook his head and returned his attention to his notes.

After a full day's worth of arguing, Daniel had finally won Ken over to the plan of opening a portal on Midsummer's Eve to wherever Lily was held captive. At first Daniel's main strategy had been to stress that Lilith must be afraid of the girl if she'd had her imprisoned, but Ken was skeptical of the point. Reminding him of Jay Fry's advice about finding both ends of the string also had little effect; in Ken's experience untying knots, he said, one end was plenty. What finally won him over was when Daniel began to dwell upon the great difficulties involved in opening a gate without the Morcan, and how it was a task that only the most powerful of wizards would be able to accomplish. After that, Ken spent the next two days engrossed with his remote and his notebook trying to figure out an appropriate ritual to slip a foot through when the Midsummer doors were wide open.

Ken had eventually picked the hallway between the bedrooms as the best place to draw his wizard's circles, since with doors in all four directions it was the most betwixt and between sort of place in the house. Sondra, meanwhile, had shut herself up in her room with a notebook of her own, where she seemed to be composing some kind of speech that Daniel could sometimes hear her practicing while he lay sleepless in the dead of night fearing the dreams that had been visiting him recently. She was also filling a backpack with various equipment. Both Ken and Sondra consulted extensively with Cindy, Heather, and Ava, who served as their contacts with the outside world. Ava Carver was

staying in a nearby Bed and Breakfast, and she had taken over the job of cooking for everyone and making sure they all took care of themselves.

The three roommates living above the Antiquities shop had barely stuck their noses out of their apartment during the three days leading up to Midsummer's Eve. That was because the morning following the restaurant meeting, while Ken and Daniel were still arguing about opening a portal, Kate had showed up at their apartment to offer whatever protection she could still provide. "If you go out in the streets again," she had said, "it would only be a question of whether it would be the police or the fair folk or the dream beasts that would snap you up first." She and Ken had clomped next door together to consult with Cloudfoot Shantih, and the three of them had together produced a raft of sketches of ley lines and astrological charts annotated with Ken's brand of numerology. When they were through, Ken came back and began writing lists of numbers and symbols with chalk on all the doors and with soap on the windows. Kate left for a few hours and came back with a box of candy that she claimed had special diversionary powers, which she proceeded to hide around their apartment. There were walnut shells and cherries and other goodies with chocolate stuffed inside, cored apples filled with hard candy or caramel, and a big glob of still-warm chocolate that had been dipped into a bowl of tiny strawberries. "'Inverted candies," she'd said. "They ought to make the place look larger inside than it is outside and throw the searchers off

the track. I've only got scraps and leftovers of power now that I've eaten that soul-candy, but these should work. I think they'll even keep the dream beasts at bay for a while, but still - sleep lightly, all right?" Cindy said she had grown a bit more like her old self, but to Daniel she still seemed fearsome and formidable.

Despite their entreaties, she categorically refused to assent to their plans for Midsummer's Day. "Leave this to the grown-ups," she said with her arms folded across her chest. "You three have done plenty already. Dan, we'll cover for you at the shop - it's the least I can do for you considering all you've done for me. It's too dangerous for any of you to stick your noses out of doors right now. I've got my own plan, and I don't need your help, so the three of you need to lie low until all of this is over." Daniel had indignantly reminded her that she already knew he was going to be in the center of things, but she was adamant, and eventually he backed off.

"It's because she's angry at herself for not finding a way to go after her daughter sooner," observed Sondra after Kate was gone. "I'll bet she's trying to punish herself by taking on the whole burden. You were right, Dan - she wasn't going to budge."

Still, they had decided to take her advice and stay under cover until the big day. Ken theorized that once Midsummer's Day broke, all of Lilith's forces would have other things to keep them occupied besides hunting mortals. "And anyway," he said with a sigh, "if she ends up winning and she wants us dead, it

won't make any difference where we are in the world - she'll be sure to find us. When your head's on the block, you're just as well off trying to kick the executioner as not."

Daniel had two main occupations during the boredom of their confinement. One was to keep going through the various books on myths he'd already checked out of the library, and to send Heather and Cindy out on runs for new ones. The other task was to catch up with his mother.

One night Daniel had stayed up with her past midnight in his plastic-shuttered room, telling her the story of all the summer's events and catching up on family news.

"Danny," she had said, leaning back in his chair after she had finished admiring his newest drawings, "you know, all the time you were growing up, I always felt I was letting you down somehow."

"Oh no, Mom. Never. You were great." Daniel leaned back against the head of the bed, reveling in the taste of home after so much that was strange.

Ava shook her head. "No, Danny. We need to tell each other the truth. I always felt bad about having to go back to work when you were so young. And other things - well, I suppose every mother has a few regrets. It's hard to have too many when I see what a great guy you're turning out to be."

Daniel, embarrassed, didn't say anything.

"But you want to know what the one thing was that's rankled me most over the years, caused me the most little guilt-stabs"

She hesitated. "It was letting those three in the shop take that stupid rock. I know it's crazy. I've told myself a million times that it was stupid, that it was only a ten-cent rock. You never mentioned it, so I convinced myself that I was the only one who remembered what happened that day. But now we know it was important after all. I let you down in a big way."

"No, Mom. You saw what we're dealing with in the restaurant. If you'd stood up to them they would have killed us both. You did the right thing, really."

"Oh." After that Ava didn't say anything more, and they sat together companionably as Daniel's alarm clock ticked on into the night.

"Vegetation, right. Women wove flowers in their hair and guys wore circlets of oak leaves. And when they built their big bonfires on Midsummer's Day, they'd throw in the bunches of the herbs they'd picked the night before. There were lots of herbal methods that girls were supposed to use to find out who they'd marry."

"I wonder what's keeping Heather so long?" Cindy interrupted Daniel. She stood to peer out the window into the darkness of the storm for the tenth time of the evening. "Ken's going to be finished with that spaghetti he's drawing pretty soon."

"Chill," said Sondra, bringing in a bowl of chips from the kitchen. "There's still almost an hour left. Go on, Dan."

Speaking of vegetation, what about this 'king of leaves' you and Ken were talking about the other night? Find out anything more on him?"

"A little." Daniel flipped a page. "It's a bit confusing - sometimes he's the King of Leaves, or the Green Man, or even the Huntsman god Cernunnos. All fertility gods, nature gods, you see. Some of the ancients thought there were two kings who ruled the year: the oak king represented light and warmth and growth, and the holly king wanted everyone to freeze to death every winter. On the darkest day of the year they'd fight, and the oak king would always defeat the holly king and restore the light so the days would get longer again. Then on midsummer's day they'd fight again and the winter king would win, and that's why days got shorter afterwards. People would light fires on both days to help encourage the light king, because obviously if he lost the winter fight, the days would get shorter forever until everything on earth was ice."

"Fair enough," said Cindy, "but what does this have to do with our brother and Doug Chee? They weren't kings."

Daniel grabbed one of the chips from the bowl Sondra had just set down. "Well, the thing is, they might have been. I'm guessing Allen was in pretty good shape, right, Cindy?"

The girl swallowed hard and nodded.

"Good, that fits my theory. See, for the Celts, the physical condition of their kings was important because the kings were an embodiment of the growth spirit - maybe even identical to

it. If the king got wounded, the land would wither, so you couldn't keep an imperfect king around. Best not even to risk him getting old, according to some folks' interpretations."

Ava nodded. "I think I see where this is going," she said. "Assuming people were as much jerks back then as they are today."

Daniel sighed. "They were a lot worse," he said. "During recorded history, in the midsummer festival there'd be some kind of symbolic human sacrifice, like burning a man made of branches or throwing a man made of leaves into the sea. But some anthropologists think that in even earlier times, they probably did the real thing."

"Kkkkk," said Sondra solemnly, drawing a finger across her throat. Daniel nodded. Cindy bowed her head, and Ava put her arm around her.

"The thing is, this king was a pretty powerful magical figure," Daniel continued relentlessly. "So after he died, all that power had to go somewhere for the second half of the year, until the new leaf king got chosen to receive it at the next Midwinter's. So there was a royal priestess-consort, kind of representing the earth herself, I think. She wouldn't get killed, and she could keep the continuity going by teaching each new king whatever he needed to know every year. But I'd imagine she'd get to be fairly powerful, holding on to the cut-off essences of all those dead kings."

"And you think Lilith has revived the custom," said Sondra.

"Looks like," Daniel agreed. "Hey, I'm sorry, Cin."

Cindy looked up with a fierce determination, but just then they were interrupted by another series of syncopated knocks at the door.

Sondra knocked out the counter-signal, then unchained the bolt and removed the pretzel. Heather came in carrying an enormous canvas bag in one hand and shaking out an umbrella with the other. A moment later the door to the inner hallway opened as well, and Ken emerged.

"Just in time," he said curtly. "Were you able to find everything?"

"Had to drive back home for some of it, that's why I'm so late. And there was one thing that I had to make a substitution for." Heather rummaged around in the bag for a bit and pulled out a wrapped package. "A mechanical clock that struck the hours. Mrs. Shantih didn't have one in her shop. I found a few other antique stores that did, but they were all priced way outside the budget you gave me. Then there were cheaper ones in the tourist shops, but they were electronic, not mechanical. Places were closing, so I wound up having to get you this."

She unwrapped the object and held it up. It was a replica of a German cuckoo clock, complete with molded plastic ivy and a leaf at the end of the pendulum. "You said we needed to create a space between the first and last strokes of midnight for the gate to open," she said defensively. "This thing has to pop in and out of its door every *cuckoo*, so it ought to give us plenty of time."

"Heh." Ken stared at it for a moment longer, then grated out an even less convincing laugh. "Heh hha ha. Considering we're going after a bird that shoved a proper-born youngster out of its rightful nest and took her place, that's pretty appropriate. The bag, please?" Heather gave it to him, and he turned back toward the hallway, then hesitated.

"How are you doing, Ken?" Sondra called softly.

"Holding onto my soul by the skin of my teeth," he told her with a sidelong glance. Then he stepped back into his lair and shut the door.

"So," said Heather briskly, sitting down on the coffee table and starting to remove her shoes and socks. "How's the plan coming?"

Sondra was still staring at the door. "I just hope he can go cold turkey when the time comes," she murmured.

"Ah, the state of the plan," said Daniel brightly. "I've already told you, Heather, the state of *my* plan is that you and your sister should stay behind with mom to guard this side of the portal."

"Hmph," said Heather crossly, wringing out her socks. "Not likely. Why let you have all the fun? We can take care of ourselves. I survived the depths of Atlantis, didn't I?"

"Actually," said Cindy, "you were practically off your head when you got home, sis. But yeah, I guess we're in this together. You guys are right, too much is at stake for us to chicken out now."

Daniel spread his hands helplessly. "I have a bad feeling about getting more people involved than are necessary, OK?"

"Pish," said Heather. "We're already involved. Besides, we've got the WonderTwin powers! You still want to go, don't you?"

Cindy nodded, but kept her mouth shut tightly.

Then the door opened again, and they heard Ken's voice from the depths of the candlelit hallway. "I'm ready," he called. "It's time."

From what Daniel could see in the flickering candlelight, practically every exposed inch of the floor and walls in the hallway was covered by chalk hieroglyphics, numbers, and swirling lines and patterns that connected six circles in the center of the floor. There were other nodes that held items like Heather's cuckoo clock, pieces of chocolate, three wooden knives in a triangle with the edges pointing outward, the shard of wood that Daniel had brought back from Mrs. Shantih's psyche, and a potted lily.

Everyone had to tip-toe to their assigned circles to avoid smudging the chalk. Rakshasa strolled lazily to his circle and sat with his tail coiled around his feet, resembling one of the statues of Bastet for sale in Crossroads souvenir shops. Ava leaned in the doorway watching them situate themselves, then sighed and waved.

"I'll be in the living room," she said sadly. "Danny, you be sure to come back now, you hear? Don't make me come into that place after you." She gave a strained smile and closed the door.

"Eleven minutes till launch time," said Ken briskly. "Don't forget to take all the iron and steel out of your pockets. Has everybody used the rest room?"

There was a brief delay as Cindy and Daniel tiptoed over to the bathroom door and then got back into their circles. Then everyone joined hands and waited for the clock's minute hand to point straight up. Daniel clasped one hand with Heather and rested the other on Rakshasa's back.

"What are the wooden knives for, oh wise one?" he asked.

"Edge country," Ken replied. "Remember where the SPF said we were going to be searching? I needed something to represent our destination, and they seemed to give out the right vibes."

"Great," said Cindy nervously. "Why am I reminded of that nightmare where you get chased by the giant scissors?"

"Hmm, you won't need to worry about nightmares," said Ken with no trace of reassurance in his voice. "We'll go beyond those."

"Oh, terrific."

"So Ken, you're positive this contraption will work?" Sondra asked from her circle near the closet.

Ken took a deep breath and clutched Heather's hand tightly. "I am positive of nothing these days," he said with conviction. "I was unsure before our last trip, and I'm twice as unsure now."

I've ... I've tried to stop listening to the snowman - my familiar - since we got back. Sonny, you convinced me that her prices were too high. This stuff," he gestured around at the chalkwork on the walls, "is just based on what I learned before, plus my gut instincts."

"I'd noticed you hadn't been using the earphones or the TV recently," said Daniel. "So you don't hear the voice in the static anymore, eh?"

Ken's face was drawn with lines like a man twice his age. "Who said anything about not hearing her?" he said in a tiny voice. "She whispers at me all the time. She doesn't need static anymore; she's in the pulse of blood in my ears."

"Almost party time, people." Sondra nodded at the cuckoo clock that showed one minute till midnight. "Say, Ken, what incantation are you using?"

"Incantation?" Ken looked befuddled. "What do you mean?"

"Don't ritual spells always have incantations?" she asked, her voice rising. "Don't tell me you spent all your time on the drawings and left out the most important part?"

"Umm, well, I suppose I could recite some of the more significant numbers." Ken pulled out his notebook and frantically flipped through pages as the clock began to whirl.

"Never mind, I'll do it." As the tiny bird popped out of its clock and began its chirping cuckoo, she intoned in a voice that would have brought down the curtain on any New York stage,

"The iron tongue of midnight hath told twelve. Lovers, to bed;
'tis almost fairy time."

Then the chalk strands on the walls untwisted themselves and the six travelers were falling between the. Daniel felt the familiar swooping sensation he'd had before on the way to Atlantis and the Gingerbread Castle, but on those occasions it had felt as if he was simply stepping through a door. This time it felt like being hurled head-first at a wall of sharp thorns, a tangled, writhing maze of knots and snares that led to nowhere but further and further within themselves and piercing and strangulation and death.

Chapter 4

Cut down the tree and trim off its branches; strip off its leaves and scatter its fruit. Let the animals flee from under it and the birds from its branches.

Daniel 4: 14

We were crazy to try this, Daniel thought. But then he saw Rakshasa's tail vanishing through an impossibly small gap. *Cats twilight gray, no barrier can stay,* he reminded himself, and he mentally forced himself through the opening the cat had used and pulled Heather along after him. The barrier seemed to clutch and claw, and for a moment he felt the breath being squeezed out of him, and then they were through and entering the Edge Country, the Farthest Reaches, the shrinking lands.

It was a short walk to the end of the world.

They stood in a circular clearing amidst a dense forest, surrounded by lush green trees whose trunks could not be surrounded easily by a person's arms. In the direction of the edge of the world, though, the forest grew thinner in every possible sense of the word. The five humans glanced at one another, then turned and began to trudge that way. As they walked, the trees became more and more spindly, until at last they were little more than slivers with green fuzz on the tips. The grass became downlike and wispy, the soil began to vibrate and stretch beneath their feet like a drumhead, the colors of

everything washed out like a fake tattoo in the rain, and even the air began to turn gaspingly thin.

Daniel and Cindy, who had never had particularly good heads for heights, were the first to stop. Then Ken, who was about to step right up to the very lip of Edge of the World, sprang back a step as a chunk of the edge broke off beneath his feet. It didn't go tumbling into any kind of abyss, though; instead, it simply began floating off into the milky grayness, joining other bits of discarded flotsam and jetsam that seemed to be drifting away forever from the solid land of Faery: broken feathers, a necklace made of grass, a forgotten alter, playing cards, a cracked mask. Some things seemed to have drifted a long ways away, and yet you felt that you could reach out and grab them if you stretched yourself to the utmost. Indeed, two of the other things that seemed to have grown thin at the edge of the world were time and distance, so that it was impossible to determine where or when anything was in relation to anything else. It was a sad place, smelling of abandoned dreams and wasted possibilities. Sondra grabbed Ken's hand to steady him.

"And it's unexpected that this meeting is, mortlings," came a voice from behind them, and they all turned to see a knee-high figure with tall, waving ears come bounding out of the trees towards them. When Skeeble stood before them she lifted her earlobes in a practiced curtsy, then tucked them against her waist for a deep bow, then curtseyed again to be on the safe side. Then she suddenly saw who was standing behind Cindy,

shrieked, and scrambled up Daniel's pant-leg until she was curled up on top of his head.

"It's the assassin!" she shrieked, while Daniel attempted to rescue his own ears which the fairy had latched onto for support. "He's come to crunch me up for good this time!" Rakshasa sat down sedately and began licking fish oil off one of his paws.

"He isn't going to hurt you," Daniel explained patiently while he tried to disentangle the trembling nis from his hair. "He's our guide. We needed him to reach here. Tell her you aren't going to hurt her, Rakshasa."

Never ask a cat to make a promise about the future, Rakshasa thought back to him bemusedly. *No future, no past, only now. But as I explained to the little morsel before, his kind are entirely too crunchy for my tastes.* From the faces of the others, Daniel could see that in Faery, at least, they could all understand the cat as well as he could.

Daniel carefully set the trembling nis on the ground, then turned to the rest of the group, mindful of his own advice that bad manners could be deadly here. "Ken, Sondra, Cindy, Heather, I'd like you to meet Skeeble. Remember, I've told you how she helped put Lilith in our world in the first place,"

('alackadaisy' cried Skeeble) "and then spent all those years raising the real Lily, which counts as good penance in my book. Skeeble, these are my friends. My debts and credits are theirs as well."

"Pleased to have your meeting," said Skeeble, curtsying and bowing again.

"But what are you doing here?" Daniel asked after a moment. "The last time I saw you, you were safely hidden in my dreams."

"Safe!" sputtered Skeeble. "Safe like a slab of butter in an oven, I'm for thinking! Didn't you know her servants have been scouring the Border Realm for your scent, mortling? Haven't you noticed the lands for your dreaming have shrunk?"

Daniel stroked the circlet around his finger and remembered the night when Lilith mowed his dreams, as well as other recent nights when his dreams had been beleaguered and besieged, and he nodded uncomfortably. "But still, isn't the Border Realm a great long ways away from here? How did you travel?"

"Distance doesn't mean much in Faery, child," Skeeble sniffed. "The answer is, the two places are just as far apart as it was necessary for me to be getting from the start of the Finding-My-Mistress quest to here at the other end."

"You know where she is, then," cried Daniel, his excited voice falling flat in the thin gray atmosphere.

"That I do. Follow me." Skeeble turned on her heel and stumped along the edge of the world, and the rest of the group glanced at one another and fell in behind her.

It was a short walk, marred only by two things. The first was how Skeeble always leapt behind someone when Rakshasa so much as looked at her, so that the gray cat eventually began stalking her as prey just to watch her jump. Also, it was difficult to

walk in a straight line parallel to the Edge of the World. Despite the strange things that were drifting off in the gray mist, it was towards the forest of the interior lands, not the Edge, that one's attention was continually drawn. The Edge simply failed to hold one's attention; the half-baked notions and discarded ideas that it held seemed not only distant but distasteful to contemplate, like other peoples' kitchen scraps.

Then something different appeared out of the mist ahead: a shimmering green bubble, hovering in the void. For a moment Daniel tried to remember where he'd seen that shade of green before, and finally he remembered that it was the same material that had made up the great wall outside Atlantis, the one that the whales had stretched and held open for the merfolk invasion. He recalled what the Sugar Plum Fairy had said about the Oberon being unable to spit without wetting the back of his head. This, then, must be all that remained of the old Oberon's kingdom, its borders pushed back and back again until it was only a prison, and a tiny one at that.

The seven travelers lined up on the Edge of the World closest to the bubble and peered through its green walls. Its interior was filled with the cracked, splintering branches of an oak tree in the last stages of decrepitude. Ivy scaled its trunk trying to suffocate it, and the handful of leaves it was able to produce were thin and sere at their edges.

The tree was murmuring an unending, droning litany to itself. "If I should live to be the last trafe upon the lea,

'twould give me sights would make me less forlorn - Forlorn! the very word is like a bell I'd be ringing in the morning, because mourning becomes the body electric starry dynamo in the machinery of night." On and on it went, fragments of poetry Daniel recognized and scraps he did not: all the rags and bitter sweepings of literature pureed together into a thin soup. "He's so old and gray now, he's almost lost his wits, wits take lodging in the sound of the great bell of Bow, which says I do not know, know, no, no."

"Excuse me, sir." Daniel called as loudly as he could, trying to penetrate both the green wall and the old king's solipsism. "This is your, well, your human soldier, I guess. I'm sorry you lost the war. We're still on your side, though! We're looking for another prisoner, the changeling you ordered brought Twilight-side when you exiled Lilith. Have you seen her?"

For a while longer the tree made no sign it had heard him, just continued its idiot babble. Then, with a crash, a bough close to the ground suddenly sheared off as if struck by lightning. As its base touched the ground it did not topple over, but took root and began muttering in its own separate voice. In the turf behind where the bough had been, they could now see a fragile lily growing out of the leaf-strewn soil.

"Never should have made a changeling again," murmured the great tree and the smaller tree in unison. "Never fall in love again, stick clothes to your disk and never go to see, never the

mane shall tweet. The old order was changeling, changing, yielding place to fresh woods and pastures new." Do you still remember my warning, soldier?" Only the main tree shouted out the last question (Daniel supposed unhappily that the best way to describe the tree's tone was that it barked), while the rooted bough continued to murmur softly down a different greased path of language.

"Yes sir. Well, it wasn't much of a warning, sir." Politeness was one thing, but Daniel figured he ought to be honest as well. "You just said that maybe you goofed - I guess when you quit letting your subjects make deals with us, hunh? Well, maybe you did, but the consensus at least among our little circle seems to be that it's probably too late for us to switch back now."

"Maybe-seems-probably? Oh, that's real definite," hissed Ken at his elbow.

"Anyway," Daniel went on, undeterred, "the reason we came here was to see if we could rescue the girl, if that's her growing by your trunk there. Would that be all right with you, sir?"

A shiver seemed to run through the oak tree from its topmost branch to its roots. "There is only one way to break out of this prison. Thinking of a key, each confirms that stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a gilded cage." This seemed as if might go on for some time, but all at once there was an interruption.

Heather was leaning out as far as she could over the void, and Daniel could hear her muttering something about "one of her victims, at least." She put out her hand to a spot on the green bubble close to where the lily was growing.

"I wouldn't do that if I was you," he called out. Then there was a sound like water going down a drain, and Heather vanished. A small purple flower now grew at the base of the tree.

"Heatheerrrrrrr!" screamed Cindy.

"Great, Danny, just great," Ken sniffed. "A whole lot of good this trip is accomplishing."

Sondra flashed him a look. "Remember how we talked about not being a jerk, Ken? Don't get all Fausty on us." Then she had to grab Cindy before she could thrust her hands into the bubble too.

Daniel knelt down next to the gray cat, who was staring off into the distance and seemingly paying no attention to what had just happened. "Rakshasa? You're the expert on getting through barriers. How do we fetch the two plant-girls out of there?"

Not sure it can be done, the cat thought back That barrier seems like it's part of the king himself. Right now we've got bigger problems, though. Weather's changing.

And indeed, a wind seemed to be picking up from farther on along the Edge, carrying with it the scent of fire-blasted trees and other dead things. Close behind the wind came the high, keening wail of a wolf.

Skeebble moaned and ran off a few scampering steps, calling back over her shoulder, "If that's the Fenris, we need to be leaving shortlike, mortlings!"

"We can't leave without my twin!" screamed Cindy.

"Twin?" At the word, the nis stopped as abruptly as if she'd slammed into a tree. "You brought a pair of twins here and had them both expecting for to be walking out? Ah wellaway, wellaway."

"What's wrong with twins?" asked Daniel. "And couldn't you tell they were twins before?"

"All humans look alike to me," Skeebble confessed. "But Faery can tell, and it hasn't been enjoying having both sides of a mirror standing in the same place, indeed not. Look at Izanagi and his poor dead sister Izanami, or Tijuskeha who had to kill his evil twin Tawiskarong, or Xbalanque whose brother Hunahpu's head got used as a lacrosse ball. One always gets kept and one released."

"Who?" asked Daniel, listening to the rising wind. "Never mind. Didn't you just say we should be going?"

"Mortal Castor and immortal Polydeuces, then. The point is, Faery thinks that just as it mirrors the Dayside world, precisely likewise all doubles should get besplit and..."

Skeebble was interrupted by another long wolf's howl. On the horizon they could see something moving in their direction, blotting out the sky like an enormous cloud of dust.

"How can we get everyone out of your prison, Oberon?"

Daniel cried, and a few oak leaves fluttered to the ground from the urgency of his plea.

"One is one and all alone," murmured the tree. "One perfect rose, one flew over Cloud-Cuckoo-Land. Only one can escape here and now. Choose."

Daniel squinted against the burning wind and stared at the lily. He'd come so far for her in so many ways, even though he'd only spoken to her once. Did he really love her, or just the idea of her?

It occurred to him suddenly that 'only one' might allow him to rescue the Oberon himself. Should he release the king to strike a blow against Lilith, to reconstitute his army and take back the lands he had lost? But no. It was clear that the aged tree had no fight left in him.

Heather had gone against his advice in coming here, but she had trusted his leadership, and she had family who would miss her if she never came home. Daniel gazed at the sobbing Cindy and realized there was only one choice, so he said the name aloud.

"Yesss. What will you pay me, say the bells of Old Bailey?" More and more of the remaining leaves of the tree were fluttering to the ground now. "What do you have that is worth a life? Tide life, tide death, I come without delay."

The mortals looked guiltily at one another. Cindy seemed about to say something, then bit her lip. Finally Daniel

void. The baying cloud of dust was now racing towards them, trees uprooted and flung aside from its path.

"sorry i talked too much. now can we run?" begged Skeeble, panicking.

"Wait a second." Daniel peered intently into the mass of bubbles. "She's got to be in here somewhere..."

"Got her!" cried Sondra, plunging her hand into the foam and pulling out the now-bedraggled purple flower, a few of its petals fluttering away in the wind. "Let's go."

"Which way?" Ken's voice didn't sound much more steady than Skeeble's.

Follow me, came the thought of Rakshasa. Then the cat was off like a gray streak through the forest, with the humans and Skeeble struggling to keep up. To Daniel, bringing up the rear, it sounded as if the very substance of the world was being chewed up and swallowed close behind him, the way far too many nightmares had chased him on other restless nights. This time, though, he knew that the teeth were real - perhaps even realer than he. He glanced back over his shoulder and wished he hadn't. The next moment, he was relieved to see the clearing that had brought them into this place.

"I can't be for coming Dayside till the lady has finished her ritual," called Skeeble, pausing only briefly. "I'll be all right, maybe perhaps. You three that they're scouring the realms for, though -- whatever you're for doing, DON'T FALL ASLEEP!"

She swung up into the trees and was gone as Daniel grabbed Sondra's and Cindy's hands. Ken began shouting, "There's no place like home! There's no place like home!" And whether this was successful as an incantation, or whether it was just that Daniel was still able to pass through a gate that had already been opened, they all found themselves tumbling into the apartment hallway and ruining the chalk lines just as the cuckoo clock cried one.

"Whew," said Heather, who was suddenly in their midst holding Sondra's other hand, "that was seriously strange."

"Heather!" cried Cindy, and gave her sister an enormous hug.

"So tell me again, Danny, what exactly did that whole exercise accomplish?" said Ken, collapsing in a heap regardless of smudged chalk and fanning himself. "I mean, we didn't rescue the girl we went for, we almost lost a different one, and a bunch of stuff got blown up. A very successful trip, I'd say."

"I know where she is now." Daniel wasn't sure exactly why that might be important, but it seemed like a bit more than nothing, so he grasped hold of it. "And we got a bit scared, but no one was hurt, right?"

"YIPES, HETH!" Cindy was holding her twin's hand with an expression of pure horror. Daniel rolled over to look at the rescued girl.

The first two fingers of her left hand were now missing. There was no wound - the mocha skin grew smoothly over the place where they'd been as if even the bones in the hand beneath were gone.

"Holy crap," said Heather quietly, with feeling. Cindy bit on her own finger to stifle a scream.

"I guess Faery kept a piece of us after all." Ken's prediction had been born out, and it was clear from his tone that he was most pleased.

Chapter 5

One night

On watch, I thought I saw in the fore cross-trees

Three women leaning forward, with white hair

Streaming behind, who sang above the wind

A song that charmed my senses, while I was

Frightened beyond fear, horrified past horror, calm,

(Nothing was real) for, I thought, now, when

I like, I can wake up and end the dream.

The Waste Land (deleted)

T.S. Eliot

Ava Carver struggled against surging waves of fear and helplessness. Her son was being pursued by monsters, and all her efforts to protect him seemed likely only to postpone their inevitable victory.

She'd clucked over Heather's missing fingers, but secretly had just been glad that this was the worst loss the party had experienced. Before the light came pouring through the door, she'd been sitting in the living room of the apartment trying to prepare herself for no one coming back out of the hallway ever. There didn't seem to be anything anyone could do about the fingers, so the twins finally left to go home, promising to come back before dawn - partly, Ava was sure, so they wouldn't have to explain Heather's hand to their parents.

Everyone else spent the rest of the night sitting in the apartment's living room taking Skeeble's final advice and trying to keep each other awake. For a while they discussed plans and strategies, but as the long hours inched toward morning, the conversation had taken on an increasingly desperate, hysterical tone. Ava finally resorted to sitting behind Daniel on the sofa and poking him arrhythmically in the back every few seconds, and even then, his eyes kept darting frantically from one corner of the room to the other, as if his peripheral vision kept transforming the shadows into fangs and long, grasping fingers. Occasionally she would lift him by the arm to pace back and forth. Ken and Sondra were doing a better job of holding sleep at bay, Ken playing his most dissonant music at high volume and reviewing his various notebooks, while Sondra stood in a corner and recited all her favorite speeches from memory. Closer to dawn, she went into her room and emerged with a stuffed backpack.

Once, for a few seconds, Ava herself fell asleep. She dreamed that she was winding a clock whose main spring was already broken - it would never keep time properly again, and yet if she didn't keep winding it all its geary guts would be exhaled across the floor and it would be ruined forever, and everyone would know that she had failed, failed, failed her most important job. She jerked awake to see Daniel nodding again in front of her, and gave him an exceptionally pointed jab between the ribs.

The twins reappeared an hour before dawn, shaken and quiet, and Ken gave everyone their Midsummer's Day assignments for

staking out Lilith and Doug. Apparently Heather and Cindy's brother, during the six months he had dated Lilith, had been estranged from his family, so Lilith didn't know them personally by sight. Therefore they were to be deployed outside the Netherby and Chee residences to get the first shot at seeing where the couple headed once they got moving. Sondra and Ken would be staked out at the entrances to the water park, since everyone assumed that would be the most likely location for Lilith to attempt a drowning. The twins', Ken's, and Ava's cars would be parked at central locations so everyone could rendezvous quickly once the couple was spotted. Ken paused when he got to Daniel, who was sitting on the floor, his head sinking and then jerking up abruptly while Ava rubbed his back.

"I meant to have everyone split up," he said, glancing again at his notebook. "But obviously he can't be left alone. Do you think you can keep him from nodding off, Mrs. Carver?"

Ava gave him her brightest smile. "It's been my life's work," she said simply.

"Good. I'll put you two at the corner near Fallen Empires minigolf. That's closest to all the interstate ramps, so you should be able to see them if they slip past the rest of us and head out of town. I've set up all our cell phones so we can do a conference call if anyone spots anything, AND I sacrificed a box of cream puffs to a local air elemental yesterday to make sure we all get good reception, so we should be able to keep in touch. Remember to use the code sheets I gave you, because anybody could

be listening in with magic or technology or both. Try to see without being seen, obviously. Everyone put one of Kate's inverted candies in your pocket, they might help throw off magical searchers. Any questions?" Ken looked around the room at his exhausted army and sighed. "Good. And remember, like they say in the movies, 'This plan is so crazy, it just might work!'"

Half an hour later, Ava and Daniel sat in the window of the Has-Beans Coffee Shop and drank the strongest espresso the place had to offer while they watched the cars rush by outside in an intermittent stream. After the previous night's storm, midsummer morning had dawned as clean and bright and perfect as a blanket of newly-washed linen. Daniel seemed to be doing a bit better with his monsters now that the sun was up, but Ava still watched him obsessively, worried that even the slightest pause in conversation might be followed by a snore. And then what, she wondered. A scream? What would a boy - no, a man, she reminded herself - what would a man look like who was getting ripped apart by his own dreams? He'd shown her the wound on his side, and she believed the fear in his voice when he told her that now his nightmares could kill him.

Best to keep his mind off that now, though.

"There's a motorcycle with two people on it," she said, pointing to an exit ramp. "What brand did you say this person has, anyway?"

Daniel leaned over to look, then slumped back into his chair. "That isn't them. Anyway, I don't think Ken really believed we'd see anything here. He just wanted to put us someplace with lots of hustle and bustle so I wouldn't conk out."

Ava shook her head. "Don't be silly, Danny. Any good general has a few back-up plans, and your friend Ken is quite the general. There's nothing dishonorable about being posted with the reserves - lots of battles get won by them."

" 'They also serve who only stand and wait,' eh? I suppose. Man, I can't get over how much poetry from that lit final is still jammed in my head."

Ava leaned back for the twentieth time to admire her son. She'd been more disappointed than she could say when Daniel had announced at spring break that he'd arranged to work out of town for the summer, though she could see that there wouldn't be many job opportunities if he stayed home. Her disappointment had turned to nameless, unspecified dread when she'd found out what town he'd agreed to work in. Ever since the episode in the Mother Goose Grotto when Daniel was four, she had lived with the constant uneasy certainty that somewhere, somehow, another shoe was waiting to drop. When the call came in from Ken three days ago, his calm, rational voice laying out the most outrageously unbelievable story imaginable, she'd heard that shoe beginning its inevitable descent, and had found herself packing her suitcase even before he'd requested her help. Somehow it all made perfect sense. She had failed her son when she let the

strange people steal his rock, and now the laws of motherhood required her to help him get it back. He was tall and strong now, but she'd seen that blank stare and nodding chin all her life - he was still her little boy who needed to be awakened to face the world. Just let anybody try to take one of his rocks now, she thought, touching her purse where her husband's handgun rested. This time, Momma means business.

She couldn't tell him any of those things, though. Instead, she just smiled and said, "We're right at the center of town. That doesn't sound to me like we're going to be left out."

"The center of town. Right." Daniel snorted and pointed out the window. "As far as Ken and I can figure, the exact center of Crossroads should be embedded in that concrete divider between the two lanes of I-47 when it goes underneath 86. We tried to get out there one night, but there was too much traffic, and anyway we didn't want to attract police attention." Briefly he outlined how Cloudfoot Shantih had told him he needed to locate the exact center of Crossroads. "So much for that advice, I guess."

"But don't you think that was probably a trick question?" Ava frowned as she swallowed the last few drops of her coffee. "There are lots of different kinds of crossroads."

"The idea had occurred to us," Daniel admitted. Then a sudden look of comprehension flashed across his face. "Wait, I get it. I guess you could say crossroads are everywhere,

couldn't you? And if you look at it that way, then the center is..."

"...wherever you are right this moment," Ava finished the sentence for him. She touched her finger to his forehead as she spoke, and he flinched back as if she had poked him in an eye. Just then, his cell phone rang.

While Daniel flipped the phone open with one hand, he quickly unfolded the piece of paper Ken had given him with the other and ran his finger down the list of code phrases. Ken had handed them out during an earlier planning session, Daniel at the time ribbing him mercilessly about how he had learned everything he knew about espionage from Justin and Joe Hardy.

"This is Zan," Ava could hear Heather's excited voice over the phone. "I just saw a pair of blackbirds, but I'd thought it was too chilly for them."

Ken's voice came right after hers. "We'll all look sharp. Countdown. This is Harry."

"Joan," came Sondra's voice, immediately followed by "Jayna" from Cindy.

"Alveric and Leto," Daniel chimed in. Ava could tell he felt foolish.

"Great. Anyone who doesn't see any more birds or hear chatter in fifteen minutes should go back to roost. Harry out."

"Well?" asked Ava when Daniel closed the phone.

Daniel ran his finger down the list of codes until he'd found all the elements of Heather's sentence. "It means our

targets are both together and they're heading into town. If they'd headed towards the waterpark they would have been kingfishers instead of blackbirds. Maybe we'll get some action here after all. Heather's trying to keep up with them, but she's chilly - she's too far behind."

Ava got up and went to the doorway, giddy with an unfamiliar surge of adrenaline. Daniel started to come up with her, but she whispered, "You mustn't be seen," and shooed him back to the table.

A motorcycle was coming fast up 93, driven by a young oriental man with a white-haired girl as passenger. "That's them," Ava hissed to her son, but then she saw that he was slumped across the formica, snoring faintly as his shoulders twitched. "Damn!" she cried, running to shake him as hard as she could.

He didn't seem to be harmed at all, just a bit dazed, but she had no time to wait for him to wake up the rest of the way. She leaned against the window to see which direction Chee and Lilith took. To her surprise, they zoomed right past the exit ramps onto East and West I-12, dodging in and out of the trickle of traffic that stayed on 93. *North? What was north of town?*

She opened her own phone and hit the speed dial button, running her finger down the list of codes. "This is Leto," she barked as soon as she was connected. "The blackbird is going, um," she ran her finger down the list of codes again, "in the direction of the bear. We will ..."

"Joan and I were about to eat some popcorn, actually," Ken's voice cut across hers. "Talk to you later."

"Zan? Jayna?" she called into the phone, but there was no answer. Daniel was standing woozily beside her now, looking scared. There was no need for either of them to look up Ken's sentence on the code sheet: that was one they'd all needed to memorize. Eating ice cream meant "In trouble, come right away and help me." Eating popcorn meant "In a lot more trouble, stay away so it doesn't get you too."

The girl behind the counter was looking at them both strangely by this time, so Ava threw some change on the table and headed out the door with Daniel close behind, heading for her car. "Thanks for waking me," Daniel gasped. "They were inside my head that time. I think they - found stuff out. It might be my fault about Ken and Sondra. Let's move."

As they turned down Beryl Avenue towards the lot containing Ava's car, trying not to break into an outright run and draw attention to themselves, a police car suddenly braked to a stop ten feet in front of them. Ava noted dazedly that the car read *Chief* on the side. Her old nemesis unfolded himself out of the driver's side: the tall, spindly clerk who had unfairly accused her son fourteen years ago and started this whole mess. She was dimly aware that he was wearing a police uniform now, and that just behind them another police car was also stopping and disgorging uniformed men.

This was her moment, Ava abruptly realized. Time now for redemption for all the tiny parenting failures that she'd ever had to confess to herself. For a moment she thought of the gun in her purse, thought of pulling it out and blasting away at the impossibly thin police chief in front of her. Then she imagined herself falling in a hail of bullets next to her son in the middle of the street, and discarded the image. Instead she gave the purse a good whip around her head like young King David with his sling and sent all ten pounds of it directly into Captain Mommet's chest. He fell backwards with a satisfying thump.

"Run," she whispered fiercely to Daniel, giving him a slight push between the shoulder blades. Then she turned to face the other two policemen, trying to put on an expression that meant *I am dangerous but not so dangerous you have to shoot me*, and charged.

Daniel took off for the nearby alley as fast as his legs would carry him. There was too much background noise for him to tell exactly what his mother was doing behind him, but at least he didn't hear gunshots, which was encouraging. As he reached the corner he heard heavy footsteps pounding after him, so whatever diversion she'd made had only bought him a few seconds of time. They would have to be enough.

He rounded the corner and ducked into a doorway, out of sight, he hoped, from the crowds of tourists who had watched him curiously as he ran. Then he tried desperately to will calmness

onto himself despite his gasps for breath. *Start down the path towards sleep, but turn left instead of right,* he reminded himself. He inhaled, exhaled, and was just inhaling again when the policeman rounded the corner and stood with his hands on his hips three feet away from him, looking with puzzlement in all directions. Daniel felt his feet float off the ground as invisibility overtook him, and breathed a sigh of relief that made the officer give a sharp look in his direction. *I'll have to be careful about breathing,* he thought ruefully as the policeman finally shrugged and shuffled away.

He'd never tried being transparent outside before, and the idea made him nervous. On previous occasions he'd managed to get around by finding things to hold onto and pulling himself along. But out here, if he lost his grip, might he go floating away forever into the stratosphere, unable to pull himself back into the real world without plunging to his death?

At least it seemed to be a bit easier to stay awake in this form, which was a blessing. Cautiously, holding tightly onto the knob of the doorway he was floating in, he peeked around the corner into the street again.

Where could Lilith and Chee have been going, though? Where is there water north of town? There aren't even any hotels up there.

Just then a tour bus pulled to a stop across the sidewalk from him. Painted in great purple letters across its side was the admonition to VISIT EASTFELL CAVERNS, and a picture of a

group of smiling tourists gliding through a flooded cave on a low, flat barge.

Daniel gauged the distance carefully, tucked his legs underneath himself, and pushed off from the corner of the doorway. For a moment he felt as if he was truly flying like Superman or Peter Pan, which would have been nice if he'd only had the ability to steer or stop. Just as the bus started moving again, he hooked one arm through the side mirror and held on for dear life.

As the bus pulled away from the curb, he saw his mother being shoved none too gently into a squad car by Captain Mommet and another policeman. For a moment he considered forgetting about Lilith and trying to rescue her instead, but he quickly decided against it. For one thing, he doubted there was much he could do against the armed policemen; for another, he remembered what Ken had said when Kate advised them all to stay put. If they didn't stop Lilith today, it probably wouldn't matter whether they were all locked in jail or hiding in a cave in Tibet; she would find them, and that would be the end.

When the bus pulled up to the souvenir store that covered the entrance to Eastfell caverns, Daniel was relieved to see Douglas Chee's motorcycle parked outside. At least he was on the right track, then. There was a bit of difficulty navigating the open space from the bus to the door, but fortunately there was a

chain railing that he could grab and pull himself along hand over hand. Once he was inside the souvenir store he felt more comfortable hovering on the tops of racks of pamphlets, without the ominous empty sky lurking above him to suck him away.

For a while he considered finding an out-of-the-way corner and reconstituting himself so he could use his phone and call the others, but he finally discarded that idea. For one thing, Ken had been very explicit about the popcorn code - if anyone used it, then everyone else should lie low and maintain strict phone silence until they were able to rendezvous back at the apartment. For another, Lilith and Chee were wandering around the store, Lilith thumbing through books and Chee playing with toys, and Daniel didn't want to risk either of them spotting him.

During the previous few days spent discussing the twins' proposal to save Doug Chee, everyone in the apartment had come to the conclusion that there was no possible way to warn him that Lilith was planning to kill him in a way that he would believe. It wasn't just that he trusted her completely, or that he was already on the lookout for most of their group and would likely try to capture them as soon as he saw them. It was that no one was positive how deeply Lilith had control over his mind. Cindy had stated flatly that she thought her brother Allen would have leapt directly into a fire if Lilith had told him to do so. So the only plan they'd been able to concoct was to try to follow the couple inconspicuously and wait for Lilith to attempt her drowning, then arrange a rescue with Ken's magic and the

waterpark lifeguards once her back was turned. Cindy had given everyone a brush-up course on lifesaving and CPR, just in case. It didn't seem like a great plan, but better than nothing. At least Daniel felt he had the part about following inconspicuously covered.

Just then a gray-haired woman behind a counter picked up a microphone and announced that the next tour would begin in five minutes, and everyone began lining up before a large wooden door. Daniel jumped from souvenir stand to souvenir stand until he could perch on a sourball candy display near the door and try to eavesdrop on his quarries' conversation, but he was still too far away to make out precise words. He got the impression, though, that Doug Chee was vastly curious about why they had to visit the cave on today of all days, and that Lilith found his questions amusing.

Just then a teenaged girl with a maroon vest and hat came out of the parking lot and walked to the head of the line. She reminded Daniel of Disney's Pocahontas, with classic Native American features, he supposed from one of the local tribes. Her blue eyes revealed a bit of European heritage as well.

"Welcome to Eastfell Caverns," she began, and then launched into a practiced spiel about things that visitors should not do underground. When she had finished, she pulled the large door open and led everyone down a set of concrete steps. At the

bottom was another door, beyond which lay the entrance to one of the dark places of the earth.

"... and each of these stalagmites has taken over a thousand years to form, less than a millimeter a decade, a drop at a time. You can look and take pictures if you want, but again, please remember not to touch any of the formations so future generations can still enjoy them. Now if you'll follow me down this passage, we'll begin the aquatic part of our journey."

Daniel wasn't entirely sure what would happen if someone bumped into him while he was invisible, but he didn't feel like finding out with Lilith and Doug Chee nearby. This meant he had to stay off the path, so he was sidling along one of the walls of the chamber through a forest of stalagmites, stalactites, curtains, and pillars. The first time he touched a stalagmite he inspected it carefully to make sure that he left no fingerprints, but it seemed his weightlessness made him unable to affect the real world in any way, so he was able to push himself off from formation to formation without feeling guilty.

As on his previous occasions of invisible eavesdropping, he felt lightheaded and cut off from the world. The deep shadows and heavy underground silence made him feel even more adrift, though, as if the sight-seers filing along the path were incomprehensible aliens occupying an implausible world. And yet, Daniel also recognized that his sense of remoteness was nothing

new. In one sense his entire life had been like this, the filmy haze of incipient sleep always blurring the world's hard edges and making people and things seem utterly insubstantial. Even with walls and ceilings surrounding him, he still felt as if he was slipping away.

The guide led the small group of tourists down a well-lit sloping passage, and Daniel launched himself off the stalagmite he'd been balancing on to follow. Fortunately there was a railing he could pull himself along, while he listened to the guide's tale with growing interest.

"My people say that we used to live in a different world beneath this one," she said as the group descended. "It was a small world, too crowded for everyone. Coyote thought he'd stir up some trouble, so he stole the two children of the Water Monster. After that the world started flooding, so they piled the mountains from the four directions on top of each other. Then they grew a reed from the highest mountain up to the top of the world and had the badger tunnel through, and then they all climbed up after him to the world above them. But that world started flooding too, so they had to climb up two more times, and still the water kept rising, until finally someone thought to make Coyote turn out his pockets and they saw that he'd brought along the Monster's children. So they gave the Monster back his boy child and kept the girl to become rain, and the water stopped rising. This cave is the place where the people broke through

into our world and the water stopped, and the three other worlds they climbed through lie drowned beneath us right now."

As she reached the end of her legend, she turned a corner and snapped on a light switch. The group filed out onto a dock where a flat-bottomed boat lay moored. The cave stretched out shimmering ahead, flooded with dazzling dark water that reflected the stalactites above, a wide underground lake that disappeared curving into shadows ahead.

"Caves like this can be flooded when the water level sinks to uncover the cave, then rises again." The guide's voice had fallen into a sing-song cadence when she was narrating her story, but now it was back to a straightforward scientific spiel.

"Please line up and get into the boat one at a time, and we'll be able to explore this amazing natural phenomenon."

It took a while for the tourists to clamber onto the boat and take their seats, and Daniel used the opportunity to slide along the gunwale and perch himself next to the guide at the end. Then she unfastened the boat from the railing, turned on a tiny motor, and pushed them off to arrow silently through the dark water. As the dock fell away behind them, Daniel couldn't help thinking that this lake was actually the Acheron, and that the skin would suddenly fall from the woman beside him and she would hold out a skeletal hand and demand two coins from each tourist who did not wish to be hurled into oblivion.

The guide continued to point out spectacular formations on ledges and shelves along the waterway, all artfully lit by a series of spotlights. Between these she had time to outline the history of the cave: how the Indians brought the local trappers to it in the 18th century, and how settlers then came and built homes nearby for the fresh water and prevented the Indians from returning to perform their sacred rituals.

During a pause in the narration, Daniel heard Doug Chee nervously ask Lilith in a not-particularly-soft whisper, "That other story wasn't true, was it? About there being drowned worlds and monsters underneath us?"

"Honestly," Lilith replied with annoyance in her normal voice. "All this time with me, and you still don't know the difference between what's true and what's factual? Of course it was true. Even though it came from Navaho lands and not here, it's still true."

"I know it is," said the guide with conviction.

"Really?" Lilith's tone was both amused and intrigued. "Tell us how you know."

Daniel recognized the power that came with that command. It would be hard for anyone with a story not to speak it under the power of the pale girl's voice, and the guide had no resistance, even though this was clearly not part of her regular tour. So she began in her sing-song voice, "When my grandfather was a young man, he decided that he needed to dream a new dream,

not for himself but for his people. He climbed past the barriers that the white men had put around this place, and came down beside the water and stretched himself out and fell asleep. And in his dreams he swam down to a country that he had sometimes seen in dreams before, where the people are made of dust instead of flesh, and he asked them if they could give him a new dream. Yes, said the people of dust, we have such things for sale. But my grandfather knew that the dream he needed must be given, not bought, so he dove into the water again and swam down to a deeper world."

The boat had now come into a final cavern with no exit, and the guide idled the motor and let the boat drift in the center beneath a shower of stalactites. The tourists seemed transfixed. Lilith was frowning.

"Then my grandfather came to the land that the people of dust dreamed of when they slept. The people who lived there were the ones we call gods, the ones we sometimes speak of as if they are humans, and sometimes as if they are animals, because in truth they are nothing like either one. My grandfather asked the gods if they could give him a dream for his people. We do not make the true dreams, said the gods, we only help you mortals interpret them. Go deeper still. So my grandfather dove into the water once more, and came to the land that the gods dream of when they choose to sleep."

For a while no one said anything, they all just felt the rocking of the boat. Then Douglas asked, "So what kind of people lived there?"

The guide shook her head. "There is only one thing there, and my grandfather said it was no person. He said it was a vastness, a voice, a whisper, a story. Maybe a monster. He wasn't very clear." She shrugged. "It gave my grandfather the dream he needed, and he swam back up through the worlds and sneaked out of the cave. And in later years he did great things, but that's a different tale." She shook herself then, and her tour guide voice returned. "Where was I? Yes, this is the deepest place we will go underground, the cave my ancestors called the heart of the world. And now, I want you all to experience the most absolute darkness you may ever taste."

She pulled a remote control unit from a pouch on the side of the boat and pressed a button. The floodlights and spotlights all shut off, and indeed, the quality of the darkness that descended was absolute.

The next moment Daniel had an eerie double sensation. Washing over him like a wave was an overwhelming sensation that said everything is all right, you don't hear a splash or feel the boat rocking, all your other senses are as darkened as your sight. If he had not been half standing outside of the world, he knew that this is the only impression he would have had, and he would have felt and heard nothing. But there was enough of him

left outside of the wave of suggestion to realize that in fact he had heard a splash, and had felt the boat rock beneath him as if it was suddenly lightened.

This was the moment he'd been waiting for all day, the moment that his mother and perhaps Ken and Sondra too had all sacrificed themselves for. He pushed himself back into solid form, at the same time diving off the side of the boat in the direction of the splash. Then cold darkness enveloped him and he fell through worlds.

Chapter 6

"The dragon is the spirit of change, therefore of life itself . . . taking new forms according to its surroundings, yet never seen in final shape. It is the great mystery itself. Hidden in the caverns of inaccessible mountains, or coiled in the unfathomed depth of the sea, he awaits the time when he slowly arouses himself into activity. He unfolds himself in the storm-cloud, he washes his mane in the darkness of the seething whirlpools. His claws are the fork of the lightning. . . . His voice is heard in the hurricane. . . . The dragon reveals himself only to vanish."

The Book of Tea

Okakoro-Kakuzo

Of all the times that Daniel had ever fallen asleep, this truly seemed like the longest fall. He felt as if he was tumbling through worlds inside worlds, either shrinking to enter a cell's nucleus or growing until galaxies brushed between his legs like inquisitive minnows in a stream.

The first thing Daniel realized about the new place he was in was that the quality of darkness had changed. He could still see nothing, but the impenetrable black around him was not the darkness which a sighted man sees in a cave; rather it was that which a blind man witnesses at cloudless noon. This place had

the sensation of being flooded with light, but it was a light which Daniel's eyes were incapable of interpreting.

There were sounds all around in the brilliant darkness. The immense complexity of the noises, together with the lack of echoes, gave him the impression that he was suspended among the enormous cogs of a machine of infinite dimensions. Or perhaps the complicated grindings and raspings might have been the coilings of an enormous snake, whose infinitely long body continually scraped past itself in all directions to simultaneously tie and untie every thread of every particle that made up the universe.

The sense of sight wasn't the only thing that wouldn't function here; another thing Daniel found to be on vacation was his sense of scale. He had read a story once of a dragon that lived in a pool in China. A man came to the pool because he had heard legends of the dragon's greatness, but he was disappointed to see that the creature hardly seemed bigger than a prawn, only a few inches from head to tail. He challenged the dragon to come out of its shallow home, so the dragon began to emerge. It took a very long time to reach the surface, and then it stuck out one of its claws, and the claw stretched until it had blotted out the sky and overarched the horizon, and still it kept coming until the man screamed for it to go back into its pool before all the world was blanketed. That was the feeling that the inhabitant of this place gave.

For it was inhabited. In the midst of the grinding and rasping movement there was a voice. Daniel couldn't shake the feeling that, had the voice wished to roar, its roar could have ripped apart creation like a sheet of waxed paper, but it was not roaring just then. It was whispering, with exactly the same volume that Daniel's own voice made inside his skull, asking What do you seek?

"I seek my fr..." Daniel paused. There could be no speaking untruths here, and Douglas Chee was hardly his friend. "I seek the life of Douglas Chee, who was offered up here as a sacrifice."

You have found him, whispered the voice. Daniel stretched out his hand and touched Doug Chee's leather jacket. The leader of the Wild Hunt lay curled up in a ball, apparently dead to the world.

"What...what do I need to offer for his life, sir?" Daniel asked, knowing he had nothing left to offer.

I require no sacrifices, except that you listen to a story. For I am the voice that tells stories at the heart of all things.

"Certainly!" Daniel sighed with relief. Then the story began:

The Wolf's Betrothed

Once. Not once upon a time, because time came later, but certainly only once because it couldn't have happened twice, there was a boy with very little to do. He was holding a ball in his hand, and in his mind he dreamed of throwing it up and catching it, over and over and over again. Since there was no up for him to throw it, though, if you'd been watching him you would seen him and his ball standing perfectly still. For that matter, there was no place that you could have stood to watch him. He was standing in the only place there was.

Just then a girl happened to walk by, and she fell in love with the boy at first sight. So she kissed him, and as soon as she did that, the boy was able to throw the ball as he had always dreamed he might. He threw the ball up and caught it, then threw it up again higher and caught it again, until finally it vanished into the unseeable distance.

Then the boy said to the girl, "We are perfect for one another. Will you marry me and stay by me forever?"

But the girl pulled away from him. "Alas," she said, "I am engaged to marry the Big Bad Wolf, and he is the most jealous of lovers. Nothing he hunts can ever stay uneaten."

Just then the Big Bad Wolf appeared in a whirlwind, his eyes pinpricks of fire, his breath hot and his stomach always empty. "My dear, sweet wife," he said in his silkiest voice, "who is this boy you are speaking to? I do not wish you to speak to anyone but me. Behold, I will eat up both him and his little ball in one gulp, and then you and I will never be separated."

But the girl faced down the Wolf until his red eyes flickered and turned away. "You shall not eat him," she said. "If you must eat someone, you will have to eat me instead."

"Very well," said the Wolf. He stretched his jaws open wider than galaxies full of stars, but he saw that the love that the girl had felt made her too mighty for him to swallow in one gulp. So he slinked around her and eyed her speculatively, and then he opened his jaws again and gave her the merest nip at her heel.

"Is that the worst you can do, Wolf?" the girl smiled. "I could scarcely feel that bite. Why was I ever frightened of you?"

The Wolf just grinned his low, hot grin. "It doesn't end here, my beloved. I cannot eat you in one swallow, so I will eat you one morsel at a time. From now until the end of all things I shall follow you, nipping you again and again until there is nothing left of you but a last strand of your hair to be picked from between my teeth. And then I shall eat the boy as well, for nothing that I hunt can ever stay uneaten."

Now the boy saw that what the Wolf said was true. So he said to the Wolf, "Oh Wolf, is there nothing we can give you that will make you change your mind?"

"Of course," said the Wolf, smiling an insincere smile. "You can buy anything with the right price, and who am I to stand in the way of young love? If you can bring me a billion drops of starfire, I will allow her to escape me."

Well, you can be sure that the boy laughed when he heard that, for his name was Grandfather Space, and the ball he had been throwing was the universe, which meant that he was a very rich boy indeed. So hand in hand, he and the girl (whose name, of course, was Grandmother Time) wandered through their universe together and caused it to cool down and spread out and clump up and ignite until it was filled with a billion times a billion stars. They plucked a billion drops of starfire and dropped them into a basket and went to find the Wolf, whom they eventually discovered ramming two galaxies together like a boy playing with toy trucks.

"Here are your starfire drops," said the boy, setting down the basket. "Now you must let my wife go."

"Oh, she's your wife now, is she?" sniggered the Wolf without looking up. "What say you crack open one of those drops and see what's inside it?"

So the boy cracked open a drop of starfire, and inside it he found one of the Wolf's teeth. Then he cracked open another one, and another one, and another one, and inside every one he discovered a Wolf's tooth.

"You can't give me something that's already mine, can you?" asked the Wolf. So the girl tried changing some of the starfire into heat, into light, into radiation, and the heavy elements of matter. But she found that no matter what she tried, she was never even breaking even, but that her goal got farther and farther away with every transmutation, and the Wolf's teeth grew

bigger and bigger. And the laughter of the Wolf rang in both of their ears as the girl felt another nip upon her ankle.

Douglas Chee coughed weakly in Daniel's arms, but did not awaken. The voice went on.

For a while the boy almost gave himself up to despair, for he did not think he would be able to bear the pain of watching his only true love being eaten up piece by piece. But as he wept, he saw that the girl he loved was shrinking and withering faster and faster.

"This is not fair!" he cried. "Must even the brief moment we were given together be taken?"

"It is your tears that are withering me," she said, "for when you mourn that which you have not yet lost, then you lose it twice. But there must be another way to defeat the Wolf, and we must find it or we both shall surely die.

But the boy and the girl could find no way to defeat the Wolf. Neither could their children, the Laws, nor their grandchildren Matter and Energy, nor their great-grandchild Life nor their great-great-grandchild Mind. And much time passed."

There was a long pause, during which Daniel listened to the grinding and scraping surrounding him. Finally he asked, "What happened next, sir?"

That is all of the story that I have to tell, said the voice. *You must find the rest yourself.*

"And this man, Douglas Chee..?"

Take him. For I desire, not sacrifice, but mercy.

The last word echoed in Daniel's ears until it was the roar of flickering galaxies again, and suddenly he found himself dog-paddling in dark water, holding Doug Chee's sodden collar with one hand. He maneuvered himself until he had the limp body in a fireman's hold that Cindy had demonstrated the day before, and began swimming in a random direction. The underground chamber hadn't been particularly large, and Daniel felt sure of coming to an edge eventually. The major problem was the bone-sapping cold.

Suddenly Doug Chee began coughing and choking and struggling to push away Daniel's arm. Then the cavern was abruptly awash with red and orange light coming from a brightly flaming sword that Chee was waving over his head. Daniel pushed him away, and he promptly went under. The sword plunged into the water and created huge billows of hot steam.

"Put that thing away!" yelled Daniel when Chee surfaced again. "I'm trying to rescue you!"

After a few more moments of panicked thrashing, the light went out again and impenetrable darkness descended once more. Daniel called out to the sound of the flailing figure, "Can't you transform that thing into something that floats?"

"No -- it's gotta be a weapon," Chee yelled back.

"How about one of those big Styrofoam noodles? Lots of kids whack each other with those."

There was a faint splash, and the thrashing died down a bit. "Good idea," called Chee.

Between the icy water and the utter exhaustion he'd been fighting all day, Daniel felt his energy reserves slipping away fast. "Could I hold on too?," he asked, swimming closer.

"I guess so."

Daniel's arm brushed against the tube and he hung on for dear life, his shoulder pressed against Chee's on the opposite side. "Thanks," he gasped.

"No problem," came Chee's voice beside him. "So tell me, who the hell are you?"

"My name is ..." Daniel tried to think of a good pseudonym on the spot, but he was too wiped out. "My name is Daniel Carver."

"I'm Douglas Chee."

Daniel slipped a bit and swallowed some water trying to get a better grip. "I know. My friends and I figured out Lilith would probably try to off you today, so I followed you to stage a rescue."

"Yea. She did, didn't she? That bitch. Man, when I get my hands on her..." For a while, both just focused on breathing. Then Chee asked, "So where are these friends of yours? They coming to fish us out?"

"I don't think so," Daniel admitted.

"Can we swim to a ledge, then?"

"I looked for one while you were waving that sword around. The walls were pretty sheer."

"Oh." Chee gave a sigh. "Some rescue. Well, thanks for trying." They kicked feebly for a while longer. "Hey, are you those guys I saw during the Battle of Atlantis?"

"Yep. We've been keeping an eye on you two all summer. You know, trying to stop Lilith from taking over the world and all."

For a long time Chee didn't say anything. Finally, he murmured, "I've been pretty stupid, haven't I?"

"Maybe. I'm hardly a good judge."

Just then, they heard a distant voice in the darkness.

"Hey, I'll bet that's another boat!" Chee cried happily. "They come through every half hour."

"Great," said Daniel. "Look, I'd rather not answer questions when they haul you out, so you won't see me, OK?"

"What the hell are you talking..." Chee began, but just then the lights of the chamber switched on and the prow of the tour boat emerged from a tunnel. Daniel held his breath and performed the sideways sleep maneuver to make himself disappear, pushing himself out of the water to grab onto the side of the boat as it slid by and pulling himself onto the spot beside the guide. This time the pilot was a thin-faced man in his forties, who looked astonished and appalled to see Douglas Chee dog-paddling in the water.

"Hey, could I have some help here?" Chee called out, and a dozen startled tourists reached to pull him in. "And don't forget my ..." He peered behind him at the water, his eyes flicking around the chamber, then bit his lip.

"What, exactly, were you doing in the water there?" cried the guide, clearly not sure whether to be terrified of a lawsuit or outraged at someone messing with his precious cave.

Chee shrugged off his jacket and shook himself. "Aw, I just felt like taking a nice cool swim on a hot day," he grinned.

"Young man," snapped the guide as outrage won out, "in all my years working here I have never... the police will certainly be informed about this..."

"Whatever," Chee interrupted. "Look, are you guys heading back to port or what? I could use some hot chocolate."

By the time the group returned to the gift shop, it was clear that the middle-aged tour guide was actually the manager of the caverns. He kept trying to lecture Chee about the danger and irresponsibility of his behavior, but the Philippine gang leader was having none of it. When the manager tried to physically detain him in the store while he summoned the police, Chee had had enough. He pulled his antler-headed cane out of his pocket and transformed it into a flame thrower.

"Look, I'm just gonna leave here quietly, and no one's gonna get in my way. Everyone understand that?" he asked, while

flames drizzled out of the weapon's muzzle onto the concrete floor. No one got in his way as he strode out the door.

Daniel wondered whether Lilith had ridden away on Chee's motorcycle, which certainly would have spoiled his dramatic exit when he had to come back in to thumb a ride. Fortunately, though, it appeared that she must have had other transportation arranged - probably so the police would be able to put together a nice tidy case when his body was found later - and everyone in the store could hear the bike fading off in the distance a minute later.

Daniel took advantage of the distraction to turn off his invisibility behind a rack of brochures. It was something of a strain keeping it going even in the best of times, and this was not the best of times. He stumbled outside and sat on a bench by the parking lot, wet and shivering and hoping no one would notice, to wait for the bus to return.

By the time the next bus arrived and Daniel boarded it, he had one thing to be thankful for and one thing to worry about. The good thing was that his thin clothes had mostly dried in the blazing midsummer sun. The bad thing was that, in one sense, the chill had been helpful, because it had kept him awake.

The bus jolted as it pulled away from the curb for its journey back to Crossroads, and Daniel snapped his eyes open and shook his head. Never had the dragon of sleep loomed more inescapable and menacing. Even without Skeeble's warning, he

would have realized that on today of all days, sleep was his enemy. Since the night before he'd been skipping across it like a flat stone spun across a lake, and every time he'd brushed its surface, clustered at the corners of his consciousness he'd sensed demons, waiting to pounce.

Most of the rest on the tour boat must have driven their cars to the caves, for the only other people on the bus were a pack of dark-skinned middle-schoolers sitting in the back, chattering rapidly to one another in Spanish. No help there, then. Daniel would have to fight this battle alone, using every weapon he'd ever picked up in a lifetime of losing such struggles at movies, plays, classes, weddings, and funerals. He bit the side of his hand hard enough to leave tooth marks that would last for hours. He recited all the poetry he could remember, and sang snatches of songs to himself under his breath. He pinched each of his arms again and again. One of the teenybopper girls noticed what he was doing and glanced at him with fear and distaste. Nothing he did was enough, though, and the world kept splintering more and more at its edges until finally, unable to stay awake even to save his life, Daniel slid helplessly into the teeth of the Border Realm.

It was Lilith's pet spider that waited there to take him into its tender embrace - the one they'd seen last in the crumbling rock candy castle. It seemed to have appropriated Daniel's dream-space for its own; he could see his childhood furniture and toys and castles and nightmares and all the rest of

his dream accoutrements, all covered in white mists of sticky webbing. He tried to fly, to run, to turn invisible, to hold his breath and become weightless, anything, but he seemed to be paralyzed even before the spider's glistening fangs approached him.

Summoning every ounce of his mental energy, Daniel tried one more time to use the power of partial waking that had saved him in the burning forest and the insect swarm. And at first he thought it had worked, for he found himself back in his seat on the bus. But a moment later, a forest of waving legs emerged from beneath the seat two rows ahead of him, and the spider squeezed its massive body out to tower over him, spinnerets wriggling hungrily.

Daniel managed to flick his eyes backward to check out the Hispanic teenyboppers, but they and the bus driver seemed oblivious to the salivating arachnid whose back now brushed against the bus's ceiling. Daniel's eyes seemed to be the only parts of his body he could move; the rest was locked in the cataplexy he'd long dreaded as one of the worst symptoms of his illness.

The segmented legs of the spider brushed down the sides of his face almost tenderly. Then the creature hoisted its abdomen up to begin ejecting its clammy web, and Daniel tried to close his eyes to what was about to happen to him. His eyes stayed open.

And then, from the front of the bus where there had been nothing but the driver a moment ago, a milky white angora cat strolled casually down the aisle. When it reached the spider, there was a lurching adjustment of perspective and scale, like the famous picture that looks like an old woman viewed one way and a young girl the other. And all at once the spider was only the size of a normal spider scuttling across Daniel's seat, and the cat leapt up beside him and caught the nasty thing in one paw and scooped it into his mouth. There was a horrid crunching sound, a leg fell to the floor, and the spider was gone. Then Daniel could move again, and Jay Fry was sitting in the seat beside him, grinning.

"Cats snowy white

Bad dreams put to flight"

the bluesman recited nonchalantly. Daniel collapsed against the window, murmuring, "Thank you, thank you," over and over between great gulping breaths.

"Hey, take yer time," said Jay, throwing his head back onto the seat and stretching his legs. Then Daniel had an unmistakable impression of something, maybe an aura, maybe a personality, departing from the man at his side. Every part of him looked the same, but his attitude suddenly seemed younger and less cocksure. He glanced over at Daniel and smiled again, then peered past him out the window to watch the scenery flowing by. "Nice bus," he said in a low voice. "Spent a lot of time on buses." He began singing softly,

*"You may bury my body down by the highway side
You may bury my body, ooh, down by the highway side
So my old evil spirit can catch a Greyhound bus and ride."*

"That's by Robert Johnson, that bluesman you told us about when you played in the Blue Nile, isn't it?" asked Daniel, still scarcely trusting himself to speak. Jay nodded.

"Good thing this ain't no Greyhound, though. Best stay away from dogs when the wolf is on the prowl, hey?"

Daniel's heart was finally calming down. "That's a question I've been wishing someone would explain to me," he said. "What's this Fenris Wolf that everyone keeps talking about? I mean, I know about the one in Norse mythology, but he was supposed to be chained up, not prowling around."

"Well," said Jay, "way I understand, iss like this. Ya know how ya bring hot chocolate inta a room, and by and by iss the same temperature as everything else?"

"Sure, we studied that in physics," said Daniel. "That's because of entropy -- the second law of thermodynamics. Our professor called them the 'You can't get ahead and you can't break even' laws. He said everything will eventually be the same temperature."

"Right. An' if ya go inta that same room thirty years later, an' all the chairs is busted up and the windows broken and rats runnin' round on the floor, and you yourself ain't feelin' as spry at fifty as ya did when you was twenty, ya call that entropy too?"

"I suppose so."

"See, wolf's teeth live in exchanges, jus' the way worms live in apples. Every time two things get swapped for each other, wolf always gets ta carve away his piece till there ain't nothin' left. Way off in the future, maybe all the galaxy is gonna be busted up like that room, stars goin' out like smashed lightbulbs and the green earth itself nothin' more than a song no one remembers the words to no more. Thass the wolf's work, boy. Thass why we sing the blues - ta show ol' brother wolf that we ain't afraid of him, that he can knock us down and rip out our hearts and spit our guts across the sky, but we'll keep on makin' music juss the same. He hates that, an' thass why we gotta never stop."

Daniel watched out the window as a billboard for *Fallen Empires Minigolf* flashed by. "Talking about the blues reminds me, Jay. Ken and I, we came up with some theories about you. I even did a bit of research. Mind if I ask you if our guesses are good?"

"Iss a free country las' I heard, and guesses are real cheap," answered Jay, closing his eyes. "Fire away."

"OK. Guess number one. Jay Fry isn't your real name."

Jay let his shoulders rise and fall. "Don' rightly have no name no more, truth be told. I think I sold my real name somewhere along the road, but I don' rightly know to who."

Daniel pursed his lips. "Well, I suppose that makes it hard to know if we're right on guess number two. We think you're

actually the ghost of Robert Johnson, the singer you told us about in the Blue Nile. Ken bought the CD of recordings he made, and you sound exactly like him."

Jay opened his eyes a slit and peered sideways at Daniel. "If what you say is true and I'm him, I oughta be better than that record, doncha think? I woulda had an awful long time ta practice. "

"Man." Daniel shook his head. "Ken said you must have done some pretty awful stuff in life, if your punishment was to play through all eternity in bars full of rich white folks who wouldn't recognize the blues if it shot 'em in the foot and stole their women."

Jay closed his eyes again and chuckled softly. "I done some bad stuff in my time, thass fer sure. Ya could be right about that there punishment."

"My sympathies." Daniel wanted to pat him on the shoulder, but suddenly felt nervous about sitting next to a ghost, even one that had saved his life. "One more guess, then. It's the only thing that makes sense. When Robert Johnson went to offer his soul for music at the crossroads, it wasn't the devil that met him and tuned his guitar, was it?"

"Well, I'll tell ya, I surely have met the devil a few times, and he weren't no musician, thass fer sure." said Jay, tilting his head. "Busted strings and sour notes 'bout all you can 'spect ta get from that one."

"So like I said, I did some research. Ken and I remembered how you looked that night in the Blue Nile after Mr. Santiago died, and it reminded us of how in the Vodun religion, the loas, the spirits, take possession of the bodies of their worshippers. At that crossroads in 1932, you took on the loa of the god Legba, didn't you? The bargain was that he'd give you music, and you'd give him a body and a soul to occupy when he needed them."

At that Jay opened his bright eyes again and turned to face Daniel, his smile gentle, like a father's. "Thass some mighty big guessin' you an' yer friend are doin' there. What does that there library know 'bout Legba? White folks thought he was jus' another name for the devil back where I come from."

"Well," Daniel ventured, wishing he had his notes. "He's the Yoruba god of crossroads and thresholds. Whenever anyone wants to invite any god to a ceremony, they have to sacrifice some candy or rum to him first, because he's the opener of ways, just like Hecate or that god Wepwawet that Lilith was trying to summon in the Blue Nile. Sometimes he's young, sometimes he's old and limping. He's a trickster, but he's still basically one of the good guys."

"No he ain't," Jay shot back quickly. "Lemme tell ya a story. One time ol' Legba wore a hat that was red on one half and black on the other, and he walked down the middle of a village jus' ta see what'd happen. Well, the left half of the town said 'Hey, you see that that red-hatted dude that came through 'round lunchtime?' And the other half said, 'What red-

hatted dude? He had a black hat on.' And by suppertime most of the men in that town had swelled-up eyes and busted lips from fightin' over it. He ain't good and he ain't evil. His job is just kinda helpin' folks be more of whatever they are." He sighed. "Which can be evil pretty often, sure enough."

"Well, so why's he - you - why've you been helping me then?"

"Ain't that obvious?" Jay grinned. "You'se standin' in the crossroads, right enough. Tryin' ta reinvent the medicine wheel, manhandlin' the mandela. Whatchu gonna ask for, watchu gonna give up? There's more than just that Hecate wannabe thass innerested in what you decide."

Just then the bus pulled up to its stop on Main Street in Crossroads. Jay held up his finger in front of Daniel's face. "Now, I can't do much outside of the in-between worlds like the one you was just dreamin' in, so don't expect no more rescues any time soon. Ya gotta be careful, y'hear?"

Then Daniel found himself waking up from a deep, restful sleep. The seat beside him was empty, and the teenyboppers at the back were starting to move down the aisle. He stood up behind them and made his way down to the street.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, and the midsummer's sun was stroking all the world with its burning thumb. Daniel's first impulse was to head toward the police station, turn himself invisible again, and try to find out what had happened to his friends. But Ken had been very emphatic

about what to do if anyone used the popcorn code: try to complete the mission first if you can, then head back to the apartment and regroup with anyone else who'd managed to escape before planning any rescues. He decided he'd just peek in briefly, then head downtown to do some reconnoitering. Perhaps he'd ask Mrs. Castellano or Mrs. Shantih for help after all.

At least the alley was cool in its perpetual shadows. Daniel climbed the iron steps wearily and turned the knob of apartment A.

Relaxing in Ken's love seat was a smiling Captain Mommet. There seemed to be another half-dozen shadowy shapes in uniform nearby. Daniel pulled back sharply, wondering if he was fast enough to leap the railing and bolt down the stairs, when two more smiling policemen burst out of apartment B. One pulled his arms behind his back and the other snapped on handcuffs, and Daniel was a prisoner.

Chapter 7

All the world was filled with voices of all kinds that cheered me, so I charged. I had the cup of water in one hand and in the other was the bow that turned into a spear as the bay and I swooped down, and the spear's head was sharp lightning.

Black Elk Speaks

"How kind of you to drop by on us this afternoon. How thoughtful! How fortuituituitous!" beamed Captain Momett as he frogmarched Daniel back down the steps. His voice was high and flutey and entirely too eager. "My Lady thought that there was one more out of your little vipers' nest left to pick up, especially once she found out that *someone* had interfered with her intentions at the speleoleological site."

"You mean the life I saved at the cave?" snarled Daniel, desperate enough to grow reckless. Now that he had an opportunity to examine him closely, he'd grown convinced that the creature Lilith called the Momett was not human, and he had doubts about some of the other police as well. "In the town I grew up in, the police were the lifesavers - the heroes. Guess you didn't care about that when you sold out, hunh?"

"My dear lad, you have absolutesolutely no idea what you've gotten yourself into. You can't stop this." The thing gave a squeaking high-pitched titter. "She told me herself that that particular sacrifice was useful but not critical. I'm sure that,

if she looks around a bit, she'll discover a way to substitute quantity for quality. Five for one should be a good trade, don't you think?"

Five? thought Daniel. *One of us must still be loose, then. I wonder who.* Aloud he said, "She doesn't know the first thing about sacrifice, if she thinks it's something you can force other people to do and not something you do yourself."

"Sacrifice is what all other people will have to do for the Lady soon if they want to keep their precious toys!" sneered the creature. "Now get in!" They'd reached his squad car, and he poked Daniel in the back to force him into the caged-in rear. Another officer went around to the driver's side, and the Mommet opened the passenger door in front. "And don't try any of your tricks! Lilith warned me about them, and I intend to keep you under uninterinterrupted scrutiny."

It was true, Daniel discovered despairingly. As the car started he tried to force himself sideways into invisibility, but it was impossible with the Captain's beady eyes staring at him from the front seat. There was no wriggling out of the handcuffs either.

"This isn't the way to the police station," he said a minute later.

"Correct," smiled the Mommet. "My Lady has a send-off party planned for you in another part of town."

It was with a sick feeling of inevitability that Daniel recognized where they were once Captain Mommet dragged him out of

the car. A one-block section of the street had been cordoned off from all traffic except for a fleet of parked police cars. In the middle of a circle of police stood Ken, Sondra, Heather, and Ava, all their handcuffs linked to a chain fastened to a bicycle rack. A crowd of other odd-looking people stood nearby, facing the Netherby family: Lilith resplendent in the center, flanked on one side by her sister Kimberly with her raven on her shoulder and on the other by Jack, her balding father, and his second wife, the dazzlingly blonde Chrissy. Above their heads circled the continually pursuing wolf and fleeing damsel of Nightmare's Castle.

Captain Mommet briefly unfastened Daniel's handcuffs and reattached them to the chain where the other prisoners were attached, then went to talk to Lilith, beginning his report with a deep formal bow. She glanced in Daniel's direction and smiled hungrily.

"So much for the charge of the light brigade, eh Danny?" whispered Ken out of the side of his mouth. "How's that go? 'Into the mouth of death...'?"

" 'Into the jaws of death, into the mouth of hell," Daniel replied automatically, staring at the forbidding entrance of the haunted house, which for some reason frightened him more than all of their captors. The thought flickered across his mind that he'd never actually read the Charge of the Light Brigade, but he brushed it aside to worry about more important things.

"Hey, who are those guys?" asked Sondra. Kim Netherby's raven was in the process of introducing an odd-looking trio to her sister. Two of them were teenagers: a tattooed, slightly overweight boy with uncut hair, carrying an unplugged electric guitar slung over his shoulders, and a slender girl with piercings and dark makeup. The third was an elderly dark-skinned man wearing a starched white shirt, holding under his arm a cardboard box.

"These are the only ones?" Lilith sounded upset. "I thought you were going to have a whole coven by now, sis!"

"It's been hard transferring the contracts with the Lady of Lures gone," croaked the raven. "As far as I can tell, though, these were the only ones who finished their homework. Witches, state your powers."

The guitarist kept it simple -- from his voice, it sounded as if simple was what he did best. "Man, I got guitar licks that can kill."

The girl with black makeup pulled something out of her pocket that glittered in the bright sun. "I am the mistress of razors," she intoned in a low voice, cradling the object. "All things sharp and deadly owe allegiance to me."

"Myself, I only fold paper," said the elderly man in a flower-like accent. "Nothing dangerous like these two."

"Bow!" commanded the raven, and all three witches bowed low to Lilith.

"Well, you'll have to do, I suppose. Like my sister must have told you, if you stick by me, you can have your pick of empire." She shrugged, then brightened as she turned to her prisoners again. "Now let's get this party started!" She raised her hands above her head, and the crowd instantly fell silent.

"Citizens of Crossroads!" she called out, "the first day of a new era is finally upon us! In the ceremony I shall now perform, as well as the one I shall perform shortly Twilightside, I shall permanently..."

She didn't finish her sentence. Out of the crowd like a rabid squirrel darted Mrs. Vanderski, raising a glittering object high above her head. It happened so fast that none of the surrounding policemen and witches had time to react. Only Lilith kept her head; as the small, shining object began to descend towards her throat, she grabbed her stepmother and dragged the blonde in front of her as a shield. The weapon sank into the side of the girl's head, and she collapsed like a punctured balloon. A moment later Mrs. Vanderski was down as well, something white wrapped around her throat.

"I saw him throw that," whispered Ken. "The origami witch. Nothing dangerous my size twelve foot."

Jack Netherby was kneeling on the ground now next to his wife. There wasn't any blood, but she seemed to be leaking some liquid that reminded Daniel of the inverted sugar they had used for making fudge. Her features gradually flattened as she

deflated. The red-faced man was weeping softly now, calling out "Chrissy" and holding the thing's limp hand.

"Oh, shut up," said Lilith, looking down at the balding head of her erstwhile father crossly. "I know you went to see my mother for help against me, so you were due to get your eidolon revoked anyway. And besides, it's not like you didn't get good service from the thing. They don't last forever, you know."

"What's an eidolon?" whispered Sondra.

"It's Greek for the image of an ideal," Ken whispered back. The others looked at him in surprise. "Hey," he said defensively, "the word showed up in a computer game, so I looked it up. I guess now we know how Lilith bought her Dad's cooperation all those years."

Lilith knelt down, picked up Mrs. Vanderski's wrinkly brown hand, and sniffed it. "This wasn't her idea," she said menacingly, straightening up. "She smells like my mother's stinking cacao. WHAT'S THE MATTER, KATE?" she yelled at the crowd. "TOO AFRAID TO FACE ME YOURSELF, SO YOU ENSORCELLED THIS EMPTY SHELL TO USE AS YOUR TOOL? NO MORE HIDING, MOTHER! COME OUT, COME OUT, WHEREVER YOU ARE!"

Daniel noticed the elderly male witch fold something and fling it into the air. It hovered above the crowd, and when he got a closer look at it, he saw it was a paper crane. Then it descended on a large black man standing in front of a movie theater on the opposite side of the street.

"You'll find that's the one, your majesty," said the old man deferentially. Two policemen grabbed the bystander and began dragging him across the street, and halfway across his disguise flickered and he reverted to being Kate Castellano, who greeted her daughter with a string of obscenities.

Lilith reached to her mother's belt and snapped the string of the wooden spoon that hung there. Then she blew on it, and it crumbled into dust. "Not a bad attempt, mother dear," she chuckled.

"Bring me my real daughter back, you fey bitch," Kate hissed.

"That would hardly be practical, would it, mother? So you've found your sense of purpose again. And you really believed your wind-up assassin would be able to hurt me? How droll."

Kate was drawing deep, shuddering breaths. "Back when I was only planning on revenging myself against this one," she gestured dismissively at her kneeling husband, "I began preparing this instrument. It seemed better not to come up with a whole new plan. But ... she's dead?"

Lilith nudged the wrinkled skin of Mrs. Vanderski with a delicate shoe. "Gone to infinity."

"Oohh, what have I done?" Kate swayed, then sank to her knees near Jack.

"The question is, what should be done with you?" Lilith tilted her head to consider. "Have you completely forgotten that

you get back three times whatever you send out? Out of the strong comes something sweet - how about some bees under your bonnet?" She laid her hand on her mother's forehead, and Kate suddenly shrieked, clasped her head, and fell to the ground. Without another glance at her, Lilith stepped forward and raised her hand to address the crowd again. "Citizens of Crossroads!"

And again she was interrupted, this time by a vast thundering roar. Zooming around the police cordons charged a column of motorcyclists waving weapons, led by Douglas Chee. The Wild Hunt had arrived.

The crowd scattered away down alleyways and into buildings, while the police ducked behind cars and drew their guns. With their captors' attention elsewhere, Daniel's first impulse was to run away as well, but then he saw that the bicycle rack they were chained to was attached to a bolt on the street. "Get down!" he yelled to his friends, and they all fell as flat as they could; Daniel tried to cover his mother with his body.

He looked up in time to see the male teenaged witch raise his arm over his guitar for a power chord. Whatever noise he made, though, was drowned by the Harleys' roar. One rider, the blond Leo who had almost been electrocuted at the Blue Nile, brought a hatchet down to neatly decapitate the guitar's neck with a jangle of strings. The girl with the dark makeup seemed to draw something sharp and glittering out of the air and hurl it at another biker with a long ponytail. It punctured his tire, but he leapt from his seat and came after her swinging something

that seemed halfway between a bicycle chain and a flail, and she turned and fled.

There was a popcorn-like rattling that Daniel realized with terror was the police firing their pistols at the bikers. An aspect of the ancient companions of Herne and Cernunnos seemed to have come over the gang, though, and they were unstoppable. Sometimes now they were riding motorcycles and sometimes plunging stallions, fire shooting from their exhaust pipes and sparks from their hooves raining around Daniel and his friends where they cowered. One by one, the police were cut down or fled, pursued by the avenging Hunt.

Douglas Chee parked his bike in the middle of the road and pointed his antler-handled cane at Lilith. Antlers were painted on the sides of his helmet, and he seemed taller now, halfway to an embodiment of the god Cernunnos. "You tried to kill me, bitch!" he cried. "Get ready for payback time!"

Lilith wrinkled her nose in apparent annoyance, said something to Kimberly, then strode swiftly into the depths of Nightmare's Castle. Chee dismounted and ran a step after her, but suddenly Captain Mommet rose up before him, pointing his gun at the biker's chest. Before the inhuman policeman could pull the trigger, though, Chee's cane shifted into a machete. With a flick of his wrist, he hacked the Mommet's torso in half, then strode past the two pieces of the police chief as they fell to the street.

Daniel tried to scream after him, but no screams could be heard amidst the roar of the motorcycles. For behind Chee's back, the upper half of the fallen captain was still moving, its hand lifting its gun. A shot rang out, and Doug Chee collapsed with blood gushing from a bullet hole near the base of his spine.

He still held his machete, though. With his elbows he pulled himself to where the policeman's body still writhed, then raised his machete and brought it down again and again. Splinters of wood flew through the air. That, apparently, was all that the Mommet was made of; it was clear now that he was a golem, an animated scarecrow, a puppet. When there was nothing left of him but scattered kindling, Doug Chee swayed, then pitched forward onto his face.

Daniel felt his arm grabbed from behind. He turned, not sure who would be more frightening - a policeman, a gang member, or a witch -- but it was Heather, free of her handcuffs somehow.

"They slipped right off," she yelled in his ear over the motorcycles' roar, waving her maimed hand. "I balled up my fist when they cuffed me so they wouldn't notice the missing digits, and now my hand's skinnier than my wrist. Hold still and this won't hurt." She tucked up her remaining fingers and waved her hand an inch away from the chain connecting his handcuffs, and the hardened steel shattered. "Turns out my missing fingers are pretty strong, twilight-side," she smiled grimly. She turned to free Sondra and Ava. Ken had already had his chain cut, and was

searching through the shattered remnants of the Mommet for his confiscated remote.

With their leader fallen, the remaining bikers no longer seemed like spirits of righteous vengeance, but once again just a gang of bored, violent young men. The ones who hadn't already taken off in pursuit of the fleeing police glanced at one another with the kind of guilty 'I meant to do that' looks of a cat who gets spotted messing up a leap onto a table. Slowly they formed their bikes into a line again and drove away. The remaining police weren't much better without their leader, and soon the street was almost empty, with Kim Netherby and the man who folded paper the only ones left facing the freed prisoners. Jack Netherby was still kneeling beside his fallen idolon.

Daniel stepped uncertainly toward Kim and the oriental man. "Look," he said, "I don't know what kind of hold she's got over you two, but you can see from your dad there how she keeps her promises."

"Father was weak," croaked the raven on Kim's shoulder. "We are strong enough to be her lieutenants, and more than strong enough to kill you now." And Daniel saw something that made his stomach lurch, for the raven's tongue was not the raspy, pointed tongue of a bird, but a flat, pink, human tongue that pushed awkwardly out of the sides of the bird's beak as it spoke.

"Step aside," called out Ken. "There are six of us and two of you."

"Ahh, you're the other wizard that the Gingerbread Lady recruited on her own, aren't you? We've been investigating you," said the elderly man, walking forward until he was standing in the middle of the street. "What can you use against me now, probability-shaper? No light poles in range to crash down on me, no buildings that would reach me with their bricks if they collapsed. Since I've got perfect health bought and paid for from the fair folk, I doubt you can make me keel over with an embolism. So I believe you are mistaken when you say you've got us outnumbered."

He dug a hand into his box and pulled out a sheaf of paper. As he held the stack of pages on his left hand, he began flicking them outwards with the fingers of his right, and as he touched each page it flew off the stack and snapped itself into a different winged configuration, airplane or gliding hoop or bird or toothed dragon. Ken was frantically pushing buttons on his remote when the first one reached him, and he yelled ow! as it swooped past and left behind a nasty red papercut.

"You really think you can stop us with office supplies?" yelled Sondra. But then a swarm of the little flying slicers closed in on the rest of them as well, and soon they were all swatting and ducking and bleeding. Worst were the ones that headed towards your eyes, and while you covered them a dozen more would zoom in and cut elsewhere. Their magic was strong enough that swatting seemed to do little good, and their edges were sharp enough to cut through the fabric of Daniel's jeans.

He was peripherally aware that Kim Netherby's raven was taking off from her shoulder and flying toward the roofs of the nearby buildings, cawing something that did not sound human, but was recognizably not Raven either. From the trees and parks around the city, clutters of starlings and murders of crows began gathering, then swooping in through the gaps between the paper attackers to peck and clutch.

Chapter 8

Beloved, gaze in thine own heart.

Gaze no more in the bitter glass

The demons, with their subtle guile.

Lift up before us when they pass.

"The Two Trees"

W.B. Yeats

"Ow," said Daniel. "Owww!" Heather was using words far less printable; she was able to take out occasional real and paper birds by jabbing at them with her missing fingers, but there were too many. Sondra had grabbed a baseball bat that had been dropped by one of the Wild Hunt and was doing slightly better. Daniel's mother just curled herself into a ball for protection.

Then came the sound of more flapping from above, and Daniel lifted his face, already bleeding heavily from pecks and slices, to find out what fresh horror was descending.

It was not a horror. It was rank upon rank of the pigeons that Daniel had been feeding since his first day at the fudge shop, aware enough in Crossroads' magically steeped aura to recognize that their feeder was in trouble. A moment later the air grew thick with battling winged shapes.

The worst of the assault was still focused on Ken, who had dropped to his knees and let his remote fall to his side.

"You call yourself a wizard, but you don't understand the first thing about magic," sighed the origami man in the midst of a swirling tornado of his paper creatures. "Your insistence on keeping the universe rational is blocking you off from nine tenths of your power. How are you going to conquer the forces of nature when you can't even conquer your own assumptions? Let us end this." While he spoke he was emptying out another ream of paper from his box, and this time the pages snapped themselves into dogs and monkeys and tigers and snakes as they touched the ground, all scuttling and slithering and bounding towards his exhausted opponent.

Ken dropped his remote completely. And then, Daniel thought he saw the expression on his roommate that he'd seen before during the fall term when Ken solved an extra credit calculus problem that had stumped him for three days. He pushed himself to his feet, lifted his remote and pointed it steadily at the origami master, and said in a loud, clear voice, "Die." And suddenly, he was holding not a device of plastic and circuits, but a twisted wooden wand, from which a bolt of lightning blasted. The old wizard fell to the ground blackened and smoking, and an instant later, his lethal folded bits of paper became nothing but street trash.

With a screech of rage, Kim's raven launched itself off an awning and zoomed down directly at Ken's face. Ken turned to shout another word at it, and as he did so, and it exploded into a ball of feathers. As he turned, though, Daniel caught a

glimpse of his face that sent icicles down his spine, for it resembled a face carved out of flint. Black feathers floated out of the sky where the raven lay, but no blood - instead of fluid, it seemed to lie in a pool of yellowish stuffing. It opened its revolting tongued mouth in an unending gasp and squeaked "Why is a revealing like a rotting dusk?" and went limp. The flat wet tongue seemed to dribble out of the side of the thing's mouth like a captive slug trying to escape.

Free of the pecking and slicing, everyone turned now to their remaining foe. But it was clear that Kim Netherby was no longer a threat to anyone. She opened her mouth wide for an enraged shriek, but no sound emerged. The space behind her teeth was as vacant as a cave. A look of horror came over her face, and she took a step back toward the dark shadows of the haunted house. Then she seemed to change her mind, and instead she turned and fled down the street, over the police cordon and away.

"I'll bet Lilith is one of those types who execute minions when they report that they've failed," said Heather, shaking her head. "She had the look of a minion who didn't feel like reporting. Bad management style."

Just then a figure came hurrying out of the street where the bikers had driven off. It was Cindy, wearing a plaid backpack.

"Cin!" squealed Heather, bounding over to meet her.

"Are you all OK? Thank goodness," sighed Cindy. "I've been trying to keep an eye on you guys, but I couldn't figure out

any way to stage a rescue until I saw Doug and his pals driving around looking for Lil. Luckily I could tell them where she was. Here, I picked up that stuff you had in our trunk, Sondra."

"Come on," yelled Sondra, grabbing the backpack from Cindy and slipping into the straps, "they're getting away!"

Cindy shook her head. "No can do. There's sure to be a gate there, right? And now we know for sure that Faery wants to keep one of us forever. We've lost enough already. Heth and I are out this trip, aren't we?"

Heather glanced down at her hand and nodded. "Right, sis. Besides, somebody should tend the wounded. That's your department, pre-pre-med girl. But first you ought to call an ambulance." While Cindy was making the call on her cell phone, Heather added, "we know some of the doctors at the hospital in Archer's Bluff, and they aren't in cahoots with the Crossroads police. They should be all right."

While Sondra reluctantly refrained from charging into the haunted house for long enough to dig a first aid kit out of her backpack, Daniel went to help his mother. Her fetal position strategy seemed to have worked, and she wasn't as badly cut up as the rest of them. She suggested that they search the Mommet's body for his keys, and seemed to take a certain vindictive pleasure in kicking around the flinders that were all that remained of him until they were located. Then Daniel went around unlocking the handcuff bracelets that everyone was still wearing,

while Ava searched the Police Chief's car and returned carrying her purse and brandishing her snub-nosed pistol.

"I'm not going with you either," she said before anyone could ask. "I made a promise long ago that I wouldn't ever go back in there, and it's a promise I intend to stick to. Besides," she gestured at Cindy and Heather, who were now carefully examining Douglas Chee's bullet wound, "somebody needs to give those two some cover in case any more bad guys show up." She gave a weak smile, the effect marred by a trickle of blood running down her cheek.

"That's ok, Mom." Daniel gave her a fleeting hug, hugely relieved that everyone he cared about was still in one piece. "You've done plenty."

"We've got to get the bullet out," Cindy was saying. "Normally I'd say wait until he was in a hospital, but look at him."

Indeed, Doug Chee was rolling on the ground and moaning as if his insides were stuffed with fiery worms.

"I think the bullet was poisoned or something," Cindy went on. "Does anyone have a knife? I hope I can do this."

"Wait. Let me try something, sis." Heather laid her maimed hand across the wound. After a few seconds of intense concentration, she held up the bloody bullet clutched between her remaining fingers.

"I'm finding all sorts of uses for these things," she said with a weak smile. "Though I don't suppose Mom and Dad will think it was a good trade."

Cindy stared at the bloody piece of metal. "The bullet is green and smoking. Ridiculous." She began attaching a bandage. "I'd always heard Captain Mommet had a tendency to go to extremes, but really. As if piercing someone's internal organs wasn't enough."

"What about over here?" called Daniel. "Cindy, is there anything you can do about Kate?"

"She's next. And then our paper cuts. Look at me, I'm doing triage!"

Whether there were actually bees in her head, or whether she just believed there were, Kate Castellano was jerking back and forth as if a tribe of migraines were playing lacrosse inside her skull with her brain as the ball. Small whimpers emerged from between her clenched lips.

"Serves her right for sending the Dersk to be killed," said Heather angrily.

"No one deserves whatever she's got. But I certainly can't treat it." Cindy joined Daniel in holding her, then looked around desperately. "HEY KEN! Could you get your wizardliness in gear and help us out over here?"

Ken was still standing motionless staring at the twisted wand in his hand. Slowly he turned, a terrible look in his eyes, and paced over.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked gravely.

Daniel gestured at the chocolatier. "Can you help her?"

"I'll try." Ken knelt and passed his wand across her forehead. "Sleep" he said, and her wildly darting eyes calmed and shut. Then, louder, he turned to the rest of the group and cried "Cure," and everyone suddenly felt their wounds begin to knit themselves up.

"And yet the words are a crutch too," Daniel heard him muttering in a voice like ice as he stood. "Soon I won't even need them, and then what?"

Just then Doug Chee began coughing, and his eyes fluttered open. "Where's the bitch?" he groaned. A moment later, he added in dismay, "I can't get up."

"You shouldn't try to move at all," scolded Cindy as she hurried back.

Ken, standing behind her, nodded. "I'd listen to her if you don't want to be crippled for life," he said. "If you really are the summer king, I think that would be bad not only for you, but for the whole town."

Sondra, meanwhile, had been walking back and forth in the entrance of Nightmare's Castle, peering inside and clutching her baseball bat. "Look," she called, "Cindy and Heather and Ava should be able to tend these two. If we wait too long, she wins and we die. Ken, Dan, it's just us again, right? So let's go already."

Chee started and stared at Daniel. "You're Daniel Carver, aren't you? The one who rescued me at the cave? I never got a chance to see you then."

"You saved him?" asked Ken, and Daniel imagined everyone looking at him now with a bit more respect.

"Yep. But you've got to listen to your nurses here and rest, or the rescue will have been wasted."

Doug Chee tried to push himself up, then groaned and collapsed again. "You're going in after her, though." He groped on the asphalt beside him until he had found his horn-tipped cane. "You take this. You know what it does."

"That may be a poor idea," said Ken with a touch of alarm. "There's no telling how much baggage that thing carries." But Daniel was already grasping it. It seemed to shimmer with power as he held it, as if even the air was being sliced by its potential keenness.

"You're the one who says we should use whatever weapons we can find," he said accusingly to Ken. "And it seems to me I have a right to this."

"Better than me, probably," said Chee with a sigh. "Just use it to get some payback, all right? Not just for what she tried to do to me. For all the bad stuff, everything I..." His voice broke up with coughing again.

"Now are we ready?" cried Sondra.

"Not yet," said Ken. He took a deep breath, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny box, big enough for a

single piece of chocolate. "Dan, you just got yourself a weapon, but in the spirit of balance, I'm afraid we've got to give one up. It's time for me to renounce my powers."

"WHAT?" cried Daniel. "I mean, yes, I absolutely want you to eat that candy and get your soul back. But I thought we'd agreed that you were going to do it *after* we defeated Lilith. One more day won't make that big of a difference, will it?"

"I just killed a man!" Ken's face was as tight and unreadable as ever, but in his voice fear battled with hunger. "He's right over there, dead, and I killed him. With a lightning bolt, no less. I don't even know his name." He stepped back, looking from one face to another. "Remember how I was able to bring down half the Sugar Plum Fairy's castle Twilightside? And back then I was barely an adept. I just had a breakthrough and now I'm ten times more powerful than I was then, and I'd be twenty times more powerful Twilightside than I am here."

"So ... what's wrong with that?" Daniel asked, confused. "Didn't you always say there's nothing wrong with seeking power when you're in a battle? Against a would-be goddess, no less."

"You don't understand, do you?" said Ken miserably. "If I get any more power than I have right now, I ... I think I'd end up fighting you once we got there. I wouldn't be able to give it up. It sings, all the time it sings in my blood. Twilightside I wouldn't be able to hear anything else."

"Eat it, then," said Sondra gently. "We want you for your mind, not your magic."

Ken opened the box and stared for a long time at the heart-shaped dark chocolate. He seemed to wince as if hearing something - perhaps the echo from the thunder that had killed the origami master. Then, with one gesture, he scooped it up and bit it in half. As he finished the second half, he snapped his wand over his knee. Instantly it reverted to a broken remote control.

"That ought to cover it, right?" he asked, licking his fingers.

"You should say something," said Sondra. "Repeat after me: This rough magic..."

"This rough magic..."

"I hereby abjure."

Ken's rubbed his hand across his eyes as he finished the line, but Daniel and Sondra pretended not to notice. "I hereby abjure." He stared at a passing cloud and whispered. "Goodbye, Statticus.

From the middle distance came the sound of sirens.

"Now we can go," said Ken. "I'd rather not answer questions." He stuffed the broken remote into his pocket and strode toward Nightmare's Castle.

Just inside the entrance they passed Jack Netherby huddled up in a corner. Of the thing that had formerly been his second wife, there was nothing left now but a damp, multi-colored stain on the sidewalk.

"Wait a second," said Daniel, and veered off to speak to the old man.

"Now what?" Sondra muttered, swinging her bat impatiently.

"Mr. Netherby," said Daniel, kneeling down beside the old man. "We're going to risk our lives now to rescue your real daughter. Is there anything helpful you can tell us about the fake one?"

Jack Netherby looked up with haggard eyes. "Lil always gave me such good business advice," he said brokenly. "I was so proud I'd raised a genius daughter to surpass her old man. I didn't want to know, I shut my eyes, and then Chrissy..."

"Seriously, Dan, time to move!" shouted Ken. Squadrons of vehicles with flashing lights were pulling up on the other side of the traffic barricades. It was hard to tell whether they included police cars, and if so, their jurisdiction.

Daniel glanced around one last time, something tugging at his memory about the battle in the street that he knew could be important. Then he saw it.

Touching the damp stain that had once been Chrissy's head was something that looked like a flat, triangular piece of slate. Daniel flipped it over, and the other side flashed silver. It was a piece from a broken mirror, the same piece he'd seen a week earlier in Kate's office. It had to be the weapon that Mrs. Vanderski had used to try to assassinate Lilith, a shard left over from the smashed psyche he'd seen in Cloudfoot Shantih's store.

Daniel stuffed the fragment into his pocket and ran to join his friends. They held hands as they stepped together into the

darkness, Sondra swinging her bat on the right, Ken in the center with a flashlight from Sondra's pack, and Daniel holding Doug Chee's walking stick on the left. The darkness was more than the absence of light, it was the absence of warmth, of bravery, of sanity, of hope; still, side by side, they entered it together.

When Daniel stepped through the gates of Nightmare's Castle, for a moment he was carried back to being four years old again, one part excitement at the beautiful swan boats and the lights on the sparkly water, one part uncertainty, one part downright terror. At some point in the intervening years the waterway that carried the swans had been tiled over. Daniel wondered whether the old dry causeway still ran beneath the floor, now the run of rats or stranger creatures, or whether perhaps it might still be filled with ancient dark water like the slimy veins of a sleeping giant.

"I was here once last summer," said Sondra out of the darkness. "They had teenagers dressed up like werewolves and things to jump out at you. Puffs of air, sudden noises, kid stuff like that."

"Didn't the sign out front say this place was supposed to be closed today?" asked Ken.

"I think so."

"Then if something jumps out at us, Sonny, I'd suggest you bash it first and find out if it's a teenager afterwards. Better a bashed teen than me losing my own personal throat."

Suddenly Daniel remembered what Doug Chee had done in the darkness of Eastfell Cavern. He gripped the stag-horn handle and concentrated on holding a flaming sword, and suddenly one blazed into being just as he had pictured it.

"Wow," said Ken, "nice. I just hope that thing doesn't come back to bite you the way it bit Doug."

He hesitated. "Did you really rescue Doug out of the Eastfell Caverns?"

"Yeah," said Daniel, and sketched in a few of the details.

"Not bad." And with this much praise, Daniel had to be content.

With the combined light of Ken's flashlight and the sword, they could catch glimpses of the displays in the alcoves that lined the walls. Daniel thought he recognized some of the figures from the old fairy tale ride in different clothing: Snow White transformed into a vampiress about to rise from her coffin, her dwarves now pygmy cannibals with filed teeth. The witches and wolves had barely received face lifts. One mummy looked suspiciously like an old Prince Charming in bandages. Just as he had when he was four, he was caught in an uneasy tension between the tawdry and the terrifying - and in the flickering light, there was definitely something terrifying about the monsters.

As they went deeper down the tunnel, the nature of the displays began changing. No longer did they depict solely the creatures of imagination. Here was a suicide bomber standing on a table at a wedding, on the brink of transforming joy to misery

with one twitch of his finger. Here were families looking up for water to come from showerheads, and instead breathing the sickly scent of Zyklon B. Here were soldiers shooting unarmed Indian women and children, just across from another alcove where Indians scalped the families of settlers. Here was Giles Corey of Salem Village, pressed beneath stones until blood came from every part of his body and his tongue was forced out of his mouth. Daniel had to turn away from a gory medieval display of a prisoner being hung, drawn, and quartered, only to turn a corner and see demonstrations of all the curious ancient inventions of brutality: the rack, the thumbscrew, the iron maiden, and the guillotine.

"We've gone beyond the original path," said Sondra quietly. "We should have gotten back to the gift shop by now."

And still the displays kept going: Timur the Lame resting on a mountain of his victims, Vlad Tepes with his sharpened stakes in geometric patterns and Elizabeth Báthory's unusual beauty regime, castrators and carvers and cannibals and crucifiers. A dozen times, sickened, Daniel wanted to extinguish his sword to keep from having to watch, and yet without light one might stumble into the unthinkable. Centuries and continents of all the worst that humanity could muster swept before them, on to the final display of a naked farmer bashing in the skull of his naked hunter brother. And beyond that was even deeper darkness, in which Daniel suddenly realized that the light from his sword was quenched and he was alone.

There was something in front of him, lit from within. Daniel approached it cautiously. It was a full-length mirror, just like the psyche in Mrs. Shantih's shop. He looked into it and saw his own reflection, and for the first time he understood the truth.

You call yourself an artist, a writer, a creator? Daniel's reflection told him. You think if you spit out all the butt-ends of your days and ways, that one single other human would find any least dribble of it to be a tiny bit original or interesting? History's ash can is packed with cleverer folks than you who found they had nothing in them to paint that the world cared to look at. They learned how to choke down their bitter dreams, and so too must you, so must you. Learn that immortality is for a different breed than such as you, and accept forever your paltry lot!

Thus and more did the mirror tell Daniel. Eventually he sat down so he could listen to the voice more comfortably. The longer he listened, the more he became convinced in his leaden soul that it spoke the truth. He was only born to walk around for a bit, perhaps reproduce if he was lucky, and then die, just like 99.999% of the rest of the miserable human ants on the globe. What a wise mirror it was, to teach him these important truths so early in his life. He could sit and listen to its truthful voice forever. It was far wiser than the mirror in Mrs. Shantih's store, that was for sure.

And as he remembered the smell of the tobacco smoke in that shop, he recalled something else from that morning as well. He remembered Cloudfoot Shantih twitching aside the cloth draped over another mirror, and saying as she did so, *Remember, with mirrors it's always best to get a second opinion.* Turning away from the mirror didn't help break its hold, since the buzzing voice kept chirping in Daniel's ear regardless. Still, he turned away. The darkness behind him seemed impenetrable until he found a way to push through it, the buzzing voice inescapable until he sought for a place where he might, at least briefly, escape it. When the darkness became too thick against him and almost pushed him back to the mirror, he drew his flaming sword again and cut a path through it.

"Ken!" he called as he pushed through the darkness.

"Sondra!"

Eventually, he found her.

She was sitting entranced before a mirror of her own. From Daniel's angle, it was easy to see that her mirror was grotesquely warped and distorted to give back a horrible false picture to anyone standing where she stood.

"Do you think your friends are all idiots, Sondra?" she was whispering to herself, and her voice sounded almost exactly like the buzzing voice in Daniel's own head. "They're smart enough to see past the make-up and that ridiculous flouncing exhibitionism you do on stage. Smart enough to see what a contemptible person you really are, and the only reason they don't tell you so to

your face is that they're too polite. Maybe they feel sorry for you too, but no, mostly it's just contempt. Ever since your best friend died, no one who got to know you could avoid being disgusted by you, and that act you put on is just elaborate denial of the truth. Fred's leaving you is just the first wholesome taste of the rejection that will help prepare you for the rest of your lonely life, because..."

"NOOO!" cried out Daniel, and for a moment his shout drowned out both the buzzing voices.

"Who's there?" called out Sondra blindly, and Daniel groped forward until he could take her hand. In a broken voice he told her how wrong she was, how her friends thought she was wonderful and beautiful, brave and witty and kind, attractive and infuriating and infinitely worthy of love. And when she understood a bit of what the voice in his head was telling him, she returned the favor by telling him what she thought of his drawings and poetry.

At last they dragged one another away from her mirror as well, and went seeking Ken's. "Stupid!" he was muttering to himself when they found him. "You think you're so smart, but if they haven't found out yet what a faker you are, they surely will soon. Your father was right all along, you won't last ten minutes in the real world. You gave up magic, all the wonderful gifts the fair folk could give you, and what is there left that would make you any more useful than a damp mop? They'd be better off picking hexagrams from an I-ching bowl than listening to your

advice. Sure, you've got good grades because you take tests well, but when it comes to the real world, your average salamander could live by his wits better than you could."

Then Daniel and Sondra embraced him. "You're Tom Swift, Encyclopedia Brown, and the Hardy Boys all rolled up into one," cried Sondra.

"Like a cross between Mr. Spock and Sherlock Holmes," added Daniel without the least drop of sarcasm. "Bad guys better beware when you're around, I tell you. And might I add, Inspector, that a bad guy is in the process of getting away right now?"

Soon, leaning heavily upon one another, the three friends left behind them the demon that can never be escaped alone, and wandered farther into the darkness. Eventually they found that, like all darkneses, this one had an end, which consisted of a plain wooden door. They looked at one another and shrugged, and Daniel turned the knob and opened it. As soon as they were through, the door swung shut behind them.

They stood in Daniel's bedroom in their apartment, his unfinished painting of fruit still resting on its easel where he had abandoned it.

"What the hell?" said Ken, surveying the room with his fists clenched. "Was there some kind of teleportation spell on that door to send us back to square one?" He turned around and grabbed the doorknob again. "We've got to look for another way..."

"Wait!" cried Daniel. He'd played hide-and-seek with the sleep dragon in this room too many times not to be able to sense the different sort of oddness that filled it now. "If you open the door, we might be back there. But right now - can't you feel it? We're betwixt and between - under the threshold, one foot on sea and one on shore, between the pillow and the dream. I think we've got the potential to be anywhere, in any universe."

"I feel it too," said Ken slowly. "Like an uncollapsed probability wave."

"But what good is that if we can't open the door again?" asked Sondra. "We're at a dead end."

"No," said Daniel. "Some ends are deader than others." He walked up to the black plastic that he'd taped over his window on the first day. "Let's open our eyes." He ripped off the plastic, then put his shoulder underneath the window itself and shoved it open. The others crowded behind him.

The street below was both like and unlike the Sapphire Street they knew. The awning and perpetual yellow light bulbs were gone; instead the sign for Antiquities hung from a creaky pole, and a sprawling elm tree brushed against the window where there had not been a sapling that morning. There was no stoplight at the intersection with Main Street anymore; in its place, a short man wearing a bright yellow topcoat and a metal face directed carriages with red and green sticks which he tucked alternately beneath his arms. The parking meters that had lined the street were now hitching posts. Across the street where a

soda machine had formerly stood, now an impossibly slim, willowy figure of a woman was squeezing apples and oranges into glasses and setting them out on a roadside stand. And so it went wherever you rested your eye: everything new was old again.

"How do we get down?" asked Sondra. In answer, Daniel leaned out and grabbed a branch of the elm, then wrapped his legs around its trunk and held out his hands to her. She laughed as she took them, and a few minutes later all three of them were on the ground and strolling around the corner. Daniel noticed that somehow, in the passage through the Nightmare and their emergence wherever they were, Sondra's hair had resumed its natural color again.

A full-blown Goblin Market was underway on Main Street. Dazed tourists were wandering up and down the sidewalks between dozens of stalls and booths, in each of which a goblin or nis or specter displayed wares and called out an echoing "Come buy, come buy!"

"Look at that!" said Ken suddenly in disgust, pointing to a flowering green bush across the street. "Do you see that? What are they thinking?"

"What's wrong with it?" asked Daniel.

"Take another look."

Daniel took a step closer, and realized that the yellow objects that he had assumed were flowers were actually gold coins. A few tourists had noticed also and begun stuffing their pockets, but the coins kept miraculously reappearing.

"That used to be an ATM," said Ken. "I'd like to think that when those people take money off the tree, it disappears from their banking accounts, but I have no such faith in the fairy grasp of economics. It could really be as it appears, that these things are just free-floating inflation generators. I'll bet if I went to my bank branch right now and asked to see my balance, they'd take me to a big room full of gold coins so I could swim around in them like Scrooge McDuck. Interest, stocks, international investments - I think they all just went pffft."

"Don't forget the stories," Daniel reminded him. "When all that gold starts turning into dry leaves tomorrow morning, I wonder what the Federal Reserve will do about that?"

"Guys, I have a question," said Sondra. "Where exactly are we? Is this just a part of Faery that happens to look like our world, or is it the real Crossroads we've come back to? Because if it is, then I kind of think we got here too late."

"Too late, lateness personified, and soon to be late in the permanent sense," said a familiar voice at Daniel's elbow. He turned to see Skeeble crouching beside him, holding both ends of her ears down in an effort to make herself appear less conspicuous. Shyly peeking around her back was the woolly refrigerator brownie.

"Brownie!" said Sondra happily. "I was hoping we'd run into you. Did you get my message?" She beckoned it to one side and began talking to it earnestly. A moment later she took a

dish out of her backpack, filled it from a container of expensive clotted cream, and set it down on the ground for the creature.

"How'd you get here?" Daniel asked Skeeble. "Wherever here is? I know, I know, time and space don't mean much for you Faery-dwellers."

" 'Here' happens to be about the most important place in both worlds right now," answered Skeeble seriously. "It's all for being the spot where two soap bubbles touch one another. First they're only joined at a point, then it spreads, and finally there's just one. This is the first spot where all the gates are abolished and Daylightside and Twilightside are one, but from here it's all for spreading outwards in all directions at the speed of dreams."

"Actually, I don't think that's exactly how soap bubbles work," Ken began, but Skeeble went on in a sing-song voice,

"Oh, the bogies are back under the beds, sure enough. The knockers have returned to their mines and the will-o-wisps to their swamps. As for how I was for getting here, it's waiting for you I was with no mistaking, and all for expecting someone to be coming along at any moment to recognize poor Skeeble and whack off her head, wellaway."

"Coooooooooome buy," shouted a nearby goblin peddler in a high, squeaky voice. "Extra discount for doomed enemies of the new Hecate!"

"So we really are too late," murmured Daniel dully.

"We'll see," said Sondra brightly as she rejoined them.

"Look at all the junk this one's got!"

The sign by the booth stated, in spidery long sloping letters so beautiful as to be almost illegible, that household implements were for sale here.

"I can see that Sir is a painter," squeaked the goblin to Daniel, clearly filled with excitement at having its first real customer in centuries. "Would Sir be interested in this magical paintbrush that can create an exact duplicate of any scene that Sir witnesses in only a few short minutes?"

"A camera," grunted Ken in disgust. "We've had what you're describing for over a hundred years now. Plus you can send the picture halfway around the world now with a few buttons pressed. Is that all you've got?"

The goblin seemed startled. "Ah, but the pictures from this camera of yours, do the creatures it paints come alive in the dead of night and leap out to stalk you? If you touch one of the landscapes, can you fall into it to wander around lost for a year and a day, only to emerge and find nothing the same as it was?"

"And this would be advantageous precisely how..?" asked Sondra. The goblin winced.

"You should go into software marketing," said Daniel.

"Repeat after me: 'It isn't a bug, it's a feature.'"

"All this stuff is pure crap!" shouted Ken, who had been looking over the signs on the table closely. "Look: 'Enchanted

needle -- Touch with one finger and this will sew forever in a straight line.' Let me guess, if you don't say the right magic word to stop it, it will sew everything in your house into a big ball. Am I right?"

"Something like that," the peddler admitted grudgingly.

"And look here," Ken went on, pointing at other signs.

"Tiny goats, 'For keeping ye grass at an even length.' And here, 'An amulet for frightening ye rats and other vermin away from ye house.' Arrgg!" He passed his hand across his face. "You could get stuff more reliable than everything at this table for a few hundred bucks at Sears."

"No you couldn't," snarled the goblin angrily. "Seers are across the street. They've got a special today on weather forecasting and the reading of entrails. Bring your own entrails."

The group left the stall and continued down the street. "Come buy my cookies!" called a wizened crone at the next booth. She swept a tray out of a blackened oven and passed it beneath their noses, and Daniel had to admit that they did smell indescribably tempting. "Listen, mortlings," she dropped her voice as they came closer. "I'm having to refamiliarize myself with dealing with your kin once more, and I'll reward you well if you help me learn their habits. Do ye think other mortals will be willing to buy cookies if they find out they were baked by elves?"

"Glurk," said Daniel, trying to strangle the hysterical laughter that was bubbling in the back of his throat. "I think you may find that a surprising amount of groundwork has been laid for you. Are you familiar with our copyright laws?"

"I have a friend who's a copy wright," said the crone smugly. "Was there something you needed copied?"

"Never mind," Daniel sighed.

Ken added darkly, "There goes our patent system."

The old cookie-seller suddenly lunged forward and grabbed Sondra's arm. "You have the smell of a girl whose sweetheart has up and left her for some strumpet, dearie. I can bake you a fine sugar snap that will make him pine his heart out to win you back, or else wither away to naught. You can have it for a mere pittance as my first customer!"

To Daniel's surprise, Sondra's face crumpled and she blew her nose into a handkerchief loudly. Now that he thought about it, she had said something about Jack's leaving her back at the mirrors. But a moment later she rallied against the old woman again. "What do your kind know about love? For you everything's a transaction across a table, payout or payback. You really think that love means trying to win someone back whether he wants you or not, or else torture him if he manages to resist? Love is when you want a person to be happy, maybe even if his happiness stabs dagger points into your heart. You don't know the first thing about love!" And truly, the cookie-seller's face could hardly look more uncomprehending.

"Wait a sec," said Daniel suddenly, leaning in closely and peering at the crone's face. "I recognize that voice. You're the Sugar Plum Fairy. I thought you were heading into exile - isn't this place about as far from exile as it's possible to get?"

The wizened fairy gulped down an audible sniff. "Don't turn me in!" she begged. "I couldn't stay away. All these crowds of pretty mortlings coming to buy things after so long, how could I resist?"

"But aren't you scared of what will happen if Lilith catches you?" asked Ken.

"Ach, she won't be able to see through my Glamour," said the fairy, pulling her shawl tighter and glancing nervously around.

"MY EMPIRE BARELY AN HOUR OLD, AND ALREADY IT IS BESET BY SPIES AND TRAITORS?" roared an earthshaking voice behind them. The Sugar Plum Fairy wheezed like a trapped hedgehog and dove beneath her table. The others turned slowly to behold Lilith, the new goddess of crossroads and shadows and magic.

Chapter 9

*If all the seas were one sea,
 What a great sea that would be!
 And if all the trees were one tree,
 What a great tree that would be!
 And if all the axes were one axe,
 What a great axe that would be!
 And if all the men were one man,
 What a great man he would be!
 And if the great man took the great axe,
 And cut down the great tree,
 And let it fall into the great sea,
 What a splish splash that would be!*

Traditional Children's Song

It was difficult to say how large Lilith had grown. It wasn't easy to compare her to nearby houses or trees, not so much because she was clearly larger than they, as because one's brain would automatically place her in a different category altogether, a category in which the concept of size was meaningless. Still, the impression she gave now was one of immense stature, gravity, and presence - Daniel was reminded uncomfortably of Anubis above the Blue Nile.

"But..." he said in a near-whisper, "I rescued Doug Chee. She didn't get her water sacrifice - she shouldn't have been powerful enough without it, should she?"

"YOU KNOW NOTHING OF MY POWER!" cried Lilith the Goddess in a voice like a tornado's roar. "I HAD IT IN OVERABUNDANCE EVEN WITHOUT THE SACRIFICE OF THAT PETTY UPSTART EXCUSE FOR A SUMMER KING." Despite her obvious fearsomeness, though, Daniel couldn't help but feel that there was a tiny bit of bluster there, covering a smidgen of weakness and uncertainty. "BESIDES, I SAW WITH MY OWN EYES HOW MY SERVANT CRIPPLED HIM. HIS KINGDOM IS BROKEN AS HIS BODY IS BROKEN, AND THUS IT BELONGS TO ME."

"Don't be too sure of that," said Daniel more loudly, stepping forward and brandishing the horn-handled cane above his head. Clearly the time for hiding was gone now; this was time to do or die, with whatever weapons he and his friends could scrape together. The walking stick might be transformable to any weapon a human mind could imagine, but it felt weaker than a tuft of straw in his grip. Still, from somewhere he felt strength flow into his voice as he faced the pale goddess - if not from the sword, perhaps from the sun at its height on this midsummer day that was not quite over yet. "What you didn't see was how, voluntarily and of his own free will, he passed his sword to me when he fell. I'm the new Summer King, and I say you're no consort of mine, and thus no goddess in this or any other realm."

The vast apparition of Lilith seemed taken aback for the briefest of moments, but then recovered. "IS THAT SO? YOU WERE

DUE TO DIE SOON ANYWAY, TROUBLESOME GNAT. ALL YOU HAVE DONE IS TO MAKE YOUR OWN DEATH A MATTER OF BUSINESS AS WELL AS PLEASURE. YOU SHALL BE BURNED, BEHEADED, AND DROWNED." Then she seemed to move inward and outward simultaneously, and as she spoke, her sense of immensity seemed to expand as well. "I AM THE THREEFOLD GODDESS, AND BY THREE TIMES THREE HAS MY POWER GROWN. I AM THE MAIDEN, THE MOTHER, AND THE CRONE; I AM DIANA, ISIS, AND MORRIGAN; I AM THE SEA, THE BLOOD, AND THE MOON. BY ALL THE STRENGTH OF MAGIC AND CROSSROADS, BY ALL DOORWAYS AND ALL THAT EXITS AND ENTERS THROUGH THEM, BY EVERY EXCHANGE AND EVERY WINDOW-LEDGE BARGAIN, I CALL MY POWER TO ME. LET ME BE TO THIS UPSTART KING AS THE HEAT OF THE SUN IS TO A BALL OF SNOW, AND LET HIS NAME BE STRICKEN UTTERLY FROM THE MEMORY OF ALL THINGS LIVING AND DEAD. POWER, POWER RISING!"

Before, the aura of magic that had surrounded Lilith had crackled with the intensity of a tornado, but as she spoke it seemed to grow to hurricane strength. Daniel gripped his stick and pondered his best move. Charging her with a sword would surely be suicidal, and guns were doubtless a bad idea given the dicey state of technology. He could try a bow and arrows, but that seemed pitifully weak, and anyway he had never been a very good shot. With growing desperation, he was just about to try forming his stick into a cannon when Sondra pushed past him, clutching her backpack.

"No offense, boys," she whispered to Daniel and Ken. "But I thought she'd take this route. If she's gonna make this a club

issue, then she'll have to be dealt with by another member. I love you both dearly, but stay back for now, okay?"

"Look, I mostly got us into this, I should get us out!" cried Daniel desparingly, but Ken touched his arm.

"She's right, Dan. We can't afford not to use any of our weapons. Besides, she's been preparing this all week."

Daniel hesitated, staring at Sondra and seeing her shining eyes as she undid her pack. "Fine. I suppose we have to let her try," he said finally, stepping back. Still, he kept the form of the cannon in his mind, just in case.

"Hey Lil!" Sondra called out. "Think you're the only one who can make a nice speech? I've always heard that gods and goddesses need a few believers. Well, I'm a mortal woman, and I reject you utterly."

The goddess Lilith sneered. "WHAT OF IT? YOU ARE ONLY ONE, AND I HAVE ALREADY ENTERED THE DREAMS OF THE MULTITUDE."

Sondra was fishing around in her backpack. "I thought you'd say something like that, which is why I brought some friends along. Listen to this."

She held up a tape recorder. For a moment Daniel thought, *there's no way that thing is going to work now that magic is running the show*, but then he saw that their captured and released refrigerator brownie had darted out of the crowd and was holding onto the end of the recorder's power cord, cream still dripping from its twiggy chin.

The first voice that came after Sondra pressed the Play button was Cindy's. So self-conscious it could scarcely be heard, she whispered, "If you are a maiden, where is your virginity?" A second later came Ava Carver's voice, strong and warm and richly amused, asking "If you are a mother, where are your children?" The final speaker was Cloudfoot Shantih: "If you are a crone, where is your wisdom?"

Lilith seemed taken aback, and before she could regroup, Sondra pressed forward with her main attack. By now most of the people on the street had been drawn to witness the confrontation, fey and mortal alike, so that it was to a full house that Sondra now played in her grandest theatrical style. "You call yourself Hecate, Goddess of Magic," she called in the voice of Saint Joan facing her accusers. "I submit to all here assembled that this Lilith, this Changeling exiled by the lawful king Oberon, is ignorant of the highest orders of Magic that whoever embodies Hecate must surely comprehend."

Back and forth Sondra strode down the center of Main Street as she spoke, the midsummer sun warming her hair to the color of burning coals, and Daniel thought that even Lilith, nine tenths of a goddess though she might be, still looked as washed out as a full moon in daylight compared to her. He'd seen her before on stage on nights when a good audience filled her with energy like fire, but the audience here seemed to carry the light of all the stars in its inhuman gaze.

"Surely the highest magic is that which allows our green earth to spin through the heavens and support all the life we know of," Sondra cried. "But the only sorcery that she understands is nothing but payout and payback. For centuries now, we humans have known that our sun gives us its light, not as any kind of repayment for our rituals or sacrifices, but because it is the sun's nature to light our world as a free gift that demands nothing in return. What payback does the earth expect when it grants us crops, or the sky when it gives us rain?"

"They both expect you not to poison them!" cried the slender woman who had been selling fruit juice earlier, and who Daniel guessed must be a Dryad.

"True," Sondra shot back. "But at least we've gained enough wisdom now to know that when we poison them, we poison ourselves. Why do we need a goddess of vengeance, when the universe has already arranged things so that all our acts for good or ill come threefold back to us?" She turned again to face Lilith. "And here's something else false about your magic -- you only make your offers one-on-one. Each mortal wizard must bargain alone, study alone, work alone, and die alone." Here she glanced briefly at Ken. "The more power he gains, the more alone he becomes. And that, too, flies in the face of the universe." She held out her hands to appeal to the fey in the audience. "In your absence, we've built bridges whose ends are too distant to view from the middle, buildings that scrape the clouds, tiny boxes that let us to speak across oceans, winged steeds faster

than a flying carpet, and boats bigger than islands. It was never one hermit, it was thousands of us working together that made these things. Lilith is utterly ignorant of this, the strongest form of Magic. She is no goddess of true magic, nor of the fey, nor of any living glamorous thing!"

And indeed, now that Daniel looked at her closely, Lilith did seem diminished in stature, more like the girl and the fey she had been than the goddess she had started to become. Her words no longer shook the foundations of the universe as she found her voice again and snarled, "This is all a waste of my valuable time. Drallo? Where are you, you stunted shrub? Weren't you supposed to recruit a new retinue for me?"

"Here, my liege." The dwarf emerged from a t-shirt shop across the street, leading a pack of a dozen spriggans wearing a collection of obscene shirts. "What do you wish us to do?"

Lilith gestured at Sondra, Daniel, and Ken. "Run those mortals through for me, would you? And then get my army out of those ridiculous outfits."

"I thought they were funny," muttered Drallo as he directed his forces into a broad line and began advancing down the street. Sondra readied her bat while Daniel tried to envision a machine gun, but Ken stepped past them. "Nice job, Sonny," he said quietly. "But now it's my turn. After all, magic is nine tenths attitude, and I've still got plenty of that." Then loudly enough for the spriggans to hear, he cried, "Do some of you remember me, lackeys? I'm the wizard who broke out of the Castle of Lures by

dissolving it from the inside, so that now it's nothing but an empty skull. I've smashed locks, brought down lightning from the sky, and commanded the field where your companions were scattered like frogs from a heron. Attack me if you dare, and find out what it feels like to have your faces attached to the soles of your feet so you can't take a step without dirt in your eyes. Come and find out what it's like to be allergic to air. Who's first?"

He drew his smashed remote control from his pocket as he spoke, careful to hold it so that no one would notice its missing back. "I've got seventy-three curses lined up and ready to go, from the aardvark's tongue hex to the zoospeech binding, all guaranteed to be both debilitating and incurable. For any of you math-impaired ones, that's five apiece plus one left over - which of you do you think will get it? Come find out NOW, lackies!"

But the spriggans made no further move. They gripped their spears tighter, took tiny steps forward and backward, and snuffled nervously to one another.

"Oh... you can't all be such fools," said Lilith with cold fury, turning to address the crowd of onlookers. "FAIRY SUBJECTS, this is your QUEEN speaking. Let us DESTROY these spying interlopers together, and then we can return to our cheerful trading on this historic day!"

"Should the free people of Faery be treated as slaves!" cried out Daniel in desperation, for several of the larger Fair

Folk had begun to move forward at Lilith's command. "Surely it is a law that an Unseelie can never become King or Queen?"

"Aye," called a nearby nut-sized fairy with an incongruously deep voice. "Are you saying our Queen is not of Seelie blood?"

"Fifteen years ago," Daniel cried out to everyone in the street, "the servants of this woman gave me the Morcan without demanding anything in repayment from me. And later, she herself took the Morcan away again and offered me nothing in return. Even a courier deserves recompense, is that not so?"

At this there was some grumbling, and several of the younger sprites began dancing from one foot to another in uncertainty. Lilith, though, seemed to be entering entered into white-hot fury. "I SHALL DO IT MYSELF THEN!" she cried, and began gliding down the length of the street like the side of a cliff collapsing on a hapless skier.

As he saw her coming, though, he felt the curious sensation of something uncoiling from his finger, like a spring breaking free from its clock. He looked down and saw, resting in his hand, a long strand of a black hair, and he remembered Skeeble's voice from their last trip speaking about the twins and saying, "*One gets kept and one released,*" and in a flash he knew what he had to do.

As he had suspected since the first time he saw it in Kate Castellano's office, the sliver of psyche was the key. Doubtless that was why Kate had given it to Mrs. Vanderski to be used as a

weapon. The thing to take Lilith out of the world would have to be the same thing that had brought her into it.

He jammed his hand into his pocket to grab the fragment of mirror so hard that he stabbed his palm, but he realized ruefully as he drew it out that in such a procedure a bit of blood couldn't hurt. The hair he quickly wrapped around the edge of the mirror shard, and he wasn't surprised that it fit exactly and stuck to the edge of the silvered glass. Then, as Lilith reached him and his companions and reared back to obliterate them with cold fire, he was able to feel the close proximity of something he hadn't sensed since he was four. It was the Morcan on a chain around Lilith's neck, calling to him across space and time, remembering the gash it had torn when it passed through his dreams. And with the sense of the Morcan came also the sense of how gates could be opened and pathways straightened, how similar places far apart could be joined together once more.

With all the knowledge bought and paid for by a lifetime spent on the border between reality and Faery, Daniel re-opened the gate that had been made through the shattered psyche for the infant Lilith a lifetime ago. He thrust the mirror shard at Lilith, and as she glanced down at it, she witnessed her doom. Suddenly perspective and scale seemed to be reversed, and she was falling, falling, falling into the mirror. She only had time to hiss despairingly, "Payback is a snaky-haired bitch," and she was gone. Daniel was never sure afterwards whether her last words

had been a belated realization, a threat, or simply a true statement of fact.

In her place, curled up in a ball on the street, was black-haired Lily in her shining white dress. Daniel made Doug Chee's walking stick into a penknife and slipped it into his pocket, then knelt beside her and reached for her hand. For a moment, beautiful and alien there before him, she seemed to be the very personification of every dream he had ever dreamed, and suddenly touching her seemed like downright profanation. How could he bring his dream ideal into the real world, he wondered? Date her? Kiss her, even? Wouldn't it be too much like kissing a part of himself? Might it be possible that dreams were better off untouched and untouchable?

Then he noticed that lying beside her was the Morcan, the gateway between worlds. It would be a bad idea to leave the gate he had just made open for long. He grasped the stone instead.

In later years, Daniel often thought back to the moment of reconnecting with the Morcan as the only time in his life when everything had seemed entirely fit and right and proper. For just that instant, he was no longer being shoved along by the clock hands of time against his will; he was controlling, steering, his hand on the crank that spun the engine's twirling gears. It was the work of a moment to press the stone against the mirror shard and obliterate the portal entirely, so that it was only a piece of silvered glass once again and Lilith become the one trapped forever in a floating bubble beyond the edge of

the world. Then he tried again to reach for Lily's hand, but suddenly he found his vision obscured by a multitude of fairies like a flight of butterflies, some congratulating him, some shaking tiny fists at him, and some prostrating themselves before him like grass in the wind.

"Enough!" cried Lily, rising to her feet in the midst of the swarm. The fairies ebbed and backed away from her, and she seemed as tall and beautiful and alien as one of the moonlit trees in the grove where Daniel had first dreamed of her. "Fellow mortal, thank you for rescuing me and banishing my changeling. She was evil and deserved to be sent away, but I say that not all of her plan deserves to be banished with her. So for you, I have a question. Have you been a border skimmer for most of your life, coming to the edges of our kingdom even against your will?"

Daniel glanced back at his friends, but they seemed as taken aback by this turn of events as he was. He remembered all his struggles with the sleep dragon, and nodded.

Lily's gaze seemed to penetrate him like a sword. "In recent days, have scraps and fragments of all the world's words been rising unbidden to your mind?" Remembering the poetry he had begun quoting with no memory of having read it, Daniel again nodded.

At this, Lily turned to face the assembled fairies, who now seemed to stretch in every direction in unending strange multitudes like silent spectators at the end of some great race.

"Citizens of Faery!" she called. "Behold, he carries the Morcan and the sword, and he bears the other signs as well! La Belle Dame Sans Merci has been banished, but see, she has been defeated by the one who is destined to be her successor! Let us pay reverence to our new king!" And at these words, the crowds of fairies, some larger than oaks, some like ropy brambles, some no bigger than a spot before one's eyes, all the quick and bright and furry and bestial and pure creatures of that realm rose to their feet and cheered.

"How can I be king if I'm a mortal?" gasped Daniel to Lily. She just shrugged. "It's happened before."

"But how can you declare me king when you're mortal too?" Then another thought crossed his mind. "And why didn't you say my name when you declared me king? You knew my name when we met before." He spun around and searched the crowd of faces, beautiful and hideous, until he saw the one he was looking for hiding in a tree. "Skeebble! Get down here!"

With obvious reluctance, the long-eared nis made her way to Daniel's side. He pointed at the girl beside him. "Skeebble, is this your mistress?"

Skeebble clutched her earlobes distractedly, and seemed to be bracing herself as for a blow. "Ah, wellaway, must I say? No, your majesty. This is a fairy all be-Glamoured, but she is indeed not the one I brought up from a baby. Please don't hurt Skeebble, Lady!"

The lines of Lily's features blurred as if a waterfall was passing over them, and standing in her place was the Lady of Lures in all the regal majesty they had first seen her wearing in her sugar palace. "Oh, very well, you saw through my little charade, then," she said, smiling. "When you lost sight of the other girl for a moment back there I sent her home to her mother, who needs her. I thought you might be more resistant to what I was proposing if I kept my own form, that was all. But the offer still stands!" She was clearly so eager now that she was near to bursting, the stars in her hair circling bright and alluring. "It's true, mortling. The planets say that you should be our next king. I spoke truly that not everything about Lilith's plan was bad. She herself was rotten through and through, you know as well as I, but you wouldn't have to be like her. And as a King of Faery born mortal, you'll surely want to keep the gates open so you can keep a foot in both worlds, won't you? This Market Day can go on and on forever, no need to change a thing, but now with good leadership instead of bad. Keep the gates open and eat of our Glamour and you can rule these fair lands for a dozen mortal lifetimes! What say you?"

Daniel scanned the crowds of fairies again until he spotted the faces that didn't fit. "What about my friends?" he asked, gesturing for Sondra and Ken to join him.

The Sugar Plum Fairy gave a long, trilling laugh. "They can stay as your counselors or go back to their lives. No one will tell you how you must run your kingdom, your majesty."

Looking pale and confused, Ken and Sondra shuffled up to stand beside Daniel, who reached out to grasp both their hands tightly. "Well, counselors," he whispered urgently. "Got any counsel on you?"

Sondra shrugged and tossed her hair. "It's up to you, I guess," she said sadly. "You heard where I ended up on the issue. You've seen the world as it was and as it could be. Which one do you like better?"

Daniel turned to his former roommate, but Ken just shook his head slowly, then held out his hand and dropped his broken remote onto the ground. "We landed on the moon," he said quietly. "The moon!"

Daniel looked at his friends again, and then at the silent expectant, inhuman faces of the fairy mob, and finally at the triumphant Lady of Lures. "One last temptation," he muttered to himself. Then he knelt and lovingly placed the Morcan on the ground in front of him. In his right hand he held the shard of mirror, and he glanced at his reflection in it and said firmly, "Reality." With his left hand he drew the penknife out of his pocket and willed it to become a tiny dagger of the same size and shape as the mirror, and he gazed at it and said, "Fantasy." Then he clasped the two blades together between his palms, raised them above his head, and crying loudly, "Without contraries there is no progression!" drove them into the Morcan.

As the stone shattered into dust, all the gates it had opened between worlds swung shut. And as they ceased to exist,

the world Lilith had formed in the midst of the open gates, the world they were standing in, ceased to exist as well.

To Sondra, Ken, and Daniel, it felt as if they had been standing with one foot on a boat and the other on shore while the boat steamed out to sea. As the two worlds tore apart they left a void between them, and into the void, helplessly, the three humans plunged.

Underfoot was an endless indistinct plain. Its surface seemed to be an expression of perpetual decay, the same compound of dust and undefinable trash that would cover the floor of any uninhabited dwelling given enough time. A cold, monotonous wind whipped up the dust and mixed it with a low-hanging fog that flew by in constant scudding drifts, so that anyone who stood on the plain felt within a few seconds filthier than any soap could clean, damper than any towel could dry, and colder than any fire could warm. The air smelt mainly of dust masking undertones of rot.

"This does indeed seem to be all there is," said Ken after they had trudged in the direction the wind was blowing for an indeterminate length of time - with the wind because going against it caked ones' eyes with dust in minutes, and for an indeterminate time because their three watches had rusted into red powder moments after their arrival.

"All there is, there is," echoed the monotonous wind.

"Tell me again why you thought that stunt would work, Danny?"

Daniel sighed. "You know perfectly well why I had to do it. High time for me to wake up, don't you think? And it would have taken literally ages to close the gates one at a time, because she had them pushed so far open some of them were bent. The stone told me a lot of things while I was holding it --- how many gates there were, how to destroy them, what would happen if I did. I suppose it would have warned me about this place, too, if I'd thought to ask."

"Thought to ask, to ask," agreed the wind's echo.

Ken shielded his eyes with his hands and turned slowly to scan in every direction. "This place truly is nowhere city," he said at last. "Dan, remember how you told us about that trip you made through Eastfell Caverns, and the big scary voice that told you a story? Did that place feel anything like this?"

Straining his eyes against the gray nothing, Daniel shuddered. "Actually," he said, "it feels like the exact precise opposite."

"Opposite, posit, sit," added the echo, falling away in diminishing returns.

At that, Sondra spun around to face the wind again and swung her bat pointlessly into it. "Quit playing games with us!" she yelled. "You're more than just an echo, whatever you are. Who are you?"

"Who are you?" responded the wind's voice, but then it changed. To Daniel's ears it turned into the voice of Doctor Vang, his professor of Physics 101 the previous year.

"Whenever any form of energy is transformed into any other form, a percentage becomes unusable. That unusable bit is the reason that time's arrow points in only one direction, and why every perpetual motion machine ever made eventually runs down, from stars and galaxies on down to the splendid machines taking notes in this classroom right now." Daniel could still remember how sad the elderly Vietnamese professor had looked gazing at his students then, as if he'd lost everything he'd ever cared about. "It's like a tax the universe charges on every transaction that gets made, and no one can avoid paying." Then the voice in the wind changed again, and the sound of it now was unmistakably overfilled with teeth. "For none that I hunt can go uneaten."

"You're the one they call the Fenris," Daniel said then, his mouth dry.

"Correct," replied the wolf's voice. "Welcome to the throat of the beast."

Chapter 10

*what if a keen of a lean wind flays
screaming hills with sleet and snow:
strangles valleys by ropes of thing
and stifles forests in white ago?
Blow hope to terror; blow seeing to blind
(blow pity to envy and soul to mind)
-whose hearts are mountains, roots are trees,
it's they shall cry hello to the spring
e. e. cummings*

"This is bad." Daniel reached out instinctively to grab the hands of his friends for warmth. "What ... what can we do to escape this place, Wolf?"

At this the wind and scudding fog and dust and trash seemed to pick up a bit, as if eager to tear clothing into rags and skin into tatters if given half the chance. "You three owe me for banishing my sworn servant, and I always collect my debts, late or soon. The price I must have is one life. You may pick who is to be swallowed amongst yourselves, or if you cannot decide I myself will select a stalk to snap. The other two, if they wish, may return to the world of mundane reality you have restored. Tell me when you are ready, for I am always nearby." Then the wind and the voice died down again, but the stale smell of decay remained strong.

Daniel, Sondra, and Ken stared at each other, balanced between panic and dull despair. Finally Ken, in a voice he was clearly forcing to be steady, said, "Inventory, folks. We've got to find another way out. Dan, you were juggling a whole trunkful of major items there at the end. Any of them still serviceable?"

Daniel checked his pockets and sighed. "The mirror shard is just slivers now, and I think this dead leaf is the final form of Chee's sword. It won't transform anymore. And it looks as if I completely unmade the Morcan - there isn't even dust left. I suppose any powers I had from being the shortest-reigning king of fairies ever are gone as well." He checked the space in his head that kept dragging him toward sleep, and found that to be empty as well. "It looks like even my old threshold is no more."

"This is all that's left of my tape recorder," said Sondra, opening her backpack and pulling out a corroded lump of rust and flaking plastic. "This place doesn't take kindly to things that run. Though I doubt listening to the calculus lecture on the other side of the tape would have helped us much even if it had worked." Her voice teetered closer to panic. "Did I understand that ... thing just now to say that one of us is going to have to ... to die here, before the others will be allowed to leave?"

"That's what it sounded like," said Ken wearily. Then he looked at Daniel and drew a deep breath. "But I think Danny and I will agree that it won't be you who has to get swallowed,

Sonny. We'll rock-paper-scissors it out between the two of us if it comes to that."

Daniel bit his lip, then nodded, wishing he'd said it first.

"And why *not* me?" Sondra demanded, hands on her hips and voice rising. "Is this some stupid macho thing, where the guys sacrifice themselves to protect the dainty flower of womanhood?"

"Something like that," agreed Daniel. Then, sensing a storm coming, he held out his hands. "Look, it isn't because we think you're weak and helpless or anything, right Ken?"

"Right," responded Ken instantly. "Just an inherent survival of the species thing. Women and children get first crack at the lifeboats because frankly, from our DNA's point of view, we men are more expendable. It's the whole carrying-on-life thing."

Sondra drew herself up tall, her eyes flashing. "Well, I can assure you both that I'm not carrying any new life right now. And I thought we all reassured each other back in the mirror chamber that none of us think of the others as being expendable." She hesitated, looking entreatingly from one to the other. "None of us think of *ourselves* as being expendable, do we?"

"It would make things easier if one of us did, wouldn't it?" said Ken. "But no, even though my parents send me into fits of black depression sometimes, I love my own life dearly."

"As do I," said Daniel. His voice was starting to break a bit; even the trash-strewn, decaying belly of the wolf looked

unutterably beautiful as he realized that it might be the last sight he ever saw. "But don't you understand, Sondra? It would be better to get swallowed by that creature than to have to go through life knowing we let someone like you die in our place!"

Ken nodded, swallowing. For once he seemed to have nothing to say.

"Why shouldn't that apply just as well to me, then?" Sondra snapped. "The women on the Titanic had terrible survivor's guilt. I absolutely don't want to d... to die, but I don't want to go through life thinking I'm a coward either. Besides, I can't believe we're spending our last few minutes together fighting. Now on my count, one, two..."

"Wait!" Daniel cried out. "I ... I volunteer to be the one. I mean, maybe I could have kept one gate open to get us home when I smashed the Morcan, so it's my fault we're here. And do I really want to go through life knowing I could have been King of the Fairies, and I blew it? Let me be the sacrifice."

Ken frowned. "You can't take all that onto yourself, Dan. You were just following our advice. I was the one who screwed up when I ditched my magic, so I ought to be the one."

"Guys, guys!" and now Sondra was half laughing and half crying, "None of us *deserves* to die. As far as I'm concerned, no one anywhere does, but that doesn't stop the Fenris from taking people every day. I don't want to die either, but I'd go through it anyway, because I love both of you. And you won't say it, but

I know you feel the same. Now please, please, can we get this over with so we have time for proper goodbyes?"

Daniel and Ken exchanged a glance that said that even if Sondra was the loser, they'd still figure out a way to go in her place. Then Sondra, her eyes shining, raised her fist high in the drenched air, and the others did likewise, and she began again to count, "One, two..."

And once again, before she could reach three, there was an interruption. On the vast windy plane that never changed, there was a change. In the direction the wind was blowing toward came a golden haze that might have been a sunrise or a sunset, and sparkling colors that might have been a rainbow, and striding out of that rainbow, wrapped in its colors like a flag, came the figures of a man and a woman. The man's fingers hit the guitar he was carrying like falling stars, and as he walked he sang,

*I got to keep movin',
I got to keep movin',
blues fallin' down like hail,
blues fallin' down like hail.*

*And the days keep on worryin' me,
there's a hellhound on my trail.*

Even though Daniel knew who it had to be, for a moment he still didn't recognize the singer. He seemed like a small bit of the Jay Fry they had known, and a larger part of the bluesman

Robert Johnson whose picture Daniel had seen in the library, and largest of all, a great strong figure whose hat was red on one side and black on the other. The hat seemed to be the universe saying *Go ahead and pick which color it is -- everyone else may see it differently, but no one will ever see it more clearly than you do right now.* The figure beside him was clearly female, but it was impossible to tell anything else about her, for she was draped in black falling in complex Pre-Raphaelite folds, and her head was bowed so that her face could not be seen. From the spot where the male and female figures stood in the trackless plain, roads sprang up out of the ground like horses and plunged off rearing to every point of the compass.

Then the presence of the male god faded a bit, though it could still be felt just beneath the surface, and the singer's voice was again that of Jay Fry. "You done did it!" he cried. "You figgered out the one sole way to beat ol' Brother Wolf."

"What was that, sir?" asked Daniel, still trembling between hope and fear.

Jay shook his head. "Ain't you folks been listenin' to nothing? I tol' you that the wolf gets his tooth in every time someone swaps somethin' for somethin' else. The only way ta beat him is ta do what you three just did."

"Which was what?" asked Ken uncertainly.

"Be ready ta give somethin' up without spectin' nothin' in return, of course. Ol' wolf's powerless 'gainst that." Then again the aspect of Legba came over the blues singer, and beneath

it another presence still grander and deeper. Together the combined voices said, "For I desire, not sacrifice, but mercy."

Then the aspects were gone entirely, and it was just a very old, very tired bluesman's ghost standing before them. He indicated the female figure beside him, and said "This one wanted ta thank you folks properly too, for helpin' her stay the way she was used to. Now, time ta give ol' wolfie that life he wanted." He held his arms out in the direction of the rising sun and seemed to be looking beyond it, and his face, for the first time in the months they had known him, seemed joyful. He cried out, "Thanks for bein' my rider all these years, lord, an' double thanks for lettin' me move on now. Ginny baby, little Robby, don't you get too far ahead of poor Bob. Wait up a spell, Daddy's comin', he's comin' at last!" And as the light hit him, he took a step down a road, faded, and was gone.

The woman who remained pointed to a road in the opposite direction to the one taken by the King of the Delta Blues, and raised her head. Beneath her hood her face was covered with a white, smooth-faced clay mask painted with rosy cheeks and red lips, which said, "That path is the one you have chosen for yourselves. Travel joyfully, for I wish you love that will speak your name." Then she reached up and pulled the mask off, and it dissolved into sand as she pulled it away. Beneath it was another mask with thicker cheeks and heavy eyelids, and that mask said, "Travel carefully, for I wish you love that will carry your name." That mask also was removed, revealing beneath it a third

mask with wrinkles and a crooked nose, which said, "Travel expectantly, for I wish you the love that outlasts all names."

The pale fingers removed the final mask, and there was nothing beneath it but stars and galaxies and space. Then the robe collapsed to the ground, empty.

"Goodbye, magic," whispered Daniel. He and Ken and Sondra looked at each other and took a step along the path she had indicated, and found themselves back in Daniel's room just as the cuckoo clock in the hall called out the notes that said that Midsummer's Day was over and the window of the year was closed.

Chapter 11

*who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot
for Eternity outside of Time, & alarm clocks
fell on their heads every day for the next decade
"Howl"*

Allen Ginsberg

Labor Day weekend in Crossroads was like a fireworks explosion in reverse. The big boom of vacationers came Friday, Saturday was sheer sizzling madness with fudge flying out the door faster than Cindy and Daniel could cook it, Sunday began to slow down, and by Monday evening some of the shops actually closed early in a town gone suddenly dead. And as always, the locals and the summer employees congregated in the bars as the sun went down.

The Blue Nile had reopened under the ownership of Mr. Santiago's widow, a tiny determined woman who had seemed to sense immediately that Daniel and Ken and the rest had managed to bring a type of vengeance to her husband's killer. She didn't charge them for drinks, and seemed ready to studiously overlook any shortcomings in the IDs they presented. So Daniel wasn't particularly surprised to see Heather Erickson carrying a drink and wandering across the tiny dance floor towards him as he leaned uneasily beside the jukebox on Labor Day evening.

"So, the new bouncer didn't card you?" he asked, speaking loudly over the Radioactive Lizards blasting through the speakers.

"I think he figured the police department is too busy getting rebuilt from the ground up to worry about going after underage drinkers," she shouted back. "Besides, Ken gave us a pair of his IDs, and they look great! Hey, could we sit farther away from the music and talk?"

Together they threaded their way back through the maze of chairs and tables. At one point Heather headed toward an empty bench, but Daniel held her back and pointed at a stain on the floor beside it. She looked puzzled, then her eyes widened, and she let him guide her the rest of the way to a booth near the back door.

Heather folded her hands on the table in front of her, her missing fingers making the folding awkward. "We only lost two people," she said so quietly he could barely hear her above the song. "It could have been a whole lot worse."

"True." Daniel drew a deep breath and sought to change the subject. "Haven't seen you at the souvenir shop for the last month and a half. What have you been up to?"

"Cindy didn't tell you? Oh, well," she shrugged, "with all Jack Netherby's businesses getting sold off after his arrest, some of us weren't getting paid. I quit, and now I'm working checkout at a Fresh Pride in Archer's Bluff. I miss it here, though."

"I guess Cindy did say something about that, now that you mention it."

Heather pushed her hair out of her eyes awkwardly and took a gulp from her screwdriver. "So when are you guys going back to school?"

"Ken left yesterday. He's going to help Justin move in with us, now that he and Sondra are officially over."

Heather shook her head. "The mysterious Justin. Did you ever find out why he dumped her?"

"He's not a bad guy, actually. It was something about the assistant stage manager. Apparently it's already gone into the summer romance fizzle, though. I'll bet he'll be crying this fall."

"Lot of that going around these days," said Heather. She stared at the dance floor for a while, then leaned a bit closer. "So whatever happened to that Netherby girl you rescued?"

"You mean Lily?" Daniel watched the swirling lights above the dance floor without really seeing them. "You met her after we got back, didn't you? What did you think of her?"

"Eh." Heather shrugged uncomfortably. "It's always tough adjusting to a new culture, isn't it? I've seen it in those Romanians at the fudge shop. It must have been a lot harder for her. But, well, I kind of thought you and her..."

Daniel leaned his chin on his hands and sighed. "I didn't really know her, of course. But we tried to make a go of it for a while after ... you know."

Heather nodded. She and Cindy had been told every detail of the confrontation with Lilith and the Fenris in the days following Midsummer's Day. Somehow, though, the more time that passed from those events, the harder it became to speak of them. Daniel had seen the same thing in Kate Castellano and some of the other townspeople they'd seen congregated at the Goblin Market - they would flinch away whenever anyone mentioned anything that had happened in May and June, as if the whole town had been involved in some sordid and shocking scandal that needed to be quickly and thoroughly forgotten.

Now, Daniel found that even trying to speak of those things to Heather felt like trying to swim through jelly. "Well ... all that she had to eat when she was there was, you know, their food, Glamour or whatever, so she's going to be more made up of their world than ours for a long time. And I'm not sure I quite realized before, but *they can't love*. It's foreign to their nature, giving without necessarily expecting anything in return. They think it's a kind of insanity - well, I suppose lots of folks would say they're right. Their nature and love can't exist in the same place at the same time any more than the sun can shine on something that's in shadow. Which is why, in the old stories, any of them that start to fall in love with us straightaway lose their immortality. I mean, if you think about it, that's what being mortal means, right? The big things, love and death, they both wind up being about learning to give more than you get."

Heather turned to look at him fully again. "So what did happen to her?"

Daniel continued to stare blankly at the dance floor. "It turns out she didn't need a boyfriend, she just needed a friend, period. That's what I've tried to be. Anyway, once Kate dodged the wrecking ball that smashed up her ex's empire, she sold out her own store to the speculators who were swooping in. I think she'd been planning on getting out for years before it all happened, and it was only her girls who kept her around. So three days ago she and her daughters left for a long ocean cruise to get reacquainted, and when that's done I believe she's going to look for a new home as far from this place as possible. I suspect the girls will go with her. They're all learning sign language for poor Kim."

"Leaving their dad high and dry, I suppose?"

"Actually, last time I talked to Kate, she had a lot of sympathy for Jack. When he finishes whatever jail time he winds up getting, I wouldn't be surprised if she's the one who reestablishes contact. She seems to think he may have learned his lesson."

"I suppose anything's possible." Heather waved her hand in front of Daniel's face, and he finally turned to face her again. "And what about Lily? If she ever figures out how humans love each other, is someone going to be waiting for her too?"

Daniel took a deep breath. "Possibly. I don't know. Maybe." He passed his hand across his eyes, and when he opened

them again, he saw a black-clad brunette weaving through the tables toward him clutching a scotch on the rocks like a life preserver. At first she looked unfamiliar, but then he recognized her as the young witch who had called herself the mistress of razors. His eyes flickered nervously around to search for possible means of defense, but then he saw that she was almost too drunk to stand, let alone pose much of a threat.

"How could you do it?" the makeup-smeared teenager hissed at him. "We all could have had so much. How could you bring yourself to kill it all off?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Daniel, knowing perfectly well what she meant, but hoping he could throw her off balance enough to make her go away.

"You know." The girl swayed in place as if trying to dredge the word up from deep inside herself, "Magic."

Daniel tried to consider how to get rid of the razor girl with minimal fuss, but to his surprise it was Heather who answered her. "You want magic? It's eighty-five degrees outside, and we live maybe a thousand miles from the nearest glacier, but the ice in your drink is cheap enough that if you ask the bartender nicely he might give you a glassful for free. That ought to be magic enough for anybody."

The girl stared blearily at Heather and Daniel for a moment, swaying, then snorted, turned on her heel, and staggered away.

"Wow," said Daniel. "I thought ... Remember that big fight you had with Ken about magic that day in the water park? Have you come around to his side?"

"Not really. I just said that stuff to get rid of her. Maybe something like sucromancy isn't the path I'd pick anymore, but I still believe there's some kind of magic in us." Heather stared ruefully at her missing fingers. "How can I not?" Then she looked across the bar and her eyes widened. "That idiot! I don't believe she brought him here!"

Daniel turned to look. Approaching the bar were Cindy and Philip Chee, seemingly dressed as a reenactment of the last scene of *Grease*. Philip, wearing conservative khakis and a white shirt, was leaning on a real cane that he now obviously needed to walk upright, while Cindy's hair was teased and she was dressed in some kind of skin-tight motorcycle vixen black vinyl.

In front of them like an apparition rose the diminutive figure of Mrs. Santiago. No words were spoken, but Philip lowered his head and closed his eyes in an expression of true contrition, and Mrs. Santiago put her hand on his shoulder in a sign of forgiveness, then turned and walked away.

"That one may be shaping up after all," sighed Heather. "But I hardly think Florence Nightingale syndrome is a good basis for a relationship. I told her she's seriously cruising to get her heart broke."

"It's always been my theory," Daniel observed, "that girls have a certain number of jerks that they have to work out of

their system before they get around to dating the nice guys.” Then he stiffened. Someone new was standing in the door, looking lost in the smoke-filled room. After staring a moment, Daniel said to Heather without looking at her, “Would you excuse me?”

“Go for it,” she replied gently, nudging him in the ribs. “The nice guys finish last because they’re too nice to ask.”

“Well...” Daniel swallowed hard, then stood up, and the Sugar Plum Fairy’s halo of stars seemed to swim in front of his eyes. “You’re right, I will.”

Quickly he crossed the floor, and Sondra looked up at him questioningly through her flaming hair. “Come dance with me, Sondra,” he said in a breathless rush. “When people dance, the colored lights and the people look beautiful and the nightmares go away. Come dance, please, dance with me, please come dance.”

The best part of the end of the summer for Daniel was the way he was now able to go to sleep in one place and one place only, his bed, and how once there he could walk the deep paths uninterrupted until dawn. Sometimes when he woke he felt he might have brushed by some of the shadows of Faery in the Border Realm, but his memories of dreams had gone back to being the shifting slush of images that most people retain when they wake, and he could never quite be sure. He never again dreamed of the birch forest.

On his last night in Crossroads, though, he finally sank far enough to catch a glimpse of the Twilight Land. There was a

tall woman on the other side of a gap waving, and for a moment he thought it might be Lily, and then a moment later dreaded it might be Lilith or the Sugar Plum Fairy. But then he saw it was none of those.

"Skeebble?" he asked disbelievingly.

"That's all who I'm for being," said Skeebble regally. Now that Daniel could see her more clearly, he recognized that ears were a bit longer and taller than a human's ears, but in Skeebble's new proportions they looked willowy and graceful, not grotesque. There was another change as well: a crown on her slender head.

"So you're the queen now?" Daniel asked wonderingly.

"Oh aye, aye, once a few malcontents were all bedeaft with. Glamoured me up until I was all presentable, they did. Proximity to the previous monarch was what made them turn to me."

"But Lily wasn't ... oh." Daniel swallowed. "You mean ... me?"

"Aye," said the new monarch. "All the time I was for spending in your dreams. There's something you may not have been knowing about us, Daniel. The more time we fair folk spend around you mortlings, the more - I suppose you might call it personality we end up with."

"You mean you can't just be rolled up into the clay and remade into something else very easily," said Daniel, remembering how Lilith had described the fey.

"Exactly. And between you and my mistress, I've spent more time around mortlings than any other twilight sider. There will always be part of you that remains with us." As she and the dream faded together, she added, "and the opposite as well!"

But when Daniel awoke, he could remember nothing of the dream except that that it had been pleasant.

Few visitors can resist the constant pressure to buy shirts, paintings, sculptures, and various other Crossroads souvenirs during their stay, and Daniel was no exception. When his ride to the bus station pulled up to the curb, he had two full shopping bags to bring home with him in addition to his original backpack.

"Put it all in the back of the pickup," said Cloudfoot Shantih through her open window. When Daniel had done so and climbed up to the passengers' seat, Rakshasa beside him opened one eye to look at him lazily, then shut it again.

"Really, I could have walked," said Daniel as the truck lurched into gear, "but I do appreciate your giving me a ride."

Mrs. Shantih waved dismissively. "Least I could do."

The truck jolted and rattled as it turned the corner. It would be a short ride, and after much thought, Daniel had decided which question he would most like to ask. As a resource, Mrs. Shantih had always been a spotty source of answers, but she seemed to be the only one left who would still agree to talk about the other world. "Umm, about, you know, our adventures.

There was one thing I still wanted to know. The Morcan. What was it really? Where'd it come from? Do you have any idea?"

Mrs. Shantih took her everpresent cigarette out of her mouth and tapped it into her overflowing ashtray. "From the stories I heard, it was just an ordinary rock until someone a long time ago believed it was something more. Believed hard enough, you know. A strong enough belief can do amazing things." Then she shoved her foot on the brake. "And here we are."

Daniel thanked her again, unloaded his things from the back of the truck, and watched her pull away. Then he hoisted on his backpack and paused for one last look up and down the main street of Crossroads.

In a crack of the sidewalk nearby rested a smooth, white pebble. Balancing carefully, Daniel bent down, picked it up, and slipped it into his pocket. Then, whistling, he stood and turned to go into the darkness of the bus station, and from there on to wherever the road he had chosen would wind up taking him.