

MERCURIAL

Book 1

STRANGER

Lenna Mahoney

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Please visit the Mercurial website at <http://mercurial.info/> for information and the eventual sequel.

## READING AND PRINTING SUGGESTIONS

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{:- 1 -;}

The patio light had made Ivy visible by the time she stepped up to the glass door and looked through, but Bunderbye hadn't noticed her yet. He was sweeping upholstery stuffing, broken glass, crushed doll faces, and other waste from the ravaged household into a box taped to the carpet. A mop and basin stood next to one of the graffiti-covered walls, and a vacuum cleaner waited in the foyer.

It wasn't what she'd expected.

*So what did you expect? To find him on a pedestal in the Temple of Conquering Heroes?*

"...that utterly destroyed Madrid yesterday remains unexplained. The electrical storm was of unprecedented violence and scientists say the scale of energy released by it can only be conceptualized by comparing it to a nuclear explosion." The radio was branded with the ChirpFellow cartoon; it must belong to the Briarson boy.

She recognized Bunderbye easily: his narrow face and dark hair and eyes, and his nose broken near the bridge, an old break. There were more bruises on his face and arms now; they'd had three days to reach their glory. The cut lip was half-healed, the black eye extraordinary. And he stood a little crooked as he swept.

She rapped cautiously on the glass. Bunderbye turned, startled and ready to defend—was he reaching for a now absent gun? Then he peered sharply out at her though the reflected glare. Recognizing her easily, smiling warmly, carrying the push-broom with him, he unlocked the door. She came in and felt the impact first of his pleasure and surprise, then of the well-lit despoiled family room.

"...coming only three months after the unforeseen explosive destruction of the planet Mercury, has terrified..."

He turned off the radio. Ivy had never in her life felt as self-conscious, or perhaps self-aware, as she did while Bunderbye studied her in the silence. She took stock of the room to gain time for something like self-possession. Her eyes were drawn again and again to the graffiti. A huge 5 in a teardrop. EMPIRE A 2 Z. AZA! A pentagram drawn not with straight lines but sickle-curves. FEAR THE DARK. Urine-splashes.

End tables collapsed in pieces, trampled books, and floor lamps bent and fallen. On the floor by the lamps, the marred and disframed family photos that had guided her. New white-and-gold curtains hung by the new glass door. Out on the patio, a black beetle stomped a meandering path in the light by the cat-food bowls. Standing over them

was the reflection of Bunderbye gazing at her curiously, still with that private warmth. She turned to face him.

“Is anyone else here?” She made that a whisper in case they were.

“The Briarsons are staying with the rest of their family in town for a few more days. Closer to the hospital than here.” He didn’t whisper.

“How are they doing?”

“They’re holding up.” He sighed. “Better than they look on the news.” Another pause. “The place needs cleaning up before they come home again.” He put out his hand and she shook it, finding it easier to look at this hand of his than at his intent face.

“Jeremy Bunderbye.”

“um? Ivy Langbourne.”

“It’s been three days. I was afraid you wouldn’t show up till the trial.”

She paused an instant when she saw the size of his relief. *Of course you never thought to tell him how to contact you!*

“Oh no, not the trial,” she blurted in consternation, and some amusement at it, “they might recognize me. No no no no.”

Jeremy laughed, and put a hand on his ribs and tried to stop, and kept on laughing until he was empty. Ivy was piqued.

“They’re still sure you were a boy!” He looked down at her with a quantity of wry humor. It almost hid the glint of plain male appreciation.



Jeremy watched Ivy laugh in scorn, snort in surprise, put her hands on her hips, yank a hand off again to gesture widely. Yeah, that got her. Outrage wins out over shyness.

He’d thought she might clean up pretty, but he’d expected the quirky dashing kind of prettiness. She was more contained than that. He might not have recognized her in daylight and a dress. Here, with night behind her, he had no trouble.

Her clothes were almost as dark and baggy as last time, a man’s shirt, but even so. Look at her mouth, and the slim wrists and the smooth brown hair. *Some boy!*

“They really did? I thought that was, it wasn’t just something to trick me out of hiding? They still think that? Isn’t that the damndest thing!”

“A hippie boy,” he told her. “Some white kid running with the Aza gang, who grew a soul almost too late.”

“HA! Well, I had my hair ponytailed and greased back out of my way, but the clothes aren’t that shapeless,” she complained. He agreed but he’d pick a different moment to say so.

She paused. “It was kind of you,” she said with care, “not to

disabuse them. I never want to have to explain...”

Seeing his opening, Jeremy put up a hand to mean wait-a-minute. She stopped explaining at him. He went to the foyer and killed the lights there and in the kitchen. Hand on the switch for the living room lights, he paused to anticipate her reaction. He flipped the switch. Yeah, it was dim enough but there was still plenty of light from the hall and patio. She couldn't misinterpret and think he'd hidden in the dark in the trad way. He looked her in her half-puzzled face and faded.

“That's why I didn't tell them,” he said. Let her hear his voice coming from nothing. Then she'll be sure.

“You can do it too!” Ivy took a couple of steps toward him. He stayed invisible. “I can't believe I didn't notice.” She grinned suddenly and looked through him even harder. “I suppose there were distractions.”

“It isn't supposed to be noticed.”

“That saves me a lot of explaining!” *Bet on that.*

Jeremy unfaded. Look at that smile. She couldn't have had anybody to talk to about this. It must have been months for her as it had been for him.



Ivy made a close orbit of the planet Awe when she saw him vanish, and never mind how likely it seemed that Jeremy Bunderbye was the same kind as she was. (*Whatever on Earth that was.*) She couldn't regard him as anything but one of a kind.

“How long have you had the power?”

“Twenty-two years.” The corners of his mouth lifted in a wry vee, and his eyebrows rose at the inside ends. Ivy guessed he was recalling his own starting days. Would he have been in his twenties then?

“That's approximately eighty-eight times as long as me.” *Please train me...*

He switched on the living-room light. The broom, left leaning against the wall, turned maliciously and slipped away when he touched it. Swiftly he reached to catch it. He missed, grimacing.

“What?” Ivy knew it must be another three-day-old injury, though if it were serious the Briarsons of all people surely wouldn't have put him back to work.

“Bruised ribs.”

“Do you mind if I help?”

Jeremy considered her for an extended moment. All of his smiles were wry and pointed at the bottom, she concluded, even this one that was the softest she'd seen from him.

“Wouldn't be a first.”



Ivy hunkered down, picking up salvageable debris as they talked. She glanced up at him to see if he agreed with her choices. He did.

“I’ve been experimenting the last two months,” she said, “but there’s only so much I could... Is it all right if I ask questions? Lots of questions?”

“Who, what, where, when, why, and how?” See if they taught that in her school days, too.

“Ha! And, how much? How much can I trust it? What are the limitations?”

They took their loads through the kitchen.

“Limitations on fading? Light brighter than twilight, unless it’s moonlight. Gold, diamonds, sunflowers, or heliotrope if we wear them or carry them. Other nightrunners can see you if they’re faded too.” What else could catch her off guard? “Cats see us during the new moon.”

“Nightrunners? Is that what we’re called?” Curious as a stray cat at new moon. It was a pleasure to feed her.

“We’re called lots of things.” He laughed. “Stick to what we like to be called. Nightrunners, nyctanthropes, nyctads, lurkers, runners, lopers, were-shadows.” He aimed the polite finger at her. “Don’t ever say darkies.” Then he realized he’d gotten carried away. She could ask some troublesome questions now. He reminded himself, the surest way to be careful what he said was to be careful what he thought about.

She stayed quiet a moment. Jeremy scrubbed at the high graffiti. She wiped the mess lower down. That was the latrine job, he’d meant to do it himself but she’d given him a look and moved in on it.

“Huh.” She looked intrigued. “Why is gold a problem?”

Good. She hadn’t caught it.

“Because it has the nature of the sun.” *There, he thought, magic is a safe subject. Even people who don’t believe it take it for granted that somebody always has.*

“The sun? That sounds like magic.” Her smile said discomfort. “I’d noticed my wedding ring interfered with, with fading, but I figured it was an emotional block.”

“You’re married?”

No wedding ring, right, there’s a reason for that. But what about three nights ago? What kind of idiot husband let her go unarmed to do that?

She hadn’t missed a thing about his reaction.

“I don’t know whether I’m married,” she said.

He stared at her. She looked back at him directly, quiet and unhappy.

“My husband disappeared a few months ago. I don’t have any idea—”

“During that wave of missing persons?” A yank and a nightrunner in one household. *There’s a coincidence.*

“That’s right.”

He glanced down at her and away again. The polite thing now was to pay attention to the wall.



*He isn’t much like Mark, is he?*

Then Ivy ejected that from her mind.

All of the walls of the room (pale pink) needed to be cleaned. The scrubbing was heavy work that made it hard to talk without grunting, and that made an excuse for not talking except in the most functional way.

Jeremy grunted now and then, when his ribs ached, and was always looking the other way when she glanced at him. The privacy he gave her was not wholly welcome because it made it too easy to watch him. *But if that’s not what you wanted, why did you come here?*

She ejected that too.

He called it “nightrunning.” There it was, a thing with a name, and what kind of a life did it mean her to have from now on? In some parallel universe, in some alternate history, Ivy Langbourne hadn’t become a nightrunner. Now there in that universe was an Ivy whose life had comprehensible implications. It could even be that she still had a husband.

Out with that.

She glanced, and confirmed that Jeremy wore no wedding ring. Around his neck was a thin steel chain pulled down by some pendant under his shirt. He hadn’t had that three nights ago. Something the Azas had taken, that had been returned to him?

Another sidelong dart of her eyes told her that he was almost done with his scrubbing. The next logical step would be to vacuum up the tiny needles of glass. Ivy was not about to let him push that vacuum cleaner himself.



Jeremy stretched knowledgeablely. By today he was an expert on how not to stretch. He was satisfied. The living room looked like humans might live there again someday. The carpet didn’t glitter. The graffiti were ghosts. The savable parts of the end tables were stacked on the couch along with the undamaged books and photos. He heard Ivy emptying the washbasin into the toilet. Good thing he’d cleaned the

bathrooms and the kitchen before she got here. That had been a puking kind of job.

He killed the living room light and looked east through the glass door. The moon was barely up, judging by the glow behind Green Mountain. That made it not long after eleven. They had hours of good running time before dawnlight. He saw Ivy's reflection checking her watch.

"Leave the furniture for the repair crew tomorrow..." He peeled the manufacturer's label off the glass. "I could use a nightrun."

She looked at him questioningly. The eager student was back.

"Want to come along?" He locked the door, bending to place the bar. A pang, ribs again.

"What about your ribs?" she asked. Observant.

"Best thing for them."

{:- 2 -;}

There were cracked ribs, and there was exercise, and how could the two possibly be compatible? Ivy had an idea that by leaving her that question Jeremy was luring her into following him out to be told the answer. How little lure she needed...

On the porch, locking the front door, hoisting the backpack he'd taken from the hall, he went on. "A nightrun is better rest than sleeping, hadn't you noticed?"

It had better be, because she had work tomorrow; and he ought to have realized that tomorrow was Friday and alarms, not Saturday and free waking.

"Do you mean...?"

Jeremy was gone.

"Ready?" came his voice, from halfway between the old brown van and the porch trellised with scarlet runner beans.



No experience with other nightrunners, or she'd have expected that. Could be she's the only one who emerged in Spokane. There, she faded. Looks like she wonders if the joke's on her. *Don't get touchy, student.*

"Watch me," he told her. "Now I'm faded." Then he unfaded. Ivy and the pearly clear sight of the faded condition both disappeared. "Now I'm not. Could you see the difference?" He repeated, showing as little amusement as he could manage at her dark frown of concentration.

"I'm not really sure. It's awfully subtle."

"Takes experience. Some things about this you get right away. Others you have to grow into, the way a baby does. We'll work on it."

What else won't she know about?

"How about a run to the river?" he asked.

"That's fine." The voice of a woman with reservations. With a husband.



Nightrunning had precisely the feel of running in the very best dreams, long bounding, gliding, not hampered by wind-rush or effort. On the third night of finding herself faded, she'd half-blankly gone out her door and into a run in spite of all her fears. The run was a craving that built energy instead of consuming it.

Now she saw that how nightrunning looked was not far from how it felt. Jeremy ran in an unstrained sliding extending trust of the air. He was an impala, a swallow. He was nothing of the kind, there was nothing like him.

He made Ivy stretch to follow him. Her instinctive urge to nightrun hadn't troubled to tell her reasoning mind of how far she could push her power. She trailed Jeremy along the loop in the ranch's gravel driveway, gaining speed powerfully on each easy step, the sensation of acceleration a visual and visceral thing, her long hair and scalp half aware of it, her skin entirely unaware. The pastures and pine hills were brilliant with the pallid color and surreal clarity of the particular night vision that came along with the invisibility.

Jeremy swerved south between the poplars that lined the upwind edge of the driveway, and his swerve flew into a leap. Without looking down, he cleared the four-foot llama-containment fence like a breeze turned into a body.

Ivy cleared it too, staring it down into submission, and she landed running. She was a steeplechase natural and she did it with her very own legs. *National Velvet, eat your heart out. To hell with gravity.* She paced Jeremy through the fields, over the next hurdle. Over and over they ignored every property line and marker, and for a while she giggled after every fence. One or two appaloosas wondered about it.



She was laughing back there. Good, but there's a car way down the road ahead. Make sure she knows how to deal with headlights. Jeremy beckoned her and gave her a running explanation. How you had to approach a car from behind, along the angle of its imaginary wake, then run by the side middle of the car where there weren't lights. She was dubious. Didn't like to admit that she didn't want anything to do with it. That was no way to learn, and she needed to learn fast.

"Taken any falls because of headlights?" he asked.

"No, I got my amateur bruises from running past a house spotlight triggered by a motion detector."

"Must have been ultrasonic. Infrared can't see you. Get yourself an ultrasound detector."

They curved out into the field and bent back their course to approach the car. Sheriff's Department, a familiar deputy.

"The speedometer says thirty-one," said Ivy, half to herself. "I'd been wondering exactly how fast..." She threw a glance of concern at the driver.

"That's Abe Kendall, the regular. Probably checking the ranch for sightseers and souvenir thieves."

“Was he there on the night of?”

“Yeah. He took my statement.”

The close quarters called on his attention, but he spared a glance back at Ivy. As she ran she leaned a little off-balance away from the side of the car. It reminded him of an amateur climber leaning close into the rock, that wrong-way instinct. He led her back out into the field, angling to dodge the tail-lights. They swung back to the southbound course. Highway 206 and Forker would still have some traffic. Go by way of the forest instead.



Finally, finally they reached the river shore, an unimpressive steep little weedy dirt-bluff that even a nightrunner’s sure feet couldn’t take at a run.

“How could you be sure my reflexes would be good enough for all that?” Ivy closed her eyes to find out whether she could still see pine trunks bouncing themselves toward her and past at thirty miles per hour. Yes. Her eyes burned because she hadn’t dared to blink. She would have liked to sit down on the granite gravel beach and demand a rest, but as usual the run had invigorated her and naturally he’d know that.

“No reason they shouldn’t be.” He was looking out over the much-dammed Spokane River, two hundred mighty feet of breadth. His expression had more to do with distant impatience than amusement. She thought of a Zen Master training his disciple with a Buddhist shillelagh, whack! but Master Bunderbye wouldn’t use any club smaller than a pine tree.



Laughing again. She’s fine. Let’s try it.

“We can run on water,” he told her.

“No.”

“Yes.” He measured the beach one more time. Seventy feet long, plenty for a run-up, and wide enough for two.

“I can’t swim.”

“Then don’t stop running once you’re out there.”

“No.”

He grabbed her hand. She looked like she had too much pride to plead but wished she didn’t. If he couldn’t convince her on this, how could he warn her about all the rest?

“Run the shore till we’re up to speed, then turn out. If you slow down to normal you’ll sink me too.” He pulled at her and she came unstuck. Like hauling a dwarf mule. “Come on!”



*Weren't you thinking you wanted to learn from him?*

Ivy ran. It felt horribly like running away from. Her feet didn't push down into the gravel. She distracted her mind with one last speculation about how a nightrunner's light feet could possibly have traction enough to support the acceleration. They'd run halfway down the beach, now, and Jeremy hadn't released her hand. Already he was turning her out to glide onto (*oh no, into*) the smooth night water of the river; it was too soon, surely, she hadn't reached top speed.

*You're out of your depth.*

He looked back at her, all quiet impatience and demand. He was expecting her to balk, and then he'd start her over, and that was the worst he was expecting; he couldn't be bothered to notice the water.

She was running on the river! There was moonlight under her feet!



She'd gone along with him. Maybe there was hope.

Ivy flew like a freed phoenix. He let her have her hand back to improve her balance. Besides, it was a pleasure to move off and watch her independent pace. He knew she could stay with it all night.

Little piers by the shore, like hunters' traps set for boats. Nobody out fishing or gigging with lights. Here were some rapids not worthy of the name. They might as well be oil swirls on the surface. She couldn't catch foot in those.

Cars thrummed by on the road beside the river. The headlights were twenty feet up, a good hundred feet away, with shrubs to block them in most spots. River-running had always been safe here so far, but he checked the fade-border of the headlight beams once again. He could swim even if she couldn't. The thought of holding her to swim her to shore had him warm down to his wet soles.

Here were those boulders. A couple of boys ten feet up on one of the covey of granite knobs. Graffiti or adventure? No flashlights, they had the moonlight to do their sneaking with. Ivy passed the last boulder. Then she swerved toward the bar of gravel downstream of it.

"Can't stop there!" He caught her arm. "Not enough room to get up speed again!" She couldn't have had any trouble there in the shallows, though. She could walk to shore from that spot anytime she felt like it.

Their voices made the boys stare in all directions. Hard to locate sounds over water.

She'd taken his hand and ran side by side with him. He kept it that way the next few miles.



Jeremy led her off the water playing under her feet and onto the stolid coarse concrete. Her shoes squelched, small voices of dissatisfaction. Jeremy was the only element of the river that had stayed with her. Ivy put her hands on his shoulders.

“That is absolutely!” she told his eyes.

He’d known men with a hobby of bedding virgins. He hadn’t seen the sense till now. Too much timidity, too much dithering.

*She beams like Lady Moon.* There’ll be some other firsts. I can give them to her.

Jeremy’s hands lifted themselves toward her waist.



This was pure and entire joy but it was about to change, and the change wasn’t likely to be for the better if she hadn’t thought it through first. Ivy pulled her hands away from his shoulders and turned her eyes away to look at granite, and then at the river.

*You’re on the rebound. Don’t be a tease.*

It was easier to lapse back into thoughts of river-running.

“How did anyone ever find out they could do that?”

“I never heard.” He watched her intensely but smilingly. “Maybe somebody was showing off drunk on a beach.”

“O alcohol and all its wonders!” She giggled and truncated it.

“We could river-run to Idaho and back before light.”

“Oh no,” and she giggled again, abundantly, “let me put my reality back where it belongs before I try that.”

Several cars passed in close succession above them on Upriver Drive, and then another turned in at the parking lot up the steps. Car doors opened, with a burst of DNA rock that sounded like code. Ivy realized that if she were not careful and elusive she’d soon be back in the world of other-people and sopping-wet-shoes and work-the-next-morning.

“This park is Camp Sekani, right? Our house is a short walk. Would you care to visit?”

“Sure.” He showed no more enthusiasm or smile than a poker player. Of course, he had work in the morning too.



How to warn her. Now if her husband told her about it, she’d take it at face value. How much would she take from him, nearly a stranger? Last time he tried warning anybody, he might as well have whispered up his own asshole.

A month ago Mrs. Briarson had let him use their home computer for part of an evening. A favor for the new hand.

<"missing persons" AND (crisis OR emergency)>:

Search Results:

NBIE Lists of Kidnappings And Missing Persons  
NBIE Chief Wants DNA Database For Missing  
Experts Fight Over April Missing Estimates  
Custom Software to File Missing Persons  
Bank Freeze Policies In Vanishment Cases  
Families Demand Faster Process For Missing  
Vanishment Panic Sparks Natal Riots  
Telethon For Vanishment Families  
Rapture March Disrupted by Anti-Wreckers  
Congress Votes Tough on Kidnapping

Top Headlines, May 20, 2016:

AREPO Exec Gochanour Suicides  
Mercuroclysm Investigator Chides Media  
Fundie Link In RFK Assassination  
More Hauer's Disease In Pac Northwest  
BC Aid Blocked By Secesh Strife  
China Dow Reparations 'On The Way'  
Telethon For Vanishment Families  
Gochanour: Space Mining No Bubble  
HPL Studio Funded by Aza Extortion?  
AREPO Stock Sinks Market

Searching for Mercury was a waste. Too much hype. The same computer animation kept showing up every time he thought he'd finally got plain text.

“Disaster on the far side of the sun: Mercuroclysm, March 23, 2016. Virtual re-enactment.”

There was the explosion fireball, a glorified version of what the orbital relay sat had transmitted. There was the spotted Sun shining through the cracks in Mercury. There were the dry rocks of all sizes tumbling in outer space.

Ha. There on the desk, on the flier for corral fencing, was a paperweight with a bit of yellow metal from Earth and a hologram plaque.

***AREPO***  
***MASTER MINERS OF THE SOLAR SYSTEM:***  
***WE'LL GET GOLD FROM MERCURY!***  
***ALCHEMISTS EAT YOUR HEARTS OUT!***

Anomaly searches had found him a few facts. He took down notes.

*no recent poltergeist news  
freak tsunami at Pitcairn on Mon. 5/16, simultaneous  
satellite photos 'defective'*

Next, he set up the search that he hoped nobody would ever trace. Try to find the nightrunner stories, the early warning.

<(psychi\* OR polter\*) AND mad\*> (English only):

The folding door behind him rattled.

**BREAK.**

“Do you wish to restart the computer? Yes No”

“Can I have it soon?” Danny Briarson was missing his games.

Yes

“Danny, don’t bother the man!” Danny’s mother was missing his manners.

“Yeah.” He closed his pad. “All yours. Thanks for letting me on.”

Danny wandered around the pool table, looking for the cue ball. He rolled it into the bumpers.

“What were you looking up?”

“AREPO.”

Danny arrived at the computer. The notepad was pocketed, the searches wiped.

“This same AREPO, right? The space miners.” Danny picked up the paperweight and looked up at him for appreciation. “Do you know what AREPO stands for?”

“In French? No.”

“You don’t, J-fellow?” The kid loved to lecture. Passed on the load he got from his big sisters.

So Jeremy spelled out what he did know, the coincidence or the clue. His vote was for coincidence.

S A T O R  
A R E P O  
T E N E T  
O P E R A  
R O T A S

“That’s what it used to stand for. A magic square in Latin.”

“So?” prodded Danny.

“Just so.”

Nothing less interesting in the world, to Danny. *Good luck to him.*

He found the Briarson women out in the front room, along with the TV and the family collections. One display case of fuzzy animal dolls with porcelain chubby-baby faces. Another of statuettes, paintings, more stuffed animals, every one of them a dragon. Porcelain plates and home-bound books. A llama’s family tree framed behind glass. Next to that, the family photos. The shoulder-high TV screen announced, “Tonight’s classic cinema, *Nowhere To Go But Down.*” That added to the dragons wasn’t a good omen. *Good luck to them all.*

“Thanks for the use of the computer,” he said to Mrs. Briarson.

“It’s no problem, Jeremy, let us know any time you need a little time.”

He looked back at them from the foyer. Mrs. Janine Briarson, maybe a few years younger than him, maybe the same age. Some black women had such smooth faces nobody could guess their age. Pretty Cindy Briarson, fifteen, dressed like she cared about boys and handsome clothes. Luce Briarson, taller but thirteen, dressed like no such things ever existed.

*Can you warn them?*

“Dave changed his mind.” Mrs. Briarson thought he was waiting for an assignment. “He said, tell you, first thing tomorrow is make sure the barn fans work.”

“After that, the new feed troughs?”

“That’s what the man said. G’night.”

“Night.”

Outside he walked away from the front door, by reflex checking the depth of the evening light. Not fadable yet.

Mr. Briarson came striding across the driveway toward his ranch house. His headset was still on, so he’d been using his bracer as he drove in.

“Evening.”

“You’re still here?” He sounded like no dinner and thorny nerves.

“Danny lent me some computer time.”

“There are Net coffeeshops down in Spokane.”

No surprise he’s touchy about sharing his home. “Yeah. Sorry to bother you.”

A couple of llamas ambled over to the pasture fence to see what the bosses were up to. This is a good ranch he’s made. Is he going to lose it to the Dragon? How to warn him without giving myself away?

“It’s a good ranch.”

“Uh-huh.” Mr. Briarson yearned toward his door.

“Hope there’s something in reserve in case of trouble.”

“You sound like an insurance salesman, Jeremy.”

*Strike one.*

“You always have to have a fallback position,” he pointed out. “Something like a second bank account in another county...”

“A spare roll of toilet paper...” Briarson replied with tolerant humor.

*Strike two.*

“A whole stockpile of supplies and a couple of guns.”

Briarson’s face tightened and he stared.

“Now you sound like a survivalist.”

*Strike three.* Forgot how these people have a horror of self-defense. They treat it as if it was spitting in a god’s face.

“You have to have backup.” *You’ve got to find a way to put it across without saying too much.*

Briarson passed by him and looked back, his hand on the doorknob.

“Thanks, but you don’t need to be concerned about us. Good night.” The door closed sharply.

He looked out to the horizon. Right then a meteor burned across the western sky. Not an omen, it happened too often, only another reminder. *Two months and counting.* Try warning them again after Madrid.



Ivy watched Jeremy’s face as they walked and reminded herself not to be self-centered. He was brooding but it didn’t have to be about her. Back at the river she’d retreated from him because, now that she’d had a chance to think about it, because she didn’t want to be dragged into any man’s romance by the mere fact he was a fellow nightrunner. But she wasn’t actually so guilty of that; she hadn’t known Jeremy was a nightrunner when she returned to the scene of the crime to find him. She hadn’t known anyone else was.

She could fairly describe him as hatchet-faced when he looked like this. She could fairly describe him as the living opposite of Mark.

Here was their house. She touched Jeremy’s arm to turn him at the driveway.



Her home and her husband’s was a gray split-entry house with a turquoise door and the only tall front hedge in the neighborhood. The house was maybe 1800 or 2000 square feet, a college-degree house. Why had a married college woman come to the ranch three nights ago? Maybe she was a cop’s kid.

“Are you coming in?” Ivy hesitating at her door, wondering why he’d stayed out in the yard. The house was her married life, that was why.

“Let me use the bathroom. Then I’ll come back out here and sit.”

The floor and carpet were light-colored. They needed good manners. He took off his wet shoes and socks and left them at the door. Ivy looked at him, smiled in appreciation, and did the same. She moved around opening and closing drawers while he was in the drop-off. When he came out she handed him a small towel and a big one.

“What?”

“If we’re going to stay outside, I’d rather have dry feet than feet-cicles. That’s one towel for drying and one for wrapping your dry feet in.”

“We won’t get that cold.” She acted like she heard implications in that. Her expression was one to remember. “Runners don’t get cold easily.”



*Rebound Woman! Her special powers let her bounce from man to man at the speed of light!*

Ivy snickered bitterly to herself. She pointed him at the door to the back deck and he led the way out through the dining room. She shut off the lights nearest the glass door and faded as she went through. Jeremy was already faded. He threw a closed look back toward the house and settled himself on the padded lounge surface of the deck, taking off his backpack. Sitting not very much next to him, she dried her feet, trying to think like an experienced nightrunner.

*Know your limits.* First, she noted the thin set of glimmering lines around the lit zone of the dining-room floor. They outlined the area where she couldn’t stay faded. What else? No car headlights would reach back here. They wouldn’t be overheard because the open bedroom window at the Premzic house next door was in front. And they were blessedly out of view of old Mr. King across the street, who tended to stay up late at his window with curiosity as importunate as his bladder.

Jeremy lay back, one knee up, and studied the sky. The silence threatened to develop gravity and suck all possible conversation into itself. Reluctantly Ivy thought back to the ranch.

“*Negotium perambulans in tenebris.*”

“Hmm?” He was quizzical.

“It’s from the Bible, I think. ‘The peril that walketh in darkness.’”

“Been known to happen.” He gave her a quick knowing look and then gazed at her more probingly. She tensed, wished she hadn’t, and crossed her arms loosely over her stomach.

“At the ranch—did you ever do that kind of thing before?”

“I read up on it ahead of time, but...” She wrapped her arms tightly around her knees and turned to face him for a grilling. “No, I’m not even a ‘gifted amateur.’”

“How did you get into the house?”

*Stupidly*, she thought of replying. But his tone was professional curiosity and self-recrimination wasn’t the professional response.

“I went through the garage.”

“Past the guard!” He propped himself on his elbows.

{:- 3 -:}

“The police or the SWAT team, whoever was responsible, had posts set up in a ring round the house,” Ivy said. “All of the officers were wearing goggles, for infrared I’d guess, and there was a giant mutant TV. I had the impression it viewed through the walls of the house but I couldn’t make any sense of the image. The police had spotlights, too. Those were off, maybe because of the full moon.”

“Turning off the spots was part of the no-harassment deal,” Jeremy corrected.

“The negotiated deadline, right. Listening to the cops in the siege line, or whatever they call it, didn’t tell me much more than the news had.

“I was wearing—you know what I was wearing. It wasn’t that I thought that dark clothes and a blackened face would hide me if a light hit me, but at least it would be a normal excuse, relatively normal, for why I hadn’t been seen sooner. I did hope no one would spot me as a woman at first sight, but I never thought it would last... ha.

“I reached the outside garage wall, which was blazing with moonlight, and I froze. Then the guard in the garage looked out the doorway—the door had been broken off the hinges—”

“They used me to break it off when they caught up with me.”

“Oh...” Ivy glanced at his ribs. “Who made the 911 bracer call that the Azas jammed, then? The news didn’t seem to have that straight.”

“Luce Briarson. She didn’t know that Matt, the other ranch-hand, had punched the emergency beacon before he ran for the woods. She kept trying to call for help. They might not have found where she’d hidden if her bracer keys hadn’t beeped.”

“God, that poor girl... When the guard looked out the door at me I nearly fainted. But it was the best thing to happen because it thoroughly convinced me I was invisible. I peeked after him—down at crouch level, the way you’re supposed to—before I followed him back in. I knew he couldn’t turn on the lights. The news had said that police had shut off the power.”

“You trusted the news with your life?” He sat up straight, outraged and glaring.

“um, I’d also heard it from the police. Remember I told you I’d listened there.

“There must have been all sorts of opportunities for me in the garage if I’d recognized them. You know that labyrinth of boxes and equipment. I especially noticed the hammer on the workbench. I would have used it on the guard but I could picture the hammer

punching down into his brain, I could see that scene more clearly than anything in the garage.”



She'd looked at the hammer and looked away, swallowing an incipient heave and realizing she had no idea how hard a blow was hard enough to knock a man out. Her heavy flashlight would be safer; if she hit too hard, it would leave a long dent rather than a deep pit. She looked at pebbles on the floor. If she tossed some of those, the guard might go check the noise and give her access to the door into the house. But the bottle and the powder-packets next to the guard disagreed with that plan. The guard was drugged and just might start shooting, and then the hostages...

She looked at three or four stuffed birds up on a shelf, and one of them was a ringneck pheasant cock with all the stylish long tail feathers.

The guard rubbed his tickled forehead, but she flirted the tip of the feather away from him sharply. Standing at arm's plus feather's length she kept up the faint tickling, dodging, and tickling again, fornicating his forehead, neck, hand, nose, lips. Finally, leaning closer, not breathing, she draped a strand of cobweb over his eye.

“Motherfuckin shitbag spiders!”

And the guard, swiping a hand over his face, went to the moonlight shining in at the outside door to brush himself off at snarling length. The house door didn't squeak for her.



“I want to shake your hand.” Jeremy's expression was vastly sardonic. Ivy put out her hand in perplexity and he shook it hard with both of his. “Because I hope some of your luck will rub off on me!”

“Um, well... that put me in the kitchen, where the problem was the crunchy broken plates on the floor. Then the next shift of guards came out of that door on the left end of the hall.”

“Luce's room.”

“Oh, God... I think my memory veers a little here, because I don't remember moving. I remember looking down the hall from the kitchen and feeling appallingly in the wrong place. Next I remember looking at my bracer, but by then I was huddled up behind the overturned recliner. And of course I wasn't actually wearing the bracer because months ago I'd found it kept me from fading. I paid some attention to the shift change but most of the time I was trying not to throw up. After that, I remember standing over the new guard who was between the foyer and the glass door.”



The second shift had been two men in their twenties, one black/oriental, one hispanic/oriental or perhaps a Filipino. Yes, these almost had to be Azathoth's Mongrels, the news had gotten it right. She didn't focus on their clothes or insignia. They were carrying so many guns that nothing else they wore was worth noticing.

"Had a good time suckin yourself off, Gitop?" A voice in the kitchen taunted the garage guard she'd bypassed.

"Shit no, the meats did it for me! Hey fives, I fuckin hope you like spiders!"

"Hey, fuckup," said the Aza who was relieving the guard at the main doors.

"Hey, upfuck, gotta take my cunt-break," was the response.

And there was some energetic, closely descriptive discussion that made her plug her ears.



Jeremy's mouth tightened, but he said nothing more than, "What are 'meats'?"

"The police, because they're all supposed to be overweight."

Ivy started to form more words, retreated, retrenched, winced and looked down, started slowly. "So the guard at the glass door... he was sitting next to a long gun and had a handgun in his waistband. He had a bag of potato chips that were spilling out on the floor along with his cigarette ashes and he was relaxed. He was smiling in a way that I would have thought was pleasant in another context but, after what they'd just been... Never mind. I..."

"You see, the garage guard was a different matter, I could opt out of knocking him out. I figured I could leave him in my line of retreat because once I was in the house there were other escape routes. But this guard... I couldn't leave him at my back."

"Right." Jeremy didn't show any sign of disapproval, whatever he might be thinking. She sighed.



She nearly remembered how she'd hit the guard with her flashlight. After that she had to crush his cigarette, which had dropped out of his mouth onto ripped-out book pages (handbound edition of Beowulf). His guns she pushed back under the couch—if she couldn't use them, the Azas couldn't either. The latrine smell told her it might be too late to move the guard before he left a stain that could be a clue. She dragged the grotesquerie into the back rec room behind the pool table, which had been used to catch vomit. His lips sagged and jiggled as she tugged, and his feet turned inwards. When she had cached him out of sight she wiped the flashlight on his shirt, and only then thought to pull

up his eyelids and look for the mismatched pupils that would mean cerebral hemorrhage. But there was no way to tell whether he wasn't hemorrhaging at all or simply hadn't begun to show the signs. Did it make a difference? Not really.

Ivy rubbed her hands on her pants, pulled up her long shirt-tails, and wiped the runnels from her face. She felt as if her stomach contained a heavy dollop of sloshing mercury and as if she were floating up into the top of her skull and as if her eyes were too far open and could never close again. She no longer felt paralyzed with fright. So far she hadn't felt the bloodlust she'd feared to discover in herself.

She unlocked the front door and the broken glass door and returned to the garage door to silently lock it. There were framed photos on the floor; she looked them over to make sure she could distinguish between the family and the pirates.

The first door on the left of the hallway was a bathroom in a barbarous condition. The first door on the right was almost closed. She crouched and listened at it, heard nothing, pushed it open at arm's length, waited, and peeked in at waist height.



"Why did they put you in a separate room from the other hostages?"

"Nobody told me," he said drily. "They caught me at a different time. Maybe they thought I was more trouble or less valuable. All I overheard was that the Azas had figured to snatch the kids for ransom, plus selling the girls' first pop to guys who get their joy from passing on diseases."

Ivy gulped and resisted thinking about all the other similar stories she'd heard about the new gangs, the pirate gangs.

"Were you faded when I first crept in?" she asked.

"Sure. You didn't sound like an Aza. I thought it might be a rescue but I wanted my options open. Then you went back to the bedroom door and I unfaded. Wasn't as if fading gave me any edge over you."



Of course Ivy hadn't been able to tell he was faded when she first saw him with faded vision, any more than she could tell now.

He made a noise behind her. She was jolted by terror (*but I bet it's only the family cat*), and jumped to inadequately hide behind shelves of almost-undamaged model robots. There was a heap of blankets and sheets off the bed, and in them a man. The man was gagged and bound with his arms pulled behind his back, duct tape wrapped above the elbows and above the knees. He must have heard her bump something because he was staring directly at her. She silently edged back to the

door and out of his line of sight, made herself visible, and re-entered the room, hoping that no supernatural interpretations would occur to him.

He was dark-haired and dark-eyed but white, which meant he wasn't Briarson. And he probably wasn't Aza, since they chose members from the "mongrel mixed-blood types" that Lovecraft had decried. She wondered whether the Azas had kidnapped him elsewhere and brought him here. If she didn't accomplish anything else by all this, she could get this man out. She started to carefully detach his tape gag, but he shook his head and jerked his arms at her. Arms freed, he dealt rapidly and brutally with the gag while she cut the tape on his legs with the utility knife from her car.

"Quiet!" she whispered. He made a small scornful sound that she could translate with ease: as if she had to tell him to stay quiet!

"Who are you?" He didn't take time to remove the tape bonds, only smoothed them down where they were.

"Help, I hope."

"Can you spare the gun?"

She looked where he was looking, at the realistic little dark gun-butt sticking out of the pocket of her oversized man's shirt.

"It's an ammonia squirtgun." He stared at her as if she had just that moment incontrovertibly appeared out of thin air. "But there are a couple of real guns under the couch."



"Unbelievable!" Jeremy stared at her again, closed his eyes, and shook his head in blunt negation.

"I can't argue..." But at the time she'd been completely certain that her inexperience would make a gun no net benefit to her or to the hostages.



Sloppy bumping steps in the hall. Hell. She'd dropped out of sight right away, she had good reflexes anyway. (*Who was she?*) He made himself look captive again. Whack, the door flung open and banged doorknobs with the closet door next to it.

The Aza stood tipped. He looked at the room as if he'd walked into some kind of foreign museum display. His brain was twisted right around in its socket. Was all of the gang that veer-witted now? If they were, it meant blood and death for the Briarsons if the cops moved in when the deadline was up.

"Wha'd'fuck," the Aza groaned, and opened his fly. His stream didn't splash off anything invisible. *How'd you like that for an ammonia squirtgun?*

The Aza stumble-footed out. Slam, somewhere on the bedroom end of the hall.

“Guards?” he whispered to her a moment later, rubbing the strength back into his hands.

“There’s one awake in the garage, one unconscious in the back room, and two others that they relieved.” She’d unfaded again, still concealing her fading from him. That at least showed good sense. “I don’t know if there’re more.”

“You knocked one out? Won’t be long till they find him.”

“But they’d changed shifts just before that, you must’ve heard.”

“I know where some of the hostages are. You’ll help me get them out?” He crouched at the door and peered into the hall. Nothing.

“I’ll help as much as I can,” she said uncertainly.

He made his unfaded dash into the bathroom, closing the door not quite to the click point.



Jeremy stretched out on his side, leaning up on his elbow. Now she’s embarrassed all over again. Cute.

“You know how long I’d been tied up?” Ouch. Not enough padding under that elbow. He rolled onto his back. “And then that Aza came in and did what I needed to.”

Ivy laughed quietly, looking down.

“um, well, no one ever needs to in the movies.”

“If you ever see me acting like a movie hero, shoot me.” She laughed again, flashed him a smile that woke him up, then cocked her head.

“I’m sorry, but I still don’t see why you didn’t fade. Why was that a good tactic?”

“The Aza had to see me where they left me or he’d have raised the Wild Hunt.”

“But after that?”

“You didn’t need the distraction.” *You think I wanted to trust a squirtgun ninja?*

“Hmph.” Tight-eyed annoyance.



They pulled the rifle and automatic out from under the couch and cat-prowled down the hall. On the left, Luce’s room. Men’s voices. Ahead, the master bedroom. Some kind of radio? Cindy’s room to the right. A few hours ago he’d heard knocking on the wall that Cindy and Danny shared. Nothing now. Look in anyway.

Some sort of perfume smell. Cindy’s makeup was thrown around. Lipstick insults written over the Christian slogans on Cindy’s posters.

Dave, Janine, and Danny were all here, taped the way he'd been. All three of them had been beaten on. The Azas hadn't kept Janine with them but her skirt was torn and stained. No blood on the back of Danny's shorts, and he looked alive behind the eyes. They were better-off than he'd expected from what he'd heard early on. How was the ninja woman taking this? Shell-shocked but listening at the door.

"Guard the door," Jeremy whispered to her, setting down the guns. "Your knife?"

While he worked on Dave Briarson, he asked the ninja, "Exactly where are the guards?"

"One in the garage, probably sitting near the house door." Pause as she listened at the closed door, not turning to him. "Another one I knocked out fifteen minutes ago, he's by the pool table. I looked around the house outside and didn't see any."

"Where's the rest of the gang?" he asked Dave Briarson, and, "Is the pipe-wrench still under the kitchen sink?"

The Briarsons had too much to say even in whispers.

"They dragged our girls away and I haven't heard them scream..."

"Jeremy, we thought they'd killed you!"

"Who's he?"

"Shhh, keep Danny quiet."

"Stay down!"

"We could call the police..."

"Is he one of them?"

Dave Briarson finished helping his wife and son. He picked up the handgun, looked hard at the woman. She kept turned away from the Briarsons, using the door for an excuse. Briarson's look hung up on the "gun" in her pocket. Right then Jeremy was glad the squirtgun looked real. Briarson had an itch to kill a villain and a mystery stranger might be close enough. As an armed stranger, she might be safer.

"Guard the door," he told Briarson. Keep him and the woman apart, he thought, taking up the rifle. "You," to her, "I'm going for more guns. If you hear shooting, get everyone out the window." Then hope the cops have educated trigger fingers.

Out in the hall. Fade. The pipe-wrench was still lying under the leaky sink. No need to use it on the guard in the rec room. He'd need an emergency room to wake him up. *Wasn't that too bad?* Seemed like the squirtgun was the only mistake she'd made, except... He smoothed away the drag mark into the rec room.

He opened the garage door fast and stopped it faster before it could whack the counter behind it. The guard turned around into the pipe wrench. Jeremy had to stretch to catch the guard's shotgun before it clattered on the concrete floor. The broken ribs yelled when he

stretched but it wasn't any surprise and didn't slow him. Open the circuit breakers. Pocket the superglue tube. Take the gun-belt and shotgun, all of those are loaded. Hide the rifle and the wrench, too much to carry. Leave the garage door unlocked.

His mistake was going through Cindy's door without identifying himself. The automatic's muzzle jabbed at his cheekbone and Briarson's grip was tightening. He guessed being white was all that saved him.



"It was a three-hundred-sixty-degree mess," he said. "Three of the hostages were nearly safe. They had you to get them out. I was ready to get the others. But Mr. Dave Briarson had a gun and he was as big a threat as the whole gang of Azas."

"I'm surprised you trusted me with a gun!"



After he'd left, she'd gotten up and knelt on the desk that was built in under the window, keeping her back to the room, applying someone's scented body oil to the squeaking window hinges. The boy in the ChirpFellow quail T-shirt stared at her unceasingly. Ivy wished she could let herself fade. Though she kept all but her hands behind the curtain, she could feel the weight of some police sniper's eyes on her and it frightened her not much more than the Briarsons' shadowy scrutiny.

A sound from the door made her look over her shoulder. She hadn't ever expected anything other than that the man (Jeremy? first name or last?) would return with more guns, as he'd promised. Here he was and Mr. Briarson was about to shoot him through the head. She nearly fainted, the room roared in her ears.

*If you could see yourself now, you'd know why they call us WHITE people!*

It occurred to her that if she laughed she'd be in hysterics the next moment. By the time she'd settled that thought, Briarson's gun was down and his eyes were wide. Jeremy's face ran sweat and she had no doubt it was cold sweat like hers. He closed the door, leaned against it, and set down a long gun. The boy started toward it and Mrs. Briarson grabbed him, putting a hand over his mouth.

Ivy left the window when Jeremy beckoned her abruptly. He tried to hand her one of his pistols.

"No!" She pushed it away, trusting herself with a gun no further than she trusted Mr. Briarson.

"Take it!" The anger flaring over his face convinced her.

She held the gun scrupulously, her finger hooked outside the loop around the trigger. Low-volume confusion then, as Jeremy told her to

take the Briarsons out and reconnoiter for them, as Jeremy and Mr. Briarson brusquely persuaded Mrs. Briarson to escape with Danny, as Jeremy failed to persuade Mr. Briarson to leave with his wife and son. The Briarsons hugged, tentatively, people who hoped to convince each other there wouldn't be any later memories that this had been the very last hug.

"Make it easy for the cops," Jeremy told them. "Put your hands up when you get outside." A hint of irony crossed his face.



"Did you have any trouble with them?"

"With which 'them', the Briarsons or the police? That boy badly wanted to collect the garage guard's knife, you know. I faded and looked around, and then I talked them out the door, but we didn't get far before I saw police moving in and I ran. That worked out all right, but..."

"Best thing to do."

She waited for Jeremy to finish the story—the end was his. He sat up and looked her over thoroughly, musingly.

"Can't figure out why they thought you were a boy."

That left her warm and inclined to breathe shallowly. He glanced at her house, sighed almost inaudibly, and lay down again. She looked through her glass door into her well-lit long-known rooms and suddenly it was like looking into an aquarium, a place where the native creatures lived in an entirely different atmosphere.

"What happened after I left?" she asked.

"Go read the news again."

"Jeremy, the more you don't tell me, the more I wonder what the news didn't tell me."

He grunted, or chuckled. It wasn't the sound of an eager raconteur.



"How many Azas are there?" asked Jeremy.

"I never saw them all at once," said Briarson. "Guessing, eight?"

"Two less now. The rest must be across the hall or next door."

"With my girls!" Briarson kept it to a whisper, but his face raged.

Jeremy peeked out the door. Give him a minute to cool.

"Let me go in there across the hall. Stay back here and cover the master bedroom door."

"It's my fight, Jeremy!" *Strike one.*

Wouldn't be the first time a fader got blasted by some trad who couldn't see he was there.

"I'll have to move around fast in there." That much he could tell Briarson. "I don't need friendly fire!"

Briarson looked him up and down, now with bitter-cold fury, and reached for the shotgun. *Strike two.*



“I sucker-punched him.”

“You did what?” This wasn’t what she had expected.

“Knocked him out.” Jeremy looked sharply at her, frowned, and explained reluctantly, a disappointed mentor. “I couldn’t fight faded as long as he had a gun. Couldn’t take the guns away from him, either.”

Would he, she wondered, have dealt so bluntly with a white? “In a crisis like that, couldn’t you have explained to him about fading? He was your ally.”

“Watch out for telling Christians about magic.” That was a flat, experienced admonition.



Faded again, finally. He left Dave Briarson by Cindy’s bed. A motion at the window? Better hurry, the cops are on the move. How did they know things had changed? Could they scan through walls? Out into the hall. Now he didn’t hear anything from the master bedroom. Its door wasn’t locked. Neither was Luce’s door, but there was more than one voice in there.

The master bedroom door opened quietly. It faced into a wall, he had to swing it all the way open to view the room. If it had creaked it wouldn’t have mattered. Only one Aza in the room. He was busy raping Cindy and she was crying high and breathy, not much different from a squeaking door. Staying at arms’ length, Jeremy thumped the Aza’s head with the shotgun butt. This was the guy with the red threads woven into his hair. He’d bossed the others. Jeremy shoved him under the bed, face-down, arms superglued to each other behind his back, a strip of cloth glued over his eyes.

Cindy was scratched and broken-lipped and her pampered fingernails were broken off. No cuts or deep bites, no uncontrolled bleeding. Once the Aza was out of her, she hadn’t had anything to fight so she’d passed out. He wrapped her in her mother’s bedspread and carried her to her room. He left the revolver with Briarson. Blocked that door with superglue in the lock—a half-ass barrier, but quick and quiet. He blocked the master bedroom door too.

His stomach clamped. All the rest of the gang must have gotten Luce for a consolation prize.

He stayed far back on the hinge side of Luce’s door to push it open. Another squeakless door but it bumped something on the floor. Somebody inside yelled, “Get back on watch, Brund! You asshole!” Jeremy went in fast, not bothering to crouch. Messed-up bed, but no

Luce. The room was crowded, one Aza on the bed, two on the floor, one heading for the door.

“Hey, fuckup, you can run but you can’t hide!” The Aza went out into the hall.

One of the others picked up a pair of dice from one of the heaps on the floor—money and packets and tubes of powder.

“Less change the rules! Winner gets a pile, loser gets her, she all fucked out... Hey, who gets the boy!”

“Vimel says save that fucktoy for dealin’.”

Easy targets for the shotgun butt. The one on the bed slid down onto the other two. They thought he was playing games, swore, pushed him off, crashed over. The Aza in the hall could wait.

Jeremy found Luce on the floor of her closet, some of her clothes and hangers dumped on her. Smell of piss. She might be breathing. Only parts of her arms and legs and face showed. Maybe it was an optical illusion but her limbs didn’t look like they bent the right ways. Bracing himself for cold, he gently reached down his hand to her neck. Warm.

Glass exploding and a handful of shots out in the front room. Glass crunching under leather under weight. He put his guns out of reach, sat unfaded on the bed with his open hands in sight, and waited for the cops.



Ivy blinked fast a few times, looked back toward him with her face straightened out.

“I’m still amazed you didn’t have to kill any of them.”

“No need to kill blind men who don’t know they’re blind.” He kept the other good reasons to himself.

“That’s admirable.”

“Tell Dave Briarson.” He laughed, she didn’t.

“The Aza I hit...” Her face was troubled. “Did...?”

“The one in critical condition who wasn’t shot is the one you hit.”

“I was afraid of that.” She looked away from him again. “I wasn’t sure the news had it right.” She caught her breath, pulled up her knees, put her head down sideways on them. “Amateur!” Harshly. He couldn’t see her face.

That was how professionals reacted. He gripped her arm hard, above the elbow. Ivy looked at him over her knees, startled twice, once by his hand, once by how close his face was.

“It was worth doing,” he told her. “Think about it.”

“I’m sure I will.”

Stunning eyes. Dark blue. No longer looking closely into his the way they had been an instant ago. He drew back and let his hand loosen and slide down to the roll of her turned-up sleeve.

“Will you get the blame for it?” she asked.

“No. Forensics says nothing they found in the house hit him. Dave Briarson stated that mystery boy said he knocked out the rec room guard.” He let go of her arm and leaned back. “And if I was charged, I’d get off with self-defense. You might not.”

“That’s—”

“Why wouldn’t I take the blame? I’d have hit him if you hadn’t.”

“Not as hard.”

“Probably not.” She wants blame, give her training instead. She needs it soon.

Out of pure habit, he checked the time of night. Vega stood near its peak, with a hint of the moon over the roof of the house. Maybe three more hours of full darkness.

{:- 4 -:}

Jeremy lay lax for a long pause and looked up toward the night sky. There were nearly no clouds, only a few thin interruptions of the stars, and the air came gently cool. Ivy watched him and decided, almost dispassionately, that whoever designed a figurehead for a fast ship should use him for a model. Even lying still, he gave the impression of moving at racing speed—something about the lines of his profile, the angles of brow, nose, and jaw, even the way his ears were set.

“Ivy, cracking his skull wasn’t one of your mistakes,” he finally said.

“Oh yes?” She heard her own cool tone and mentally slapped herself for it. Apparently she’d been expecting her earlier self-criticism to turn aside his judgment, and she already knew better than that.

“You don’t do cop work with a squirtgun,” he told her, giving her a hard look.

“If I’d known where to get a silencer—”

“No point in that. Silencers aren’t quiet enough to let you shoot without being heard all through the house.” He nodded. “Yeah, you needed to keep quiet. But any gun gives you control you have to have. And don’t ever conduct a building search without a partner.”

“If I’d followed those rules I wouldn’t have done anything,” she protested. “Where’s the good in that?”

“Being one of the good guys doesn’t mean you have to help get yourself taken down.” He sat up and pointed a finger at her. “That’s Superman Syndrome. A big waste of good guys.”

“If I don’t do anything, that’s just a different kind of waste.”

“A friend of mine used to say, ‘If you wanted easy decisions, you’d have reincarnated as a rock.’”

“A rock. That’s good.” She fell into a fit of chuckles. Jeremy glanced over her shoulder and she turned hastily to look. Mr. King’s white tomcat stared up at them from the stump in the back yard.

“Apparently you think I’m going to go play shadow-police crimefighter again,” Ivy said, returning cautiously to the subject.

“I hope you don’t but you probably will.”

“um, why do you hope I don’t?” *Oh, please don’t rub my nose in my own amateurishness.*

He snorted. “Because it’s dangerous, why do you think?”

“I don’t actually anticipate many openings for a repeat performance.”

“Didn’t you enjoy the excitement?” He was smiling, but it was a keen-edged smile that demanded a real answer.

“Enjoy? It’s about like hitting myself on the head with a rock, it feels so good when I stop!”

The two of them laughed the different happy laughs of the joke-maker and the joke-appreciator.

“You’ve been in the police, haven’t you?” She wasn’t in any great doubt of the answer.

“A while back. What’s your day job?”

“I’m a tech author for data-span web-pages, a sort of bastard half-engineer. I work for a consulting firm, so I handle several different clients.”

“Can’t picture you doing it,” with a small smile. “It sounds routine.”

After a pleased instant she said, “There’s always some little surprise. I fix the things that the clients thought were terribly clever, and maybe they even were before they obsolesced, and I clean up their messes for them.”

“That I can picture.” His expression made it a grateful acknowledgment.

She looked him in the eyes and lost her breath again. He looked back without moving, until his eyes widened and she looked down. As her demand for the bond with him flickered, he glanced at the cat.

“He can’t see us. It isn’t new moon,” he commented.

Ivy recalled what he’d told her back before the river-run.

“Earlier you mentioned names that we, we nightrunners, are called by. That implies there’s some number of us and someone else knows about us. Is there an organization, or a network, or a conspiracy? I never found any clues on the Net.”

“No organization.” His expression was not entirely forthcoming. “We’re maybe one in a hundred thousand. We don’t breed, so there aren’t any children. That gets rid of the reason to organize.”

“But it sounded like there was some animosity to organize against?” She probed with all due tact.

The tomcat, halfway up the stairs to the deck, froze and glared in affront at the noise.

At the top of the stairs the cat sat tall, promptly becoming an alabaster Egyptian divinity.

Circling, navigating with swiveling ears and loud sniffs, the cat began to stalk Jeremy.

The cat put his fore-paws up on Jeremy’s backpack, sniffing it cognizantly like a studious familiar.

Gradually petrifying, the tomcat looked wide-eyed at Jeremy, who eyed him back.

“No organization, so no target.” While he stonewalled without resentment.

“It’s something you’ve got a reason not to talk about.”

“Mmm.”

She circled and found a different approach. “If we don’t breed true, how—”

“We don’t breed at all.” He smiled wryly, studying Mr. King’s cat. She wondered, did Jeremy enjoy literal fencing too?

In an exuberance of caution the cat leaned far forward over its forepaws to sniff Jeremy’s shin.

“But if we don’t inherit it, how do we come to be?”

“You said it before. Magic.”

He touched the cat’s forehead with a dabbing fingertip. The cat metamorphosed into a Halloween icon, exhaled a single mad puff, and plunged down the stairs with the unregulated vigor of a balloon shot off on its own air jet.

They laughed together and Ivy kept laughing till she restarted Jeremy. He sat up taller to squint along the cat’s flight path, and restarted Ivy. She wiped her eyes and rubbed her face to stop laughing (*aren’t you glad you don’t wear makeup?*), caught his eye (it always happens), re-restarted, and put her head down to snort and grmph to a stop.

*Magic*, she thought. She glanced up at him in wonder and saw his delighted gaze. Looking away, she thought again, *Magic*. *Mark vanished as if by Magic*.



What now? A second ago she was roaring like a schoolgirl.

“Jeremy, is nightrunning white magic or black?”

Yeah, that had to come. “No such colors.”

“Maybe that was a meaningless question.” She wanted not to be laughed at, that was easy to see. “Maybe I should say... I’ve been worried about whether becoming a nightrunner meant I had to become evil in some way.”

Yeah, there’s the rest of the syndrome. She examined his reaction. Her face relaxed.

“I found out I could fade less than three months ago,” Ivy said. “It was about a week after Mark disappeared. He’d gone toward the end of Vanishing Week, after the news of it started to come out.”

She mentioned it again, so I can ask. “Did your husband take anything with him?”

“That’s just what the cops asked.” She looks like nitroglycerin teetering on a knife-edge. “No, not a thing. He handled it just the same

way as all the vanishments in the news. Those must have been a very convenient cover for him.”

“What makes you think he ran out on you?” *Ask now or forever hold your peace.*

“Well, maybe I’m just in denial!” She saw his question. “He’s been gone three months, so if he isn’t fled he has to be dead!”

Bitter. It isn’t like she’s given up on him. I could tell her he won’t be back. I could tell her he didn’t leave by choice. I know it but how do I prove it? If I use up her capacity for belief by telling her that, she won’t have any left for the warning.

*Leave it for now, he told himself. Wait and see. We have a little time.*

She was studying his face again.

“It sounded like the cops thought the same thing,” she added quietly.

“They treated you like a murder suspect?”

“It seemed so to me at the time.” Ivy shrugged, thought for a moment. “How do nightrunners usually find out they can fade for the first time?”

“By accident. I was caving, last man on the rope. The next guy up thought I’d run off and left him.”

“I think I must have faded in my sleep. I got up in the middle of the night—I don’t ever wear my ring to bed, much less my bracer—and went to the bathroom. There’s a very dim nightlight there. I couldn’t see myself in the mirror.” She rubbed her arms against a chill.

“Was it a bad dream that woke you up?”

“I don’t remember. I thought I was dreaming but when I leaned into the mirror for a closer look my breath clouded it. I hadn’t even thought of doing that as a dream-test, so it was unexpected but logical enough that I decided I must be awake.”

“You didn’t try to wake up?” She could stand some teasing.

“That wouldn’t have done any good if I’d been dreaming,” she finally hinted a smile, “I would just have dreamed I’d awakened. I have a lot of practice at that. So I turned on the light and there was my reflection, as normal as it could be. That was a relief at first, because I’d been afraid that I might be in the process of vanishing like Mark. Then I thought of another hypothesis.” She touched her neck under the angle of the jaw, took her hand away again. “This is going to sound foolish, but I thought I might be becoming a vampire.”

“No,” he said, grateful to find something he could take off her mind. “We aren’t vampires. We don’t take prey.”

“That helps. That helps a lot.” She looked him in the eyes. Her face tilted up slightly. “If I hadn’t seen you in action, you could say that and it wouldn’t mean much, but as it is...”

Overwhelmed, without another thought he leaned toward her. She was already looking away, drawn back to her confession. He stopped.

“Even before the Briarsons I’d been thinking about crimefighting,” Ivy went on. “I’d actually already been studying police technique, in a sort of police textbook if you can believe that, and I’d set my bracer to zizz me with local crime news.

“But besides that... I needed to test whether I wanted blood. I didn’t think so, but maybe I was hiding it from myself, I knew I hadn’t been thinking very well. I thought, in a situation like that I’d be forced to find out whether I craved to kill. I wondered if I’d tried to bleed Mark, without ever remembering it, or if he’d noticed something else... so he ran for his life.”

“No chance,” he said. She sighed. Months of superstition behind that sigh. “It’s only magic. Forget the fables.”

“Magic is a word that means something different to everyone who uses it.” She was back to probing and back to smiling.

“Words are like that.”

“I’m asking.”

Thinks she’s being teased, does she? “I could tell you about it all night and it still wouldn’t be anything but words.”

“Oh, get on with it, please, Jeremy?” They both laughed. A meteor crossed the sky.

“Nightrunner magic, then,” he conceded. “You know enough of that to get past the words.”

Jeremy told her nightrunner stories for fun and training. He knew which few details to keep back for now. She described her own tests of light, shadow, and fading. Suddenly she oh!ed and changed subjects. She’d figured out the gold in the circuitry was what’d kept her from fading when she wore her bracer. So he said a little on the subject of gold, the Sun, Fire, and magic theory. That was vague enough to be safe. The elements were Air, Water, Fire, Earth, Metal, and Claw (or Wood, some said), the movements were Stasis, Oscillation, and Impetus, and he didn’t know the details.

Then she noticed him checking the sky time and asked, “What sign are you?”

“That’s superstition. Planets control magic, they don’t control fate.”

She gave him back a small stubborn silence.

He passed over that and told her about a couple other stray nightrunner abilities. The easy way of getting along with animals. The little extra comfort in cold and heat. They’d been sitting a while now, though, and the cool was starting to reach them. Ivy brought out hot tea and a blanket apiece. He thought of reaching for her and making a

bed of the patio. Then he looked at her chaperoning house and wondered how many times she'd bedded out here with her husband.

They sat in their separate blankets and talked about magic. She'd read a lot of senseless books about it. They talked more randomly and laughed more often as the late hours loosened them up. She followed his occasional glances at the sky. When she looked up, her face had a kid's expression of concentration. Maybe she was seeing the myth images of the constellations. He'd never had the knack, himself. Winged horse, king, queen, giant bear, Dragon.

He told her about the brain-dead Briarson questions the reporters had been asking him. Starting in sympathy for him and going on to her own old grudges, she ranted about the media. At last she shook her head hard as if to scare off her own topic, then called a break for more tea. The white cat came back, peeking around the corner of the house, half a face and one eye.

They talked about pets they'd had. His Siamese cat who had a trick for killing large attacking dogs, and lived to seventeen. His time in K-9 duty. (He talked about the dogs, not the monkeys.) What had broken his nose and why he hadn't fixed it. A little about the treatments that had fixed her allergies and short-sight. (But even so she distrusted doctors.) Why she wasn't a fullblown engineer. (A fondness for science fiction and math wasn't enough.) Great engineering fiascos, undulating bridges that collapsed, all the US space program disasters and now the EU with AREPO.

Jeremy checked sky-time again. Deneb and the Milky Way had passed their peak. Off to the south, so had the Moon.

"Once we, I, saw a feeble pale version of the aurora borealis from right here," she said, looking up with him.

"Pretty soon you'll be seeing sunrise."

Ivy peered at her bracer, scowled about forgetting it wasn't on her wrist, stood up from the midst of her blanket.

"It's really interesting how you slyly let me do most of the talking." She rubbed her back. His rib muscles whined when he moved.

"Yeah, it was interesting," he agreed. She snickered sidelong at him.

He pushed off the blanket and asked, "Some help here, Ivy?"

She took his upstretched hands and pulled as carefully as a chiropractor. "You're not that old and battered."

"Forty-five." Not looking at her house, he let go of her hands.

"Forty-three."

That old? She looks mid-thirties.

"Drive me back to the ranch?" He began to reach for his backpack. She picked it up for him.

“Do you live there?”

“No. My van’s there.”

They walked faded into her front yard. No lights in the neighborhood. The bald old man across the street wasn’t sitting at his window now. Ivy stopped to work the garage lock. Jeremy stood behind her shoulder and reviewed her closely.

Slender. No man’s beauty, except for her eyes. No man’s boredom, either. Long face, clear features, her expression always varying. Water could look plain when it lay still, but never when it moved. Mouth and long straight dark-brown hair that were made to be touched more than looked at. Touched thoroughly. There, she’s keyed in the wrong passcode again.

“Never going to get the tangles out of your hair,” he said.

“I’ll cut it off,” with slightly breathless defiance.

“Lazy.”

The door rose. No automatic light. He could guess why she’d shut it off. Her garage wasn’t packed tight like the Briarsons’. Room for two cars, but only one was present. This car was a blue SUV, not brand-new.

Ivy opened the driver’s door and the dome light unfaded her by surprise. She glanced back at him in embarrassment. He laughed.



She pulled up in the front drive of the Briarson Ranch. Her car clock, an OLED animation of a grandfather clock, showed 4:32 AM, Friday, June 24, 2016. Jeremy turned toward her, his backpack cramming his legs. He wore a covertly tentative smile.

*It’s the end of the first date—do you remember how to do this, Ivy?*

“Dinner tonight?”

“Um. Yes.” Ivy caught his eye and knew by his changed expression that she was sending forth small hopeful signals, daring him and cautioning him.

He handed her a note with an address.

“I live in the room over the garage,” he explained absently. She assumed that his mind had gone on to the next move, just as hers had. “It has its own outside stair and door, use that. Six-fifteen?”

“Sure.”

Jeremy leaned and kissed her, not tentatively. His lips were warm and so was his hand on her shoulder, the plain human warmth that was so easy to forget after losing it for a while. She returned his kiss softly, eyes closed.

He leaned away and smiled at her with a trace of surprise and sweetness she hadn’t expected. As he walked down the driveway, his back canted a little under the backpack, he didn’t look back at her.

Ivy was fuddled. She took another look at the mock-anachronistic clock.

*And it's only three days since I became insane.*

{:- 5 -:}

As Ivy drove home her mind stirred like a card in a varying light breeze. One almost imperceptible eddy, and the card flipped and fell to show Jeremy. Another gust, another flip, and the side with Mark turned up.

She went straight to her computer. Mark's name had not been added to the list of re-appearees on the National Vanishment Site.

The vanishment and re-appearance statistics hadn't been updated in the last two weeks, but two days ago the home page had updated, adding a little more background. In the course of an average year, 2,000 missing persons might be reported per million of population. By the end of the year only about 100 of the 2,000 cases would remain open. This year, there'd been a "statistically significant spike." The data showed 2,000 persons per million had been reported missing in the single week after March 23rd. To date, three months later, fewer than one percent of these missing reports had been closed.

The White House's Vanishment FAQ had been updated yesterday. Ivy looked for the text changes and couldn't discern them; probably the spin had been tweaked so minutely that only a politician's press secretary would notice. The disappearances were attributed to social-structure stress reaction. The vanishers had simply panicked because of the wild rumors about world-wrecker bombs used on Mercury, had tried to escape into alternate lives, had been abetted by identity merchants, and would gradually return as the social psyche calmed down.

She deleted all the v-finder spam that she'd received (it had been foolhardy to register with the NVS back in April). Then she went to her bedroom for her cards.



Jeremy Bunderbye sat with coffee in the Briarsons' kitchen. He looked through the walls into what he foresaw. His mouth tightened and relaxed as he revolved plans in his mind. Halfway through the coffee, he took the pad and pen from his shirt pocket and began to write.

*House title. Insurance policies. Bill payment records.  
Bank accounts, checkbooks. Car documents. IDs.*

He walked into the rec room, setting his cup on the pool table away from the puke stain.

*Computer. Backups.*

He stood in the living room for some time, looking at one kind of destruction and thinking of another, finally sighing and tipping up the cup for the last of the coffee. The holes in the wall where the shelves had been attached caught his eye.

*Valuables. Mementos.*

In the hall bathroom he glanced at the medicine cabinet, which still needed a new door.

*Medications. Prescriptions. Doctors' names and addresses.*

On afterthought, he crossed out his last entry.



The Nine of Coins, Trump XXI (the World) reversed, the Ace of Cups, Trump IX (the Hermit), and the Six of Swords lay on the floor in a line with a large but no longer full mug of yerba maté. Ivy sprawled as she wrote notes in her Tarot record book.

*7/24/16 Q - Is Mark gone for good?*

*A -*

*9 P: Past. The Widow. The Grass-Widow?*

*XXI R: Past. The World Turned Upside Down.*

*Failure. Refusal to accept a change in home?*

*Ace C: Present. Love and joy come to you.*

Though unobserved, Ivy turned red. "Did I ask you to keep tabs on me? You're nothing but a pack of cards."

*IX: Future. Sage advice. A loner? The hermit's lantern is ironic, if it's J.*

*6 S: Future. Exile. Losing this home because I can't afford it now?*

*A well-targeted spread. No deception cards. No court cards -> no social personas. No Wands. 2 trumps and an ace out of 5 cards -> more deep influences than usual. 1 point No, 5 points Yes.*

“Damn you, Mark.” She blinked at tears and replaced the cards in their wooden box. It was coming up on 7 AM and she might as well face the Friday. Early to work meant early to home again, and she could nap after work before going to Jeremy.

Showered and breakfasted, she dressed in the bedroom. Above the waterbed headboard hung a large print of the Ace of Cups from the Thoth deck; it matched the Ace of Coins in the living room. In their first apartment she and Mark had tacked the Thoth posters to the wall. For this house, they’d bought fresh posters and framed them under pricey no-glare glass.

Ivy looked at the Ace. “Damn it, Mark.” And she put on her bracer but not her wedding ring.



The furniture repair van arrived early with three packers. They took the beds, the couch, some tables and chairs, and the computer desk. They dismissed the end tables as hopeless. Jeremy discouraged their questions about the pirate gang raid—he’d have to answer to lawyers for anything he let slip. There was a downpour of lawyer jokes. The oldest mover asked him for an autograph for his daughter. Jeremy traded him the signature (*Regards, I Bunderbye*) for a copy of today’s Spokesman-Review. Then the painters showed up.



Her day’s earliest task was an in-office teleconference with her prime client, Max Hardwig. Even with the time difference, she could fit in a good disagreement before his lunch. After lunch on a Friday neither of them would be good for anything. Ivy ate two chocolate-covered espresso beans, linked her bracer to her earclip and her office computer, tested the camera and directional mike tabbed to the top of her center monitor (working, said the status light), and filled all three monitor flatscreens (TrypTek™) with the elegant Tufts graphs that always baffled Max into submission.



Much of the S-R’s front page was a satellite photo released by NATO security, Madrid after the smoke plumes blew off. There was a scale of miles. The glyph of rubble that the “ultrastorm” had carved into the city was made up of lines and curves each more than a tenth of a mile wide. The centers of the lines glittered where sunlight reflected from glass, which was city vitrified by the long-persisting arcs of lightning. The photos had a queasy familiarity to Jeremy.



After lunch Terry Harness came by Ivy's office. He had a new note to add to the collage of Mercuriofreak cards that he insisted on maintaining on her office cork-board, not his, despite her protests. "The Sun God Apollo has disintegrated Mercury to free the spirit of Hermes Trismegistus, the patron of magical wisdom, from a planet soon to be polluted by Christian exploitation. Hermes once freed, his avatars on Earth evanesced." No question about it, the item belonged under Divine Interventions, not Aliens, Governments, Multinationals, Organized Crime, or Invisible Colleges.



Mr. Briarson came home to spend his afternoon reviewing the cleanup and re-bandaging llamas. His conversation with Jeremy was anything but easy. He was disinclined to say anything about his family or his plans out beyond the weekend. Jeremy asked to be let off work early that day. Briarson scowled, looked relieved, and agreed. If Jeremy had planned to keep working at the Briarson Ranch he'd have started worrying right then.



Sheila Vickerson caught Ivy on her way out the door and asked how she was doing. That followed her usual concerned glance at Ivy's desk photo, so the question translated as, "How are you doing without Mark?" Mrs. V and Jake Graeme were the only co-workers whom Ivy was sure had been interviewed by the police after Mark Langbourne vanished. The others might or might not know about Mark; they'd said nothing. Ivy was pleasant and non-committal with her boss lady. She did not try to hide her newly nakedly ringless left hand. She did not look into her office at her center monitor and the photo of Mark on it: big, blond, cheery, open, and boyish, the opposite of Jeremy.



Ivy arrived on the landing outside Jeremy's door at 6:12 PM, according to her new watch, which was the cheapest wrist-wearable purely-mechanical nothing-but-timepiece she could find. Terry Harness had twitted her repeatedly about the locator technology built into mass-market bracers, together with all the communications, link, geodex, and health monitoring capabilities. It was time to take him seriously, even if it meant wearing a watch she had to wind. Not to mention having to find and use a cellphone so antique that it committed the discourtesy of beeping.

Jeremy's street was post-suburban, circa 1960s. Most of its homes were in the shade of large trees, in spite of which the lawns were seared in patches and the houses' siding rippled slightly, as if overheated. The

neighborhood had descended to containing dingy and neat houses in equal numbers, but not all the way to fully fenced front yards with beware-of-guard-dog signs. Ivy would have liked to see Jeremy living in an area more worthy of him. But what could a ranch hand afford? She couldn't guess.

Concrete stairs with open risers and an ominously flexible railing led to his door. There was a ladybug on the wall near the doorknob, but no doorbell. She knocked. "Jeremy?"

"Come in."

It was the only studio she'd ever seen that had to be called an "apt" because it hadn't grown up to be an apartment. Jeremy, sitting on the mattress on the floor watching the news, looked sideways at her without turning from the TV and raised a shush finger to his lips.

"—the air quality inspector remains in intensive care. Local farmers say they will continue to resist what they call 'a bureaucratic incursion into farmers' rights.'"

Everywhere she looked she saw something that made the apt seem smaller and emptier. There was a kitchenette, a folding table with one chair, and a walled doored block that couldn't contain anything more than a shower stall and toilet. All of the electric outlets were at different heights.

The room was stained and gouged, but all the sparse contents were neat. There was a faint incense or herbal smell. He stored what, perhaps his clothes?, in plastic trash bags in cardboard boxes. She had the impression he'd cleaned his face, though his clothes were the same dark shirt and jeans he'd worn this morning.

Blare of amateur brass. "Playfair Auto is ready to—"

Jeremy offered the tiny old TV. He looked around and up at Ivy. She looked too fine for words, her figure no longer hiding, trimly dressed in light green top and pants with lace here and there. He stood and gave her his full attention.

"Did you run out of ninja clothes?"

"They went on strike for shorter hours." Her eyes flicked around the room once more. "Were you looking for Briarson news?"

"Bad enough being Briarson news."

She didn't want to be tactless, but she gestured in light protest at the apt's lack of ambiance. "You've been here two months? It looks as if you're just passing through."

Jeremy had meant to bring up that subject soon. Before bed, but not now.

"I am."

Her face passed rapidly from stunned to expressionless, then slowly tensed. He felt only the minimum hope. Maybe she hadn't given up on him, maybe she'd hear him out.

"When are you leaving?"

"In a week or so. I'm not likely to come back."

Reproach came into her eyes but not her voice, which was dry.

"Where are you going?"

"I haven't decided." Last time, he'd rolled dice for it. "South, maybe. The winter nights are warmer there."

*Go for broke.*

"Want to come along?" he asked her.

Ivy's poisoned resignation broke open in a flash of unconfined hope. She was relieved, confused, unsure of how many conclusions she was jumping to.

"um, how personally do you mean that?" She willed him to come to her but he stood where he was, putting out his hands.

"Come here and find out."

Without looking away from his dark eyes, she took the few steps to reach him and put her hands on his shoulders.

Her gaze was full of shadow. He couldn't see anything beyond her. He spread his hands wide on her back to hold her and kissed her harder than he'd first meant to. She gave it back, heartfelt, eyes open on him.

"You..." She drew away a fraction and touched his lip with a fingertip. "Your lip's not cut. Your black eye's gone."

"I heal fast." Refusing to be drawn, he looked down at her. "I want you with me."

"I'm... not sure I can just leave and start over from ground zero. It's a harsh thing to do." Her look was just short of beseeching.

He closed his eyes tight, briefly. "I know."

"Why do you have to go?"

He felt her embracing arms and hands slide up and down his back. If she kept on doing that it would be a short conversation.

"Can't tell you," he said, his voice darkening.

"You mean you won't tell me."

She knew she should try harder to get through to him, but he felt distractingly good. Some of the old Western writers used a phrase, "whipcord leanness," to describe their cowboys. This tough, spare, narrow body was what they must have meant.

"Won't, then," he agreed. "Not till we've left here."

"Are you testing me?"

"No."

"What about the trial?"

"It won't matter in the long run."

“In the long run we’re all dead,” she quoted reprovingly.

It caught him on the quick. He pulled her in tight, one hand on the back of her head, her face down in his neck, his cheek pressing her smooth hair. She took a long pulsing breath. He feared for her and hardened for her.

“You planned to stay the night?”

“Yes,” she answered in a small dry-mouthed voice, licking her lips.

“Good.”

Jeremy cradled her head in both hands to hold her for exactly the kiss he meant for her. Her lips opened softly around his. In a passion of discovery he moved his tongue along hers and his hands over her body.



“But when did you cast the spell?” Ivy asked, as if it had to have been too time-consuming a thing to fit into the day.

“After work.”

“And it healed the bruises and broken ribs right then?” She was grilling him and wondering at him, both at once.

“Flesh damage, yeah. I’d fixed the bones first thing Tuesday because they didn’t show. Bonemend is a separate spell.”

Jeremy lay shirtless, shoeless, and faded on the pad of closed-cell foam. She sat with her legs across him and leaned sideways against his braced knees. Tonight was cloudy, with small soft sudden breezes that surprised the pines. He moved his hand to find her skin under the ninja clothes she’d changed into for the long hilly run.

“Did you use your amulet?” Ivy looked at the six-lobed wooden medallion on his steel neck-chain. Don’t handle it, he’d told her.

“Doesn’t work that way.”

“You’ll have to teach me how to do this.”

“Yeah, sometime.” End of subject.

Once again she felt led, lured, or tested, and it was objectionable. But every story about sorcerers she’d ever read agreed on the great inadvisability of intruding into their doings...

She exchanged a long look with Jeremy and felt there was really nothing at all for her to object to, however little she knew about him.

“You’re a good Thai cook,” she told him.

“You’re a good dishwasher,” bantering.

“I suppose you must have been bacheloring a while?”

“Long enough.” He reached up to tap the tip of her nose. “You’re asking whether you have competition? You don’t.”

“I’m that obvious?”

“Transparent.”

She allotted him an insincere harty-har-har.

“I can top that,” he said. “Know why I wouldn’t visit in your house last night? It’s your husband’s home.”

Faintly concerned through the euphoria, she said, “I hope you change your mind.”

“Time will tell.”

She stared away into the trees. He watched her lean on his knees and think about her husband. He had a stony-hard urge to shake her out of it but he held himself quiet.

“I doubt Mark will ever come back.” She didn’t look at him.

“Going to divorce him?” She heard the hardness and the hope in his voice.

Ivy laid her head upon her knees and studied his face.

“I suppose I should start the legalities. He might be dead, or he might just be... not worth staying married to. Abandonment, they call it.”

“Hard times.” He relaxed again.

“Whatever does not kill us makes us stranger, hey?”

He took her hand from his chest, kissed it, and put it against his cheek.

“I can’t honestly believe I’ll just leave within the week,” she began, and his expression turned stern. She hurried on, “But I can’t honestly believe I’ll let you leave without me.”

“Ivy. If it was life and death, how would you start leaving?”

She sat up, her head tossed back in indignation.

“Life and death! Jeremy, I don’t know how much of this exile I can afford. Holding on to a job is what middle age is all about, crass as it sounds. You shouldn’t be asking me to do this thing without even telling me why you won’t stay.”

“I’ll tell you within a month.” He didn’t sound as if he were going to bargain. “We can come back after that, if you still want to.”

Ivy thought about methods, then, instead of bargains: collaboration wares that would let her work remote from the office, a dedicated data transfer antenna.

“I think,” and she sighed, “my boss and I will be able to live with that.”

Then her mind moved on to secrets and menaces.

“Jeremy, is it that you’re escaping from,” she saw the inside ends of his eyebrows jump, “some kind of, I hate how this sounds, conspiracy against nightrunners? You weren’t very forthcoming about that last night.”

Jeremy laughed, peered at her hearty exasperation, and worked to stop laughing.

“Well, you’ve left me in a vacuum, do you expect me not even to guess? Do you know what the Net says about the Azas and the other pirate gangs? They’re covert death squads for the government, that’s what the Net says about them.”

He began laughing again. “There isn’t any sign that anybody’s chasing me,” he stated. Not yet. “Rest your mind on that.”

His mind could rest, too. She’d accepted as much of his warning as would get her out of town. If he played his hero reputation right, he might be able to convince a few other people besides. After that, there’d be the mechanics of finding Ivy a cover story and arranging himself a life that wasn’t named Jeremy Bunderbye. For now he had a success.

He sat up sharply and, with that usual twinge of vulnerability, pulled his amulet over his head. Ivy fondled his neck as he kissed her and adeptly tweaked her blouse buttons open.

“You’re hard to satisfy?” She recalled how much time they’d already spent climbing the learning curve.

She worked her pants open with feeble distracted fingers, then gasped as he ran his tongue into her ear.

“Nightrunning is an aphrodisiac.” He dealt with her bra latch. She looked quizzically at him over her shoulder, breathing hard. He added, “So are the stars.”

She forced off her shoes, not untying them. “The stars?”

Then the rest of her clothes were stuffed into the backpack, and Jeremy started undoing his jeans. “We can see them but they can’t see us.”

She lay back naked on the pad, perusing the sky through branches and needles and then studying Jeremy through her eyelashes. He had the look of a man waiting for the banquet to start.

“Now that’s an intriguing idea,” she admitted. “I do believe you’re right.”

Joyfully he descended on her.

{:- 6 -:}

Saturday June 25th, 2016

Angry enough to choke on it, Jeremy listened to the Briarsons' home phone.

He asked, "Abe, when were they told? What direction will they come from?"



Ivy reviewed her workload and resolved on another few hours in the office to prepare for her announcement on Monday. If she conferred with Terry this weekend, she'd be able to present a remote-work project plan complete with access scheme. Knowing Terry, he would set her up for excess access, just for the principle of the thing.

She sang her way down the dim empty hall, knocking Tom Lehrer's tango rhythm on the doors of empty offices.

"Bash in my brain, and make me scream with pain, then kick me once a-gain, and say we'll never part. I know too well I'm underneath your spell, so, darling, if you smell—"

Her earclip clunked. Keying her bracer, she answered melodiously.

"Hello-o, Saturday Slavery Incorporated..." Ivy automatically lifted her wrist to look for ID. The bracer textbar read Payphone 1319.

"It's your lurker, don't say my name. I've got troubles. Remember where we dropped the pack last night? Meet me there. I won't park too close to the spot. Don't you either."

Silence, click, and a dial tone. Ivy ran back to her car.

Jeremy must have thought the line could be tapped. Were all payphones monitored? Or was it her phone, and why would he think so? Perhaps it wasn't either end of the phone link that worried him; perhaps it was the middle. Terry had told her convinced and convincing rumors about the government's recording the whole phone network, and using nanotube computers to search the records for "indicative knowledge signatures."

But what brought the government into this? Were they Aza allies? Or were they nightrunner enemies?

Driving, Ivy changed her mind four times before making her fifth decision at the last possible intersection that would take her home. No, she wasn't going to renew that mistake of being unarmed, and the Aza's gun was in her nightstand.



Jeremy left the van locked in a little meadow off the dirt road. Some of his personal items stayed inside. If the cops found the van, they'd expect him to return for it. Let them stake it out. He'd never show. Same thing he'd done at the ranch house, leaving it locked up with a note on the front door, "Painters: back soon." Maybe that would hold the cops there. It might even keep them from realizing he'd been warned. Abe had probably had the sense to call from a payphone, but take no chance, shield him.

The pack was heavy with more gear than usual, and the rolled deflated air mattress from the van was tied on top. It was a long walk over the ridge in the intermittent sunlight of the pine woods. The sunhood kept slipping off his head.

How much did he need to tell Ivy? The immediate situation, sure. She had to be told she was helping a wanted man. How much of the rest to say now, that was a matter to ponder.



As soon as Ivy saw Jeremy among the trees she sprinted to him. Before he'd shed the pack, she was asking, "Is it Azas?"

"Them and their lawyers." He took off his shirt and the gauzy anti-UV cowl. "It's lawyer chess."

He put his hands on her shoulders, absently smoothing a thumb over her hair. She saw wariness and resolve in his face. He saw confusion and astonishment in hers.

"Lawyer chess?"

"Give me a minute."

Jeremy began to wipe off sweat with his shirt, though most of the cloth was too soaked to help.

"Where's your car?" he asked.

"About half a mile downslope."

"Further would have been better." He scrutinized her as he drank from his camping canteen. "Is that where you left your bracer?"

"It's at home."

"Good."

"I brought the Aza's gun and I didn't want to be traceable while I had a stolen weapon with me." He nodded. She saw him look at her large purse as if he were marking it in his mind: the first thing to grab in case of crisis.

She reached for the canteen and gulped. Her throat was dry for more reasons than heat. She asked, "What's happened?"

"There's a warrant out for me," he said.

"What!"

"Driving without any papers."

“But that’s absurd!”

“I don’t have any paper identity. If I wasn’t a media hero they’d already have taken me in.”

“Then, is your name really—”

“Yeah.”

“Then why...?” She caught her breath. “Never mind... What do we do next?”

“Disguise,” he said grimly. “I don’t want Jeremy Bunderbye recognized anywhere, much less next to you.”

“What kind of disguise do you need me to get for you?” She stood.

“No need.” He took off his amulet, set it down on his shirt, and reached for his pack.

Across the ground he spread a miscellany that Ivy could not immediately interpret. For the first time, she thought to be curious about exactly what might be in that backpack.

“A disguise spell,” Jeremy explained tersely. “It’ll help if you don’t distract me.” He began to clear the pine needles and grass from the small area in front of him.

She settled herself for careful viewing. *Magic!*

He did not gesture or chant. He spoke quietly throughout his work, syllables so easy to parse that she could have taken notes. None were familiar. There was no Tetragrammaton, none of the Hebrew or Kabalistic ritual, and probably no Enochian.

There was a small glass chalice, to be filled with water and what looked like a pinch of salt, then stirred with a one-piece metal knife. There was a small brass thurible, to be part-filled with dry slivers of incense and a drop of oil from a small bottle, then lit by a spark struck from steel with an edged flint.

She surmised that his next steps were acts of purification. She might have called it “ritual purification,” but there was nothing ritualistic in his demeanor. He was like a car mechanic, knowledgeably precise about disassembly and reassembly.

Jeremy circled the thurible around himself, then spattered drops of salt water in six directions. Hadn’t he told her there were six elements? He passed three packets like scaled-down tea-bags through the clove-scented incense smoke, then dipped a small round mirror into the salt water.

He cut off a few strands of his hair and placed them on the mirror. With his index finger he stirred the hair together with crumbled herbs from two of the packets. The third packet proved to contain something she recognized as forsythia flowers. These he crumbled and rubbed into the pile of hair, leaves, and dried blue petals, while looking into the mirror. Ending his peroration in unlanguage, he licked his index finger.

His hair was straw-blond and long, his eyes pale blue, his skin ruddy-toned under the tan he'd already had, and his disorganized blond beard reached his chest.

Ivy stared in fascination and disappointment. Jeremy smiled back drily.

"Magic is that easy?" She felt as if her Christmas present were socks.

"Some of it."

"That takes all the magic out of it..." She laughed at herself. "Only nightrunners can do it?"

"Anybody."

He began to pack his equipment again, rapidly, tucking away even the emptied paper packets, glancing narrowly at her once and then twice.

"Is this why you were going to leave town?" She was sure it wasn't, but she was determined to start him talking.

"No." Jeremy stood and slung his pack on. "I had no idea. This changes all my plans." *Understatement of the millennium*, he thought.

He started downslope, then turned back, gesturing for Ivy to lead the way to her car. She walked beside him.

"You have to understand the risks," he told her.

She nodded at him.

"There's more to it than the missing ID and registration paper," he said. "Abe Kendall, the cop who took my statement, told me the Azas in jail have claimed I helped them attack the Briarsons. Let me finish. So once I'm jailed for failure to paper, I'll be held for other reasons. That gives the Aza prison net a chance at me."

"I'd get you out on bail!"

"If they set bail, you paying it would pull you in further than I did by meeting you here." He stared her down. "If you help me," he finished, "you'll be harboring a fugitive and taking the same risks I am. They'll be hunting both of us."

"I'll testify on your behalf," Ivy told him. He saw her force a deep breath before she went on. "I have the flashlight I hit that Aza with, that will be evidence that I was really there. That and my nightrunning, which isn't illegal, at least not yet, so it's less of a lawyer attractant than your ID. They wouldn't have to know that you're a runner, we can work out a story to cover for that."

There was nothing he could do at that right moment except drop the pack off his shoulders and grab her. He held her too tight to breathe but she didn't complain, only held him almost as tight. She was more Luck than he'd ever expected.

“You don’t do that,” he said into her ear. “Never, not even if they catch me with you.” She started to pull back, to argue. He deflected it, “Ivy, I only need two things. To stay at your house and to borrow money for another van.”

She held herself stiff for a minute, then started something quiet that could have been laughing or sobbing. “It’s funny,” she said with her head down on his bare shoulder, “funny strange and funny amusing. It was easy to say I’d testify for you, and I meant it, and it’s easy to say come hide out with me, and I mean it. But when it comes to giving you money, that isn’t so easy. God. How crass I am.”

He looked down at her shamed, half-hidden face. “The pain is in the details,” he said. “Forty-three years old and you don’t know that yet?” He pulled her in tight again, still praising Luck.



After the garage door had slid down behind them, Jeremy led her in a rush through the basement, past Mark’s old pinball machines, up the stairs. Ivy swallowed as he crouched and peered at knee-level between the closed curtains of her front window. *Here we are back at the Ranch, Ivy.*

“Mr. King’s kids and grandkids are visiting,” she offered. “He’ll have been paying attention to them, not us.”

Jeremy sat down on the couch and looked around her living room like a man measuring the size of the trap that had caught him. Ivy sat beside him, stroked his back and then his leg. He set his elbows on his knees and his head between his hands, pressing on his temples.

“I haven’t told you the part you won’t believe,” he said. He looked at her, wry and anxious, hands loose on his knees. “Even leaving the Azas out of it, I’m still dead if I get stuck in jail.”

She thought, *this will be the part that explains why he was afraid the phone might be tapped.*

In his mind Jeremy reviewed what he’d planned on his hike. Yeah, that’s where the walls are between what I can and can’t tell her.

“The same kind of disaster that destroyed Madrid is going to hit Spokane in the next week or two. Being trapped here would be sure to kill me.” Pause. He couldn’t interpret her blank face. “So that brings up the biggest thing. I want to put out a warning, tell people to evacuate. That’ll make the feds hunt me for knowing too much about the disaster. One way or another, I’ll have to hide out for a long time.”

He saw she was hardly breathing. She sat looking down, arms folded tightly under her breasts.

“If you help me,” he finished, “you’ll be harboring more of a fugitive than you thought, taking the same risks I am. They’ll be hunting both of us.”

“How do you know it’ll happen here?” She closed her eyes. “No one seems to know enough about what ruined Madrid to be able to predict a recurrence.”

“It’s safer if I don’t tell you till it’s done.” *If you let me keep you alive.*

Ivy flung up to stand over him, her arms still tight around her like the straps of a harness she’d been lifted by.

“I’ll help. It isn’t even a question. You can hide out here.” Her face was remote, closed, and dismayed. “But Madrid...” A instant of self-control, then she protested, “I can be foolhardy and believe you, or I can be blind and think that you’re insane.”

She looked directly at him. It seemed to distress her to. It wasn’t a long look.

“I don’t see how... You told me you didn’t know of any plot against nightrunners, but now that I think about it you didn’t rule out knowing about any other kinds of conspiracy.” She shook her head abruptly as if she’d been stung on the neck. “Is that the cause? Enemy action?”

“No. It’s a natural disaster. That’s all I know.”

Ivy turned and took a step away from him, stopped stiff, swung back sharply, aimed her eyes not quite at him.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” she said, looking like she was making up her mind to something she already regretted. “I have to get something.”

Jeremy took a few steps to look down the hall after her. Her bracer would be down there, probably. He couldn’t picture her bringing the police down on him, but if there was some other authority she could call in...

She came back with a small cedar box. When she took out the Rider-Waite Tarot deck and shuffled it, he felt he’d come home.

“I hope you don’t think this is...” Ivy gave him a self-conscious instant’s glance as she spread out the deck in a long arc of face-down cards. “Pick out whichever card feels right to you.”

The Hermit, top-side up.

“Sage advice.” She sighed and looked up at him across the cards, her faint apology meeting his faint hope. “That’s a definite vote in favor. I’m with you.”

He locked his arm around her shoulders and gave her an awkward kneeling kiss. She saw he was impressed with her as well as relieved.

“I’m glad you have the gift for cards,” he said.

“I don’t claim that...”

Too late, she realized that a man who used spells might put more weight on fortune-telling than she ever had. She'd meant to do she hardly knew what with the cards, and she'd put herself in a vividly false position.

"Here." He handed her a sheet of notepad paper. "Things for you to store outside town. Don't rescue too much or the hunters will think it looks suspicious after the storm."

"Thanks..."

*House title. Insurance policies. Bill payment records.  
Bank accounts, checkbooks. Car documents. IDs.  
Computer. Backups. Valuables. Mementos.  
Medications. Prescriptions. ~~Doctors' names and~~  
~~addresses.~~*



She watched Jeremy at her computer as he narrowed a news search for warning signs that might have preceded the Madrid storm and might recur in Spokane. The man was hero, nightrunner, itinerant ranch hand, computer-literate; ex-cop, fugitive, mage, and prophet of doom. His life made non-Euclidian angles that forcibly opened her mind and jammed it open. It hurt.

There was a monster on her 24" screen. It was the Millennium Storm, a roiling cloud jellyfish with lightning and tornadoes for tentacles. Most of its detail was lost in distance, jitters, and digital noise. The caption read "MADRID ESPAÑA, MIERCOLES 22 DE JUNIO 9:25 H, 100.000 MUERTOS, 500.000 DESPLAZADAS, 4.800.000 DESAPARECIDOS."

"Nothing useful there," said Jeremy.

"After viewing the whole file," pronounced the TV personality, "it became evident that the lightning bolts, if bolts is the word, were long-lasting high-power electrical arcs that caused—"

"It'll start here between dawn and noon. It won't be long after the new moon on July fourth. That's all I know," said Jeremy.

"The Millennium Storm, as many call it—"

He clicked out and started another search of the Spokane Spokesman-Review site.

Please type in your subscriber ID: \*\*\*\*\*

<Bunderbye OR Briarson>: Date Range: 06/25/16 - NOW  
Alert Me? **Yes** No

Sorry, there's no unread news in this category, but we'll bring you up to the second when there is!

“Jeremy, what had you planned to do?” She couldn’t imagine.

“A lousy plan.” He snorted. “Take advantage of being a media hero. Go public with this on Monday, then disappear with you.”

“Back at the beginning of June I sent letters to Spokane authorities and a few to the *Guardia Civil* in Madrid. Then I spent a week of nights sticking up leaflets about Madrid and Spokane all over town. You ever hear about that? Didn’t think so. There’s no sign it did any good, but I’ll bet it left a trail for the feds.

“Ivy, one thing I won’t do. I won’t get us caught. A lot of things are worth risking, but not the kind of inquisition we’d get for committing prophecy.”

His earnestness had almost the sound of piety.

A pear-shaped tone from the computer.

The man who claimed to have downed seven members of the Azathoth’s Mongrels gang and rescued their hostages in the June 20 crisis at a ranch outside Spokane now has a \$5000 price on his head.

“Oh, no.”

Jailed gang members say Jeremy Bunderbye helped them target the Briarson Ranch for robbery and rape, then saved them from a firefight by a pretended rescue.

“Shit, they can’t!...” Ivy looked at the screen and then at Jeremy’s fists.

David Briarson, the father of the hostage family, has offered \$5000 for information leading to the arrest of either Jeremy Bunderbye or the escaped Aza. Briarson said, “There’s too much I don’t understand about this. Getting at the truth is worth a lot to me.”

“Truth! You trad sonofawhore...”

Bunderbye admitted to having hit seven Azas with a pipe wrench. The eighth remains in critical condition and supposedly was the victim of the fugitive gang member, who has not been located.

An angered Spokane County Prosecutor Rollie Jackman said, “These allegations are baseless, ridiculous, a blatant diversionary tactic. But our case is far more than strong enough to survive the loss of th

“Is his case that strong?”

“Yeah.”

“Shit. If it’s a strong case,” Ivy went on, “he won’t need you enough to work as your ally.” She rubbed her folded arms.

He looked up at her in frustration and wry inquiry. “You have any ideas about how I can move the warning to people after that?”

“No, not really. I’ll have to give it some thought.” Even she could hear how evasive she sounded. She deserved the hard-shelled suspicion with which he responded.

“Ivy, are you humoring me?”

“No! I don’t know. I haven’t had any chance to think this through.”

It was one kind of misery to hurt him, another to make him disappointed with her, and under that the small categorizing part of her mind said, *He's delusional, don't for God's sake make him suspect you!*

"I don't think you're nuts," she puzzled it out as she spoke, "I think you're mistaken. After nothing happens you'll decide you were wrong, for whatever reason.

"If I thought you couldn't change your mind even after the disproof, but I went along with you anyway, that would be humoring you. I don't believe it's going to happen, but... I'm not about to leave you by yourself with it."

His guard was still up but his suspicions were down.

"That's the best I can expect," Jeremy agreed. "Could be worse."

Ivy imagined a destroyed Spokane. It was untenable. Any tendency to belief that she felt was nothing but cowardice, like her inability to completely disbelieve in Hell and the End Times.

"I know you're a bona-fide sorcerer," she conceded. "But that's only a clue that your Spokane prophecy, foresight, whatever it is, could be right. It isn't proof." Jeremy opened his mouth impatiently, closed it, and let her finish. "You could still be wrong. There are still ways your brain could have fooled you."

She paused, he gestured for her to go on, his eyebrows flying in challenge.

"A few years back I was sinking into a nap and worrying about a friend," she explained, "and then a voice said, 'Fool, she'll be married within six months.' I was alone in the house, but it was a clear voice that came from a definite direction. It was also definitely wrong."

"It isn't a voice," he said. Finally he was telling her more than he wanted to. Ivy felt a margin of triumph, contingent on whether he told her enough.

"What is it?"

"It's a book I can see in my mind's eye."

Jeremy closed his eyes, and she saw them scanning under his eyelids as he frowned.

"It's a cheap book. Not many pages, weak printing, crooked margins. I can read a few phrases. They're always the same. 'Midsummer's Day.' '...most of them would not outlive that same full moon.' 'The morning sky was clear and seemingly...' The rest I can't read, but I can see it's words and I have a general idea what it says."

"And you can see it whenever you want to. If it were just dreamstuff," she said, intrigued, "you'd be able to read it all but you could never read it twice because phrases would change or turn to gibberish. That rules out a dream, to my mind, so I don't know what to think."

She thought, at least, that he might be wrong but not culpably wrong, and he deserved as much support as anyone in honest error could deserve.

“I think I could use a hug...” She smiled tentatively.

With no reluctance or apparent grudge he held her, her legs across his lap. He let his head drop back onto the couch, and sighed. She linked hands behind him and put her face into his neck. His hand ran over her hair, stopping here and there, fingertips moving as if reading Braille. She sniffed.

“You don’t just look different, you smell different.”

“Sweat. Spell herbs,” he dismissed it.

“Sorry, no, it’s you.”

She leaned back and he looked at her hard, his eyelids dropping a little. His eyebrows were definitely shaggier, as well as blond.

She ran a finger over one. “So is all your hair shaggy and blond?”

“Why ask when you can look?”

Jeremy’s hand made a rambling, contoured journey from the nape of her neck to her hip. Ivy kissed him under the ear.

“I’ll set up my air mattress,” and he began to move toward his pack.

“I have a bed,” she reminded him, confused and amused.

“Your husband’s bed? Not for me,” with an expression of controlled distaste. For a moment she couldn’t believe he’d said it.

She stood and glared down on him, unaware that her hand had put itself on her hip in a hectoring-housewife pose she disliked. He gazed up at her in real surprise.

“Well, now, that certainly makes me feel like a fallen woman!” She huffed, undecided between resentment and the preposterousness of it. He stood too. “Would you like me to stitch a large scarlet A for Adulteress on my bodice?”

She sketched the A from nipple one to neck to nipple two, cross-slashing with vigor.

“What would you prefer? Embroidery? Crewelwork? Appliqué?” She saw his lips untighten and jiggle in suppressed humor. “I could learn lace tatting,” she offered.

“I should shake you!” Laughing, he grabbed her shoulders.

“The feeling’s mutual!”

“It’s still going to be the air mattress,” he told her, and swatted her on the rump.

“Yow!”

She glared. His spirits, at the very least, were rising.

“You enjoy that too much!” she accused.

“Right!” He pulled her off-balance and kissed her almost too hard for their teeth.

“What makes you so bumptious?”

“I have a hideout and I don’t have to fight you to get you safe out of town.”

“Um. If I hadn’t agreed to leave, you’d have knocked me out like Briarson and driven away with me, right?”

“If I needed to.” He ignored her re-evaluating stare. “I wish warning people was that easy.”

“Oh, if you want easy, there’s always spam. Who knows, one in ten thousand might pay attention. After all, that possibility is what makes spam the world’s fastest-growing life-form.” She mused. “And I do know a waresman...”

The plan evolved rapidly from there.

{:- 7 -:}

Later, Jeremy barbered himself without hesitation or clumsiness, working over a sheet of plastic. Then he piled all the trimmings into the sink and made a sludge of them in drain cleaner. That, more than his commentary, told Ivy whether curses were a type of spell that worked.

He borrowed her car and her house cash and came back with herbs, a two-person air mattress, car want ads, and a list of the addresses of pay phones that weren't in heavily lit and observed locations. She told him the meeting with her waresman was on, and visited the bank for a cash refill.

By evening after dinner they'd finished preparing for Terry Harness to drop by. They left no evidence of Jeremy upstairs. All the curtains were closed and only the few lights at the far walls of the living room were turned on. That left time for one last chore.

The five cards on the floor were Trump IX (The Hermit), the Eight of Swords reversed, the Two of Swords, the Three of Wands reversed, and the Eight of Wands.

"The cards aren't a crutch, Jeremy," she warned.

"Humor me." He caught her eye and chuckled.

"The question was, 'Will Terry help us in spreading the warning?' The deck says success but don't try too many things at one time. In the end the word will spread."

Ivy looked at the cards with doubt.

"It's a little bit Delphic. This final card," she touched the Eight of Wands, "means 'News flies far.' The remaining question is, 'Which news?' The storm warning alone? Or the things we don't want known? I know Terry's aptitudes and I like him but I worry about his discretion. After all, he did tell me about his wares."

The sound of a car engine grew and ended as the car parked in her driveway. Ivy boxed the cards and set them on the hearth.

"Punctual," said Jeremy's voice, from nowhere.

Knock-knock, ring, knock. She hurried down the stairs and opened the door. Terry stepped onto the landing, as always making the doorway look short, wide, and soothing by contrast to him.

When she'd first met Terry, she'd seen a stretched young Abe Lincoln with an excessively witty expression, a henna rinse, and a full, drooping mustache. She wondered whether Jeremy saw the same resemblance.

"Where is the Mark-entity?" asked Terry.

"He's not here."

Terry leaned with both hands against the door, opportunely trapping Ivy between his arms and looking steeply down at her. She growled and bent her mouth down at the corners.

“Look at this romantic lighting, smell the enticing fragrance,” he murmured. “You’re finally giving me the chance I deserve.”

Ducking away under his arm and playing along, although playing gave her the twitches under the circumstances, she said, “Sorry, sonny, you’re still too tall, I can’t abide being loomed over.”

“I don’t loom when I’m lying down.”

“I should have seen that coming.”

“You’re coming already?” he riposted happily.

The twitches coalesced into an acid spasm of indignation.

“Whoa sonny! Here’s the news. Mark left three months ago, just vanished, after sixteen years of marriage.” Her hand went to her hip again. “I am not happy about that. I am not happy about my finances.” Terry stood dumbfounded. “Your foot’s inserted all the way to your larynx, kindly take it out and dry it off.”

Terry did not consider that he had made a gaffe, whatever she might carelessly believe.

“And a risqué remark is what it takes to make you admit to Mark’s disappearance?” he prodded, outraged. “Mumsy! After all the Vanishment plots I’ve set before you as lures to conversation!”

“The police talked to you?” Now she was dumbfounded.

“Not nearly so much as I talked to them,” he snapped. “Whom did you tell about Mark leaving, if you didn’t tell me?”

“No one but his family. It wasn’t fit to talk about and I wasn’t fit to talk.”

“Shite! You didn’t tell any of his friends, did you?”

“I didn’t know which of them were already in on it with him,” she said tersely. “And I had enough with police and in-laws.” She started upstairs.

“Have you been glooming like this for the last three months?” Terry reached for the entryway light switch.

“What? No,” over her shoulder, “Terry, leave the lights off, please.”

“It’s enough to make the ChirpFellow suicidal.”

Ivy said, “I was a little desperate a while back but not that desperate.” She flashed back to the Briarson boy’s T-shirt with the ChirpFellow, a fat cartoon quail, grinning gamely out of the filling of a deeply bitten sandwich. No, she hadn’t been trying for suicide-by-Aza when she went to the Briarson Ranch.

Terry moved ahead in the dim hallway, sensing something new in the offing and relinquishing his umbrage.

“Don’t be too aggrieved at Mark,” he offered for consolation and probe as they entered the dim computer room. “The odds are he was abducted by virtue (or vice) of one or another conspiracy.”

“His family says he had some kind of stroke and wandered off in a state of amnesia. Amnesia doesn’t work that way. I say he ran.”

“There’s the Equinox Legion...”

“I know I shouldn’t ask...”

“Being the ultimate soul of tact, I shouldn’t tell you. If you want to be very very distressed, search it on the Net. Incidentally, have you considered selling Mark’s pinball machines to bolster your finances? I’ll buy.”

She growled, pointed at the text file on her screen, and directed, “Read this, please.” She looked at the half-open door into the hallway.

Terry sat, read, and was lost in uffish thought.

“Can I hack that onto the Spokesman-Review website at peak readership time?” Ivy asked, greatly discomfited.

“You called me away from my concubines and jelly donuts,” he turned and stared at her in perplexed disappointment, “for a mere tawdry hoax against FEMA.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Do you believe this?” He scrutinized her and concluded she might.

“I believe as much as I need to.” She glanced into the hall. “If I’m wrong, all I get is an out-of-town vacation. Catastrophe insurance usually costs a lot more.”

“You may as well accept Pascal’s Wager or some other insurer’s Big Lie while you’re at it.”

“Should I believe your ‘Equinox Legion’ instead?” She laughed. “Well, the virtue of that is never having to do anything about it.”

Animated, sarcastic, Terry threw back, “You are completely and totally wrong! The very nature of the meme is that I must spread it once I’m infected.”

She shot back, “How about spreading this one?”

“You can easily do it without risking enforcement, but it’ll cost you.” He was pleased to see that stop her cold—*what on Earth could she have been thinking?*

“What will it cost us?”

“A most revealing plural pronoun; who else is in on this hoax?”

The room lights came on. Ivy saw Jeremy at the door, wearing an impenetrable but amicable expression. Terry, startled, saw that the eavesdropper was a stranger but no great surprise to Ivy.

“Is that my answer?” Terry asked Ivy, his self-possession fully restored.

“Yeah.” The man had usurped Ivy’s reply.

“So you’re the reason Mumsy’s been falling asleep at her desk,” Terry jab-tested him.

The short blond bearded man took on something of the look of a deer in the headlights, though for only a moment. Ivy looked like the headlights, if lasers were ever to be used as such.

“Terence, you’re just begging for me to request an anatomical impossibility of you,” she threatened him.

“That would be fun but not as much fun as an introduction. I’m Terry Harness.”

The man shook hands. “Jeremy Bunderbye.”

“Ah, I perceive,” Terry said, “you’re the fellow who dramatically didn’t slaughter the Azathoths out at the llama ranch. You’ll have to teach me that trick.” He eyed Bunderbye with professional regard. “I must say your appearance isn’t quite as seen on TV.”

“Good,” was the reply.

To make sure that Terry knew the risks, Ivy pointed out, “He’s also the fellow with a \$5000 reward on him.”

“Am I impressed? Not that I’ve noticed.” Terry marked up a point for himself as she glared and went rewardingly red again. “Now, the action at the llama ranch, that was impressive.” Spining her for trying to keep him uninformed about Mark, he added, “And that was less than a week ago. You’re a fast worker, Mumsy.”

“You had—”

“Fond as I was of the Mark-creature, I must say this is a step up for you.”

“Shut UP!” said she, well and truly spined.

Wry and innocent, Bunderbye asked, “That’s the anatomical impossibility?”

The two men looked at each other with tactical appreciation. Ivy prepared to kill.

Terry said to Ivy, with heaping sarcasm, “Your mastery of invective leaves me speechless.” And to Bunderbye, “As for you, sir—”

“Truce,” and he put up a hand for stop.

“Was there ever a war?” Terry asked ingenuously.

Ivy, now unblushingly ready to scathe, began, “You—”

“Hush,” Bunderbye told her, putting an arm around her waist. She subsided, acquiescing, giving him a look of mild chagrin.

“You’ll have to teach me that trick too,” Terry suggested to Bunderbye.

“First find one of your own.”

“Yessir.” Terry paused. “Where were we?”

“Costs.”

Terry swiveled back to the computer. For a moment he tapped fingertips on the computer desk, devising ways to gratify his curiosity about Bunderbye's hoax and the motives for it without revealing too much about his own endeavors. He fed their little ersatz news file to the printer and turned back to lecture his captive audience.

"Today's course title is Hackonomics 101, the study of scarce resources on the Net. There are almost no scarcer resources than Net entry points that are potential Bombays. The etymology derives from 'bomb-bay doors.' (Surveillance sites are, of course, Pekings.)

"Your modest project requires at minimum three Bombays to launch your hoax and re-launch it after each deletion. That will ensure it lasts long enough to be widely read. Us has several Bombays to offer but Us will desire favor for favor, because your project will lose them for We and scarcity equals costliness."

"Who is 'Us'?"

Terry sang, from Kipling, "We are the worm in the wood, we are the rot at the root..."

"Can 'Us' keep a secret?" There was a caustic tone in Bunderbye's voice.

"Us can, Us do, and Us are."



Negotiations continued over green tea in the living room.

"If, in fact, your prediction saves my ass(ets), that would somewhat offset your costs." Terry sat on the floor, knees up, ankles crossed, leaning back on his hands.

"Only somewhat?" Ivy perched on the edge of the couch, concerned equally by the undefined price and by spreading the secret to unknown Us.

"It depends on what the rest of We want."

"Wait, this won't work," she said suddenly. "The Bombays would be scapegoated for the hacking."

"They wouldn't be Bombays if they weren't spit-shined respectable. Three of them advertise in the Spokesman-Review."

"If there was one source, it'd be easy to scapegoat," Jeremy noted. "With three, they won't blame the sources. They'll figure it's an outside attack on all of them."

"Okay." Ivy bit her lip. "What's the price?"

"I'll have to consult We." Terry laughed. "I doubt you can accomplish enough to make Our price worth it to you."

"How not?" Jeremy leaned forward intently.

"You don't know? I thought you were psychic."

"Only for this," Jeremy held up the printout, raising his eyebrows.

Terry reached, grabbed the paper, and shook it. “This is a very cute simulation of a warning that FEMA might issue—”

“Thank you,” Ivy muttered.

“—but it’s not nearly enough to get the response you want. You’ll need specifics to persuade or even fool Joe Six-Pack, Joe Six-Wack, and Joe Six-Puff.”

All three of them leaned into the argument.

“I see this in a book, in my mind’s eye,” Jeremy explained. “I can’t read much of it, and I don’t know that I remember it right.”

Terry cocked his head. “It’s literally a book that you can’t read? Hypnotism would be the preferred methodology.”

“No,” said Jeremy, hard-faced with refusal.

“A hypnotist could get at your specifics.”

“After the Dra— the disaster, the feds will be hunting anybody who predicted it. More people mean more leaks.”

“Quite right, I’m sure,” said Terry dismissively, “but Us knows a hypnotist in the Tri-Cities who owes We a few large favors, and security precautions can easily be taken.”

“Hypnotists create false memories.”

“They don’t have to, it’s just a matter of avoiding leading questions,” Ivy threw in, watching Jeremy worriedly. He was smoldering.

“Exactly,” agreed Terry.

“No!” Jeremy gripped his teacup. Ivy saw the tendons of his knuckles shifting.

“Jeremy, if we can’t include enough information to get through to people,” Ivy paused when Jeremy lowered his head as if staring into the cup, “then I don’t see any point in risking the penalties for hacking. The charge would be ‘infoterrorism.’”

“A weak warning is better than nothing!” He didn’t look up.

“We could use fliers and leaflets instead of hacking the news.”

“No. That isn’t enough.” He stopped silent, the muscles at his jaw hinges clenching.

“Neither is this,” said Terry, fist crumpling the printout with a small shocking noise, then letting it expand into a loose wad.

He held it above his head, “Now then, try making this mess into a paper airplane, it’ll be precisely as likely to fly as your article.”

The ball of paper dropped in a sloppy arc to the carpet. Ivy thought she heard a low sound in Jeremy’s throat.

“You’re not telling enough,” she coaxed him quietly.

“If I told you all about why I know this will happen, you couldn’t believe me.” He sent her a glowering, obdurate, pale-eyed look.

“Jeremy—” Beseechingly.

“Couldn’t! Not till after it happens, because that’s the only proof I have.”

“If you truly have proof, what makes you so certain a hypnotist can’t find it?” asked Terry insinuatingly, smugly cornering the hoaxer.

Jeremy stood up, staring down at Terry, still holding the cup in a double-handed grip. “Nobody gets the keys to my head!”

Ivy touched his arm. Terry looked up at him superciliously.

“It is, of course,” said Terry, sending the spine in deeper, “entirely up to you how many people you want to save.”

Jeremy’s face went taut in fury, eyes wide. His hands vibrated the cup. His arm swung and the teacup hit the slate at the side of the fireplace away from Terry. Tea splashed. The shattered pieces showered.

In the next moment Jeremy was hunkered down on the floor, picking up pieces, his back turned to Terry and Ivy. Terry froze unbreathing. He looked ten years younger, a teenager, now that alarm had drained the wit from his face. Ivy stood with no idea what to do or say.

“Sorry,” said Jeremy, not looking around.

He carried the pieces into the kitchen, keeping his back turned. Terry, still without flippancy, looked at Ivy. His mouth began to open, and she shook her head hard.

Jeremy stood in the kitchen doorway, watching Ivy. She didn’t understand his explosion but she understood his expression: withdrawn self-disgust.

“There has to be a way around this,” she said, deeply concerned, looking at his bitter eyes.

“Maybe. I’m going out for a run. I’ll come back before dawn.”

“Please do,” she said emphatically.

His steps went down into the basement, and then the back basement door opened and closed. Ivy looked out the front window. She saw no one, excepting Mr. King at his window.

Terry sat, silently uncrumpling the printout, then looked up sharply at Ivy. She fetched a towel and picked up another piece of teacup.

Rubbing at the wet rug, she finally said, “This day just keeps getting more and more unique.” She could joke or she could cry.

“Observe me,” said Terry. “I am serious.” It looked as though he could be.

“And?”

“I don’t see why the teacup had to die, but I don’t dislike the man.” He looked out the window. “Do you believe me?”

“Yes.”

“Is there any chance he’s clinically paranoid?” Terry took meticulous care to say it seriously, without spite or affectation.

He observed that Ivy reacted as though she’d been thumped on the center of her mind.

“Well... many of the things he says, and doesn’t say, sound paranoid.” She spoke with wavering grimness. “And there’s his lack of ID—”

“Oh? That’s nugatory. In fact, that’s in his favor. Any sane individual has no official identity, or several.” For now it was his object to pick her brains about Jeremy; changing her mind would come later.

“I’ve met paranoids,” said Ivy, arguing and doubting, “my folks were in the counterculture. To a paranoid, everyone’s out to get him, the world revolves around him. That doesn’t fit Jeremy.”

“No? He’s led you to the verge of an enterprise that, if not for my genius, might sink you.”

“I never heard of a paranoid taking real risks to save anyone.” She was convincing herself too rapidly to tell him very much.

“Even paranoids have friends.” Terry smirked. “While they last.” He cocked his head. “If he isn’t a paranoid, then he must be a man with more than only the one big secret.”

Ivy misquoted him, “Any sane individual has no big secret, or several.” Cautiously, she let herself think out loud about what most worried her. “I think something could be misleading him about Spokane but I don’t know what.”

“Something? Or someone?”

“Someone? One of your conspiracies?” He didn’t rise to that; she’d only half meant him to. “I’ve seen him do magic.”

“Be more specific,” Terry urged.

“No. And he talks as though some other people know about it, but he won’t say more. So... conspiracy?” The idea made her tired.

Terry suddenly found this hoax project surpassingly interesting. The Bunderbye’s imagination or delusion could actually be worth some expenditure of effort to explore.

“Find me a pen.” Terry smoothed out the printout into something whose back could be written upon. “We shall design security measures, including foolproof Bunderbye-protecting questions for the hypnotist.”

“First we write a program for the hypnotist,” Ivy shook her head and hoped, “then I’ll try to reprogram Jeremy.”



This was one of the few phone booths in a fadable dark location. He didn’t see any camera nearby, but not-seeing wasn’t believing.

Jeremy was grateful that such things as pay-phones still existed and hadn't been gotten rid of to aid caller-ID. *Not so far, anyway.*

One of the young Kendalls had picked up the phone.

"Tell him it's somebody who owes him a favor," Jeremy said. He didn't give his name till he heard Abe Kendall's voice.

"There's a load of shit in the paper, Abe."

Abe laughed. "So what else is news?"

"What's behind it?" Jeremy watched around him. Customers at the gas station, that was all. Outside the lit pad of the station it was fading-dark.

"I don't know. No rumors yet."

"No rumors? Is that unusual?"

"Nah, not when it's going to blow over. I bet this will. Jackman's up to some sort of save, he's taking this very personal."

Jeremy recalled Ivy's Net tales about plots connived in by the feds and the pirate gangs. "You think the Azas have a lot of paid friends in local government? It would explain why they made the raid, if they thought they'd get let off easy."

"Drop that thought." A short annoyed laugh. "This could be any damfool thing. Anything from some licensing nitpick cleaning up loose paperwork to some Aza's backdoor-buddy trying to get you a prison slicing."

"Thanks. I've got to run now."

"Keep in touch."

Jeremy shifted his backpack and flipped the phone book pages back to the B's. *Payback time.*



The neighborhood was full of hedges professionally trimmed into wings, smooth balls, or plump dwarf walls. Briarson's brother lived here in a light gray split-level house that wasn't exactly across the street from a dark gray car parked in a driveway. The car windows were open two fingers' width. Two men in the car, slouched down, hefty build, one white, one tan, both of them wearing earclips and bracers. Cops.

The brother's mailbox had eight spots in a line on it where stick-on letters had been pulled off. Jeremy left the Briarsons' house keys in the mailbox with a note.

*For Mr. D. Briarson. In lieu of one week's notice.*

*Bunderbye*

If the note scared the Briarsons by showing he could get past their guards, that was fine. If they took it as a peace handshake, that was fine too. Either way he'd call that account settled.



Abe Kendall's neighborhood had smaller houses and smaller lots, mostly with flower gardens and rough home-trimmed hedges. Abe's house was one of those century-old clipped-gable Spokane bungalows. Jeremy prowled around it, mentally mapping the rooms. The biggest bedroom window was the master bedroom. One window with doll decals, a daughter or daughters. No locks on the gates, no dog, no motion detectors. Lights at the front door and the side garage door.

Next to the front door was a big wooden replica of a policeman's shield with the name KENDALL on it. Abe wasn't shy.

Jeremy settled down behind Kendall's waist-high front hedge, out of the way of headlights, and shed his pack. He thought about Luck and his obligations and what to do about them, and he pulled the book out of his pack.



Ivy's house didn't have any lights on. As he came back up the driveway, a large meteor flared a line in the sky over her roof.

"News flies far," he quoted to himself. It wasn't any omen, but it was an icon of why he'd enlarged his plans.

He took off his shoes for quiet, then entered the basement with her spare keys.

"Ivy?"

But the room where he'd set up his mattress was empty. Ivy wasn't in the hall-side rooms upstairs, either. Not in her husband's bed.

*Good.*

He didn't think she'd have left her house to get away from him after his violent outburst. Terry Harness had looked fit to flee, though. He might have passed the panic to her.

She was asleep on the living room couch, sitting up slumped sideways against the back. He stayed faded a moment to see her clearly, every detail. Then he unfaded and sat down beside her. She shifted her legs and blinked at him in the dark.

"Bedtime," and he stroked hair off her face.

"S not fair. You're wide awake now." She looked at him as if she'd been dreaming about him.

"You'll wake up," he promised.

{:- 8 -:}

Sunday June 26th, 2016

Hearing Ivy's front door being opened, Jeremy went to the top of the stairs. It was Terry, as expected.

"You're on for tonight at ten," Terry announced, taking the stairs three at a time. "And Madame Hypnotist was as hard to persuade as you were. The world is full of ingratitude."

Tight-lipped, Jeremy stood aside for him.

"Ivy said you were in," noted Terry. "Are you?"

"I'm in."

Beaming, Terry darted at Jeremy, exclaimed, "My hero!", and kissed him on the forehead. Then, adding prudence to his challenge, he moved two strides away.

Terry suspected that few had ever seen the Bunderbye flummoxed. He approved the effect, all the more because it kept the man merely irate rather than furious. He critiqued Jeremy's forehead: one of his better efforts.

"Excellent!" said Terry. He added, lightly and meaningfully, "You've passed the first of many tests by not bashing me."

"You should be kept on a leash!"

"Be grateful I don't wear lipstick."

Rapidly passing Terry, looking wary, Jeremy went down the hall to the computer room.

"You told Ivy the schedule?"

"Not yet," said Terry, noting the four movers' boxes in the hallway.

"She's making backups."

They entered the computer room. Ivy, looking around, stared at The Mark of the Brat on Jeremy's forehead, shook her head, and grinned helplessly. Enlightened, though incompletely, Jeremy swung round and headed for the bathroom and the nearest mirror. Terry blew a kiss to Ivy as she stood up laughing. She followed Jeremy (and wasn't that her whole problem in a nutshell?).

Terry rapidly refreshed his no-gloss natural-tone lipstick. He pressed his lips hard against the meat of his fist, behind the base of the thumb. Ivy was whooping with laughter in the hallway, with nary a sound from the Bunderbye. Terry pictured him as clean but thunderous of brow.

Touch up the lip-print on his fist, and press it against his forehead...

"Jeremy, believe me, you aren't the first or the last—" she started guffawing again just outside the door.

As they showed up in the doorway, Jeremy was looking at Ivy as if he couldn't decide what to do to her because he was distracted by planning what to do to Terry.

Both of them stared in astonishment at Terry and the lip-print on his forehead.

"Yesterday you said you wanted an anatomical impossibility," he reminded them.

There was uproar.

After the noise ebbed, Jeremy said, grinning broadly, "Anatomical impossibility. I can top that. Ivy, we'll do our disguises now. I'll call you down when I'm ready."

They heard him descending to the basement. Terry assessed Ivy, confirming his first impression that she was underslept and (of course) had no thermal reason to wear a turtleneck in June.

"The man fails the one-upmanship test, but passes with high marks for impulse control and sense of humor," he commented. "Not a paranoid test score."

Ivy didn't respond; she looked at his forehead and hee-hee'd to herself.

"I see no black eye and no bruised lip," he went on, "but I have to wonder what damage that turtleneck conceals."

"It's a pity the things you say when I don't have a gun, sonny," she flared, very red indeed. Ah, then the damage was carnal in nature.

He wiped off all the doses of lipstick, one, two, three. "Is that any way for Mumsy to talk to her dear protective adopted son?"

"Today I really am feeling old, so don't start."

"She's willing to put him under tonight at ten and I know just the right location for privacy. Visit your bank on the way—she wants \$500. Make it cash, and please be so canny as to begin by running the bills through your microwave oven to burn out the records in the microchips."

That took her aback. He'd wondered if it would make her reconsider, all the more so because an ATM would only disgorge \$300 *per diem*, but (sadly) she didn't.

Terry sighed and made a small bet with himself that he could still reveal the facts and restrain Ivy from being lured into this morass. He did not for a moment believe that the Bunderbye could invent a satisfying tale of the shape of things to come while under hypnosis. Once his story imploded, Ivy would (almost) have to be too rational to follow him into the hoax. Magic, she said. Spells. *Shame on her!*

"Ivy!" Jeremy called.

"Her Master commands," Terry said to her back.

He'd been left alone with her computer, an oversight which he did not regard as deep wisdom. He logged onto a flea-market and typed with two fingers and a thumb, remembering Mark's hobbyist encomiums.

Six truly classic electro-mechanical pinball machines from the fascinating 1970s, all Bally, including Fireball. For the right offer I could bear to lose them. All are eminently playable and in rainbow condition, complete with schematics and gaming instructions; contact [ie\\_langbourne@prototaz.jnt](mailto:ie_langbourne@prototaz.jnt) for images and details.

He steered a selective route through the site menu, appending standard verbiage about payment and shipping (mere camouflage in this case), and logged off from his act of unsolicited financial forethought barely before the loving couple reappeared in the doorway. When he looked at them the surprise twisted his former opinion of the two of them into a Möbius strip, then threw it away.

Ivy was a subflaming redhead with wavy hair, amber freckles and brilliant viridian eyes. Jeremy was Mexican—to be precise, Indio dark—with long hair and a beard.

Terry blinked and asked, “May I examine the evidence more closely?”

“Be my guest,” said Jeremy, smiling a small shit-eating smile.

Ivy submitted with a doctor's-office expression to Terry's scrupulous examination.

“Brown becomes lurid auburn, without a wig,” he tugged on a lock of her hair while peering at her scalp, “dark blue becomes neon blue-green.” He turned her face to the light and scrutinized her irises. “I testify she hasn't worn contacts since her optomorphic operation, and she isn't wearing them now. Hair dye is excluded by the timing. It is indeed anatomically impossible.”

“She can use her existing ID, though,” Jeremy pointed out. “All it says about eyes is ‘blue’.”

“I had thought myself an expert on disguise.” Terry reviewed the changes in Jeremy from a less personal distance. “Show me how that was done and I'll square all your accounts with We.”

Ivy couldn't miss Terry's change from skepticism to acceptance. She'd never expected to see him turn true believer.

“Magic,” she reminded him.

Terry's eyes flashed from Jeremy to her and back again.

“You can have it free after the storm,” promised Jeremy.

“Sooner,” insisted Terry. “Sooner always has the edge over later, and I'll always pay for a technological edge.”

“Afterwards.”

Jeremy wouldn't give way on that point, for all of Terry's persuasion. Terry shifted to scientific inquiry with limited success.

“Does the ‘magic’ change the fingerprints?”

“They're skin, so they change.”

“Would a DNA test on your hair or skin match a test on your blood?”

“Yeah.”

“Does the ‘magic’ change all the right DNA and only the right DNA?”

“I don't know.”

“What about mitochondrial DNA?”

“I don't know.”

Terry made grunts and slashing gestures of frustration. Ivy laughed. Jeremy traded glances with her and his mouth twitched.

“How can you possibly trust a technique when you don't know its principle of operation?”

“Practice.”

Terry stood up, stalked out of the room, knocked his forehead on the hallway wall, and returned, raising his right hand high.

“I swear before Alan Turing, Freeman Dyson, and all the other dead gods of High Technology, if you die before telling me everything you know about this, I will personally teach myself necromancy and allow you no rest in peace.”



That evening they reconvened in a hotel room in the Tri-Cities. Terry had spent the afternoon there making arrangements with the hypnotist, then met the still-disguised Jeremy and Ivy. He led them on a tour of the wooded riverside area where the hypnosis session would happen.

During the hour before true dark the three of them ate in the hotel room and brainstormed their operations, summarizing on Jeremy's notepad.

*6/27 Hack paper*

*July. Us: Hack J ID (Spokane born), car does*

*6/30 followup hack spam*

*6/29 Pay safe-dep box and my storage with cash, leave  
no record*

*6/28+ pack minimum, not enough to look suspicious*

*7/1+ Learn guns*

*6/28+ Supplies for post-storm rescue. Buy spell makings, bandages, water, dust masks, support belts, work gloves, heavy shoes, lots of rope, duct tape, pads & pencils, add more*

*Getting More People Out*

*Drive them out*

*terrorist attack threat*

*Block incoming road with gas truck Impracticable*

*Lure them out*

*gold rush*

*unicorn hunt*

*appearance of Holy Virgin*

“This has gone quite far enough,” and Terry put the capped pen back into Jeremy’s pocket.

“We’re into the witching-hour sillies and it’s not even nine,” agreed Ivy.

Terry lapsed into esthetic contemplation of the last fried wonton. Ivy rubbed her face awake with both hands. Jeremy stood and stretched enormously.

“Such elegant perfection of form...” Terry was lost in admiration, apparently of the wonton.

“What if the hypnotism doesn’t work?” Ivy looked up at Jeremy. He stroked her hair, looking away into forebodings.

“I have a backup,” he said. “It’s a spell that will get what we need, but maybe too much of it. It’s risky in a different way.” His tone closed the subject.

“You’re full of surprises today,” smiled Terry.

Jeremy gave Terry a flat look.

“And so am I,” Terry added. “Last night Ivy mentioned that you were in need of some such appurtenance as this.” With at least two kinds of enormous satisfaction he handed Jeremy a very deftly faked ID card in the name of Jay Berenson.

Terry did not choose to reveal that this gentleman really existed, somewhat resembled the blond variety of Jeremy, and had done Terry an obscure bad turn three years ago. He said, “Please remember, that feeble object will only be of use to reassure persons who require no signature of you. At a later date Us will supply a bureaucratic talisman vastly more powerful and lasting.”

Ivy gave Terry a brilliant, preoccupied smile. Jeremy, comparing the fake Jay Berenson ID to Mumsy’s real one, only glanced up to say, “Thanks.”

Terry took it as his cue to make an exit. At the door of the room, shooting the deadbolt, he looked back and said, "I hope you two will appreciate my disguise. I'll be participating as Kerry Halteman." *Let them puzzle over that.*

{:- 9 -:}

Jeremy lay faded with his head on Ivy's lap, his backpack nearby. She sat on the foam pad, her back against a gnarled maple tree with thick low-set branches, her skin greasy with the insect repellent that Jeremy didn't need by virtue of his amulet. Between them and the Yakima River was a small natural levee, around them were tall grass, maple sprouts, and wild rose bushes, and under them was a bed of small rounded river-rocks. They heard the freeway susurrus in the middle distance, but nothing suggesting that they might be overheard.

"It's a good spot," said Jeremy softly without seeming wholly reassured. "Smart to bring her here without telling her where she'll be going."

"That's an overkill precaution."

"High stakes."

"I had no idea Terry was so deep in the covert arts," said Ivy, looking down in empathy at Jeremy's tense face. "I only knew about the petty hacking and wares."

"What makes him such a loon?"

"He says the unexpected keeps people young."

"He keeps it up, he'll die young." He said it with some emphasis.

Stroking his hair, Ivy said, "Well, that's the point—"

A crackling of steps in grass interrupted her.

"Showtime." Jeremy sat up, alert.

He stood and gave Ivy a hand up.

Very quietly he told her, "Check around, make sure it's only them."

"It'd be a little paranoid to think Terry would—"

"If she's scared of us," he whispered, "she might have had a friend follow them."

Still focusing unwillingly on the word "paranoid," she dodged away to reconnoiter.

Jeremy unfaded. When Terry and the stranger came in sight, he forgot tension in favor of annoyed amusement. Terry wore a false nose and glasses and a long green flowering false beard. Less obvious was his real disguise, his mustache gone, his hair parted down the middle, his eyelids a different shape, his hollow cheeks filled out. He was carrying cushions and wearing gloves.

"Kerry, grow up." Jeremy'd made sure to remember and use the alias.

"I like a disguise that looks like a disguise," Terry informed them, then glanced around. "Hmm, something is missing... I can't quite make it out—"

“She’ll be back.”

The hypnotist was a slight, pretty, round-faced Eurasian woman. Jeremy guessed her to be part Vietnamese, like one of his own mothers but not much like. She looked in her thirties. He noted a small scar crossing her left eyebrow. Unobtrusive makeup, hair drawn back into a knot, neat clothes, walking shoes. No bracer on her wrist. That assured him Terry had taken the obvious precautions against tracking, in spite of his jackass games.

The hypnotist checked Jeremy out in return, guardedly. She looked ready to retract into her professionalism like a turtle into a shell. Terry viewed them with indifference.

Finally Terry hinted, “And here are two people who need no introduction...”

The hypnotist put out a small hand and Jeremy shook it.

“It won’t be easy to do this successfully without names,” she admonished.

“Try Thing One and Thing Two,” Terry suggested with a feline smirk. “You’ll have to pretend my Hat.”

Ivy emerged from behind a thick rose bush, detaching it from her sleeve, grinning at Terry’s overgrowth.

“You should have done that before you left,” chided Terry.

“It was the thrill of your arrival, Kerry.”

“I often have that effect on women.”

“And that’s even without the... beard-thing.”

Jeremy queried her with a look. “Nothing,” she said.

Terry pulled down the blossoming beard and wrapped it around his neck for warmth. He whispered very loudly in Ivy’s ear, “I gave her the cash, Mabel.”

The one thing Ivy could say for Terry’s approach was that it made the rest of them allies in aggravation. She sat by Jeremy on the foam. Terry took off the fake nose and glasses, sat on a cushion, gestured the hypnotist to the other cushion. Jeremy was watching the hypnotist intently. He seemed to have partly relaxed.

“Kerry tells me you’ve had a vision of the future that you want to clarify,” the hypnotist said to Jeremy, “but you’re extremely distressed about privacy issues.”

“Yeah.”

“Please tell me more about this. I need your words, not Kerry’s.” Her voice was smooth except when she referred to “Kerry.” Ivy wondered how much pain there was in those favors she owed to We.

“I’ve seen a book,” began Jeremy, “a short one. Most of it is unreadable. What little I can read says Boise will be destroyed this summer. I can’t act on it without details.” Jeremy paused. “I can’t afford

to be known as a ‘psychic.’ I don’t want anybody chasing me to find out what else I know about the future, because that’s all I know. That’s why this rigmorole.”

Without any comment on his attitude, the hypnotist asked, “Can you read the book’s title, or author, or date?”

Jeremy closed his eyes and frowned, eyeballs scanning.

“The title is ‘An Age Turned Upside Down.’” He spoke with great care. “No date, but I’m sure it’s a few years off.”

At the increase in tension everyone shifted position. The hypnotist observed Jeremy with care. Ivy looked at her, looked at Jeremy, and felt on edge, all the more so because of Terry’s happy curiosity.

The hypnotist asked, “When did you first see the book?”

“In my teens.”

“Was it more readable back then?”

Ivy muttered, “Good question!”

“I could read it then,” Jeremy answered slowly.

The hypnotist rubbed her hands together thoughtfully, then took a small disc recorder from her purse.

Jeremy leaned forward, saying, “No recordings.” It was clear he’d accept no dissent.

“Ahem,” uttered Terry. A pause, and the others all looked at him. The hypnotist seemed to be holding her breath.

“It’s already agreed,” explained Terry with ineffable boredom, “that I’ll take the disc and obliterate any residual clue, tangible or virtual, before I return it to the good doctor.”

Jeremy looked at Ivy.

“Is there tech to do that?”

“He can do it,” she confirmed.

“Good enough,” Jeremy agreed.

The hypnotist began to lecture. “Have you ever heard of J.W. Dunne?... I doubted you would have. He was a British investigative philosopher.” Ivy had never heard that phrase, though she vaguely recalled Dunne as someone whose books had been beyond her as a teenager. “In the 1930s he proposed a theory of the infinitely serial nature of time that explained a wide variety of precognitive dreams and visions.” The hypnotist sat up as straight as if her spine were the spine of one of Dunne’s books. “I’ve been gathering evidence for years. Perhaps I’ll find more in your Boise vision.”

Resenting the implications, Ivy glanced at Jeremy.

He laid down the law. “It’s not an experiment.”

“It is. If there weren’t anything to be learned about time, I wouldn’t have come here tonight.” Her eyes darted toward Terry and away. “You have no idea how important it is.”

“It is often,” Terry spoke loftily to the hypnotist, “a capital mistake to theorize before you have all the evidence.”

“It’s a collaboration, not an experiment,” the hypnotist rephrased, projecting at Jeremy, glancing at Terry as if she wished she could safely ignore him.

Jeremy looked quellingly at Terry, piercingly at the hypnotist. He shrugged, visibly deciding to go on with it.

“You know our ground rules?” he asked the hypnotist.

“You want the whole book in your memory, and no questions asked about it or yourself while you’re in trance. You want your girlfriend to be able to bring you out of trance. Those are trivial to arrange, but I expect your mistrust to make the session very difficult.”

“Better get started, then,” said Jeremy.

Following the hypnotist’s instructions, Jeremy lay down as comfortably as possible. He put his head in Ivy’s lap, and she disposed herself and the spare cushions into a position she hoped she could hold for a couple of hours. Terry watched the preparations with judicious fascination. The hypnotist sat cross-legged and straight-backed on a cushion and began to speak.



Ivy rapidly began to suspect that she was far more susceptible to hypnosis than Jeremy. She had the feeling that large lumps of time were passing unregarded as the hypnotist spoke in her low smooth easeful voice.

“warm dark summer night. try watching a leaf up there. it keeps moving in the gentle warm breeze. your eyes could get tired watching it so long”



“warm and dark here. you can relax. you might remember other relaxing times. you’re relaxing now. then remember those past warm relaxed times. relaxing now. and remember”



Ivy began to take square roots in her head. She saw Terry as alert as ever.



“eyes are very tired. I wonder if it would feel good to close them, maybe you could try it. Is it harder to keep them open?”

“yeah.”

“you can close them now, there’s no need to open them. it’s very relaxing, very calming”



“remembering all those past calm times, serene times. a little like floating. so relaxed and warm it’s like floating”



The night was becoming warmer and quieter.



“your arm might want to float up. it’s warm and relaxed and light. do you feel it rising?”

“yeah.”

Jeremy’s arm slowly moved up, his fingers lax. There was no strain in his face. The shadows under his eyes seemed incongruous.

“it might be hard to push it down. if I tried it might be buoyant, it might hold itself up, it’s so light”

The hypnotist pushed on Jeremy’s arm. It held steady.

“your arm’s holding itself up, it doesn’t want to sink because it’s floating. you remember floating before. you’re relaxed, you’re calm”



“you’re relaxed. You’re calm being relaxed. The rest of us will talk now. Just to help you relax, just temporarily, you don’t have to listen except when one of us touches your shoulder like this.”

The hypnotist put her hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. He did not react. He swallowed stiffly.

“When we’re not touching your shoulder, you don’t need to listen. Keep feeling more relaxed, feel the warmth, remember when you’ve been relaxed before.”



Lifting her hand, the hypnotist said, “Now you’ll be free to relax and stop hearing us for a while.”

Ivy rolled her head on her neck, cautious to avoid jarring Jeremy. Her legs ached. She was grateful for that.

“Does it always take so long?” she asked.

“I was sure it would take longer. He must have done this before.” The hypnotist studied Jeremy fixedly, her eyes slightly narrowed. Terry, observing her, tapped fingertips together.

“I’m going to try to work him back to his adolescence, when he first saw the book,” explained the hypnotist. “What was the title again?”

“An Age Turned Upside Down.”

The hypnotist looked Ivy between the eyes. “I won’t ask about him but I have to ask a few questions related to the book to strengthen his

recall. Bear with me a little, it's a technical necessity." Terry shifted again.

The hypnotist spoke to Jeremy, her hand light on his shoulder. "There's a book you told us about, called 'An Age Turned Upside Down.' You wanted to remember it. You said you needed to. Do you still want to remember it?"

"sure."

"Do you remember the first vision you had of it?"

A small impish smile crossed Jeremy's face, his eyes still closed. He looked like a child getting away with something.

"Were you outside or indoors?"

"In the woods."

"Was it cloudy or sunny?"

"A lot of sun. Sticky summer." He swallowed again.

"Picture the woods and the warm sunlight around you. You can call it all back, it's waiting for you. I wonder if you can see the scene?"

"Sure."

Straight-backed, the hypnotist lifted her hand. In a cool voice she told Ivy, "This is where I need to ask about the book to fix it in his visual memory." Ivy nodded.

Terry's eyes glinted as they paused on Ivy for a moment.

The hypnotist's hand settled on Jeremy's shoulder. Ivy noticed her manicure for the first time. "Can you see the book we were talking about?"

"I can see it fine."

"What color is its cover?"

"Lots of colors. Things are exploding." Jeremy frowned tenuously. Ivy glanced at the hypnotist, who swayed an inch forward, and back, once.

"Look at it closely. It'll help you remember the details you want. Can you see the author's name?"

"Reinhold Langley." The frown remained.

Ivy thought fast and twice and remained certain the author's name hadn't been in the program of questions she and Terry had assembled. But, a professional herself, she'd demur to the hypnotist's professional expertise. For now.

*But isn't that what hypnotic subjects always think, Ivy? That they're only playing along with the hypnotist for the time being?*

"You can see the book very clearly now," said the hypnotist to Jeremy, "the way it was in your first vision. Can you open it and see what's inside?" Terry and the hypnotist both leaned forward.

"Sure."

“Just for a minute or two it’s important for you to stay focused on my voice.” The hypnotist looked Ivy hard in the eyes, reminding her of the necessity, then looked down at Jeremy. He swallowed again. “Listen to me carefully, you don’t need to hear anything else. Only my voice, for a few minutes.” Terry cocked his head knowingly. “Now can you find the table of contents?”

Jeremy’s frown became more perceptible.

“It’s there,” he said.

Ivy looked at him and suddenly, strongly, was sure that he was being betrayed and she was letting it happen. She looked at the hypnotist’s hand. It had tightened on Jeremy’s shoulder. Terry nodded to himself.

“The table of contents and the copyright date. If you look, you can read them.”

The hypnotist leaned forward willing him to answer, like a sports fan willing the ball to go where it would win the game.

Ivy put her hands tightly over Jeremy’s ears. “Stop it!”

The hypnotist yanked her hand from Jeremy’s shoulder and drew it back almost in a wind-up for a slap. Her face was fiercely frustrated. Eyes still closed, Jeremy scowled and put a hand up to Ivy’s hand.

“We all want the same thing,” said the hypnotist firmly, her voice gone abrasive. Her glance kept rushing from one to another of them. “We all want to save the people in Boise. Surely you must realize that you can’t do it by simply taking your vision home with you and making claims. It can’t be done without scientific evidence to support your claims. Let me finish the session—”

“No,” said Jeremy, sitting up. He studied the hypnotist, his look inimical without much overt anger.

“Let me finish the session, please, and you’ll have science backing you up, and you’ll help to advance science as well.”

“No,” he repeated.

“Doesn’t any of that matter to you?”

Ivy glared. “Science isn’t my religion.”

Terry snorted, and donned the small thin smile that is worn with that kind of snort.

“You have the wrong experimental animal.” Jeremy gathered himself to stand up.

Terry stood, and spoke gently to the hypnotist as to a senile aunt. “If you’d be so good as to give us the disc...”

Looking up at Terry as if she’d forgotten him and now badly regretted it, the hypnotist shoved the recorder into her handbag. She was much smaller than Terry. She grasped her purse like David holding his slingshot in the moment when he first saw Goliath. Ivy recognized

the woman's fear and defiance but was puzzled to see it aimed more at Terry than at Jeremy.

Next everyone was standing. Terry looked at Jeremy, who was ready and determined to lunge for the purse, and backed a step out of harm's way. Jeremy glanced at him mistrustfully.

Ivy was still bubbling with anger and uncertain guilt. "You took your fee," she threw at the hypnotist. "Then you tricked us by asking the wrong questions, and now you're cheating us out of the disc. Such professionalism."

Apparently piqued, the hypnotist put her hand down into her purse.

"Here's your disc, then," she held it out reluctantly.

"Ladies and gentlemen, place your bets as you will," and Terry looked down at the disc from the safe distance he chose to maintain. "Myself, I'll wager that's a substitute."

"I might have grabbed the wrong one..." the hypnotist said quickly, staring down into her purse and reaching deep inside.

"Keep your hands out—" shouted Jeremy.

There was a handgun in the hypnotist's small, elegant hand. It was aimed at Jeremy. Off to one side Terry stared at the gun as if he could see a bullet, in slow-motion, only an unstoppable inch from his targeted eye. His mouth hung open.

The hypnotist wetted her lips, and her voice quivered, but her gun was close enough to being steady. "The disc is more than my research, it's my insurance." To Jeremy, "You won't hunt me later if you know it'll mean the disc goes public."

Jeremy and Ivy exchanged glances, instantly concurring on a plan for fading.

Terry took a breath and the hypnotist glanced at him. She said bitterly, perhaps vindictively, "Why are you so shocked by the gun, Kerry? You of all people know why I need day-by-day self-defense—you counted on that to get me here."

Terry closed his mouth and drew himself up. The gun angled towards him. He closed his eyes. Jeremy and Ivy moved a step away from each other.

"This perceived n-need of yours for insurance against a n-nemesis seems to be a recurring motif in your life," Terry said to the gun, now that he couldn't see it. "Us may not p-provide the insurance any longer."

The hypnotist's face showed stiff white horror and her arm drooped with the gun's weight.

"You wouldn't help Gar—, him, find me because of something as, as... like... You know what he'd..."

“You are one of Our projects, and so is Our B-Boise mystery man.” Terry’s fright was being replaced in equal magnitude by malice. “Frankly he’s a much more intriguing challenge, and if you force We to shield him from publicity, Us will need to divert resources from your protection.”

“Oh God.” Her head was down.

She passed Terry her purse and took a few steps back. Ivy watched her as Terry confirmed the disc playback and Jeremy, borrowing Terry’s too-large gloves, unloaded the handgun. Ivy remembered her own expression back in April as she’d looked into the mirror, first unfaded, then fading, then reappearing, and wondered what had got hold of her and what pit it would drag her into. The hypnotist had that look.

“I’m sorry she misbehaved,” said Terry urbanely. “It was only science going to her head, always a dangerous thing in a woman. When shall we three meet again?”

“Oh, don’t quote the Witches.” Ivy grew less amused the more she considered the situation.

“Tomorrow—” began Jeremy.

“—and tomorrow—”

“—at the usual place.”

“Don’t forget to return my cushions,” requested Terry, turning away, then craning from a few feet of distance to look over the hypnotist’s shoulder and see what her hands were doing.

Jeremy and Ivy watched the hypnotist and Terry walking away. After a few steps up the barely-worn path, they were hidden by the brush. Jeremy began to roll up the foam pad.

“I don’t think Terry put her up to that,” whispered Ivy, picking up cushions.

“Right.” She noticed he wasn’t startled that she’d thought of that.

“She’s an enemy now,” Ivy continued, still whispering. “I think we should fade, follow them, and track down where she lives.”

“Not part of the deal.” Jeremy tied the roll onto his backpack. “We’re pretty well covered without that.”

“Did you get any memories back?”

He looked at her ruefully. “The Table of Contents. ‘Chapter 3. The Dragons Dance: Madrid, Spokane, Singapore.’”

Ivy gulped. “Singapore too? This just gets bigger and bigger.”



They had time to refresh themselves with a nightrun before driving back to Spokane. From near the top of Rattlesnake Mountain they surveyed the lights of West Richland and Richland, the flat dark wander of the Yakima River, and the thicker blank line of the Columbia. Off to the north, the low-lying red glimmers were a wildfire that had probably

been started by the stunted thunderstorm out there. Most of the lightning was cloud-to-cloud glows and flickers. The wind front hadn't reached Rattlesnake yet, but a wavering breeze rolled a sepia-colored last-year's tumbleweed past them.

Ivy looked away from the storm to her own personal two-legged enigma. "Jeremy, you knew what was coming to Spokane. Why did you go there, of all places?"

"I'd gotten to Washington without trying. After that I let Luck lead me. I'm satisfied." Touching her face, he looked at her with a warmth that made it clear who he thought his luck was.

Ivy felt wholly open to him then and nothing would do but to kiss him. She put her hands on his shoulders and stretched up, watching his dark eyes widen. Before she reached him, thunder arrived. Jeremy turned away. He gazed to the lightning in the north and put his arms around Ivy absently.

"I knew Madrid and the Moon would warn me when to leave." He looked at her. "Ivy, do you believe me about Spokane?"

"Belief isn't my forte," she said, troubled.

"I know that," wry and regretful.

Never mind anything else she might give him, or the risks she might take; absolute belief in extraordinary claims was beyond her principles. And she hoped it wasn't just that she was afraid to believe this monstrosity.

"I think in terms of probabilities and tradeoffs..." She struggled. "The hazard of your being wrong and our being caught is offset by the opposite hazard of your being right and our not having saved anyone." She sighed and looked back at him. "So... don't ask me to think in terms of belief, but I'm in this all the way."

He looked at her piercingly and said nothing.

{:- 10 -:}

Monday June 27th, 2016

Ivy called the office and took the day off. “A sanity day?” asked Maria.

“I wish,” said Ivy.

Jeremy, re-spelled to blond, went out in Ivy’s SUV. She packed boxes and worried while he was away. After worrying long enough, she checked the news on him. There was an eye-opener.

“The Azas have put their own \$10,000 reward on you,” she greeted him when he came back with an armful of herbs and the word that he hadn’t found a decent van yet.

“Dead or alive?”

“For ‘information leading to your arrest’, according to their outer-site.”

“Public-spirited, aren’t they?” He raised sardonic eyebrows.

Ivy made a small bitter growl. *Public-related*, she thought. The media loved to hate the pirate gangs, with all their music videos and broadband websites and movie tie-ins. Offering a bounty on Jeremy was the best publicity ploy any of the glamor-gangs had ever devised.



It was mid-afternoon. Ivy, in her native coloration, sat with Terry on the hood of her SUV in a grassy clearing in the hills. They each had a small fire extinguisher near to hand. Upslope of them stood an abandoned mobile home with its roof crushed in, probably by some winter’s snow load. Near it Jeremy shoveled dirt and grass.

Ivy kept an eye and ear on the downslope dirt road. The echoes of shoveling had worried her at first. She disliked trespassing in open daylight, and she had drawn the hemisphere of sentry duty that didn’t let her catch a glimpse of what Jeremy was doing. And she was testy because Terry, claiming professional confidentiality, had refused to explain his history with the hypnotist.

Jeremy finished clearing the tinder from an eight-foot circle. He put his amulet in the pack, outside the circle with his extinguisher, and took out his gear.

“Good grief, the man has a collapsible cubical altar.” Terry grinned in amazement under his binoculars. His face looked almost deformed without the mustache.

“Do you believe him about Spokane?” she asked.

“Don’t you?”

“About fifty percent. He knows that, it’s no secret.”

“No wonder he wanted a firebreak...” At no time did Terry stop watching the spell. “I surmise that someone somewhere has discovered what magic was always really about. Jeremy’s one of them.” He paused. “But how can their group be so secret? There’s nothing on the Internet about disguise spells. If those have been around any time at all, where are all the people changing their own race or (without permission) someone else’s?”

“He won’t talk about whether there’s a... group, or a conspiracy. He did say no one was after him.” Ivy counted back; that was only two and a half days ago. “But that was before Briarson and the police turned on him.”

“Now that move was deliberate obfuscation...” Terry sadly shook his binocular head at Jeremy’s lack of candor. “I would give twenty-two of my twenty-three extremities to see what’s in that pack.”

Ivy glanced away from sentry duty to catch his eye. “But not your tongue?”

“He’s shaking something he’s hiding in his fist...” Terry puzzled. “He’s writing.” Terry tugged Ivy’s unmagical brown hair for attention. “Mumsy, I wonder what’s in that backpack, don’t you?”

“You’ll have to wait and ask his executor.”

“Over his dead body? Is that what you’re saying?”

“And it’s what you’re hearing. Is he doing all right?”

“He’s not finished.”

“It doesn’t all come from his pack. He bought herbs today, and then he dowsed them with a pendulum to test for adulteration. It doesn’t especially matter how much herb he uses, he says, but it has to be only the right herbs.”

“Would one cell of each herb be enough? One cell nucleus? This is a matter for quantitative experiment.”

“How’s he doing now?”

He lit broad-bottomed candles in an octagon around the altar. Next step was censuring the paper with caraway.

Jeremy glanced over his shoulder. Move his arm here... Now his body and pack would block their view of the next step in the spell.

Pen-of-art was working, ink was mixed.

Jeremy sketched the grid of the magic square, eight by eight cells, Mercurial.

1

“Speak, Mnemosyne.”

2

“Heed, Mnemosyne.”

3

“Obey, Mnemosyne.”

mosyne.”

mosyne.”

“Still mysterious.”

mosyne.”

“He told me he’d pass out and be confused for some time afterwards.” She bit at her lip. “...caught up in invoked Memory...’ Well, he talked about it as a hindrance, not a hazard.”

mosyne.”

mosyne.”



“It looks like the moment we’ve all been waiting for.” Terry leaned forward.

62

“Obey, Mnemosyne.”

Ivy, abandoning sentry duty, looked around at Jeremy.

63

“Heed, Mnemosyne.”

Till now he’d sat with crossed legs, writing on a slip of paper on the altar as he spoke. Now he took up the thurible and burned the paper in it.

64

“Speak, Mnemosyne.”

Jeremy pronounced the calling syllables, then the invocation he’d worked out while he sat on Kendall’s lawn.

“I call on the memory of ‘An Age Turned Upside Down’ to return to me clear and complete.”

egg of cloud appeared over Spokane. Only

The memory of Ivy sitting on her couch, looking at him half probing, half sorry. “What is it?”

“It’s a book I can see in my mind’s eye.”

The spotted Sun cracks in Mercury. tumbling in space, “re-reminded him of that

“How could so much happen so fast? Jeremy!”

shining through the Rocks of all sizes enactment,” it had book’s photo of a

stadium with a crater in the play field and a quadrant of bleachers burned and blasted. Next to that on the page, a grainy enlargement, some metal on the bleacher steps. Caption: “AREPO mining robot parts were unearthed in the wreckage

the punishment of the coven of AREPO conspirators made no

Another time he’d talked about it. That schoolyard in the Poconos. Laurel pretty and

lanky, standing with Lone and Eartha who aren’t. It’s before class. Their coveralls are still clean. Eartha’s need to be expanded across the front. Laurel’s name patch is sewn on her shoulder again, right back on the spot where Ben tore it off yesterday. Big waste of effort all around.

“Thousands of people,” he’s telling the girls. “It’s called ‘spontaneous human combustion.’ You don’t realize you’re burning till you’re mostly gone.”

“But his sphincters are still

“I never heard of that!” Eartha snaps. “I’ll bet you made it up!”

“Ugh.” Laurel grimaces.

“He’s such a jeremiah!” Lone whispers loudly to Laurel, who giggles and looks deftly at him, then at Ben behind him.

pulse and  
breathing  
seem normal

Ben. The shadows twisting in the campfire. A fuffle and squeak not far away in the thick woods. Owl and mouse, probably.

Across the flames, Ben’s finished zipping the bags together. His face stands out pale because his black hair and beard fade into the black woods at his back. Barb called him the last Neanderthal. Right now he’s like a Neanderthal’s ghost.

Caving with Ben, pointing out the needles growing all directions on the wall in Jewel Caves. Remembering the photo of the fallen crystal towers and part of a barn beneath them. Part of a cow, besides.

same full moon that shone on the gladrid began to rise wanly over Spok izens strolled in the bright moonlight

Memory of talking about that. Morning. His particular

mother wiping wet blond hair back from her eyes, always her kitchen habit. The hot water tank in the woodstove is sizzling. He should’ve known better than to tell her any book-stories now. Not when she’s getting ready to do dishes.

“I don’t want to hear any more, Jer.” He looks up a little at her disappointed face. “It’s a nasty thing to think about. If you take my advice you won’t pay any more attention to it.”

The water sizzles louder, bubbling.

Reminded him. A circle drawn on the corner of the aerial photo is labeled Marsala Seamount.

picture. It’s like crossed a water pillar in the middle.

bring the car here while I

The sea circle fills the ripples in the sink with Looking close, the

scale’s five miles to the inch. A two-mile column of ocean water?

The morning sky was clear and seemingly halcyon



Ivy felt that she couldn’t move any more except to keep trembling. Jeremy lay outstretched on his mattress and didn’t move at all, except to keep breathing.

“Ivy, if you insist on having hysterics, I have many loathsome ideas for home remedies.” Terry stood in the middle of the small basement room.

“Just... I’ll be...”

He decided it was well past time for her to drop her self-centered insistence on being sympathized with.

“All his reflexes work,” he reminded her peremptorily. “He can swallow water without mishap. His temperature is normal, ditto ditto his pulse.” Terry thought back to Bunderbye’s instructions, an act of which Ivy seemed incapable. “The man said ‘caught up in invoked memory’? Let us surmise that we can translate ‘caught up’ as ‘engulfed beyond all distraction.’” *If so, it makes an LSD flashback look like therapeutic amnesia.*

Ivy raised her head from her knees and looked at Jeremy. His arms were by his sides and his feet turned out, as they’d laid him down. He could just as easily have been asleep but nothing woke him up.

“We can’t take him to a hospital, can we?” she said, looking up at Terry. “He’s a wanted man.”

Terry exhaled. *At last, the behaviour of a rational adult human being.*

“Even if he weren’t, he would be soon. They’d assume he’d injected a drug.” Terry tapped the bandage he’d put on Jeremy’s arm. “Perhaps he did.”

Ivy shook her head protestingly.

“I can’t tell whether it’s too much chemistry or too much memory,” he continued. “Either way, I opine he might stay that way quite some time unless you distract him. It should be easy for you, since he’s male.”

“No. That’s too much like necrophilia.” She shook her head, exactly as if refusing could change the facts.

“The primal methods of getting attention are pleasure and pain. I know which one I’d prefer.”

And he left her to it. He’d have to wait for a chance to look at the strange blood-daubed fountain pen they’d found in the circle with Jeremy. He was sure that it had begun as a hypodermic (the trademark was Hy-Pen) and he wished he hadn’t backed down when Ivy hysterically demanded control of that pen and that pack.



Whatever faults Ivy could find with Terry’s suggestion, it had one merit. It was something she could do that might work.

She lay down by Jeremy, pressed against him, put her leg over his, and kissed his neck. When she moved her mouth over his ear and murmured his name, his breathing seemed to change. Nothing else about him suggested any awareness.

It chilled her to be so close to him and feel no response from him. It was unnatural. With a kind of grimness she slid her hand down his body and stroked him. He responded to that, swelling, breathing faster, thigh muscles tensing almost imperceptibly. In a burst of relief she called his name again, softly, into his ear. There was nothing in his face. Kissing his unanswering mouth, she opened his jeans.

After a moment, almost inaudibly he said, “Barb, you don’t know what that does to me...”

More piqued than she should have been, and amused when she would have thought amusement impossible, she looked down at his face. His lips were parted now.

“I’m Ivy,” she said. “Ivy, the nightrunner at the Briarson ranch.”

He frowned faintly, as he had under hypnosis.

“Ivy. Ivy, keep talking. Let go, don’t need sex mixed in.” Guiltily she closed his zipper and sat up. “I need words to block words.”

“Jeremy, are you hurt?” She stared, trying to interpret his expression. Fear? “Are you paralyzed?”

“Nothing hurts. I can feel my whole body but I can’t recall moving it... You have to talk, I’m slipping.”

“Slipping? Jeremy, don’t worry.” She put her hands on his shoulders. “You must still be able to move. Your face has an expression and you can speak.”

“I was after words, so words are easy.” His voice was minutely louder now. “Ivy, don’t say anything to remind me of the, what we were trying to get, it makes me slip. Talk, please.”

Sweat had come out on his face. Ivy began to grasp what he might mean by “slipping.”

“Jeremy, I’m not leaving, I’m just calling Terry.” She took four fast steps to the door, opened it, screamed, “TERRY!”

“Ivy, talk. Talk about anything.”

Back on the mattress, she found nothing in her mind except Spokane, spells, nightrunning. Magic seemed to be related to everything! Desperately, “I can only think of unsafe topics!... Jeremy, try thinking about numbers. The multiplication tables. Count by seventeens.”

Terry stood braced in the doorway, glaring in anxiety.

“He needs conversation to hold off memories,” Ivy told him, “but we can’t talk about anything like what we’ve been doing lately.”

“The memories of that link to other old memories,” said Jeremy. “They all drain in—”

“A cascade. A cataract. I perceive.” Terry nodded. “The doctor prescribes Lewis Carroll. Ivy, surely you must know Jabberwocky?” He picked up Jeremy’s pad and pen.

“‘Twas brillig...” Ivy closed her eyes to concentrate. “...and the slithy toves... did gyre and gimble in the wabe... all mimsy,” she took the note Terry passed her.

“—‘were the borogoves,” Terry continued, eyeing her. “And the mome raths outgrabe.”

*He cd go catatonic any time. 2 much at stake. Must ask about storm. If  
he drowns in memories, he did volunteer.*

“NO!” She stood and Terry backed away from her one step. *How much do you want that backpack, Terry?* She refrained from saying it. She couldn’t really believe it of him.

“He took his vorpal sword in hand,” Terry went on, his voice sharp and wavering; he was unsure of where she’d made him leave off.

Ivy looked at Jeremy. He was wet with sweat; she herself hadn’t been dry since they carried him to her car. She sat again and put a hand on his chest. Now he was even more helpless than he’d been last night. If only Terry’s hypnotist had been trustworthy! If only she could...

“Jeremy,” she began, gesturing hard for Terry to stop reciting, “I’m going to keep talking for a while.” She realized she was talking too fast. “Just relax and focus on my voice and don’t be distracted by anything.”

“You’re trying to—” Jeremy broke in, sounding troubled in some way that his face didn’t convey.

“That’s right.” She tried to sound calm and smooth. “That’s right. Relax and don’t be distracted. Focus on my voice.”

How do I get his attention while keeping it safely on abstracts? Remember Terry’s first suggestion, make it very sensory.

“Jeremy, sometimes when you think of words and numbers they have colors and textures. See each word as I say it, picture each word. Keep concentrating. Listen to my voice and picture the words. You don’t have to remember, just listen and visualize.”

She wrote Terry a note asking for water to drink and a damp towel to wipe their faces, while saying, “Yes... sometimes... words and numbers... seem to have colors... Do you ever see that?”

“Numbers, not words.”

“Okay, good, think of the numbers then. Twelve thirty-one. What color is it?”

“Yellow and green, like a rose bush.”

His face was showing less strain. Ivy licked salt from her lips and wished for some lip balm.

“Is it shiny? Dull? Velvety?”

“Not the right words for it.”

“Okay, that’s good enough. Look at the colors and relax. Three ninety-seven is red and gold for me. What do you see?”

“Red and gold, and purple.”

“Look at my words, and listen to my voice, and watch for the patterns in them. The patterns will keep changing. Relax and watch them. Your mind will become calmer and more regulated as you picture what I say...”



The sheets on the mattress were soaked with sweat around Jeremy, but his face was fully relaxed. Terry sat on the floor, edgy and observant.

“I’m going to wipe your face again now but it won’t distract you, you’ll be able to stay relaxed.” Ivy wiped his face and then hers, taking the drops of sweat from the ends of her bangs. She put her head back down on her knees.

“Jeremy, now imagine your mind is a quiet house,” she instructed him. “Picture it. It’s easy to see it. What does it look like outside?”

“It’s built of concrete blocks. It backs up against a bluff. The windows are small.”

*It sounds like a fortress! (Are you surprised?)*

“What color is it?”

“Dark blue. Not painted. The concrete is permanently dyed dark blue.”

“Jeremy, if you go into your quiet house, your quiet mind, and look for the area where your memories are resting, what does that look like?” She took a gulp of water.

“Tunnels leading back into the hill. Halls of books. I can’t see where they end.”

“Are the halls dark or light?”

“Dim.”

Her mouth was dry again.

“Jeremy, where in the house is ‘An Age Turned Upside Down’?”

“It’s all over.” Ivy watched for signs of another memory cascade, but his voice and face were calm. “All the pages are mixed in with all the other books.”

“Okay, I’m going to give you water now. While I’m doing that, look around a minute and see how many of the pages you can find.” She tipped the glass carefully. His swallowing reflex was working. “It won’t be hard. You told me once it wasn’t a thick book.” She took a hint from intuition. “And your blood that you wrote with in the spell will glow to mark all the pages for you. Or it might mark them like incense with a scent on all the pages.” She gave him another swallow of water. “They’re your pages now. Tell me when you’re done.”

Jeremy still seemed to be keeping control. She glanced at Terry, who lifted one eyebrow at her.

“I’ve got them,” said Jeremy.

“So they’re all in order now.”

“Yeah.”

“If you look around, there ought to be some room or some container where you can put the book, somewhere away from the other books, locked up but easy to see. Maybe a glass-top case like the one the Constitution is in.”

“The pages are between sheets of transparent metal. The metal is welded together in racks in a side room.”

That had the plain sound of victory. Terry picked up the notepad and imperiously waved it at her.

“Jeremy, can you see the pages about Spokane?”

“Sure.”

“When is the Spokane storm?”

“July 6, 2016.” He spoke easily, with the hint of a smile. “It starts 9:30 AM and lasts most of the daylight. It causes a wildfire to the northeast later that night.”

“Oh, you’ve got it, Jeremy.” She wiped his face again. “It’s all under your control now and it’ll stay that way.”

“Yeah.”

Then Ivy thought about that date, only a week from day after tomorrow. And really, with Spokaners starting to leave this Friday for the Fourth of July weekend, the storm warning would need to be out by this Thursday to catch them. That was the day after the day after tomorrow.

Terry laid notepaper on Jeremy’s chest. She looked at the new note.

*Is he still paralyzed?*

She closed her eyes and waited to get her confidence back.

“Jeremy, you can come up out of trance soon. When I tell you to come out of trance, you’ll do it completely. You will open your eyes and sit up, and your memory of how to move will be in order just like all your other memories. It’s all under your control now.

“Come out of trance now.”

Jeremy took two deep breaths, sat up, and reached for her. She seized him hard and pushed her wet face against his wet neck. He tilted his head back, gulping air, looking around at the room. The real, right-this-minute room. Terry was staring off to the side of them, looking like his toes had been stomped.

“It’s past my dinnertime,” Terry said, sounding peeved, “so I’m stepping out to a distant part of the house, completely out of sight and earshot, to order pizza.”

After a while Jeremy pulled back from Ivy. She kept watching him every instant. He looked over the two of them and couldn't believe the sweat.

Pulling a soaked fold of shirt away from his chest, he said, "We need a shower."

She sniffed a few times. "That's how frightened I was..." Streaks of fresh tears down her face.

"I'd heard it could be that bad," he said in amazement, "but I thought I could control..." He pushed her hair off her face.

"I was afraid we couldn't retrieve you," Ivy wrapped onto him again, "because I'd be too scared to be able to hypnotize you, because I couldn't be confident enough to reach you."

He grunted. "It works by trust, not confidence. If you hadn't been scared for me, you'd have been hard to trust."

Jeremy didn't like to keep remembering what had happened in his mind, even if it didn't want to keep happening. Get back to real life.

"Yeah," he rallied Ivy, "it was a close call."

She looked at him uncertainly.

"I know that."

"Much longer and you'd have had bedpan duty."

She laughed in a choked voice. He glanced around. There was his pack with his gear on top. That meant his amulet was safe. What about the pen with his blood in it? Still sticking out of the top of the pack. *Good.*

{:- 11 -;}

By the time Ivy and Jeremy finished showering, Terry was on the second rewrite of their storm announcement article. Terry kept rewriting on his clip-puter while the pizza made its way down the three of them.

“If the book says 9:30 AM,” Terry asked reasonably, “why do you want the article to say ‘between 8 and 11 in the morning’?”

“It’s a lousy book,” Jeremy said forcefully, looking up from his note-taking on Ivy’s computer.

Terry and Ivy stared at him in consternation.

“About a dozen major disasters and more near-misses.” He jabbed his forefinger at each number in mid-air. “Only thirty pages disaster history and some photos of the ruins. Sixty pages AREPO conspiracy theory.”

“AREPO?” Ivy rebelled. “What sense does that make? I don’t doubt they have the know-how to commit multinational fraud, but to destroy a dozen cities? They haven’t even figured out how to launch their mining robots!”

“So we’re told,” commented Terry. “The annals of human stupidity show how many conspiracies were dismissed as nothing more than flukes of human stupidity.”

Jeremy raised his voice slightly and stayed on topic. “I don’t trust the book with anybody’s life for the fine details. Here’s a case—it didn’t mention the hysterical deafness afterwards, but that’s in all the Madrid news. That’s why I don’t waste our time dictating the whole book to you.”

Terry and Ivy kept watching him, so he closed his eyes and read out loud. “As Madrid struggled and smoldered in the aftermath of the dragon-cloud, the same full moon that shone on the glassy molten streets of Madrid began to rise wanly over Spokane, Washington. Its citizens strolled in the bright moonlight of Midsummer’s Day, having no way of knowing that most of them would not outlive that same moon.”

“Ah, I perceive,” Terry shook his head slowly as if it was sloshing over with regrets. “I see your concern, and raise you five doubts.”

“Crap.” Ivy laughed, frustrated. “Why couldn’t you have had a vision of a future encyclopedia instead?”

“Wouldn’t have been vivid enough to stick in my mind this long.”

Strategy discussions began after the pizza disappeared. Their original plan to hack the Spokane paper seemed infinitesimal in the face of all the larger catastrophes that would follow Spokane. The question was how much more they could safely do.

“You’ve already agreed,” Terry argued, “that we should send out a spam Dragon-alert within Spokane, above and beyond hacking the paper. Us can almost as easily spam the world with a message that details all the disasters.”

Ivy opened her mouth to ask how much Us would charge for that service, but deferred to Jeremy.

“No.” Jeremy leaned forward in intense rejection. “No. Think about it. Spokane is a small sprawled-out city. We can risk a panic here, but not in an overgrown overpacked city like Beijing or Singapore.”

“The earlier the warning, and the more complete the information, the more salutary the panic,” insisted Terry, mutinous.

“No. The complete warnings only go to the governments and charities. They know the local situations, we don’t. Maybe they’re not good enough for the job. That doesn’t prove we can do it better.” Jeremy looked at Terry’s expression and added, “Wait and see what happens after Spokane. If the head people don’t act, then we shoot spam all over the planet.”

“Okey dokey, boss,” Terry said, after a pause.



At the table sat Jeremy with a map of Spokane. He was overlaying it in pencil with a pattern of destruction that was not quite identical to the glyph the Madrid storm had drawn. He drew; then closed his eyes to look at the small photo in his book; then drew again. His pack leaned against his chair.

Ivy sat on the floor in the living-room. She typed on Terry’s clip-puter, adapting Jeremy’s notes to fill out the outline.

**8/3/16 Singapore, city and island: Ultrastorm.**

**A Madrid/Spokane type of storm will begin at dawn (plus or minus 1 hr). The south half of the island of Singapore will suffer most of the direct damage. Lightning arcs striking into the ocean will produce clouds of superheated steam, causing additional fatalities.**

**Category 2: overgrowth of crystalline monoliths**

**Category 3: hypermagnetic pulse along ley-lines**

**Category 4: plague of spontaneous human combustion**

**Category 5: tidal wave from collapse of sea circle**

It was like looking at a word for so long that it turned into impossible gibberish. Her mind toggled back and forth. First she’d see the disaster phrases as absolutely meaningless; next she couldn’t avoid the images of what they might mean.

She heard the printer shut off down the hall, and then Terry’s thumping footsteps approached. She’d never seen him work so single-mindedly at the office, not even on their occasional joint prank.

Terry dropped printout on the table by Jeremy.

“There’s the latest draft of the article,” he informed them, “insert a scan of the map as indicated. I’m off to ransack the Net for our mass mailing addresses.”

“Why not do it here?”

“If the hounds come a-hunting on the traces of my search, we all want the fox to be my decoy puter, not your little buddy.”

Jeremy held out the spare keys to Terry. “We might be out of the house when you come back. I need to make a call from a pay phone.”

“God, we’re such a pack of sneaks.” Terry laughed in sly delight.



“Our beloved prosecutor wants to give you a big prize.” Abe chuckled on the other end of the pay-phone. “You and your Jane Doe didn’t match DNA with anyone on file.”

Jeremy tightened up. “Jane Doe?” Then he realized.

“You didn’t wash your sheets.”

Jeremy punched the side of the booth, hard.

Faded, not far away, Ivy jumped. Then she wondered if he’d ever tell her what that was about.

“What about her prints?” He rubbed his knuckles.

“What about them? Partial. Smudges. Nothing matchable.”

“Take her out of your damned records!” Jeremy snarled.

“Sorry, that can’t happen till you’re cleared.” Abe was startled.

Jeremy leaned his head against his upraised braced arm. “What are the chances?”

“There’s not much new, except I found out what lit Briarson’s fuse. Nick Capovecchio made some casual comment that we’d ruled you out as an Aza, but he was still checking on the old Aryan Nation. Nick says Briarson linked to that idea right away.” Abe snorted cynically. “He must have liked that better than being grateful to a white.”

Jeremy knew better. He figured his failed warning about the Dragon had been misinterpreted by Briarson in hindsight, and the sucker-punch hadn’t helped, but he let it be. He was tired. The last two nights he’d got his rest, what little there was, by nightrunning. Tonight he had to get some dreaming-sleep.

“Are you going to be out of town over the Fourth?” Jeremy asked.

“Yeah, you gonna rob my house?”

“First tell me what’s insured.”

Abe laughed. “We’re all going to Florida thru next week. That’s Disney World for the Fourth-of-July fireworks, plus the Kennedy Space Center and the Everglades.”

Jeremy sighed, relieved. One less obligation to track.

“So who do I call for news while you’re gone?” he asked.

“Call no one, say no thing. That’s an order, mister. Jackman’s busy rolling up the good political mileage because the defense helped the nasty Azas drive off his pet witness.”

The conversation closed off and Jeremy picked up his pack and headed for Ivy.

“What’s the trouble?” she asked.

“Abe says nothing new on the Azas. His bad news was that I’ve gotten you into the police DNA records as a Jane Doe. My bed back at the apartment.”

He added, “I’ll cast a purge spell on both of us. That way nobody can use our juices to curse us.”

Already swallowing hard at being mired in the enforcers’ files, the way her parents had been, she choked on the idea of curses.

“Let’s run a little,” she said. “I need to think.”



Ivy was ready to talk again when they were a couple of blocks from her street. They slowed to a walk.

“If they didn’t match my DNA,” she said in a low voice, “would they still keep a centralized record of it? At the NBIE?”

“I don’t know,” he replied as quietly. “My police procedures are years out of date.”

“Suppose they do. I have fingerprints on file from working at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation, those are seventeen years old. So if I don’t use your DNA-changing disguise spell I can’t afford to be DNA-tested ever again. If I do use it, the next time I’m fingerprinted I’ll have the wrong prints because of the spell and I’ll come up as an impostor. Fortunately prints aren’t taken so often nowadays.”

“Terry’s inventing an ID for me,” Jeremy said reluctantly. “Ask him about your files.” After a moment he added, “If we want to trust him for any of that.”

“Do you think he might blackmail us later?”

“Hard to say.”

“I know it sounded as though he blackmailed the hypnotist or at least pressured her.”

“You’ve known him a while. What do you think?”

“I know him, I don’t know We.” Reluctantly she trusted her intuition. “I don’t think Terry himself will turn on us.”

“Yeah. We’re all three outlaws together. That helps.”

“As Franklin said, ‘If we do not hang together, assuredly we shall all hang separately.’”

He closed his hand more tightly on hers. They were at the corner of her street.

“Do you have friends to rescue from Spokane?” Jeremy asked her. “I’ll help.”

“No, not one beyond Terry. I’m not a social animal. I shouldn’t say it to you but... I had Mark, so what other friend did I need?”

He latched his arm around her shoulders, more possessive than fond or sympathetic. Ivy thought, *it’s a week from day after tomorrow.*

“I can’t think of anyone I could persuade to leave,” she said, “even if you showed them magic. I’ll try, of course.”

“We don’t have to settle for persuasion.”

She understood that immediately and it left her in utter dismay. “What? You mean...” She moved away from him. “That’s... You want to pull a Briarson on them?”

He stopped dead, staring at her with his head back, disliking what he wasn’t sure she was accusing him of.

She clarified. “You’re planning to knock them out the way you did Briarson and kidnap them out of danger?”

“Yeah.” He came right back at her. “A lot like that.”

“No, that’s not right. It has to be persuasion.”

“Ivy. Leave them in Spokane and they’ll probably die next Wednesday.”

“Jeremy, I see the logic of what you’re saying but I don’t have the facts you’re basing it on.”

“The book. Or do you think that’s insanity?”

“Oh, you’re sane. I’m sane too, I think, but even so my brain has lied to me every night for as long as I can remember. Your book vision could have some facts right and the rest could still be from dreamland. And I know there are other things you’ve chosen not to tell me.”

“I can’t tell you everything yet.”

“Won’t.”

“Can’t.” Jeremy stared at her, forceful and bitter. “It is physically impossible for you to be told. You can’t hear it as the fact it is. You’d figure I was dangerously insane and throw out everything I’d said.”

“No, not everything, that’s not—”

“A one-woman hung jury,” he said harshly, but without scorn. He shook his head.

She turned away, looking for a straightforward black-and-white argument to get through to him. She focused, in the next instant realizing why the phrase “black-and-white” had come to mind.

Jeremy followed her look and grinned crookedly.

The skunk was standing on her one-house-down neighbor's front porch. It had raised its head from the cat's food bowl to listen to them argue.

"Remember what I told you about nightrunners and animals? Watch." Jeremy walked to the street end of the neighbor's walkway, sat on his heels, and unfaded. The skunk observed him with interest that Jeremy returned cordially, though without looking straight at the animal.

"Jeremy, it's not a pet skunk!"

"Unfade and hunker down here. It'll be all right."

Ivy thought he might be testing her trust, so she risked joining him. The skunk ambled toward them. Amused at Ivy's strict motionlessness, Jeremy gave her a wry sideways look. He stretched out his hand at snout level.

The skunk took two more steps. It sniffed his hand. At this distance Ivy was amazed by the cleanness and gloss of the skunk's fur. She could also smell a hint of skunk. Oddly, it made her hungry.

"Don't stare at it," Jeremy whispered. "Put your hand out slowly."

The skunk sniffed Ivy's hand. She tried not to smell like suppressed dread.

"See what I meant?" asked Jeremy, pleased with himself.

The skunk turned back to him. He scratched behind its ear. It drew back, and Ivy prepared to levitate. Then it tilted its head and leaned into the touch in pleasure.

"He acts like an animal who's never seen humans before," Ivy whispered in worried wonder.

When the skunk went back to the food bowl, they went back to the argument. Ivy glanced at the Premzics' open bedroom window and kept her voice to a whisper.

"Look, Jeremy... I'm approximately eighty percent sure about your prediction. That isn't strong enough to justify kidnapping, not to me."

"Ivy, if you don't act the result won't be that they're only eighty percent dead."

"But kidnapping is an unacceptable risk... I don't mean to us... maybe the risk to us is worth it, even on top of infoterrorism charges, even at only eighty percent certainty." She let out a quiet cynical giggle. "Anyway, we can sell the movie rights to our story for billions and be rich when they let us out of jail."

She rather liked Jeremy's sardonic expression.

"But there's a risk to the people we're supposedly saving. I have maybe fifteen acquaintances, that's thirty-plus people counting spouses and kids. I doubt we can control that many. Someone will go anthrax trying to protect his kids, or get caught in crossfire if the cops show up."

Jeremy nodded. "Yeah. We can't handle that many. If you want any saved, you'll have to choose a few."

"Well, I..."

Oh, that hurt. She thought about it. *If this really happens, a week from day after tomorrow...*

"I could," she said firmly, exhaling, forgetting to whisper. Remembering, she continued, "But if someone has to choose anyway, it's more ethical for it to be their choice. So I'll stay with persuasion."

"They won't have an informed choice," Jeremy reminded her.

"Neither do I," she retorted. "It's contagious."

As they reached the steps up to her deck, she added, "I'd invite everyone to an out-of-town party that morning, but I've never thrown a party in my life. It'd look suspicious afterwards."

"You telling me you can't find any excuse for a party?"



\$60,000. There was only one scratch-card game with that top prize. She couldn't use that one. Ivy thimbled the screen and scanned further down the state lottery page.

\$50,000. There were two games but the top prizes were already gone in both of them.

The scanner had finished reading and optimizing Jeremy's map of the Spokane destruction glyph. Thimbling through the windows and pages, she pasted the map into the storm warning article. It was finished, but there was so much else to do.

\$40,000. That was the ticket, so to speak. There were four games. Between them ten top prizes were left, and one of those would expire on Friday. If it remained unclaimed at that time, no one could prove it hadn't been hers.

Question: were any of the scratch cards for those games actually sold in Spokane? Probably. At which stores? Of course the Washington State Lottery page didn't make that searchable. Answer: if she claimed she couldn't remember the details, no one could pin her down.

"Oh dear, I had the ticket," she said to herself in the voice of the blonde in all the blonde jokes, "I can't think where I could have left it! Oh dear me, no, I don't remember which game..."

Ah. Her mental prank-generator gibbered for her attention. It offered her an improved plan. She and Jeremy had worried about whether her van purchase would look suspicious, given her evaporating savings. Under the new reality she could openly buy it, to travel on a long lottery-funded trip she and Jeremy had planned. A cost that was

painful in the real world would in pretext-space be proof that she really had expected to be knee-deep in the money to pay for it.

"I'm home, dears!" Terry was back. There was the man who could refine her story.

"...ask the oracle a question," she heard Terry say as she walked toward the living room. "Regular linkers will recall a certain book's prediction of a leak from the water utility's pressurized chlorine tank, causing a fortunate life-saving evacuation of a large area of the city early on dragon-day."

Nearly finished with the Singapore glyph, Jeremy looked up at Terry in inquiry.

"The element of unreality is that the utility hasn't used or stored chlorine gas since the terrorist scare back in 'twelve, when they switched to UV disinfection technology." Terry took a breath. "What does this mean for our little cottage conspiracy?"

Jeremy shook his head. "We have nearly two pages saying the city was destroyed, but only one sentence mentioning the evacuation." Irritably, "I said it before. I don't trust the book for fine detail."

"Well, I don't object to thinking the book is fallible." Ivy proposed a reconciliation. "But do we know that the utility completely emptied the chlorine tank when they retrofitted? What if haz-waste disposal rules got in the way?"

"That's probably not disprovable," Terry said loftily.

Ivy sat down by Jeremy. He looked worn down.

"Does this data discrepancy change your plans?" Terry threw out a challenge. "It certainly changes mine."

Jeremy stirred and gave Terry a hard stare. "Are you dropping out?"

"No! Sir!" Terry stood his ground. "I hope to avoid a temporal paradox, on the supposition that the historically documented evacuation won't occur unless we cause it."

"You intend to gas people?" Jeremy's distrust showed.

"Virtually, my dear Watson." Terry took offense.

"Virtual or real, it'd be too hard to avoid mass panic. Don't do it," gloweringly.

Terry gave way as graciously and sincerely as a teenager. "Right, Boss. Aaanything you say."

Pause.

"If we're going to bicker," Ivy suggested acidly, most of the acid aimed at Terry, "let's wait and do it sometime when I'm awake enough to cheer you on." Jeremy turned his scowl toward her. She went on, talking to Terry. "Right now the news article is ready to go to Bombay, and I need your advice about winning the lottery."

It distracted Terry as successfully as she'd hoped it would.



“...doesn’t mean he’s always right!”

Jeremy muttered and rolled away from Ivy, turning onto his back, frowning in his sleep.

“Wha’?” Ivy, lying on her side, narrowly opened her eyes. The room was too small and too short to be her bedroom.

“You have claw,” he said. “What do you do for metal?”

Jeremy got one arm out of the blankets. He absently rubbed the freed hand on his bare chest, over his heart. Ivy sat up and tried to understand her situation.

“Mark, what is it?” she asked.

Jeremy stopped motionless, his hand hovering an inch above the blanket, his mouth open. Ivy looked at him and recognized, first, the blond bearded man, and then the room.

“Oh...”

Jeremy sat straight up, eyes staring open, with a sleeping look of shock and dread. He reached out as if to drag someone back from a cliff brink.

“Ben, DON’T!”

Ivy saw the fresh sweat on his face, remembered him slipping into an undertow of memories in this same room, and shook him hard by the shoulders. He shoved her off the air mattress.

He looked around the dark room in confusion.

Not venturing to touch him, Ivy said, “Jeremy, it’s Ivy. You had a bad dream.”

“No. Bad memories.” He dried his face with the sheet.

“Oh, no.” She moved over to him and put her arm around him. “I could hypnotize you again to prevent it.”

“No. Let the safety valve do its job.”

She disagreed but decided they both needed sleep, not an argument.

“Roll over, I’ll rub your back.”

She straddled Jeremy, keeping her weight off his back, and began to knead the muscles of his shoulders.

“They could use you for pavement,” she told him.

Ivy moved up to his neck, starting at the hollow at the base of his skull, working out to the sides, then inward, then down onto his back. She thought, Terry and the rest of We should have finished infiltrating their Bombays by now. It wouldn’t be many hours till she and Jeremy found out whether Us were such adepts as Terry had claimed.

“‘The conspirators made numerous attempts to trigger population panic,’ says the book. But it doesn’t specifically mention Spokane?” Even if it made him tense again, she couldn’t resist asking.

“No. Maybe the hack won’t work. We’ll know soon. That’s enough, it’s your turn.”

She unzipped and pulled down the top of her one-piece. Jeremy knelt by her and rubbed her back. Out of the corner of her eye she saw him brooding over her.

“Ivy,” he said gently, “be prepared for this to last a long time.”

She sighed. “It’ll certainly be a long week. And then there’ll be a long aftermath whether your book is right or not.”

He stroked her hair lightly, tenderly. “Not what I meant.”

{:- 12 -:}

Tuesday June 28th, 2016

The double-sided color printer spat one printout as it sucked paper for the next. During that little applied art project the sun had risen to make a nuisance of itself. Terry closed the blinds of his apartment window and turned on one of the ceiling strings of bean-sized white xmas lights.

6:02 AM. It would be a while before the peak news-reading time. Terry reviewed his apartment, furnished in the nomadic style of wooden crates, beanbag chairs, and easily disassembled desks, and concluded that nothing of value would have to be left behind when he evacuated.

The poster (TEMPORARY AUTONOMOUS ZONE) on the inside of the entry door—he would take that, along with the one on the outside (I AM NOMAD). The glassed but empty frame mounted over a particularly evocative water-stain on the wall and labeled “Portrait of the Landlord as a Young Man”—he’d always meant to leave that.

Terry fingered his mustache one more time, to be sure, and returned to ruminations about the Hy-Pen® brand hypodermic-pen. The “trademark” was not to be found in the Registry; it was a demonstrable sham. Nonetheless, the device could not be explained as a mere one-of-a-kind gimmick. Jeremy’s group obviously had access to manufacturing facilities on some scale. That implied financing, and what did that further imply? Great difficulty in achieving secrecy, because it involved more people, or great ease because it involved more money?

He wasn’t a conspiracy addict, as Mumsy liked to pretend; he did in fact find the Hy-Pen plot highly implausible. *Large, secret, and successful; a conspiracy can have only two out of three.*

But suppose that among the conspiracy’s spells was one that would let them identify anyone who’d informed on them... There, now, was a (hypothetical, remember) aid to secrecy that it would be wise for We to keep in mind.



6:11 AM.

Fidgeting, Ivy thimble back to the front webpage of the Spokesman-Review. At her shoulder Jeremy crunched buttered toast.

Top Headlines, June 28, 2016:

Madrid Casualty Count Increases  
EU Commissioner Shot in Madrid  
Polls Assess Voter ‘Compassion’

Millennialists in Defense Did Aid Al Qaida  
AREPO Investigator Attacks Media  
US Spy-Satellite Weather Data to Go Public  
Raindance Marathon Reaches Day 20  
New AWW March in Jerusalem  
Wizard Riots in Congo Kill Hundreds  
Latest HPL Film's 'Unspeakable' Debut

6:13 AM. Ivy hit Refresh.

Top Headlines, June 28, 2016:

Spokane Ultrastorm Predicted by FEMA  
Madrid Casualty Count Increases

“Yow yow yow yow yow!” howled Ivy in triumph.  
Toast bounced off the ceiling, butter side up.



Terry stretched back in his chair, arms out in front of him, fingers interlocked, popping his knuckles. He grinned in maniacal gratification, stripped off his oversized t-shirt, and headed for the shower.



6:54 AM.

Ivy packed Mark's photo in her briefcase. To her dismay, the front page of the Spokesman-Review had been repaired.

**NEWS UPDATE IN PROGRESS!  
SEE YOU SOON!**

There were no longer any headlines at all. She moaned to herself.

“You heard about that, eh?” Andreas Lin looked in at her door. “Try the Sports page. Or Weather, hoo boy, that's the right place for it.”

There was their ultrastorm headline again. Apparently another Bombay had made its delivery—or however Us had programmed it.

“Where were you yesterday?” Andreas asked peevishly.

“Monday won, I lost.”

“Virmeet with Max, pleeease. That biomining file was corrupted and so is his patience.”

Yes, she could probably remember what biomining was. She thimbleed the VirMeet menu for a two-person virtual meeting with transcript and video and keyed her camera/mike, stuck up the V sign outside her door, closed it, checked the camera's status light one more time to ensure it was ready.

“As if I want a client to see me this muddled,” she muttered.

Midway through the virtual meeting Terry barged in, ignoring the V. He wagged eyebrows at her and held up a sign outside the camera's view: "Resistance is Useless!" Clasp hands above his head in victory, he turned and was gone.

He'd had a full mustache again.



I regret to inform you of a number of natural disasters that will strike localities in many parts of the world within the next nine months. The catastrophes will include storms of the Madrid type as well as tidal waves, urban fires, earth motions and windstorms, all of types that produce unprecedented damage. I will not explain how this information was obtained, but if it is not acted upon by the authorities the result can only be an appalling loss of life. I am sending this warning to numerous private and public organizations. The attachment lists the government agencies I have contacted.

And the rest of the warning, text, images, and all. Jeremy closed his eyes and reviewed the book, page by page. There wasn't anything more to add.



"What do you think, Mumsy?" Terry closed her office door.

Ivy blinked at what he'd handed her. It was an invitation card. On its front was a cloudless summer sky with dozens of toy balloons rising into it, near and far, each with a gold-leaf dollar-sign stenciled on it. She opened the card.

**I'm celebrating winning the lottery!**

**I insist you come to my party**

**next Wednesday morning (July 6), 9 to 11 AM.**

**Unfold this card for a map and directions.**

**We'll have a brunch, odd entertainment,**

**and a platinum hunt for the kids (be sure and bring them).**

**Please tell me by Friday, July 1, whether you can make it.**

The signature was hers, digitized.

"Entertainment, you say?"

"Jugglers extraordinaire. They're local boys, so it'll be two more off the body count."

She still had trouble believing that Terry believed in the disaster. *And how had he convinced We?* She put her own doubts aside.

“Terence, you’re my favorite son. And I’m proud of your mustache.”

“It’s the spare.”



“FEMA disavowed it an hour ago,” said Maria Santillan.

“It took them that long?” Jack Dyson smirked. “I wonder how far up the ranks they had to go before they found someone with the ba—, the guts to say something straight out.”

Terry said, “But then, if it weren’t a hoax would FEMA publicly admit it and start a municipal panic? How could we ever know?”

Her thimbled hands pausing on the screens, Ivy canted her eyes sideways at the conversation in the hall.

“It’s a hoax.” Jack was always so definite. “Why else would the paper be trying to wipe it off their site?”

“But consider the political incentives,” urged Terry. “Which would cause the election-sensitive elite more difficulty? To have caused a killer panic with a prediction based on an untested theory, and then have no disaster occur? Or to have publicized the prediction as a hoax, taken no responsibility, and settled for saving only the easily frightened?”

“Oh, no, that’s too cynical,” protested Maria.

“I expected more cynicism,” laughed Jack. “You didn’t say anything about the truth being leaked only to the richfarts—’scuse me—the rich dynasties that pull the world’s strings.”



“BEN!”

Mostly awake, Ivy lightly rubbed Jeremy’s rigid unawake back. He gasped and woke up, and wiped sweat and tears from his face. She kept rubbing, rhythmically, undemandingly.

“We should sleep in a different room,” she said, “not where you woke up after the memory spell. How about out in the rec room? We can move the pinballs to make space.”

“Worth a try.”



Wednesday June 29th, 2016

Ivy thimbled the company calendar to show July 1 and the morning of July 6 as vacation time. Normally she’d have given more warning for a long weekend. Normally she wouldn’t have been trying to prove that

she hadn't planned her vacation until after the big scary storm story appeared in the news. Terry, she noticed, had marked this morning, and of course July 6, as the off portion of his part-time status.



"Jugglers and a caffeine tasting," Ivy responded, off-balance, after her first party announcement. She hadn't expected that "winning the lottery" would make Maria hug her in delight!



Jack laughed a knowing laugh. "You make it sound like fun, but I keep remembering it's been months since your last practical joke. You're overdue. It worries the he—, it worries me."

"I promise, no pranks. You'll be safe." Ivy suppressed a reprobate snicker at the unintended irony.



Mandy Wiles looked wistfully at the invitation on her desk and hopefully at Ivy.

"Will Ian come?"

Ivy mentally painted the word "louse" onto her own forehead, but she couldn't quite tamp down her prankster glee. "Ian said he'd try to be there." She gave it a doubtful tone.



She stared at the beautifully lettered Twenty-Third Psalm on Jake Graeme's wall. Even under these circumstances it helped her suppress a slow burn.

"Oh." She looked back at Jake, who had the decency to seem dismayed that he'd spoiled her friendly gesture. "um, well, you'll be welcome if you decide the lottery isn't irreligious gambling."



Ivy responded, "Well, Ian, I'm pretty sure Pat will show."

The word on her forehead began to flash in five alarming imaginary colors.



Terry closed her office door after lunch, by which time her pile of undelivered invitations was greatly reduced.

"Kerry Halteman does good work," he remarked.

"Someone hired him? Even with that beard?" Ivy rejoined, after a short confused pause. "What line of work is he in?"

"Kerry installs, maintains, and repairs some pre-eminently high-tech security systems all over Eastern Washington. There's a local copyrights

lawyer who relies on the highest-tech equipment to protect his speedboats. That makes him Kerry's bread and butter."

"Beard and butter. Do go on."

"Kerry found a computer hidden with great care in an RF-shielding box in the lawyer's boat shed. The computer seemed to be connected to the lawyer's phone and electric lines and, would you believe, it seemed to be programmed to send spam to every webber in Spokane. And to quite a number of worldwide important peoples' privatest faxboxes. Tomorrow."

"So. What did Kerry do about it?"

"Why, he left it alone, of course, presuming the lawyer wanted to do that sort of telemarketing. You know how lawyers love attention."



This was the hard part.

"It will shut down the office all morning," said Mrs. Vickerson in a friendly tone that expected a reply.

Ivy scrupulously said nothing. She counted the letters on the plaque on Mrs. V's award from the Family Protection Council, the trees in Mrs. V's framed mountain landscape, the eyes in the maple veneer of Mrs. V's desk.

"Once in a lifetime, though..." Mrs. Vickerson went on, with an indulgent little chuckle and twinkle.

Ivy smiled nicely, wondering if she should swear on her hoped-for pension never to win the lottery again in her life.



Payphone 1076.

"I finally found a van," Jeremy told her. "Any reason we can't close the deal this evening?"

"That sounds wondrous fine."

"I wouldn't go that far." He snorted, a sound the bracer earbuds made unpleasantly realistic to her ears. "The van isn't great, but it'll last a few years. We can camp in it part-time on the trip to save money. It's good for that." He stressed "on the trip," and she realized that he was saying "indefinitely."

"Mm." She borrowed his noncommittal noise.

That kind of life would be far too much like the nomadic part of her childhood. Ivy preferred to see it differently: if the Dragon didn't happen, they could re-sell the van at not too much loss.



On her way out of the building she finally caught up with Pat Morrigan, handed over the invitation, and felt the word on her forehead burning its way into her frontal lobes as Pat walked off.

“Oh, Pat?” Ivy called after. “Mandy said she’d come.”

*And that was three out of three, tee hee.*



While driving home, Ivy saw the State Patrol arresting about a dozen Anti-World-Wrecker demonstrators who were standing in a line, holding up their disturbing fractured-Earth signs on the shoulder of the freeway. There was no sign of violence from the AWW or the cops.

Jeremy met her at the top of the stairs. She hugged him and he held her tight enough to hurt. That was the real world again.

“After all the blarney I committed today I almost believe I did win the lottery,” she told him.



“Okay, um, so what if you brought the PTA meeting along with you to the party...?” Ivy asked Mrs. Premzic, trying to sound lighthearted rather than conniving. “I’d hate to see you miss it.” She’d left her next-door neighbors for last, expecting them to be the easiest to invite successfully. She’d forgotten they weren’t techies and therefore had a broad network of social obligations.



“A platinum hunt is like an Easter-egg hunt but shinier,” she answered Mr. Castle, who chuckled. She was actually talking more to Minda Castle, who’d come to the front door to see what her Daddy was up to.



Ivy held up a shiny platinum charm (bracelet not included). The charms were masks of Disney characters’ faces, all flat on the back to allow “AREPO” to be graven there.

“I’ve been too busy for the whole catastrophe to sink in,” she said. “I’ve been having too much fun. Naughty, bad, wicked Ivy.” It wasn’t altogether a joke to her. The idea of twenty-percent disbelief in disaster had for some reason began to waver as she drove past the AWW protest. It had left her entirely, though temporarily, when Jeremy proposed to live out of the van.

She put Tinker Bell into her protective plastic tube and looked up at Terry on the couch, expecting anything but sympathy.

“It’s an emotion resulting from bifurcation.” Terry crunched and swallowed a sugar cookie and brushed crumbs out of the Journal of American Criminology. “Phase change.” Crunch, swallow.

Ivy beamed perplexity at him.

“Metamorphosis,” he said analytically, picking up another cookie and glancing at the journal. “Your ‘cocooning’ days are over, Psyche. Blame it on Cupid.”

“Ivy.” Jeremy had come up from the basement. He was holding the handgun he’d taken from the Azas and given her at the ranch. “Time for gun training.”

“Drill Sergeant Cupid,” Terry added in a disconcerted, suddenly crumb-choked *sotto voce*.



Moving their sleeping quarters hadn’t helped Jeremy. Ivy put her arms around him. Every time the dream or memory came for him he was easier to awaken, but every time he was more shaken.

“Who is Black Ben?”

“He’s dead.” Jeremy’s voice was low and broken.

He stretched out and she rubbed his back.

“Nobody can say I haven’t been getting my dreaming sleep,” he said after a while, his voice back to normal. “Let’s run a few hours tonight to finish getting rested.”

“Fine...” If only they could keep running from now till Wednesday, instead of sitting at ground zero, waiting, watching all the other targets living daily lives. “Jeremy, we’re all agreed that the hacking is complete. We needed to get it done by tomorrow to catch people before they left on vacation. Now it’s set. I’ve been thinking you and I should leave for a long weekend. We should get out of Doom Central so we can be rested before it happens.”

“Yeah.” He sounded as if he’d been thinking the same. “Yeah, we’ve got our supplies and our van. I’ll oversee the pinball movers tomorrow, get that done. Terry’s sendings are in the system. All that’s left is the kidnappings. There isn’t any point in those till the night before.”

Thursday June 30th, 2016

Ivy looked at her list and counted up the jugglers and the promised attendees. *Eight, hey? That's more than you could have handled by kidnapping, Jeremy!*

"Ivy, are you free?" Mrs. Vickerson was at her door.

"uh, no. Maybe."

A tall clean-shaven man in a suit came into the doorway, partly eclipsing Mrs. V. He was holding up a badge in a folder.

"I'm Agent Richard Cowan from the National Bureau of Investigation and Enforcement," he stated. "I hope you have time for a few routine questions."

*NBIE! So much for being "free"!*

"We're following up on the disappearance of your husband Mark Langbourne," he added.

Ivy's face became a mask of nothing.

Mrs. Vickerson moved away.

"Sheila?" Ivy called to her. "Could you stay and witness?"

Cowan's expression was neutral and amenable. He stood straight-backed with one hand on Ivy's spare chair.

"I'm told it's confidential." Mrs. V walked out of sight.

Agent Cowan pulled the chair closer to Ivy and sat, holding out a disc recorder toward Ivy so that she was sure to see it. She saw it. He reached to close her door.

"Case AP99217-03, Cowan querying Ivy Langbourne—"

"I'm sorry," she said rapidly. "Is this likely to take long? I need a bathroom."

"Not a problem."

Like the host at a party, Cowan walked along the corridor with her. She saw Terry's office door ahead, open, on her right.

"um, I guess I'm supposed to examine your badge up close," Ivy said, not especially loudly. "Not that I'd know a fake if I saw one."

Cowan obligingly held out his badge. She looked at it closely.

Ivy did not look toward Terry, but had the peripheral impression he was gazing lackadaisically out into the hall. The agent glanced in through the door, or perhaps at the sign by Terry's nameplate: "Committee Against Linear Thinking" and a circle-slash-line symbol with a definite yin-yang curve to the slash.

The bathroom was around the corner and two doors down and she was glad it was not any farther. The bathroom was empty.

*Scared shitless. Routine questions. Scared shitless.*

She hoped it had been clever to give Terry a chance to notice what was happening. Would he warn Jeremy?



Terry, not lackadaisical, strode into Ivy's office with a roll of black electrical tape.



She had the shakes for a minute or two and her mind wandered in a small tethered range. She remembered looking up at her mother, up past the peasant skirt, woven belt, halter top. Two short-haired men in dark suits walked away between the bushes. Her father walked between them, one of their hands placed on each of his shoulders at exactly the same distance from his ponytail, she knew the word was "symmetry." Her father's wrists were stuck together with metal behind his back. "Ivy, baby," said her mother without looking away from her father, "if the pigs ever come for you, the first thing you don't do is talk."

Wait and see. Talking might be an option. She didn't believe it. Her parents had been hounded by the old FBI; now it was her turn with the fully reorganized, rationalized, and consolidated NBIE.

Ivy cleaned up, drank water out of her hands from the faucet, looked at herself in the mirror. She was the very model of a modern techno-citizen, bracer on her wrist, phone clipped to her ears. All of that meant the NBIE could find her without any effort. How far back toward the cavewoman would she have to go to be really invisible?

On the way back with Agent Cowan she glanced casually into Terry's office. He was virmeeting.

The agent closed the door and they sat down. He started the disc recorder. She felt her shoulders hike up with tension. Her screen-saver was waving in a byte breeze, the "Don't Tread On Me" Revolutionary War flag with its coiled rattlesnake.

"This is a routine investigation that the Bureau carries out in certain unusual missing persons cases, such as your husband's case," said Cowan.

"If it's routine," Ivy kept her voice slow, "why did you tell Mrs. Vickerson that it's confidential?"

"We may touch on some personal matters. For that reason, our conversation falls under an exemption from the Freedom of Information Act and will not be publicly retrievable."

He held a partly unfolded clip-puter but looked at Ivy as he talked, not at his screen or the clipped-on papers.

"According to the police records, on March 28 of this year you entered your house from the garden and found your husband was no

longer present. You had been outdoors for about five minutes and had seen him immediately before leaving the house. At that time he was reading. You found his page-and-play on the floor near his last location. Both household cars were still in the garage. Later investigation determined that no notes or messages had been left, no clothes or belongings were missing, and there had been no prior unusual activity in any of your financial accounts. Is any of this incorrect?”

“It’s correct.” Her shoulders lowered. She thought about Mark.

<1> At the time, your relatives, co-workers, and neighbors unanimously confirmed your statement that there had been no fundamental disagreements between the two of you and no evidence of any reason for him to abandon the marriage. Would you like to add anything to that?

<2> No. I don’t have any idea why he left.

<1> Have you heard from your husband since then?

<2> No.

<1> Have there been any unexplained withdrawals or deposits on any of your bank accounts, credit cards, retirement accounts?

<2> No.

<1> This is a list of his contacts. Is it complete?

<2> It’s, it’s more than complete. I didn’t know about the lawyer, there, or the herbalist. Also, Mark’s a member of the Classic Pinball Federation, you could add that.

<1> Several of his friends hadn’t been made aware of his disappearance.

<2> I told as few people as I could manage. He ran out on me. I wasn’t proud of that.

<1> Had he, or have you, received any unusual messages? Mail, phone calls, or e-mail? Notes left on your door or car?

<2> Just the usual spam. I haven’t noticed any weird new topics.

<1> Have you received more wrong-number or hang-up phone calls than usual?

<2> No.

<1> I’m sorry, but I have to ask this. Had your husband spoken about suicide before his disappearance, or seemed depressed?

<2> No. He was cheerful. He usually was, is, in spring.

<1> Had he shown any unusual preoccupations or aversions?

<2> Unusual? I can’t think of any.

<1> Did he seem more interested in nature at that time? Did he spend time, for example, watching clouds, looking at the river, collecting rocks? Or, for another example, had he said anything about wanting to take an ocean cruise, or go hiking?

<2> I’d say the opposite. He’d been on a pinball binge, playing his machines that were in our basement.

<1> Were?

<2> I, I sold them. And his car. The house is expensive on just my salary. If Mark doesn’t like it, we’ll thrash it out at divorce settlement time.

<1> Have there been any strange phenomena near your

“Mark, why are you so interesting to the NBIE? Marky, I hardly knew ye,” said Terry, watching the transcript intently.

Terry nibbled his lips and regretted dear Mumsy’s unseemly candor. Now more steps would have to be taken to veil the records of We’s little flier in pinball investment.

house? Freak wind gusts, or sounds like voices in the wind? Unexplained light effects?

<2> No, nothing.

Agent Cowan allowed himself a look of mild doubt or interest. Seeing that, Ivy realized she'd been spending too much attention on trying to figure out what was behind his questions, too little on remembering that she was the criminal being questioned.

"At that time was your husband out at night more often, or did he take long night walks?"

"Definitely not."

"Were there any incidents when he startled you by seeming to appear out of nowhere?"

"No." She tried to keep the tautness out of her face and voice.

Cowan leaned back.

"There are just a few more questions, and then you can go back to your work," he said reassuringly. "We've heard that recently you've had the lights on in your house after midnight."

"That's true."

"I'm curious, why the schedule change?"

"I, I have a boyfriend."

"Did he know your husband?"

"No." *Too quick a reply? Slow down, Ivy.*

"Are you sure?"

"As far as I know."

"What's his name?" Cowan didn't seem terrifically interested.

"I'm sorry, that's none of your business." The rattlesnake flag rippled on her screen.

"Has your boyfriend shown any special interest in your husband's disappearance?"

"No." *Don't snap at him, Ivy.*

"Has he asked any of the same type of questions that I've been asking?"

"No."

Agent Cowan stood up and moved his chair back out of the way. Ivy sprang to her feet.

"The Bureau appreciates your time and cooperation, Mrs. Langbourne."

"You're done?"

"In some cases there's a further follow-up."

She couldn't think of anything to say.

The agent shook hands with her and left. Ivy stood and gazed at the empty open doorway, not taking her hand back yet. Her hand started to tremble.

Her computer beeped and the screensaver was gone, showing a VirMeet screen. In its center blinked a message box.

**Recording captured.**

**Audio redirection and secure remote control to anarcho-me node relinquished.**

If VirMeet had been running her mike, where was the status light? It looked as though the black plastic cover of the camera had melted down over the light, concealing it. In fact it was black electrical tape.

“Mumsy dearest, are you finished?” She jumped and gasped. It was Terry at the door. He was waving a couple of pages of text at her. “You’re needed at a crash meeting in Annie Zender’s office.”

Annie kept her office full of photos of her children, plus their fingerpaintings, drawings, and crafts. In her present aftermath, Ivy found the mother things intolerably touching.

Terry closed the door. “The Agents of Law might possibly have bugged your office,” he said with his best excessively-on-top-of-things demeanor, “but they’d never have troubled with one as near the social norm as this. Here’s the transcript of your interrogation.”

“How did you?...” She was wearing thin.

“You know my methods, Watson.”

“God, Terry, I’m so glad you’re helping us...” Ivy said with nothing but sincerity.

Her breath caught and Terry looked at her in discomfort. When she put her hands over her face and started crying, he escaped the office in three fast strides.



Before dinner Terry arrived at Ivy’s house wearing a bandolier radio and out-of-fashion baggy pants that concealed a variety of microelectronics and antennas. He marched through the house, playing Convergence music, making a meticulous inspection, nodding in oracular satisfaction when he’d finished.

Jeremy wondered how Terry had calibrated and tested his surveillance-spotter. How many bugs had Terry himself planted? On who?

The three ate without conversation. Then, on Terry’s advice, they went to the basement hallway and closed all the doors that opened onto it.

“I’ll certify that we’re all free of tracers,” declared Terry, “and the house and car devoid of bugs, at least till the next moment you leave them unguarded.”

“That’ll be tomorrow morning.” Jeremy sat down with Ivy on the cushions they’d taken from the upstairs couch. “We’re going camping then. We’ll come back Monday night.”

“This is not the better part of strategy, *mon general*.”

“It has advantages.” Jeremy hoped Terry would take a break too. It’d be like him to keep playing this game till he dropped a clue that got them all caught. “We’re done with the hacks. Going on vacation makes us look innocent. More important, it lures the feds. They’ll get a good opportunity to bug this place. If they do, we’ll know they’re interested.”

Yeah, those were good enough reasons but not the best. They could get jailed any day. They could be caught in the fire when they went into the city for the post-Dragon rescue. He wanted a few days of real life, right now. But not in Ivy’s husband’s house, if he could help it.

Jeremy held up the transcript. “The feds aren’t after us as terrorists. The question is, will they catch us because they’re watching us to catch Ivy’s husband?”

He spoke to Ivy then, with care. She’d been running on brownout since she got home. “Suppose the fed saw you were nervous. Maybe he’d think it was because you were shielding your husband.” Jeremy didn’t want her to think he blamed her for showing nerves. He didn’t. “You did right to stay at work and act normal after the fed left.”

“Why are they after Mark?”

Don’t look so pleading, Ivy. It’s still too soon to tell you. “Doesn’t matter. It’s something they’re wrong about—”

“If you know something about my husband you had better tell me!” She went up like a gasoline fire.

“All I know is that he disappeared.” Jeremy wasn’t able to stare her down. “I have an idea what the feds are hunting, but I won’t talk about it now.”

She yanked her shoulders away from his arm.

Terry stood, uneasy and above it all.

“Shall I leave you two to it, then?” he asked.

Yeah, so much the better. Terry closed the door behind him, and Jeremy braced for the fight. Ivy was watching him without much friendliness.

“Get it said,” he told her.

“I wonder whether you’ll ever tell me what you’ve been hiding,” she said, “even if Spokane is destroyed.”

*Still if. Always if.*

“We’re even.” He pointed at her, right between the eyes. “I wonder if there’s anything I can tell you that you’ll be willing to call proof.”

“I don’t like the way you’ve been manipulating me,” she accused.

Jeremy wanted to shake her. “Manipulating?”

She drew herself up, stiff-backed. “You only give me the information that suits your intentions. I believe in your intentions, I’m willing to go along with you, but you’re still making a puppet of me.”

He found himself kneeling up. Still sitting, Ivy had to look up at him. “Go along with me?” His voice went louder. “You talk like you’re doing me favors. You gave me a hideout and yes that was a favor. The rest of it isn’t any favor, it’s saving peoples’ lives.”

He scored a hit with that, broke the skin but didn’t stop her. Her outrage changed to sharp coolness.

“No other favors? I would have thought you’d thank me for rescuing you at the ranch.”

“We’re even.”

“Oh yes?”

“I got you out of there before a war could start. You weren’t equipped.” He’d never figured that out.

“I always half-wondered what made me go there.” He saw Ivy was cornered, grabbing for anything in reach to hit him. “It wasn’t exactly characteristic behavior. Did you cast a spell to lure in anyone who could help you?”

“No!” The hallway echoed.

Her eyes softened, with an instant of startled apology in them. Whatever she’d meant, it hadn’t been to catch him below the belt. Not that far below, anyway.

“That isn’t even possible,” he told her. Not for me. That’s a magian’s trick, spider and fly.

“Okay,” she conceded, “but did you know about me, as a nightrunner, before I went there? Did you put a spell on me in particular?”

Those weren’t more blind punches, they were questions she meant seriously. She ought to know him better than that.

“No and no.”

“It didn’t seem believable,” she started to gesture indignantly, defensively, “but I don’t know what you’re hiding, and now you have me wondering if it’s something to do with Mark.”

“You ought to have more sense!” he bellowed down at her.

“Sense?” and she stood.

He stood too. She went on loudly, “How would I see sense when you’ve been blindfolding me into obey—”

“That’s enough!” Jeremy covered her mouth with his hand. “Hold your voice down,” he ordered, muting his own.

She glared at him, narrow-eyed with outrage.

Manipulating her! He'd told her everything he could as soon as he could. Tell her the rest now, she'd think he was crazy. She'd throw it all out as delusion. Then she'd still be here when the storm hit.

He couldn't let her. If that looked like manipulation from her side, too bad.

Ivy's eyes were still angry and demanding.

Her damned husband was the reason for all this. Because of him, she wouldn't give up.

Jeremy's anger twisted and bit itself. She had a right to not give up. He should tell her what he was sure of. Her husband was gone for good. Not by his own fault, by natural disaster.

Jeremy looked into her and wondered. Would she ever have started with him if she hadn't thought her husband had run out on her?

If that was part of the reason he hadn't told her, he had been manipulating her. Tell her now.

*No. That's a good reason but not enough. Will she be in more danger if she knows you're a yank or if she doesn't?*

All right. He took his hand away from her mouth. She looked down sullenly, hands fisted.

*Tell her the whole thing. Then she'll know everything she has to keep hidden. If she throws you out, that's your problem. It doesn't have to stop you from keeping her alive, whether she wants you to or not.*

Jeremy pulled up her chin to make her look at him. Still angry. Being stared down hadn't quenched her.

"Promise me." He kept his voice down. "Whatever else you do about what I tell you, promise you'll be out of Spokane on the sixth. Even after you think I'm crazy."

"Of course I promise," Ivy said, louder than he liked.

He walked quickly and quietly to the hall door and opened it. Nobody there. The pinballs were gone, there wasn't anything Terry could be hidden behind. Jeremy hoped Terry hadn't planted any bugs of his own.

He closed the door again. "All right."

"Wait a minute," she said quickly, doubtfully.

"Make up your mind!" He was tired of her half-agreements and half-concessions.

"Jeremy, if you'll answer two questions now I can wait for all the rest."

He stood by his pack and waited.

"First," earnestly, "do you know how to get Mark back here, or how to get him out of any danger he might be in?"

"I swear I don't. All I know about him is what you've said." He slipped his amulet out of his shirt and held it, answering on it.

Ivy caught the meaning of the gesture and looked at him wonderingly. “Two, do you know of anyone beyond yourself and We who knows what we’ve been doing, or who knows that I’m a nightrunner?”

“I sw—” and his glance stopped on the sheets of transcript.

“I don’t know.” He started over, grimly. “The fed’s questions have implications... Now I have to tell you.”

Jeremy sat on the floor with the backpack between the two of them. Ivy looked at the pack and at him in pleased curiosity and doubt. Now she was surfing a different part of the adrenalin wave.

“See what you make of this.” He opened the pack and pushed it toward her. He wished he already knew what she’d make of it.

“What about Terry?”

“Maybe. You first.”

Ivy looked at Jeremy's strained face and wanted to relent, wondering whether she was pushing him too far. When she reached into the pack, her sense of the forbidden was so potent that her eagerness evaporated.

The small black book she pulled out was *The Manual of Sentry, Search, Rescue, and Care Spells, 3rd Edition*.

Published by CRC Press. Edited by Corinne J. Chu, Battelle Memorial Institute. On the next page was a long list of technical contributors and their companies.

Copyright date 2068.

"Where... where did you get this?" Ivy's voice dried up.

"A used book store." He watched her narrowly.

She stared at Jeremy as if he'd waved his hand and created a door into one of those ephemeral quaint small shops that sell risky miracles in fantasy stories.

"The new edition of the book would have cost me twice as much," he added.

"You're from the... future?"

"2075. Born in 2029."

Ivy unfocused on the hallway wall and remembered what his silences had been about and what his skills were.

"It makes so much sense that it makes my hair stand on end," she concluded. She rubbed the backs of her arms, smoothing them.

"It isn't proof. You must know books can be faked." Jeremy was the 3-D image of a man who found it impossible to grasp that he'd had a clinching argument all along but failed to use it.

"Two whole generations..."

Ivy opened at a random page.

63. Cure of Liver Disease. Gramarye, Inc. Timing: Jupiter at peak at sunrise. Ingredients: three blue candles, amethyst stone, liverwort, betony (var. GramInc B),...

Here was another page.

152. Purging the Link-Nature from Body Detritus. J.N. Lichteig. Timing: the three days of New Moon. Ingredients: angelica, nettle,...

Another...

37. Invocation of Memory (Testimony Spell Type 1)...

"The big difference between now and then isn't advances in Science, is it? It's... reliable public magic." She looked at Jeremy for confirmation.

“Comes to the same thing.” He was watching her in subdued astonishment.

Suddenly there were large loud ideas that the back of her mind was trying to reduce to silence. Jeremy’s unenviable situation came to the front, unsilenced...

Sixty years back, for her, would be 1956. Back then they’d had cars, trains, planes, radio, TV, houses with electricity and running water, elections, doctors, hospitals, the nuclear threat, almost computers... It was startling how much of her daily life she might have had back then, though much slower, less convenient, and more expensive.

She’d have had to suppress her anachronistic slang, not that she used much now; she wouldn’t have needed most modern jargon because the tech didn’t exist yet to be spoken of; and she’d have hidden her untimely opinions till the troubles arrived that would justify them...

“If I were back in my grandparents’ time I’d feel as if I were surrounded by enemies. It’d be lonely.” Ivy said it shyly and Jeremy looked down, touched, uneasy, and disarmed. “I could have made some things easier for you.”

“We’re even.” He put an arm around her shoulders, despite the inconvenient pack that barred him from her.

A moment later he moved to join her on the cushions. She touched his face.

“Are we all right then?” she asked.

“Yeah, till next time,” he said wryly.

He kissed her, running his hands over her in almost gentle demand. Ivy would have liked to make up in the best possible way but by now the ideas in the back of her mind were screaming and couldn’t be silenced any longer.

“Jeremy, I can’t.”

She thought of her home, blasted. The four homes around her, Premzic, King, Castle, Horsepoole, blasted. Her picture of it expanded jerkily in concentric rings. The whole city.

“I believe in the Dragon one hundred percent now,” she told him, “not just eighty percent.”

She huddled into him, close, to feel him breathing. He stayed quiet and his silence let her think about whether she could have done more to save Spokane. It wasn’t easy to think.

“Why didn’t you show me the book sooner?”

“I figured you’d think it was counterfeit.”

“If you were sure of that, why were you cagey about letting me see the things in your pack? I wouldn’t have believed those either, after all.”

“To keep you safe I had to tell you all about it or nothing.” he said tightly. “If you’d known it all, you’d have understood what you had to

keep secret for your own good. I thought I couldn't do that because you wouldn't believe it. The next safest thing was to tell you as close to nothing as I could manage."



The fugitive gang associate is described as being under 20 years of age, height between 5'2" and 5'6", small-boned, and thin. He was dark-eyed, dark-haired, and probably white. At the time of the crime he was wearing jeans, an oversized dark plaid shirt, and long hair greased back into a ponytail.

"How implausibly romantic," remarked Terry. Hearing Ivy approach the computer room, he closed the Spokesman-Review and left the Fortean Times up in its stead.

Ivy was even more like the walking and talking dead than she had been after the interrogation earlier in the day.

"Am I speaking with the ghost of the late Ivy Langbourne?"

"What?" She puzzled at it, which gave her an apparently much-needed mood break. "No, he only abuses teacups."

"How reassured that must make you feel, Mumsey."

"Stop being a whelp and come look in his pack," she snapped. *Oh my!*



Terry plumped down on a cushion across the hall from the impervious and exclusive alliance of two. He reached deep into the pro-offered backpack.

"Thank you, Santy Claus," he said politely to Jeremy.

Vexingly, the man pushed a small ring-bound black book in front of Terry's face. "Start here." The book was open to the copyright page.

Terry had never thought that the first time he found out that people's jaws really do drop, it would be his jaw doing it.

He turned the book over in his hands like a monkey with a square banana. "I don't know where to start, Mister Time Traveler," he said feebly.

"You don't tell any of this to We." Jeremy turned his full intensity on Terry. "That's for a start."

Terry began to laugh, although it might have been the most perilous thing he had ever done in front of witnesses.

"Of course I tell We. I can't help myself. It's done."

"Your bugs." Jeremy looked with searching hostility around the hall.

"So I've been told," and kept on laughing, "the Bunny himself." He had no choice, he had to tell all, if only to match Jeremy's great revelation.

“No bugs, there are no bugs,” he finally managed. The alliance was staring at him. “You hadn’t realized that you’d met another member of We? Besides Terry Harness?”

“Kerry Halteman,” he finished, after years of surreptition finding the perfect audience to whom to divulge. “We is all of I and me are all of Us.”

“How many identities have you got?” asked Jeremy with an impressively short lag time.

“One is too many and a hundred are too few.”

Ivy shook her head, laughing in a whispery helpless way. “Is ‘Terry Harness’ the name Us was born under?”

“Mumsy, that was more than twenty years ago. You can’t expect me to recollect such trivia.”

“You used We to jack up the price you were going to charge us,” accused Jeremy.

“If you backed off from the price, Us would have prevented an infocrime. If you didn’t, advanced marketing techniques profit again.” Terry admired the book once more. “You certainly are in need of Us’s identity services. Fortunately for you we’re all partners now, so there’s no fee.”

“Fortunately for you, too,” said Ivy with some asperity.

Jeremy stared silently at Terry. *Fair enough*, he thought, *Terry’s a partner*.

“The fed’s questions mean that the feds are hunting preternatural humans,” Jeremy began. “The feds must think that all the vanished turned preter right away, but most of that change happened later in the spring and summer, gradually, not in that first burst.” He looked at Ivy. “The people who disappeared first, like your husband, were yanked to other times the same way I was. It was another kind of natural disaster.”

She gazed back at him, believing.

“What time would Mark have gone to?” she asked.

“He’s almost bound to be in the past from here.”

It stopped her. She had nowhere to chase that idea. Jeremy picked up the transcript and rattled it at Terry, who looked up from the manual, startled.

“The feds are misinformed but they couldn’t know enough to ask these questions unless they had info from future yanks like me,” Jeremy went on. “If they’ve already caught some futurites, they might look for more by scrying. That’s crystal-ball divination.”

“In fact I do know the word,” Terry murmured.

“I’m concealed from hostile scrying by my amulet.” Jeremy showed it to them, briefly. “You two are scryable, though. Till today I thought the less you knew, the safer you were. That isn’t so clear now.”

Terry's eyes were flickering as high-speed ideas crossed his mind. He leaned forward and took the pad out of Jeremy's shirt pocket.

"I need to write down questions while I still remember them," said Terry, "because I foresee an excess of answers in my life." He wrote.

Jeremy leaned toward Ivy, restrained by the lack of privacy.

"You believe me. I didn't expect that."

"When it's steam-roller time, you steam-roller," she shrugged. Terry raised an eyebrow but kept writing. "When it's belief time, I believe."

No arguing with that. He stroked her hair and went back to his lecture.

"The feds were checking for the early symptoms of people changing into preters. Three kinds of preters lose their bodies when they change. Windians, fluans, and lithos. They're called gaiads or bodiless. Those are the most powerful kinds of preters, except they can't cast spells. The two other kinds keep their bodies and can live like trads, traditional humans. Those are magians and nightrunners."

"...nightrunners..." Ivy repeated softly.

Partway down the page Terry had lost his ability to write. He stared at Jeremy in fascination.

"Am I distracting you?" Jeremy asked him kindly.

"I'm distracted, overwhelmed, bewitched, bothered, and bewildered." He crumpled up his notes. "Obviously there's more to the future than I'd ever think to ask, and less rhyme or reason than I'd ever expect. Suffice it to inquire, where do we stand with the NBIE nabbies?"

Jeremy leaned his head back against the wall to think out loud.

"The feds must have futurite informants, but some of their info is wrong. Maybe their futurites know even less history than I do."

"In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king..."

"Maybe," Jeremy ignored Terry's quote, "maybe the feds don't trust the futurites and are double-checking. Either way, they're probably not scrying. In Case One the futurites wouldn't know how, in Case Two the feds wouldn't trust it. No guarantees, though. No guarantees at all." Jeremy smiled sourly. "If they are scrying, you can bet it's us they're looking for because of our predictions."

"See here." Terry pointed at the end of the transcript. "Has your boyfriend shown any special interest in your husband's disappearance? Has he asked any of the same type of questions that I've been asking? The NBIE must suspect that they aren't the only ones in hot pursuit of the preternatural."

"Yeah, and not only the public governments," Jeremy laughed sardonically. "Maybe the secret ones too, black ops and teracrine. You have that word yet? World-scale criminal orgs."

Ivy looked at him with eyes a little too wide. He tightened his arm around her, wishing Terry would walk.

“On second thought,” Jeremy told her, “we’re probably safe on the disaster predictions. We didn’t send any hardcopies to scry from.”

She put her head on his shoulder, closed her eyes. “It just gets bigger all the time. It started with Mark and now it’s whole cities, and for the rest of our future all three of us will be waiting for someone to snatch us. And, for all that, we can’t even save very many of the people.”

*Look what she gets when she does believe me.* Jeremy kissed the top of her head lightly, hearing Terry squirm.

Can’t spare her the bad news. They have to realize.

“Get braced for it, Ivy. Witches, preters, futurites, we all have the same troubles. Scientists put us in asylums. Governments put us in arsenals. Godbods put us in graves.”

When he was a kid he’d read sensational stories about the recent past. Watched the movies, too. The teachers in the covune schools had spent class time on the witch hunts, and sometimes on every side’s atrocities. He wished he’d paid attention to the history, not the thrills and chills and pictures.

Sketch: A whole row of electric chairs with one switch ready to start the frying. Was that the Elemental Traitor trials in Australia? Film: a windian’s laser beam from mid-air slicing into a traffic jam. Where? Probably Israel, the attack had a lone-godder feel in his mind. Photo: masked people up to their waists and necks in gravel, or only hands sticking out. Litho work. The gravel had been a city street. Something about Carnival? Mardi Gras? On the blackboard: Africa was rich because that was where a magian delivered the first slave-ring spells. Whole cities were powered by captive fluans, windians, and lithos.

“The next five or six years will be the worst,” Jeremy said, fairly sure of it. “If we can survive the Shambles we’ll probably make it to old age.”

Ivy dug her face into his neck, her breath catching. Terry sat forward on his cushion, eying Ivy warily, ready to dodge off again.

“I suppose I’ll have to settle for living to old age,” said Terry, “since the index doesn’t show spells for immortality.”

“There’s no such thing,” Jeremy told him impatiently.

“It doesn’t sound as if you chose this time period to come to.” Ivy looked at Jeremy for confirmation.

“Chose? I was yanked between one step and the next. No warning, no return ticket.”

He didn’t want to make a long story of it right now, and it was hard to talk about. For the last few months he hadn’t let himself think about

home except in glances. It might have made him slip, say something that could be a clue.

“I was on night patrol for the Tallgrass covune,” Jeremy began. “‘Covune’ is short for ‘coven commune.’ This was 2075. I was running the perimeter of the Tallgrass Preserve watching for poachers.

“Then I started tumbling. All of a sudden it was daylight. That was 2016.” Yeah, Ivy had picked up what he meant. The sun had knocked him off his nightrun speed. It had been rough deceleration from thirty mph. “My first gift from Luck was that I had my standard patrol gear with me.” He patted the pack.

Terry raised his eyebrows. “Were your disguise spells S.O.P. for patrol work?”

“The kids had given me joke gifts for my birthday. A lot of the herbs in them are used in more than one kind of spell. Easier to keep all my packets in the same place.”

“...party favors...” Terry was incredulous. “The government allows disguises as good as that to be sold as party favors?”

“The feds don’t care. They have forensic spells and scrying to deal with it. Anyway, covunes govern themselves, as far as what goes on completely inside them. Some covuneers who trade outside keep their full US citizenship. I didn’t.” Jeremy almost smiled in reminiscence. “I think the kids dared each other into putting up the spells. They must have sneaked a look at the recipes somewhere.”

Terry’s mouth opened and closed, giving Jeremy the chance to go on.

“I knew what it had to be that had happened to me. I’d seen plenty of movies about yanks. I had to get some money, so I tried Luck. I’d always heard she took care of yanks. Maybe it wasn’t superstition.”

He’d been yanked from Oklahoma into Washington. He camped in the hills outside Seattle. He tried to get trudge jobs and found out how many needed IDs. After a few days of that he heard there was a state lottery. He flipped coins and rolled dice to get a set of lottery numbers. But no taxpayer ID, no prize. So he looked for a patron who had an ID and proposed an even split.

Some of the homeless guys he talked to thought he was trying to scam them for the price of a ticket. Some of them took his ticket money and scammed him. Finally he got into the Mini-Nam part of town.

“One of my mothers had taught me some Vietnamese. On the strength of that I got a guy to go along with me. He was a cashrunner for some of the street vendors. Took their revenue to their banks for them so they wouldn’t lose sales time doing it themselves. It was a family kind of job.

“We played Keno. That way we could win small and stay inconspicuous. We changed cities a few times before I had patron trouble. Not because of the split. He liked that, but he liked bragging too. By then Luck had given me enough for a van to live in, a fake ID good enough to show anybody who wouldn’t check it, and a month’s life.”

“I hope your luck hasn’t run out yet.” Ivy had taken an interest. She looked twice as alive as she had before his story.

“She’s done her job.” He smiled at her.

“It didn’t counterbalance your ill fortune in being cursed with this era,” Terry commented.

“Yanks all come from now or to now,” Jeremy said tersely. “It’s when Mercury was lost. The experts say it took seven planets to control magic.” He’d always had a kid’s image of it, a clock with seven hands. “The dam broke when Mercury blew. It released the magic. Spells, preter changes, yanks, and a year or so of disasters.”

Terry broadcast skepticism. “Only since Mercury? Then how do you explain the magic that’s been done since time immemorial?”

“I’m talking spellcraft. Anybody who can follow a recipe can do it every time.” He jabbed a finger at Terry. “You’re talking willcraft. Only a few can do that, and it isn’t dependable. Before Mercury broke up, the world worked by two sets of rules, science and willcraft. Now it’s rules plus—” he took the manual, “—recipe books,” and tapped Terry on the chest with it.

“Is this book—”

“That’s enough for now. We need a dinner break.”

“If we’re insouciant enough to continue this conversation upstairs, the nabs (if they’re trying) could listen by reading the vibrations of the windowpanes with laser instruments.”

“Pass notes, then. I want a meal.”



Dinner was pizza again. As cover, though Jeremy and Terry agreed that it probably wasn’t needed, they talked about their plans for the weekend’s time off.

Terry used up most of Jeremy’s notepad with questions. Ivy was intrigued at what Jeremy did and didn’t know, or at least what he would and wouldn’t admit to knowing. His history was only a glimmer except when it came to the covune movement. It seemed covuneers didn’t care to pay attention to the doings of name-brand governments. His information on technology was more thorough. She noticed he was especially versed in the sorts of devices that could detect nightrunners.

She remembered his eyes scanning over the used-car lots, paying as much attention to the half-hidden cameras as to the vans.

After dinner, Terry burned the notes over the toilet. Jeremy piled up most of the future gear from his pack. "Terry," he said casually, "do you want to borrow this stuff for the long weekend? Don't use up any of it."

Terry was stunned. Ivy was too. Jeremy laughed.

"I'm keeping these," half-a-dozen packets and tubes, "for first-aid for our camping trip. The rest will be better with you than us while we're gone."

"You'll be astonished at how wisely I'll care for it," replied Terry, openly pleased, maybe even grateful.



Jeremy duct-taped a sound-stopping folded blanket over the window curtains of their makeshift basement bedroom. Ivy was subdued as she watched him and thought of all the risks they were taking, thought of the dragon-storm.

"I'm surprised you changed your mind about telling me all this before the storm," she said quietly.

"It struck me we weren't even. You had never tried to 'manipulate' me. You could have threatened to throw me out of your house or your bed if I didn't tell you."

"If I had it wouldn't have worked anyway." She turned away, vexed at her self-pity. "I don't have any leverage."

Amused and touched, Jeremy rested his hands on her hips. "You have more leverage than you could need, so long as you don't try to use it."

Ivy looked up at his warm wry smile.

"I love you," she told him, putting her arms around him.

Jeremy kissed her welcomingly. His amulet felt like a knot between them. He held it out to her.

"You'll need your own protection," he said.

She looked at his face, then at the amulet.

"That-which-must-not-be-touched?" she said, almost chiding.

He smiled at her as if he were giving her a gift.

"Go ahead."

"Why not before this?"

"Because I hadn't been telling you the truth."

Ivy left it at that. She held the amulet in her hand and glanced up at his eyes. His expression told her surely that this was an intimacy.

She breathed in again and examined the amulet. The design was smooth, not precisely symmetric, with six rounded shapes curving into each other. There was a small off-centered stone...

“Oak for strength,” he said. “A star sapphire for wholeness, six lobes and six rays for the six elements.”

She recalled his hand on the amulet when he wanted to swear to the truth. He was foreign, thoroughly and genuinely foreign, however ordinary his English and his clothes were.

“What exactly does it do?”

“Too much to list.” His mouth quirked on one side. “It’s good for what ails you.”

“Is there something inside?”

“Hypericum. Moly. Sea salt. Tortoise shell. A bead made from a used anvil. A piece of mirror. Some of my blood, hair, and semen. Yours will need your hair and both kinds of blood.”

For once she was sorry that her period was weeks away. It was just as well, though. Before then she’d have to plan how to safely dispose of the blood, as security against curses...

“Oh... it’s a little overwhelming...” She was uneasy but curious, and it was obvious that he still liked playing teacher, so she risked asking. “Do you have a secret name?”

“That’s superstition,” he said firmly.

“You mean there still are things that are just superstition?”

“Sure. I don’t believe in any of those, of course.” He chuckled at himself.

Ivy shook her head, reviewing all the witchy tales she’d ever read. She felt overborne by the magnitude of living with a small part, a large part, any indefinite part of those tales. She sat down on the mattress.

“Jeremy, I don’t see how I can... find my way through all this. I’m sure I can, but I don’t see it now.”



Jeremy talked with her most of the night. He napped a few half-hours, not deep enough sleep to unlatch his Ben memories. He was sure Ivy didn’t sleep at all. When she cried, it was quietly. He could hear it in her breathing and feel the wetness on his chest. She didn’t make a show of it.

There was a perspective she had to get to. Mostly she’d have to reach it herself by seeing the rules of the new post-Mercurial world. It wasn’t, wouldn’t be, a harder life overall, once the Shambles were done. The hard and easy things in the new world were, would be, different than she was used to. That was all.

He’d already given her a glimpse of the hard side. Now he told her stories about the rest. His two mothers and two fathers—it was a fourfold marriage. A few superficial anecdotes about Ben as a kid. Back then Ben was always barely on the safe side of some kind of edge. The

different covunes his and Ben's families had lived in. Ivy turned out to have some childhood commune stories to match with his.

He said a lot about his last covune. Working with the town's bodiless patrons to protect the Tallgrass Preserve next door for the Nature Conservancy. Putting up spell packets. Patrolling. Convening for covune lawbuilding. Dealing with tourists. Handymaning, which wasn't hard because most of their devices were autonomy-tech, not electric. Watching the garden-phoenixes—those and some native herbs were what he protected from poachers.

It was a homesick night for him. He guessed it was a heartsick night for her.

Friday July 1st, 2016

There were only five cars in the lot at the park entrance, but the lot was busy with Boy Scouts. For a while Ivy helped Jeremy load the camping food they'd just bought into their backpacks. But she couldn't keep her eyes off the Scouts because of wondering where they were from.

"Back in a minute," she told Jeremy, and went off to talk to one of the scoutmasters.

Jeremy finished the packs and took the National Enquirer out of the bag. Look at that. Their warning e-mail had earned the whole front page except for a strip of celebrity libel at the top. Beneath that, "Hoax, Terror, or Prophecy? YOU Decide." Beneath that an already famous photo from the Madrid Dragon. Looked like they'd blurred the worst pieces of exposed anatomy. It was still gruesome. Next to the photo, a quote from their Spokane hack. At the bottom, "Who Is To Blame?" and another list: "Aliens, Terrorists, AREPO, The Military, The End Times..." Inside, he glimpsed "Madrid Destruction Pattern is Arabic Terror Message!"

"Scuse me," an apologetic woman's voice, "if you're going hiking much," a woman he didn't know, "could I ask you, keep an eye out for my brother Walt Hallam?"

"Mmm." He looked at her.

Short, lean, tanned enough to look dry around the eyes, light blonde, greengray eyes, fortyish. Some makeup, short waved hair. Three pierced earrings in one ear, one in the other ear below the ear-clip, no wedding ring. Not expensively dressed.

"He looks a bit like me but he has dark collar-length hair going bald in front and very green eyes. He came up here looking for this record bull elk he'd heard about, and he was off the track mentally at the time."

She'd turned prettily confiding. Maybe she'd misinterpreted his careful cop look-over.

"It isn't hunting season."

"I know, I know." Her left eyelid had a tic. "Walt does have a license, he wouldn't normally do this. He kind of gets fixated now and then, is all. It's this prescription medication from his idiot doctor. This time Walt hasn't slept in three, four days."

He straightened, put down the paper, looked down at her. "That long? He might as well be drunk." She opened her mouth and he overrode. "You let him drive like that? And hunt?"

“What could I do?” Helpless protest.

Jeremy counted off options on his fingers. “Take his car keys. Take his guns. Call the police. Report the doctor.”

“Do that to family? You must be crazy!”

She threw him a freezing glare and stalked off. Ivy passed her on the way back to him. Glanced at her unappreciatively, that woman-at-woman look.

Ivy gestured at the Scouts. “They’re all on a week’s trip from Spokane. Those are a dozen orphans.”

Jeremy made his own gesture that meant, hold your voice down.

“We can’t save everyone,” he said quietly.

Ivy glanced around for listeners. She confirmed that no one was closer than a few cars away, where the bleach-blonde was haranguing a distressed, evasive scoutmaster.

“Where do we stop trying?” Ivy asked with low-voiced vehemence. “What do we do about all the later disasters?”

“We’ve taken all the risks that make sense. All we can do now is watch and wait.”

“That doesn’t seem to bother you much.”

Jeremy sighed. “How would being bothered help?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I’ve always known how many people died of ungoverned magic. It isn’t any shock.”

Ivy could understand that, but she didn’t find it a pleasant thing to understand. “I keep feeling we shouldn’t be resting, we should be doing more now, we should take more responsibility.”

“Nothing more.” He was remorselessly definite. “This isn’t my responsibility. I can’t be responsible for people I can’t control. I’m working against the Dragon because Luck brought me here and I want to give some luck back.

“We can get the word out. We can trick a few people out of town and drag a few. We can rescue a few afterwards. It isn’t enough but it’s all the control and responsibility we have.”

Jeremy reached into the car and took out her pack, shoving it toward her with an air of using it to crush the topic into irreparably small pieces.

“Don’t forget to leave your bracer here,” he said.

“After I call the neighbors and ask them to keep an eye on the house. I remember.”



An hour or two upslope, they left the trail they’d shared with the Scouts and hiked into trailless ponderosa pine woods. The fire danger

dial at the park entrance had read only “Moderate.” But this area northeast of Spokane, between the city and the new ski resort on Mount Spokane, was going to burn on Wednesday if Jeremy’s book was right.

“I didn’t think till now,” Ivy projected her voice forward to him, “your book must have been a real one, not a vision.”

“Yeah,” over his shoulder. “My mothers hated me reading it. They called it disinformation, bloodsucker journalism.”

“That’s funny,” she said bitterly. “That scoutmaster used the same word ‘disinformation’ about our storm warnings.”

There was a short silence.

“Hope you were careful what you said to him. That’s how criminals get caught, they can’t leave it alone.”

“I complimented the troop, I asked where they were from and for how long, I implied they’d like any excuse to be out of Spokane on Wednesday, he turned testy. I said the only real hazard I’d worry about was wildfire, he said they had their bracers programmed to pick up Forest Service fire alerts. Does that sound careful enough?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy stopped and let her come up to him. “Put it aside for now, Ivy. We only have four days.”

“I thought you thought we were going to survive.”

“There’s no guarantee,” he said. “It’s the Shambles.”

His face had grown more gaunt since they met. Ivy was sure of that. It wasn’t merely that he’d changed from dark hair and eyes, solid earth colors, to blond hair and blue eyes, disembodied sky colors. She remembered that she’d suggested this trip to give him R&R, and she resolved to stop undermining it.

They walked unspeaking for a few minutes. He kept easing away from her, then slowing to let her catch up. She started to sweat and breathe hard again.

“Were you ever a Boy Scout?” she asked.

“No, I wasn’t qualified. Scouts have to believe a lone-god faith.”

She puffed. “How many gods do you believe in, then?”

“As many as it takes,” drily.

*Foreign, foreign, foreign!*

“Are you <gasp> kidding me?” She couldn’t be sure.

“Partly.” He stepped up onto a granite outcropping, turned, and helped her up.

“Are we lost yet?” She didn’t let go of his hand.

“No chance.”

“Usually people have to be thoroughly lost before they talk about religion,” a little archly.

“Runners don’t get lost, night or day,” he said, willfully ignoring her metaphor. “You know how to find the car from here, right?”

“Yes!” She was delighted. “I hadn’t realized! I’ve lost my talent for getting lost.”

“What’s your religion?” Jeremy asked her, affable but probing about a subject he took seriously.

She too took it seriously, and his earlier evasion made her reticent.

“Oh... I don’t believe in religion. God is another matter.”

Jeremy started to hike again, still holding her hand, not smiling but watching her with acceptance and his own flavor of reticence.

“It’s hard to talk about, isn’t it?” he said.

“It is. Always.”

“It’s better not to piss it all away in words.”



They camped before sunset and began to rove at fading time. After they’d cleared off most of Ivy’s aches by running a few hours, hiking around the damper areas where the bushes were thick, they smelled scorched hot dogs and marshmallows and soon found the Scouts’ camp.

Jeremy and Ivy sat faded on his foam pad. Down the slope, the Scouts’ campfire burned lower. The boys at the fire were taking turns talking. Others had gone off down the trail without their packs. It was a group of some older, some younger boys. Jeremy figured it was a snipe hunt.

“It looks like they’re telling the old scary campfire stories,” Ivy whispered, watching the boys moodily. Jeremy tightened his arm around her shoulders.

“I bet some of the stories are about people like us.”

“The old old tales? I thought there weren’t any preters before Mercury blew up.”

“Never been ruled out.”

“Maybe people thought we were vampires?” That particular connection still troubled her. He eyed her.

“No, vampires are something else. Some say the werewolves were nightrunners. Night hunters.”

“It’s likelier we were the original nymphs and satyrs.”

He laughed almost silently, which made him look satyric. “Could be.”

“And what about the other kinds of preters?”

“Some myths might fit them too.” He tried to explain. “Fluans are preters over water. They change its flow and nature. Nereids, naiads, mermaids. The windians are the preters of air, wind, sound, light, heat. They make illusions. Oreads and fairy folk.”

Jeremy recalled: Mud inside his clothes and out. The knobby column of clear water held him up away from the sucking brown flow in the irrigation canal. Ben, who'd dared him there to race hubcap boats, watched half laughing, half scared. Then he turned to reply to the whirl of air and darkness at his shoulder.

Ivy imagined: Turbulent faces in the clouds looked down, calling out in thunder tones to mutable faces flowing up from the waves.

"Lithos handle stone, metal, and earth," he went on. "Tommy-knockers, gnomes. They can make stone shells that look like parts of people. Maybe the Medusa and basilisk stories started there."

Jeremy: The lithos had come in droves to hear the concert. Their hollow-eyed blunt stone faces pushed out all over the granite wall of the theater they'd cut from a ravine.

Ivy: Craggy hands held pickaxes. Faceted glittering eyes stared deeply out of caves...

Jeremy picked up a jagged stone, looking at it thoughtfully. Ivy sat enthralled.

"Magians are mad scientists," Jeremy finished tersely. "Spells use magians to deliver themselves. To make themselves actual. Better to stay away from magians."

"They use magians? Are spells living things, then?"

"Water isn't alive and it uses creeks to go downhill."

Jeremy looked earnestly at Ivy. She turned in his arms to look back at him.

"Vampires, though, vampires aren't preter." His whisper took on overtones.

He held the stone out of sight behind her. He kept it between his fingertips so it wouldn't warm up.

"Maybe the vampires are ghosts of a sort, or clusters of ghosts. Merged ghosts from battlefields and mass murders."

Ivy looked apprehensive.

"Vampires drain life from your neck. That much is right. You only feel a tiny cold touch. When they mate they do it inside living flesh so it causes cancer."

He shifted as if to get comfortable, brought the stone up behind her neck. Down the slope, part of the snipe hunt was returning with flashlights.

"Vampires look like little clusters of floating lights like fireflies," Jeremy whispered. "When they seem to move away from you, they're coming closer. You're only safe when they seem to be coming closer."

Jeremy looked away from Ivy, downslope at the approaching lights. Her look went that way too.

“If those lights, there, were actually vampires...” he whispered, and touched the stone’s cold point to her neck.

She shrieked like a catamount and half stood, her hand clutching her neck. Yells responded from down the slope. Some of the boy yells cracked from low to high. The flashlights on the trail swung around. Shadows ran in the trees.

Jeremy grinned so broadly it hurt. He took a quick look back to check their line of retreat. An antlered silhouette was bounding up the slope, merging with and separating from the tree shadows as it went. Out in front of it ran a slightly smaller dark shape with less forehead furniture. It fled over the ridge and out of sight in the instant he noticed it.

He had to muffle a laugh. His scare story had gotten even more audience impact than he’d figured.



“Men of garlic ever fuming, See those vampires self-exhuming...”

Jeremy glowered a warning back at her. Ivy finished singing the vandalized verse of *Men of Harlech* anyway. They’d be hiking upslope soon enough and then she wouldn’t have enough breath to keep repaying him for last night.

“How many more verses?” he asked, slowing.

“Men of garlic, grab your crosses, Show those vampires who the boss is...”

Jeremy dropped back to walk beside her, his mouth quirking hazardously within the beard. She stepped away from him and sang much more loudly.

“All those fangs abounding, Isn’t it astounding? That platoon of bats will soon Be giving you a pounding!”

He whacked her on the rump. “yow!”

“Oh, well, it’s a lovely place for a beating,” she said, stopping and looking around at the pines, the mountainside, and the morning.

“I like it,” said Jeremy, looking at the place where he’d left his fondling hand.

She turned and kissed him, silently blessing him for his ability to enjoy these days. *If this be callousness, make the most of it.*

Up past his head she saw a large bird soaring. She closed her eyes.

“Jeremy,” when the kiss broke, “is that a vulture?”

His alert look told her it was. “We’d better go check. Back at the lot somebody said a hunter might have gotten himself into trouble.”

It wasn't the first time Jeremy had tracked vultures' circling. Without taking any false trails they came to the base of a small bluff. Ravens flapped away from a heap.

"Did the hunter have a dog?" Ivy asked, looking at the wide-open, squandered animal and feeling more pity than disgust.

"Don't know. This probably happened yesterday." He squatted ten feet away from the dead dog, examining the body, tracks in the dirt, and dried blood. His expression translated as "what do you know?"

"Rottweiler. Bet he'd been feral a while. Lots of old scars," he announced.

The ravens cursed proficiently. Jeremy, still studious, moved up closer. He flipped the dog's body over. He strode away, picked a yard-long thin dead branch from a pine tree, and used it to probe a deep wound in the dog's chest.

At last he stood and looked at Ivy like a car mechanic delivering an expensive but intriguing diagnosis. "A unicorn's hunting this area."

"A unicorn?" She looked at the dead dog again.

"Unicorns are predators."

Laughing, she said, "I believe you entirely, and the unicorn's horn isn't really a horn, it's a proboscis for sucking the life out of its prey." She added meaningfully, "Like a vampire."

"Last night was tall tales, not now. Unicorns are preter and clever too. They've killed a lot of big-game hunters."

"If they're preter, what are they before they change?" Ivy wanted to give him rope with which to hang himself even more than she wanted information.

"Deer, horses, that kind of grazing animals."

A shadow crossed them. They both looked up at the vulture.

"Should we get out of here? Should we warn the people in the park?" Warnings, warnings, wherever they went.

"No need. Unicorns avoid humans, except that they hunt the hunters who trail them."

"So it isn't true that unicorns seek out virgins?" She canted a sly eye at him.

"Fairy tale," Jeremy replied.

"The Boy Scouts don't know what they're missing, hey?"



Twilight, and their tarp was set up on a level step of granite in the side of a ravine, surrounded by hawthorn and wild rose, and twenty feet above the scars of past flash floods. Cramped in the bottom of the ravine, running over streaked stone, was a thin stream that passed through one fat pool.

“That water was so cold it had a life of its own.” She shivered for effect. “I didn’t think there was any snow left on Mount Spokane to feed a melt stream...”

“You’re getting soft in your old age.”

She remembered him naked and unshivering in the cold pool, grinning at her, looking much like a golden satyr and even more like the center of the universe. Now he lay with his head in her lap.

“I never thought a twentieth would take all this so easily.” He gazed up at her with a small, endeared smile.

“Easily? And what do you mean, twen—”, it fell into place. “Oh. Well, my parents were commune hippies for a while. Whatever century I was raised in, it wasn’t the twentieth. I can fake it, though.”

“I’ve been thinking. We could try founding a covune,” he suggested with a trace of wistfulness. “After the Dragon.”

“I didn’t care for most of the old communes...”

“Yeah, they must have been a lot like covunes. The good ones work. The ones with cults are loon factories.” He raised eyebrows at her for agreement.

She nodded. “I remember one place that spooked my parents, even though they were such activists I’m not sure whether they had an ideology or it had them.”

He made an acknowledging sound and went on, “When I was a kid, my folks stayed at one covune that worshipped the six elements. Soooo, it was the Air time of day, on an Air day, in the Air season.”

She blinked in ignorance, but didn’t stop him to ask.

“Ben forgot the Rules. He stretched during the rites.” Jeremy demonstrated a child’s exaggerated stretch, hands opening and clenching. “The elders accused him of ‘seizing disrespectfully upon Air.’ Ordered him to fast for three days, to get his fill of air.”

He shook his head, still wryly impressed by it, and settled himself more comfortably in her lap.

“Is that another tall tale?” Ivy meant to stay skeptical tonight.

“Afraid not.”

“And this was the same Black Ben you’ve been dreaming about?”

Jeremy’s face closed. She didn’t expect him to answer.

“Black Ben McCullough. Yeah. I’ve been thinking about him a lot.”

He’d told a few anecdotes about Ben on the night before last, and then last night he hadn’t had the awful memory dreams. It was possible that talking helped him, so against her usual instincts she decided to ask more.

“Jeremy, what happened to him?”

He looked away, unhappy and thoughtful.

“He burned.” He looked at her directly, not grudging her the question. “That was years later.”

And Ben is still mourned to this day, she thought.

“Was he burned for being a witch?” It wasn’t a kind question to ask but she badly needed it answered.

“No. Ivy, we’d better not talk more about Ben now.” Jeremy was serious and almost apologetic. “It’s ill-omened because we’ll be trying to rescue people from burning after the Dragon.”

An omen. Was that his superstition or something to take seriously? At the moment she didn’t want to press him and, besides, she didn’t really need to know.

“Getting tired of having me say I’ll tell you something later?” he asked, looking at her searchingly. And contritely, which was a rare mood for him. What expression had she been wearing to cause that reaction?

“I don’t mind this one.” He still looked as though he were on the hook. “How about a run?”

He sat up. “Later,” and kissed her.

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“All right, say for the sake of argument that we buy an unwanted piece of land like this for the covune. It’s unwanted for a reason—what about water? And electricity?”

“We can nightrun in a wheel to get power, if the wheel’s sheltered from light.”

“Run in a wheel? Like hamsters?” Ignoring the July midday heat, Ivy walked faster to catch up with Jeremy and see whether he was spoofing her again. “How could we possibly have the traction to make it turn when we’re as lightfooted as we are?”

The brush crackled out in the thicker undergrowth to the side. Jeremy and Ivy both turned and saw nothing. The noise had come from a clump of young Christmas trees and flowering bushes.

“Sounded big.” Jeremy was alert, not alarmed.

“Do you think it’s a bear? Or the...?” She couldn’t move the word “unicorn” out of her mouth.

“Neither.” He took off his pack. “But we’ll sit down for a snack and see who happens.”

“Whose snack?” Ivy pulled off her pack and sat down with him, looking over her shoulder at the bushes.

Jeremy dug into a side pocket of his pack. His eyes were amused, but he didn’t quite laugh. “It’s like luring the feds by leaving your house empty and ready to bug. We do something that looks innocent, see if they show their hand.”

“One tactic fits all, hey? Is that why you left your gear with Terry? To find out what he’d do?”

Now he laughed. “I figured it would keep him busy. Didn’t want him thinking up more to do about Spokane, pushing it too far, getting us caught.”

He handed her a honey-sesame bar, saying, “You watch my back, I’ll watch yours.” Then he put on the Aza’s holstered handgun.

Ivy couldn’t hear anything over her own crunching. She watched what might be animal trails. They led out of the shaded bushes beneath the firs into the sunny pine woods behind Jeremy. Hints of a sweet scent came out of the shade.

“Elk. Turn around slowly.” Jeremy’s expression was candid admiration.

The buck elk was watching them with wide eyes, ears, and nostrils. There were flowing watered-satin patterns in his pelt and his antlers branched in magnificent excess, a few strips of velvet hanging from them like award ribbons. Some of the drooping clusters of creamy

flowers on the bush that arched over his back shook as he snorted and looked back over his shoulder, then shook again as he stood to attention.

Ivy smiled back at Jeremy. "It's the emperor himself."

"I've never seen finer."

The buck wheeled and disappeared behind the bushes. The cracks and rustles of his passage moved away under the firs.

Jeremy stood, stretched and twisted, picked up his pack, and gazed down at Ivy. She looked back in satisfaction, feeling that the elk just might be one of their lasting shared memories. She replaced her canteen in her pack and reached for their snack wrappers.

A hurtlingly loud crack sound. Dust flew from the top of Jeremy's pack an inch behind his head. The pack's brown surface was marred and the damaged spot seemed to be fuming. Jeremy, wide-eyed, wide-mouthed, and gasping, hauled her up by one arm and dragged her toward the elk's bushes. He ran bent over as if his pack hurt him, awkwardly carrying her pack one-handedly.

He pushed her down on her stomach behind the bushes and sprawled over her.

"Stay down!" A savage whisper. Her pack was on the ground in front of her. She couldn't see over it and there was a pine cone or rock under her belly. A smell of burned plastic mingled with a strong sweet scent. The small shrub to the side of her bore silky white flowers half the size of her palm. Jeremy pushed up, peering through the bush and putting uncomfortable weight on her. She grunted.

"Quiet!" He whispered more harshly than before.

Jeremy strained his hearing. Footfalls on pine needles? Yeah. Only two feet, but the gunman was talking to somebody. On a bracer? He wouldn't have thought a fed's first move would be to kill them, but the bullet had been too close for a scare tactic. Jeremy felt for his automatic.

The man crossed behind a few trees before coming out where Jeremy could see all of him at once. He had a rifle. He was average height, with dark brown shaggy hair behind a high bald forehead. Rough skin from old acne. When he stopped walking his belly curved forward like a little boy's because of the slight arch in his spine. Hunting clothes, camouflage with blaze-orange hat and epaulettes. Hip flask. No bracer or earclip. Didn't look like a fed.

The hunter was smiling and talking to himself. He held his rifle loosely, finger through the trigger guard. His head kept turning, scanning the ground, seeking a trail. Close enough now to begin to hear his unending yatter.

I know this trail that I saw him drop down. I can't believe it had what a great shot I'm serious what a chance once in a lifetime. He dropped down where's the trail. Jeezus what a day need ha more days like this. There were shadows; the trail? Hey where's the trail? Ya I earned my money around his eyes, hollows wait till I find him I saw him drop down I'm serious. Wait under his cheekbones. His at up there? Jeezus what a fine day ya. Gotta find his cheeriness was overdrive. What a chance you gotta believe me ya once in a lifetime. Christless no good leaving their trash around they're gonna learn better. Where's the trail ha I sure can't let Frowning, he trailed toward them, still talking. Not a one of a kind like him ya. That's their trail not his. Hikers ha I'm serious I'll make them eat their goddamn litter up. Where's the trail of the Big Chief Elk you gotta believe he's one of a kind Jeremy leveled the gun over Ivy's pack. "I'll make them eat their goddamn litter up their asses. Time for a drink ha."

He stopped and glared around.

"He wasn't after us?" Ivy whispered. She was shaking. He couldn't see her face.

"Wasn't. Might be now." Jeremy tilted enough to unholster the handgun.

"But what..."

"Quiet!"

The hunter looked around, puzzled. He bent down, picked up the snack wrappers, stuffed them in his pocket. He looked toward their bush. Their trail was as obvious as a snail's.

"Now that's their ha trail not his not elk trail them and their trash spoiling a fine day. I don't believe it tourists are Christless no good leaving their trash around they're gonna learn better. Where's the trail ha I sure can't let Frowning, he trailed toward them, still talking.

Not a one of a kind like him ya. That's their trail not his. Hikers ha I'm serious I'll make them eat their goddamn litter up. Where's the trail of the Big Chief Elk you gotta believe he's one of a kind Jeremy leveled the gun over Ivy's pack. "I'll make them eat their goddamn litter up their asses. Time for a drink ha."

The hunter gulped from his hipflask. His tense smile loosened. He walked away, rubbing his mouth with his hand.

"Jeezus what a day. Too nice a day for a fight ya. Ya. Don't want to lose him. One of a kind ha Big Chief Elk. Earned my money today ya Christ with a shot like that what a shot

The hunter followed one of the animal trails into the firs. Jeremy moved off Ivy, letting her breathe. Furious and unbelieving, she stared after the hunter.

"There's no gravity inside that man's head!" she whispered.

"He's skittered," watching after the hunter.

"What?"

"Stimulants. Give him fifteen minutes lead and we'll trail him."

Ivy stared at him. He saw it from the corner of his eye.

"Why?" she asked, barely keeping to a whisper. "There are all sorts of directions that crazy didn't go in." She poked a finger into the bullet hole in his pack. "Those are the directions I like."

He looked at her briefly. She drew back from him.

"I'm going to shut him down before he shoots Boy Scouts or anybody else."

"Oh?"

“His name is Walt Hallam. He’s hunting that elk. Back where we parked, his sister was asking everyone to look out for him. She said he’d had these medication effects before.” Ivy hadn’t taken her wary eyes off him. “She wasn’t willing to control him. I will.”

This would be easier if Ivy would help him. Otherwise he’d be fighting on two fronts.

“What are you planning?” She was curious now. Always a start.

“Knock him out and break his trigger finger.” He didn’t bother whispering any more. She blinked and her mouth sealed up into nothing. “Pour some of his booze on him. Make him think he did it to himself in a drunk.”

“No!” Ivy was whispering because she was shocked at Jeremy’s plan, and nearly ashamed of him, not because she feared a returning Hallam would hear it. “He’s a crazy! He’s not responsible.”

“I am.”

Her righteousness swiveled. She had no doubt that someone had to take the responsibility for preventing harm from Hallam’s hair-trigger. Who, then, and what were the options? She thought. Jeremy sat up, impatient.

“Jeremy, I can see it’s no good talking to him, and I know we have to avoid catching the attention of the police. And we don’t want to give any clue that nightrunners are involved. But cripple him? It’s a dirty thing to do. He doesn’t deserve that.”

His frown took the place of shaking his head and saying no, no, no.

“I don’t know what he deserves,” said Jeremy. “I know what works.”

“Why not knock him out, pour his booze on him, and pretend to be him to call from his bracer for help?” She gave up whispering.

“No bracer.”

“I didn’t see that... and we can’t use mine. Then, why not break his gun instead of breaking him? Or why not take his gun?”

“He could come back with more guns tomorrow,” Jeremy pointed out, glowering, “itching to potshot anybody he thought had stolen or broken the first batch. He has to blame himself, not somebody else. He has to scare himself or he’ll be satisfied to stay crazy.” He checked the loading of the handgun.

Out of her depth, Ivy floundered. “Look, I was furious at first and I wanted to kill him. I’m glad you don’t, but—”

“Right now I want to see him dead,” he said forcefully, “but I’m not willing to kill him.”

She sat up and asked him the dishearteningly obvious question. “Have you ever—”

“Three men.” He acted as though he’d been asked that before, as if answering were routine even though the answer wasn’t. “Two teenage

men who shot up my covune and an ungoverned magian who'd killed—a man.”

Jeremy stood up, looking her over as intently as he had the gun, while once again she reassembled the whole range of things she knew about him.

“We haven't moved that far toward a covune way of life yet,” Ivy said tentatively. “I don't think we need to be that, that desperate. There are still organized alternatives—”

“Think of one.”

He put down his hands to pull her to her feet. His warm, vital grip turned her sympathies. He could have been dead and cooling by now—there was the hole, the bullet had passed that close to his head. She found she was quivering. It was fury again.

“I'd guess that if he'd shot you dead he'd have hidden your body and walked off giggling.” She clenched her teeth.

Jeremy frowned, looked her in the eye. “More likely he'd have puked, cried, and gone for help.”

Her fury flattened under his gaze.

“He doesn't have to be a villain,” said Jeremy, “we don't have to be heroes.”



They'd returned to their last night's campsite after trailing Hallam and finding he'd chosen that same ravine for his camp. It wasn't pure coincidence: this was the first gulch they'd found where there was enough granite to yield a clear path to the water. The others were inhospitable except to wild rose and hawthorn.

Jeremy had decreed a fireless dinner and no unpacking, then gone back to examining the Aza's gun. Ivy had a feeling he was hoping to discourage conversation.

She pulled out her Tarot cards. He glanced up at her, startled.

“They go where I go now,” she told him defiantly.

“Good.”

She unrolled enough of her sleeping bag to make a clean surface, shuffled the deck, and spread out the arc of face-down cards. That card, there, that was the one who wanted her attention.

Trump VIII, upright. Strength. Serene and powerful, the angel crowned with infinity closed the lion's panting jaws. It was a hard card to follow.

Jeremy was watching her, inquiring, awaiting the verdict. She held up the card.

“Virtue conquers all. It might be an endorsement, but...”

“I don’t want your help stopping Hallam if it’s against your judgment,” he challenged her.

Ivy took her time re-packing the bag and cards.

“He took the first shot,” she said pensively. “He created a situation where all of our options are bad. Crippling him enough to restrain him from more trigger-happiness is our strongest option, but I don’t have to like it.”

“Good.” He holstered the gun.

“Jeremy, you didn’t kill the Azas at the ranch. Why not?”

“Lots of reasons.” He’d been caught off guard.

“I’m asking.” It was her turn to challenge.

“I figured the Azas would go to jail,” he looked at her seriously, “and the Dragon would kill them. I didn’t want to end up dead in jail myself. Besides, it would be too easy—”

Jeremy looked past her shoulder at the far side of the ravine across the creek. His face was brilliant with awe and the beginnings of fear. Staring, he put the gun behind him.

“Turn around very slowly,” he said.

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Ivy began by thinking it a trick of the early sunset light. The sun's rays lay at a reclining angle where they struck the brush near the top of the ravine, making a golden chiaroscuro chaos. The satiny patterns that ran over the unicorn's sable fur were easy to misperceive as interlocking rose canes and branches.

The unicorn stood still, at gaze and yet confident. It was much like a horse, and then less and less like a horse, as Ivy's eye quickly educated itself. The glossy auburn horn spiraled like a narwhal's but was broader-based, like a rhino's. Somewhere else Ivy had seen the deep chest, pliant narrow waist, flat sides, and fur-fold hanging soft below the belly. She'd seen it on a cheetah. Another instant, and her eye joined all the animal elements into an utterly new whole, unicorn and incomparable.

"Beautiful," Ivy breathed. "Oh, you beauty."

The unicorn flowed when it turned away from them and bounded up the ravine bank. The brush at the top of the slope crackled, though the creature's footfalls had made no sound.

"Break camp," came Jeremy's voice.

She looked back at him, and was shaken. He was pale, incredulous, and frightened. Everything about him said, 'Unicorns don't act this way—now what do I do?'

"Don't ever shoot at her," he told Ivy, some self-possession returning to him.

"Well, of course not."

"Wrong," he said loudly. "Ivy. Don't be lured by her looks," desperate to convince her. "Our gun couldn't kill her with one shot. Our only chance is to make sure she doesn't think we're hunters."

"But she didn't attack us," Ivy reproached him.

"Cat and mouse. Finding out if we're easy meat. If she wasn't hunting she wouldn't be near us."

Jeremy turned to scraping food scraps from a plate into a small plastic trash bag. Ivy began to help him clear up, and it occurred to her there was something even uglier than the idea of a unicorn that preyed.

"It couldn't be rabies that made her approach us?"

"No chance," he said definitely.

"I always thought of unicorns as white."

"That one looks like she started life as a Morgan mare. Morgans are bays."

After another minute of cleaning up, he gave a single sour chuckle.

“The joke’s on us. We can’t leave Hallam defenseless with a unicorn prowling around. She’d love to find a hunter unconscious. We’ll have to stop the sonofawhore and then guard him till he comes out of it.”



After twilight, Jeremy and Ivy faded and walked softly around the bushes and into the clearing that held Hallam’s camp. The hunter had already spread his bag in his one-man tent. He sat near the fire, between his rifle and his pack. He checked his watch, sighed, looked at his hip flask as if it were a disappointing conversationalist, and drank one large swallow. The fire recaptured his brooding attention.

Jeremy stood at one side of the clearing, outside the fade-border of the firelight, and bent to half-rest the collapsible bucket of water on one foot. That kept it supported and invisible. He checked Ivy. She’d taken up her position on the far side of the firelight, gripping her handful of cartridges. Both of them clumsily wore their packs in front as horn-shields, leaving them ready to fight back to back, and they’d put on the light work gloves they’d brought for camp chores.

The breeze stirred pine needles, rustling. An owl hooted. *In a Western*, Ivy thought, *that would be an Indian warrior’s signal to attack*. She looked around her share of the clearing perimeter, her gaze dodging the firelight to avoid being blinded.

Hallam stared sullenly across the subsiding fire into the woods. He couldn’t have seen much through the flames, and his expression suggested he didn’t care to. He drank more gulps from the flask.

“Goddamn Christless horsepiss, they must have watered it at the distillery. Swillery ha not distillery. Doesn’t even make me sleepy. Jeezus what horsepiss.” He’d lost his energy. His voice was hoarse.

From the woods in front of Hallam came a rising and falling, thinning and thickening sound: rruuuuooouu, between a croon and a howl.

“What the hell?” Hallam tried to see into the woodshadows.

Jeremy moved up behind Hallam’s right, quietly, as the firelight unfaded him. Ivy stood and circled the fade-border to come behind Hallam from his left.

A bucketful of water smashed the fire. A goblin of steam, and the firelight was gone.

An instant later, so was the rifle.

Hallam crabbed away from the leaping embers, shock in his face.

“Jesus Christ where in hell that come from?”

He reached reflexively for his rifle but it was gone.

“There’s no way...!”

Dirt sprayed over a flaring ember. The tent shook.

ruruuuoo, from a different direction, louder, or closer, or both.

Jeremy and Ivy looked too. The clarity of their faded vision showed them nothing.

Then the unicorn gleamed at the edge of the clearing. She was three bounds away from the fire, and not in any of the directions she'd called from.

Jeremy strode to put himself between hunter and unicorn. Her horned head turned to watch him.

*She can see us!* Ivy ran to stand by Jeremy. The unicorn observed her with reflecting eyes.

The unicorn made three precise steps further into the clearing, her eyes fixed on Jeremy and Ivy.

Jeremy glanced back at Hallam. It was the briefest motion of his eyes before he returned his full attention to the unicorn. He stood fearful and hyper-alert, balanced on both feet, poised to go any direction.

Ivy felt her knees go loose. She sidled away from Jeremy to leave him room to move if she froze.

"Get behind me!" he whispered.

"The hell you say!"

"What am I hearing?" Hallam froze briefly, cocking his head.

He stood and peered toward the cry, baffled and a little frightened.

"Christ what am I hearing?"

Hallam stood staring between the unicorn and the embers of the fire.

Hallam shook his head slowly, mouth open, greatly admiring, perplexed.

"I couldn't shoot that Jeezus it'd be like axe-murdering an angel. Ya but still what a chance to miss."

Hallam backed, crouched, and reached deep into his pack, seeking with his hands. He never once looked away from his unobstructed view of the beautiful thing.

"Jeezus what a chance this one will be. Ya it's once in a lifetime."

Ears turning, the unicorn reared and dropped again, howling huuuhuhurr.

“Gotcha!” said Hallam.

Ivy took in a series of sharp vivid images. The unicorn’s open mouth, well-fanged, with long jaws gaped more widely than any horse’s. One raised cloven fore-hoof with a vicious central claw scything out from the cleft. A twin-pointed hind-hoof firmly planted on stone. A predator.

The world disappeared in a soundless white flash that made a gap in time.

Crouched at the edge of the clearing, the unicorn snarled, grrhoouu, an uncertain rising narrowing sound. Back behind her, brush crackled. Mouth open in surprise, Hallam looked into his camera’s viewfinder, then stared up into the space before him in which two people no longer stood.

Then he fell with a wet patch on his cheek. A small plastic screw-top bounced on the fir needles next to his unconscious body.

Hurriedly, beginning to twist out of his pack, Jeremy strode toward the tent where he’d flung Hallam’s rifle.

“Get his feet away from the embers,” he told Ivy.

Tugging Hallam’s legs, she saw Jeremy, pack dropped, raising the rifle. It was partly hidden by the tent’s front panel of mosquito netting. The unicorn’s glare was still fixed on the hunter, Hallam. Suddenly Ivy realized who, of the four of them, had gone on the attack and who hadn’t.

“Wait...” she said.

“No,” Jeremy took aim.

“She still hasn’t attacked us.”

“Playing with her food,” he growled.

“Remember when you petted the skunk?”

Jeremy’s eyes turned to Ivy, though his head didn’t move and his aim didn’t alter. His expression upbraided her.

“You can’t count on nightrunner charm with a unicorn any more than with people. Unicorns are preter and they’ve been hunted too much.”

“Look.” Unstirring but no longer crouching, the unicorn watched Ivy, who went on, “She hasn’t attacked us, even after the flash. Has she been hunted? Has she been preter any longer than I have?”

“Not likely,” he granted.

He took a breath, lowered the rifle, and assessed the threat. Tilting her ears, the unicorn turned her head to him. Jeremy set down the rifle inside the tent.

Ivy began to walk toward the unicorn. Jeremy took a stride to block her. He threw a glance at the unicorn, who moved only her ears.

Still walking, but slowly, Ivy said, "I'm guessing she was some equestrian's darling." Her voice shook on the last word.

Jeremy caught her arm to stop her. The unicorn watched interestedly.

"I'm sure I'm right." She said it unsurely. "Remember the Tarot card? Animal trainer in action."

"I've worked horses, I'll try. You stay here."

Jeremy put his pack on in front. He walked smoothly and intently toward the unicorn, not looking her in the face, one hand held out. She considered him, alert, head and ears high.

Ivy retreated to the fire. She was ready to throw her cartridges onto the remaining embers, the distraction Jeremy had suggested in their original plan.

Jeremy stood at arms' length from the unicorn. Both took sharp looks into the forest as brush crackled.

They refocused on each other.

"Here I am," said Jeremy in a low voice. "What next?"

Watching him intently, the unicorn lashed her silky tail once, back, forth. She picked up one fore-hoof, turning it in like a cat readying for an opportunistic swat. Mrrhuurrrm, she said, but her ears didn't flatten and her claws didn't emerge.

Jeremy settled down, sitting on his heels. He was sweating lightly. With slow smooth motions he took off his pack and reached into it. The unicorn set her hoof down again and flared her nostrils, sniffing toward him.

He unwrapped the foil from a bouillon cube and held it out on the palm of his hand. Sniffing, the unicorn lowered her mouth to his hand and skillfully lipped up the treat. She nosed over his hand for more.

"You only get the rest for good behavior," Jeremy said, sighing and finally blinking.

He turned and called to Ivy, "Your turn."



Ivy found out quickly and almost without qualms that the pupils of the unicorn's eyes were six-petaled, that her breath lacked the stink of a carnivore, that her fur and mane were softer than rabbit fur, and that she liked being scratched softly around the base of the horn. That horn was faintly blood-stained, but Ivy no longer felt that it was a betrayal for the unicorn to be a hunter. She was, after all, a unicorn.

Ivy spared a glance for Jeremy. He looked stunned, unbelieving, perplexed, hilarious. The past had let him get away with something

outrageous. She wondered: did touching a unicorn mean more to her, the woman who'd never thought they existed? or to him, the man who'd never thought he'd get near one and survive it?

The brush crackled again, and all three of them looked. The bull elk that Hallam had been hunting stood part-hidden by bush at the far edge of the clearing. The unicorn turned toward him.

"He must be her mate," said Jeremy as the unicorn stepped away from them.

"But isn't he her prey? Do they eat their mates like praying mantises, then?"

"No," he answered, startled. "Unicorns don't breed. They make other animals unicorns by mating with them."

The elk stretched out his head toward the unicorn mare with courtly eagerness as she approached him. She nuzzled his satin-streaked neck and he accepted it regally as no more than his due.

Jeremy looked at Ivy with a small, thoughtful smile.

"They mate for life," he said.

She latched her arm around his waist, and she felt as though some unicorn had rubbed off on him.

"Good thing, too," he added, "or there'd be so many unicorns they'd eat all the other predators."

He squeezed Ivy and stepped back, looking over to Hallam.

"Better stop making friends with her," he told Ivy as he picked up his pack, "or she'll trust hunters too much."

Ivy looked at him regretfully, then back at the unicorn and her mate.

"There's such a thing as too much foresight, Jeremy."

"That's my job." He stood by Hallam. "You know your time and what works in it, I know where it's going. Foresight."

He hunkered down by Hallam and examined him, raising one of the unconscious eyelids and feeling the neck pulse.

"Wide asleep," Jeremy concluded. "See this?" He screwed the plastic lid back onto the top of a small canister that stuck out of a side pocket of his pack. "Don't touch it without gloves. You might get a free nap."

"Did they sell that in cop shops?" Ivy asked it without much real curiosity; now she remembered the end of their plan for Hallam.

"Yeah."

"Will it keep him unconscious when you, we break his finger?"

"Probably." He was learning the controls on Hallam's camera and didn't look up. "If you're going to try to stop me, now's the time."

"No. I haven't thought of any other responsible way to handle him." She was grave and regretful. "And I think I know you well enough to know you don't enjoy this."

At that he looked at her, losing his defiance. "I could."  
He repeated it more loudly, "I could. If I ever start to..."  
"If." She gave him a brief smile. "I can live with if."

Jeremy looked at Hallam's last photo. His and Ivy's backs. Between and beyond them, a rearing unicorn. Unbelievable. Wipe that image, and then if Hallam talked unicorn the psycho doctors would commit him to the local chaos coven.

Hallam's wallet. Jeremy checked the ID and said, "He lives in Spokane."

He traded a long stare with Ivy. She muttered, "That means he'll burn whether he's home, or in jail, or here for the forest fire."

"Besides that, the unicorn could kill him if he keeps chasing her or her mate." *A better death than burning*, thought Jeremy. That was all he could say for it.

Both of them glanced quickly at the predator across the clearing. Her mate was out of sight and she was watching the three humans, swinging her head in small movements, either irresolute or preparing to stalk.

Jeremy looked back at Ivy. He could read the question on her face. "No kidnapping him," he stated. "Too much risk for us." She agreed, sighing.

Opening Hallam's pack, Jeremy began to search for a first-aid kit. If the man wasn't carrying any topical painstopper, he'd need a donation.

The kit was untouched. Lying above the contents was a note, "Happy camping, Walt, and play it safe!" Signed Lisa. The sister? Painstopper, bandages, antibiotics, the rest of the usual. Clipped to the inside of the lid was an emergency locator beacon. It had a button to test the circuit and battery. They were working.

huuuuuurr? The unicorn was partway across the clearing to them, her body stopped in the hint of a crouch, her mouth in the hint of a snarl. She glared irritably at Hallam.

Ivy went to the unicorn to soothe the beast's nerves or jealousy. After a minute of thought, Jeremy followed. He wanted to talk plan where Hallam wouldn't hear it if he woke up.

If the two of them couldn't kidnap Hallam away from Spokane, the park rangers could. That is, if there were grounds to put him under psych observation.

They worked out details. Retake the photo with blank forest in it. (First lead the unicorn away so the flash wouldn't stir her up.) Rebuild the fire and drop in the rifle to ruin it. (First take out the rounds, too much bang could throw embers everywhere.) Powder one dose of Hallam's prescription, put it in his hip flask, pour some of the dosed whisky on his shirt. If he was lucky he'd be babbling again when the

rescuers arrived. Ivy confirmed he'd probably be sent to the state mental hospital at Medical Lake, where he'd be Dragon-safe.

Tiredly, Ivy admitted that Hallam probably wouldn't be committed unless he was a menace to himself or others. It had to look like he'd harmed himself.

"His hand ought to be burned, not broken," she finally proposed, gloomy. "It's more plausible. It'll look as if he'd tried to grab the rifle out of the fire and passed out from the pain."

Jeremy felt his mind stop. Burning again. He'd be making somebody burn.

He saw Ivy dismayed and resentful at his stunned reaction.

"It's a better story," he agreed at last. "Besides, it'll probably heal faster than a broken finger for the same amount of pain. Use his fingerprint to turn on the beacon. Burn his palm a little, take the unicorn, and go."



Thinking about meat-smoke and whimpers, Jeremy ran in the lead. Rippling brown off to his right. The unicorn bounded past him again, her pale eyes gleaming. If she at any time had more than one hoof on the ground, he didn't see it.

They'd been running a while and it still wasn't any easier for him to face Ivy. Hard not to blame her for suggesting the one act that his mind couldn't rest on because of Ben. Hard not to give her credit for joining him in the responsibility for that act.

Time to stop and check in with her.

"Daddy, she followed me home!" Ivy pointed at the unicorn and gave Jeremy a careful smile.

"She won't do that," he reminded her, finding it easier to talk to her than he'd expected. "Too many people down there."

"I can't see why she's followed us so far from her mate."

"At her speed she'll find him again before the night's out. Hallam and his rescuers should be safe from her if we head for the car now. We're off the direct route that the finder team will use."

They nightran again. Ivy saw when Jeremy's spirit began to clear with the running: his stride lengthened, his shoulders swung relaxed as he ran, he made easier choices of path.

It was a mile after the first NO TRESPASSING NO HUNTING NO DIRTBIKES NO SNOWMOBILES NO LIGHTSHOWS signs when they leaped the first barbed-wire fence, the unicorn lagging further behind them than she had been. When they found a dirt road and began to run along it, the unicorn bounded out in front, moving like a cheetah's shadow.

She stopped crosswise to the road, staring at them. She lowered her horn toward them, raised it again, a gesture more like opening a conversation than like making a threat. hhhriiiyy! And, head up, she walked decorously upslope toward Jeremy and Ivy.

“She means something by this,” said Ivy inanely, wishing a second later that she’d been at a loss for words.

The unicorn stepped straight to Jeremy, tilted her horn well away from his face, and nosed his shoulder hard enough to throw him off balance. He stepped back to catch himself. The unicorn walked upslope around the two of them. Disconcerted, they turned to keep facing her.

She nosed Ivy’s shoulder lightly, then took Ivy’s upper arm carefully in her jaws and pulled.

“Whoa there!” Ivy was too startled to be truly alarmed, but the fangs did no more than hint at sharpness through her summer blouse.

Jeremy sat down on the road. The unicorn looked down at him, bemused by his unexpected subsidence, the flower pupils of her eyes expanding. Baffled, she released Ivy.

“Sit down!” he directed.

Ivy sat, glancing at her arm for blood and seeing none. The phrase “passive resistance” crossed her mind. The three preters looked at each other uncomprehendingly.

Mhri. The unicorn tossed her mane in beautiful frustration. She mouthed Jeremy’s shoulder but drew away without setting teeth to meat.

“Why does she want us to turn back?” Ivy asked.

Jeremy shrugged without looking away from the unicorn. “This road points at Spokane. Too much population ahead.”

Mhri. The unicorn put a cloven fore-hoof lightly on Jeremy’s knee. The claw showed, just enough to dint the cloth of his jeans, and then courteously withdrew.

“I know that move,” he said in amazement, and put his right hand out. The unicorn touched her hoof to his palm. “Wonder who taught her to shake hands?”

The unicorn nosed Ivy’s ear, turned, and walked away, leaving the road by the shortest path. She looked back over her shoulder, said nothing more, and cantered into the upslope woods.

Ivy, deep in regret, looked at Jeremy and saw startling attachment and loss on his face. She hugged him and he put his arms around her, but he didn’t look away from the unicorn for long. Even faded vision couldn’t follow her far into the woods, flowing brown on shifting browns. She’d be dashing back to rejoin her mate the elk, whom they’d outraced soon after leaving Hallam.

“Can we lure her out to a safe place before this area burns?” Ivy asked urgently.

He chuckled ruefully, dissuasively. “We couldn’t budge her any more than she budged us. She can outrun it, though.”

“I don’t doubt it, but what about her mate?” she asked.

“We have to hope her mate can change before it’s too late.”

*One endangered species fretting over another,* Jeremy thought. For a moment he felt nothing except a ruthless urge to protect.

Monday July 4th, 2016

A bicyclist angrily tingled his bell at the pedestrians blocking his clearly marked bike lane. The sidewalks overflowed with people who were going to the Arena across the street or to Riverfront Park. A policewoman was speaking to a man whose picket sign read, "Behold, a whirlwind of the Lord," and a police van idled nearby.

No one, not even the fashionably masked student who was intermittently on guard, saw Jeremy and Ivy climbing the fire escape at the back of the art school building. But then if it hadn't been dark enough to fade, they'd have had no reason to be here yet tonight.

The open ladder at the top of the stairs was well-constructed. That didn't save Ivy from acrophobia halfway up. She closed her eyes to slits, peered at the rungs, listened to the party sound effects from the roof, the megaphone from the park, did anything but look down, and kept mechanically, attentively hoisting herself. At that moment she would have vastly preferred not to have to live up to Jeremy.

Some of the art school students and teachers had preceded them. All three Joes were represented: Six-Pack, Six-Puff, and Six-Wack. Off to the left was the tipsy parasol of lights over the pavilion. Ivy listened for the carousel's organ music and briefly revolved schemes for rescuing the antique handcarved horses. "One of a kind," Walt Hallam reminded her.

"We'll be out of the way back here," whispered Jeremy.

"uh, right. No, would you mind standing further from the edge?"

"Out this direction?" He jerked his head south at the river.

"We'll see soon enough."

The city's final fireworks display began with dramatic bursts from the entire palette. They heard the concussions as they felt them in their feet.

"The last show... Now I couldn't possibly believe that it won't happen," said Ivy, viewing the city and the coruscations draining into it from the sky.

"Everything looks more mortal at night."

"It's always seemed like the opposite—"

Knowing his gaze was on her, she broke off to look back at him. He was watching her moodily, vulnerably, for once with no wryness to him. She turned to hold him, closing her eyes.

Her neighborhood, on reconnaissance, revealed no observers in cars or vans. Her house, on examination, showed no signs of unrequested entry. None of the dust-fluffs and cobwebs they'd left on or near doors had been displaced from the positions recorded in the digital photos Jeremy had taken before they left.

There were messages on Ivy's answering machine. She marked up her list of guests. Garlick and De Marquette, out of town. Castle and Premzic, no. Yes for the other ten—

"Come shower!" Jeremy yelled from the upstairs bathroom.

"After I leave a message for the caterers!"



Terry and his debugging pants sat down in the basement hall.

"Clean?" asked Jeremy.

"Spotless and shining, as am I and my bachelor abode."

"Good. The feds must not think we're interesting."

Ivy noticed that no one was so convinced of that as to suggest moving the discussion upstairs.

"Now... let us talk about investment tips and financial planning for your future." Ivy and Jeremy stared at Terry. His pleasure with himself was of astronomical magnitude.

"Here are some very eligible companies alluded to by your gear. Some of them invented spells, others hold the patents on genetically engineered herbs required by the spells." Terry flourished the folded pages he took from his pocket. "Study and invest at your own speed."

Ivy perused the list, thanking him preoccupiedly. Jeremy gave him a look of a certain approving surprise.

"Next." Terry held up an unused, foil-wrapped Hy-Pen. "As a hypo, it sucks blood; then, as a pen, it writes. I've reviewed the Patent Office database. Based on the most recent patent number, the rate at which new patents are being granted, and the lag time after application, this toy needs to be invented and submitted real soon now."

Ivy blinked and looked up in rebuke. "It'd be theft of intellectual property. We didn't invent it, so we shouldn't."

"How do you know we didn't?" Terry retorted coolly. "Round and round causality goes, and when it stops, nobody knows."

"That's too traceable," Jeremy said firmly. "Leave it to some other yank to get hooked that way."

"There are many too many of We for us to get caught."

"Don't do it," ordered Jeremy.

"Jawohl!"

Terry looked down with a practiced eyebrow raised haughtily. The Boss looked back, frowning, no doubt indulging suspicions of Terry's facile acquiescence.

"Then, instead, I shall trace the futurite who does invent it." Terry smiled the light feline smile that rests above an adroitly-swallowed canary. He looked at Ivy. "Have you checked your e-mail lately, Mumsy?"

**From:** FEMA FRC Region X  
**To:** ie\_langbourne@prototaz.jnt  
**Subject:** Special Disaster Preparation Alert  
**Date Sent:** Sunday 3 Jul 2016 12:49:23 -0700

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We regret to inform you of a number of natural disasters that will strike localities in many parts of the world within the next nine months. The catastrophes will include storms of the Madrid type as well as tidal

"You sent—", Jeremy broke off, then continued in a whisper, because they were upstairs, "you sent out our complete disaster list? To everybody in Spokane?"

Terry sighed and corrected him, also in a whisper. "Kerry Halteman arranged for FEMA to e-mail this particular letter to users of major online services all over the US. And to penny it all over the Net. It's called 'pennying' because—"

"You damned irresponsible IDIOT!" Jeremy bellowed, moving toward Terry.

Terry backed. Ivy felt sure that he was regretting Jeremy's position between him and the door.

"Quiet down!" Ivy whispered, putting her hand on Jeremy's arm.

"Shall we take our disagreement downstairs?" Terry suggested, doing his best to address Jeremy with bravado.

"You two go," directed Jeremy harshly, "I'll be down after I check through my gear."

Terry's aghast expression matched the one Jeremy had worn as he first saw the e-mail. "Do you actually think—"

"Later!" Jeremy cut him off.

Terry sent Ivy a silent demand for support; she stared back with no sympathy. She headed for the stairs. Behind her, Terry passed Jeremy with a brief cautious rush of steps.

"Don't you realize that he believes I've stolen from him?" Terry asked Ivy angrily.

"After that trick of yours he'd be a fool to trust you. You know we agreed not to do what you did, and you jumped at the chance to renege as soon as we were out of the way," she glared at him over her shoulder

as they passed through the basement rec room. “Were you lying when you agreed not to do that? How far back did you plan this?”

“I changed my mind!”

Terry slammed the door between hallway and rec room. It rebounded. He closed it solidly. Ivy shut the room doors into the hallway.

“You say he’d be a fool to trust me? He certainly is a fool to think I’d be so moronic as to rob him in such a ‘traceable’ manner,” Terry announced more loudly than needed.

“Quiet down! You should have waited and discussed that e-mail with us. You knew we’d be back in plenty of time.”

“You should have told me that you two were nightrunners. Precisely when were you planning to inform me of that?”

Ivy took one breath, thought of Jeremy’s little black manual that Terry had been reading for four days, took another breath, and thought of the Briarson Ranch news stories. She remembered how Terry had pressured the hypnotist.

“Maybe we wouldn’t have told you. Trust just doesn’t stick to you.”

“I’ve always heard paranoia was contagious.”

Jeremy opened the door and closed it quietly. He sat on the floor by the door, expression tight and simmering, looking steadily at Terry.

“He’s figured out we’re nightrunners,” Ivy said, sitting by Jeremy.

“Easy enough.” Jeremy paused.

He told Terry, “Explain it. Why the mass e-mail? What makes you think that causing mob panic is a good plan?”

“As long as I’m risking the punishment for infoterrorism,” Terry said vehemently, “it won’t be for conveying the miserable dribble of information that you planned. I value my freedom more highly than that, thank you, sir.”

Ivy’s anger jumped a notch. Jeremy’s anger boiled high.

“Because of your ego there’ll be panics that’ll kill more people than anybody can guess.” Jeremy’s quiet voice was amplified to a shout by his finger thrust against Terry’s chest.

Terry took a slightly shaky breath. “I have researched human behavior in disasters. For a typical example, studies of major building fires agreed that,” he recited, “the typical response was not one of mindless panic, but an effort to do the reasonable and even altruistic thing, hampered solely by incomplete information about the situation.

“Therefore I increased the general level of information.”

“You trust academics to tell you about mob action?” Jeremy’s hands clenched. “I know better. You can’t control mobs. Not an option. I’ve got history to go by.”

“Terry’s right,” Ivy said reluctantly to Jeremy, “and you’re right. It all depends on which portions of history you look at.” Jeremy gave her a look of flaming-hot betrayal. She went on. “There is absolutely no way to know which of you is closer to being right in this case. I certainly can’t predict whether releasing information will be safer than withholding it.”

“Make up your mind.” There was almost no good will in his impatience.

She spoke slowly and carefully for the sake of self-control. “I wasn’t finished. When you can’t make a decision based on good solid knowledge, you have to go with principle alone. On principle, I like the possibility of mass panic better than the possibility of the government using their secrets only to strengthen their own position.”

Jeremy deliberated. His expression was the equivalent of a long low growl. But his hands gradually relaxed.

“Yeah, that’s a case,” he finally said. “The NBIE’s secret preter hunt. That’s one point. FEMA’s refusal to protect Spokane even after our warnings and whatever their own futurites told them. That’s two. The feds are hoarding everything they know about this. The extra risk of the worldspam is worth it.”

He looked at Terry gravely and unhappily. “Thanks, Terry—”

“There is no extra risk,” said Terry scornfully. “All the dangerous hacks on this our project, including the hypnotist hack, have been carried out by Kerry Halteman. Kerry’s records go back to birth. I’ve worked part-time jobs to give him his very own physical presence away from mine. He’s been with We for five years.

“Kerry is firmly scheduled to work on high-premium security installations in Spokane on Wednesday. He is to be missing and presumed dead. Definitely expunged. A dead end.”

“Okay. You’re the expert,” Jeremy said, flatly but without sarcasm.

“How kind of you to notice.” Terry’s insolence was shallow. He shifted position. He’d eagerly awaited a chance to use his quickly-improvised attacks, but hadn’t thought of how to deal with assent.

“You should have talked to us before you sent the e-mails,” Ivy said again to Terry.

Jeremy gestured silence at Terry. “Ivy. There’s no time for that now. We need to get the ID and packing work done.”

“I’ll pack,” said Ivy, and stood, swallowing other words.



*House title. Insurance policies. Bill payment records.  
Bank accounts, checkbooks. Car documents. IDs.  
Computer. Backups. Valuables. Mementos.*

*Medications. Prescriptions. Doctors' names and addresses. Resume. List of clients. Samples of my webpages.*

And, of course, clothes and such. She looked at her bedroom, now emptier in many small ways (*Mementos*), and stood paralyzed at her next decisions.

Should she pack only enough clothing for the next day or two, as if she didn't entirely believe in the disaster? Or was that more camouflage than she needed? Should she pack everything? There seemed to be enough time and boxes. Or should she take only the fanciest clothes and figure on replacing the others at garage sales? That would be cheap enough even though they'd be short of money from now on.

Her home was in the Glass Zone on the map, so no one could come here afterwards and find out how far she'd emptied the house. It was only a matter of whether she filled so many boxes that the neighbors or the manager of the storage units or some other watcher noticed and found it suspicious later. How many boxes were too many?

Ivy sat down on the bed and put her face in her hands.

After a while there were whispers and footsteps on the stairs. Ivy composed her face and dried it. The front door opened and closed. She stood up and looked into the closet and noticed, as if for the first time, that Mark's clothes took up less than half.

Jeremy stood just outside the bedroom door.

"How's it going?" he whispered.

"I've boxed everything except your pack, my clothes, the computer, and the monitor," she told him. "I thought I'd leave the computer till tomorrow morning, so we could see the news."

"We can check the headlines on your bracer if we want to. Right now, you go ahead with the computer. I'll do the clothes. Might as well take all of them."

When she went to the bedroom door, Jeremy put his arms around her. She found to her surprise that for the moment she had no more crying to do. She and Jeremy held each other and the world around them became a minute haven.

"What do you think of the name 'Jeffrey Thorne'?" asked Jeremy.

"It's a name." Ivy shrugged.

"My next identity. Hope it lasts."

"Was that name his idea or yours?"

"You think I'd let Terry name me? I'd end up with a name from another planet." Jeremy shook his head. "The last thing he asked me at the door was, 'Do you expect to disappear in 2029 when you're born again?'" He chuckled low in his throat. "Like I'd know."

“He shouldn’t have said anything about that upstairs, even in a whisper,” Ivy muttered. “He’s out of control.”

“Experts always are.” Jeremy sounded resigned. “He’s done all the real work on this.”

“Oh, yes? What risks has he taken?” Ivy barely kept it to a whisper. “What has he sacrificed? You nearly went mad with that spell—”

“Risks and sacrifices aren’t the point. What matters is what works. If it’s safe and easy besides, all the better.”

Jeremy tightened his arms around her and rubbed his cheek into her hair.

“One of my mothers survived the big panic, the Night Flight from New York City next year. False rumors caused it.” He paused and sighed. “Hard to say if it’ll happen now. Terry’s worldspam wasn’t in the history I remember...” She heard him swallow.

“Now we’ve changed history enough that I can’t trust my memory. I thought about that happening but I didn’t really believe it could. Much good my foresight will do now.”

She held to him more tightly. Whatever else happened, he was still here; that timeworn paradox of changing his own past hadn’t made him softly and suddenly vanish away.

“It could change to something better,” Jeremy said with conscientious hope.

Tuesday July 5th, 2016

“Hello—Terry?”

“Who else? Hello, Mumsy.”

“I’m sorry for what I said last night.”

“I was very disappointed in you for not living up to the manners you’d always raised me to have.”

He wasn’t disappointed in the brief silence that came from his phone.

“We have an interesting situation,” Ivy’s voice eventually said. “First thing this morning, we called that self-storage facility in Medical Lake to make sure they were open. But all of their space sold out over the past few days, owing to the news stories.”

He deduced from her surprise that she and The Boss hadn’t read any news lately. “You see what happens when you indulge in an ill-timed vacation?”

“We called Cheney, Medical Lake, Reardan, Davenport, all the way out to Coulee City, and there were no openings. So he’s just left for Pullman, where they’re holding a unit for us at double the normal price.”

“Mmmm, isn’t that delightful!”

“It depends on your perspective.”

Terry chortled at her cautious phrasing and heavily ironic tone.

“Lacking him, may I have your help at Airway Heights to set up for the party?” she asked.

“Certainly, Mumsy.”



Ivy sat on her front porch to escape her house and all the small reproaches and farewells inside it. Most of the neighborhood was using the hot summer holiday as a chance to service their yards.

*Admit it, you’ve reached your limit.*

There was Mike Premzic, wearing his thermosatin smart-vest with built-in blue-ice packets, mowing his lawn. He had a wife, two ambulatory children, and one infant. He was a high-school coach, jumbo-sized and fit, and with an NRA sticker on his van he could be assumed to have a gun. He might even know how to use it. That was a risk.

*You couldn’t even decide about packing your clothes last night, remember?*

There were all three of the Castles, Everson, Jean, and Minda,

husband, wife, and daughter, weeding the strip of roses and lavender between their lawn and hers. There were only three of them, and only one child. Did that make them better candidates, because they'd be easier to handle, or worse, because there were fewer of them to save?

*You assured Jeremy you could decide who to take, but you can't, can you?*

She let her mind go blank. Every hour that passed gave her the feeling there was less of her, less judgment, less emotion, less energy, less guts.

Terry's hatchback pulled into the driveway. The adult Castles glanced at him, Minda stared. As Ivy stood up, she smelled the fragrance of the lilacs in her front hedge. For the last time...

Terry rolled down his window.

"Can you reach The Boss?" he asked her.

"He doesn't have a bracer."

"I do believe he'll be intrigued with these news items." He handed her papers.

She leaned against the car, leaving a broad clean mark on it, and read the printouts. Some of them postdated the last ones she'd viewed on her bracer.

"'Hero Cleared, Reward Zeroed'. But not the Azas' reward, of course..." she muttered. "'Spokane Payoff 50 to 1 At Vegas'... 'NBIE Closing On Terror Hoaxers'... 'FEMA's Anti-Hacker Measures'... 'Extra Cops Called In For Hoax'..."

"That last one is a most disingenuous object," commented Terry. "They 'strongly deny' rumors that the National Guard will be called in to cordon off Spokane, with not a word said about the ready availability of jetjocks from Fairchild."

"This is outrageous! The governor says it's only a hoax—don't panic. The NBIE agrees but says it could be a decoy for a renewed terrorist attack—be wary. Then they mention the National Guard and extra police—be reassured. They couldn't do better if they were trying to confuse people into a panic!"

"Why not?" Terry raised a chessmasterly eyebrow at Ivy. "They aren't merely fighting the last war, they're hedging their bets. If the only disaster tomorrow were to be a 'mass panic,' they'd still have an excuse for more hard-shelled laws. Oh, what a glorious opportunity." He looked aside. "Auooga! Auooga! Shirley Temple on the port bow!" he said softly.

Startled into a state of surrealism, Ivy looked away from Terry. Minda Castle was approaching them. She stopped and hunkered briefly, picked up a black beetle from the edge of the driveway, and continued toward them, watching the beetle's legs scramble. Her

parents glanced after her, unconcerned.

“He has five legs,” Minda informed them, now staring up at Terry. She looked down and picked at something on the side of his car. She held the beetle so that it could look at the something.

She gazed inquisitively at Ivy, who said, “Minda, what’s up?”

“Is he?”

Ivy saw Jean Castle coming after her daughter, wearing a familiar there-goes-that-blessed-kid-again expression.

“Am I what?” asked Terry, intrigued.

“Are you really a drug dealer?” She looked unblinkingly at Terry.

Ivy’s mouth opened in horror. “What?”

Terry was laughing in unabashed glee. Minda dropped the beetle.

“Mr. King said.” Minda pointed across the street.

Ivy looked at the old man watching her from behind his picture window, and she began to burn.

“Child, observe me,” Terry affably commanded. He was copiously entertained. “Do I have horns, hooves, and a long pointy tail?”

Minda observed him as if he were a seventeen-legged glowing beetle. Her mother arrived and peremptorily took her hand.

“Minda, it’s not polite to interrupt—”

“If I don’t have horns, hooves, and a long pointy tail, how can I possibly be a drug dealer?”

“Oh no, Minda!” said Jean Castle, looking down at her child’s position on the brink of a social abyss.

“Well,” Ivy muttered, “I guess I can stop feeling guilty about not inviting that one to the party.” She looked away from Mr. King. Terry laughed sardonically.

Jean Castle was profuse with apologies and disclaimers. Ivy accepted them all. She felt sure the Castles hadn’t believed the story—after all, they hadn’t tried to protectively stop Minda from coming over to visit. But why hadn’t they already warned her about the rumor?

Terry shrugged off his share of the apologies with, “Small children are (traditionally) infallible judges of character.” That remark carried enough strange edge to cut the conversation short.

As the Castles walked away, Ivy muttered, “Now I know who told the NBIE we’d been keeping strange hours. And I’ll bet the nabs used the drug-dealing story to cover their real reasons for questioning the neighbors.”

“That’s obvious,” said Terry airily. “Myself, or I should say Uself, I would never (Us would never) descend to drug-dealing. Not when there are more ingenious and equally lucrative opportunities for We in the next few weeks.”

“Oh yes?”

Terry went on with pointed enthusiasm. "After the Dragon, the relief effort will need assistance with their survivor and casualty database. Assist I shall, resurrecting any victims that'll make useful identities for We."

"That's vulture work." Ivy was deeply shocked this time.

Annoyingly imperturbable, Terry replied, "I prefer the maggot analogy, boring from within."

"No, Terry, you can't do it. What about their survivors who think they're still alive somewhere?"

Showing great patience with her lack of acuity, Terry said, "Mumsy, think it through. Victims who leave survivors aren't loners and don't have identities worth hoarding."

"How much money would you take to not do this?" she asked desperately.

"If you have to ask, you can't afford it."

Ivy looked away from him, angry and disheartened. After altogether too long a silence, Terry continued.

"I like the idea that someone can benefit from all this, especially if it's We. Or would you prefer an unrelieved disaster where everyone suffers equally?"

"I'd prefer you to be less entrepreneurial," she said, refusing to look at him.

"Among the hallowed techniques of self-defense, being rich comes second only to not being seen. Us always works for pay." Terry shrugged.

Ivy remembered Jeremy's concession, "He's done all the real work on this." She said nothing.



Jeremy came home cheerful. He'd seen a long line of cars with Spokane license plate frames at the Pullman storage facility, he'd heard radio talkshow claims that numbers of Spokaners were extending their out-of-town holiday vacations, and he'd seen no signs of panic on the roads. Ivy's neighborhood news troubled him not at all.

"It doesn't matter," he reassured her as they stood in the basement hall.

"It does matter," Ivy retorted, "if the neighbors don't come to the party because they believe the rumors and think the party's paid for with drug-tainted money."

"Do you want to kidnap them tonight?" He came to the point right away.

"Maybe," she said reflexively.

He looked at her piercingly.

“Yes. The Castles,” she told him, her mouth pinched tight.

“Fine. Think of a way to get them outside after dark without identifying yourself,” he directed, and looked down at Terry’s sheets of news.

‘Hero Cleared, Reward Zeroed.’ *Too little, too late.*

‘Spokane Payoff 50 to 1 At Vegas.’ Is that all? Must be a popular bet. Tells me the Maf hasn’t caught any yanks yet to warn them this’ll happen. Or maybe they have and this is the lowest they can offer without causing suspicion.

‘NBIE Closing On Terror Hoaxers.’ If they were, they wouldn’t tell it to the media.

‘FEMA’s Anti-Hacker Measures.’ Seems like most of the news is about too little, too late.

‘Extra Cops Called In For Hoax.’

His mood blackening, he read that one for detail. Ivy put her arm around him, to his surprise, and leaned in to see what he’d noticed.

“We might not be able to get into the city afterwards if it’s cordoned off,” she said reluctantly, watching his face.

“There’s that too.”

“Too?”

“Getting out through the cordon once we’re in.” He exchanged a long frustrated look with Ivy. “We’ll have to give up on bringing a lot of the gear we bought. It would look suspicious if we got caught with army rations, half-masks, five-gallon buckets of water, anything else that people wouldn’t ordinarily keep in a car’s personal emergency kit.

“You and I can take anything we can carry in our packs because we can run it out unseen. Terry’ll have to be clean.”

“We won’t be able to help as much.” She sighed. “Is it still worth it?”

“Yeah. We can still provide some first-aid and transport away from the midnight fire. This article tells me something else,” he went on slowly. “I have to break the promise I gave you to help get your friends out of Spokane tonight.” He had to hope she’d respect his older obligation. “You recall Abe Kendall warned me I was going to be arrested? He told me he’d be out of town tomorrow. This call-up might bring him back.”

“That’s no good,” she sympathized.

“I owe him for helping me stay out of jail. I have to take him out of town, even if it means your neighbors stay behind.”

Her arm dropped away from him. She stared at him as if his face had fallen off. It was about what he’d expected.

“You want to kidnap a policeman, armed and competent.”

“And his family. If it’s needed.”

“Kidnapping a cop! You’ll do this even if I don’t help, won’t you?” She looked boxed-in.

“Unless you turn me in first.”

“GOD, no!” First she was shocked. Then she gave him a stare of grievance. “You’re testing me.”

“Sometimes you don’t seem to know what you think till I prod you.” It came out faster and more irritated than he’d meant. It was from the heart, yeah, but not from any deep part of it.

Ivy blinked at him, hurt and nettled. “I think you’re less likely to be caught if I help, so I’m in.”

Jeremy wondered what he was leading her into. Taking Kendall tonight, that was nothing. Cops were as blind as any other trads. The true threat was going into the city tomorrow. The Need to do it was on him, not Ivy. Her willingness to follow him was a burden to him and he was grateful for it.

“It’s not right for me to drag you in against your judgment,” he said, not finding any way to explain himself.

“I wasn’t pushed, I jumped,” she came back.



They left Ivy’s house for the last time before twilight and drove her car to Terry’s apartment for the final detailing of Dragon Day plans. After a mild altercation, Terry agreed to lend them his bug-detector gear, minus pants, plus instructions, so that they could examine Jeremy’s old van. It would be a test of how interested in Jeremy Bunderbye the enforcers were. There was more to the plan than that, but Terry didn’t need to know about the kidnap.

Jeremy drove their new van to Airway Heights and left it parked in a hotel lot near the building where the party would be. That made the van one less thing to take out of Spokane later. Besides, it left his new Jeffrey Thorne identity, and Ivy, cleanly out of the night’s felony. Neither the vehicle that was registered to Ivy nor the blond Thorne DNA in the vehicle would go anywhere near the kidnap. Ivy followed in her SUV, freshly vacuumed to reduce the old Bunderbye DNA, and picked him up.

It was past fading dark. Leaving the SUV a mile away, they nightran to his old van. It was as he had left it, ready to run, unvandalized and unbugged. They would have preferred to use a vehicle that had never been on the wanted list. It was well past difficult to believe that the charges against Jeremy had genuinely been dropped. But the risk of the van being recognized on this frenetic last night was less than that of using transport that was connected to Jeffrey Thorne or Ivy Langbourne.

“If the cops try to pull us over,” said Jeremy, “I’ll drive off the road

into a dark spot. If I can't get myself out of the light, don't stay for me. Fade and run. I'll make a diversion if—"

"The hell you say!"

"Ivy." He stared her down. "Run."

She shook her head, lips snarling a little. "No, that isn't when I run. That's when I ruin every light they have. And their tires, so they can't drive you to the jail."

He didn't want her sacrificial loyalty, but there was nothing he could do about it. Odds were the situation wouldn't arise. Almost regretfully he kissed her, and she ran back to her car to return Terry's equipment. Jeremy cast the spell to return to his natural coloring. Bunderbye's old van, Bunderbye's old DNA. Then he went over the van to remove anything Abe could use to get himself out of cuffs.

Taking the back roads, he passed the abandoned barn where they planned to store Abe. No sign of anybody near it. He couldn't avoid all the larger roads. He had to hope that police would be too busy with Dragon prep to look out for a minor offender like him. Whatever the reason, he made it.

There was Ivy's car where it should be, a mile south from Abe Kendall's street. He parked his van a block north of Kendall. Two vehicles meant they'd have a fallback if they had to make a run from Kendall's. It would be easy to come back for her car later tonight. Drive partway from the barn, leave his old van for the Dragon, run the rest of the way to her car.

No lights in Kendall's house. There was Ivy, stretched out faded on the short grass in the shelter of the hedge. He joined her and they waited.



Wednesday July 6th, 2016

Midnight. Deputy Abe Kendall lay unconscious behind his short front hedge where Jeremy had dragged him. Following directions, and wearing gloves, Ivy put his gun, cuffs, bracer, wallet, and a few other pocket objects into a paper bag.

Jeremy was still in the house, where none of the lights were on. Ivy looked at Kendall from the heights of her invisibility and felt hubris. She knew full well it was a foolish reaction. All it would have needed to throw off their plan, though it had worked out so easily, was the headlights of one passing car.

Jeremy emerged, locking the door behind him. He dropped Kendall's keys in the bag.

"Nobody here, no suitcases, and a lot of gaps in the closets. Bet his

family is still safe in Florida.” He knelt, took off one glove, and put his hand on the pulse in Kendall’s neck. “Better get him ready. I’ll get my van.”

They set Kendall up in the back of the van, blindfolded, cuffed, and cushioned. It wasn’t a long drive to the disused barn that Jeremy had picked out. Before long, their silence was broken by sounds of movement from the back of the van.

Ivy grimaced and looked guiltily at the bag of Abe-items between her feet, pitying Abe Kendall’s confusion.

“Bunderbye, that’s you, right?” asked a voice from the back.

Jeremy looked at Ivy with wide unbelieving eyes, then turned back to the road. She twisted around and looked, appalled, toward Kendall.

“How’d you get behind me?” Kendall asked angrily. “Same way as the Azas?”

Jeremy leaned toward her, watching the road, whispering softly, very intensely.

“I’ll have to tell him why to try to talk him out of making a report.”

“No, he’s only guessing.”

“A guess is enough.”

“But it’s Jeremy he’ll blame, not Jeffrey.”

“Either way, we don’t need extra cop attention from being cop-bashers. If I can persuade him, we’re better off. If I can’t, we aren’t worse.”

“Bunderbye,” Kendall snapped, “I know the weird incense smell in your van. I went through it before, remember?”

“You’re right,” Jeremy called out.

“What’s your problem, shitwit?” Kendall sounded furious.

“We’ll be where we’re going in fifteen minutes. I’ll tell you then.”

Ivy closed her eyes in apprehension. She heard Jeremy whispering.

“I’ll let him loose and stay unfaded. There isn’t any other hope of convincing him. You play poltergeist if it comes to a fight.”

“What?”

“Tug his clothes, throw things at him. Don’t let him touch you and feel there’s a human there.”



Abe Kendall acted cooperative while Jeremy unfastened him from the van’s seat supports. A good sign, probably. Jeremy uncuffed him and sat back a few feet away. He kept his hands in plain sight.

Kendall pulled off the blindfold-hood that Ivy had contrived. Jeremy watched him look around with the cop scan that picked up all the important details. His gun and gear next to him. Jeremy, apparently unarmed, in a position he couldn’t move out of fast. The van’s engine

off, no keys in sight. The van's ceiling light not on. The empty land outside the open back door of the van. No sign of any second kidnapper.

"Ready to talk?" asked Jeremy.

Abe Kendall looked at his revolver again and left it where it was.

"Talk?" Angry, but curious too. "Shit, explain to me what makes you such a goddam idiot."

"I wanted you safe from the megastorm for payback," explained Jeremy. "You saved me from being in jail there when it hits."

Abe was flabbergasted. He didn't look like a man who was honing to make an arrest. Jeremy relaxed a notch.

"Hey, that's touching!" Abe had slipped down lower on the anger-meter but sarcasm came easy. "You believe that shit?"

"Yeah." Jeremy couldn't keep from smiling.

"How long were you figuring to leave me here?"

"I'd have sneaked in and let you loose late in the morning. Your family's safe in Florida, right?"

"You call Orlando safe?" Abe huffed out a tight laugh. "You really think you did me a favor with the headbanger." Abe felt his head, trying to find a sore spot. He looked uncertain for an instant.

"There's your gear," said Jeremy. "Don't waste my trouble, okay? Stay out here and you can go do good deeds after the storm starts. It's easier when you're alive."

Abe's mouth opened and closed twice.

"You goddam—you know something? FEMA had us set up special squads to stay outside Spokane on hoax day, so in case anything earth-shattering does happen we'll have a reserve. I'm on that detail starting early early."

Jeremy laughed. *The perfect end of a perfect two weeks.* He let go and stretched out from a laugh to a long guffaw. Abe looked at him in astonishment, maybe wondering at first if he was the joke, then deciding not.

"I'd better get you home so you can sleep," Jeremy said at last, leaning forward, still grinning.

"You think that's all, Mister Hero?"

"Why not?"

"Why." Abe was sour. "Not."

"You never heard of a fireman getting rough with somebody who tried to run back into the burning house?" Jeremy stood up, as far as he could in the van. "Come on, we both have things to do."

He started toward the driver's seat.

"What things?" Abe's voice went tight. "More kidnaps?"

"No," said Jeremy.

He looked over his shoulder at Abe's gun. It wasn't exactly aimed at him. On the side of his vision, he saw his pack jiggle. He hoped Ivy still had her gloves on.

"You trying to tell me there's no one else you want to 'rescue'?" Abe pointed the gun but didn't cock it. "Nobody in the whole city? Bite that."

Jeremy unfocused his vision to watch for movement around Abe without cluing him. Ivy was holding off, following his cues. *Good.*

Abe cocked his gun and broke into a small dry smile. "Face me. Hands up."

Jeremy did it. "What next?"

He cuffed himself, professional style, while Abe held the gun on him. He stayed quiet for the weapons search. Abe was unusually thorough. If that was a sign of respect, so much the better.

Holding the van keys, lowering the gun, Abe said, "House arrest. Your vigilante ass is staying off the street till daytime. You give me your word not to run?"

"Yeah." *Ivy, keep holding off. We don't need an officer-down on our record.*

Abe slammed the van door shut. Edgy but smiling, he moved up toward the driver's seat.

"I promise not to tell anyone at any time about this dumbshit favor you did," he said over his shoulder. He sat down and waved Jeremy up to the passenger seat.

"Thanks." Jeremy sat. He felt the back of his seat jolt. *And thank you, Ivy.*

Abe started the van. "Hey, I might tell it no names no numbers. It's too good to stay totally library."

He's already calling it a story, not an offense. Maybe nightrunner charm does work on people sometimes. Wouldn't count on it, though.



The route took them down past the Briarson ranch. Abe had stayed quiet till then. His lips moved a little sometimes. Probably working up the story to tell over donuts.

Now he said, "You've been hiding with Jane Doe, right?"

"With my fiancée," Jeremy said on impulse and with full intention. His seatback leaned against him.

"She know she could go to jail for that?" Putting the needle in. A good interrogating trick.

"Yeah."

"She out of town now?"

"Yeah."

Jeremy felt Ivy's fingers curling between his. He sighed and closed his hand over them, rattling the cuffs, then pulled his hand away as oncoming headlights appeared. She took the hint.

"She's tied up, with a blindfold and a knot on her head?" A sharpness in Abe's voice.

"No need."

"She believes what she reads in the papers? Hey, you sure know how to pick 'em."

Jeremy laughed and leaned his head back against the seat.



When they reached the Kendall house, Abe kept Jeremy cuffed and with him every minute while he danced the cars around. His car went to park on the street. The van went into the garage, away from witnesses.

Abe uncuffed Jeremy as the garage door dropped.

"Were you ever a cop?" asked Abe. His tone of voice said he was betting the answer was yes.

"Twenty years back. K-9."

They walked toward the front door.

"Yeah, you'd be good with animals, you talk about as much as they do." Poor Abe. Frustrated about the answers he hadn't gotten during the drive.

He hadn't asked anything about the missing "Aza." That was one worry off Jeremy's short list.

Jeremy stopped short of the front porch.

"Can I use your phone to call my fiancée?"

Abe studied him, then took off bracer and earclip. Jeremy put them on and called the number of one of the pay-phone booths he'd used. If he remembered it right. Nobody answered.

"It's me." He paused and turned away from Abe. "I won't get back tonight. Get some rest."

"I'm staying here in case he turns you in," Ivy whispered in his unclipped ear. Her hand cupped over his shoulder.

"No. I'm absolutely safe," he said sternly, and looked a hard question at Abe Kendall.

"I covered for you this far to keep the Azas off your skinny ass," Abe growled, "I'm not stopping now."

"I promise I'm safe," Jeremy said into the bracer. "Stay outside town and I'll meet you in the morning."

"Then I'll see you at the breakfast party, fiancé," she whispered, breath in his ear.

That made him feel about twenty years old. He smiled.

"You've got it," he told her huskily. "Bye."

{:- 20 -;}

The last thing Ivy heard as the front door closed and the inconvenient light from the foyer narrowed to nothing was Kendall saying, “Your fiancée puts up with a lot.”

*You don't know the half of it, officer! (Thank goodness.)*

But she grinned and she couldn't stop. The whole torturous slow day spent too much alone, too much with nothing to do, was wiped out of her mind. She felt braced to stand up to the Dragon tomorrow. Today. *He proposed marriage and I accepted, imagine that!*

*Don't get carried away, girl. You're forgetting something important.*

*Mark.*

*Nice try but no lollipop. Try again.*

The first thing to remember was that Kendall might go back on his bargain with Jeremy. She put herself on sentry duty. As she circled the house she saw lights go on in what seemed to be the bedroom area, and go off near the entrance. She started around the block.

Loose ends. The three of them needed to work out a way to deal with the cordon around Spokane. There'd be some time for that while they waited for the Dragon to finish.

The neighborhood around her was at peace. She turned her mind away from the kind of peace there'd be after the Dragon.



Abe had a sleeping bag he took on hunting trips. When Jeremy spread it out on Abe's wife's bed, two orange squirtguns fell out.

“Bag any big game with those?” inquired Jeremy.

“Nina must have confiscated them. My bag is her stash. I bet the kids wanted to take them on the plane.”

Jeremy laughed, “Squirtgun ninjas,” and took off his shoes.

Abe called the station on his bracer, shook his head at the unusual number of cops tied up on squabbles, break-ins, and drunks. So far his reserve was still off-duty for the night. He punched a sequence of buttons on his standard-issue scanner, damned it, and started over.

“Software fighting you?” asked Jeremy. The scanner was clunky and quaint compared to the ones he remembered.

“Always. I'm setting the filters,” said Abe. “We don't want DUIs and domestics to keep us up all night.”



Ivy stood on Kendall's driveway and watched and listened. All the house windows were dark. Not a thing was going on in the

neighborhood except cat action. Did animals have any sense of what was coming in the morning? She saw and heard no evidence for it, unless they were indulging in some extra reproductive activity precisely because they knew. Would the unicorn know?



Terry closed the “Jeffrey Thorne” folder, closed the connections to the state licensing database, closed AbNihilo. It was no small project to create an identity that transposed Master Bunderbye’s skills and experiences into contemporary terms.

“Looks like you can learn my magic a lot easier than I could learn yours,” Jeremy had said about twenty-four hours ago, after his life story had been drained into Thorne’s AbNihilo folder.

“At last you appreciate my genius,” Terry had replied.

Smiling in rational glee, Terry opened the interface he’d written for NCSS, the crisis support software so beloved of FEMA.

Needless to say, one could expect no “user-friendliness” from code that originally had been written by government consultants from the East Coast megalopolis. Had they ever heard of modularity? He thought not.

The USGS map of the risk area, Spokane County, appeared on the screen with a list of display options. Traffic control points, no, all paved roads, no, major roads, yes, census zones, yes...

Terry crunched some microwave bacon: “Be still, my beating arteries.” Then the Event Data frame came up.

**Scenario: Verisimilitude2**  
**Release ID: Hypercybil Semiconductor**  
**Releases: Arsine**  
**Met. Tower: Spokane NWS (loading tower data)**

Slowly, as the computer calculated the block-by-block effects of local slopes and building-sized obstacles, the predicted irregular plume of dense toxic gas was drawn on the screen, spreading out over the city. Wait for it... wait for it... the front of the plume whisked across the river.

That should be quite enough. Terry clicked into his BracerHound hack.

**Accessing street map database for plume increment 1...**  
**Accessing phone number database for plume increment 1...**  
**Downloading contact file for plume increment 1...**

The plume’s color gradually changed from red to white as phone numbers were extracted from the area within it.



Loose ends. Ivy had decided less than twelve hours ago that the Castles were the neighbors to save from Spokane tonight. She'd forgotten about that. But what could she do about it by herself?

*Poor little clinging Ivy...*

She made another circuit of Kendall's house and the neighborhood, and stood and listened. There was nothing. Jeremy had been right. He was safe here.

*Go make yourself useful, girl.*

She ran for her car to drive homeward one more time.



Terry thimble'd We's flowchart to the foreground. The wardialer icon was a phone overlaying a lightning bolt. It linked into the voder, HideMeHack, the randomizer (but he'd only written up two versions of the message), the translator (Spanish and Russian), UsurpFEMAsys, and several remote cellphones.

He selected BracerHound and the wardialer, pulled out the wardialer menu, and clicked Initialize.

5% of numbers...



The night was full of small events. A child's new tricycle left out on a scraggly lawn. Two cats squared off for battle in the middle of a small street, but fleeing from headlights exactly as she would have done herself. A church signboard, miraculously missing no letters from the adage: "Sorrow looks back, Fear looks around, Faith looks up." A meteor burned across the sky above her and she watched it in one-hundred-percent belief.

Ivy parked three blocks from her house, in case Mr. King was up, and began to walk. One block along she passed a family squabbling tiredly around their car.

"But should we bring more clothes?"

"I don't know!"

"Why did you leave this so late?"

She ran.



Voder re-initializing...

The computer said, "Mask 23 Version 2 on. Recording." The screen flashed.

Speaking clearly, distinctly, and officiously, Terry recited the second version of his message. “This is a toxic chemical spill emergency alert from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. This is not a test. An extremely toxic arsine release was reported at 2:18 AM. Evacuate at once. Proceed to Spokane International Airport for emergency support. Turn off ventilation in your vehicle and do not stop en route. This message will now repeat.” He shut off the recorder.

“I’m the man who hacked history,” he said softly, grinning.

Terry selected every module on the screen, clicked the wardialer icon, and blew a farewell kiss to his denuded apartment.

0% of 6326 calls...



Ivy stood faded in front of her house. Downslope, on her left, was the Castle home. Upslope, on her right, was the Premzic home. She had no plan.

She turned three hundred and sixty degrees. No indoor lights were on anywhere in her neighborhood. Mr. King wasn’t sitting in his window, either; he must be asleep and allowing his neighbors some privacy for once in his life. And for the last time in his life.

At once she foundered in her own spiteful inaction. Here was a living man she knew personally and hadn’t even begun to try to save, precisely because she did know him. They’d squabbled over free-running dogs and yard-care for years and now he’d slandered her. Or so she’d heard second-hand. Did she really know enough to judge him, turn away, leave him to die?

*Triage, Ivy. Triage is the magic word. You can save only one household tonight, if that. But if you’d tried harder and sooner, you could have...*

*Only anger washed the guilt away. Stop being planless. Stop being useless. Stop being helpless. If you can’t keep in motion in any other way, then by all means do it with anger.*

A skunk—the same one?—ambled across King’s lawn. It was a pity she couldn’t arrange for the Lurker at the Windowsill to meet his nocturnal relative. Sometimes chemical warfare could be justified.

She remembered a week ago when Jeremy had turned on Terry, “You intend to gas people?”

And Terry, firmly saddled on his high horse, “Virtually, yes.”

*Why not?*

*Change of plans...*

*If you can get them out of bed, you can get them out of the house. If you can get them out of the house, you can get them out of town. Get on with it!*

She ran for the cat food bowl on the front porch one house down.



7/6 RESERVE  
HAZ RESP UNIT  
available  
no call in

Abe grabbed his bracer and clip.

“This is a FEMA toxic gas release alert,” said the scanner, almost professionally calm. “Arsine, severe flammability and health, northbound from Hypercybil Semiconductor at 2:18 AM. Evac team assembly point is...” The voice cut off as Abe transferred the call to his bracer.

Abe looked stunned as he put an arm into his jacket. He said to Jeremy, “Now there’s not a spare cop in the city. Dispatch is calling out to Idaho.”

Jeremy thought back to about a week ago. His jaw muscles clenched.

The scanner blinked a fresh message. Abe rolled his eyes up to heaven. “Good things never come alone...”



Nervously, and for the moment ruthlessly, Ivy lured the skunk closer to the Premzics’ open bedroom window.



HAZ RESP UNIT  
Chlorine  
Siding 31

Abe pulled his earclip, buttoning it in a pocket for safe-keeping. The scanner said, “—truders near chlorine tank car, in the railyard southeast of the Fairgrounds. Access from the railroad crossing, 200 block of—” Abe offed the sound.

“What’s that about?” asked Jeremy, looking at the map on the scanner screen. He tried for memorizing it. North Fancher, East Sprague, East Valleyway...

“Probably a chlorine shipment for the city water...” Abe surveyed the room for any gear he’d forgotten. “Drug-makers. Fuckers know we’re too busy tonight to get there...”

“The water utility uses chlorine?” Jeremy hoped his questions wouldn’t raise suspicions. “I thought that was history.”

“Read the fine print,” Abe snorted, striding down the hall. “They don’t dump the shit in full time, but they still keep it around to clean scum off the pipes sometimes.”

Out in the front room, Abe tossed Jeremy the van keys, saying, "The NBIE said the storm hoax might be a distraction from real terrorist attacks. For once the nabs got it right."

"The semiconductor leak bulletin was from FEMA?" Jeremy had to try. "You trust them? If you think the storm was a hoax on them, why believe this?"

"We'll check that," Abe paused, stared at Jeremy, shrugged. "You're on your own, get out of here and try to act like you had good sense."

"Scout's honor," said Jeremy.

Abe wrote on the margin of a newspaper.

"Here's the garage door passcode. Lock everything up."

"You want help?"

"We're short on masks as it is." Abe swung the door open.

Jeremy was alone in the house. He wanted to break Terry's face.

The book had been right about the real toxic release. Terry had been wrong when he said there wasn't any chlorine there to spill. An easy mistake, sure, but now Terry had done what he'd agreed not to. He'd set up a hoax release. Now the cops had to triage the real one. They figured it was just another theft, probably harmless, but the book proved it would get out of control.

Jeremy sorted his obligations. Ivy was safe out of town. Kidnapping her neighbors was off, he didn't have the backup to handle a whole family. Too much risk of hurting them without helping them. That left him the responsibility for this chlorine fiasco.

Juggling pieces of plans, he headed back to the bedroom for his shoes. Orange plastic caught his eye. Poltergeist tricks... Toxic release...

He grabbed the squirtguns, then headed for the bathroom, the laundry room, the kitchen, and his van.



Miserably, in rapidly-donned clothes, the Premzics evacuated their skunked home. Mike Premzic was the last man out. He was overladen with two suitcases, an infant carseat and a paper bag. Carla Premzic held the baby girl.

The three-year-old, whose name Ivy couldn't recall, sucked his thumb and gazed, muddled, up at his mother, who caught the six-year-old (Roger?) by his shoulder to hold him back from the acrid bush under the now-closed bedroom window.

She spoke sharply to him. "You stay right here, that skunk might still be around." *Yes, here I am*, thought Ivy.

"Yeah!" The idea filled Roger with delight.

*Now go, go, go.*

“I’ll call a hotel,” said Mike brusquely, installing the carseat in their van. Ivy moved closer to overhear.

“The papers said the hotels outside the city were all full, but we might—” Carla strapped her baby into the seat.

“Who said out of town? I didn’t, I’ve got work tomorrow. Today. We’re staying in town. I’m not going to let anybody think that those,” he mouthed a eloquently silent short adjective, “hoaxers chased me out.”

Carla’s face was drawn and disappointed; all the signs said that she’d have been glad to have an excuse to leave Spokane. But she wouldn’t fight in front of the kids, it seemed, any more than Mike would curse.

Ivy’s disappointment and frustration veered back toward anger.

One hand over her nose, Carla put the suitcases in the back of the van. Taking a deep breath, Mike started back to the house.

Ivy dodged behind the van. Andy Wheeler, from the next house down, was approaching with a flashlight. He had the expression of a man who knew he was guilty of a skunk attractant. She was glad she’d put the cat-food bowl back on his porch.

“What’s wrong?” Wheeler asked.

“Can’t you smell it?” Mike Premzic turned around, irritated.

“It’s a skunk!” cried Roger.

“It’s gotten all through the house, it absolutely turns your stomach,” said Carla, and rubbed her pinched mouth.

“Is it down in your crawlspace?” Wheeler started over toward the Premzic front door. Carla Premzic and the three-year-old trailed him.

“We don’t know, be careful.”

“Why don’t you sleep at our place tonight?” asked Wheeler.

Ivy looked at the Premzics’ relieved faces. *Get them out of town!* Desperately her mind scrambled through one “plan” after another.

“Oh, that’s nice of you, we couldn’t,” said Carla a bit too fast for courtesy, going through the motions to get the motions out of the way. Her main attention was on the family van.

“Don’t be too hasty!” Mike Premzic took the conversational lead.

The three-year-old climbed into the van through the back. He peered through the dirty windows at Roger, who’d made his way to the bush in front of the bedroom. Carla noticed the older boy from the corner of her eye and hurried over to pull him away once again.

“What say we take you folks out to dinner on Friday, then?” asked Mike, concluding the deal.

Ivy looked down at the baby girl, who was semaphoring pointlessly. *What would he do?*

To get some vantage, Jeremy climbed to the top of one of a long line of stopped boxcars. A lot of sidings, a lot of tank cars. Over there the nearest lights were out, conveniently for somebody, and it was close to the spot the scanner had cross-haired. He dropped from the ladder and started running.

He knew it was the right place when he found a man fallen by the track. Keys, flashlight, empty holster, a uniform shirt made him a night watchman. He was unconscious but didn't seem much hurt beyond that.

Jeremy looked down the length of the train. There was a long yellow tank car, with the standard diamond-shaped chemical warning placards on it. Faded vision showed him a man standing at the side of the car.

Jeremy scanned and planned. He picked an upwind direction to run in if he had to. He had his gloves and he had one of Abe's towels sopping wet in a plastic bag inside his shirt. Wrapped around his head it would be a little protection, depending on how much chlorine got loose. He moved closer.

There were four men. All of them were young and white, none of them had bracers, one had an earring with the French tricolor. A Q marker? Could be, the Q's were a white gang.

Two guards, one at each side of the tank car, both with guns drawn. One man at a corner of the car, working on a big tin can. One man shining a pencil flashlight on the can. Those two had holstered guns.

"You know what I wish I could say to the railroad boss here?" whispered the guard near Jeremy. "That kind of threat mobsters say in the movies?"

"Shut the fuck up."

"Ha ha, besides that."

"Don't distract me, I'm fixing the timer on the thermite."

Jeremy looked at the can again. It had a cone top, and it stood on four short metal-bracket legs. If that was a thermite bomb, it would make a stream of molten metal that could cut right through the steel wall of the tank car. No stopping the chlorine then.

He took a squirtgun from his shirt pocket. It was full of Abe's bleach. The gun smelled like swimming pool. *Use a little chlorine to prevent a lot.*

"I meant," the talkative guard whispered, "a threat like, gee, that's a real nice tank car you got there but it sure looks flammable, it'd be a pity if it happened to explode one night."

The man with the can picked it up and started toward the tank car ladder.

“Shut the fuck up,” said the man with the pencil light, turning it off. “Chlorine doesn’t explode, thermite doesn’t explode, and this tank’s an empty anyway. Christ, all that matters is they pay us not to do it again with a full tank, it doesn’t have to be funny.”

“I mean, it could go up just like that,” persisted the talky guard, “accidents will happen.”

An empty tank? Maybe this crew thought so, but the book didn’t. Jeremy wasn’t going to chance it. He took two quick shots. The thermite man, now two steps up the ladder, coughed, dropped the bomb, and wiped at the bleach running down his cheeks. The bomb tumbled and broke apart into a can, a spill of coarse powder, a funnel, and a plastic straw. Next Jeremy shot the man with the flashlight.

“Run, the tank’s leaking!” whispered Jeremy loudly.

“Who said—”, the man with the light choked, and stopped trying to talk or see. He tried to run anyway.

The guard from the other side of the car climbed over the coupling, looked at the spilled bomb, and spat on the ground in rage and disgust.

“The tank’s leaking, don’t you smell it?” The talky guard was louder, panicky. “It’s not empty!”

Jeremy stood by the talker and yelled at full volume, to warn anybody who might be close, “It’s a BOMB!”

“What the fuck!” The talky guard backed away.

“You slip bastard,” said the second guard, raising his gun, “You motherfucker. Best chance we’ll ever get, and you’re trying to get us caught. I’ll shoot you—”

The first guard sprinted like a champion. Jeremy shot the second guard in the eyes. He lost his balance and fell, rubbing his eyes and coughing. Plenty of noise—when would more watchmen arrive?

Jeremy stepped past the bomb-handler who hadn’t run, who was groaning, choking, and wiping at his eyes. The can was lined with something like rock and half-filled with a rusty metal powder. A straw was stuck into the powder. There wasn’t anything that looked like a fuse or wires, but the bomber had acted as if the setup was complete. That meant the straw had to be some kind of starter.

Jeremy plucked out the little tube with breath-holding care. It had a cork in the bottom. He put it two feet away from the powder spill and tenderly piled gravel over it. He turned the can upside down, gently dumping the rest of the powder.

Nobody would ever sort it all out. Even when they found out about nightrunners they wouldn’t make the connection. With no knockouts, no established Bunderbye method, Abe wouldn’t figure it either. Jeremy wished he felt that safe about the Briarson Ranch.

There was a shot and then another. Jeremy snapped his head around. The guard he'd blinded stood ten feet from the tankcar. His face was a knot wet with snot and tears. He waved his handgun in the air, firing blind again, screaming "Not this time! Not this time!"

Somewhere nearby Jeremy heard feet crunching gravel, more than one person. He saw a flashlight beam and he ran. As he passed the gunman, he gave him one more shot of bleach to hold him for the watchmen.

Now to get to my van and out of Spokane right away, in case the roads jam with Terry's damned evacuation.

The patterned floor stretched far away to topless beige walls. Hovering above the floor were drab flat surfaces attached to shiny

“How much longer do we have to be here, daddy?” geometries of tubes.

“I don’t know, honey.” Tables. Table legs.

Chair legs. The feet and legs of people were moving through the space.

Behind all the open space and all the voices was a faint but heavy choral whining drone. “No, don’t look out there, Pat, it’s not good for you,” she directed.

“Dump the coffee and refill ’em while the water pressure lasts.” A man’s voice, less familiar.

Ivy sat up. The swing of space around her made her ill. She felt Jeremy’s hands catch her shoulders barely long enough to hold her up. Her hands went up to cover her ears.

In the quiet, space organized itself before her.

The room was full of the smell of coffee and yerba maté. There was a crowd of folding chairs and familiar people. No one was eating. There

“Ivy, I hope we don’t mess up your catering,” said Jean Castle just inside the door, “but... we thought if we didn’t show you might think we believed it.”

“It’s no problem, I’m glad you’re all here.”

the jugglers, were carrying the caterer’s big coffee brewers through another door. That was the restroom.

She was not in Spokane now. This building was the Kalispel tribal hall in Airway Heights. She had rented the main room for the party. She

was sitting on the floor with her back against one end wall. There were three long tables in the room, covered with paper plates and napkins, each table with a self-heated chafer at the far end. None of the electric lights were on. A quivering twilight came in from the windows at both ends of the room, all of whose folding partitions were open. The six windows and the glass doors along the long outer wall were covered with taped-up sheets of newspaper.

were the Castles, huddled at the far wall. Mrs. Vickerson was leading Pat, who was sobbing, through a door in the inner long wall of the room. Maria’s husband and two young men,

The Mickelsen newlyweds gaily touched coffee cups together.

“Here’s a toast to your excuse for being out of town on this fine morn,” Guy teased his wife.

“You know I don’t believe in that!” She giggled.

Some time ago she herself had put up those glittery paper ribbons on the walls and around the rudimentary podium. Had she lost the keys to the door since then? How had she come here from Spokane?

A single detached memory returned.

“Tell us your system, Ivy!”  
“Let’s hear it!”  
“I know what I’d do with  
forty K!”  
“Speech! Speech!”  
“Sorry, folks, I won’t say a single  
public word till the end of the party.”  
“The suspense is killing me!”



Behind the tribal hall lay a small garden, hedges muddled with forsythia, azalea, and lilac bushes. The children under eight darted about in their half of the platinum hunt, which was marked off with string and stakes. The older children pursued a more methodical but equally sincere search on their side, glaring their competitors away. The adults looked back and forth between the children and the sky.

Without a word or sound everyone stopped perfectly still. They stared east over the top of the low square concrete-block building. Tires screeched out on the main road.

A convoluted ball of thick, pale, clay-textured cloud roiled in the sky over Spokane. Ivy could not estimate its altitude, but it was below the scanty cirrus.

Jack Dyson took one step and stopped. “We can see better from the parking lot.” He looked around for support, catching Ivy’s eye as if he needed the hostess’s permission to spoil the party.

Suddenly Mrs. Castle called to Minda. Annie, Maria, and Mrs. Graeme hurried into the garden. The Dyson twelve-year-old glanced quickly toward his father and stepped over the fair-play string as if he hadn’t seen it.

Next to her, Terry said in a small voice, “Dragon’s Egg. 9:46 AM.”

Behind her a child asked, “How much did you get?” Ivy began to walk toward the front parking lot.



Ivy took her hands away from her ears. She could stand the drone and all the other voices now.

Andreas Lin sat on the edge of a table, his baffled face turned up to the ceiling, his legs swinging idly. “It can’t be happening, can it, hmm? It can’t...” His girlfriend wasn’t in sight.

Minda sat loose on her father’s lap, almost asleep, almost unconcerned. He told her, or himself, “It’ll be all right.” Beside them, turned away, Jean Castle wiped tears as surreptitiously as she could.

Mrs. Graeme knelt on the floor playing Hubbub with her children. Her face was strained. The thirteen-year-old girl, the oldest, watched her mother for cues. The other three kids laughed and wrangled with each other, engrossed in the card game.

Ian Black leaned against a table. His eyes were tight closed, his hands over his ears. Mandy Wiles, her face full of the hope to comfort, had a tentative hand on his shoulder.

Jack Dyson and Mrs. Vickerson stood at the restroom door, organizing water.

Ivy looked up at Jeremy sitting in the folding chair next to her. It was Terry.

“How...”

“Out there,” Terry explained lightly, “is the all-singing, all-dancing end of civilization as we know it.” The pupils of his eyes seemed unnaturally small. His shirt was brown-stained. “Hail Shiva.”

None of that meant anything. “I was in Spokane just now. How did I get here?”

“You can’t have been in Spokane just now...”

A blond-haired man’s arm lay clenching its fist on her front room’s pale-green carpet. The flesh smoked where a strand of lightning wrapped it like barbed wire. She looked past the arm’s shoulder to its face.

“... you’re alive, after all.”

“No, Mark!” she said softly, voice cracking.

“It’s Mark you care about? Fancy that.” The razor blades were all in Terry’s words. There was nothing sharp in his mildly surprised tone and expression.

Jeremy was blond again and fully bearded. The salmon-hued eastern light warmed his tired amused face. There was an unfamiliar bleached spot at the bottom of his shirt pocket.

“I finally found a use for a squirtgun,” he informed her.

“I finally found a use for kidnapping,” Ivy replied, getting out of her car. She took a breath before she asked him for help.

“Where’s Jeremy?” she asked Terry in horror. Had she sent Jeremy into Spokane to make the call? He wouldn’t have gone, would he?

Terry looked indifferently at the paper-covered front door. The many-voiced drone intensified for an instant, then receded.

“Oh, I expect him momentarily.”

“Is he all right?” she demanded.

Terry glanced back at her with detached bitterness. “You don’t really believe he’ll be hurt, do you?”

“NO, no, no!” a voice shrieked from another room.

She stood in a dark pay-phone booth with the phone book open to P. Her faded vision let her keep an eye on the infant carseat in the front of her SUV.

The phone cried out, "Don't hurt her! No, please don't, no!"

Ivy whispered shakily, "I'm sorry, I had to do it." That wouldn't reassure them at all. "She'll be fine, she really will.

Keep your bracer with you, the police will call you to come get her in the morning."

She drove past the "Welcome to Idaho" sign. The baby was somnolent now except for her soft twitching eyelids. The simulated grandfather clock showed 2:52 AM, July 6, 2016.

The policemen coming out of the Coeur d'Alene

station couldn't locate the crying baby.

"I wonder how much you remember."

"It sounds like he's right next to us," one cop complained.

She set down the carseat on the sidewalk. Hearing the startled voices of men unaccustomed to being harmlessly startled, dodging the fade-borders of the streetlights, blessing the lack of traffic, she ran back toward her car.

A hand waved in front of her face. "Do you hear me?" inquired Terry.

Ivy felt a hard single squeeze of guilt; maybe she would have been happier turning herself in at the police station. Reluctantly she looked at Terry.

"Is Jeremy all right?" she asked again.

"While he carries his amulet," Terry said dismissively, and still with bland bitterness, "he's the safest sanest man in the county, unlike the rest of us lesser mortals."

"What's the matter with you?" She rubbed her jaw.

Terry stared at her and laughed suddenly. "Someone once said of Lord Byron that he was 'mad, bad, and dangerous to know.' The Boss scores at least one out of three on the Byron scale. I wonder why—"

"What are you—"

"—why he never warned us that the Dragon drives men mad."

"Mad? That's ridiculous! The Madrid news talked about mass panic and post-traumatic stress disorder—that's hardly what I'd call madness." Then she stood up too fast and made the world dark. When she could see Terry again, his expression was peacefully scornful. Anger shook her.

"Jeremy's gone a-rescuing the partygoers who were insanely attracted to Spokane by the Dragon."

"As you might have noticed, the Dragon has the power to cloud mens' minds."

“I think you’re the one who’s mad!” she flung at him, and walked away.

She went directly to Mrs. Vickerson, who was conferring with Mrs. Graeme.

“Besides the caterer, is there anyone else you saw at the party who isn’t here now?” Mrs. V acknowledged Ivy with a glance. “We need to account for—”

“My fiancé,” interrupted Ivy. “Do you know if—”

“Your fiancé?” Mrs. V lifted her chin in disapproval. “Do you mean the man who picked a fight with Jake Graeme and punched you after you started calling for your husband?”

“Punched me?” Ivy rubbed her jaw again. Now she was aware that it hurt.

“Yes, he—”

Ivy turned quickly and walked away, arms wrapped around herself. Terry met her halfway across the room and accompanied her silently to the far wall.

As she sat down on the floor, he said reasonably, “There are, after all, numerous myths that warn against looking into a dragon’s eyes because of their power of fascination.”

“Eyes?”

“Couldn’t you say the eye of the tornado as well as the eye of the hurricane?” he asked, settling himself next to her. “Or the eyes of the snakes on Medusa’s head, whose glances you return an instant before you turn to stone? The Dunwich Horror wore its eyes on its tentacles but that, of course, is Hollywood Lovecraft rather than myth.”

The room was swinging again. The floor wasn’t solid. Ivy put a hand over Terry’s mouth. “Leave me alone, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Rebukingly he pulled her hand away and discarded it. “You really don’t remember, do you?”

“Not if I can help it,” she whispered before realizing what she’d said.

Paper crackled. The front door opened slowly, in jolts. The droning sound leaned in at the door. Guy Mickelsen’s head and shoulders tilted forward through the opening. Someone laughed helplessly.

Jeremy and Jake Graeme brought Guy the rest of the way through the door. Guy sobbed and kicked out his legs. They set him down on the floor. All three men wore taped-on masks, or vizards, made from paper plates with thin vision slits cut in them.

Graeme’s shirt fell open at the top where buttons were gone. One of Jeremy’s sleeves hung partly torn off, and there was a V-shaped rip in the outside of the thigh of his jeans.

“But it’s my mother, mother...” Guy muttered.

“Here’s our beloved Leader now,” commented Terry.

Jeremy pushed up his visor and anxiously scanned the room. Mrs. Vickerson, looking through him, nodded at Jake Graeme as he told her, “There are five more victims out in our cars, and most of them are unconscious. Can you mask yourselves and help bring them in here?”

Jeremy limped toward Ivy quickly, as if he expected her to run away. He looked inimically at Terry and Terry responded in kind.

“Get away from us,” said Jeremy.

Terry walked away without a word.

Jeremy sat beside Ivy. He winced on his way down to the floor, then laid a hand gently along her sore jaw. She looked down and away from him.

“How are you feeling?”

“Confused.” She saw his leg was gashed and badly bruised under the tear in the jeans. “I don’t seem to remember very much of this morning.”

She nerved herself to look up at him. “They said you hit me?” *Make sense of it, please!*

“Yeah.” She saw nothing in his face but regret, no guilt, no righteous assurance. “Any loose teeth?”

Caught by surprise, she said, “I don’t think so.”

Graeme’s voice came from the door.

“Careful, don’t bang Annie’s head on the frame.”

Jeremy looked toward the door. Terry approached them carrying a folding chair. Seeing him, Jeremy began to stand up, but Ivy caught his arm.

“Never mind him,” she demanded. “What happened? You have to tell me.”

Jeremy had seen Ivy on brownout before but never so scattered. The Dragon hadn’t let go of her yet. Turning away from Terry, he settled down to talk her back to herself.

“I missed the party because of that phone call.” He wondered if she remembered that. “I told the cops where to make contact.”

“I hope it worked,” she said.

Yeah. Here was something she didn’t remember.

Terry listened to them with interest. Damn Terry. Jeremy leaned against Ivy’s shoulder to whisper rapidly in her ear. “If it was my kid, I’d have gone to pick him up right away and I’d have taken the rest of my family so they wouldn’t be out of my sight for a minute. But I don’t know for sure that it worked.”

“I remember now.” She looked thoughtful and didn’t lean away from him. “That’s what you said before the party.”

“Yeah. I don’t know anything about your party. I’ll start after.”



He'd driven Ivy's SUV to Medical Lake to make the call and taken the back roads to return to Airway Heights. A lot of trucks in camouflage had been leaving Fairchild Air Force Base. Fair warning.

After changing the fuelpack at the only pack station in town, he parked her car in the front lot of the party building. Sitting in the front seat, he tried for a rest, even a fake rest. He opened his eyes when he heard heavy braking out on Route 2. There was the ball of cloud.

Then Ivy came around the building with Terry and other party-goers. Her eyes were fixed on the eastern sky till he called to her.

The Spokane Dragon. Jeremy had seen the thick morning traffic headed out of town. He'd heard about the packed hotels outside town. He'd felt like the city was winning a point or two until he saw the Dragon.

The ball of cloud was opaque as white mud. It turned within itself in broken layers each at its own speed. The wisps of clouds above the ball kinked. Then they swept toward the dragon's egg in wide mismatched curves. By then the traffic sounds were switched off.

The egg burst after it finished sucking down all the other clouds. A dense white mass shot up, across, down, at skywriter speed. For a minute or two the cloud looked like a textbook thunder-anvil. A few small bolts of lightning struck Spokane. They were normal lightning, there and gone.

"God, think of the updrafts!" said somebody in awe. Jeremy tightened his arms around Ivy. She kept her back to him as they watched.

Then the cloud became the Dragon. It still had a stretched shape, though not an anvil, but the shape was made out of moving coils that were covered with small puffs like scales. The underside of the Dragon was a belly with pouches and long tufts. Some of the tufts flared into thick lasting arcs of lightning like battered, unraveling brilliant violet-white string. Others let themselves down into tornados.

That was when the Dragon began to sing. The stretched spike of the cloud bent down to the city as the tornados droned.

"That goddamn cloud acts like a hound on a trail!" said somebody.

The Dragon was easier to see than it should have been at that distance. The tornados bent and swiveled like exercise or dance. Now and then one turned its tip up into mid-air. The funnels pointed telescope ends at the audience. The lightning arcs crossed the city slowly and they never broke off their white burning.

Before long, the Dragon was dark gray. The darkness was sucked up from the city into the cloud in streamers twisted around the tornados. The Dragon kept turning darker and fuller.

“The most ghastly beautiful thing in the world,” breathed Ivy, her eyes fixed on the Dragon.

“No more of that,” he said through a nearly closed throat. He turned her to face him and put his hand over her eyes. She didn’t resist much.



“You might not have been paying attention to the cloud at precisely that moment. You might have been distracted,” noted Terry.

Jeremy looked up at Terry. It was the first long close look he’d taken since the Dragon started. Terry’s eyes weren’t right for the dim room. Too much blue and white, not enough pupil.

“The whole Dragon spun on itself,” Terry said agreeably. “It looked like the back of a giant’s head, a filthy straggling head, that kept turning and turning without ever turning far enough to show its face. You wouldn’t want to see its face. It was Medusa.” His face was pale enough to make his mouth stand out from the skin around it.

He stood up. “Pardon me, my gorge has risen again.” He ran loose-legged for the restroom door.

Ivy looked stranded. Jeremy reached for her and remembered he hadn’t told her enough to let her settle with him. He was taking advantage of her lost memory. If she knew, she might not want him anywhere near her.

He put his arms around her anyway. She huddled into him in the smallest package she could make of herself.



Everybody from Ivy’s party had been staring at the Dragon. No, there was an exception, a mother in her thirties who never took her eyes away from her four kids. Jeremy didn’t spot anybody else with an outside interest.

The Dragon’s voices had been in the ground then, and they still were. Maybe they weren’t transmitted direct through the ground from Spokane. Maybe the sound in the air vibrated the nearby buildings enough to be felt in the ground.

Spokane was downwind, but Jeremy had thought he could smell the city burning. He took his hand away from Ivy’s eyes and pulled out his amulet to hold it. He looked down at the earth for wholeness.

“There are powers who heal and protect us and who give us the strength to heal and protect ourselves,” he prayed, focusing in on what he meant, beyond the words.

He felt Ivy turn back to watch the Dragon. Another voice started not far off, a deep voice.

“Shall I not punish them for these things, saith the Lord? Shall my soul not be revenged on such a nation?” It wasn’t said with spite. It didn’t have to be.

Jeremy went on. Better for him to regard his own prayer than to waste his soul’s best attention on what the voice was quoting.

“Powers, be around us now, be above us, be below us,” he finished.

Then he looked for the source of the bad news. It was the husband of that woman who’d been watching over her children. He was a big round-shouldered middle-aged man with a badger-striped beard. His eyes were tightened down as if he’d always had a headache or a grief.

“I will weep and lament for the mountains, and mourn for the beautiful places of the desert,” the man continued, “because they are burnt up and not a man may pass through them.” His family was paying more attention to him than to the Dragon. “Nor can man hear the voice of the cattle, the fowl of the air and the beasts have gone away and departed. And I will make Jerusalem heaps of sand, and dens of dragons.”

Slowly and precisely Terry knelt down on the parking lot. He began to retch. The sound was in tune with the Dragon’s drone.

The man gave Terry a glance of distracted concern. Then he looked reassuringly at his wife, whose hand was on the cross on her necklace. His children looked less shaky already. “I will make the cities of Judah desolate, without an inhabitant. Who is the wise man who may understand this? And who is he to whom the mouth of the Lord has spoken—”

Jeremy’s fists clenched. Lone-goddess. As long as they could tell themselves their god favored them and them only, they’d gladly throw the rest of the world down the shithole.

“—that he may declare why the land perishes and burns up like a wilderness, which none may pass through? And the Lord said: Because they have forsaken my law, which I gave them, and have not obeyed my voice and walked according to it.”

The bearded man paused. Two men and a woman behind him were watching him, one blankly intent, one accepting, one devout.

He finished, “Jeremiah, chapter 9, verses 9 through 13.”

Jeremiah.

Jeremy let go of Ivy then. His skin was tight. He felt no sense of weight in his body. That was anger, way too much of it. He forced his fists open and walked over to the Bible-quoter.

“You think only the evil are dying in Spokane?” Jeremy challenged him.

{:- 22 -:}

Mark stood at the front door of their house. He was carrying a shopping bag from the continental bakery; pastries had always been his best apology gift. Half the street was in deep shadow, but a ray of sunlight made Mark's hair shine as brightly as clean straw. Her heart jumped and toppled.

He entered the house and called, "Ivy?"

"No, stop!" She pulled away from Jeremy.

He held her shoulders and coaxed her to face him. "What is it?"

Ivy held her head down, hating to look at him, fending him off with fists pressed against his chest. "You're making me remember!"

"Go ahead and remember," he said quietly. "Don't let it fester. I won't let you run off to the Dragon. You're safe."

She looked up at him quickly, wide-eyed, mouth drooping. "Will you hit me again?"

"No need," he said, still-faced.



"You think only the evil are dying in Spokane? You think that storm makes any distinction?"

The bearded man had had no composure for a moment. He had words to answer Jeremy with, though. Yeah, they could always manage words.

"We are in the hand of the Lord," he said firmly, "and we have faith in His plan for us."

"Faith?" Jeremy's scalp tightened. Hackles rising.

"Jake..." said the man's wife. She looked more frightened of Jeremy than of the Dragon. The children huddled behind their father.

Jeremy stabbed his finger at the Dragon and leaned toward the Bible-quoter. For a moment the wife looked at him as if he was the taller of the two men.



Ivy found she could hold herself far enough away from her memories to realize she was remembering.

She had climbed up on something for a better view. The Dragon pointed a tentacle at her. From a block away, she saw a funnel loll its tip into the street by the art school building in downtown Spokane. A carousel lion smashed against the Arena wall. Buildings and people broke up, soaring and dispersing.

“Show your faith.” Jeremy’s voice was twinned, raging in the past, expressionless in the present.

From Mr. King’s front yard, she saw an arc of lightning like the cable of a suspension bridge, so bright and white it barely let itself be seen. It seared through a van. Brambles of electricity covered the vehicle. The Premzics exploded into steam.

“Forget the words.”

In a frenzy her house bloomed open to the sky. The dining-room wall shuddered, warped and flew. Furniture rose, upholstery fluttering. An end-table struck Mark’s legs. His thighs bent sharply at backwards knees.

“Go into that city right now and see—”

An arc of lightning cut a swathe of glass that spit and splashed across Mark’s legs, and small barbed-wire tendrils of lightning ate him alive.

“—see if your Christian god thinks enough of your Christian goodness to let you live.”

“Mark! Maaark!”



“Oh Mark, Mark, what happened?”

Ivy pushed at Jeremy without seeing him. He held her loosely.

“Ivy, it was a hallucination.” He stroked her face and she looked at him in desperation. “It was only the Dragon’s lure.”

For a moment she held him tightly. Then she pulled back.

“What if it wasn’t?” she asked, anguished.

“I promise you,” he said in devout earnest, “when the city’s cooled off, I’ll go to your house and see if I can find out what really happened there. I’ll look for your husband. I promise.”

Ivy curled her legs under Jeremy’s knees, wrapping herself onto him, making sawing noises as she sobbed on his chest. He surrounded her as well as he could. When she didn’t quiet, he drew his amulet out of his shirt.

“Hold this,” he unfolded her hand and put the amulet in it. “It might help. I don’t know.”

From his chair, Terry looked down at them almost humanely. After a time, as Ivy ebbed into silence, his eye was distracted by the approach of Mrs. Vickerson and Jake Graeme.

“Your fan club has arrived,” Terry announced to Jeremy.

Briefly startled out of hostility, Jeremy looked at Terry and then at Graeme and his companion. Ivy wiped her hand across her downturned face.

“Are things all right here?” Graeme asked tentatively, embarrassed both by seeing and by asking.

“Close enough,” Jeremy said neutrally.

The lone-godder again. That woman, she’s the one who stood behind him, loving him for his Bible.

“Ivy, what do you say?” the woman asked pointedly.

Spousal-counsel type. Thinks she has an abusee to rescue.

“A handkerchief?” said Ivy shakily, letting go the amulet, looking only at the floor.

Jeremy ripped off his loose sleeve. Ivy’s breath jerked in laughter or hysterics. She put her flushed face into the cloth. Terry started laughing. That wasn’t hysterics. He was looking up at Graeme and the woman.

Graeme was the first to get his words back. He spoke almost too quietly to hear over the drone.

“How long do you think the storm will last?”

“In Madrid it was more than eight hours,” said Jeremy.

“Some of us are going to go out and try to find the authorities and help with emergency services.”

“Take plenty of masks.”

Disappointed, Graeme said, “I thought you’d want to come and help—”

“We’ll wait it out.”

Graeme and the social worker got three steps away. Then the woman came back.

“Ivy, if you have any more problems,” she said, wasting enough tact to supply an army, “don’t forget how many people there are out there who are willing to help, and remember I’m one of them.” Puzzled and uneasy, Ivy looked up at her.

The woman walked away, confident she’d said the right thing. After a few steps she walked faster, maybe to catch up with Jake Graeme, maybe because Terry was laughing again.

Ivy stared, bewildered, at Jeremy and Terry. “What was the point of all that?”

Terry shook his head and gazed significantly at Jeremy.

“Was it something I missed?” Ivy tucked Jeremy’s amulet back into his shirt. “Tell me the rest of what happened.”

Jeremy leaned his head back against the wall. “Chaos.”



Ivy had screamed her husband’s name. Jeremy turned so fast he felt the heel of his shoe twist underfoot.

Ivy was climbing down from the hood of her car by the time he located her. He started to sprint. Past a couple who stared at the Dragon and wept. Off by the building, Terry leaning on the wall, dry-retching. Three people running across the street direct toward Spokane, yelling to their mothers. The godbod shepherding his family into the building, yelling "Everyone get inside!" as he went. An oldish well-groomed woman with a hand up by her face shielding her from the Dragon. Kids driving a small car over the curb into the side-street. The grating sound of the car bottoming out dissolved into the Dragon drone.

"Oh, Louise, I can't!" A woman running from the lot toward Route 2.

A siren. Fire engine on the side-street. Another car in the street, turning violently away to dodge the engine. The car turned toward Ivy. She didn't see anything. Some others were already running in the street, heading for Spokane.

"Get everyone inside!"

Jeremy leaped, knocked Ivy several feet forward. There were too many different impacts too fast for him to figure what hit him when. He was still mobile afterwards, and Ivy too. She was fighting him off, shrieking her husband's name.

More people running into the road, more cars on the move. Jeremy started to pick up Ivy and drag her. He gave that up, she didn't care if she hurt herself levering loose from him. Another engine started. Metal punched into metal. He looked around for help but Terry wasn't in shape for it.



"Ah, so it was all my fault you hit her," said Terry.

Jeremy did not look at Terry, but Ivy felt his muscles jump.

"I couldn't handle any rescues with you out of control," he told her. No apology, no arrogance, just regret.

*He'll do more of the same to you whenever he thinks he needs to.*

"I thought you must have had a reason," she told Jeremy, trying to fend off the grudge before it could lodge in her.

"A stopwatch would have shown he had exactly one minute's worth of justification," said Terry biting. "It wouldn't have required more than one minute for him to take you inside."

"Too long." Jeremy jerked his head around to whip a look across Terry, who flinched.

Ivy paused. She was sure she could work up to thanking Jeremy. She would probably have forced him to leave her friends' lives in danger, and he'd stopped her... But at this moment it was mortally hard to restrain the vindictive urge to rebuke. *Don't let him get away with it!*

“Well, I’m sorry I missed my chance to hand down judgment,” she finally told Terry. “Besides, you know I’d asked him to help with the party.”

Surely she could have said something less inane. But she was satisfied that it silenced Terry. Jeremy looked at her somberly, not feeling or expecting any reprieve. He deserved a more forbearing response from her than that.

“I think I’ll just forget it all over again,” she told Jeremy, and failed at saying it lightly. She bowed her head against his chest.

Terry’s chair squeaked against the floor as he shifted uncomfortably.

“I’ve changed my mind again,” Terry said softly, “I shall be accompanying you two into Spokane.”

“When had you said you wouldn’t?” Ivy poked her memory to make it respond.

“When he—”

“You decided to back out,” Jeremy said fiercely. “Now stay out.”

Terry leaned back from Jeremy but shook his head dismissively. “I was beside myself when I told you I wouldn’t help. Now I prefer to return to rationality, that is, to follow the plans we made before the Dragon raped our minds.”

“You call yourself rational? After last night,” Jeremy whispered, just loudly enough to be heard over the storm sound, “I don’t trust your judgment with or without the Dragon.”

Terry looked over his shoulder for listeners before starting to retort. With a scorching stare, Jeremy went on, “You were wrong. The water utility still uses chlorine to clean out the pipes. There was a train tank car of it sitting on the tracks and the Q’s were setting up a spill.”

“And you learned this exactly how?”

“I was there.” Jeremy ignored Ivy’s startle; he tightened himself away from her to aim his full force at Terry. “Your damned hoax! What good was it? Your evacuees had already gone back home when the Dragon hit.”

“Prove that.” Terry pushed Jeremy’s argument away with both hands. “Prove none of them stayed safely outside town once I threw the fear into them. Do you actually believe all of them did a lemming back to their homes to wait for a second wave of ‘terrorism’?”

“There was a police reserve safe outside Spokane. You pulled them into the Dragon’s reach, for nothing.” Jeremy was snarling.

“Abe Kendall,” Ivy said to herself. “Oh, no.”

“So long as civilian lives were saved by my semiconductor surprise,” hissed Terry, “any risks the meats took were precisely what they are paid for.”

Jeremy untangled himself from Ivy. Terry jumped to stand on the other side of the chair from Jeremy.

“You keep away from us,” Jeremy told Terry. His voice was soft, his body language violent.

“Is that you I hear,” asked Terry, not quite dispassionate, “or is it the voice of the Dragon?”

“Keep away.” Jeremy made a gesture of rejection that ended with his finger jabbing into Terry’s chest.

Terry flinched again, to his own continuing dismay, but by pure strength of character didn’t jump back.

With blatantly reluctant acquiescence Ivy allowed Jeremy to help her up. Terry surveyed the room, curious to see who might be watching. Ah, the eyes of Mrs. V. But, absent her pet patriarch Graeme, she wasn’t likely to intervene.

“Keep your eyes closed. I’ll guide you to your car.” Jeremy commanded Ivy.

“I’m not sure whether the effect comes from seeing the Dragon or hearing it,” murmured Ivy, decidedly resentful, “and I don’t agree with you about Terry.”

“In private.” Jeremy said it forcefully but so quietly Terry barely could contrive to hear it over the Dragon’s chorus.

Would Mrs. V attempt to prevent their departure? She would not and did not, nor did she do more than watch when Terry tore a small slit in the paper covering the glass front door.

Terry saw no sign of Graeme or his cohorts in would-be rescue. Ivy’s SUV was still to be found in the parking lot. Maskless, Jeremy was examining a deep dent above one rear wheel. Ivy was waiting in the car, wearing Jeremy’s mask and for good measure averting her face from the Dragon.

Terry watched Jeremy rattle the rear wheel, give it what would pass with high honors as a look of menacing remonstrance, and lead Ivy along the sidewalk toward Route 2. So the van was parked within walking distance for a Dragon-susceptible woman; that was a point of reassurance. Terry picked up mask makings and prepared to pursue the Alliance of Two.

That pair was going to put on quite the show in Spokane and he wouldn’t acquiesce in missing it, no, not if he were offered ten free identities.



“Tell me then. Who do you want for our backup?” Jeremy glared at her in the fadable light in their van, impatient with her recalcitrance.

“You want that Christian? He’s a witchburner. Terry? He’s an irresponsible brat.”

“Wrong,” countered Ivy. “He was fighting the Dragon by guesswork just as you’ve been. The two of you made different guesses. That isn’t irresponsibility.”

“He figures the reason cops exist is to get killed for the benefit of civilians.” Jeremy’s dull hot fury seemed to fill the van. “You heard him. What do you bet he expects the same from us?”

“No, I don’t believe that. He’s a friend.” Ivy rubbed her forehead and despised her own lack of stamina. “Jeremy... could I hold your amulet for a minute?”

His face opened into concern. He put the amulet in her hands and wrapped his hands around hers as if it were warming that she needed.

“Terry isn’t anyone’s choice for a best friend,” she conceded wearily, “but he is our best choice for partner. We won’t be giving anything away if we fade in front of him, or cast a spell.”

“We can’t depend on him.” His face closed again, though he still held her hands protectively.

“I think we can, and I’ve known him longer than you have.”

“I won’t team with him,” Jeremy said, hard as flint.

Ivy took her hands away from him. She felt as if her brain were twitching under sparks of indignation.

“I won’t go into Spokane if there’s only the two of us and one car. That means no backup for us! And you call Terry irresponsible!”

Jeremy stared at her with a depth of shock she hadn’t seen before. He said, “So this is as far as you go?”

She realized the way in which he’d misunderstood.

“I won’t go,” Ivy repeated, “and I won’t let you do it alone.”

Jeremy scanned her, her expression and position. Yeah, she meant that. Her eyes were checking out his toolbox and anything else that might give her a weapon. Much good that would do her. He was sure of her again, though. Much good that would do him, as things stood.

Watching her hands, he leaned forward to speak.

Ivy flung herself back ready to stand up. She raised her hands to fight him off cat-style. “Back off! No more knockouts!”

When she jumped, she’d unthinkingly moved away from his toolbox and pack. Good.

“I wish I’d asked the cards yesterday about going into Spokane,” Ivy said, never looking away from him. “I can’t do it now, my mind’s cringing too much.”

“You wouldn’t have changed anything. I’d have gone in whatever.”

“You can’t mean that!”

Next she'd be demanding why. But she didn't. She kept glancing away from him and back, as if a covey of different guesses about him was flying across her line of sight. Maybe there's a chance to get through this without knocking her out again and losing her. Start now. Maybe some agreement will soak in over the next few hours.

"I know we can't do as much rescue work with only two people. We can't take as many risks," Jeremy said, "but if we get one person out, that's one who won't burn."

A shade of sympathy crossed her face. Maybe she figured he was thinking of Ben. He was.

"Ivy, don't forget we can back each other up better than two trads could," he pointed out. "In fact, a trad could be a burden more than a backup. We can—"

Somebody knocked on the back door. Who? Terry wouldn't have the balls. Could be cops collecting people into a safe zone. Or arresting him.

"If it's police, stay faded," Jeremy told her. "I'll get out. You wait for a chance."

Ivy nodded, relief and worry at the same time.

"You two in there, may I visit?" Jeremy's face clenched a moment when he recognized Terry's voice. "Are you decent?"

"Of course we're decent," Ivy's voice went shrill over the drone, "do you think we're superhuman?"

Jeremy tucked that one into the back of his mind for the next time he felt like laughing. He opened the back door a little. Terry stood his ground but he looked like a man facing an aimed loaded shotgun. His hand hovered near a pocket with a lump in it.

The boy was armed, was he? So he was willing to defend himself instead of leaning on other people to do it for him. Good.

"This isn't a place for you," he said, keeping tight control.

"I'm fine, thank you, and how are you?" You had to admire the boy for trying to sound carefree. "N-nice weather we're having."

Hyperalert, Terry craned to look around Jeremy into the dim interior. Jeremy felt the van jostle. What was Ivy up to?

He turned around fast. The side pockets of his pack were open. The important one looked empty, but he couldn't be sure with unfaded vision. He swung the van doors wide open to let in what little sunlight was getting past the Dragon.

The light reached Ivy. She still knelt on the air mattress, in almost the same place as before. She had one hand behind her back. Her face was stiff and she didn't meet his eyes. Yeah, she had the knockout tube.

"No point taking it any farther, Ivy," he called to her. She didn't move.

Terry cleared his throat. Jeremy looked around grudgingly, knowing Terry was much the lesser threat. Terry's hands were still in front of him and empty. He had a weapon and he hadn't gotten eager with it yet. That was good too.

"What's your weapon of choice?" Jeremy asked him.

"You mean this protrusion?" Terry's fingers touched his trouser pocket. "Couldn't we just pretend I'm glad to see you?"

A chuckle got through Jeremy's grudge. No laugh from Ivy, though. He looked back. She wasn't in sight but the fade-border was further from him now. She couldn't reach him without unfading.

"What is it?" he asked Terry again.

"High voltage on a stick."

"A stun gun? Dump it."

Terry snickered at him.

"We may be firefighting in Spokane. You don't want your balls to short out if water hits you."

"You're assuming I'll come with you," Terry said, after a brief disconcerted pause. "Suppose I only made my appearance to rescue Mumsy dear from you?"

Jeremy looked over his shoulder again.

"She couldn't need it less. Get in here. Don't waste our time playing your games."

"Excellent, then don't you waste any time," snapped Terry. "We must cross the river now, before our esteemed military seizes the bridges and denies access."

As they had planned, they assumed their disguises in the new van before they made any move toward Spokane and the cordon. One after another they used the chalice, the thurible, the mirror, the herbs, while Jeremy spoke the words. Terry winced at his red-headed companions and his own pale Scandinavian skin and long snow-blond hair.

“Personally, I prefer baldness,” he said. “And a second layer of disguise can be quite efficacious. I have with me scissors and razor.”

“Good. We’ll do that, too,” Jeremy decided. He ended Ivy’s tired protest when he explained, “Hair is one more thing to catch fire.”

They drove north from Airway Heights in the van and Terry’s hatchback, taking a dodging route to the Seven Mile bridge over the Spokane River. The car windows facing the Dragon were covered with the weekend’s National Enquirer. The pages left only a narrow slot to look through, not the whole dangerous alluring Dragon panorama. Every time the road changed direction Jeremy and Terry pulled over, drew their vizards down over their faces, and readjusted the shields against reality.

The roads were empty of moving traffic. When they passed wrecks or abandoned cars, they stopped but never found survivors. There were the fatalities left behind, and there were the car doors left open by the fatalities-to-be who had hurried toward Spokane on foot. That same behavior had been reported from Madrid; now they knew “mass panic” wasn’t the most basic reason for it.

At one of the pull-overs they found the third layer of disguise that they’d hoped for. An abandoned van and a pickup truck with camper were new, undamaged, and still had the keys in the ignitions. Pushing aside his own unease about burglarizing the dead, Jeremy helped Terry move most of their gear into these vehicles. Painstakingly they brushed every item with a whisk broom, working to keep hairs and skin flakes from being transferred to the disguise vehicles. Finally they gave the same treatment to themselves and Ivy. Jeremy guided her up into the van they were stealing. He agreed with Ivy that she should remain blindfolded as long as possible.

They left their own vehicles and ID papers there, along with a water bottle and a spare gas can. They locked the cars purely by habit. It hardly seemed useful. No vehicles had passed anywhere in sight while they worked.

Not much later, Jeremy stopped at the back of a line of empty cars. Beyond the end of the line stood the Dragon. It blackened the eastern sky. Its singings were louder than thoughts. Jeremy checked Ivy’s

strained, blindfolded face. Yeah, she was holding up. He patted her shoulder and she nodded. That was their pattern from the other times he'd left the car.

Terry was already out of his car, tugging at the side of it. He raised his mask, settled his improvised deafeners, turned toward Jeremy, held up his rear-view mirror in explanation. Then he walked backwards along the road, holding the mirror in front of his maskless face.



The Dragon was soot-black now, the most solid object that Terry had ever seen rising so far into the sky. So long as he was careful to view it only in reflection behind him, Perseus redivivus with the new Medusa, he could convince himself that it was not about to topple onto him.

The Dragon still proceeded with its stirring, carving, and welding, as busy as an anthill, or as a child dissecting an anthill. The swings of the lasting lightning made monochrome pulses on the beast's belly and tentacles, a hypnotic effect like moiré ballet. Perhaps watching the swaying, dazzling blackness in the mirror was not in fact such a terribly wise idea.

Terry gave the sigh of a disappointed theorist, tucked the mirror inside the belt of his fanny-pack, and once again pulled down his vizard.



As expected, the front of the line of stopped cars was at the bridge at Seven Mile, which was located about half as far from the Dragon's workbench as Airway Heights had been. The call had left no one among the camouflage vehicles parked at the bridge. More than a few uniformed and civilian bodies floated in the river.

Cars pointed outward from Spokane occupied both lanes of the city end of the short bridge. Halfway across, the cars in the lead had collided with an inbound military truck, which sat flat-tired and sideways from railing to railing. Not all the vehicles in the jam had crashed. Some at the back seemed undamaged, and one van was still running.

Jeremy eyed the sign that warned of a natural gas pipeline. Where? Mounted under the bridge? Probably not a threat.

Terry nudged him and said loudly, over the Dragon, "Observe the shiny new green van. There is our third vehicle."

"If Ivy's fit to drive."

Jeremy found the green van's gas tank was mostly full. Fill it all the way by siphoning from those wrecks back in the woods. Better not to use any of their gas-can reserve till they were on the way out of the city.



“Can you drive?” Jeremy put his arm around Ivy.

“Maybe. I’m not sure I should,” she finally said, with effort. “Sitting here I hear the sound from the inside out, instead of from the outside in. That doesn’t make sense, does it? I’m sorry.”

“Back by the creek where we changed cars. Was it bad there?”

“It’s worse here than there.” She rubbed her ears.

“We’ll be driving away from the Dragon and then around it. No need to come this close again.”

“I know we need that third vehicle...” She shook her head, then dug in her backpack and found her Tarot box. “Let me try this,” she held up the Chariot trump, “hold it where I can see it while I drive. It feels like a right thing to focus on. I think it’ll help.”

“Try it. You drive between me and Terry. We’ll head you off if you try to break away. Terry, what about you?”

“My stomach is troubled,” Terry said tiredly, “but I don’t feel the slightest hint of an inkling of a whim to make an impromptu tour of beautiful halcyon Spokane.”

“The Nine-Mile Falls bridge roadblock might be emptied out like Seven-Mile.” Jeremy pondered the map. “As far west as Long Lake... no way to know if they’d cordon there. If they did, the troops there would probably still be combat-ready.”

“Nine-Mile, then. And after we cross over into the Promised Land?”

“Play it by ear. Their southbound cordon was probably too close in. We’ll wait it out someplace as far north as... here, Half Mile Prairie. Then when the storm quits, we try the roads south till we find a dead roadblock.”



*Three o’clock and all is hell.*

They had not driven nearly so far as Half-Mile Prairie. They had found the perfect lair en route. Terry was insanely (no, sanely) grateful for the Phytosolve Building, one of those fringe-of-the-city monuments to bizarrely optimistic agri-bio-meditech. He was even grateful for state regulators and their opinions regarding the amount and quality of parking that should be required for new construction.

Phytosolve’s architects had included an underground parking garage and a self-starting emergency micro-power unit for lights and ventilation. And so, despite every stock-market vagary, agri-bio-meditech was indeed saving lives—the dozens of people all huddled and uncommunicatively encapsulated in their own dear little cars.

Terry had parked near the entrance, hoping for a modicum of radio reception. He kept tuning his allwave radio and listening to his earclip, under the deafeners, for what might not be static. His mind shifted now

and then to the investigation of nightrunning he craved. He prided himself on his present curiosity, his proof that the Dragon had swayed his mind only temporarily.

This evening's activities would be well worth attending, he thought. Invisibility—now there was a variety of identity-control he'd never hoped to see (cute cute), one he could only stand back and admire. The Boss must have all manner of tricks for extracting the best use from it. Terry hoped to see every one of them.



Jeremy checked the car clock. The Dragon would break up at six. Normally it's ten, twenty minutes southbound from here to the northeast city. Today it could take a couple of hours. The book didn't say when the wind would turn. Something to watch out for. Looters, military, explosions, unsound buildings, four more things to watch out for. Bad judgment, too, that made six.

He tuned the car radio. Nothing but crackle and sputter. In Madrid all the electronics in the city proper had been burned out by arc proximity. Here too, he'd bet. No radio, no bracers, no chips in car engine controls.

Spokane was burning. He could hear it from the speakers, he could smell it here upwind of it. The Dragon wasn't keeping every particle of its dinner to itself. Ben...



Ivy shook her head again. It was hours after the Dragon had hatched, and how many of her partygoing friends were still alive? How many would regain their sanity? Had the Premzics rejoined their baby and had they all stayed safe outside Spokane this morning?

*Mark, were you there?*

*That way lies madness, girl.*

This would have been the time to study Jeremy's manual, but it was in storage. She thought of the Tarot, too, but she was afraid of wearing out its succor. She rose from the air mattress and grudgingly began to read the Enquirer taped over the windows. Before long she was full of confusion and nostalgia at the trivial peculiar things that had excited people last weekend.

A hand on her shoulder made her jump. It was Jeremy. She grimaced at the Dragonsounds as she uncovered her ears.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Improved," she said. "Now my troubles are coming only from inside my head. How are you doing?"

His face was taut as he touched his amulet. "Fine, maybe. If I wasn't, maybe I couldn't tell. What do you think?"

“Turn around. I’ll give you a backrub and it’ll do both of us good.”

“I keep thinking of Ben,” he admitted after a minute under her hands.

“The Dragon certainly knows how to get at us. Mark gets into my defenses, Ben into yours.” Ivy was surprised when he twisted around to look probingly at her. “What?”

“Not a problem.”

She knew better than that; it was always a mistake for her to mention Mark.

Jeremy rotated his head, roll, pitch, and yaw, unknotting his neck. He’d turned his eyes away from her, his expression revealed nothing. “I thought the haunting was over when the dreams stopped.”

“I suppose the amulet isn’t a perfect shield...” She rubbed, and felt his shoulders drop a half-inch, relaxing. “Strange how the Dragon doesn’t seem to have any hold on Terry.”

“It gets at you through people you’re attached to.”

“And Terry has identities where most people have attachments? That sounds about right.”

A few minutes later Terry climbed in at the front of the van. He looked them over and shook his head knowingly. Ivy felt Jeremy’s muscles tense again. She put her cheek down against the back of his sweat-soaked shirt. If that gesture made Terry uncomfortable, fine, let him be the uncomfortable one here.

“Professor, isn’t it time to begin our class in magical first-aid?” Terry sat down at the far end of the mattress from them.

“Past time,” agreed Jeremy.



Coils of well-fed drowsy Dragon, coils of taut full bowel, the convolutions of low black clouds filled the sky after the tornadoes had spun away to nothing and the thick violet-white arcs of lightning had retracted into wide flickers in the murk. At street level the air was hot and thickly windless. As he drove Terry heard nothing more than a light ringing in the ears, the slow tapping of the large drops of black rain, and the sounds of his own truck.

The rain left greasy sooty smears on the windshield. About ten slow, obscured minutes into the journey, Jeremy led the way to pulling over. He’d run out of windshield-washer fluid, but he had a bottle of ammonia in reserve and he shared it out.

Further along and they’d reached camouflage trucks and sawhorses across the road, a vacant roadblock. At no point before this, and not at this point, were there any people to be seen. Ivy wondered which direction they had run and whether they’d done it before or after the

storm began. On second thought, those were two ways of asking the same question.

Then they reached the true edge of town, beyond which there were too many streets and cross-streets to be easily cordoned off. Now they needed to worry only about air patrols, but no planes or helicopters had appeared as yet.

Here the streets looked like nearly emptied store shelves, holding a scattering of small branches, roof shingles, dry green leaves, pieces of paper. There were a few broken windows on houses and cars. The rain, still sparse, tossed up puffs from a thin layer of grit on the paving.

Another stop to clear their windshields, and the rain became heavier but no cleaner. There was a flash of normal lightning to the northeast. In the next block a small leafless tree had fallen across the road. They bypassed it by driving over a parched lawn. All the greenery they saw was dried to paper, as if subjected to a week of desert wind.

Another block, and abruptly the houses were jagged and roofless, trees branchless, cars and large furniture lying sideways and upside down, and the layer of dark moist stone grit over everything was perhaps an inch thick. The premature twilight, the murk in the air, the black grease on the windshields, and the blanket of coarse dust, all made it hard to be sure of the nature of the smaller objects lying on the road.

Further down the road the erasure of the known world was even more complete. It was not remotely like what Ivy remembered of the World Trade Center devastation. That had been the wreckage of something that, like the Pyramids, had not needed the individuals in it and might just as well have been an empty public exhibit. These had been homes. They were not supposed to be empty, or public, or as much alike as they now were.

She found herself picturing what would lie further into the city, the planet itself rubbed away to an ill-defined pit filled with interplanetary space. *That would be merciful.*

A little further, and Jeremy slowed and stopped. As Ivy followed suit, stopping beside his van, she felt her van strike something that seemed to go soft under her wheels. She gagged.

Outside the van the smell of hot scorched meat was much stronger. The other parts of the smell of burning, the woodfire and oilfire scents, were weak. Ivy pulled up her dust mask and saw that Jeremy and Terry had done the same. She felt grateful her hair was gone; it would only have been contaminated by the rain. Her sodden scarf was filthy enough.

"It's worse than I expected," said Jeremy, looking around him in disgust, distress, and assessment. "We can't drive through this, the tires

will go. There probably aren't any survivors further south of here anyway."

Ivy's soul rose up against him. He was too calm; it wasn't his city; he didn't belong here now if he could react so reasoningly to this desolation. She turned away from him. Her van sat tilted. The left front wheel was resting on what seemed to be a mud-covered disjointed piece of upholstered furniture.

Terry's eyes were wide-open, babylike. He looked at Jeremy, then away at the unrecognizably monstrous world around him. "We're in Lovecraft," he said.

"No, we're home," said Ivy, feeling she was paying a kind of final tribute.

Terry stared a rebuke at her and walked away, placing his feet carefully.

Her van's headlights were even blacker than the windshield. All of their vehicles were blackened. She wiped a hand across one headlight to clear it.

Jeremy moved up beside her. "Ivy?"

"I'm all right. I thought it'd be worse, I thought there'd be more bodies." Ivy stared at her filth-curdled hand, feeling increasingly uncomfortable and unsure why.

"No, not many bodies." Jeremy's voice was remote.

"Not after the Dragon's appetite," he added.

She wiped the dark lard off her hand and onto the van, dove into the gap between the two vans, yanked her mask down, and threw up explosively.

Jeremy looked away and checked Terry. What was he up to? Coming back this way carrying part of a long golden wig.

"Look. These are strands of lava glass, Pele's hair," Terry announced. "The tornado winds must have stretched them out from the melt in the vitrification zones where the lightning arcs were continuous."

Jeremy decided Terry's light-mindedness was shock. It'd pass or it wouldn't.

"Gloves from now on, Terry, when you handle anything," he said evenly. He heard Ivy returning. "You too, Ivy. There's broken glass all over. This fat will be instant infection if it gets into a cut."

Ivy gagged again.

"Sorry," she said in a choked voice, "I couldn't ignore it any longer. Sorry."

"Put a drop of your ti-tree oil in your mask to cover the smell. Both of you."

Jeremy took his own small bottle of essential oil from his fanny pack. He'd been planning for the odor of rot that the summer heat

would bring on, not for this. This smell roused his oldest memories of disaster, and he couldn't have them now.

"A few miles east," Jeremy closed his eyes, accessing an even older memory, "the photo in the book shows a gap in the glyph where we can probably get in. It'll still be in our priority zone, downwind of the midnight fuel-depot fire."

"Can't you retrieve any more detail than that from your anachronistic memory?" asked Terry.

Jeremy opened his eyes and took the plastic-covered glyph-overlaid map from Terry. He caught a glimpse of another man to the left, nearby, almost out of sight at the edge of vision. Jeremy looked that way quickly. Nobody there.

He began to study the map with eyes closed to invoke memory, then open again. The man returned, brightly sunlit, black-bearded, recognized at once.

"Ben!" Jeremy cried out. "What—"

He turned left and turned again, never catching up to Ben. Stifling, he pulled down his mask.

"Ben, where—"

Now Ben overlapped Ivy and Terry. Not Ben, a hallucination. Not a ghost, ghosts didn't exist. Not even in this city where they belonged.

He felt Ivy catch his arm.

"Jeremy, it's only memories," she said, voice shaking as if she believed in ghosts.

He looked toward her, not leftward. What could he see of Ben if he didn't try to look straight at him? Not sunlit now. Dressed like the three of them, hiking boots, all-covering clothes, gloves. Plus a headlamp, gear from their caving trips.

"Jeremy, are you slipping again?" Ivy took his hands and he gripped hers hard. "Should I hypnotize you?"

"No, it's not the same." He focused on her, more easily this time. "Yeah, it is memories. Ben. At the edge of my vision. The smell must have set them off..."

Was he going to see Ben dying, the way he burned at the end? He wasn't sure he could stand up to that much of an omen. Eyes closed tight, Jeremy reached for his amulet.

He felt hands lovingly cupping his face. For an instant they were larger hands than Ivy's.

"Don't do that now!" Jeremy burst out to her, making her pull back. "It's what Ben—"

He saw Ivy's attentive eyes. Terry was behind her, mouth opening, impatient to speak. Taking up any gauntlet they might throw down, he finished what he'd started. "It's what Ben used to do."

Astonishment on her face. Had she understood him or not? Terry certainly had, his whole face was nothing more than Aha.

All the chances he'd had to tell Ivy this in the right way, and he hadn't even begun. *Damn this time in history for making me into a secret. Damn me for not knowing how to be anything else.*

"There's no time for this now!" he said, looking away from Ivy.

"That's true." She became still. She'd moved away from him.

Terry broke in sharply. "Shall we strike the expedition?"

"No," said Jeremy. "The visions are passing." Ben didn't move, but it was true enough. Knowing that he was a memory image made all the difference.

"Be candid," insisted Terry. "Can you drive? Aren't you a risk to us?"

Ivy looked Jeremy in the eyes again. "You're not obligated to go on," she said seriously.

"That's the point." Seeing her working that out, he added, "That it's not my responsibility. It's a free gift."

He handed his van keys to Terry. "My safety goggles are in the toolbox. Make a cardboard blinder, tape it onto the left side of the goggles. It won't stop the video show but I won't be fooled into thinking it's real. You drive the lead car from here on."

Ivy watched Jeremy's eyes flicker to his left again and again as he spoke to Terry. Water ran down their faces and hers; the rain was finally clean.

Terry looked as though he wished he'd kept his stun gun with him. He turned away from Jeremy without a word, and judging by his expression there was a significant chance he'd return for just long enough to tell them he was leaving the expedition. If he did, what would she do?

They wouldn't be here if Jeremy would recognize the possibility that the Dragon was driving him. If he would remember saying he scorned the idea of acting like a movie hero. If he would tolerate letting Terry be the one who'd worked the saving of Spokane. And especially, if he would allow Ben to let go of him.

*So what kind of self-centered idiot are you to be able to think of all this pettiness with a dead city looking over your shoulder?*

She looked at Jeremy and saw him watching her worriedly and searchingly. Thank goodness he wasn't a mind-reader. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Close enough." He kept watching her. "You caught that I'm doubled?"

*So we're both self-centered idiots right now.*

"Does that mean bisexual?" she asked.

“Yeah. I’d have told you before we got married.”

“It doesn’t bother me, fiancé, I’m not that much of a twentieth. What bothers me,” she could keep the volume out of her voice but not the shrillness, “is that I can’t even touch you now without reminding you of him.” *Jealous of a dead man in a whole city full of them, this is a new low for you.*

Jeremy put his arms around her then, but she could only bear to hold him for an instant—clammy, slippery, smelling of burned fat.

“Sorry. I really can’t stomach this slime,” she told him, holding his hands but unable to control a shudder. She heard Terry close the van doors. “Promise me we’ll be away from Spokane before it all starts to rot.”

“Is this the time and place for romantic dalliance?” Terry asked them as he approached.

His voice was even more cutting than Ivy had expected. “Are you sure,” he accused Jeremy, “candidly, genuinely, sincerely sure, that it’s wise for us to go deeper into Spokane?”

“You’re free to leave.”

“And drive through this shambles on my own? No, I’m compelled to rely on your judgment and protection at this point. Boss.”

Jeremy put on the half-blindered goggles Terry had brought him.

“We’re going east,” Jeremy said.

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“I saw a light a block or two south of the last intersection,” Terry insisted in the face of the prevailing lifelessness.

A few blocks ago they’d tried to go south and found that direction blocked by a room-wide canal of melted city, crusted lava, that ran perpendicular to the street. After they’d returned to the eastbound street, Terry had suddenly made a right and pulled over in a neighborhood that looked as empty as others that they’d bypassed.

Jeremy assessed their situation. They hadn’t had to use their reserves of gas. The vehicles were still in good shape. Parked side by side, though, too close together for a fast simultaneous departure. Doors were locked, headlights off to allow for fading. Jeremy had disabled every light in and on the cars except the headlights. That was an old trick that criminal nightrunners used to avoid surprising themselves.

Everyone was as geared up as security precautions would allow. Jeans, long-sleeved shirts, hiking boots, work gloves, dust masks. He and Ivy also had belly packs and fanny packs, canteens, flashlights with heavy aluminum cases, small knives, notepads, pens. He carried their gun in his shoulder holster.

It was fading dark on the street, thanks to the opaque clouds over most of the sky. The two-story houses blocked the low rays of sunlight that emerged from the cloud gaps off to the west. A light but steady cool breeze came out of the east-northeast where there were lightning flashes. Thunder, too. The delay time put the storm at halfway to Mount Spokane. No rain here and now, though.

This neighborhood was full of houses maybe twenty years old now, lots of quaint skin-deep gables and arch-topped windows. The winds here must have been over sixty mph. Roofs were stripped in a couple of places, paint and glass sandblasted on the cars, some windows broken, trees leafless and fallen. A lot of small branches lay in the yards and on the street. The windburned lawns were damp under the coating of shiny black grease. The rain had been heavier in this area.

The canal of lava across the street looked like pure fluke. A small lightning arc must have carved the melt deep into the neighborhood in one pass. Over there it went through the corner of a house but hadn’t started much of a fire. Wide patches of lawn were burned black near the canal, but no major fire there either. Too much wind right then, maybe? Carried off the tinder, sucked the fuel away from the flame instead of helping it. Then later the rain came down.

Jeremy stepped closer to the lava, with Ivy and Terry following. He looked at the crust and away to figure out whether it was glowing almost too dimly to see. Maybe. If it was that hot at the crust, it must be deep to hold so much heat.

Terry tapped his shoulder and said, "Observe." His voice was loud here where the only local noise was the clink of the cooling lava.

Terry tore a sheet off his pad, made it a paper airplane, tossed it in a wind-drifted arc onto the lava. The plane started to burn when it landed on its back. The crust was impassable, then.

Here the lava canal was about eight feet across, but it made a wider barrier than that in the street because of the melted asphalt on either side. Next to the lava the gravel in the pavement showed under a thin coating of heavy tar that hadn't boiled off. Further out the asphalt bubbled and smoked a little. There, near a little spurt of flame that didn't last, curled a dead cat with its fur gone to char.

"Look there," said Ivy, pointing. Less than a yard into the soft tar were a pair of kid's sneakers placed about one walking stride apart.

"Behold the Rapture," pronounced Terry.

"He wasn't sucked up out of his shoes. There wasn't enough wind here for that," Jeremy said. "Somebody rescued him."

"I'd like to think so." Ivy grimaced. "It must have happened after the lightning but while the Dragon was still luring. Someone was strong-minded."

"They could still be close by," Jeremy concluded. "It's a good spot for rescue work."

They'd begun to discuss how best to search the houses when they heard a car engine. Then Terry said in a tone of high vindication, "There's my light!"

About a block away, headlights were approaching from the south.

The oncoming car kept its speed as it drove on toward them. Terry found himself stepping backward without any intention of doing so. Insanely, Ivy still stood at the edge of the soft asphalt, waving her arms imploringly and screaming for the car to stop. Where had Jeremy gone?

Ivy began to back when the juggernaut was two houses away from her. She cried out, "He's trying to drive through!"

At that same instant the car swerved to its right into a nearly treeless yard on the east side of the street. Terry registered, in one mental snapshot, that he had the privilege of seeing a flawlessly maintained classic convertible with its top up and spotless and all of its upper paint still gleaming clean. It had been safely stored away till after the rain, then?

Although in its last few seconds the car had jerked into deceleration, it snapped a sapling, veered away from the adjacent

house, and crunched into the lava crust. Up sprayed a spectacular mass of glittering glass spicules and splinters mingled with char.

The front half or more of the car tilted down into the crust, its headlights partly submerged and, bizarrely, still shining. The back wheels rested on the sere lawn behind the lava, the doors were out over the lava; in fact, the bottoms of the doors were barely above crust level. The car's paint was a dark color indeterminate in the red-hot underlighting.

Ivy trotted closer to the damage, then jumped away from the hot soil underfoot. A second later the car's back tires popped. The two bangs echoed into many up and down the street. The headlights died out.

"Gas tank's in back, right?" Jeremy's voice seemed to be calling out from behind their own cars, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Sure," Terry told him, hearing Ivy say the same thing almost simultaneously.

The footstep sounds were spaced slowly but approached rapidly. Ivy said, "wait..." Then there were small grating sounds from the car. A short, muffled cry came out of its driver.

Terry saw Jeremy behind the car. He was running away from them, decelerating, turning back and sprinting to the car. Ivy stared at him, transfixed.

Crouched on the car's trunk lid, Jeremy cut with his belt knife at the convertible's plastic back window.

"What is he doing up there?" Terry asked no one. He was suspended between two entirely different disbeliefs, that Jeremy had crossed the red-hot lava, and that Jeremy was trusting himself to a platform that was sinking into red-hot lava.

"Oh god, the car's melting!" cried Ivy in terror.

Terry looked at her precisely as she vanished. His mind cleared, then, and presented him with lucid explanations of everything he had (hadn't) seen.

He heard the door of the van Ivy had driven being unlocked and opened. He promptly ran to watch. The gallon-bottle of water manifested itself sitting on the road, its cap flew off, it disappeared. Once and again a gush of water poured from mid-air into shin-level nothingness, splashing off nothingness. The empty bottle hit the pavement. A wet footprint appeared a stride away and he heard slow, light steps receding rapidly.

The car was not in fact melting, not as a whole. Those pre-electronic classics were steel construction with a high melting point. Certainly the car's front was tilting farther down. Jeremy seemed to be struggling with the driver, but it was hard to see through the fogged or

melting windows. The driver screamed like a woman; that tended to confirm that there was indeed some conflict.

Small gouts of flame shot out from the sides and hood of the car and smoke rose from the edges of the doors. A sizzling puff of steam rose from the crust at a spot that was across the street from the convertible. Something small began smoldering at the spot.

And there was Ivy on the far side of the lava, running away (with a slightly unbalanced stride) across the yards on the far side of the street from the burning car. She dropped the canteen she'd been holding and ran back to the scene of the rescue.

Warily Terry approached the action. Jeremy had induced the driver to crawl back toward the slashed back window. Ivy, face distorted by fear, knelt on the trunk lid. She was coughing as she reached into the car to pull, and so was someone inside. Smoke or fumes dispersed from the window.

Choking and frantic, Jeremy surged out of the back window, vulgarly shoving the woman whose wrists Ivy was pulling. A dragon's huff of flame shot forth from the engine compartment.

Coughing and sodden with sweat, the three of them made incongruous, hotfooted jumps till they were several feet distant from the car. Then the driver tottered. Jeremy and Ivy moved clumsily, as though their legs were attached more strongly to the lawn than to their bodies, but they almost levitated that fool of a driver. The front of the car sank another inch or two.

Jeremy turned and yelled, voice rasping, "Get back, Terry!" The driver went limp. Ivy thrust herself sideways to catch the woman's weight, grimacing suddenly.

Terry was exactly nine running steps back when there was a large FWUH and a complicated wad of fire and smoke soared from the car. A wisp of fume like the stem of a question mark trailed below it. Shatteringly brilliant small bits of flame flew out on all sides.

Seated on the pavement, Terry watched Jeremy flailing Ivy's thigh with (what could it be?) his doffed gloves. All around them, and up on the roofs of the two nearest houses on the east side of the street, small fragments and puddles of this and that were burning. The wind from the east was stronger now and not so cool.



Ivy knelt and rubbed antibiotic salve into the sore but unimpressive burn on her leg. Her hands were trembling. Somewhere behind her Jeremy was doing something, probably helping their rescuee, but she refused to look. With a fraction of her attention she watched Terry reverse his pickup away from a small burning puddle. Her mind felt like

a kind of balloon, a skin stretched around pressure from some unseen fact.

Terry trotted forward as close as heat would let him come.

“Throw me your keys!” he shouted.

“It’ll wait!” Jeremy shouted back.

The balloon was a cold-air balloon. Ivy shivered and stood up.

Jeremy’s hand clasped her arm. She gritted her teeth.

“Ivy?” His concerned voice, as he stepped in front of her.

“Leave me be a minute,” not loudly, “in my mind’s eye you’re still dead and burning.”

“No omen!” Jeremy rapped it out, shocked, snapping his fingers as he said it.

He put his hands on her shoulders and she looked up at him, feeling the balloon pop.

“What was all that?” Her voice scorched out of her irritated throat. “Superman Syndrome?”

Jeremy drew back, stung, far off his guard. “No. I had backup.”

Now Ivy was too enraged to look at him. She stuffed her hands under the back of her belt because they wanted to slap him.

“What does that mean? Do you have to try harder to get yourself killed because Terry and I are here to see it?”

“Look me in the eye,” he yanked her chin up and around to force her eyes to meet his, “look at me and tell me you wanted me to let that woman roast!”

There was hot iron behind his anger and only a sheet of fire behind hers. After a long time she closed her eyes.

“I can’t say it.” Her voice shook.



Jeremy turned away. No point talking now.

The woman they’d taken out of the car was in her thirties, red-haired, dressed in blouse, skirt, and nylons. Her shoes had come off in the struggle in the car.

He poured a dribble of water on the driver’s face. She stirred and coughed. He sat back away from her, hoping to avoid frightening her. She’d fought him to the point of near-calamity in the car. He’d still had his knife out then.

“Who are you?” she asked, after several fast glances all around the street.

“We’re a rescue team,” he said loudly. She shook her head.

Looked like the Madrid news had been right. He pulled out his notepad.

Ivy and Terry were shouting back and forth about how to get the woman across the melt. Ivy broke off for a minute to stand one-legged and peer at the bottom of her foot.

The woman started to talk again.

“Where’s my car?”

Jeremy pointed and wrote, at the same time saying what he was writing. “It blew up after you—”

“I can’t hear you—”

“—drove into the lava.”

“—there’s too much noise.”

Ivy came toward them, blank-faced. Jeremy handed his note to the driver. She’d started staring at his holstered gun.

“Yeah, she’s deaf,” Jeremy told Ivy.

“Where’s my car?” the driver asked in a high voice, pushing herself away from him. He pointed at the note she’d dropped.

She tried to push herself up, but slipped on the greasy pavement. Her eyes rolled toward the hulk in the lava and away. “That’s not, no, what did you do with my car!”

Jeremy stayed seated, hoping to look less threatening. He told Ivy, harshly, “Take care of her. She’s scared of me.”

Graceless with hysteria, the woman ran away. Ivy dashed after her without looking back at him.

There were patches of flame on the roofs of both the houses that neighbored the lava canal. The wind was maybe twenty mph and still from the east-northeast. That put the burning roofs on the upwind side of the street. So check those two houses first. If there are cars in the garages, or any other kind of fuel tanks or packs, we’ll have another explosion before long. Siphon out the gasoline and take it downwind?

Ivy was holding the woman by the arms, talking to her. It was doing her good to act calm for the woman’s sake. Terry was squatting next to a house on the west side of the street. He looked up.

“There’s still a wee bit of water pressure here, I say a wee bit,” Terry yelled, “but not enough. This whole neighborhood will be burning soon!” He started toward Jeremy.

“I’ll scout for a place we can all get across!” Nightrunning would make a quick job of that. The trads would be the slowdown.

“The melt stretches as far as I can see!” Terry threw out his arms to each side, gesturing the distance.

Jeremy thought, *yeah, as far as a trad’s vision can see.*

Terry gestured a construction in the air, the same thing he’d been yelling to Ivy, “We build a bridge of cars! We siphon out any gas, push them into the melt, and you cross before they melt!”

Jeremy yelled back, “If we can find any that we can get into neutral gear!”

He and Terry both looked around. There weren’t many cars to see. All of them were neatly parked on the sides of the road, not as if they’d been left in a hurry. No keys, no gear-shifting. How long would it take to find and push a couple of cars?

“Terry,” Jeremy called across the lava, “the car-bridge would only work once. We might need to get another bunch of people across later. Instead, make a rope-bridge across the lava. We have enough rope, if we can find second-story windows or trees that are close on each side of the lava.”

“Rope? Must I explain what the radiant heat above glowing lava would do to a rope?”

Jeremy remembered the kiln temperature in the car. On the reminder he gulped water and a salt tablet.

“However we cross, it can’t be here,” yelled Jeremy. “We can look for cars, or places to moor a bridge, or a narrow spot, but we have to explore. We’ll start by going east. That way if there’s something out that direction we can find it before the fuel-depot fire stops us from reaching it. Later we can try west.”

“We? How do you mean we?” asked Terry with rigid sarcasm. “I only see one person on this side of the heat, and it doesn’t give me a warm feeling.”

Yeah. To make it worse, Terry was unarmed.

“We’ll stay together as well as we can. You drive east in your car. Watch for us at the north-south streets and check in. If you see trouble, drive yourself out of it.”

“Who’ll guard the vans?”

“As long as we have your truck we can lose the vans if we have to. There aren’t enough of us to guard people and vans at the same time.”

Hoarse from yelling in the smoky air, Jeremy put his mask back on. Looking around for Ivy, he saw that she’d settled herself and the driver on a west-side lawn. She was examining the soles of the woman’s bare feet.

He went over to them and was relieved to see the driver look at him with apology instead of terror. Ivy still gave him the blank expression of somebody who refuses to have lost the argument.

“She got glass in her feet when she ran,” explained Ivy.

“Find shoes for her. Let her doctor herself.” He remembered Ivy’s stork pose. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“You were checking your foot.”

“It isn’t anything.” She took off her goggles and wiped dust off them, not looking at him.

Concealing injuries wasn’t allowed. “How bad is it?”

“My foot’s fine, it’s just my shoe. I lost a piece of the rubber sole crossing the lava.” She said it fast.

Unable to make any sense of that, Jeremy pulled his goggles up and his dust-mask down. “Crossing the lava?”

“I was afraid to run across the car the way you did..”

Jeremy looked swiftly at the woman, who was watching their faces with puzzlement. Yeah, she was still safely deaf.

“It wasn’t one of my better ideas,” Ivy went on explaining without any assurance. “I had it fixed in my mind that you could come out the car window just then and I’d run over the top of you. Besides, the car was already sinking...

“I soaked my pants-legs and shoes with water first. But I had to touch down once midway.”

The driver patted Ivy’s shoulder uncertainly. Jeremy looked down at her boot. An inch-long chunk of the sole was gone near the toe. If her foot had stuck she’d have fallen face down right there on the lava. His stomach knotted.

“I shouldn’t have dragged you so deep into this,” he said in a voice with no body to it.

“You shouldn’t have left me behind when you jumped the lava,” she retorted, choked. She looked at him and away again almost too fast to let him see tears.

Terry yelled for him to come over. The driver put her arm around Ivy’s shoulders.

“Find out her name,” Jeremy told Ivy, for reasons that escaped him, “and find shoes.”

“I should have told you what I was about to do before I jumped.” He added that after he’d begun to walk away.

Toys. Exercise machines. Antiques. Family photos. Inspirational plaques and posters. Dry African violets, dogs' sleeping baskets. Patched wall plaster with a picture-hook just above it; the picture that disguised the patch had fallen. Ivy was glad she'd talked Becky into staying outdoors, and gladder that she'd found a good pair of walking shoes for Becky after only two houses, because the homes were full of heartbreak.

No sooner did she hand the shoes to Becky than Jeremy called her aside. He wanted to lay out rules of reconnaissance. Ivy kept her silence and looked straight ahead. She didn't feel fit to talk after the things she'd allowed herself to say to him not long before.

She was on Jeremy's blindered side. He had to turn his head to glance at her. She saw it from the corner of her eye and knew his patience had flared up and burned away. He caught her by the shoulders and pulled her mask down.

"Look at me," he ordered, fixing her eye-to-eye as she raised her head. "Stop hiding from me. What are you angry about?"

Tight-throated, Ivy said, "I'm not angry at you, I'm ashamed of myself. I shouldn't have scolded you for saving Becky."

Jeremy put his own mask and goggles out of the way. He was almost affable. "Whiplash of the nerves. It happens after action. Forget it."

He squeezed her shoulders and released her, gazed east and west, ending the topic and laying his plans. She looked at Becky's concerned, abashed, curious expression and wished for privacy. But Ivy wasn't willing to suppress the rest of her confession; it would have taken even more effort for her to stop than it had to start.

"No, Jeremy," not so much determined to finish as eager, "it's one thing for me to be a coward about the possibility of losing you. It's another for me to try to make a coward of you. I don't have the right to tell you not to take risks."

"You've got the right, but I probably won't listen."

"You're a little hard to live up to," she told him.

His expression was astonished, gentle, and repentantly amused, softening his response: "Talk sense."

"Oh, I am," Ivy said.

Still looking into her, Jeremy put his mask up.

"I'm glad you made a chance for me to apologize. I was afraid we wouldn't have the time before something terminal happened to us here..."

“Is that a premonition?” He gripped her shoulders again, his eyes intense.

Startled and skeptical, she said, “Precognition has never worked for me.”

“That’s what you used to say about reading the cards.”

She caught his unease and pulled up her mask.

“Let’s get moving,” he said. He took his watch out of the fanny pack. There were still a couple of hours between them and midnight.



They traveled along the lava canal, staying at a distance where the soil felt warm underfoot but not hot. Jeremy ranged, reconnoitering, fading and unfading when Becky wasn’t looking. Ivy kept herself visible and near Becky. The two women hurried forward when Jeremy gave them the go-ahead, waited when he was out of sight.

Becky volunteered that as she drove east she’d paralleled the lava for three blocks, hoping to find a break in it. That was as much as she could tell them about the westward extent of the canal.

They scurried through two sooty, slippery backyards, crossing easily from one to the other because the back fence between them had been crushed by a treehouse and the branch attached to it. There were no signs of people here, and no trees or buildings close enough together to support a rope bridge.

Terry winked headlights at them on the next street over. One old pickup truck with oversized tires stood sideways in the middle of the road. The gears were in park and interlocked against shifting because the keys were out. Terry yelled that he’d found one car with keys in, but it was last year’s model and the plastic panels would ignite as soon as the car hit the lava.

“That would be burning your bridges before you cross them...”

Further east they found fewer signs of the windstorm. They detoured where fences hadn’t been damaged enough to cooperate. In one yard two tall spruce trees stood as close to each other as the lava would allow, suitable for a rope bridge, but one tree was already burning and the water pressure was too low to extinguish it.

They circled around a small steaming fishpond that was less than half full. It added yet another odor that was a parody of cooking.

Becky went back to telling Ivy about her escape. She’d been at home several blocks southwest, about to take a shower when the storm hit and the power went off. Sickened by the noise, she’d hidden in her recording studio in the basement. The soundproofing hadn’t helped enough. She might have passed out; the storm’s duration was hard for her to comprehend. Afterwards she ran for her car, which wouldn’t

start, and then for the old convertible that had been her husband's hobby.

She didn't talk about her husband.

Ivy was selfishly grateful for that; she couldn't stir up any comfort for someone else without having it muddy itself into self-pity. Besides, Becky's reticence was a sign of independence, compared with the almost childlike clinging affection she'd been left with by the Dragon. She was recovering.

Becky explained, breathing a little faster in regenerated panic, that she'd avoided driving into the canal without realizing it was lava. She'd thought it was pavement that was broken and rough enough to damage the fine old car. Then she'd seen help on the other side, and she'd decided to try driving over the softer lawns and let the car take its chances.

"If you hadn't been there..." Becky clutched Ivy's arm and stopped talking.

The back of Ivy's mind completed the sentence in its own untrusting way. *If you hadn't been there, she might have found a way out without being lured to drive into the lava!*

Never mind Becky's recovery status, thought Ivy, what about her own? Watched, stifled, oppressed of mind; but she couldn't be sure any of that was beyond reason. Jeremy? No, she wouldn't return to her earlier disloyalty of seeing his resolve as nothing better than a Dragon-powered obsession. What was that old saw about the self-centered attitude? "I am determined; you are stubborn; he has an *idée fixe*." She smiled a vinegar smile at herself.

The three of them stepped out onto a four-lane main road. An almost undamaged trampoline stood across the double yellow line. Jeremy snorted and caught Ivy's eye.

"Want to jump over again?" he asked. "There's your chance."

"Try offering me a thrill that's new."

Terry beckoned them. No, he hadn't found a way across the lava, he'd only found some pieces of a radio broadcast quilted together with waning static.

"What they say, pick your favorite they, is that the city is entirely encircled by milits who have already intercepted droves of would-be looters." Terry laughed it to scorn. "This is puffery and propaganda. Modern looters are rationally avaricious men who'd know better than to come in here.

"The same they also say, satellite data show the clouds are still meteorologically anomalous, unstable, and (in a word) unsafe, so the milits and rescue personnel haven't entered Spokane. This also is

pseudo-information. Look and you can see the strobes of the firetrucks lighting the clouds above the fuel depot!”

The low clouds to the east did seem to have a vague flicker to them. Jeremy reserved judgment on where the glimmer came from, and whether it was fire, lights, or heat lightning. The wind came from that quarter but he didn't hear sirens or engines. He waved Terry east and moved his group on.

Over on the east side of the road stood an older neighborhood, any number of wood-shingled roofs, wood fences instead of chainlink, dense trees. The wind was hot and blowing stronger. When the burning oil from the fuel depot landed here, everything here would burn faster than a hank of old dry hair.

He told Ivy, “This is pure tinder. Before long we'll turn back and try the west.”

He had extra misgivings because the lava canal looked to be aimed straight at the depot. Surprising it hadn't already blown up the gasoline. Since it hadn't, maybe the canal veered north or south before it got that far east. That wouldn't do them any good.

Two more blocks east, they were longer blocks in this older part of town. Still no sign of people. Cautiously he opened a gate for a fenced-in beagle. The dog wasn't mean with fear; he ran from them. Jeremy hoped he'd keep out of the hot tar. Then he released a pygmy goat. He heard chickens somewhere but couldn't spot them. Animal rescue, of all things. He wondered if the unicorn was safe.

Maybe thinking of her was a good omen. In a back yard in the next block they found the freak canal's freak end, a house-wide spider mark of lava left by a stutter of lightning. Becky looked at it, yipped in elation, and hugged Ivy, almost Jeremy, then Ivy again.

Ivy smiled at her and plummeted from celebration and relief into terror. The next hazard of the rescue spread itself all around her. What could they do with Becky? How could they take her to safety without effectively turning themselves in as people who'd obviously planned ahead for the Dragon?

The Dragon had ended and they had survived it. But in fact it had always been less hazard, to them, than the NBIE and all the other never-be-identified enemies. She could never afford to forget that threat.

Ivy looked around for Jeremy, wanting to seize hold of him for the briefest sort of reassurance. He'd vanished into scouting duty again. She settled for taking Becky's hand.



By the time all four of them had regrouped, the wind had increased to more than thirty miles per hour. It was a dry, dust-laden, throat-

raking wind. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that the two houses that had been infected with fire by Becky's car would be well alight now, and they wouldn't require much more wind or time to become contagious. Whatever rescue might be needed on that street couldn't be delayed.

Terry drove them slowly west, without headlights, watching for signs of life. They argued. It began between friends, all of them still sporadically smiling at the Dragon's oversight in leaving them a chance to simply circumambulate the lava canal.

"There's no sense in staying!" Terry insisted to Jeremy.

"Remember the kid's shoes? There'd been survivors there. We'll keep on searching that street."

"This is madness. If we stay, we need our heads candled," Terry intoned. He thumped the steering wheel to demand total attention. "We're heat-exhausted, our lungs and throats are scabbing over, you're still having hallucinations—correct?"

"Not so much."

"You're having not-so-much hallucinations," he coughed and not for mere effect, "both of you are limping, we have one victim to take care of, we don't know that the survivors haven't already walked away from here, anyone else we do find will be too wobbly-headed to help us, and we do not have a guaranteed evacuation route."

Jeremy looked around, gauged the wind, shook his head.

"Survivors can't hear that the storm's over," said Jeremy, plowing into a plan. "They might still be hiding indoors. We need to go in and get their attention by eye with flashlight beams. Ivy, you and I will go in and search. Terry, you get onto a roof to watch for fire threatening our escape route."

"The local conflagration must be spreading at speed." Terry almost snarled. "I shall not trap myself in a high place separated from my means of escape. I shall remain in my car."

Terry paused a moment as he turned left into the street from which they'd departed. He, Jeremy, and Ivy all looked quickly at the vans, making sure of them.

"You two are nightrunners," Terry went on, "you have special powers, you triumphed back at the ranch, and as a result you tend toward the delusion that you can handle any situation short of massed federal assault. But could you use any of your powers in this firelight? I doubt it."

Jeremy and Ivy shot each other glances. Personally, Terry didn't care how many wordless communiqués they sent each other and he didn't intend to cater to their heroics. He parked by the vans and left

the truck idling, hoping against hope that the running engine would subliminally influence Jeremy to leave.

“We have obtained a survivor of our very own,” he went on with added scorn. “We should end this scavenger hunt and we should leave. Otherwise Us will be forced to hold out for hazard pay.”

As Jeremy climbed out of the back of the pickup, he gave Terry a long, hooded, contemptuous look. “Leave, then.”

Ivy glanced an admonishment at Terry, gave Becky a wan reassuring smile, and followed Jeremy out of the truck.

She and Jeremy walked a few steps down the street and stopped to scan the houses that were brightly blazing inside and out. Now there were three of those next to each other on the east side of the street, near the lava and the burned-out convertible. Small spots of fire flared on the roofs of several other houses. The smoke and dust set Ivy coughing, and she heard false voices coughing and snarling in the fire clamor.

Jeremy yanked his cardboard blinder off and dropped it. “One less thing to burn.”

“The image is gone?” asked Ivy.

“No.” He looked back toward Terry’s car and his face became harsh. “It didn’t take him long to start thinking like a trad.”

Ivy left that unanswered a moment. She’d thought Terry was on the right track, though much too far along it, in thinking their powers were misleading their judgment. She couldn’t easily put that opinion in the category of pure prejudice.

“You can’t say that he’s been more of a hindrance than a help,” she finally replied.

Jeremy shook his head brusquely, meaning she’d missed the point. She meant to continue to miss it.

“It should be safe to search the west-side houses,” she thought out loud.

*POOM!* The sky shook enormously. Glass shattered and fell from a window on the west side of the street, and the wind-shock whirled dust roof-high. A tsunami of flame colors slowly spread up into the eastern sky while the echoes were still drumming.

Dazed, Ivy coughed and said, “It’s too early for that, it’s not midnight yet.”

Terry stood behind his truck, gazing east toward the fuel depot. When Becky got out he rapped on her shoulder, saying nothing, and frantically gestured her back into the vehicle. Bits of burning debris lay all over the lawns, roofs, and street.

There was another smaller distant explosion. No more glass broke. Behind the popping, fluctuating rush of the nearby house fires came a

deep steady indistinct roar from the east. A piece of the sun seemed to have fallen in that direction and not too far away.

Jeremy tried to guess timing. The wind was a hard wind, over thirty mph, could be forty. It came straight from the fuel depot about a mile away, where at least two of the six or more big tanks had blown. How long till it reached here? Was there any point staying? If anybody was still in these houses they'd have come out by now to see what the shocks were.

The garage of the east-side house next to the lava shot its door out into the street in a fireball, with a hard sound that went beyond bearing.

"what the fuck!" Almost inaudible, from Ivy. Jeremy wondered about his hearing. His ears hurt as if they'd been spiked.

Flaming debris had showered the roadway. Fires cast an uneven but too bright light over the whole block. A burning chunk of cloth and foam lay inches from Jeremy's foot. Their cars remained undamaged except for a fresh dent in his van.

His eyes were wet, irritated by smoke and dust. He blinked the moisture away and looked at Ivy and the others for injuries. Ivy had landed flat on her back, but no sign of shrapnel wounds. Terry was shaking all over. His eyes were too wide to show any sign of eyelids and the white stood out all round his irises.

"I'm ill. We n-need to be away from here," he mumbled as he settled into the driver's seat.

He began to back his truck up, slowly, staring at Jeremy and Ivy with sick disbelief at their immobility. In the front passenger seat Becky was sobbing.

Jeremy thought about cars and gasoline cans in other garages besides the one that had blown. Yeah, it was time to go. They had to regroup, get out of the explosion target zone and out of the smoke plume. Move the cars a block west, then take the shielded back-yard route into the houses on the west side of this street...

Terry swiveled violently in his seat, stared west, yelled and flung his arm out pointing westward, yanked his hand back to seize the steering wheel, swiveled the other way to stare out his open back window. To Ivy, still sitting dizzy on the pavement, Terry's motion looked so much like a spasm or a convulsion that it took her seconds to realize his scream had not been wordless panic. He had in fact shrieked, "Looters!"

The truck screamed backward, Becky folded forward gasping over her seat belt.

Jeremy saw three armed men running heavily toward the vans from a house midway along the west side of the street. Two with a handgun apiece, one with a shotgun. Others still in the house, hostages?

The bald gunman bellowed and fired his handgun at Terry's truck as it swerved, still in reverse, around a burning wooden beam. Ivy was still down and half-dazed, her feet skidding as she tried to get them under her weight.

No nice choices. Jeremy leaped for the shadow between the vans. Before the men had reached the vans, Terry had made a left across the corner lawn and was out of sight.

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Hearing the shot, Ivy stiffened herself motionless where she sprawled. Her ears roared but the false noise was dwindling. Jeremy had their gun, but where was he now?

The three looters plunged up to her.

“Don’t move! We’ll shoot!”  
“I’m faded in the shadow between the vans,” Jeremy called out. “We’ll shoot!” screamed the bald man. “We won’t hurt you!”  
“Try to bring them back to me.” That was the dark-haired man, loudly and sincerely.

The three men didn’t react to Jeremy’s ambush threat as they aimed at her. He’d been right to count on their deafness.

Ivy refused to move. She tried to assess the situation through a mind still swirling and opaque with dizziness. First, her scarf was gone and her shaved head was exposed. Second, she didn’t seem to be injured, except perhaps for her inner ears. Third, Jeremy was safe and so was his gun. Fourth, she couldn’t possibly reach the fade-border before someone’s gun went off; the shotgun wouldn’t have to aim accurately to hit her. Fifth, there were more people in the house behind her, crying out in a discordance of woman and child voices stirred up by the armed drama.

She examined the three gunmen closely, with an eye to later testimony and a hope of distracting herself from her dull-witted frozen fear.

The most frightening of them was a tall burly bald man, perhaps fifty years old, with white blotches in his beard stubble. Thin streaks of dried blood ran down his neck from his ears. He had a handgun and he watched her eagerly, with nothing but ill-will. The other man had tightly curly dark hair, no gray in it. He was under forty, narrow-shouldered, thin-armed; his shotgun looked too heavy for him. The boy with the handgun wouldn’t have called himself a boy. He might be seventeen and had some muscle, a brown crewcut and a heavy tan. All three had busily-tattooed arms.

“We only want your vans!” said Dark-hair. “Our cars won’t start!”

He and Boy were still panting from their run but already looked less explosive. Bald was another matter.

“Get away from the van,  
 come on now, get away!” Boy.  
 “Freeze, looters!  
 Don’t move!” Bald “I’m back be-  
 shoved his gun toward tween the vans.”  
 Ivy’s head. Jeremy’s voice.  
 “Don’t fight un-  
 faded. Bring “John, are you  
 them to me if you all right?” A  
 can.” woman calling out  
 desperately from  
 “They’re res- the west, out of  
 ident, Ivy—they sight. “Chris?”  
 aren’t looters!”

Dark-hair shook his head once, uncertainly, glancing at the house. Ivy registered that their hearing might be returning. If they could communicate again, would that improve their sanity or would it just remove their tactical disadvantage?

“Your men rabbited, didn’t they? No balls for a fight!” Bald lowered his gun reluctantly, barely noticeably. “Skinheads! Don’t you know skinhead is out of date?”

*That’s exactly why I forgot it might cause an image problem!*

She looked up at Bald and the blood trail beneath his ears. He’d gouged his own eardrums to keep the Dragon’s voices out. He must have. What had he done after that, held the others prisoner? They had grooves around their wrists, but the grooves were thin as wire, too thin to be rope-marks. The tattoos on their arms were notes—conversations?—written in felt-tip pen.

Ivy tried, “We aren’t looters, we came to res—”

“Shut up!” Bald yelled at her, thrusting the gun into her face, denting the dustmask. “We know you’re talking to the rest of your gang! Shut up, you fucking looter!” He snatched off her mask and crumpled it. The smoke bit into her throat.

Still sitting, not trying to stand, Ivy pushed herself back from him. He followed her, sudden gratification on his face. She was stopped when her shoulders lodged against Jeremy’s van, and she could have sobbed with relief when Dark-hair tapped Bald’s shoulder.

Boy stood guard on her while Bald and Dark-hair withdrew a few feet, taking pens from their pockets to write notes to each other on torn-out magazine pages. Occasionally they’d wave to warn off whoever was calling to them from the house.

Dark-hair, who might be Chris, could confine himself to writing. Bald, who was probably John, couldn’t. He had to talk, and gesture, and

face-off in between notes. The nightmarish thing was that he wouldn't let Ivy write a word of explanation or defense, and his vigor and imagination seemed to draw the other two gunmen along with him.

"Who gives a shit if she acts harmless?"

"They're all looters! The ones that ran off, they're still waiting for us!"

"She wasn't their hostage, she's as bald as they were!"

"Even if she was their hostage they're still hiding around here to threaten her, you still can't believe anything she says! Don't give her a chance to fool you any more than she has already!"

Ivy heard a scraping under the van behind her. "Ivy, I'm still here," came Jeremy's voice. She opened her mouth and Boy's gun twitched. She stayed quiet.

Bald John kept going. "Do you really think those three are the only ones in the gang?"

"Rescuers, shit! Where are their badges? Where are their insignia?"

"They don't let people do emergency work without giving them ID, that's exactly to avoid this kind of bullshit!"

Bald John strode over to her with his edge-of-panic cocksurenness, not like Boy's new-recruit hopeful obedience or Chris's quashable doubts. John looked her up and down. He was probably checking for weapons but she wished her clothes weren't sticking to her.

"How many are in your gang?" he demanded.

Ivy held up three fingers.

"Only three of you shitheads?" He laughed in simultaneous belief and disbelief. "We're ready for all the others if you're lying."

She repeated the gesture.

"Where's the rest of them hiding out? You must have set up a rendezvous in case of trouble."

Ivy began to shrug and lost track of it when she heard Jeremy say, "Try to get back here where you can hide." Forgetting he couldn't see, she shook her head.

Bald John chose to take it as defiance and thrust his gun at her, stepping closer, savoring a fight he was winning.

A roar came from the nearest burning house. Flames bannered from the upper-story windows. Sparks cascaded over the lawn in the wind from the east and smoke rolled out into the street. Most of the eastern sky was orange, too ferocious for any dawn.

Chris yelled, "The Robertsons, they have that propane tank in back!" He shook his head, grabbed John's arm, and wrote frenziedly.

Jeremy said rapidly, "Ivy, I'll do what I can but I won't risk you, so don't risk yourself. Let them get far enough from here to be safe from

the fire, but stop them before they take you to the cops. Try not to hurt them. Remember where we agreed to meet if we got split up.”

Now there were wives and children boiling all around the vans. If Jeremy was still talking, she couldn't catch it.

Bald John yanked her up by her arm and stuck the gun in her ear. She was less afraid than she had been the last time he'd held the gun on her; experience paid off.

“Give me the car keys!”

She did, pointing at the green van.

Ivy relaxed enough to breathe after Bald John beckoned Boy over to guard her again. Chris brought an opened coathanger to John and gestured questioningly at Ivy.

Bald John shook his head, laughing. “I'd like to see the bitch try anything, I really fucking would!” She believed him.

The other refugees were bringing their belongings wrapped in pillowcases and blankets, bundles that were taped together or tied with ropes or power cords. Bald John and Chris broke the driver's window of Jeremy's van, got in, and searched for the keys.

John climbed out the back and thumped his fist hard against the van, snarling. Then he grinned again and wrote a quick note. Chris read it and herded the women and children into a cluster behind the vans.

When Ivy saw Bald John aiming his gun at a front tire, she thought of ricochets and wrapped her arms around her head as she cried out to Jeremy. “He's shooting the tires!”

Bald John saw her reaction out of the corner of his eye and laughed triumphantly. “You thought they'd come rescue you in some big car chase? Give up on that!” Ivy heard movement under the van just as John fired.

One tire after another—Jeremy's voice came, “I'm safe, Ivy”—the van settled and the crawlspace below it shrank to crushingly narrow. Had Jeremy anticipated that? She convinced herself he must have. If he were pinned under his van unconscious, he'd have unfaded and she'd be able to see him. But he might be pinned and conscious...

John made his seating assignments, gesturing like sword slashes, pushing people toward one door of the green van or the other, awarding an extra shove for each disagreement. He left the water bottle and gas can, but threw Ivy's big hiking pack out of the van to make room. “You won't see that loot again!”

Ivy thought she heard sirens over the clamor of refugees and flames. Police? Had they been close enough to hear all the shots? She flinched. It was all too easy to see that the police would be no benefit to her or Jeremy.

Terry had turned his headlights off after being alerted by searchlights swinging through the murky sky ahead. The roadblock on Waikiki that had been deserted when they passed it on their way south into Spokane was apparently manned now. Terry had been expecting that, being cynically aware of the military habit of reclaiming any territory that the milits had ever had a chance to mark as their own.

He'd felt confident he could find a pawn shop or a gun shop on Division, and there his little darling was. Becky asked him what he was doing as he got out of the pickup. He patted her grudgingly and wrote her no explanation.

As he crossed the sidewalk he heard wailing in the southeast. Why would police or firemen trouble themselves to use their sirens in this absence of traffic? Of course. To attract victims, that is, victims of the Dragon, victims to be rescued. *It's that old siren song for any with ears to hear.*

He herded his mind back to the problems at hand. In the process, he realized resentfully that he couldn't be nearly so comfortably reliant on his own crisp rationality as he had been this past afternoon, or yesterday. He could barely remember retreating from the looters; it had been like a fever that quickly rose and broke.

Delightfully, the door of the shop was unlocked; business must have been interrupted by the Dragon. Terry found handguns easily. The matching ammunition, now that was a challenge, but it turned up in a cabinet in back. Deciding there was absolutely no point in alarming Becky prematurely, he tucked the guns and ammo into a double paper bag.



Jeremy ducked his cheek against his shoulder to wipe the blood before it could drip off and be left behind for a clue. Without his amulet and Luck, he'd have lost an eye to the road shrapnel from that sonofawhore's tire-shooting rampage.

The green van's engine rumbled above him. When he saw the last refugee's foot lift up into the van, he lunged out under the back bumper on his stomach. There wasn't any broken glass under him. *More help from Luck.*

He ran unfaded after the accelerating van and jumped. Luck was still with him. He caught the deep step on the green van's back bumper with his feet, the handle of the gate and the post of the back wiper with his hands. His side slammed into the gate. He slanted his crouch to hide himself behind the back gate and the bundles the residents had put in the back.

A block later it was fading dark and he straightened up and shifted his grip, reaching one hand up to the luggage rack, then both hands. Yeah, Luck was with him, but She'd have to get tired of his company soon. Ben on his left, standing sun-lit in midair, was enough to remind him of that.



It stank inside the van, sweat and smoke growing stale, and it was hot. Everywhere Ivy looked she saw one or another stranger who looked back at her with hostility but took it no further than a glare. No one wasted effort in speaking. Bald John was still muttering and accelerating. It was like a fever dream, and it added to the numb fear she'd unwillingly been fostering ever since she'd been captured.

Boy was still watching her, handgun pointed at her, gun hand resting on his knee. He looked slightly drowsy, and his finger was outside the trigger guard. Chris was watching out a window. She didn't trust the easing of their attention to give her as much help as she needed.

A story, true or not, had come to her in melodramatic flashes. It explained why Boy and Chris obeyed Bald John with dissent that went no further than a few words, why they discounted his enthusiastic viciousness, why they'd stayed for home defense instead of walking out to safety.

John must have been the man to rescue the unknown child from the tar, and the child had been related to Chris or Boy. In the course of the rescue John had exposed himself to the Dragon and gone insane, becoming Bald John the refugee marauder. After that, he'd destroyed his hearing to fight the Dragon's influence, vainly, and tied up the men with coat-hanger wire. He must not have bothered with the women; their wrists weren't marked. And then he'd made everyone stay inside even past the point where they'd have been safer to start walking out.

*Oh yes? Wasn't it really that they stayed because you three were out there frightening them?*

The post-storm story built itself from the notes she'd glimpsed on Bald John's left arm.

*must b more thn 3 of them  
go thru backyards, search fr guns  
stay down  
one gun NOT enuf  
the gang at that ranch*

And across the back of his hand, behind the knuckles, **QUIET!**

There'd been much more than that, criss-crossed and interlocked, crosstalk as compulsive as Hallam's. And there must have been further

conversation on paper. It must have taken all of Bald John's time to persuade the others to arm themselves and attack the "looter gang." Once they'd agreed to that, any and all further obedience would have been natural and the path of least resistance.

Her story had two virtues that didn't need to include truth. One, it would keep her from underestimating Bald John if she got the chance to take action. Two, it was keeping her from thinking about how she could get that chance.

No more procrastination, then—what would Jeremy be doing now? It all depended on that. All she could do was wait for his cue and then try to get out to meet him and find out the rest of his plan.

*That must be how Chris and Boy think of Bald John—he's the Man with the Plan.*

Ugh. All right, then, stop depending on Jeremy. Stop pretending it's hard to think. Stop being a hostage.



Terry and his onboard yellow pages had pondered the choice of a lair. It needed to be near the cordon, for the most timely assistance when the milit rescuers moved in. However, if it were in view from a roadblock, the milits might arrive prematurely, that is, a split second after they saw Terry's car drive in. And if it were the kind of facility where desirables (drugs guns or valuables) were stored, it might attract looters or encourage the milits to mistake a lairer for a looter.

Becky opened the bag and saw the guns. Her anxiety was peculiarly mingled with excitement.

"You're going to go back and help them!"

Because that was exactly the glorious unwisdom he planned to avoid, he nodded.

Terry found that his instinctive prevarication worked wondrous well. It persuaded Becky to let him leave her at the motel on North Division. Convinced that he planned an epic rescue, she thankfully accepted one of his guns, half of his ammunition and snacks, and all of his advice to start walking north if he hadn't come back to her by daybreak. For an instant he was afraid she'd kiss him a hero's farewell.



The wind around Jeremy was more from the van's speed than from the distant thunderstorm. They were a little ways north of the local fire where they'd started. Towers of shaking flame leaned westward from the fuel depot. It belonged in a movie and he wished he could sit down safe in a theatre and watch it there.

Now, even if he had to stop the van permanently they were located far enough from the fire to protect the refugees. No more time to think.

His gear hung at clumsy angles. His flashlight and canteen had banged against the back of the van as it bounced him round. Might as well have been Morse code to tell Ivy he was there. Did she know?

He looked in through the back window. Hard to see through the tinting. Ivy sat in the left middle bucket seat. She glanced quickly out her window, away again, then at the opposite window. The man with the shotgun looked worried about the windows too.

Jeremy tightened greasy gloved hands around the greasy bar of the luggage rack. He thought about paying the driver a visit, breaking in the driver's side window with his heavy flashlight. He'd have to go over the roof, though. He could get better grips and footholds than the worst ones he'd ever had in a cave, but caves didn't bounce.

Break in this back window instead of the windshield? It'd be less likely to cause a car crash. Less likely to get him shot, too, since there were women and children between the gunmen and the window. But would a continuing attack like that get Ivy shot?

He could shoot out the tires from here and they'd mistake it for natural blowouts. Afterwards they could walk to safety. That was the best.

Grating noises. They were opening the right back side window. It didn't move easily once the grit on it got into the track, but they forced it all the way open. A shotgun barrel poked through. Yeah, that gunport could've been a good idea in other circumstances.

Jeremy moved over to the right, slipping, changing his holds. Finally he grabbed behind the front sight and yanked. A wordless yell and a clatter on the road. No shot. The safety must have been on all the time.

One less gun in the van now, but they'd suspect they were under attack. It'd probably make them careful not to lose their hostage, so Ivy wasn't any less safe. *Don't count on it.*

The window was still open. He could slip in through it, but only from the roof. He wedged one foot into the hollow of the gate handle and shoved himself up. His goggles fell off as he grabbed right-handed for the front bar of the rack while keeping his left hand on the back bar. Not quite. He pulled himself forward. It was like doing a chin-up while being stretched on the rack. Then he lodged a foot onto the wiper post and pushed off.

Luck got bored with him. The van roof bounced and swerved at that exact moment. He slid sideways. There was air under his left leg, his right leg found a friction hold on the back bar. He got both hands onto the front bar of the rack. After five more tearing efforts, he was belly-down and braced on the roof of the van.

Instead of stopping to retrieve the shotgun, the driver had sped up. The swerving and slaloming wasn't because of the few cars in the middle of the road. Either a tire had blown or the driver was trying to clear the gun-grabber off the roof. Jeremy hung on with both hands and pushed to lever his feet against his holds.



At first Ivy decided, and tried, to show no sign of attention to the clattering at the back of the van. Next, briefly, she was dull-witted and trembling with fresh terror at Jeremy's position. Then she tried to confuse the gunmen by turning furtively, glancing at the side windows but not the back, making a vaudeville production of Hearing What Was Going On, and then abruptly, insistently, paying no attention to anything.

It didn't work directly. It only made Chris, Boy, and the blonde woman with thin hard penciled eyebrows suspicious enough to jitter their heads back and forth trying to look out all the windows in turn. Chris exclaimed suddenly—he'd seen something that he thought was an ambush.

He opened the window and settled himself and his aim. Then the shotgun launched itself out the window, leaving him rubbing his gouged finger and bashed knuckles. Ivy put her head in her hands and clamped her elbows against her ribs to hide her laughter. And her fright; had Jeremy been able to yank as forcefully as that without dislodging himself?

Chris moved forward between the bucket seats. More clattering came from outside, jerking its way up the back of the van. Ivy could guess why. Jeremy had seen a good chance. And it was likely to remain one; Boy was trying to close the window, while watching her, but the pane had jammed.

But Chris would be reporting the loss of the shotgun to Bald John, which meant the tactical situation could rapidly deteriorate.

She surveyed the van as the clattering went on.

Between her and the back gate of the van were one boy child, one girl child, one toddler, and two adult women. Those were sitting on the back bench seat, the women held down by their lapfuls of toddler and girl. The luggage space behind the bench was filled with bundles, the gas can, the bottled water, and the fannypack, bellypack, canteen, knife, and flashlight she'd been wearing until Bald John pulled them off her.

Boy sat in the bucket seat beside Ivy, facing her. She had no possible use for her side door as long as he was attentive and the van was moving.

Between her and control of the van were one adult woman with infant in the front passenger seat, Bald John in the driver's seat, and Chris standing bent and sheepish between them.

If she wanted to avoid the mistake of underestimating the enemy, she'd have to take the risk of fading in public to play poltergeist.

Ivy looked at the refugees, and at Boy's gun, and a story of her future flashed in her mind. *Oh, this is going to be bad.* If she didn't fight, these people, even Bald John, wouldn't be likely to harm her. Would she do better to wait and risk the police?

No. She couldn't fool herself. She'd be turned in as a looter, under martial law, and Jeremy was already here on the van and as much at risk from police action as she was.

Her guts turned over when she heard an explosion of cursing from Bald John.

"The looter's on the roof, fuck!" came the explanation. Then he began to swerve hard enough to lean everyone. Boy looked toward John in alarm.

Ivy moaned hopelessly, hearing the clattering and imagining Jeremy slipping to fall from roof to pavement. She started to stand, then wavered, collapsed, and let herself slide down onto the floor between her seat and the one in front of it. Boy's gun began to track her, but he looked concerned. At that she took hope and faded.

She wriggled around the seat like a contortionist, dodging feet and knees. Boy crouched, peered, and reached, trying to find where she'd fallen to. If only she could slip up to the driver's seat and stop the van, letting herself jump out and Jeremy jump down to safety... But the noises from the roof had stopped.

Chris had turned around to anxiously watch Boy's attempts. From the floor Ivy saw Chris turn back, pen in hand, to report the new surprise to the driver.

"Get off my fucking van!" roared Bald John.

The van braked sharply. Ivy expected to hear what Bald John hoped to see, Jeremy sliding forward over the windshield.

Boy tumbled against the backs of Chris's knees, making him totter and fall between the two front seats. Ivy had no chance at the driver. The gun was second best, but if she just grabbed it there'd be a struggle—and no way to know where the gun would be pointing if Boy panicked and pulled the trigger. Up through the roof?

Twisting herself out of Boy's line of fire, she licked his grimy gun hand.

{:- 27 -:}

Terry gave one more glance to his vehicle and surroundings, checking for the overlooked, and allowed himself to be satisfied with his plans. He'd discard the gun and ammunition he'd used to portray himself as returning rescuer, and all evidence of foully premeditated rescue. He'd undisguise. Next he'd leave the truck in an out-of-the-way spot and walk to a roadblock, where he'd tell the pitiful story of his futile and lonely attempt to help the victims in Spokane.

He listened again for shots to the east and heard nothing other than sirens. And there were planes overflying. That latter would be aerial reconnaissance. No doubt they'd be able to observe his vehicular peregrinations with infrared even though his headlights were off. He had better behave like an innocent and seek out a roadblock, directly.

If he went west, he could easily find the block on Waikiki Road. If he went east to explore for a different northward route and roadblock, he'd pass near the street where he'd left Mumsy and The Boss. That was an option up with which his rationality would not put. He would not return.

He was unarmed and his inability to vanish would make him a burden to the nightrunners rather than a savior. Surely they could take care of themselves.

He wasn't obligated to add his own heroic misjudgments to Jeremy's. In fact he'd be an imbecile to give The Boss another chance to lead him into unconscionable hazards. *Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, and I deserve the Darwin Award.*

But he sat in his parked pickup, idling, feeling preposterously as though he were waiting at a stop sign for some oncoming decision to finish crossing the intersection. Finally he got out of the truck, retrieved the gun, and began to load it with exasperating inept gloved fingers.



“Get off my fucking van!”

Warned, Jeremy braced himself harder. The deceleration didn't fling him. He heard a man scream as the green van lurched, skidded, and stopped.

“Get it off me!” The voice cracked. “It has a mouth, God, what is it!”

Sounded like Ivy was stirring the brew.

The yelling multiplied, children were crying, and suddenly a car door opened on the left side and feet scuffled away fast.

Ivy's voice, “Jeremy!”

He dropped down from the van's roof, a place he hadn't expected to leave except ballistically. A child inside yiped as the van bounced. Ivy, faded, was turning to run back to him. Right inside the still-open van door knelt the teenage man shakily pointing his handgun out at the street.

Jeremy dodged to the latch side of the door, shouting, "Ivy, stay out of his aim!"

A man in the van yelled, "Close the goddamn door!"

Jeremy hit the teenager's wrist down, hard, with the edge of his gloved hand. The gun spun out clattering onto the roadway. Jeremy gave it an extra kick to send it further from the van. *Bait*, he thought as he watched it slide. The van door slammed.

Jeremy hugged Ivy into submission, hurting his bruised side. He ignored that and Ben too. Then the yelling inside the van reminded him about business.

"I'm putting a stop to the crazy one," he told her.

Ivy nodded, with a savage smile. "Bald John. I want in on that."

He took stock of the surroundings. Nobody in sight. This area was like any other strip commercial zone he'd seen here in history. Somewhere in the directionless distance were sirens and, he thought, a truck engine. He grimaced. Police?

A light beam pivoted across the northern sky. A searchlight. The abandoned roadblock they'd passed on the way south had been in that direction. It must be remanned now.

The men and one woman were moving around all over the van in a commotion. Mostly John, hoarse yells from way down in the throat. He was hard to understand, and no reason to bother. He slapped the teen.

"Go out and get the gun yourself!" Dark-hair shouting wildly. Then he wrote on his arm and shoved it in John's face.

Jeremy unzipped his belly pack. The only things in that pack were ammo and the tube of knockout drops. Everything else was in his fanny pack, out of the way.

John and Dark-hair were still arguing, part in writing, part in useless but uncontrollable bellows. Only one thing they didn't fight over, somebody had to go out for the gun. Good.

Jeremy glanced at Ivy. She was watching the van as if it was a messy movie that she'd bound herself to review. He gave her the knockout tube. "You drop whoever comes after the gun. I'll handle the rest."

The people in the van were pushing notes at each other, organizing something. Somebody was poised at every side door. John yelled "Now!" and waved. All the side doors opened at once, the kids set up a yell, two women, the teen, and Dark-hair leaped out, the women and

the teen jumped back in, and Dark-hair slid under the van on the far side from the gun. Distraction tactics.

A moment's wait. Dark-hair located the handgun and everyone in the van dropped down out of sight, joining John in the low-risk zone. Jeremy and Ivy posted themselves next to the gun.

Dark-hair crawled out on the gun side of the van and jumped up high, gave the roof a quick scan, crouched again. "Of course there's no one there!" the man muttered to himself, then looked around uneasily. "At least not now... but if no one took the gun..." He stood again and made gestures of no-problem all's-well at the windows.

When he reached the gun, Ivy dabbed him. Jeremy caught him as he started to drop, holding him up under the arms. Jeremy wedged his weight under Dark-hair and started walking him over to the driver. He held the man's head up with one hand and nudged his knees against the loose legs to make it look something like walking. Attack of the zombie.

Ben moved along on Jeremy's left. His legs didn't walk either, he slid without effort.

There was only one gunman in the van now and that was the driver. John squinted furiously out at the zombie. He was too crazy-mean to get the horrors. A couple of the women in the van were staring out the windows with Halloween expressions on their faces. John only looked more ferocious than ever.

"Pick a fight with him," Jeremy instructed Ivy. "Play puppeteer." She gave a horrified small laugh and then the savage grin reappeared.

Ivy knocked the dark-haired man's right fist, shaped by hers, on John's window. He shook his head and said something that ended loudly in "you pussy!" Jeremy backed the zombie off a few steps as Ivy waved the fist.

"Again," he urged, his back aching from the double weight.

Ivy rearranged the fist to give John the finger.

That brought him out like a dragon from a cave. Ivy whooped with glee and dropped him. After that, they didn't need any subtlety to get John's gun.

Ivy stood watch for Jeremy as he reached past the steering wheel to pull out the van keys, but she saw no motion inside the van. The cowed refugees kept themselves crouched behind the seats. Opening the back gate while Jeremy stood watch, Ivy grabbed for her gear, pulling it out from between the bundles.

"They're hiding under the back gate!" yelled Boy. He and a blonde woman sprang up from cover behind the bench seat; they shoved at the bundles, hard.

Jeremy dodged, but one package struck Ivy before she decided on an off-balance jump out of range. Then Boy made his move, lunging out

of the back of the van. Hastily Jeremy set the keys and the two handguns, still loaded, on the pavement by the van.

“Why leave them armed?” Ivy threw a reflexive hostile look back toward the green van as she walked away.

Jeremy retorted, “Would you rather give them an escort from here on out because they can’t do their own shooting?”

Ivy looked back again. Boy was standing armed guard. Two of the women had left the van and were about to pick up Chris; they hadn’t given first priority to Bald John. Ivy closed her eyes, took a breath, and let her vindictiveness drain away into whatever internal sewer it could find.

A drone of aircraft crossed above them, three planes in formation. The world was coming to help Spokane and that made it time to be leaving.

“Do we try to find Terry?” Ivy asked.

Jeremy wrangled the point with her as they watched the refugees gather up John and then the bundles. Eventually he got her to agree there was no point. It was too large an area to search, and probably a safe zone even for Terry.

“Then let’s leave. Right now!” Ivy took his hand.

“No. We have to go back and get our hiking packs. They’re loaded with Bunderbye’s DNA, yours, and Jeffrey Thorne’s. It’s all linked now to poltergeist action and a vanishing woman.”

“That bunch will never dare tell that story—by tomorrow they’ll think it was all hallucinations from the Dragon!”

“I won’t take any chance of getting us hunted.”

“Hunted!” She shook her head hard. “Jeremy, I know they’re after us, but they can’t play bloodhound in the middle of all this! Our whole city is dead!”

“That’s the point. They’ll think Spokane was murdered. We were first on the scene afterwards. That makes us suspects.”

“Then... then use a different disguise spell, for different DNA, and change Thorne’s coloring in the records to match!”

“Ivy, once the feds hear that runners were in this, they’ll ask for opinions from their future yanks. The yanks probably know something about disguise spells. If they compare two sets of DNA that are nearly the same, Thorne’s and Bunderbye’s, they might figure it out. They’ll know a yank was here.”

“Jeremy, we already almost got killed right on that same street! You’d rather die there than, than slightly increase our chances of being tracked down?”

“If they catch us, they’ll make us into a public execution or a secret interrogation. Or both.” He caught his breath and lowered his voice as

the green van's engine started. "I told you once." He said it harshly, a reprimand. "I won't let anybody catch us. They'd never let us free. They'd use us as leverage against each other. Even if they didn't question us under torture, they'd use up our lives. We aren't going to be sacrificed for their gain. Not any way, not at any time." He glanced at the departing van. Once that crowd reported to the cordon, time could be damn short.

Ivy shook her head slowly, the kind of disagreement that had almost been backed far enough into a corner to fight.

"There's no need for you to talk about dying," he told her. "We won't be there long." He had to stop her arguing. The wind was still strong, that street was turning to a hell, every minute they wasted would make the job riskier. "We don't have to do anything but pick up the packs and run."

Ivy glared hopeless dismay. Then she hesitated, looked at him apologetically, said, "Is Ben still with you?"

"Yeah." He owed her that much answer, but he didn't like her making that connection. Did she think Ben was an omen, or a ghost luring him to death? She should know better. He did.

Ben's image was only one last symptom of the memory invocation. He wasn't about to be put off by it.



Ben was heavily on Ivy's mind and she stayed quiet about it. She watched Jeremy as she ran south with him. Did he think Ben was a kind of guardian angel?

She didn't ask. Talking to Jeremy would only warn him of what she was thinking and then she'd have less than no chance to stop him.

By the time they'd run back to Bald John's neighborhood, the fire that had started with Becky's car had seized on all the houses on the east side of the street and many on the west. The fire from the fuel depot was only a block or two to the east. It was spreading faster to the north of them, where a group of firefighters seemed to be concentrated.

Jeremy and Ivy stood across the four-way intersection that was just north of Bald John's block. Even there the heat was sweltering and abrasive with smoke, the air roared, and fading was impossible. Two blocks north, a fire truck arrived from the west and passed further east and out of sight, its flashing lights humbled by the overbearing orange of the sky.

Ivy wondered whether she'd be strong enough to drag Jeremy a few blocks to temporary safety. How could she not? She'd have to. After that she'd decide whether it was safe to come back for their packs.

“You stay here, across the intersection, as backup,” Jeremy directed, his voice muffled by his wetted dust mask. “Don’t come any closer without need. I’ll bring our packs back with me.”

“Before you go into the van for your pack, have all the doors open in case you need to get out fast,” said Ivy tonelessly, keeping her eyes on his face.

His eyes narrowed on her, but he was distracted by something to his left, by Ben. He turned away toward the van and she grabbed for the latch on his belly pack and caught it.

Jeremy seized her wrists before she could dodge him or take the knockout tube from his pack. His face was angry and almost joyful.

“No chance.” He glanced to his left again.

*If I’m having a premonition, what good is it?* He had the gun, he had the tube, she had nothing.

“Earlier you asked me whether I was having a premonition...”

It caught his attention and for a moment his face was still. Then his eyes flicked left, conspiring against her with Ben. He said, “This has to be done. It’ll be fast.”

Jeremy ran to the van and climbed into the back. The patch of fire on the roof of the nearest house seemed to pulse in the waves of hot air. Too many seconds later, he lunged away from the van and ran unfaded toward Ivy, wearing his pack and carrying hers.

“Back off!” he called out as he reached the cross-street.

There was an explosion, not as sharp a sound as the gas tanks they’d heard before, some larger fuel tank. An object whistling a discord rose into the sky from the back yard of a house on the street’s east side. There was a white flame beneath the thing. Ivy couldn’t discern its shape in the orange fluctuating light. In the next instant it was formless and jagged in a rendingly loud green-white burst. A scorpion of pale smoke spread itself out in mid-air.

Jeremy dived to the street, rolling loosely and then sliding on his belly. Her pack tumbled away from him. Ivy fell on her side in a confusion of powerful clangs and thumps of debris. Jeremy did not move. There was almost no space between the right side of his head and the curb.

Ivy felt herself very stretched, very frail, very loose-muscled as she knelt by him. She had no clear idea of how long she paused.

*What would he do?*

Jeremy was warm to the touch. He breathed. Should she move him? His spine might have been strained at the neck when his head struck.

She had no choice but to examine him, so she carefully took off his pack and turned him over. His face was scraped, his eyes uninjured. His

pulse and breathing were easy and his color seemed good as well as she could tell in the lurid light. She didn't feel anything grate in his arms or ribs.

Fire. Police. How close? She thought they had some time.

She caught herself before wiping Jeremy's face. The blood would be needed for the spells. No, that was wrong. She'd have to clean the black lard out of his abrasions and disinfect them, then make a small cut in a clean part of his skin to take blood.

In his first-aid lesson earlier today, Jeremy had emphasized that they had to carry out the conventional medical care before using spells. A broken bone that had been left unsplinted would be sound but crooked after the bonemend spell. Foreign bodies that had been left embedded in the flesh would cause infection after the woundheal spell.

Jeremy still lay unconscious. The longer that lasted, the worse the prognosis was. Both of his pupils were the same size. She couldn't even guess how much of a guarantee that might be. After she'd broken the Aza's skull he'd had matching pupils; nevertheless he'd ended up in critical condition. Ivy moaned.

She dripped antiseptic on a sterile bandage and wiped cautiously at the small bloody spots on Jeremy's face and bare scalp. She didn't find any depression or soft spot in his skull. Remembering the First Aid manual, she felt the opposite side of his head in case it had bounced against the pavement. Nothing there or on the rest of his head.

She cleaned and cut his arm. Her hands were not allowed to shake and did not shake.

The spell packets, the printed phonetic incantations, everything had to be weighted down against the wind. Or protected from it; Ivy pulled three of the wheeled garbage bins upwind for a shield and added the big backpacks. That made all the difference.

Bonemend was supposed to precede woundheal because broken bones might pierce freshly healed flesh as they rejoined. There wasn't time. Concussion was damage to flesh, not bones, so it was woundheal that mattered. She wetted and donned a fresh mask from her pack; she couldn't afford to keep coughing during the spell.

Thurible. The clove incense was porous and easy to light with Jeremy's sparker. Salt water. Saying the simple words of purification, she cleansed all the tools.

Lit the little saucer lamp with its jelly fuel. Manipulated lavender and myrrh oils and wax. Took up Jeremy's lax hand, touched it to his arm, put his bloody fingerprints on the six pieces of wax.

Ivy could barely speak through the incantation that went with the paste of vervain and sweet violet. The wind's direction had changed, she was afraid it might be because the fire was leaning over her

shoulder, and she couldn't pause to look. The incantation was nonsense, she was a fraud, it was all delusion. Nevertheless she heard no flaw in the syllables she made.

Jeremy sighed, opened his eyes, and sniffed. He focused on Ivy's face.

"Woundheal," he said, and cleared his throat. He turned his head at the sound of a small explosion. The cooled daub of soft wax fell from his temple.

"It seems to have worked like a charm." Ivy found that she was half-laughing, half-crying.

"How bad was it?"

"I guess we'll never know for sure."

She started to explain but he cut her short by sitting up and then standing up.

"I can run," he stated.

The nearest house across the street was filled with moving confined flames like animals in a zoo cage. Jeremy frowned into the firelight, blinking and moving his head from side to side.

"Ben?" Ivy asked.

"No." She watched his eyes. They didn't flick to his left.

"Headache? Double vision?"

"Not exactly." He put a hand in front of his left eye, then his right.

"No color on the left."

She stood up fast enough to make herself waver. His face and head were sound, but what had remained unhealed within his skull? He forestalled her.

"I can run. I'm well. I want to put some darkness between us and here."



Jeremy led Ivy a mile west and then turned north.

"I thought we'd cross the river next!" Ivy called out to him, disappointed.

"I found this on the mattress in the van." He handed her a notepad sheet.

She read it running, striding a little clumsily because she had to hold the paper with both hands to keep it flat in the wind.

*Gone to Croatan Waikiki*

*We*

The Waikiki roadblock was four camouflage trucks, about fifty armed uniforms, and spotlights. The moving headlights and searchlights at Whitworth College, to the east, suggested another staging area there.

Terry was sitting on a crate eating army rations and gloomily watching the soldiers' busyness. Once again he had hair and a mustache, all chestnut, all badly barbered. Ivy's relief at seeing him well and apparently unsuspected was mixed with admiration. He hadn't just remembered to cast a disguise spell to regrow his hair; he'd thought to rub Dragon-slime in his fresh clean pelt to make it match his clothes and skin.

There was no sign of his car. Becky wasn't with him, nor were there any other civilians at the roadblock. Either no other refugee had left the city by this route, or the ones who had weren't being detained here.

Staying outside the fade-border, Jeremy tossed a rock at Terry's crate. It tapped and bounced off. Two rocks later a look of mortal relief, quickly re-rendered as vexation, crossed Terry's face. He nodded to himself, set down his casserole, and strolled out into the nearest shadow. None of the soldiers paid him any more attention than a glance.

"Is all well with the poltergeist cohort?" asked Terry, looking in the wrong direction.

"All present and accounted for," said Ivy tartly. Then she hugged him.

He squeaked, struggled loose, and backed toward the light. "Sir, for whom have you mistaken me? I swear we've never met. My name is Lawrence Harding."

He heard suppressed laughter. Ivy's sounded appreciative.

"How's Becky?" asked Jeremy.

"She's safe," an off-handed answer. "And how am I? I'm quite safe too. In case you should ever be asked, wherever you may have been, you were never in Spokane with We today and neither was Becky. Come to think of it, who's Becky?"

"Good enough." Jeremy sighed.

"Tell me, what would you two prefer for a wedding present?"

Terry heard Jeremy laugh sharply, but he had to imagine Ivy's reaction. He was well satisfied with what he envisioned.

"See you at the rendezvous," said Jeremy.

"Not if I see you first," and Terry more than half meant it. Not precisely mad, not at all bad, but dangerous to know, that was The Boss.

He snickered to himself as he heard light footsteps receding. Soon the refugee documentation software would be at his mercy. He'd resurrect a few more of We from the casualty list, and he'd enter Mark Langbourne's irreproachably attested death-by-Dragon into the records. His wedding present to Mumsy would be the opportunity for the wedding. She couldn't ask for better than that.



"How is your vision now?" Ivy asked hopefully.

"The same. No color on the left in trad vision. Faded vision is as good as ever." Jeremy moved about restlessly in the small clearing. Once or twice he ran a hand down a pine trunk.

Ivy began, "I should have—"

"The spell was fine," impatiently. "If you hadn't done it perfectly it wouldn't have healed me at all." He stood and looked out beyond her, scowling and deeply troubled. "Sometimes the brain learns the wrong way to work while it's injured. Healing it doesn't change what it learned. Sometimes it relearns the right way afterwards."

"But there's no grogginess, headache, double vision?"

"No. Stop worrying about concussion."

Jeremy sat beside her; Ivy noticed he'd placed her on his right side, by his good eye. He might have to make that kind of arrangement for the rest of his life.

Suddenly he put his arms around her and pulled her into him so tightly that she lost her breath. A moment later he gave her a quick, perplexed, distressed look.

"Ben is gone now," he told her. "He has been ever since I woke up. He's gone for good, I think."

Ben had been on Jeremy's left side, like his failed color vision. She cringed at the possibility that Jeremy had lost more brain function than first appeared.

"Have you lost your memories of him?"

"No. I don't think so. Would I know?" The idea troubled him further, so she knew it wasn't what had originally been on his mind.

"Are you sorry he's gone?" she asked tentatively, flipping an imaginary coin, obeying it, and entering a very real minefield.

His eyes were sombre and confused. "I didn't think he was a ghost. I don't believe in them, but maybe I should start. He took part of me with him, so I have to think about what he meant. Did I owe him something? Did he owe me?"

Jeremy began to speak faster, pausing sometimes and then starting again as quickly as ever. Ivy held his hands and tried to hold on to what he was saying before it poured away.

“My family was fourfold plus four children. Ben’s was a pair and he was the only child. I never heard of a sixfold marriage, but my family and his always stayed together wherever we moved. They filled each other out.

“Ben was two years older than me. He finally caught up with me when I was fifteen.”

Jeremy’s pause silently asked Ivy whether he was expecting too much of her by telling her this. She squeezed his hands.

“We’d both been running riot with our dates that summer. We went caving, we had a long push, we came out worn out and we camped. We talked about our girls. Ben complained. He said girls didn’t really know how to kiss. They were always the first ones to pull away. He bet even I could do better... he’d planned it for months, he admitted it later.

“Our families never fussed about it. My particular mother said she hoped we’d unjoin at the hip long enough to give them some grandchildren. I did, he didn’t...”

Ivy hadn’t known he had children.

“I was finishing my first apprenticeship. He was finishing his second. I’d been working judgment records for a few different covunes. Couldn’t decide if I was more interested in the kind of work courts did or the kind police did.

“Ben had started out wildcrafting with an herbalist, that was his parents’ plan. A local litho asked for him for his second apprenticeship because of his caving. He brought back natural amulet stones like nobody ever saw before. They were coming from other states to bid on his finds.

“The litho and the herbalist both recommended him to a magian for his third apprenticeship. He went away to another covune, ours didn’t have a magian.

“Apprenticeships are busy. I didn’t see Ben often after that. I’d go over to his covune, bus partway, hike the rest. He’d lie sprawled out in bed making rites with his arms to show me all about the magian’s spells. It made me uneasy but he wouldn’t stop, he was fascinated.”

For a moment his expression was different, not pained but thoughtful, as he worked out an explanation for her.

“Magians are jealous of their spells. It’s a close relationship. There are old stories about kings... Pay an artist to paint something unequalled, then blind him so he can’t equal it for anybody else.

“I stayed away from Ben a week or few to keep him from talking about it. He wouldn’t have spoken that freely to anybody else. I wish I hadn’t stayed away. It didn’t help.

“Figured I’d set up a couple weeks of leave for us through the ombudsman. That would get Ben away from the magian long enough

to change his perspective. I didn't work fast enough. He needed rescue, not perspective."

Jeremy breathed irregularly, his eyes changing focus, sometimes looking at Ivy, sometimes through her.

"It was an accident, the scryers said they were sure about that. Unbalanced elements, Claw and Fire without Metal, a research accident. Spontaneous human combustion. Spontaneous doesn't have to mean fast.

"I got a call, my parents scrounged a ride for me right away. Two hours, Ben was still alive, burning everywhere.

"Like lava. They'd laid him on an... enameled metal refrigerator door because it was fireproof.

"The messenger said the magian said the right kind of balancing healing spells wouldn't come to his call, he couldn't do anything. No other magians would help. Nobody would meddle in his delivering his spell.

"If he'd asked them, they would have. He had the responsibility to cure Ben or finish him. He wouldn't take it and nobody could make him.

"The clock kept turning, nothing changed but the smoke. Ben couldn't move or talk. Hours."

The small muscles in Jeremy's hands twitched. His words slowed.

"I told Ben, be free of it, and I held his mouth and nose closed. He didn't fight me. Either he couldn't or he was helping me. The fire went out when he died. It was burning the life more than the flesh."

Jeremy turned his hands over in Ivy's and looked at his absent scars with passive bitterness. "Of course the burns didn't stay with me." His voice was lackluster.

Without any thought about how to express her sympathy, or how not to, Ivy gently picked up his hands and bowed her head to kiss them. "I'd want you to do the same thing for me."

She looked up. Jeremy gave her an incomplete soft smile.

"That's what I owe you," he promised. "But what do I owe him?"

"I don't know," and she felt an ache. "What do I owe Mark? I hadn't thought of it that way."

Jeremy rubbed a thumb contemplatively across the empty pale space on her left ring finger.

He added stonily, "Seven months later I shot the magian dead."

"How was that possible? Their powers, I thought you said—"

"They're human. They turn their backs on the wrong people." Jeremy laughed shortly. "Yeah, I shot him in the back."

"I don't know enough to say how right that was." She admitted, to herself, that she respected the practicality of back-shooting when needed. "But don't expect me to condemn you for it."

Jeremy laughed again, more naturally, and sat for some time perusing their clasped hands as if they were a mystery. Ivy's mind circled around the idea of debts to the dead and blankly found it too large to grasp.

A helicopter passed high in the east. Finally Jeremy rubbed at a black grease smudge above Ivy's wrist.

"Didn't see any sign of black rain here," he said, the energy back in his voice. "There must not have been any this far north. And we smell like smoke. We'll have to clean up to avoid suspicion."

Ivy had been buoyed by sympathy, and heartfelt curiosity, and all-encompassing relief that Jeremy hadn't been worse harmed. Now she started to sink.

The prospect of years of hiding from ambiguous pursuit, years of compulsory invisibility, repelled her. Her failure to cure Jeremy made her heartsick. The helpless frivolity of all of their painstaking assistance disgusted her. What the Dragon had done in Spokane, and the fact that such an enormity could exist, deeply revolted her.

"How many people do you think we actually saved from the Dragon?" Ivy asked, feeling her chin trembling.

"This morning—yesterday morning—the radio news was polling people in hotels and parking lots just outside Spokane. Maybe seven percent left town when they normally wouldn't have. No way to know for sure." He wrapped his arms around her. "It wasn't enough people, but we knew that to start with. Ivy..."

She was shaking all over. Jeremy recognized her sick desperation as the natural reaction. He held her only briefly because he ached to put Spokane in the distance. After a few minutes he opened his pack and pulled out the soap from the camping gear. Then he started unbuttoning her blouse. Couldn't ask for a better distraction.

"What are you doing?" Trembling outrage, along with the tears.

"Take off everything that comes off. Wash everything that doesn't." There, it's getting through to her. "They call this a clean start."

He gave Ivy Moon coloring instead of the naturalizer spell. She used it before she realized, then protested. He reminded her that she didn't want to have Jane Doe's natural DNA linking her to Jeremy Bunderbye.

"Ivory hair and, what did you say, violet eyes!" Ivy complained, but she knew well enough that this was the only painless part of hiding out.

"Your eyes are close enough to the blue in your ID. If you don't like the hair, dye it back to brown." He added dryly, "Tell people it turned white overnight. You earned the right."

He'd gone back to blue-eyed blond, Spring Sun colors. Ivy looked at him regretfully as she finished braiding her hair.

“I miss the way you looked when we met,” she said. “But... my fiancé is Jeffrey Thorne.”

He'd have kissed her if it hadn't felt like an indecency on this funeral day. *A covune of two*, he thought. *It's a start.*

“Pack up,” he told her. “We can't nightrun across the river unless we hurry. The dark won't last forever.”